

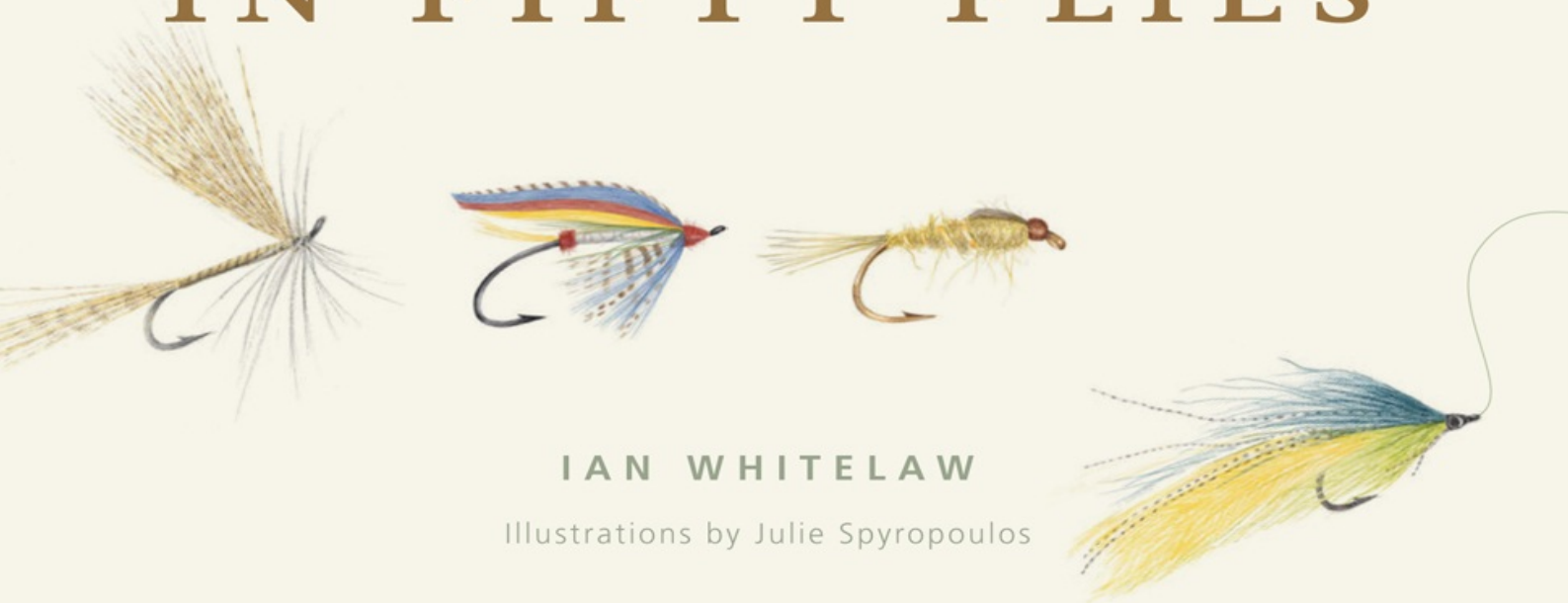
THE HISTORY OF



FLY-FISHING



IN FIFTY FLIES



IAN WHITELOW

Illustrations by Julie Spyropoulos

THE HISTORY OF
FLY-FISHING
IN FIFTY FLIES



DEDICATION

Ian and Julie wish to dedicate this book to their father, Robert Whitelaw, “with fond memories of the many happy hours we spent together on the riverbank when I was a boy,” and “with thanks for all the support and encouragement that you have given me over the years.”

Published in 2015 by Stewart, Tabori & Chang
An imprint of ABRAMS

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Design: Lindsey Johns

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2014942977

ISBN: 978-1-61769-146-1

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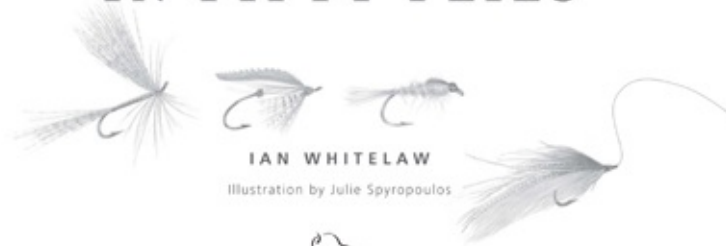
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Illustration by Julie Spyropoulos



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Introduction

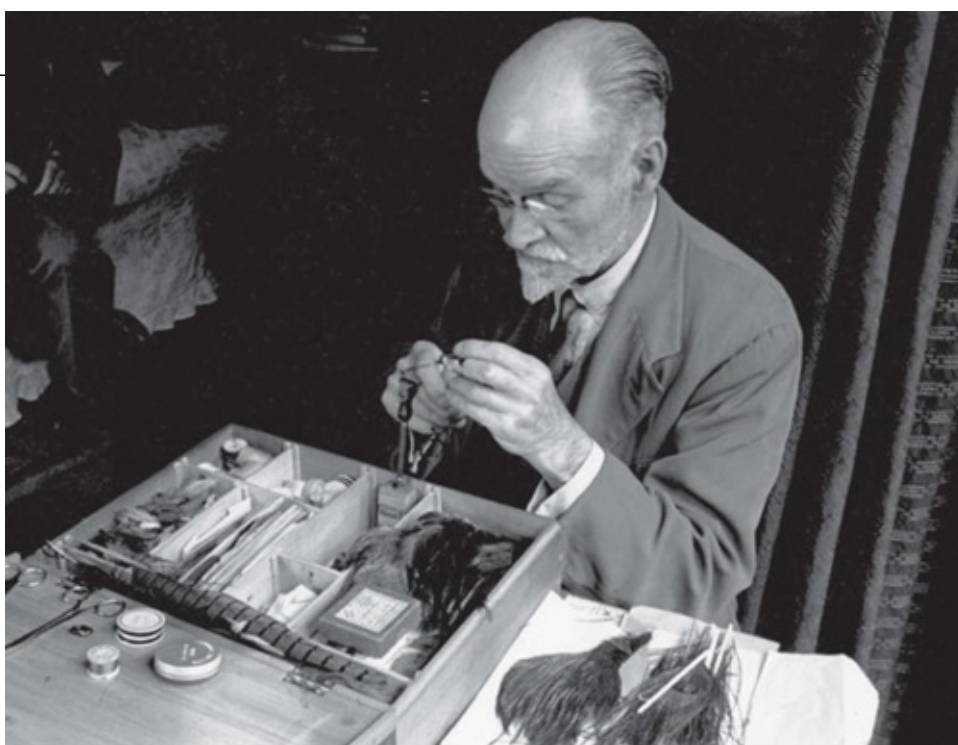
Fishing has often been referred to as an art as much as a sport, and in the case of fly-fishing the artistry extends beyond the practice to the creation of the flies themselves. Carefully designed and tied, often delicate and intricate, the flies are a large part of what makes fly-fishing so enjoyable, so what better way to examine the history of the sport than through a chronological sequence of fifty flies?

NO WEIGHT, NO BAIT

You might ask “Which fifty flies?”, but let’s start with a more basic question. What is a fly? The term “artificial fly” was already being used in the 16th century to include caterpillars and worms, and over the intervening years it has been applied to larvae, nymphs, leeches, baitfish, frogs and, in the case of carp flies, even berries and seeds, so it clearly doesn’t just mean a representation of a flying insect. Our definition is something that is too light to be cast any distance without a fly line, has no food-like scent or taste and is designed to fool a fish into eating it only by its appearance and behavior.



Three of the many plates from Mary Orvis Marbury's Favorite Flies and Their Histories show the color and variety in North American wet flies toward the end of the 19th century. The dry fly was about to change the picture radically.



A flytier's desk in the mid 1940s reveals traditional materials such as pheasant tail feathers, rooster capes and silk tying thread. Within a few decades these would be joined by a host of synthetic materials, opening new avenues for the tier.

HOOKS TO HANG THE HISTORY ON

That narrows it down to just a few thousand patterns, so how have the fifty been chosen? There is no one answer, because they have been chosen for a variety of reasons. Some are milestones in the history of fly tying, some are here as representatives of broad classes of fly, some act as a focal point around which to discuss broader issues within the sport, some are examples of the possibilities opened up by the discovery or invention of particular fly-tying materials, and some allow us to explore the larger-than-life characters who created them. Some are just too effective to leave out. Each of them has a story that extends far beyond itself to include the flies that led up to it and those that it inspired or that embody similar principles or materials. Together they chart the evolution of fly-fishing, the increasing diversity and sophistication of flies, the widening range of fish species that are being caught on the fly, and the geographic spread of the sport.

Above all they chart our deepening understanding of the natural world—of the fish themselves, their behavior and perception, the items on which they feed, their habitats and the ecosystems in which they are a part. This, after all, is the knowledge on which the art and science of fly-fishing are founded and we need as much knowledge as possible, for, as John Steinbeck once wrote, “It has always been my private conviction that any man who pits his intelligence against a fish and loses has it coming.”

“It is not every man who should go a-fishing, but there are many who would find this their true rest and recreation of body and mind. And having...learned by experience how pleasant it is to go a-fishing, you will find...that you are drawn to it whenever you are weary, impatient, or sad.”

W.C. Prime, *Go A-Fishing*



Its buoyancy and versatility have made deer hair a staple in the dry flytier's toolkit since the 19th century. As well as forming many different kinds of wing, it can be spun and sculpted to create shaped bodies and heads.

FIFTY AND THE REST

For each fly we list the year in which it was first tied, by whom and where, and include a watercolor illustration that depicts the fly in its original form. Schematic diagrams show what materials are—were—used to make each part of the fly. Each of the fifty flies is really a starting point, and as the story of each one unfolds, connections with other flies and other flytiers are made, and trends in the practice of fly-fishing appear. The materials used change from basic, locally available fur and feathers to the most exotic and colorful plumage from around the world, then to dyed replacements for endangered feathers and finally to a host of synthetic materials and new breeds of fly.

Changes in the technology of fishing both affect and are affected by the evolution of fly design, and interspersed throughout the book there are “State of the Art” sections that summarize the development of rods, reels, lines and hooks in each of the last three centuries.

Finally, there is a bibliography of fly-fishing books and a list of useful websites, as well as mention of some of the many anglers, flytiers and historians who have so generously helped to put this book together.



Eyed hooks started to become popular in the later part of the 19th century, but eyeless hooks whipped to gut remained in use well into the 20th.

WHEN DOES THE HISTORY START?

No discussion of the origins of fly-fishing can fail to mention the first known description of the use of an artificial fly. Claudius Aelianus (or Aelian), the Roman author of *On the Nature of Animals*, writing in about 200 CE, tells us that in Macedonia (now northern Greece) there is a small fly called Hippouros that looks a bit like a wasp, hums like a bee and is eaten by fish when it lands on the water. Fishermen don't use the fly as bait because “if a man's hand touch them, they lose their natural color, their wings wither, and they become unfit food for the fish.” Instead, the local anglers wrapped a hook with crimson red wool and attached two wax colored feathers from a cockerel's throat (presumably wing feathers). Using six feet of line on a six-foot rod, they cast this out and the fish went for it and got hooked. It isn't clear why the artificial fly is red while the natural looks like a wasp, but this was undoubtedly fly-fishing. It has come a long way since then.

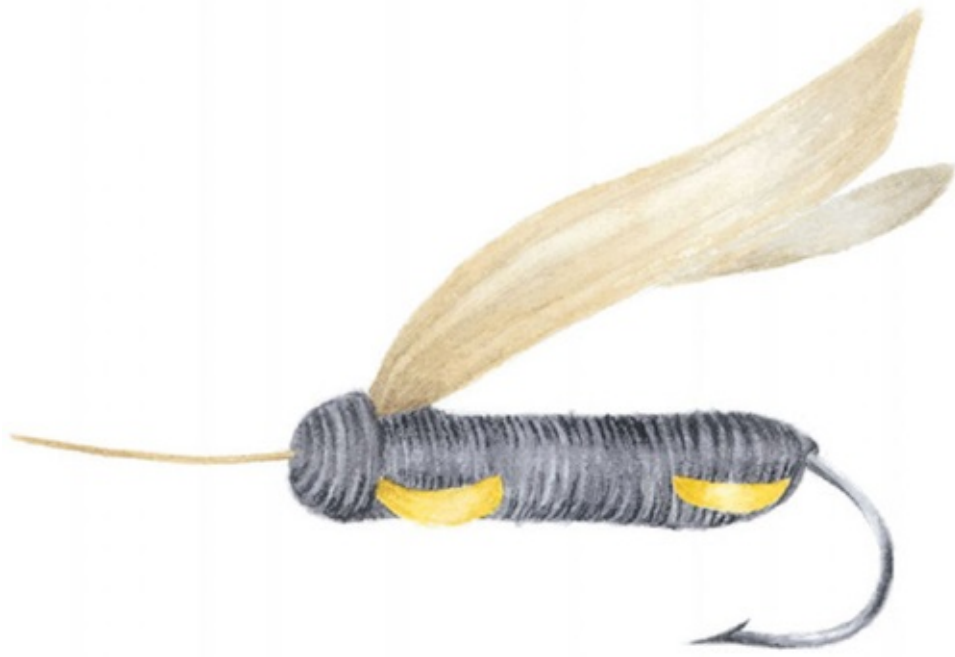
*“No angler merely watches nature in a passive way. He enters into its very existence.” John Bailey, **Reflections from the Water's Edge***



Early morning on a placid lake, a few rises dimpling the surface and no commitments for the rest of the day—what could be better

Stonefly

YEAR: 1496 **FLYTIER:** Dame Juliana Berners **LOCATION:** Hertfordshire, England



The Original Recipe



Hook

Handmade from a bent and tempered needle, with a hand-cut barb



Body

Black wool



Thorax / Abdomen

Yellow wool under the wing and under the tail



Head

Black wool



Wings

Drake feather slips



Tippet

Horse hair whipped to the hook

After brief references to fishing with what we would now call an artificial fly, almost nothing more was written on the subject for the next thousand years. Then, out of the blue, a book was printed in which the fully formed art of fishing with a hook was expounded in extraordinary detail. This very first angling literature included a list of twelve flies and the materials needed to tie them, and we've chosen the stonefly from that list as an example.

THE FISHING NUN?

The first edition of the *Boke of St Albans* (so called because it has no title page but was printed in the English town of St Albans) appeared in 1486 and comprised three essays on hawking, hunting and heraldry. A second edition, published in London ten years later by the renowned printer Wynkyn de Worde, successor to William Caxton, included a fourth essay entitled *Treatyse of Fisshynge wyth an Angle*. Although scholarly doubts about their authorship remain, the essays have been attributed to Dame Juliana Berners of the Order of Saint Benedict, Prioress of the Priory of St Mary of Sopwell, the ruins of which still stand on the east bank of the River Ver, just outside St Albans. The *Treatyse*, which was soon published separately from the other essays, proved to be a best seller and remained in print for the next hundred years.

It is clear from the writing that the author of the *Treatyse* is compiling a compendium of the accepted wisdom of the time and is drawing on earlier European treatises (of which little trace remains), rather than expressing her personal knowledge or opinions. Introducing the list of flies, for example, she says, "These are the twelve flies with which you shall angle to the trout and grayling and dub them like you shall now hear me tell," implying that the twelve are the patterns in use at the time and there are no others.

"Also, you must not use this aforesaid artful sport for covetousness to increasing or saving of your money only, but principally for your solace and to promote the health of your body and specially of your soul." Dame Juliana Berners



A 15th-century angler adds another fish to his basket. There is clearly a float on the line, but it would be several hundred years before a distinction was made between a float rod and a fly rod.

The Twelve Flies According to Dame Juliana

The list, rewritten in more modern English, reads as follows:

March

- 1 The dun fly: the body of dun wool and the wings of the partridge.
- 2 Another dun fly: the body of black wool, the wings of the blackest drake, and the jay under the wing and under the tail.

April

- 3 The stonefly: the body of black wool, and yellow under the wing and under the tail, and the wings of the drake.

May

- 4 In the beginning of May, a good fly: the body of reddened wool and lapped about with black silk, the wings of the drake and the red capon's hackle.
- 5 The yellow fly: the body of yellow wool, the wings of red cock hackle and of the drake dyed yellow.
- 6 The black leaper: the body of black wool and lapped about with the herl of the peacock's tail and the wings of the red capon with a blue head.

June

- 7 The dun cut: the body of black wool, and a yellow stripe after either side, the wings of the buzzard, bound on with barked hemp.
- 8 The maure fly: the body of dusky wool, the wings of the blackest male of the wild drake.
- 9 The tandy fly at St William's Day: the body of tandy wool, and the wings contrary either against the other, of the whitest breast feathers of the wild drake.

July

- 10 The wasp fly: the body of black wool and lapped about with yellow thread, the wings of the buzzard.
- 11 The shell fly at St Thomas's Day: the body of green wool and lapped about with the herl of the peacock's tail, wings of the buzzard.

August

- 12 The drake fly: the body of black wool and lapped about with black silk, wings of the breast feathers of the blackest drake, with a black head.

These same twelve winged flies reappear almost unaltered in Leonard Mascall's *A Book of Fishing with Hooke and Line*, published in 1590, and again in Isaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653), which he comments, "Thus have you a jury of flies likely to betray and condemn all the Trouts in the river."

What is so remarkable about this list, written more than 500 years ago, is that apart from words such as maure (ant) and tandy (tawny) it makes sense to any modern flytier. There is little in the way of tying instructions but the yarn, feathers, silk, thread and even the peacock herl are all there, and several illustrators and tiers have made very plausible attempts at replicating the original flies.

There has been considerable debate about which insects or modern fly patterns they represent and what they equate to but the consensus seems to be:

- 1 February red or march brown
- 2 Olive dun
- 3 Stonefly
- 4 Red spinner or great red spinner
- 5 Little yellow may dun
- 6 Sedge fly / caddis
- 7 Yellow dun or sedge fly / caddis
- 8 Green drake or alder fly
- 9 Gray drake or oak fly
- 10 Wasp
- 11 Grannom or sedge fly / caddis
- 12 Alder fly



In Dame Juliana's day the systematic study of insects was barely in its infancy, but the artificial flies were clearly designed to represent the naturals, such as this broad-headed stonefly illustrated in the classic British Entomology by John Curtis, published in the 19th century.

WET OR DRY?

Looking at the modern version of the list, today's fly-fisher's first thought is likely to be "dry flies" but ~~none of these flies is likely to have floated for long before becoming waterlogged and sinking~~ beneath the surface. The angler would have had to use the rod to keep the fly on or close to the surface. The dressings are suggestive of fully formed winged adults as they might appear at rest out of the water and although some of these species do emerge and become adults beneath the surface, they are not what we would now call emerger patterns. Nor are they likely to have looked like drowned adults, being relatively stiff winged rather than floppy and mobile in the current. Nonetheless, these and other winged wet patterns were to constitute the bulk of the fly angler's armory for the next 35 years!

Admittedly, the adults of some caddis species do swim down through the water to lay their eggs and the hard-winged alder fly does sink if it falls in the river, so some of the twelve could have looked like the naturals, but winged wet patterns were—and still can be—extremely effective.

THE STATE OF THE ART IN 1500

As well as extolling the virtues of angling—and of the angler—Dame Juliana’s essay deals in considerable detail with many practical aspects of “fishing with a hook,” telling the reader when and where to fish, how to prepare baits of various kinds and which baits to use for each kind of fish. Most importantly, she describes the fishing tackle of the time and explains how to make it, giving us a fascinating insight into the angling technology of the time.

The Rod

“And howe you shall make your rod craftely, here I shall teache you, ye shall cut betweene Michelmas & Candelmas a fayre staffe of a fadome and a halfe longe and arme great of hasyll, wyllowe or aspe...”

Or, to put it another way, start by cutting for yourself—between September 29 and February 2—a 9ft (2.7m) staff of hazel, willow or ash as thick as your arm. This staff must be placed in a hot oven and straightened before being allowed to dry for a month. Now bind it to a large and perfectly flat piece of wood and, using successively thicker red-hot metal rods, bore a tapering hole through the staff before placing it in the smoky roof space of your house to dry it thoroughly.

In the meantime, cut a 3ft (90cm) green hazel stick, soak it and straighten it and place it to dry with the staff. When they are both dry, make sure the hazel stick fits all the way into the staff. It will form half of the top section of your rod. The tip half is made from blackthorn, crabtree, medlar or juniper wood. Bind this to the end of the hazel and the two together should fit inside the bottom section. Now shave your staff down to give it a taper, bind it with a metal ring top and bottom (presumably to prevent it from splitting), and fix a metal catch at the bottom to hold the top section inside. Whittle the bottom end of the top section so that it fits inside the top of the bottom section, tie on a loop of horsehair at the tip (to which your fishing line will be attached), and you’re ready to go. This rod, we are told, “wyll be very lyght & nymble to fyshe with at your pleasure....” What’s more, as you walk along with your smooth and tapered staff, the top end of your rod secreted inside it, no-one will guess that you are actually going fishing—unless your broad grin gives the game away.



Undoubtedly foreshortened by the artist, this engraving shows a rod of the period with three sections and a loop at the tip.

Fishing Line

Making your own fishing line is almost as labor intensive, and here the starting point is a bunch of high quality long hairs from the tail of a white horse. (We learn in later writings that the horse should be a stallion or a gelding, as mares urinate on their own tails and weaken the hairs.) Divide this bunch into six equal parts and put one bunch aside to use as tippet. The other five must be dyed in various colors for use in particular seasons and water conditions—green for summer

fishing, yellow for the autumn, russet for winter, brown for dark and sluggish water, and tawny “for these waters that ben hethy or morysh” (heathy or marshy). Dame Juliana provides the recipes and instructions for achieving these colors, using such ingredients as copper, beer, walnut juice and soot.

Even the best individual horsehair has a test strength of little more than 1lb (0.5kg), so she then goes on to explain how to twist and plait the hairs together to make sections of line (later known as links) of sufficient strength, using a device that you can make at home with a little help from the blacksmith. She even prescribes the knots—the water knot and the duchess knot—that you should use to join the links together to create the right length of line. “Thus shall your lynes be fayre and fyne, and also right sure for any maner of fysshe.”

Although fishing reels had been in use in China for many centuries, they did not appear in England until the mid 1600s, so the line, somewhat longer than the rod itself, was attached directly to the loop at the end of the rod. Playing a big fish on an outfit like this would certainly teach you to keep the rod tip up!



Dame Juliana includes an illustration of a device for making horsehair lines.

The Hooks

Like every other item of tackle, hooks are homemade, and Dame Juliana admits that “...the moste subtill and hardest craft in making your harneys [tackle], is for to make your hookes.” She lists the tools that the would-be hook maker needs and then gives a step-by-step account of the process. This involves heating a needle in a fire to make it workable, raising a barb with a strong knife, filing the point, tempering the needle again in the fire before bending it to shape, and then hammering the tail of the hook flat and filing it smooth. Finally the hook is made red hot and quenched in water to make it hard and strong.

Hooks of different sizes are made by choosing needles, or even nails, of the appropriate size, and the strength of the tippet must suit the size of the hook and the fish you are angling for—a single hair for the minnow, two for the growing roach, three for the dace and the great roach, four for the perch, six for the bream and the eel, and nine for the trout, grayling and barbel. The great trout requires twelve hairs, and the salmon fifteen. Horsehair gives way to a wire trace when it comes to the pike.



Anglers had to make their own hooks from needles of various sizes using fairly simple tools.

Palmer-Worm

YEAR: 1600s **FLYTIER:** Anon. **LOCATION:** England



The Original Recipe



Hook

Handmade from a bent and tempered needle, with a hand-cut barb



Thread

Red silk



Body
Deep red mohair



Palmered hackle
Brown red cock's hackle



Rib (optional)
Gold wire or gold tinsel



Head
Black silk

“In March or April, if the Weather be dark, or a little windy or cloudy, the best Fishing is with the Palmer-Worm, which, with the May-Fly, are the Ground of all Fly-Angling.” So said the English physician and author Richard Brookes in his book *The Art of Angling, Rock and Sea Fishing*, written in 1740. This fly was already well established at the time and, in a variety of modern forms, it remains a “go to” fly for trout anglers around the world.

ENTOMOLOGY OR ETYMOLOGY?

The first recorded use of the word “palmer” appears in 1300, meaning a pilgrim returning from the Holy Land carrying a palm leaf, often folded in the form of a cross, as a token of the journey he had made. It later came to mean any pilgrim, of which there were many in Europe in the Middle Ages making their way between the shrines and holy places. By the 1500s the term was being applied to hairy caterpillars that travel in groups, wander in all directions and devour everything in their path. After fly tiers made imitations of the palmer, or palmer-worm, by winding the hackle in open spirals around the body of the fly to re-create the bristling hairs, the term “palmer” eventually came to refer not only to the fly but also to this form of hackle. The palmered hackle is used on a vast array of wet and dry flies today.



Gregarious, ravenous, and apparently aimless, the “palmer” hairy caterpillar took its name from the pilgrims who wandered throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. The palmered hackle is derived from this.

In the 15th and 16th centuries flies were already being tied to represent not only flying insects but also terrestrials such as ants and beetles. Walton, writing in 1653, says that there are too many flies to name “and, yet, I will exercise your promised patience by saying a little of the caterpillar, or the palmer-fly or worm.”

Hairy caterpillars, which frequently fall into rivers and lakes from overhanging branches, were a natural choice for the flytier, and the Palmer-Worm proved to be deadly, tied in a wide range of colors, although Walton’s contemporary, Thomas Barker, also published in 1653, seems to have had a preference for black:

The Mysterious Author

Although much less is known about Richard Brookes than his more famous seventeenth-century predecessor Izaak Walton (see [this page](#)), author of *The Compleat Angler*, the little information we have points to an interesting character. *The Art of Angling, Rock and Sea Fishing, with the Natural History of River, Pond, and Sea Fish* was first published in 1740, and was still in print 50 years later. The frontispiece of that later edition is shown here. Despite its success, it was his only book on the subject of fishing. He was a physician by trade, and his other works included the *History of the Most Remarkable Pestilential Distempers* (1721) and the six-volume work *A System of Natural History* (1763). From the preface of the latter, we know that he traveled to both America and Africa—an unusual achievement for someone in that age. In 1724, he also translated *The Natural History of Chocolate*, from the French *Histoire Naturelle du Cacao et du Sucre* (published in 1719).



The frontispiece of Richard Brookes’s book, originally published in 1740, shows a Palmer in the top-right corner. The terms “drake” and “dun” were used to refer to mayflies and caddis, or sedge, flies respectively.

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