

Sea Fly Fishing

British Saltwater Sport 130 Years Ago



In Volume Eight, Number Two, of *The American Fly Fisher*, we offered some thoughts on 19th Century streamers, and mentioned that we were interested in getting a look at a book called *Fly-Fishing in Salt and Fresh Water*; the book was reported to have several colored plates of salt water flies.

Museum member Walter Burr, of Dennis, Massachusetts, responded to our request by loaning us his copy of the book. The full title page reads *Fly-Fishing in Salt and Fresh Water*, "with six plates representing artificial flies, etc., London: John Van Voorst, 1, Paternoster Row, M.DCCC.LI." The book, seventy-four pages long plus plates, discusses fishing for salmon, trout, pike, grayling, and some others, including the species mentioned in the material reprinted below. The chapter on sea fly fishing is ten pages long, and we reprint it in its entirety, along with the four hand-colored plates of sea flies. Because of its novelty, and because early illustrations of pike flies are so rare, we also reprint the author's comments on pike flies, as well as the color plate of the pike fly itself.

You'll notice that the author's definition of fly fishing is fairly broad; though it seems some of the fish are taken by conventional casting and retrieving, it is clear that others are caught by handlining weighted flies. The author's equipment is of special interest, we think, because of the power of the fish; notice how far some of them run. Notice, also, the great number of flies used at once.

There seems no room to doubt that these early flies were functional streamers—flies made to imitate small fish. It also appears that the author had this system of fishing worked out quite carefully after considerable experimentation. And so, though we have here yet another example of streamer fishing in the mid-1800s, it seems entirely possible that the use of bait fish imitations by fly fishermen may go back much further. It seems equally likely that salt water fly fishing, such as is described here, may

also have a much longer history than most people imagine.

It is widely suggested that the author of this book was named Hutchinson, perhaps a Mrs. Hutchinson. Little more than that is known; perhaps some of our readers can tell us more about this inventive angler.

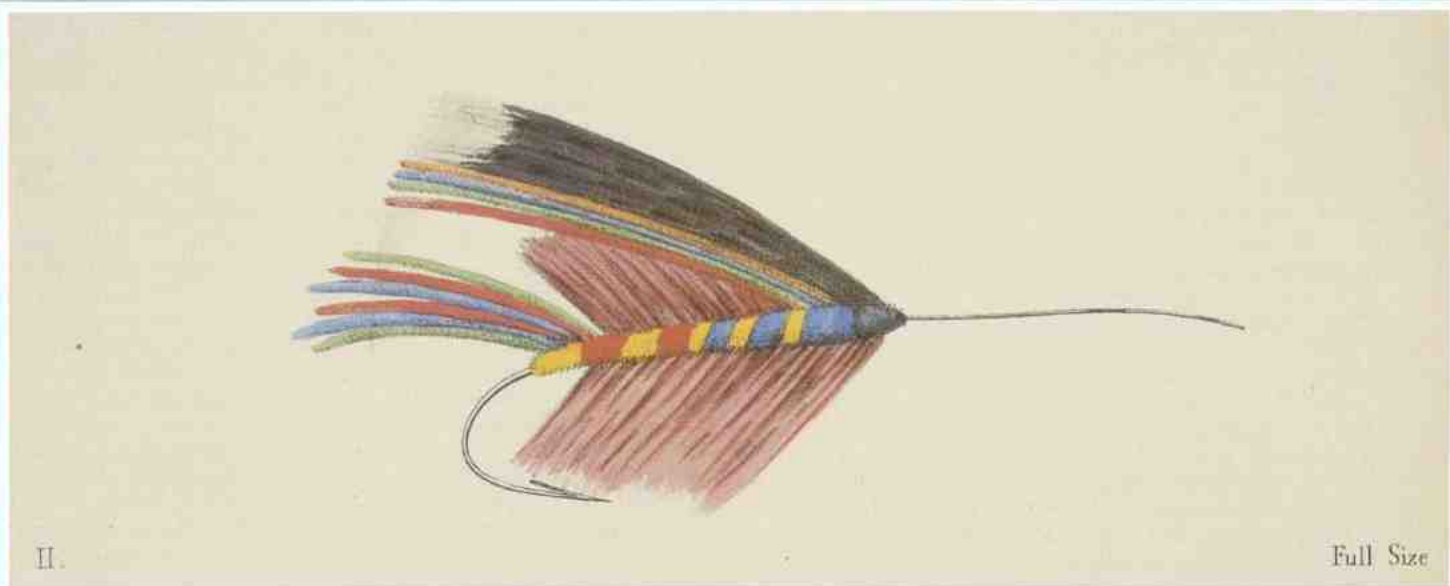
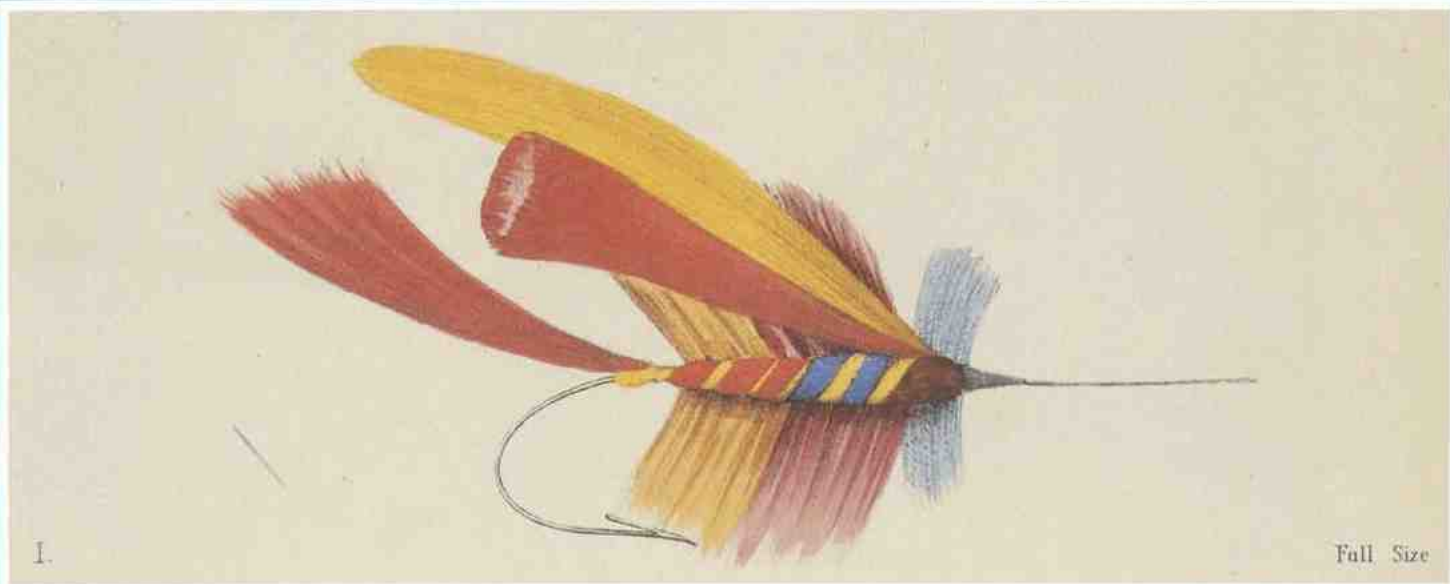
SEA FLY-FISHING

Most capital sea fly-fishing can be obtained off the coast of Connemara, viz., in Bertraghboy Bay, at the Skyard Rocks, at Deer Island, and off the Isle of Mweenish and the Isle of Arran. The whiting pollack that are to be met with there, take a large gaudy fly most boldly. I have with a fly taken some in those parts, as large as nine pounds. I used seven flies at once, and have frequently taken seven fish at the same time. One day I caught 194 with the fly, and the man in the boat with me took sixty-eight with two of my flies. I should have caught a great many more, but the wind blew fresh, and we could not remain long enough among the fish when we met with a shoal, but were obliged to tack backwards and forwards, so as to enable us to be continually passing through them. I once actually hauled in eight fish together, though using only seven flies; one of these fish being caught by the lip and the other by the tail, on the same hook. I am not sure that I could not have killed more fish had I used fewer flies, as a great deal of time was lost in taking the fish off the hooks; but it certainly was good sport pulling in so many together.

I one day went to the Skyard Rocks, twelve miles out at sea. One of the men in the boat, with one of my large flies, soon caught a pollack weighing nine and a half pounds; and before he could take the fly out of the mouth of the fish, the boatman saw a monster close to the stern of the boat take my fly, but after holding him for a

few minutes only, the hook broke just below the barb. The water here was shallow, with a sharp rocky bottom, and I consequently did not dare to give him much line; but it was very annoying to lose so large a fish. The men in the boat declared that he was the largest pollack they had ever seen. I found it quite necessary to use six-link twisted gut. Soon after this, I caught one of seven and three quarter pounds; and one of the boatmen, with a hand-line and heavy lead, and a fly that I had given him, caught eighteen fish, the largest of which weighed four pounds. The weather now looked as if it were coming on to blow, and the Skyards not being a place to be caught in in a gale of wind, in an open boat, we thought it prudent to make for home. It is almost too far out at sea for an open boat, added to which, such a fearfully dangerous and wild-looking place I never beheld; it would not do to be there with much wind from the south-west, as the whole force of the Atlantic would then break upon these rocks; and it being in the month of October, and the weather beginning to be unsettled, I did not think it prudent to venture there again. A steam yacht would be an excellent thing on these expeditions, for should the wind and tide be unfavourable when you wished to return, you could then do so with ease, when it would be impossible in a sailing boat. Scarcely a winter passes without our hearing of fishing-boats being driven out to sea, and never again heard of.

After this I went to the Isle of Mweenish. It was on the 19th of October; and I had not fished many minutes, when I hooked a fine fellow with one of my largest flies. He was so strong, and run out the line at such a rate, that although the man at the helm luffed, the fish broke away, and I found the point of the hook bent, as if it had come in contact with a stone. A few minutes after this, I hooked a monster,



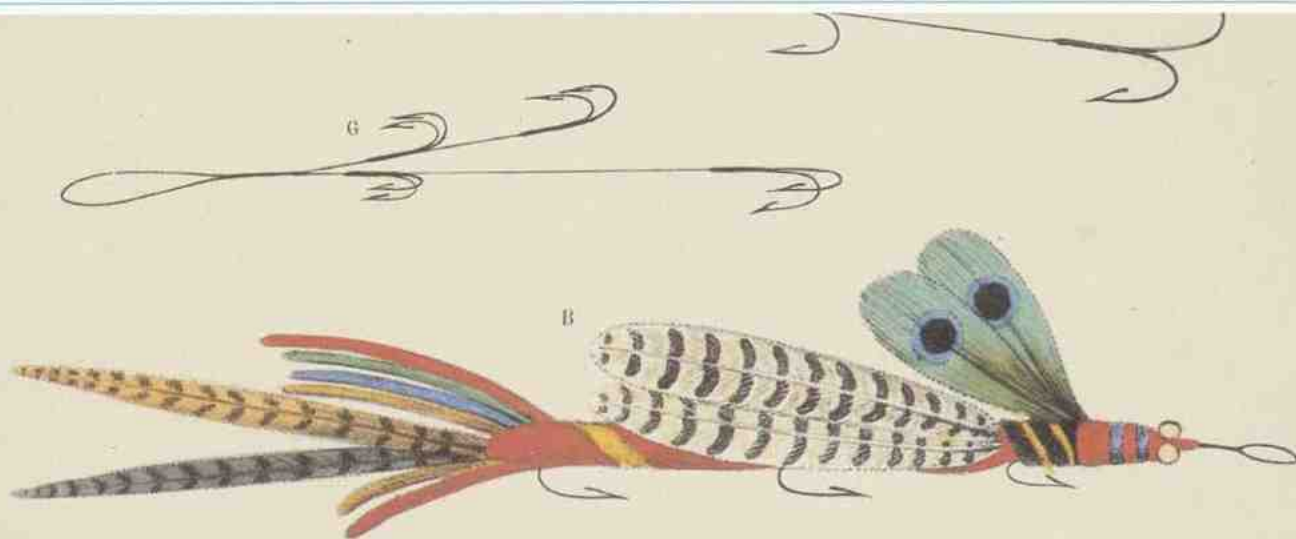


IV.

Full Size

Fly Fishing in Salt and Fresh Water, though a slight volume, has considerable historical significance; it is the first in-depth treatment (of which we are aware) of fly fishing in salt water. It seems unlikely to us that the elaborate patterns shown here were without earlier precedent, and so we imagine that salt water fly fishing in England is rather older than the 1851 publishing date of this book.

Notice that the pike fly, below, features bead-eyes and three hooks in a series, as well as a snelled eye rather than a long snell.



VI.

and after twenty minutes' play succeeded in getting him very near the boat; but he then made a dart downwards, just as we thought he was going to give up the fight, run out about 120 yards of line, and got away. I felt certain that some part of the tackle had broken; but on examination, I discovered the hook to be perfectly straightened. Soon afterwards I took eight other fish, which were all small. There was one other rod out, and two hand lines; the rod was baited with a sand-eel, and the lines with heavy leads and my flies, but none of them had a pull: this I attributed to my snood or casting-line being of twisted gut stained gray, whilst one of the hand lines had a coarse hemp snood, and the other had harp-string gimp, and the rod had on a sand-eel for bait. It was as bad a day for this sport as could be; the hills were white with snow, and there was a cutting north-east wind. The boatmen said that they scarcely ever recollected an instance of fish taking any bait in such weather. Later in the day, however, I caught ten other small fish, and the harp-string gimp with the flies caught eight fish, one of them weighing five pounds. The hemp snood with the flies caught only one fish, and that a small one; and the rod with the sand-eel did not catch a fish.

The next time I went out it was to the Isle of Arran, when I killed sixty-nine fish, all with my flies. I hooked one tremendously large fellow, which run out the whole of my line—200 yards. Unfortunately the boatmen were not quick enough in bending on a sea-line to my rod; they were nearly a minute about it, with the fish pulling most furiously all the time. The moment they had done it I threw my rod overboard, when away it went at a rapid rate for a considerable distance, but it was too late; the mischief, I suspect, had been done before I threw the rod overboard. We saw, from the sudden stopping of the rod, that something was wrong; and on getting in the tackle again, we found that the wheel-line had broken about ten yards above the fly.

My last two days of sea fly-fishing were the 10th and 11th of November, in Berraghboy Bay. A gentleman, who was desirous of witnessing this sort of fishing, accompanied me on both occasions. In the two days we killed 420 pollack, but none of them were large. I once hooked seven at one time, and killed them all; the smallest weighed three and a half pounds. I also caught two small cod with pollack-flies.

As the weather now began to get rough and stormy, I did not venture out again; for the sea gets up very quickly in those parts, and if it blows fresh from the North, it is almost impossible to regain the shore, should the tide be ebbing at the same time.

When I hear of gentlemen fitting out their yachts for Norway and Lapland, and even to as great a distance as Nova Scotia, for the purpose of salmon-fishing, I cannot

imagine why this part of Ireland has not attracted their attention; and can only account for it by the fact of its being in a wild part of that country, and very little visited or known. When I say wild, I mean that it is situated in a part of Ireland which is uncultivated, and consists principally of lakes, barren heaths and magnificent mountains; for I found the peasantry there, though very uncivilized, a particularly civil and inoffensive race, and apparently totally different from the rest of the Irish peasantry; they are supposed to be of Spanish origin.

Your snoods or casting-lines for fly-fishing for pollack must be either twisted gut stained gray, or twisted wire covered with paint of a leaden colour, that will stand the salt water. The casting-line should have two swivels; and when there is a good breeze, sufficient to enable you to use your largest flies, the swivel nearest your wheel-line should be a very large one. You should always be prepared with your strongest as well as finest tackle, that you may be properly appointed, whatever the weather may be.

No. 1.—This was a favourite fly with plenty of wind. *Tail*: about half an inch of gold twist round the shank of the hook, then red feather of cock-of-the-rock. *Body*: lower part red worsted, upper part blue worsted or shag, gold twist, orange hackle lower part, bright dark crimson hackle upper part. *Wings*: under wings cock-of-the-rock's red feather, tipped with white, upper wings two white feathers from under the wing of wild fowl stained yellow. *Head*: large blue jay's hackle twisted on. (See plate 1).

No. 2.—*Tail*: gold twist, then some strips of swan or white turkey mixed, stained red, orange, blue or green. *Body*: same as No. 1. *Wings*: under wings mixed colours, of swan or turkey stained, upper wings brown turkey tipped with white. (See plate 2).

No. 3.—*Tail*: gold twist round shank of hook, then mixed, small scarlet hackle, small blue ditto, silver-pheasant black and white feather, ditto stained orange. *Body*: same as No. 1. *Shoulders*: blue jay. *Wings*: lower wings stained, mixed, scarlet, blue, orange, upper wings mottled feather of peacock's wing, light buff with black bars. (See plate 3).

No. 4.—Hook reversed. *Body*: same as No. 1. *Tail*: mixed. *Wings*: two white feathers from under wing of wild fowl, stained green. *Head*: blue-stained hackle twisted round. (See plate 4).

No. 5.—Used when the weather is bright and not much wind, and made on large trout-hooks, two-link twisted gut. *Tail*: two turns of gold twist, then a small cock's hackle stained blue for tail. *Body*: rich red worsted, gold twist, rich bright red hackle. *Wings*: mixed; stained mallard, red, yellow, green. *Head*: guinea-fowl hackle twisted round.

I have given the above as specimens of a few only; but I have made the pollack-flies of every description of bright and fancy colours.

Your snoods or casting-lines should be nearly three yards in length, and should have two swivels, the larger one should be placed about four inches below the wheel-line, and the smaller swivel about the middle of the casting-line. The largest swivel should be two inches in length, and proportionably stout.

Your rod for this fishing should not be more than three yards and a half long, with a strong stiff top, and very large rings; and the rod should consist of two pieces only, *spliced*, as the sea-water would soon destroy a rod with ferrules. Your lines should be of hemp, some of them very stout, for rough weather, and finer ones for calm weather. The manner of using your rod when under an easy breeze, is this:—you dip about half a yard of the top of the rod in the water, holding the rod perpendicularly, and when you feel a fish strike, you immediately reverse your rod and play your fish as on any other occasion. Of the stained hackles, I think the dark orange were decidedly the best.

Those who are fond of hand-line fishing, or setting the spillet, which consists of a long line with 100 or 200 hooks attached, and which, after having baited and set, you leave for some hours, will find the following baits very good:—

Lug-worm; for cod, haddock, ling, fluke, bream, tamin, conger, sole, whiting, flounders, dabs, &c.

Worms, alias cow-horns or buckey; for turbot, ling, haddock, cod, conger, &c.

Sand-eel; for pollack, turbot, flat fish, cod and ling.

Garden worms; for flounders and most flat fish.

Scallops; almost too soft to be put on the hook, but they will take fish.

Mussels; for ling, bream, cod, whiting, rock-cod, haddock, mackerel, gurnet, &c. To keep this bait steady on the hook, you will find it a good plan to tie a bit of thread round it.

Herrings; for cod, turbot, hake, ling, mackerel, whiting, gurnet, and many other fish.

Soft-shelled crab; most admirable for cod, haddock, rock-cod, whiting, ling, bream, fluke, flat fish, gurnet, and many other fish.

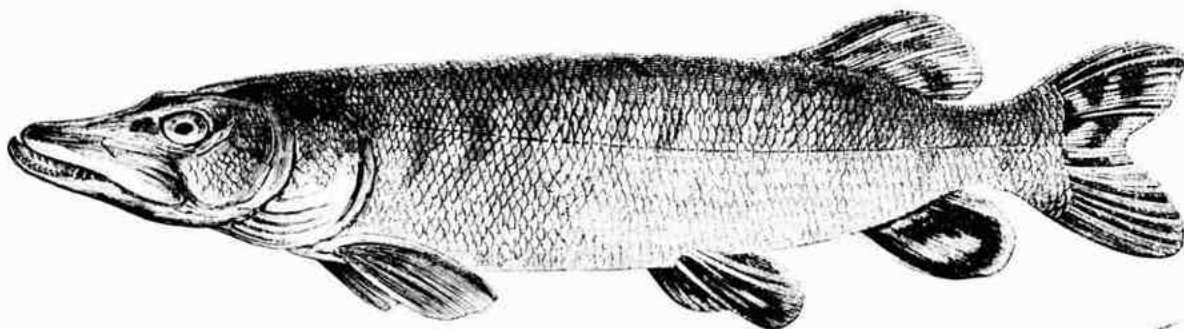
Red and gray gurnet; for hake, and a few other fish.

Sugar-loon; for haddock, whiting, cod, ling, bream, &c.

Mackerel; for turbot, ling, cod, haddock, mackerel &c. In fishing for mackerel, always use gut and fish as fine as you can.

SEA FLY-FISHING FOR BASS.

The bass will take any gaudy fly very boldly. Your casting-line should be of



Another nineteenth century pike fly appeared in John Bickerdyke's *The Book of the All-Round Angler* (London, 1888). We picture Bickerdyke's pike and the fly here. The fly is simply an elaborate, double-hooked contrivance with an entire peacock "eye" feather for a wing. Bickerdyke also mentioned that "an old Irish fisherman of Banagher told me that a fly made out of the tail of a brown calf was very killing . . . only the tip of the tail is used."



twisted gut, and your tackle very strong, as the bass is a very powerful fish. On the south-west coast of England, I have taken them with the fly, as large as fourteen pounds. The fly is thrown as in trout-fishing. At low water, and near the mouth of a river, try for them near the edges of the weeds and long grass. A boat is generally necessary for this purpose.

GRAY MULLET.

Gray mullet will take a small fly: fish for them near the mouth of a river, when the tide is beginning to flow, at which time they occasionally come in with the tide in large shoals.

PERCH.

Although this is not a sea-fish, it is often to be found at the lower parts of rivers, where the tide mixes with the fresh water; and you will find that a small flat fish, not quite so large as a halfpenny, is a capital bait for them. I have also taken them with a gaudy salmon-fly, by sinking the fly and occasionally suddenly drawing it quickly.

FLY FISHING FOR PIKE.

The following passages are from the chapter on Pike fishing. Obviously the pike fly described does not fit the general modern idea of how a fly is defined, but then it does not compare all that unfavorably with the largest sailfish flies, or with the largest tarpon flies used with lead-

core lines. In any event, it is a useful example of the extremes to which early imitationists went to create realistic lures. Notice that the fly is "leaded," and has glass bead eyes.

Jack will also take a very large artificial fly. Some persons always use flies in fishing for jack, and kill quite as many fish, and those as large, as others who use fish for baits. You throw much in the same way as you do the gorge, only it is not necessary to let the fly sink so deep; but it should always be at such a depth, that the surface of the water may not be disturbed or broken by it, (see fig. B, plate 6). The length of this fly, from the nose to the tip of the tail, is one foot two inches: you may make him thus. Get a round piece of deal, or any other wood, six and a half inches long; make the belly side of this piece of wood flat, and fasten on this flat side some lead; now whip on some triangular hooks at the tail end of this piece of wood, and let the gimp, on which these hooks are lashed, be long enough to reach as far as the head of the fly, in order that the hooks may be secured by whipping the other end of this gimp to the gimp which forms the loop at the head of your fly. Now twist any bright-coloured worsted round the wood and over the shanks of the hooks for about an inch, and then tie on also over the shanks of the same hooks some stained cocks' hackles, or any showy feathers, and then tie on the tail, two feathers of a cock-pheasant's tail. Now fasten on a piece of gold or silver tinsel by one end only, and leave it hanging; and make the rest of the body of your

fly, up to where the lower wings are fastened on, with any coloured worsteds or wools you please. Now twist on the tinsel over this, and fasten it. Fasten on the lower wings, which may be two feathers from the curlew; then twist on some more worsted for about half an inch, and fasten on for the upper wings, two eyes of the peacock's tail, and then a turn or two more of worsted and tinsel. Next get a piece of gimp and bend it double, leaving one end a little longer than the other, as in fig. G, pl. 6; form a loop by whipping a little thread or silk round the gimp and tie on your hooks, as represented in fig. G: fasten the gimp to your fly just underneath the head, and lay the hooks so that they set out well from the fly, and to keep them in their proper position, tie them in one or two places with a bit of silk round the body of your fly, but under the wings. Fasten on for the eyes two glass beads, with a bit of wire run through them, and make the nose of the fly by putting on with a painting-brush a little red sealing-wax dissolved in spirits of wine. The fly being leaded, you will not require any lead on your line, but merely fasten your trolling-line to the loop of gimp at the head of your fly. You should have with you several flies of this sort, of all colours and sizes, and varying both in bodies and wings.

We thank Mr. Burr for sharing his copy of this rare book with us; a few angling bibliographers mention it in various places, but it has escaped the notice of most people who write about salt water fly fishing and streamer fishing.

