

Tackling his catch



Josh Fortin with a brown trout he recently caught

Josh Fortin has been making his own lures for 30 years and fishing since before he can remember. “My parents have pictures of me,” he said. “We’re going fishing and I’m in diapers.”

His whole family consists of fly fishers (fishing using a rod and bait), so it is only natural that Fortin would become one, too. Fortin lives in Lock Haven, PA, and is lucky enough to be near many creeks, dams, streams and lakes that make for great places to try to catch fish. While he likes to go with family and friends, his favorite fishing companion is his pug-chihuahua mix, Loki, who loves watching Fortin catch fish.

While many fishers buy ready-to-use bait, some take up the art of making their own lures, referred to as tying flies. Homemade bait is typically made of such materials as hair, fur and feathers, and attached to a hook. These materials are used to trick fish, such as trout, into thinking they are food, typically flies, other insects, and their larvae.

The seven-year carrier attributes much of his general fishing and tackle knowledge to John Fabe, a family friend and fellow postal worker. “He’s a legend from the Muncie Post Office,” the Williamsport Branch 50 member, said. “He’s the one that really taught me how to tie flies, tie leaders, assemble all the layers.”

One particularly notable lesson that Fabe gave involved how to hand tie leaders. A fishing leader is a short strand that goes between the main line of the fishing reel and the hook or lure itself. A leader is used in bait fishing to make it difficult for fish to bite through. Fortin explained that to make the line sink to the bottom for trout, he starts with a very heavy, thick line at the bottom then ties lighter and lighter line until “you can barely see it; it’s like a hair, basically.”

Although Fabe gave him the basic knowledge that he needed to start hand-making bait, Fortin said that he learned a lot just by seeing what works and what doesn’t for each type of fish.

“There’s really no true better way of tying a fly,” Fortin said of his handmade approach. “There’s thousands of different types of flies and dozens of ways to tie each one, and it basically all [depends] on the water temperature, the water clarity, the moon phase, how warm it is outside, the time of the year, and anything that’ll make that fish

Fortin made some of his lures into a clock.



want a certain fly or a certain color or a certain size.”

So, for Fortin, it’s more about knowing what flies coincide with which conditions than about specific techniques on how to tie flies that make successful handmade tackle.

Understanding conditions is especially important when dealing with trout, which Fortin calls “the snobs.” Trout like to go with the safe option. One of the things they eat when they are hatching are caterpillars in their cocoons, and if they see anything that doesn’t look right, they won’t touch it.

“When the fish sees thousands of the same exact fly drifting by them, and then they see one that looks totally different, they know, OK, that one ain’t no good,” Fortin said. “I’m eating all of these ones. You’re different. You’re poisonous. You ain’t no good.”

For example, Fortin developed a fly that would mimic the caddis larvae that trout eat when they are hatching. He used part of a metal coffee straw, dubbing and dubbing wires—a mix of natural and synthetic hairs used to make fishing tackle—to mimic the cocoon. Trout eat the whole cocoon, “grub and all,” he said, whenever the water is above 50 degrees and it is hatching season, so from that fact his idea was “hatched.”

“A lot of guys will catch these and break them open and pull the grub out and put that on the hook and use that,” Fortin said. However, Fortin’s design is durable enough to be used multiple times and doesn’t disturb the live cocoons.

“You’ve just got to learn to match the hatch,” Fortin said, which he always

tries to do with his trout flies.

Although live flies in the wild don’t typically have fur, Fortin’s do. He explained how he made a blue dun fly, which is commonly used to catch trout. He ties the tail on, which is made of dyed calf tail hair, and then ties the wings on. There are several other flies that he makes that use some type of synthetic or animal fur as well. With this technique, he is able to closely match the look of a live fly.

There is no schedule to memorize or website that he checks to find out when certain flies or insects will hatch—he simply brings about a half-dozen flies with him to the water based on the conditions that he is able to check beforehand. When he gets there, he finds out which flies or insects are hatching that day.

As for bass, one of the most common types of fish in the Lock Haven area, they aren’t as snobby as the trout, and that isn’t necessarily a bad thing, Fortin said. He doesn’t need to “match the hatch,” as he does with trout, which allows Fortin to be a bit more creative with his tackle. Bass aren’t very picky and will be interested in anything that might be food. “Bass can be trash-can eaters,” Fortin said. To lure bass, he creates swim baits, which come as 3- to 4-inch unpainted plastic fish.



Fortin is a member of Williamsport, PA Branch 50.



The king salmon he caught in Pulaski, NY

The 27-pound, 52-inch muskie Fortin caught while on a fishing trip with his family in Canada



He spruces them up by using colorful neon oil-based paint to hydro dip them in swirls of colors, some of which are shiny and metallic. These colors are obviously not found in the wild, but that doesn't matter to bass.

He also makes wooden flies for bass because bass are interested in things bobbing at the surface—they think it might be an injured fish. Because wood floats, it is the perfect material for bass. The muskellunge fish, nicknamed “muskie,” also are often interested in wooden flies, because “muskie love to eat, just plain and simple,” Fortin said, so they will be interested in just about anything.

Some of the other fish native to his area in Pennsylvania are walleye, crappie and perch. He can't tie flies for every type of fish, so for walleye and perch, as they are bottom feeders, he uses spinner rigs with rubber worms and a bullet as a weight to ensure that they sink to the bottom. Metal spinner rigs spin in the water

to create noises that get the attention of fish and that mimic the noise an injured fish or fly would create in the water. They can be used for many types of fish, including walleye, perch and bass. Crappie are small fish, so for them he would use a small jig, like a bucktail jig, which is a fly tied with deer tail fur and other materials.

Although Fortin goes fishing more regularly at local bodies of water, he also has traveled across the United States and even ventured to Canada. He has traveled the East Coast on fishing trips to Florida, North Carolina, Maryland, New Jersey and New York.

One of his most notable trips was to the Thousand Islands in Ontario, Canada. About 15 members of his family and friends went on the excursion, including his dad, grandfather, uncles and their friends. During the trip, Fortin cast out his line just to “see how it looked in the water” with a bucktail jig that he had just made on the boat. His hands were still tacky from the fly glue when he caught a 27-pound, 52-inch muskie only moments after his line had been cast.

Fortin simply enjoys making tackle and hasn't considered creating a handmade tackle business. He is happy to give fellow fishers tackle because it gives him a sense of pride when they catch fish with it. He said that giving friends, family and other fishermen he encounters handmade tackle “makes me feel like it did something good.”

“One thing that I'll never forget is my grandfather,” Fortin said. “Several years back, I tied a fly for him. He took it on a fishing trip and caught the biggest trout of his life. He shook my hand. ‘Thanks a lot, Josh. I just caught the biggest trout ever. Thanks to you.’ ” **PR**