

Losing the Barb

By Beth Jappay



"HOLD STILL - THIS WON'T TAKE LONG."

If you are reading this article to learn about the latest research into barbless hooks and fish mortality, sorry to disappoint. While there haven't been any barbed comments or sharp criticisms, I will admit I have been stuck on informational articles lately. Instead, this month I will take a stab at entertaining with keen wit and edged humor. The point of this month's article is to tie in my personal experiences with my opinions about barbed vs barbless hooks.

When I think about barbed hooks, there are two experiences that immediately come to mind—my first fly fishing trip, and my socks getting stuck in the carpet. For those of you who haven't heard my (funny) story of my first fly fishing experience, a quick summary would be:

- 1) In the late 80's I arrived in West Yellowstone, completing a 3 week bicycle touring trip
- 2) My cycling buddy (also a physician) and I hired a local guide to take us on the Madison River, despite learning it is fly-only
- 3) The guide decided that it was a good idea to teach two rank beginners how to cast with barbed flies tied on

- 4) The guide had three opportunities to teach my buddy how to remove a barbed hook imbedded in **my** flesh (hint: the technique involves looping fly line through the bend of the hook, applying pressure, then a sharp tug)
- 5) I have a picture of a fly dangling from my ear as a memento from that trip.



I am glad to have learned this removal technique though, and have since used it twice on myself and once on another. I discovered however, that this two-handed technique requires the help of a second person when the hook is imbedded in my own hand (my fishing partner at that time was too squeamish to do it all herself).

To some the benefits of barbless hooks to fish may be controversial, but to me the safety aspects are not, as I have had personal experience with flies accidentally embedded in my flesh...

And my fishing buddy's flesh...

And my roommate's flesh, I must confess.

I currently have a young man staying with me, and he is very grateful that my hooks aren't barbed. For a while after he moved in, he kept track of the number of flies he acutely discovered in his socks. Or in his sheets. Or in his shorts. He has recently reported to me that he stopped keeping track of exactly how many flies a while ago (after it had exceeded a couple of dozen). You are probably wondering why there are so many flies loose in my house. My answer involves some back story about my attempts to figure out what to do with flies after I have cut them off my tippet.

You would think the answer is obvious: open up the appropriate fly box and put them back in the designated slot. My response is: "sorry, I don't have that much patience while I'm on the water". I can extrapolate that this is a common issue by the number of differing solutions I have seen for sale.



I have tried using the sheepskin patches that came with my vest. I have tried clip-on foam pads. I have tried slotted silicone pads. I just end up having to buy or tie more flies. At one point I drilled holes into an empty Ice Breaker (candy) container (it has a small snap-closed opening on one side and a large one on the other) and hung it on the front of my pontoon's left side bag. I didn't lose many flies with this solution, but my fly line kept getting tangled during my at-times-vigorous double haul.

Instead, several years ago I started dropping the damp fly into the right-hand pocket of my shirt. I will confess that there have been times that I had fished for several days before I sat down with my fly boxes and emptied out that pocket. Of course I try to remember to empty it before I do the laundry, but I'm not always successful. So...visualize opening the door of your washer or dryer and suddenly realizing you forgot to remove that Kleenex from your pocket. Then envision that you had two dozen flies in your pocket instead. Yeah...that. Thus my roommate doing his laundry after mine and finding flies in his socks. Or his shorts.

Not all of the flies that are loose in my house are from the laundry, though. Half of my dining room table is dedicated to fly tying, and I regularly pull back my chair and rescue the flies I find under it. I suspect that most, if not all, of the flies that end up hooked on my socks come from my tying station. My sock issues in particular have driven home the point of using barbless hooks.

In the past I didn't think twice about buying barbed hooks and smashing the barb at the vise, however often the barbs don't end up **completely** flattened. I can report that once that hook is embedded in the carpet, there is a big difference between hooks that are purchased as barbless and hooks with incompletely-smashed barbs. On more than one occasion while walking in my house, my progress has come to an acute stop when my sock suddenly attached itself to the carpet. Removing a barbless hook from a sock + carpet entanglement only requires a simple tug. Removing a not-quite-barbless hook from the same usually involves:

- 1) Pulling my bare foot out of the sock that remains stuck to the carpet
- 2) Getting two pairs of pliers from a drawer
- 3) Getting on my hands and knees, and
- 4) Jamming the hook completely through the sock and carpet, then
- 5) Using the pliers to further flatten the barb, and
- 6) Repeating steps #4 & 5 as many times as needed.

I will confess that on occasion I end up so frustrated that I use a pair of wire cutters instead. I try not to though, as I would then have to make sure that I didn't lose track of the loose point (and the fly would not be usable again).

The situation is a little different when I am on the water and a hook with a not-completely-flattened barb ends up in my wool sweater or glove. I keep a pair of Dr Slick's scissor-clamps on me while I am fishing, but they aren't as strong as pliers. In addition, the success of carefully removing a somewhat-barbed fly from wool requires the use of two hands.

A glove can be easily removed to free up both hands, but removing a wool sweater is more involved.



"WALTON'S COMPLETE BUNGLER."

"CONFOUND IT!—AND THE FISH RISING SO NICELY!"

As a result, I sometimes leave the water with a clipped-off fly embedded in my sweater. I always **plan** on taking off the sweater and removing the fly when I get to my car or to my house, but my memory is not what it used to be. For the most part I discover those overlooked flies when undressing for the night or when I do the laundry. However, on one occasion that discovery was made when trying to get out of my car, and on another when trying to get off of my couch. The result I will leave to your imagination.

Lastly, I feel the need to discuss anchor ropes. I have a Scadden pontoon, and it is designed so that the fly rods lie next to me and stick out of the back. Since I often fish with a second or third fly on a dropper, occasionally a dangling fly will get hooked into the piled nylon rope. Usually I discover this when I switch rods. Unfortunately, sometimes when I drop anchor I will hear the unwelcome sound of snapping tippet and feel the *thwink* of an embedded fly slipping through my anchor lock. Though it involves awkward twisting in my seat, on-the-water removal is often successful if the hook was fully barbless. Not-quite-barbless hooks always result in me rowing to shore, removing my fins, and attempting removal with my Dr. Slick's.

In conclusion, personal safety is an often-overlooked reason to go barbless. If you are an experienced fly fisherman, I assume you have had your own painful encounters with barbed hooks. If not, promoting learning by sharing my experiences is one of the points of this month's article.