



BASS & PANFISH

Column & Photography by Ward Bean

Beaner's Baitfish

This basic streamer has what it takes to catch a variety of our favorite fish.

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY the beauty and practicality of the feather-wing streamers that were originated in the Rangley Lakes region of Maine almost a century ago. Streamers such as Carrie Stevens's Gray Ghost were expertly crafted imitations intended to imitate the forage fish inhabiting the lakes and streams of New England, while her Colonel Bates, with its brightly colored feathers, is an example of an attractor pattern designed to appeal to a fish's anger or curiosity. Native brook trout and landlocked salmon found those streamers as irresistible then as they do today.

Many of the streamers created by Stevens and her contemporaries were intended to represent smelts, darters, baby trout, and other small fish found in the Northeast, not the juvenile sun-

fish, sculpins, and minnows that are the common forage fish where I live in Iowa. So, a couple of years ago, during the first snowstorm of the season, I spent the better part of the day at my tying desk. I was on a mission. My goal was to create a feather-wing streamer using hen hackle and marabou; the finished fly was supposed to resemble one of the common baitfish found in the Midwest.

Designing the Fly

Throughout the development process, I relied on some very useful information about streamer design gleaned from Joseph D. Bates's classic work, *Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing*. In the book's first chapter, "Why Fish Take Streamers," Colonel Bates recorded a conversation between a seasoned angler and a younger fishing companion who was new to the game. The old man,



Tie Beaner's Baitfish in a variety of realistic and solid colors. This cool pattern catches bass and other favorite fish.

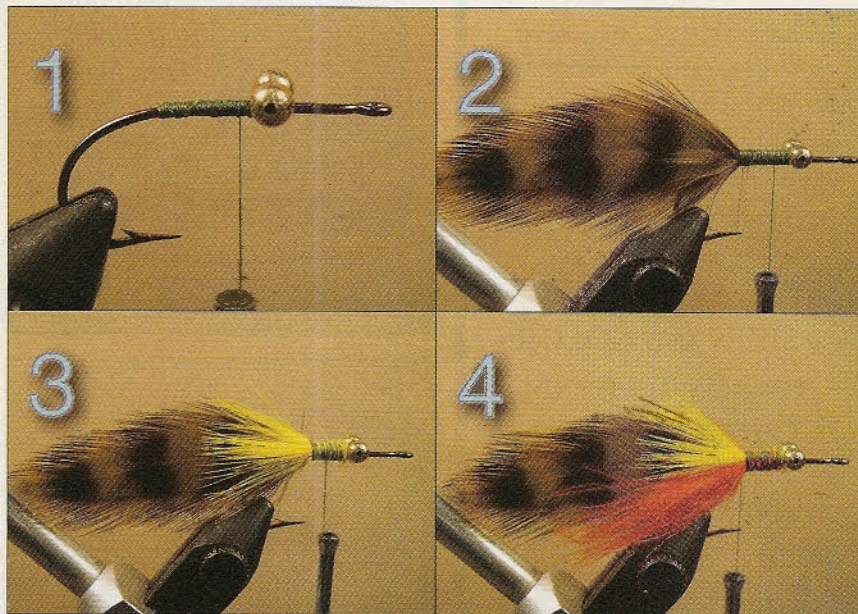
Starting Beaner's Baitfish

1 Start the thread two-thirds of the way down the hook shank. Wrap a neat thread base. Tie on the bead-chain eyes.

2 Select six or eight hen neck hackles for the tail. Align the feathers cupping together with an even number on each side. Tie the feathers to the top of the hook from the bead-chain eyes to the end of the shank.

3 Tie a bunch of yellow marabou on each side of the tail. The marabou tips extend beyond the hook bend.

4 Tie on a bunch of orange marabou for the belly of the fly. The orange marabou extends to the center of the tail.



Beaner's Baitfish is a great pattern for catching smallmouth bass. The author calls smallies "the king of freshwater gamefish."

Packing the Hackle

1 Tie on the first hackle by the tip at the base of the marabou shoulders. The cupped side of the feather faces the hook.

2 Wrap the hackle forward until you run out of usable feather. Tie off and clip the excess.

3 Wrap the thread back over the base of the hackle to force the fibers to sweep back to the rear of the fly.

4 Continue tying on and wrapping more hackles until you reach the bead-chain eyes.



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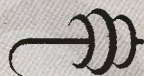


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with years of experience tying and fishing New England streamers, begins by telling the youngster that big fish like to feed on smaller fish, and that's why streamers that imitate small fish are so successful. There are four reasons why fish strike an artificial fly, he said: hunger, anger, curiosity, and playfulness. He continued describing in detail the characteristics of streamers that appeal to those instincts. Size and color are important, he opined, and shape, flash, and action are also essential. But the action of the fly, he said, is the most important ingredient.

Taking the old man at his word, I tried conjuring up images of what my new streamer should look like. After several fits and starts—it took the better part of the day—I eventually came up with a fly that looked like a bluegill with a barred olive body and orange belly. Best of all, I made it using just a few common materials: a hook, thread, hen neck feathers, marabou, bead-chain eyes, and a bit of flash.

After trying several hook styles, I settled for an old favorite—the Mustad 3366. Its relatively short shank allowed me to mount the tail, comprising three matched pairs of hen neck feathers, at the rear of the hook. This helped me to control the length of the fly and eliminate the possibility of the feathers fouling when casting. The remainder of the shank provided just enough space for sculpting the shoulders, belly, cheeks, and head of the new streamer.

After tying the tail in place, I added tufts of marabou on the sides and bottom of the hook to form the shoulders and belly of the fly. Then, employing a technique that I call "hackle packing," I wrapped more hen neck feathers wet-fly style to form the cheeks and head.

Packing hackle is easy. After making the tail, belly, and shoulders, tie on a hen feather by the tip with the cupped side facing the hook. Next, wrap the feather forward. When you run out of usable feather, tie off and clip the excess. Make a couple of thread wraps on the base of the hackle fibers so they sweep back over the body of the fly. Continue adding and wrapping additional feathers, repeating the process until the remaining hook shank is packed with hackle up to the bead-chain eyes.

Completing Beaner's Baitfish

1 Tie on a feather directly behind the bead-chain eyes, and then wrap the thread in front of the eyes.

2 Make one turn of hackle behind the eyes, and then figure-eight-wrap the feather around the eyes. Tie off and snip the surplus hackle.

3 Tie on one last feather and wrap it to the hook eye. Tie off and clip the excess bit of feather.

4 Wrap the thread onto the hackle to force the fibers toward the end of the fly. Wrap a neat, pointed nose. Tie off and snip the thread. Coat the thread head with cement.



I used bead-chain eyes for three reasons: First, I wanted the streamer to have eyes. Second, bead-chain added a bit of weight. But, the most important reason is that the eyes helped to finish the head. Once the packed hackle reached the bead-chain, I tied another feather directly behind the eyes. Next, I moved the thread in front of the eyes, made a figure-eight wrap with the feather around the beads, and continued wrapping the feather toward the hook eye.

To complete the streamer, I added a second feather and wrapped it up to the hook eye. Once the feather reached the hook eye, I tied it off and cut the surplus. I then wrapped the thread back over the base of the hackle fibers so they swept toward the end of the fly. Finally, I wrapped a pointed thread head, tied off the thread, and clipped.

My little streamer was slightly more than 2 inches long, and it definitely had the shape and coloring of a bluegill, but what would it look like in the water, and would it catch fish? It was early in the winter, and the only way I could answer the first question was to tie the fly to a

piece of leader material and swim it in the kitchen sink. The little guy looked great with all its parts providing lifelike movement. Whether it would appeal to the fish would have to be determined later, but I was confident that it met most of Colonel Bates's criteria for a good fly.

Beaner's Baitfish Variations

Over time, I shared Beaner's Baitfish with several of my friends, and we have all taken a variety of minnow-eating fish with it, including black bass, crappie, walleye, perch, white bass, pickerel, and northern pike.

Don't hesitate tying Beaner's Baitfish in solid colors. Even though the baby bluegill, perch, mad tom, and sculpin versions all catch fish, single-colored Beaner's Baitfishes work equally well. My favorite color for smallmouth bass is all white with a bit of Flashabou and red barbell eyes.

Tie supersize Beaner's Baitfishes for targeting toothy northern pike; use size 2/0 hooks, and replace the hen hackle tails with large bass or saltwater hackle. I sent several bigger Beaner's with a friend on a pike fishing trip to Northern Ontario's Pickle and North Caribou lakes. My buddy

Beaner's Baitfish

Hook: Mustad 3366, size 4.

Thread: Olive 6/0 (140 denier).

Eyes: Medium gold bead-chain.

Tail: Olive grizzly hen hackle.

Shoulders: Yellow marabou.

Belly: Orange marabou.

Head and face: Olive grizzly hen hackle.

took several large pike, and the fish didn't shred them. That was good to hear.

When fishing lakes and ponds for bass and panfish, retrieve Beaner's Baitfish with a stripping, jerking action using a 6-weight rod loaded with a 10-foot-long sinking-tip line. (I like to cut the sinking portion back to five feet.) For fishing streams, I prefer using a weight-forward floating line and a Beaner's Baitfish tied with lead barbell eyes to make it sink faster and swim deeper. If you do use lead eyes, reverse the positions of the belly and back colors because the heavier eyes will cause the fly to swim hook point up.

Beaner's Baitfish has worked very well for my friends and me. I know it will work well for you, too.

Ward Bean, who lives in Iowa, is a regular contributor to our magazine. Ward says, "I don't care what anyone says: smallmouth bass are the king of freshwater gamefish!"