

I began tying flies in 1991 because I couldn't find the flies I wanted no matter where I looked or who I asked. I lived on Western Long Island Sound, where the primary bait for Striped Bass and bluefish - the area's premier gamefish - was adult menhaden (also known as bunker), which are 10 to 15 inches long. I'd seen various bunker imitations, but none bigger than 6 inches. I needed something much bigger than that. So almost from the beginning I experimented with size, and in about a month had four flies of various sizes that I thought could pass for bunker in four different stages of development; the largest of these was a 13 1/2 incher that replicated the adult menhaden.



When I first brought this behemoth to the water, I distinctly remember thinking, "Maybe I'll be able to cast it 30 feet." Hey, everyone I spoke with and everything I read insisted that no fly 8 inches or larger was castable. Case closed! But I had a hunch - and I had to try. I took a couple of false casts, let 'er go, and lo and behold: That fly sailed out ... and out ..., and it landed the full distance of the floating weight-forward fly line - about 90 feet. I nearly fell out of the boat. "They were wrong"!

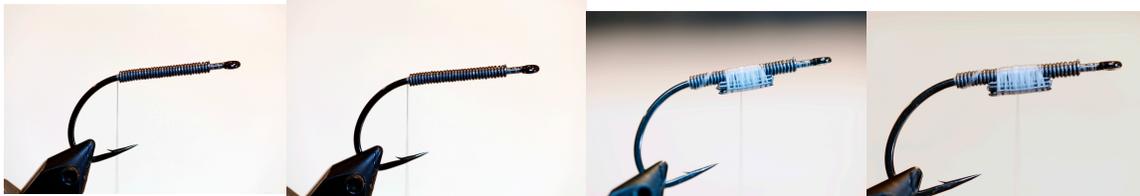
After a couple of weeks of blissful but unreflective fishing I began to wonder why what was happening was happening - why such huge patterns were going so far, so easily. These flies were heavily weighted with two big saltwater hooks, lots of lead wire wrap, a lead keel, connecting wire, 20 water holding schlappen feathers, and the equivalent of a bucktail's worth of bucktail. "This really shouldn't be happening." But it was.

I quickly realized that the weight of the fly had to be a factor in it's castability - an asset, in fact, rather than the handicap we had all been led to believe fly weight was. You needed weight in a big fly to make it castable.

Now, I certainly wasn't the first to tie big flies: Joe Brooks had tied 15- inch patterns in the 1950's, and Bob Popovics had tied a big bunker imitation since then. But these flies I tied were the first giants to be CASTABLE. Lack of weight was the main reason others hadn't been able to cast big flies a long distance before.

There was more. I could see that the mass of that giant fly created a lot of drag as it flew - or attempted to fly - through the air on a cast; I needed to neutralize the effect of that drag with just the right amount of weight. Before my very eyes was opening a whole new world of tying and fishing giant flies.

I began to experiment with different amounts of weight in flies of varying sizes. A few years later, unable to find high-quality large feathers, I moved to synthetics - and specifically Bozo Hair - and if anything, I could experiment with even bigger flies, and I could tie all the big flies much faster. The big feathered fly had taken me three-and-a-half hours to tie; now I was down to 45 minutes. So I could produce more flies faster and easier than ever.



Now I knew the secret: In general, as the fly gets bigger and more wind resistant, it requires MORE weight in it to cast well. By WEIGHT I mean the accumulated weight of materials, absorbed water, hook, connecting wire, weighted wrap, weighted keel (I originally tied in a keel after Tom Piccolo suggested it as a solution to keeping my big flies from rolling on retrieve) , weighted eyes, cone, and more. Yes, all the parts count toward the weight total - but the weight components you can control most easily are the wrap, keel, eyes, and cone. You'll know you've found that optimal weight when that big fly false casts as well as it can.

Too little weight and you'll know it in the false cast: The fly drags visibly - or you can't cast it at all - and the casting loops are very large. Add a little weight - say by wrapping weighted wire around the hook bend - and those loops get tighter and the casting easier. Add a little more weight, and casting gets even better and easier, with controlled and tight casting loops.



Too much weight, and you will ALSO know it in the false cast: once again, the fly becomes more difficult to throw. Loops get bigger, and you have less and less control of the fly. Continue to add weight, and the fly eventually casts like a rock, with little or no control.

Again, it will surprise you how easily even a large fly casts when you strike the optimum



balance between wind-resistant materials and weight. I call this the point of **WEIGHT BALANCE**. The weight-balanced fly casts well and a long, long way.

A good rule of thumb is to use two large metal weighted eyes on a sizable hook to weight balance a synthetic 10- to 14- inch bunker fly. You'll need only one of those eyes with an 8-incher. Seven inches and shorter, all you'll need is the hook. Don't tie too puffy a fly: You want it big but not too wind - resistant. I tie in weighted wire wrapped around the front hook shank with a multilayered weighted keel under this to weight - balance a 10- to 17-plus-inch fly. I tie my bunker flies now with Devlin Blends, a combination of yak hair and flash, but you will do just fine with those weighted hourglass eyes.

Remember, a fly that collapses well when wet, giving you a narrower profile, exhibits less drag when cast and needs less weight to cast optimally than a big fly that collapses very little. Ideally what you want is a big fly that is as light as it can be (often with nothing added besides the hook, the light tying materials, and a little absorbed water), doesn't have too much drag when thrown, and is still weight - balanced. Examples include: the thin-when-wet 10-inch Flashiceiver, a Deceiver with regular Flashabou (thin, not the wider saltwater stuff) in place of feathers; a big Flat-Wing (yes, the hook is vital to that fly's castability); and probably the newer Popovics Beast Fly, with perhaps some added weight for improved casting.

The Flashiceiver and large Flat-Wing are really easy-casting big flies that can actually be thrown long distances with very light fly lines. I proved this at a demonstration for the Salty Flyrodders of New York, throwing a wet 10-inch Flashiceiver the entire 100-foot length of a 4-weight floating line. It was the only time I've ever heard an audience gasp at a demonstration - but actually the cast was easy with that very light and collapsed weight - balanced fly.

Weight - balancing has taken me to extremes. In Northern Canada I fished a 17-inch-long fly tied with synthetic Bozo Hair - on an 8 - weight rod and floating line - in pursuit of big Lake Trout that were feeding on whitefish and Landlocked Salmon. I tied my biggest streamer (Bunker Fly) ever for someone who wanted to troll for giant lakera in Great Bear Lake: This fly, also synthetic, was 27 inches. Overcome with curiosity, I took



it to the water with an 11 - weight rod to see just how far I could actually cast it - and threw the thing 100 feet. Behold the power of weight - balancing!

A weight - balanced fly is not just a fly you can cast far but is also a fly you can control. In demonstrations all over the country to promote the importance of weight - balancing, I have routinely cast 20- to 22- inch flies 140 to 170 feet. I have put 12- inch Bozo Bunkers into the middle of 2- foot- diameter casting rings at 150 feet; I've done the same casting from my knees at 130 feet. I have thrown 14- inch flies 130 feet time and again at demonstrations with a 5 - weight rod. The longest cast I've had measured - at an event at Schultz's Outfitters in Ypsilanti, Michigan, measured by tier Mike Schmidt, using a 10- inch fly, and casting a 7-foot 9-inch Loomis Shortstick 10/11 prototype - was 189 feet.

Yes, weight - balancing opens up a whole new world on the water. In 1991, I was told I couldn't cast an 8 - inch fly; today I cast footlong patterns as far as I can cast any other fly. I cast giant flies with lighter line weights. It is true that I'm a good caster - but what I do illustrates that ANYONE can cast big flies 50 or 60 feet, which is as far as most of us ever need to be able to cast to catch fish. In other words, weight - balancing makes giant flies practical for everyday casting and fishing.

My work with big flies made me realize that every castable fly should be weight - balanced, regardless of size. That hook in a small fly - even a small dry fly - is vital to how the fly casts. The weight of the hook neutralizes the drag in a fly of any size just as it does in a giant fly, although you might have some additional weight in the latter. Notice that as flies get bigger, hook size and wire gauge also increase. Tiers haven't given this much thought, probably because they dismiss any fly that isn't castable as UNFISHABLE. The only flies that "pass the test" are, unbeknownst to the tier, actually weight - balanced.

Recall what happens when you cast a rod - say, a light trout rod - at a fly fishing show. At the end of the tippet is a piece of yarn rather than a fly. You cast that rod, and that small "fly" stubbornly drags; you have a hard time straightening out the leader and maybe even the end of the fly line. Now, you KNOW you cast better than that. You think, "Well, I haven't cast in a while. Besides, all these people are watching me." But the truth is that that piece of yarn is simply too light; stick a hook through it and you could cast it just fine. A hook would have weight - balanced that yarn just like a fly.

Have you noticed that, big or small, some flies just seem too heavy? But if you added just enough wind - resistant materials to some weighted nymphs, for instance, or some sparsely tied Clousers, you could weight - balance these heavy flies and render them eminently castable. By contrast, let's talk about those air - dragging deer hair bass bugs.

Add some weight to those bugs, and you might find that they cast much better - whether or not this adjustment improves their productivity.

Anglers, the fly line is only a PART of a good cast; that fly of yours is not merely "going along for the ride." Weight - balancing, which by now should be AXIOMATIC in fly tying and fly fishing, is a way to think about designing any fly - but it's especially significant when we're talking about tying, casting, and fishing large and giant flies. Weight - balancing enables us to cast flies earlier generations believed to be uncastable. With weight - balancing, ordinary anglers can reach those large fish that feed on large baits. We can cast long distances to billfish and tuna. We have a viable, more sporting alternative to what is now the standard way of fly fishing for billfish, which is essentially trolling for them. When they are properly balanced, we can cast 14- to 24-inch - long flies on an 8 - weight rod, if necessary.

Wahoo, Striped Bass, bluefish, perhaps trevally, and freshwater species such as Lake Trout and muskie: Whatever you're fishing for, weight - balanced giant flies make a fly rod MORE practical than casting giant plugs and even heavy live bait to gamefish with conventional, baitcasting, or spinning gear. Think how heavy a 24-inch plug or live bait is - and how stiff and heavy a rod would have to be to toss it. Conventional gear is much more exhausting to throw than casting a weight - balanced fly of the same size with a standard fly rod.

Now, THAT is revolutionary!

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