



*There's more to topwater fishing
than throwing any old big popper.*

TOPWATER TACTICS

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT Surface Flies

BY TOM KEER

FLY PHOTOS: LARRY LARGAY

THE WIND HAD BEEN BLOWING 25 KNOTS EAST-NORTHEAST for a week. But today was different: the water was pancake flat, an anomaly in New England. According to the computerized voice on the WX channel, we had a west-southwest wind at 10 knots, but there had been no movement in the trees when I left home at 4:00 a.m. and nary a ripple on the water when I launched the boat at 4:30.

It's not often that the seas are so calm, and I entered Boston Harbor at a trot. Between Gallops Island and Nix's Mate, crowds of gulls, terns, and cormorants were feasting on small herring, silversides, and squid. Everywhere I looked, I saw breaking fish. As I killed the outboard, part of me thought about working a big pattern down deep for bigger fish, but I quickly scuttled those thoughts in favor of some surface work.

One outfit in the boat was rigged with a floating line and a slider, and I fired the topwater fly into the fray. Every time I stripped line, the cone-shaped head made the fly move like a Johnny Most description of a Boston Celtics game: it fiddled and diddled, dodged and weaved, zigged and zagged. A small bass smashed the slider and missed, hit it and missed again and then again, until I let the fly sit for a moment and watched it disappear in a splash. For the next hour, I caught one schoolie striper after another, all on the surface. On this morning, the down-deep outfit stayed in the rod holder.

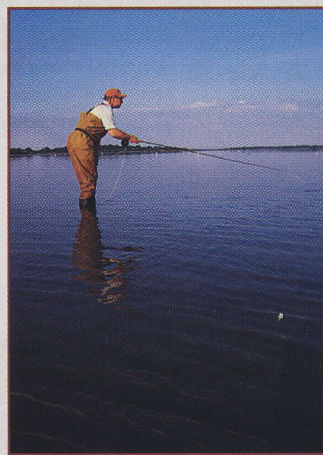


PHOTO: TOM KEER

TOPWATER TIP: When you're fishing a popper, keep your rod tip low to the water, as shown above. This eliminates slack in your line as you retrieve the fly.



With their big, deeply cupped faces, high poppers make a racket and displace a lot of water. They're good flies for choppy water.



Because they ride low in the water, Bangers hook fish very well. Anglers who tie their own flies can make Bangers with interchangeable heads so you can switch sizes while fishing.



Sliders don't make much noise, but they dart from side to side and up and down. Fish them with an erratic retrieve.

Maybe a fast-sinking line and a big streamer is the best combination for trophy fish, but topwater fishing is hard to beat for sheer fun and excitement. Because surface flies resemble injured baitfish, they provoke some of the most violent strikes from striped bass and bluefish. The fish don't connect on every strike, and that's part of the fun. It's pure magic when a fish gets frustrated by missing an easy meal, and then comes back and smokes your fly.

Types of Surface Flies

Most anglers think only of poppers for surface work, but surface flies come in many different styles. The key to selecting a fly is to match its design with the bait it imitates and the type of water you're fishing. Any fly will work during a surface blitz, but it's often fun to *make* the fish want to eat your fly even where there's no obvious topwater feed. Let's look at some options.

HIGH POPPERS. These have big profiles and deeply cupped faces, and they move a lot of water. One type is made from a dense foam called Live Body and is covered with Witchcraft Mylar tape. Other styles, such as Edgewater's popper heads, are made from softer foam. No matter what they're made of, high poppers displace water and make a big commotion on the surface. Good patterns vary from a blue or green back over a pearl underbelly to bright colors such as orange or yellow.

While many high poppers are made to imitate medium-size baitfish, they also work well as attractor patterns when the bite is on. These flies are also good searching patterns, and will attract fish over rocks or in deep water. Since they make a lot of noise, they're good flies when there's a chop on the surface. Short, hard strips followed by brief pauses will get a predator's attention and give it time to make a move. Sometimes, though, you'll get more strikes by simply chugging a popper with a steady, consistent movement.

LOW POPPERS. Long and thin, low poppers sit low in the water and look like slender baitfish. They're made of a number of materials: foam covered with Mylar tubing, foam colored with permanent markers, and even balsa painted to look like a minnow. Because they have shallower, flatter faces, they move less water than high poppers do. Low poppers are also less wind-resistant and therefore easier to cast.

When winds are lighter and the fish are sipping smaller baitfish such as sand eels or silversides, these thin poppers work particularly well. Fish them with longer strips and a steady retrieve. As searching flies, low poppers work well in mid-depth water or on calm days when a bigger, noisier popper might spook fish rather than attract them.

BANGERS. The Banger, created by Bob Popovics, has a short, cylindrical foam head that makes the fly chug water. Since the hook shank runs through the center of the foam head, and since the foam occupies only part of the hook, a Banger swims with the hook bend and point well down in the water. Like many other Popovics designs, the Banger seems simple, until you remember that none of the rest of us thought of it. And, also like other of Bob's flies, the Banger is a rugged, practical design.

Bangers come in many sizes and colors. If you don't glue the foam head to the hook, but simply friction-fit it on a base of rod-wrapping thread, you can remove the foam and replace it with a larger or smaller head, or one of a different color. Bangers work well on aggressive fish and are best fished with short, erratic strips on calm to moderately windy days.

SLIDERS. The long, cone-shaped heads of sliders can be made of hard or soft materials. Sliders have very low profiles and move horizontally as well as vertically. Their up-and-down and side-to-side motion works

particularly well in very shallow water and on selective fish. They don't make a lot of noise, but sliders can often tease fish into striking.

An erratic retrieve that mixes short and long strips is a great technique with a slider. Striped bass inhale the fly along with a lot of water. Don't strike too quickly; let the fish take the fly and purge the water from its mouth before you set the hook. Striped bass that take sliders tend to be hooked inside the mouth rather than in the lips as they are with poppers.

GURGLERS. The Gurgler, designed by Jack Gartside, is a sparse, thin, easy-to-cast topwater fly. At first glance, it seems an unlikely saltwater fly: a narrow clump of bucktail for the tail, a body of Estaz or foam with a palmered hackle, and a strip of foam pulled over the back like a shell. The secret is the foam lip at the front of the fly, which makes a Gurgler chug water and dart around on the retrieve. Gurglers are tied in a variety of colors, of which white, yellow, and black seem the most popular.

Thanks to its shape and materials, a Gurgler is very easy to cast, doesn't hit the water with a big splash, and floats low in the water. They work particularly well in shallow water for spooky fish. Vary your retrieves, but focus more on slow, short strips.

FLOATING SAND EELS AND SILVERSIDES. These belong to the group of flies tied to match specific baitfish. Most are made with a foam core covered with prismatic tape or, more commonly, a braided material such as Corsair or Easy Body Braid. Designed to imitate small baitfish such as silversides, sand eels, or anchovies, these topwater flies are tied in a variety of lengths and colors.

The purpose of floating sand eels and floating silversides isn't to make a racket (they don't displace much water), but to closely imitate crippled baitfish. They work best dead-drifted in some current, near a hole or along structure. An occasional twitch gives the fly some movement and motivates nearby fish to strike.

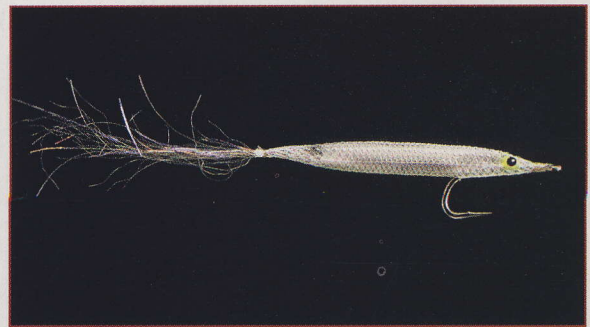
FLATWINGS. Kenney Abrames ties his long, slender saltwater streamers flatwing style—that is, with the vane of each feather horizontal rather than vertical. The hackles' orientation creates something of a parachute effect, and a Flatwing streamer floats just below the surface. Since they're tied with especially long, thin-stemmed, and flexible feathers, Flatwings move and undulate in the slightest current. Kenney's streamers, particularly big patterns such as the Razzle Dazzle or any of the R.L.S. series, don't require much (if any) stripping; their color and natural movement are what provoke strikes. Let them drift with the current, and they'll pull big bass up from rocks and ledges, from shallow-water boulder fields, and from troughs along beaches. Because they don't have much frontal area, Flatwings are easy to cast even with lighter-than-average tackle. In November of last year, Paul Apuzzo, a Connecticut shore guide, caught a 49-pound striper in the surf on a variation of a Razzle Dazzle. (You can learn about tying Flatwings from an article by this author in the Summer 2001 Fly Tyer. Order the issue at flyfishingmagazines.com.—ed.)

CREASE FLIES. These are the invention of Capt. Joe Blados of Long Island, who hit on the idea of folding, or creasing, a piece of sheet foam over the hook to make the body of a topwater fly, and securing the creased foam with superglue. The tails of Crease Flies are made of bucktail or saddle hackles. Permanent markers supply the color, and a pair of stick-on Witchcraft eyes completes the fly.

You can make Crease Flies with tapered, elongated heads if you want them to act like sliders, or with flat noses that function more like poppers. Since they have relatively little frontal area, Crease Flies are easy to cast. Fish them slowly, with an occasional pop, or dead-drift one along a current seam.



A Gurgler gets its action from the foam lip at the front of the fly. Among the easiest topwater flies to cast, Gurglers appeal to a huge variety of saltwater fish because they imitate many types of bait.



Made with Corsair or a similar tubing over a foam core, floating sand eels and silversides accurately represent long, skinny baitfish. They work best dead-drifted in the current, with an occasional twitch.



Crease flies are easy to cast and very effective on many species. They work well with a variety of retrieves, and even when dead-drifted.



Deer-hair streamers push a lot of water and appeal to most saltwater gamefish species. You can fish them on floating or sinking lines, with fast or slow retrieves, and in nearly any kind of water.



A Flatwing streamer hangs just below the surface and undulates with the slightest current. The patterns are proven big-fish flies.



Low poppers represent slender baitfish. They're relatively easy to cast and good choices on calm days or in shallow water.

DEER-HAIR STREAMERS. Eric Leiser's Angus, Lou Tabory's Snake Fly, and many of Bill Catherwood's Giant Killer series have spun deer-hair heads. These flies sit just below the water's surface, and when retrieved they push a lot of water. Fished on a floating line, a deer-hair streamer can even make a wake on the surface. Tied in a variety of sizes and colors, deer-hair streamers imitate both big and small baitfish, and they catch fish under many conditions.

Fishing the Surface

Topwater fishing conditions and fish behavior vary quite a bit. It's common to find a big pod of striped bass or bluefish blitzing bait. Heads, backs, and tails are everywhere; gulls, terns, and cormorants are either on the water or dive-bombing the school; and your fly selection depends merely on the effect of the wind on the water. Rougher water requires a fly that makes a statement, whereas flatter water indicates a lower-profile, quieter fly. If you encounter a school of big bluefish crushing butterfish, attractor patterns may work better because they stand out from the bait.

Many times, you'll find breaking fish in deep water. These schools of predators often use the sloping sides of channels to corral bait. They might also set up an efficient feeding system, with bigger fish pushing the bait toward the surface and the smaller to mid-size fish circling the remaining food in the upper part of the water column. When you spot fish feeding on or near the surface in deeper water, pick your fly according to the amount of surface chop, and remember that bright, quickly moving flies will attract smaller fish. If you're looking for that one big bass, resist the urge to cast and strip wildly. Throw a big fly and work it slowly.

Blitzing fish in clear, calm, shallow water call for a different approach. Most times, anglers who work along the edges of the action find their hook-up ratio much higher because their flies stand out from the densely corralled school of bait. Giving the fly a minimum of movement, typically just a twitch or two, makes it suggest a wounded baitfish that has become easy prey. Floating silversides and Gurglers usually get the job done.

Night fishing the dropping tide of a salt pond or estuary is a great time to work the surface, particularly when the water teems with slurping bass. Sliders, floating minnows, deer-hair streamers, and Flatwings are effective flies in these instances. Throw a few mends into your line, follow it downcurrent and across with your rod tip, and then start a slow, erratic retrieve combining short and long strips. Pause for a moment after you feel a fish's tap and strip-strike to set the hook. Longer rods, those from 9½ to 10 feet, are ideal for this type of fishing.

When you fish around rock gardens, ledges, and inshore barrier islands, particularly those in big-bass water, you owe it to yourself to cast a big Flatwing. Pitch the fly in close to the rocks and barely move it along; the fly's construction will do most of the work. Big bass will peel off the bottom or sneak out from under a ledge and simply come up and inhale the fly. You'll want to use a fluorocarbon shock tippet to prevent breakoffs.

Use a combination of fixed and loop knots for your surface work, and think about the effect you're trying to achieve. Because of the Gurgler's subtlety, I mostly use a fixed knot to keep my line tight to the fly so that I can move it with just a twitch when I want to. With sliders and Flatwings, I mostly use a loop knot, which contributes to the fly's motion. Experiment with different knots, retrieves, and flies; they're all part of the fun.



A lifelong saltwater angler and a regional business manager for Orvis, Tom Keer lives in Boston.