

# FRESHWATER TACTICS



## for Stripers

TOM KEER

*Traditional freshwater techniques can help you catch more striped bass.*

THE SUN WAS SETTING on a small Rhode Island cove, and I could tell that tomorrow would be a real scorcher. A southwest wind blew over my left shoulder, and the water was beginning to drop out of the cove. It flowed out and over a long cobble bar, then over a mussel bed, and onward toward the open ocean.

I had the company of another fisherman. I looked at the blue heron and thought of a trout stream that I fished many times, many years ago. The stripers were holding in the same familiar places that the trout did in that stream. Two saltwater feeding lanes formed where a big rock split the current into paths of slightly faster water that carried bait downtide. There was a shallow riffle over the cobble, and a smooth slick of a run where it was wider and deeper. When I dipped my little net into the water, I pulled out silversides, sand eels, and some small clam worms. I probably missed a variety of other bait.

I had been casting up- and across-stream with little success, so I tied a three-fly dropper rig with a Razzle Dazzle as the point fly, a Ray's Fly Flatwing as the second fly, and a Clam Worm on the top dropper and added a split-shot to my leader. I cast, and mended my line to dead-drift the flies. As my line came tight at the end of the drift, a striped bass took, and I thought I had a big fish. I discovered when I was finally able to land the fish that I actually had two bass and they were working in tandem. I was not disappointed.

You can fish for stripers many ways and each fishing situation requires different tactics. A growing number of fly fishermen are discovering traditional freshwater fly-fishing methods such as mending techniques developed for fishing river currents and fishing multiple flies in the salt. Kenney Abrames has been a student and a teacher of these methods for several decades.

Abrames is a native Rhode Islander who comes from a long line of Yankee fishermen. He is an artist, writer, fly designer, and a retired charter boat captain who knows the importance of understanding fish and baitfish patterns. He is also one of the early members of the Rhody Fly Rodders, a fly-fishing group formed in Rhode Island in the early 1960s.

*Kenney Abrames (left) has adapted freshwater presentations and techniques from trout and salmon fishing for the Northeast salt that allow him to use floating lines, multiple flies, and even strike indicators to catch fish when no one else can. The effectiveness of his traditional flatwing fly designs (above) has proven that lead eyes and epoxy are not always necessary components of saltwater flies. Barry & Catby Beck photo.*

### Fly Patterns

SALTWATER FLY FISHERMEN often base their imitations on baitfish removed from the water. However, these baitfish display many different colors *in* the water. With an artist's eye for these nuances, Abrames has refined the art of color-blending bucktail to create flies that look alive when fished.

Tiers credit Abrames with incorporating flatwing fly design into Northeast saltwater fly patterns. While he didn't develop flatwings (they were first used for Scottish Spey flies a long time ago), he modified them for saltwater fishing in the Northeast. Flatwings feature hackles tied in at the tail and horizontal to the hook shank, a construction that allows the fly to suspend naturally in the water.

Abrames has spent a decade working with a hackle supplier to develop a long, thin-stemmed hackle that moves with a natural side-to-side undulation in the water rather than the thick-stemmed hackles used in standard featherwings. Hackle length corresponds to the length of the baitfish, and he spreads his bucktail to mimic the wide, translucent profile of a living baitfish without added weight or bulk.

While flatwings catch fish with any technique, they excel when they are combined with dead-drifts and mends that allow the feathers to undulate in the water like a living organism. By using a different mend, split-shot, or a sinking-tip line, you can fish them throughout the water column from just under the surface to on the bottom. [See *the Fly Tier's Bench* in this issue for Ken Abrames's article on flatwings. THE EDITOR.]

A prolific fly designer, Abrames developed and outlined hundreds of patterns over the years. He chronicled several dozen as template patterns in his second book *A Perfect Fish* and has influenced many fly tiers.

Last year, Abrames shared flatwing design, mechanics of construction, use of the color wheel, theories of impressionism, and blending bucktail before it is tied into a fly with another well-known Northeast saltwater fly tier, New Jersey's Bob Popovics. Abrames's influence is seen in Popovics's Hollow Fleye. The Hollow Fleye features blended bucktail, sparse construction to allow light and water to pass through the fly, a wide silhouette, and is lightweight for easy casting. Popovics adapted a reverse-tie method for the bucktail, and he tied sections of blended bucktail in segments throughout the hook shank for fullness. [See [www.aswf.org/saltwater\\_flies.html](http://www.aswf.org/saltwater_flies.html) for complete tying instructions. THE EDITOR.]

## Techniques

FLY FISHERS ENJOY the challenge of discovering how fish, bait, and insects interact in their environment. We watch trout delicately sip mayfly duns drifting quietly on the surface, we notice the splashy rises that accompany caddis ascending rapidly to the surface, and we see trout roll on nymphs drifting naturally with the current. Trout and salmon anglers have a quiver full of casts for different fishing conditions, and Abrames uses many of these long-standing techniques in the salt.

Like trout or insect behavior, baitfish behavior also varies depending on the situation. When chased by predators, silversides



*Fish estuaries (above) like you would a large river. Try various presentations such as the greased-line swing, wet-fly swing, dead-drift, or a combination of these techniques to imitate the bait movements and to swim your fly broadside to the fish.*

“ WHILE FLATWINGS CATCH FISH WITH ANY TECHNIQUE, THEY EXCEL WHEN THEY ARE COMBINED WITH DEAD-DRIFTS AND MENDS THAT ALLOW THE FEATHERS TO UNDULATE IN THE WATER LIKE A LIVING ORGANISM. ”

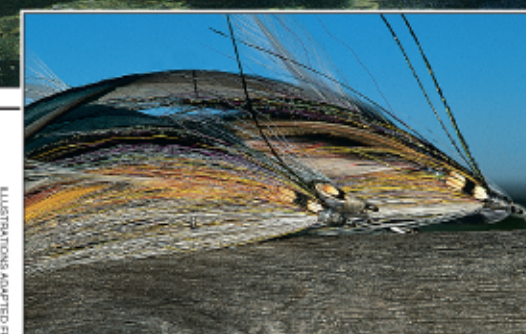
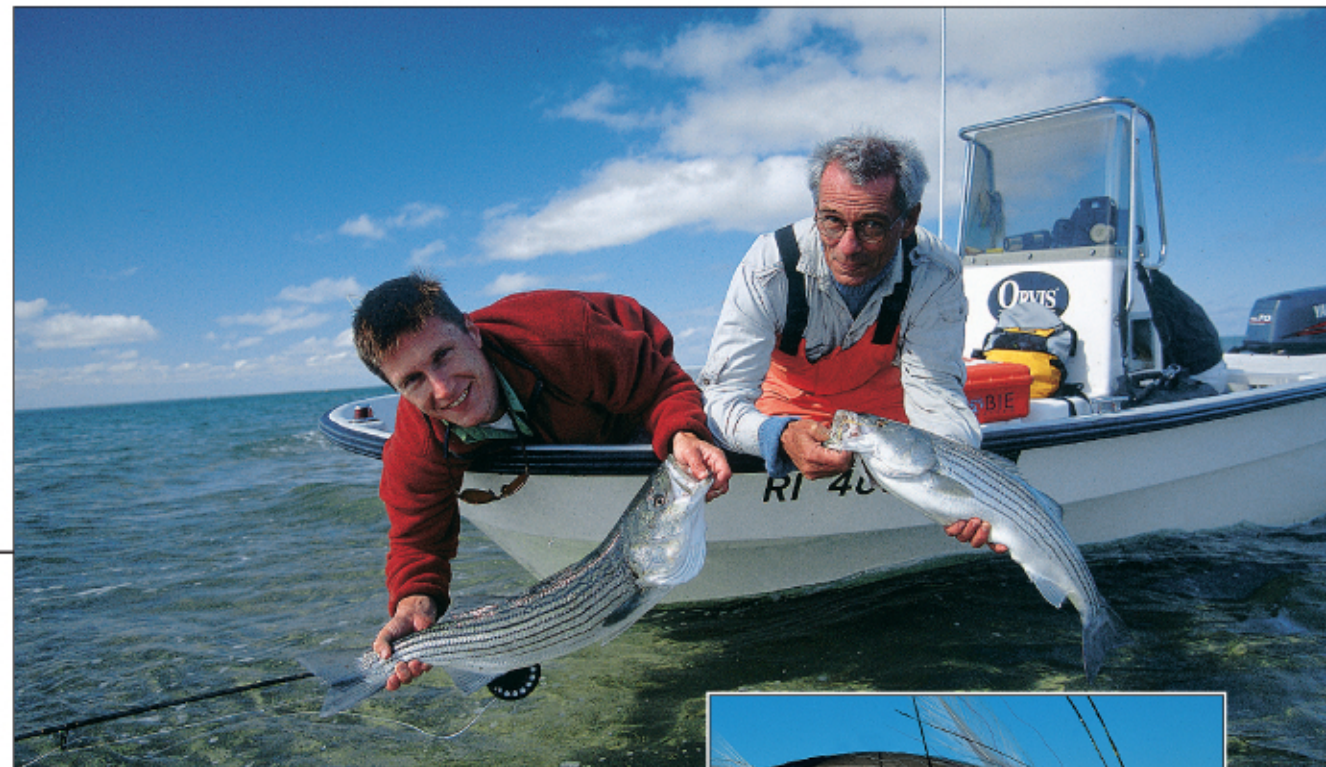
spray out of the water; sand eels remain in the water. In harder currents, sand eels group closely together whereas in softer currents they spread apart. They move fluidly and cover shorter distances than larger baitfish such as menhaden, herring, and mackerel, which can move greater distances quickly due to their size and power.

As with trout fishing, more research helps anglers determine the appropriate fly and technique. Wind pushing with the current speeds up bait movements; wind against the current slows it. Bait moving into the current swim slightly slower and with more movement than bait moving with the wind and current. Waves crashing against the rocks can disorient the bait near the water's edge, or the bait can move parallel to the rocks. Abrames teaches that you should observe your environment and vary your presentations to meet the existing conditions.

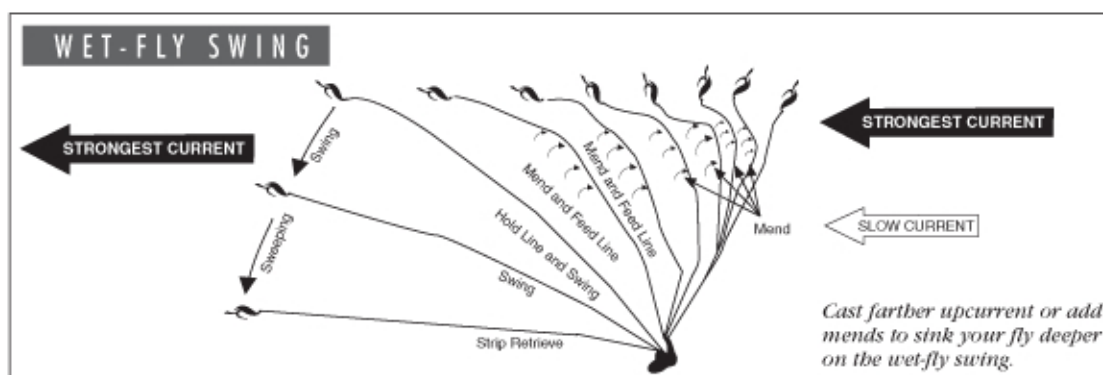
You should work with moving water and present your flies so they mimic the movements of bait (drift naturally with the current, swim against the current, or suspend in the current) by mending. Position your flies in relation to the fish and control the depth at which your flies swim by releasing or mending more line.

The **wet-fly swing** is one of the oldest freshwater techniques used in current. With this down- and across-stream cast, you use a fixed length of line and a variety of ways to cover distance. Start with a short length of line to prospect the water closest to you. Continue to cast more line until you've fished all the water you can from your position. If you don't catch fish that you know are there, try a different fly or a different technique before moving. If you must get a deeper presentation, cast farther upcurrent or add additional mends to sink your fly deeper.

*Slight fishing to stripers on the flats is challenging and exciting. Floating lines facilitate quick casts and multiple flies help you determine the size, color, and silhouette of the bait bass are feeding on.*



*Flatwings feature jungle cock eyes, bucktail blended to achieve subtle colors, and long, thin saddle backles that move in the ocean's currents. Abrames (above, right) teaches the importance of observing bait, currents, and your quarry and adapting your presentations to the ever-changing conditions.*



If you are casting blindly, then move down-current or down the beach and begin again. If you have good water on both sides of you, fish both the left and the right downstream sides before moving on.

Walking while swinging your fly is another excellent way to cover the water, particularly if you're working a feeding lane in an estuary, along a bank, or on a beach-front. Start with a series of short casts and work out longer casts while you walk. Use a combination of casts and mends to keep your fly in the fishiest looking water for the longest period of time. Fish above and behind rocks, on the inside of current seams, against cutbanks, in ocean holes, or in front of, below, or alongside mussel beds.

You can also use the wet-fly swing with a sinking line in heavier currents. Abrames uses a sinking-tip line because he can control the line better with the floating portion to keep his fly precisely where the fish are feeding.

You can use a strip retrieve to cover water between your rod tip and the end of your fly's drift on the wet-fly swing. Base your retrieve on the type of baitfish you are imitating. Shorter, quicker strips more closely

imitate silversides or bay anchovies, while longer, more relaxed retrieves work better when herring or menhaden are in the water.

If you are fishing a heavy current, slow down your retrieve to match the bait that must swim into the resistance. Baitfish swimming into a hard current swim more slowly than bait swimming in a soft current. Smaller stripers respond well to quick and aggressive retrieves whereas larger bass generally favor slower, more deliberate speeds.

Experiment with a variety of retrieves. The fish will tell you which one they prefer.

The **dead-drift** prevents your fly from moving through the current unnaturally. It is effective when stripers feed on shrimp, worms, or any other small baitfish that drifts freely with the current.

You can fish the dead-drift several ways. You can position yourself above the area you want to fish and feed out line at the same speed as the current and the fly drops down to the fish.

And you can cast up- and across-stream with a reach

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## TACTICS FOR STRIPERS . . .

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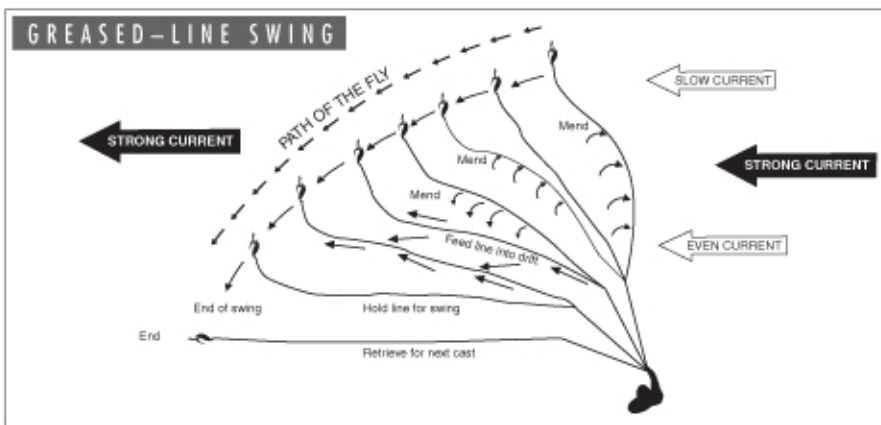
cast or a series of upstream stack mends. The mend can be delicate; simply take the slack out of your line and move your rod over an upstream arc. Your mend should be appropriate to your current; current speed dictates that you use either a few large mends or a series of smaller mends. You are using enough mends if your fly drifts naturally with the current.

To swim your fly deeper without a sinking line, use a split-shot or two and the George Harvey/Joe Humphreys tuck cast. To make a tuck cast, pull up on the ring and pinky fingers of your casting hand while pushing down on your thumb as the rod tip passes overhead. It must be a squeeze; as the line straightens, the

upstream, mend down. These mends keep the fly swimming broadside to the fish. As the fly swings below you, the greased-line swing becomes a wet-fly swing. The greased-line swing is useful when stripers are holding in a current.

The **slipping drift** is a way that an angler can achieve a more realistic baitfish drift. First, cast the fly across or up and across-stream and mend it so that the fly drifts naturally. When the fly moves past you and starts to head downstream, mend to create a greased-line swing so that the fly swims broadside to the fish. Then, feed out sections of line in 4-inch segments so the fly swims freely with the current downstream.

When all of your line is out, finish the cast with a wet-fly swing. The pressure of the line tightening combined with rod tip



leader will curl under the fly line. As it drops to the surface of the water, energy of the cast will drive the fly deeply. Extra mends allow the fly to sink lower in the water column and longer leaders and a split-shot or two helps the fly get deeper. Finish both casts with a wet-fly swing.

The last way to achieve a dead-drift is to cast directly upstream or quartering upstream. Upstream dead-drifts are classic for dry flies, deadly for nymphs, and great for striped bass. The upstream approach is most often used to cast to bass feeding on the surface. Drop your fly a foot or two upstream from the feeding fish and gather line as it drifts back toward you with a slow strip retrieve to maintain line control. An upstream mend or a reach cast works best to combat velocity changes. Because the fish are generally working upstream, all you need is steady pressure to set the hook.

The **greased-line swing** enables you to swim your fly across current and imitate a baitfish moving from one side of the bank to another. Cast the fly across the current. As it swings down, mend (upstream) the loop that forms to keep the fly swimming naturally with the current. If the current pulls the line

placement enables you to swim the fly with or against the current. By moving your tip to the left of the line, for example, you can swim your fly to the left of a fish and across his feeding lane and maintain control of the fly at all times.

The **Leisenring lift** was originated by Jim Leisenring to imitate the explosive speed of a caddis as it nears the surface. The Leisenring lift works well when fishing sinking-tip lines or weighted flies because it puts your flies right on the bottom.

Start with a short line and a long leader. If you are fishing in a current with a streamer fly, use split-shot or a weighted fly. Cast directly upstream to allow the fly to sink and as the fly drifts back toward you, raise your rod tip and pull in any slack that has gathered. As the fly drifts past you, drop your rod tip and release the gathered line and feed it through the stripping guides.

When the fly line comes tight at the end of the drift, it will swing to the surface. Your next cast should be made a few feet farther out. Continue to cover all the water within your casting range. When you've covered all the reachable water, move upstream or downstream as the tide and the fishing situation dictates.

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Add a topping of seven strands of peacock herl, if you wish.

For the eyes, take a jungle cock feather and lay it alongside the fly. Take two loose turns of thread and pull the stem to draw the feather forward until the front part of the second eyespot just touches the back wrap of the bead. Wrap two turns of thread to secure it, then repeat on the other side.

Jungle cock makes these flies sing in form and in function. Jungle cock looks better in the water than any substitute, and I believe it more completely resembles the actual energy in a real baitfish's eye. Jungle cock is a naturally fluorescent feather that is noticeable from long distances. Take a fly tied with an artificial eye and another fly tied with a jungle cock eye and have someone hold them up across a room for you to look at. The difference in presence is amazing. You will notice a fly tied with jungle cock from a long distance, and so do predatory fish.

Dub a small bead with the soft feathers at the hackle's base. Whip-finish the fly and pull the bucktail to flare it more. Place the fly under hot water to finish forming its shape.

Hold the fly by the hook point with the fly's head facing toward the faucet. Let the hot water wet the fly and soften the fibers. The water's flow will naturally arrange the shape. Then take the fly and place it on a paper towel to dry. This procedure helps set the fly and imparts a memory within the fibers. This final step ensures that your flies always have that unfixed, elusive "look of life" that fish respond to.

Anglers often ask whether flatwings work for other species of fish and the answer is yes. Innovative fly tiers have caught many different types of fish on them, from tarpon to trout. It is a small wonder that in some circles they've been popular for 500 years.

KEN ABRAMES'S website, [www.stripermoon.com](http://www.stripermoon.com), is a forum for introducing more fly fishermen to his traditional saltwater techniques. The site features articles, bulletin boards, baitfish slides, and information on his free evening of fishing every Tuesday night from May until December. Contact Ken directly at [ken@stripermoon.com](mailto:ken@stripermoon.com).

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Tackle

BECAUSE OF THE OCEAN'S expanse and diverse currents, saltwater line mends tend to be greater than they are in freshwater. A longer, more supple rod can mend short amounts of line when necessary but really excels when lifting long lengths of line in the bigger environment of saltponds, on-shore bars and beachfronts, or in rock gardens, rips, or ledges.

While the current trend among most rod manufacturers is toward shorter, higher modulus rods, Abrames has created The Stick, a rod tailored to his fishing style. Al Fuller from North Attleborough, Massachusetts, helped Abrames construct the 10 1/2 foot, slow action, 42-million-modulus rod. As with big-river salmon and steelhead fishing, Abrames favors a longer rod for the ocean, and the combination of length and softness enables it to load deep into the butt section, allowing him to mend greater lengths of line.

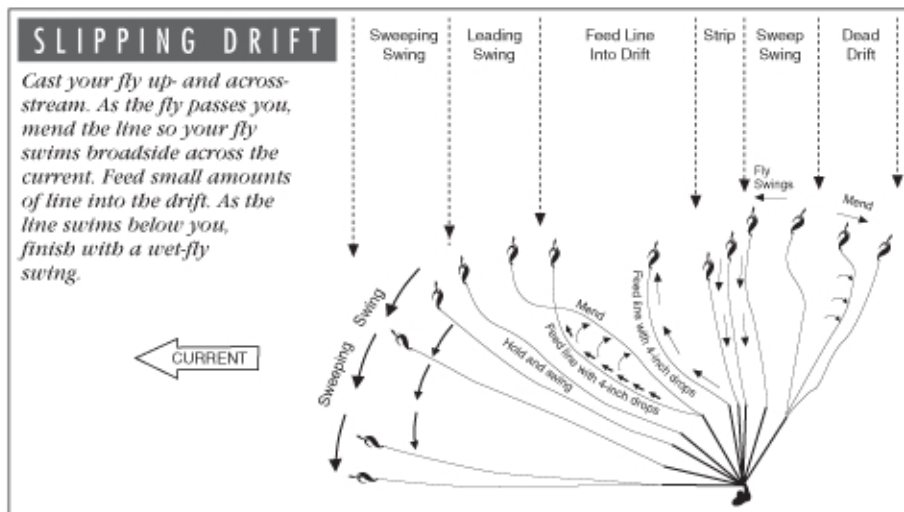
Abrames favors a floating line to help combat drag and maintain control of his fly. It is difficult to mend and control a sinking line, and if he needs to get deep-

fly 2 feet from the braided butt and then tie on each additional fly 18 inches from the next. Abrames uses a five-turn surgeon's knot to tie his droppers because the fly lays flat next to the leader and won't foul as much during a cast. The monofilament for the droppers is between 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches long, and he attaches the tippet to the fly with an improved clinch knot. He attaches his point fly with a Duncan loop.

Abrames always fishes a Clam Worm or a Ruthless (a clam worm imitation) as the first dropper. He insists clam worms are more common than most anglers realize. For the second dropper, he adds smaller flatwings or bucktails such as a Ray's Fly Flatwing, Ray's Fly, Eclie, or a Change Up. Abrames usually ties on a larger flatwing such as a Razzle Dazzle, a Stripper Moon, or a Squidazzle for the point fly.

I've fished three flies at one time, but Abrames frequently fishes with five. By fishing with droppers, you can determine if the fish prefer one fly to another and often catch more than one fish, and occasionally different species.

When he has determined bait are holding high in the water column, Abrames uses strike indicators to sus-



er than he can by simply mending, Abrames uses split-shot or a modified sinking-tip constructed by fusing lead-core line (Cortland LC-13 or equivalent) to his floating line with a section of braided tubing (available from Gudebrod). He creates short, medium, and long sections for the different depths he wants his fly to sink. The longest section of lead core that Abrames uses is 12 feet.

Abrames always fishes dropper rigs. He uses a Gudebrod 35-pound-test braided-butt section and then attaches a straight section of 20- to 30-pound-test tippet with a loop-to-loop connection.

The number of flies in the rig determines the length of tippet. Attach the first

pend the flies at a specific depth. He pre-rigs them with 10 inches of 40-pound monofilament. He uses a loop-to-loop connection and places the strike indicator in between his braided butt and his tippet. If you need split-shot, add it above the surgeon's knot on the dropper so that it won't slide down.

The next time you fish the Northeast salt, remember its long and distinguished history. Many techniques and flies that are commonly used when fly fishing for trout, salmon, or steelhead will increase your success in the salt.

TOM KEER is the Northeast Regional Editor for FLY FISHERMAN. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts.