

Fly Tying Bench — Eyes On Flies by Charlie Most

Some of the country's best known fly-tying anglers add prominent eyes to many of the flies they create, and who am I to differ from the likes of Lefty Kreh, Dave Whitlock and such. Lefty, in fact, feels that predator fish target the highly visible eyes of most baitfish.

But putting eyes on flies is hardly new. Back when so-called Maine streamers -- the Black Ghost, Gray Ghost, Silver Darter, and others -- tied primarily for land-locked salmon but good also for trout and bass in other areas, many of them had special feathers to suggest eyes.

These feathers, from the jungle cock birds native to India and other Asian countries, have an enamel-like spot suggesting eyes when tied in at a fly's head.

But demand for these feathers for streamers, salmon and steelhead flies led to near extinction of this bird, and importing them is now a Federal offense.

Many fly shops carry various stick-on eyes in both flat and three-dimensional shapes that generally do a good job. The flat eyes do sometimes present a problem.

The normally rounded head of a fly takes those stick-on eyes just fine but when you add protective coatings like Fleximent or Sally Hansen nail polish, solvents in these glues soften the stickum under the edges of the eyes and the edges then flatten out, no longer contoured to the fly's head. Un-sightly but there's a good way to prevent this.

I use acrylic paints for the eyes on most baitfish flies and bugs. Acrylics are water based -- no solvents -- and you can get a clear varnish of the same brand. This varnish won't unglue the eye edges and when dry, adds a protective finish.

But stick-on eyes are not always available in the sizes and colors I like. I've now use painted-on eyes almost entirely. Being water based, acrylics clean up easily and any mistakes are easily corrected. Just use a wet Q-tip or a wet bit of paper towel to wipe out any goofs.

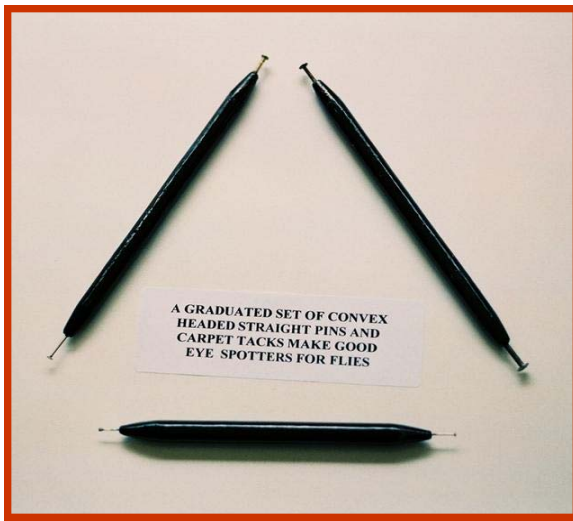
Michael's arts and crafts stores carry a line of acrylic paints and varnish called Ceramcoat that has worked well for me. A seven ounce bottle to paint a couple of thousand eyes cost less than \$2.00, and are sometimes on sale for \$.90.

Articles on using painted eyes often suggest a nail head, cut off rounded toothpick, various sizes of drill bits, or other tools to spot eyes. But most such "spotters" are flat and if pressed too hard while spotting leaves an amoeba-like shape rather than the round one you want.

Using pins and nails with rounded convex heads almost always produces a nice, round spot. And to have these handy, I mounted various pins and nails on wood dowels. I tapered the ends of six-inch pieces of ¼-quarter-inch dowel leaving a small flat spot on the end. Tiny drill bits for a Dremal Moto-tool centered holes in that flat spot and the spotter nails were then epoxied in. If the fit is too loose, wrap the nail with fly thread. If too small, move the drill around for a bigger hole.



Fly Tying Bench—Eyes On Fliescontinued



Straight pins have those convex heads and my smallest spotter uses the finest straight pin I could find which I honed even smaller. On the other end, I inserted a regular size straight pin. The second spotter “handle” has a large straight pin on one end and a small upholstery tack, convex-headed of course, in the other end. The third handle has two larger sizes of similar upholstery tacks. These graduated sizes will make any size eye I want, plus the contrasting iris.

Applying painted eyes requires a steady hand and a gentle touch. You barely touch the spotter to the paint and then barely touch it to the fly or bug head. You then wait about ten minutes and use a smaller spotter to again lightly touch it

against a contrasting paint and then barely touch it to the center of the previously painted eye.

And to steady your hand, just hold the lure in your left hand, put the right or spotter hand against the left hand and then touch the spotter into place.

The most productive way to do all this is to tie the flies and then set up a sort of assembly line. Just paint all the eyes first and by that time, depending on how many, that paint should be dry enough to add the contrasting iris.

Once the eyes are complete, let them dry a half hour or so and then use a fine artists paintbrush to coat the head with the acrylic varnish. This protects the eyes from any solvents in the Sally Hanson, which is then applied after the acrylic varnish dries.

I could be accused of making a fetish of this as I usually cover the thread of a fly head with two coats of Fleximent, which penetrates to lock the thread wraps together. I then apply a coat or two of the acrylic varnish, or a chosen color acrylic paint if wanted, to smooth up the thread wraps. After this dries, I spot in the eyes which then get another coat of acrylic varnish. When all these acrylic coats dry, about 30 minutes or so, cover the head with Sally Hansen “Hard as Nails” which lives up to its slogan.

Painting eyes on your streamers, bucktails and surface bugs adds considerable realism, provides a visible target for the predator fish we seek, and give a professional finish look to your flies. I think you’ll like the results.*Charlie*

