

# the Messinger bucktail frog

by Joe Messinger, Jr.

Seventy years old and still taking big bass





The cool shadows of evening provided welcome relief from the scorching August sun as we eased our boat into one of the lake's many secluded coves. Dad stripped some line from his old Shakespeare Russell fly reel and began looking for a likely spot where a bass might be lying in wait for a meal.

The shoreline to our right was covered with trees, brush and rocks. Directly in front of us, the few remaining limbs of a long-ago-fallen sycamore tree reached out into the dark-green depths of the cove. Dad motioned for me to move the boat into a position where he could cast to the near side of the old tree.

He made a few false casts, then dropped the little deer-hair frog onto the water, just above the main trunk of the submerged tree. The frog sat there for a few seconds, bobbing in the ripples made by its touchdown, then Dad stripped in some line, swimming the frog back toward us.

From that point, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The water around the frog swelled with the frog sitting directly on top of the bulge, as the silence of the sleepy cove was shattered by the strike of a big largemouth bass. Dad set the hook, and after what seemed to be an eternity but in reality was probably no more than a few minutes, he brought the bass boatside and lifted it from the water. The scale he carried in his fishing vest showed that the fish was just shy of eight pounds.

I was twelve years old when this memorable evening of fishing took place and the event marked my first and most vivid experience with a fly-rod bass lure that my father had created some thirty-five years earlier.

He called the fly the Bucktail Frog.

Dad was a professional fly tyer and I had always known the lure but until I saw it take that trophy-size bass, I saw the Bucktail Frog merely as something Dad made and sold to other fishermen. I had never really seen the frog in action in its true element, but now I viewed the lure from a new perspective.

#### BLONDES & BASS BUGS

Inspiration for the frog came to my father through his early bass-fishing experiences. As a boy, he caught his first bass on a live frog that he had snatched from a puddle in a meadow near a small pond where he fished. So it was not unusual that he would later choose to tie a frog fly for bass.

When dad returned home to West Virginia from the U. S. Army after World War I, he began working on an artificial deer-hair frog. He originated the technique he used to tie the frog and it resulted in a very effective imitation of real thing.

Although his lure became popular with anglers throughout this country and beyond, the technique that he created for tying the frog, and other deer-hair patterns to follow, remained a mystery to most tyers. Even those who have carefully dissected the lure in attempts to discover my father's tying technique

have been frustrated in their efforts. To the best of my knowledge, dad never taught anyone, other than a few family members, his tying techniques.

I began tying flies when I was 5 or 6 years old, but at that age the frog was too complicated for my young hands. Very simple wet flies were my specialty then. As a teenager, I made several attempts at tying dad's frogs but most were aborted. The unfinished products looked like something the cat coughed up.

During my first year in college, I managed to persuade a pretty, blonde classmate into going with me on a fishing trip to a nearby bass stream. This was no small feat, because we both had classes that afternoon, but we somehow managed to get away, catch a few fish and have some fun. My friend was picking through my tackle box, looking at the various lures when she noticed the Bucktail Frogs which, of course, Dad had tied. She commented that they were pretty and asked for one. Naturally, I told her that I tied them, and that the frogs in my tackle box were chewed up from all the fish I had caught on them. So I promised that on my next trip home I would tie one on a safety pin especially for her. My dad had tied some frogs on safety pins for ladies to pin on their blouse or sweater, so I figured I would do the same for my blonde fishing companion.





*Because of the unusual techniques used, tying the Messinger frogs has remained a mystery to most tiers. This version, the Bucktail Popper Frog, uses the same legs and celluloid eyes as the standard frog pattern*

When I returned home, I was at least honest enough to attempt the task myself. I told dad my plan and after making some comment about the frogs "catching more than fish," he agreed to once more offer instruction. He talked me through the thing and, although it was somewhat of an improvement over my earlier attempts, the final product was pretty sorry, it looked nothing like the fly my friend had admired on our fishing trip.

Dad said he would save my backside and he tied a frog on a safety pin for me to give to the young lady. I watched intently as he tied the frog and marveled at the ease and simplicity with which he performed his work. When he was done, dad said to tell my friend to send the thank-you card to him.

When I returned to school the following week I proudly presented the frog to my friend . . . and I told her that I tied it. She was pretty impressed. I gave that frog to my friend in May of 1966. Just five months later, my father died at the age of seventy-four.

Had it not been for my frivolous effort to make an impression on a pretty girl, it is quite possible that the Bucktail Frog, the Irresistible, and several other flies that my father

created would have been lost—at least in their original form and method of construction.

Although I did not master the skills needed to tie the frog with that last effort Dad made to teach me how to tie it, I did finally understand the technique used to tie the frog as he did.

I never saw that girl again after school ended that year, but I will always be grateful to her for inspiring me to spend one last bit of time with my father learning how to tie the Bucktail Frog.

After Dad passed away, I worked every day for months trying to tie a frog just like his. Unfortunately, the family members who dad had taught to tie his flies were no longer living or they had forgotten what he taught them. Throughout this period, I would tie a frog, trim it, form the legs, look it over, and then throw it in the waste can. Occasionally, one would turn out good enough for me to put eyes on it and paint them. Most of the frogs made it only as far as the waste can.

Finally, after many hours at the fly-tying desk, several waste cans full of rejects, I was able to rather consistently produce a frog that I thought might bring a smile of approval to dad's face had he been there to inspect it.

## SPECIAL TECHNIQUES

The most ingenious part of the Bucktail Frog is its legs, or more specifically, the method that my father devised to construct them.

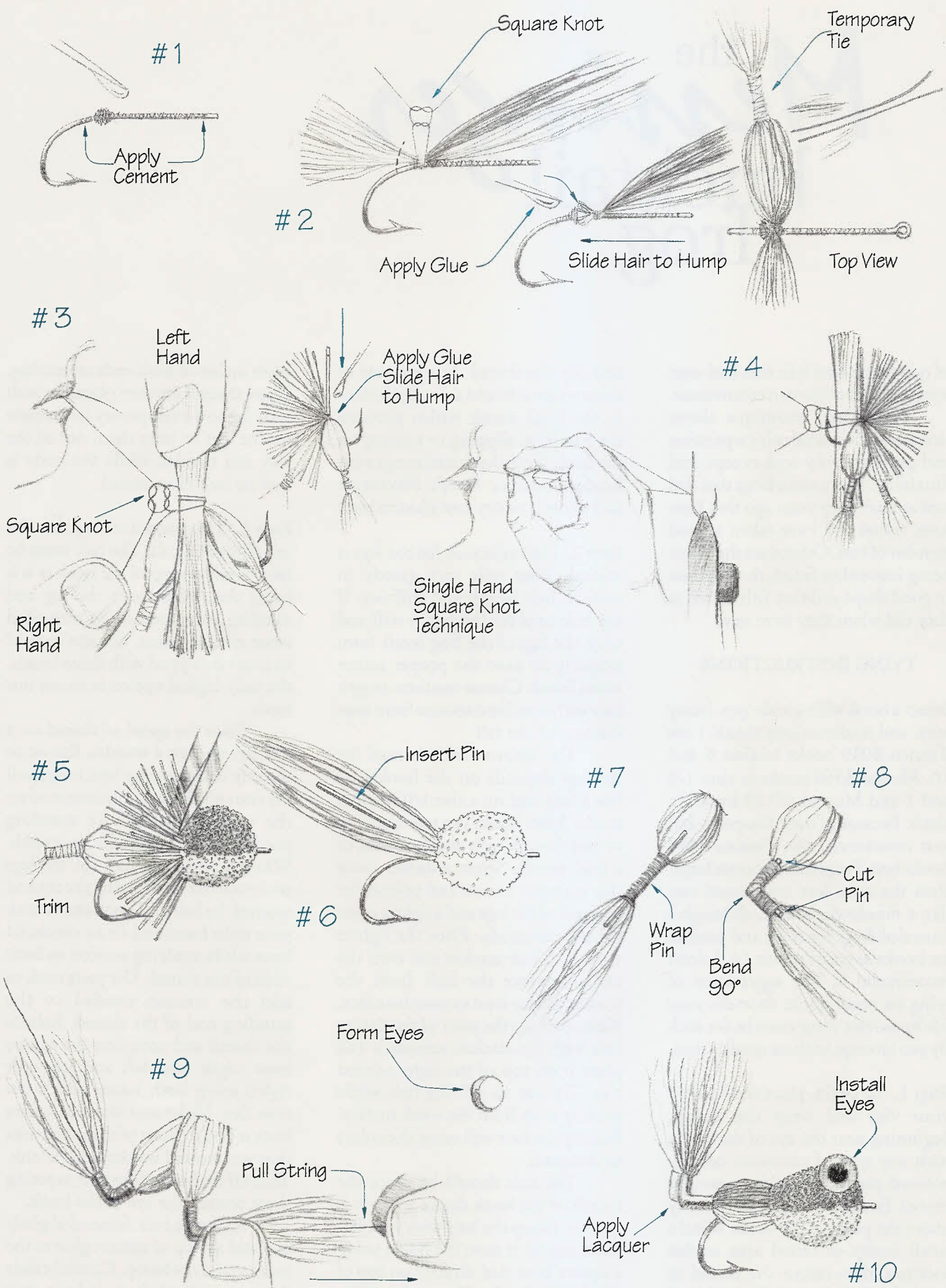
Most frog flies I have seen tied with deer hair have legs that just dangle behind them, imparting little action to the lure as it moves through the water. The legs are tied with the tips of the hair pointing back, away from the eye of the hook.

Dad tied the hair for the legs onto the hook with the tips pointing forward toward the eye, and then he divided the hair into equal amounts and pulled each side back toward the bend of the hook.

The method developed by my dad to tie the body is unique and is nothing like the more common hair-spinning or hair-stacking methods you may be familiar with. Spinning hair onto a hook allows radial color separation but does not permit lateral separation, while stacking allows lateral color separation. I am not sure when stacking was first used to tie hair, but, to the best of my knowledge, it is a relatively new technique.

Dad began tying the Bucktail Frog in the early 1920s when very little instructional information was available about fly tying. The method





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of tying with deer hair that dad used was a product of his own creativeness.

My father's technique allows lateral as well as radial color separation and produces a fly with exceptional durability. I have some frogs that dad tied at least forty years ago that have been fished and have taken a good number of bass. Other than the colors being somewhat faded, the frogs are in good shape and they fish as well as they did when they were new.

## TYING INSTRUCTIONS

Select a hook with a wide gap, heavy wire, and medium-long shank. I use Tiemco 8089 hooks in sizes 6 and 10, Mustad 3366 hooks in sizes 1/0 and 1 and Mustad 37189 hooks in size 6. Because of their sharpness and rust resistance, I like Tiemco 8089 hooks best. Frogs tied on hooks larger than the sizes just mentioned cast like a meadowlark, and, although I have tied frogs for trout and panfish on hooks as small as size 14, I don't recommend it. The aggravation of tying on small hooks shortens your life by at least three months for each fly you attempt in those smaller sizes.

**Step 1.** To begin, place the hook in your vise and wrap the shank, beginning near the eye of the hook, with any type of cotton or cotton-covered-polyester medium-weight thread. End the thread wraps directly above the point of the hook. Wind a small bump or raised area at this location, then return the thread to just behind the eye of the hook and tie it off with a few whip-finish knots

and clip the thread. The purpose of these wraps is to add a no-slip surface to the hook shank which prevents the hair from slipping or turning on the hook. Coat the thread wraps with head cement or Dave's Flexament and allow it to dry (see illustration.)

**Step 2.** Hair selection for the legs is critical. Deer tails vary greatly in texture, hair length and stiffness. If the hair used for the legs is stiff and wiry, the legs of the frog won't form properly or have the proper action when fished. Choose medium-length hair with a resilient texture from near the butt of the tail.

The amount of hair used for the legs depends on the hook size. For a frog tied on a size 1/0 Mustad model 3366 hook, use two bunches of hair that are each about the size of a lead pencil. Select a darker color (for example, brown and yellow) for the back of the legs and a lighter color for the underside. Place the lighter color in a hair stacker and even the ends. Remove the hair from the stacker and lay it on a smooth surface. Next, even up the ends of the darker hair with the stacker, remove it and place it on top of the light colored hair. Try not to roll the hair while picking it up from the work surface. Rolling the hair will cause the colors to integrate.

The hair should be twice the length of the hook shank when it is tied on. Grasp the hair with your left hand and tie it onto the hook, using a square knot tied directly on top of the hook shank. The ends of the thread are trimmed, leaving about

three inches of both ends remaining. These threads are then placed in with each leg and a temporary tie is made on the legs to keep them out of the way and divided while the body is tied on (see illustration).

**Step 3.** This procedure requires the use of three hands. The hair must be held firmly on top of the hook as it is being tied, while both the tag and standing ends need to be controlled when tying the knot. Because most of us aren't equipped with three hands, the only logical option is to use our teeth.

Place the spool of thread on a nail driven into a wooden fixture or directly into the tying benchtop; pull off enough thread to accommodate the task and grasp the standing portion of the thread with your teeth. While holding the hair for the legs with your left hand, bring the tag end around the hair and hook shank with your right hand and tie an overhand knot while applying tension to both ends of the thread. Use your neck to add the tension needed to the standing end of the thread. Release the thread and complete the square knot (right over left and left over right) using both hands which are now free. Make sure that the square knot is tied in front of the raised area that was wound on the hook shank. Trim off the butts of the hair, tapering them toward the eye of the hook.

Slide the hair forward slightly and add a drop of instant glue to the area around the bump. Carefully slide the butt ends of the hair back over the bump and into the cement. Allow



the cement to dry. Use a medium viscosity cement such as Zap-A-Gap CA+. The thin stuff will bleed up into the hair and ruin the legs. Divide the hair into two equal amounts and tie each leg with a temporary tie.

To tie the body, you'll need a vise with a head that can be positioned vertically and then be rotated at least 180 degrees. I use a Regal vise, but other vises have this capability. With the vise head positioned vertically, place the hook (with the legs tied on) in the jaws in a vertical position with the eye of the hook pointing up.

Use strong cotton-covered-polyester button-and-carpet thread for tying on the body. Wax the thread with beeswax or a similar fly-tying wax. Place the spool on a nail to your right and pull off about three feet of thread. Place the thread in your teeth at a point about 18" from its end.

With the back of the hook shank facing you, cut off a bunch of dark deer-body hair that's about one-and-a-half times the diameter of a pencil. With your left hand, hold the deer hair tightly up against and parallel to the hook shank.

With your right hand, bring the tag end of the thread around the hook shank and hair and tie a single overhand knot. During this process, hold the hair tightly against the hook with your left hand while applying tension to the standing end of the thread (see illustration).

**Step 4.** Some practice will be necessary to learn to tie the single overhand knot with only one hand. Hold the tag end of the thread

between the thumb and index finger of your right hand and place the tag end over top of the standing end. With the middle and ring finger of your right hand, reach through the loop and pick up with tag end. Pull it up snugly.

Release the standing end of the thread in your teeth and using both hands, pull the knot up tightly. Make sure the knot is tied right in the middle of the fold of the hair.

Now rotate the vise 180 degrees and cross the standing end of the thread over and behind the hook shank to your left. Do the same with the tag end, crossing it to your right. Pull both thread ends laterally and downward into the hair. This locks in the knot and compacts the hair.

Place the next bunch of light-color hair on the hook, putting it between the two threads as before. Continue building the body in this manner. As more hair is added, some care is needed to work the threads between the colors to insure a clean line of color separation. When you reach the eye of the hook with the hair for the body, tie off the thread with either a square knot or surgeon's knot (see illustration).

**Step 5.** You can tie the frog in any colors you wish. The most popular color combination that dad tied and sold was golden brown for the back of the legs and body of the frog, yellow for the underside of the legs and a small portion of the abdomen where the legs meet it, with the remainder of the belly white. Frogs tied with these colors are called

meadow frogs. Other color combinations are brown, red and white (bleeding frogs), and brown and white (pond frog). Oddly enough, as far as I know, dad never tied a green frog. A green, yellow and white combination, however, makes a nice looking frog.

Remove the frog from the vise to trim it. Proportions are an important part of the frog's design. For the frog to land upright on the water, the belly of the lure should be bulkier than the back. The extra belly weight, especially when wet, helps make the frog fall in an upright position.

Use a pair of good serrated scissors to roughly trim the body shape. Begin by trimming the back. Move to the sides and taper them from the midpoint of the body back to the legs and forward to the eye of the hook. This trimming should result in a body that's diamond-shaped when viewed from the top.

Turn the frog over and trim the belly to a round shape. Curved scissors will help to finish the job. Rotate the frog and look at the outline. Even up the body and trim it to shape in this manner (see illustration).

**Step 6.** At some point, you must decide what you intend to do with the lure. If you plan to fish with it, don't be too particular about the trimming process—as long as the proportions are close, the frog should cast and perform properly. You should be able to finish trimming this type of frog using only scissors.

If you are tying an exhibition-

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grade frog that won't be fished, more precise trimming may be necessary. To produce a collector's version of the frog, I use a razor blade for the final trimming and shaping of the body. A pair of sharp, small, curved scissors will help you to trim the body around the legs and near the eye of the hook.

Cut the temporary tie on one of the legs. Pull the tag end of this thread (with which the legs were tied onto the hook) into the hair, toward the hook eye.

Cut the head off a plated-brass sewing pin (straight pin), place it in the hair and work into the middle of the hair. I use plated-brass pins because steel pins rust and they are difficult to bend (see illustration).

**Step 7.** Use size-A rod-winding thread and begin wrapping the leg at a point about  $\frac{3}{8}$  of an inch back from where the leg meets the body, winding away from the body toward the end of the leg. Make this winding about  $\frac{3}{8}$  of an inch long. Tie a square knot to secure the wrap and clip the thread ends. Repeat this process with the other leg (see illustration).

**Step 8.** To do this, I hold the standing end of the thread in my teeth and while holding the leg with my left hand, I wind the tag end with my right hand.

After winding both legs, use a pair of needle-nose pliers to bend a right angle in the leg at the wrapped area to form the knee. Also, add a slight upward angle to bends (see illustration).

**Step 9.** Grasp the frog by the knee with your left hand and pull the heavy thread with your right hand—this pulls the leg back into the correct position and adds springiness to it. After both legs have been pulled into position, use a small pair of diagonal pliers to snip off the portion of the pins that extend beyond the knee windings. Make sure the legs are in the desired position and clip off the remaining threads (see illustration).

**Step 10.** Apply a coat of black lacquer to the windings on the knees. To give a more finished look to the knees, apply several coats of a clear finish, such as Buglaze. This improves the appearance and keeps the thread, pins and winding in place.

The upward angle, or dihedral, added to the bend of the legs acts as a horizontal stabilizer and helps the frog to land upright on the water.

When the frog is retrieved, the legs make a lifelike kicking motion as the legs are pressed back when the frog is pulled through the water. The legs then spring forward when the movement is stopped, simulating a swimming motion (see illustration).

## MAKING EYES

The final step in completing the Bucktail Frog is the addition of the eyes. I make my own eyes by cutting up a piece of plastic such as the type used for Mustad hook boxes. I cut the plastic into small pieces and place them in a small baby-food jar, then I cover the plastic with acetone and allow it to stand overnight. The result

is a jelly-like substance that is used to form the eyes.

To make the eyes, remove a small amount of the plastic from the jar and roll it into a ball about half the size of a pea. Repeat this process for the second eye and compare the two. If one is larger than the other, snip off a small amount of the larger ball so that it matches its counterpart.

Place a small amount of plastic cement, such as Duco or Fletch Tite, onto the frog's body where the eye will be located. Set the ball of plastic into the cement and with a small, flat stick, work the material into the cement to secure it to the body. Flatten the material with your thumb to form the eye. Repeat the procedure for the other eye. The eyes should extend slightly above the back of the frog. The material will harden in about four hours and it can then be painted.

Apply a coat of gold paint to the eyes and allow it to dry. I use a gold latex paint that can be found at most craft stores. After the gold paint has dried, apply a drop of black lacquer to the center of each eye to form the pupil. I use a  $\frac{3}{16}$ " diameter dowel stick that is pencil length to do this. Dip the flat end of the stick into the lacquer so that only the very end is covered with paint, and lightly touch the end of the stick to the center of the eye. After the pupils have dried, apply a coat of Buglaze to the eyes. This brightens them and protects the painted surface.

A bonus to using the plastic material for the eyes is that as it dries, small gas bubbles form in the material





*A new experimental Bucktail Diver pattern recently developed by the author takes advantage of the Dahlberg Diver style body shape and cemented hair collar that helps to make it dive.*

making it buoyant. This adds to the flotation of the lure.

### VARIATIONS

To make a weed guard, before you begin to tie the fly attach a four-inch piece of 20-pound-test hard Mason monofilament to the hook shank at the point where the legs will be tied on. Bring the winding about one third of the way down the bend of the hook and tie it off. Wrap the hook shank with thread as described before, omitting the bump. The mono tie-in point prevents the legs from slipping down the bend of the hook. Tie in the weed guard at the eye of the hook after the frog's body has been trimmed to shape.

To make a popping version of the frog, do not trim the hair near the front section of the body. Apply Duco cement to the ring of hair that remains after the rest of the body has been trimmed and form the remaining hair into a cup-shaped snout. After the cement has partially dried, trim the upper portion of the cup to form a lip that extends out past the lower part of the cup. A slight outward curve on the upper part of the lip will cause the water to press up against it when the frog is moved rapidly through the water. This lifts the popping snout up and out of the water which makes the pick up for the backcast more quiet and less of a chore. A normal retrieve produces a distinct surface disturbance and popping sound. After the cup has been trimmed and shaped, a few coats of Buglaze applied to the cup

will finish the job and enhance the fly's appearance and durability.


Dad also tied another popping lure that he called a Bucktail Popper. The body and popping snout are the same as those on the Popper Frog, but in place of the legs, the Bucktail Popper has a deer hair tail and wings that set off to the side of the lure behind the body. The action of this lure isn't as good as that of the Popper Frog, but it is less wind resistant and somewhat easier to cast.

Another deer-hair lure that Dad created for bass fishing was the Nitehummer. This fly imitates a large miller or moth. It has a deer-hair tail, tapered deer-hair body, hair wings, and beard. It is especially productive when fished on moving water and is an excellent lure for smallmouth bass as well as for largemouth, and it is also an effective steelhead pattern. When retrieved through the water, the body shape and beard create a waking action. Dad first began tying the Nitehummer in the late 1920s. It was the inspiration for his most popular dry fly pattern for trout, the Irresistible (see Joe's article *Simply Irresistible in the May/June 1991 issue of American Angler for information about this classic pattern.*—ed.). The Irresistible, tied in smaller sizes, has the same tail, basic body shape and wings as the Nitehummer. Instead of a beard, the Irresistible has hackle.

The Bucktail Frog has been around for about seventy years, and it has proven to be an extremely productive topwater bass lure.

Fished in and around good bass cover, it can bring spectacular results.

It is interesting that the lure has been used to catch bass just about everywhere on this planet that bass exist. It has been fished by and written about by many well-know anglers, such as A. J. McClane, Joe Brooks, Ray Bergman and John Alden Knight. Yet, the only Bucktail Frogs that were produced commercially were tied by my father's own hands. Because of the degree of difficulty and time involved in the construction of the fly, the number of lures that he produced annually was very small. Although dad did not make any special effort to keep his tying techniques a secret, few fly tyers over the years have attempted to learn and duplicate his techniques or patterns.

Joe Messinger's Bucktail Frog is one of the very few fly-rod lures in existence today that is truly unique in both it's design and in the methods used to tie it. It represents an important part of fly-fishing history. 



*Joe Messinger, Jr. learned how to tie the Bucktail Frog, Irresistible and other original deer-hair patterns directly from the originator of those flies, his father. Joe displays and teaches these techniques*

*at various seminars and fly-tying get togethers around the country. For those who have a serious interest in tying the Bucktail Frog using these original methods, an instructional video tape in which Joe gives step-by-step tying instructions is available for \$39.95 from Joe at Rt. 9, Box 119M, Morgantown, West Virginia 26505. Joe and his family live in Morgantown, West Virginia.*