

Fly Concepts

Dave Bradley considers flies as concepts rather than just patterns in a fly box.



Selecting appropriate flies can help target different species in the same areas – both the tarpon (above top) and threadfin were actively targeted.

Saltwater fly fishing worldwide has a rich and progressive history. The literature is extensive and much of that has focused on fly tying. Most of these writings focus on often intricate details of new or reinvented patterns designed for a specific location and species.

These patterns end up in our fly boxes through repeated exposure and word of mouth and those that prove successful for us end up as our favourites. Thus we end up with boxes of flies that we view as patterns, rather than concepts. What is the difference? Simply put, a pattern is a combination of materials tied on a hook in a specific way. A Clouser Minnow is a pattern that we all know. We know it is an effective pattern and many of us use it.

A fly concept however, is a vastly more powerful tool as it allows us to understand what the elements of that fly are that are attractive to fish under different conditions, and therefore how it can be best applied or improved, for any given situation. A Clouser Minnow is also a concept fly. A full dress Clouser Minnow tied using bucktail is a vastly different fly to a sparsely tied synthetic Skinny Clouser, although both are still Clouser Minnows.

Understanding the physical characteristics and what those two different flies achieve underwater means the angler is able to adapt the concept to suit the conditions, rather than just tie on a pattern they have caught fish on before.

To fully utilise the concept fly as a fly fishing tool, it is important to become an observer of the natural world, and to understand the key triggers of flies.

OBSERVATION

Spending time on the water is ultimately the best and quickest way to learn the movements and habits of your target species and their prey. Keen observers study both the physical and biological environments they are in. Tidal ranges, movement of sandbars and channels, locations of prey habitat, current and wind effects are all critical observations of the physical environment we should all be making.

Intimately linked with this is a keen observation of the biological environment. Observing fish, as well as the baitfish, crabs and yabbies they feed on, and how they respond to changes in the changing physical environment allows you to develop a greater understanding of where target species are likely to be under a range of different conditions.

Prey targeted by your local species in your preferred waterways will vary greatly in size and shape. These different bait sources, and their differing profiles, are likely to be found in distinct areas within a system, thus one fly will not always be appropriate for fishing an entire system, no matter how small the system might appear. For instance, most productive flats around the country, including southern climes, hold significant populations of invertebrates, most notably yabbies and crabs. When fishing these shallower areas, patterns designed to imitate the general appearance and habits of yabbies and crabs are likely to be very effective. However, the edges of flats that drop off into deeper water channels are usually patrolled by small to medium-sized baitfish. Thus a very effective yabby pattern on the flats

is likely to be superseded by a baitfish pattern such as a smaller whitebait or larger garfish pattern (depending on location) fished in a channel mere metres from that flat.

Fortunately many of our saltwater species are opportunistic feeders happy to snack on a wide variety of morsels, which is why flies chosen on the basis of a pattern continue to work. This is especially true if casting to a fish patrolling shallower areas or held up in an ambush point as they are actively feeding and will often eat almost anything.

It is when conditions appear to be less than perfect or you are casting to areas you know will be holding fussy fish that you need to put a little more effort into thinking about the bait you could be imitating.

KEY TRIGGERS

Fly concepts revolve around assembling and adjusting key triggers in a fly to maximise the probability of a response under different observed conditions. Luckily, there are only a few key triggers, and include profile, eyes, sink rate, colour and attraction (flash, rattles & water pushing ability). By understanding these key triggers you will be able to select flies that most effectively utilise the prevailing environmental conditions and tap into the trigger responses of predators.

PROFILE

The profile of a fly is perhaps the single most important consideration in designing and choosing a fly. Flies that differ in colour, have no eyes or no rattle will still catch fish, but flies that have the wrong profile of the bait they are trying to imitate are often less effective.

A very general rule of thumb for fly selection is that the dirtier the water, the bulkier the profile should be. This has two basic reasons. Firstly, dirty water environments often hold mullet, a major food source especially in tropical waters. More importantly though, in dirty water, the ability of fish

to see their prey is reduced by the limited visibility, so they rely more on vibrations picked up by their lateral line. Flies with a bulkier profile will push more water, creating larger pressure waves and allowing fish to 'feel' the presence of the fly more easily. Barramundi are a classic 'feel' feeder, hence the popularity of water pushing patterns such as Pink Things, Gold Bombers and Fat Boys.

In clear water, bulky flies often scare fish. In these circumstances, patterns that create a suggestion of movement are often far more effective. Synthetic materials in natural colours are excellent for creating flies that appear big, but don't, if that makes sense. Flies tied with materials such as hackle or bucktail create a defined outline underwater. There is a visible edge to the profile that is easily seen. Synthetics, tied sparsely at least, create a profile that one can see through, with no really defined profile.

Both these two profiles are important under certain conditions. Watching baitfish under a blue sky day over a relatively shallow substrate, one never really sees the whole profile. This is especially true when looking at bait underwater. Generally you see the head, and then parts of the body as the bait moves. Thus a synthetic imitation is more likely to mimic that profile than a natural imitation. Watching that same bait under lower light conditions changes things entirely. In lower light conditions, and if the bait is viewed from below in particular, the profile is far more defined, suggesting natural flies might better mimic what predators see.

EYES

Eyes are the subject of some great on-water conversations. Some believe in them, some don't. It is generally the lazy fly tyer that doesn't like them! My own belief is that eyes significantly improve the effectiveness of a fly.

Choosing the right size and colour and then placing the eye in the right position can make all the difference to the appeal of almost all flies. To meet these requirements pay attention to the baitfish in your region and then look to mimic their proportions as closely as possible, particularly eye size and

Flats, dropoffs, current lines, mangroves, rocks and tide changes – these are all different habitats and all potentially require different flies.





location. Squid, for instance, have their eyes set well back on their body. Some mullet species have their eyes almost on top of their head. Most baitfish have something that sets them apart. Imitating that difference will improve the effectiveness of your flies.

SINK RATE

Sink rates of flies range from zero (poppers, Gurglers and Crease flies) through to flies with tungsten eyes the size of car tyres that sink like a stock market crash. The overarching goal of the fly's sink rate is to maximise the amount of time the fly will be in the effective strike zone. As an example, while the Clouser Minnow is a classic pattern, fishing one in shallow water over a heavy weed bed would require very fast strips to keep the fly from fouling if it was weighted with lead eyes. If fish were readily rising out of the weed bed to attack the Clouser then it is an effective choice. However, if the fish require a slower presentation, then changing to a fly with a slower sink rate, such as a Lefty's Deceiver, or even a Gurgler if the water is shallow enough, will allow for a slower retrieve over the weed bed. On the other hand, if fish are hanging at the bottom in ten metres of water, using a gurgler will give you casting practice and little else. A heavily weighted Clouser or Deceiver would be a far better choice in this scenario.

While sink rate primarily provides an avenue to present the fly at the depth the fish are most actively feeding, there are also scenarios where sink rates aid in providing realism to the action of the fly. Schools of busting tuna, Australian salmon, queenfish, trevally and many similar feeders are a wonderful sight for any fly fisher. These fish actively chase baitfish by herding them up against something from which they cannot escape. In many cases, this means being herded to the surface in deeper water. Bait can't swim in air, so they swim at the surface while predators feed from below. During these attacks, many bait are stunned and slowly fall through the bait ball to the waiting predators below where they are eaten. When mimicking this it is important to note that it is not a very quick sink rate. A sparsely tied, but heavily weighted Clouser that sinks at a foot a second will raise fewer strikes that something like a Surf Candy that sinks slower with an enticing wobble action on the drop.

While surface flies are perhaps the most exhilarating to fish, their applications are generally limited to fish in shallow water, or high up in the water column and actively feeding.

The Red Deceiver (top) and Clouser (3rd from bottom) are excellent flies for low light conditions as red, like black, provides a solid contrast. the Deceiver would be fished higher in the water column as it is not weighted like the Clouser.

The FPF (2nd from top) and Pink Gums (3rd from top) feature prominent eyes.

Bob Popovics' Siliclone (2nd from bottom) is a classic bulky, shallow water fly. using a jig hook it rides hook point up, making it slightly more weedproof.

An adaptation of an Ultrashrimp features a prominent egg sac (bottom).

While sink rates can be manipulated by using different fly lines, adding extra weight to a fly is the more common approach to achieving faster sink rates within a given fishing zone. Getting the amount of weight correct is dependant on the size and bulk of the fly and the sink rate you are trying to achieve. Correctly positioning that weight is something that is also critical, but often overlooked. Weighting a small baitfish pattern at the rear of the hook will cause the fly to suspend and sink backside first. This doesn't happen very often in the natural world. Weighting the pattern from the head to the middle of the fly will cause that slightly head-first, fluttering motion so typical of stunned baitfish. Flies designed to swim hook point up require much less weight to do so if the weight is applied directly opposite the hook point or as close to it as practical.

Weight placement and quantity is not solely confined to baitfish imitations though as these are also critical considerations for correctly fishing crab and shrimp patterns designed to sink to the bottom hook point up before being retrieved or hopefully taken by the fish it was cast to. Having these type of flies tied in several weights is important when attempting to fish them in varying conditions. A lightly weighted shrimp pattern fished on a shallow flat with limited current movement will behave differently than if fished over a deep channel in a strong current. A much heavier version of the fly would be needed in that faster current to ensure the action is correct. Water depth, current and the speed the fish are travelling at will determine the amount of weight you may need. You may also may to lead the fish differently if you are not getting the fly to them.

The use of materials can also make considerable difference to the sink rate of a fly. Most synthetic materials do not absorb water and therefore sink quicker than natural materials. Synthetic materials often appear to remain bulky in the water while many natural materials will slim down.

A sparsely tied synthetic fly will have a reasonable sink rate and often all that is needed to increase its sink rate significantly is to use a heavier hook gauge. Conversely, natural materials or foam (for surface flies such as Crease flies and Gurglers) are often used to create buoyancy.

COLOUR

There is much debate over what fish see, and how they see it. It does appear that fish, on the whole, see differently to us. Be that as it may, fish definitely respond to different colour flies under different conditions.

As a general rule of thumb, the clearer and shallower the water, the smaller and more drab the fly should be. This reflects the dominance of smaller baitfish, prawns and crabs often found in the habitats.

Colour selection is something of a personal choice too, with many anglers choosing a different colour fly under the same



TOP: A fly tied with marabou, plastic eyes and no flash is designed to hover over weedbeds in clear water – perfect for slow retrieves. Unweighted 3D flies are also suitable for slow retrieves in shallow water, but give off a bigger signature, so are effective on murkier flats.

scenario. In many cases this increased confidence is critical for ensuring correct presentation, and fish will eat different colour flies if they 'dance' properly.

Under some conditions though, colour does become significant. In very dirty water, dark or highly reflective colours provide the necessary contrast with the surrounding water to be seen by predators. In other situations, there does seem to be something in the theory that a bit of contrast doesn't hurt. Often that means a predominantly lighter coloured fly with a darker overwing, or bright eyes, or even a touch of red to mimic gill covers. The theory is that this contrast is more readily seen in the water and gives predators a target area to aim for.

ATTRACTION

The triggers outlined so far are designed to mimic key characteristics of the prey items of our target species. Attraction, however, is designed to add a little something extra to the pattern; to make it stand out just a little. In nature, the weak (read something that looks and acts just a little bit different) always get eaten first.

There are a number of subtle techniques that can be used to make flies look normal, but different. Two in particular stand out: flash and rattles.





TOP: The same fly pattern tied in different colours are effective at different times of the day.

ABOVE: Drab, hackled flies with no additional weight are excellent for ultra-shallow presentations in clear conditions to spooky fish.

Flash is used in many flies from the subtle to very bold, from a simple lateral line to the entire fly tied with flashy materials of different colours. Famous flies like the Flashy Profile and Gold Bomber, which have as many variations as the locations and fishers that use them, are a perfect example that in the right situation flash is a must as an attractant. As yet another general rule of thumb, the shallower and clearer the water, the less flash one should use. Flash is designed to mimic the panicked movement of a baitfish. In shallow water, too much panic might appear to a predator to mean this baitfish is far more concerned about something other than me eating it, so I might as well be concerned too and get the hell out of here. In deeper water, where predators are more comfortable with their surroundings, that same amount of flash might be the trigger for a quick snack attack.

Ken Culgin ties a fly where he adds flash first then the rest of the fly is tied fairly sparse, Ken believes this is a way of adding flash to suggestively imitate the lateral line. A more confronting technique is the very popular use of 'flash tails'. Many baitfish patterns, in particular Deceivers, Clousers, Things and Whistlers, greatly benefit from extending the flash past the end of the fly, creating a tail comprised entirely of flash materials.

Rattles add an audible aspect to a fly's overall seduction. There are several ways of attaching rattles; bound directly onto the hook shank, generally at the beginning of the tying process or bound to a piece of mono or wire which is then tied to the hook shank allowing the rattle to swing in behind the hook, perhaps adding to the noise level of the fly but probably susceptible to damage if coming into contact with hard surfaces or crunching mouths.

We assume the underwater environment is a quiet one – nothing is further from the truth. Anyone who has freedived will know how noisy it is down there, especially over reef structures. Also remember that noise reaches us through sound waves, something the lateral line of a fish is well accustomed to picking up on. That is why rattles are an integral part of the dirty water fly fisher's arsenal – it adds another element to the profile and contrast of flies typical of those fishing scenarios.

CONCLUSION

I am positive that the single most important factor in fly fishing is presentation. Leading a hungry fish correctly is often more important than having precisely imitated a particular bait pattern. However, selecting a fly for a particular scenario is also important. If I know I am using the right fly, and presenting it properly, I fish with much confidence. Remove either technique or tool and my confidence drops.

It is important to remember that while we have discussed these major elements (sink rate, profile, eyes, attraction and colour) independently, they should all be considered closely linked. The fly that matches the most characteristics is the one that should be considered first. Under certain conditions one element might be wholly dominant over others (the action of a popper fished at night is of paramount importance, the colour and eye placement are not) but in the majority of situations, a fly selected should mimic as many elements of the target prey as possible. Remember though, nothing in fishing is set in stone, and some days you might find that fish only want a fly that resembles a pink dice.

On the whole however, starting out with a plan to understand the feeding triggers of your target species through observation of the physical and biological environment and then selecting elements in your fly to stimulate a feeding response based on those observations, will make you a better angler. Flies can be patterns, but they are far more powerful as concepts.