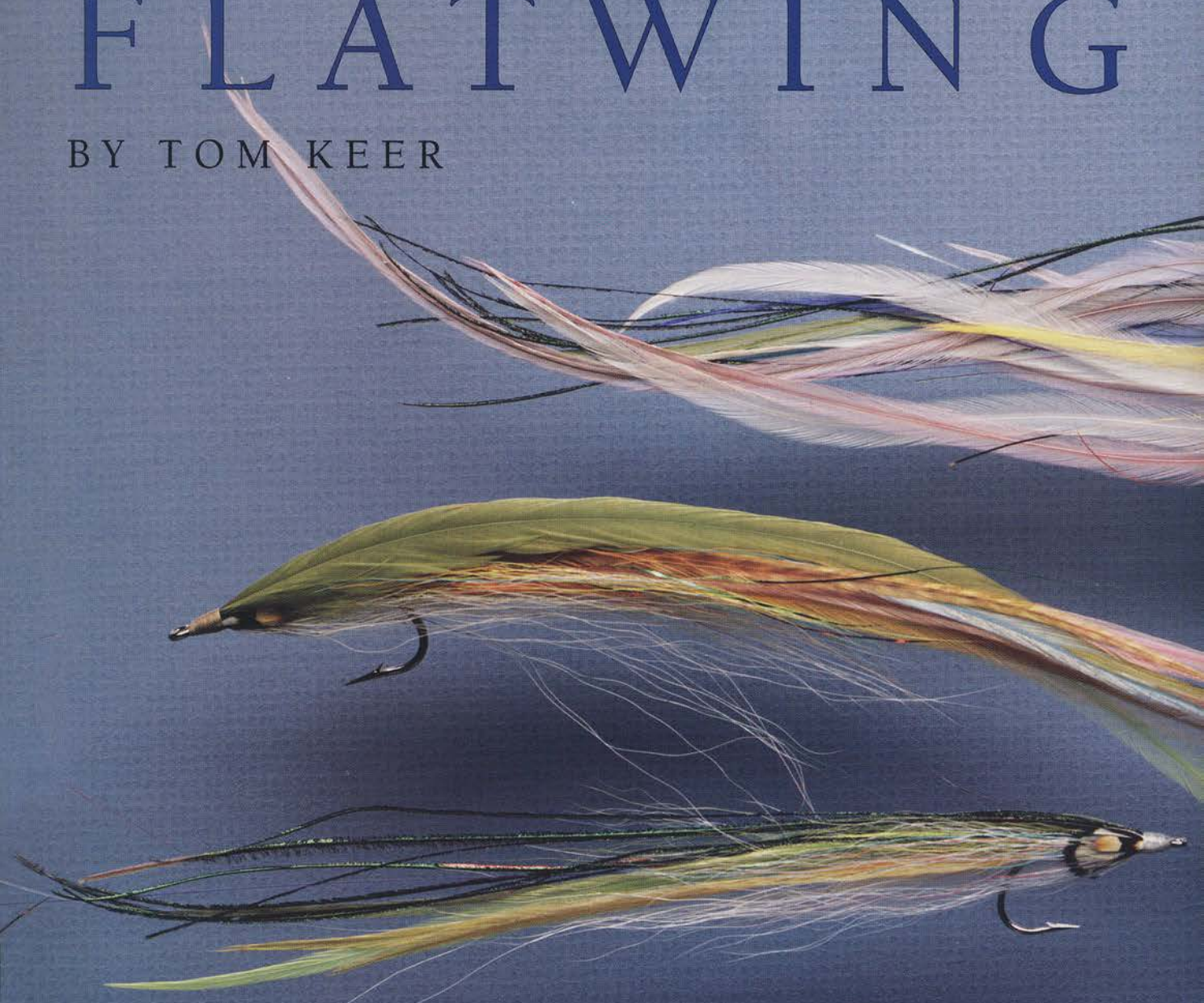


the art of the
FLATWING

BY TOM KEER



Rhode Island fly tier Ken Abrames has created a series of saltwater streamers he calls R.L.S. flatwings. (R.L.S. stands for *Roccus Leneatus Saxatilis*, once the Latin name for striped bass.) These flies meet all manner of marine-fishing situations by replicating the natural essence of baitfish. To learn more about the flies, see Abrames's book *A Perfect Fish: Illusions in Fly Tying* or go to www.stripermoon.com. To learn more about saltwater fly fishing and fly tying, go to the *Saltwater Fly Fishing* page at www.flyfishingmagazines.com.

Flatwing streamers might be saltwater fly fishing's answer to freshwater "Compara-" patterns.

I think of flies as pieces of art,
as feelings first, as simple wonderings,
as ideas next and finally as questions
seeking solutions.

—Ken Abrames, *A Perfect Fish: Illusions in Fly Tying*



The sun hadn't come up yet, but I already knew it was going to be a beautiful morning along the coast of Rhode Island. My buddy Tim and I stood on the platforms of my Maritime Skiff and studied a tremendous school of good-size striped bass over which we were drifting. Every so often, a bass would peel off the bottom, swim up a few feet, and take a small, blue-backed menhaden. I tied on an R.L.S. False Dawn flatwing streamer, cast it out on my floating line, and watched a 15-pound fish glide up and smoke the fly. It was the first of many fish we landed that day.

WHAT IS A FLATWING?

Kenney Abrames, a Rhode Island fisherman, fly tier, artist, and writer, created a series of traditional saltwater streamers in the late 1970s that quite literally had flat hackle wings. Whereas a standard streamer has saddle hackles tied parallel to the hook shank (for example, the Gray Ghost or Lefty's Deceiver), a flatwing has from one to three saddle hackles tied *perpendicular* to the hook shank.

On a flatwing pattern, the feather moves in a side-to-side motion that closely imitates a baitfish that is swimming or at rest. Tied this way, the feather also acts as a support and naturally suspends the fly in the water, which makes the fly look like a baitfish holding in the current.

Abrames shared his flatwing streamers with Rhode Island's Rhody Fly Rodders in the 1980s. The patterns were first popularized in the May 1990 issue of the group's newsletter, in an article by Ray Bondorew about Abrames's Razzle Dazzle pattern.

Later, in the August 1991 Rhody Fly Rodders' newsletter, Bill Peabody, known for his Rhody Flatwing, gave credit to Abrames as the originator of saltwater flatwings. Since those days more than a decade ago, many Northeast saltwater anglers have favored flatwings not only for striped bass, but also for weakfish, bluefish, and false albacore.

SALTWATER DESIGNS

Flatwings aren't new. Scottish Spey flies featured a flatwing design back in the 1700s, and in his 1950 book

"*To tie a fly that truly imitates bait, you first must observe the baitfish not just in your hand but also in the water.*"

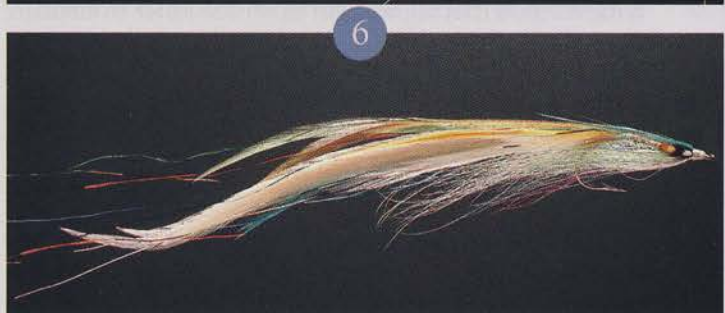
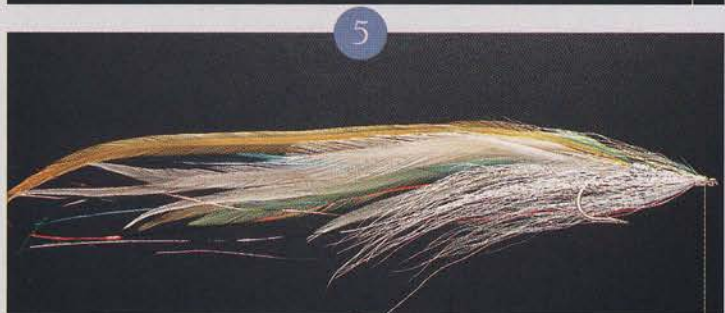
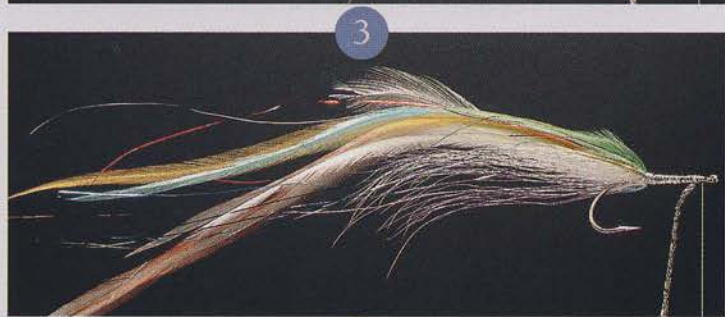
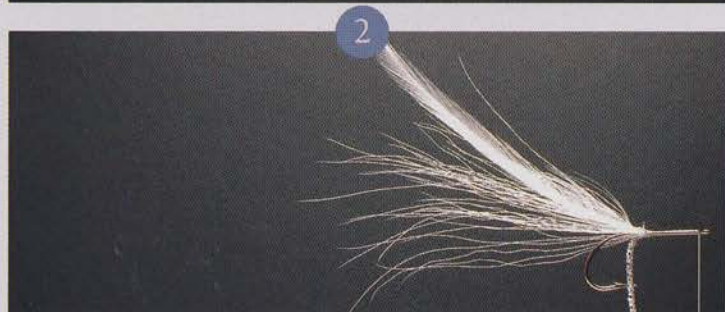
Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing, Joseph D. Bates Jr. mentions the first flatwings for American freshwater streamer fishing. But Abrames has taken the design to a whole new realm.

Abrames's flatwings are built specifically for salt water, and he uses an entirely different method of construction from what has been used on traditional freshwater streamers. For instance, he uses thin-stemmed hackles and ties in his feathers at the bend of the hook. As a result, his big-bait flatwing patterns are easy to cast, even on a 6-weight.

His fly-tying methodology is interspersed with his baitfish observations, paintings, and sketches in his 1998 book, *A Perfect Fish: Illusions in Fly Tying*. As an artist, Abrames

KEN ABRAMES IS NOW OFFERING HIS OWN R.L.S. EXTRA LONG SADDLE HACKLES IN MORE THAN 40 HUES. THE SUPER-LONG FEATHERS ARE PERFECT FOR TYING FLATWING STREAMERS. FOR INFORMATION, GO TO WWW.STRIPERMOON.COM.





TYING THE RAZZLE DAZZLE

(Originated by Ken Abrames)

Hook: 253NA, Eagle Claw, IX short, tier's choice of size.

Thread: White 3/0 Monocore.

Platform: White bucktail.

Pillow: White dubbing.

Wing support: White neck hackle.

Body: Pearl or silver Mylar braid.

Tail assembly (listed in order tied on): Three long white saddles; two Flashabou strands; one yellow saddle; two red Flashabou strands; Silver Doctor blue saddle; two silver Flashabou strands; a white saddle; two light-green Flashabou strands; a bright green saddle; two blue Flashabou strands.

Collar: Long and fine white bucktail.

Wing: One long olive saddle.

Topping: Short, 1½-inch Silver Doctor fluorescent-blue hackle tip.

Eyes: Jungle cock.

- 1 Tie in a clump of white bucktail as the platform over which you'll build the wing.
- 2 Tie in a white neck hackle with the curved side facing up. Here, you can also add a pillow of white dubbing, if you wish. Next, tie in the Mylar braid.
- 3 Add three long white saddle feathers, tied flat, one after the other, curved side down. Continue with the following: two Flashabou strands, one yellow saddle, two red Flashabou strands, a Silver Doctor blue saddle, two silver Flashabou strands, a white saddle, two light-green Flashabou strands, a bright green saddle, and two more Flashabou strands. That completes the tail assembly. Wrap the Mylar forward, tie off, and clip the excess.
- 4 Tie some long white bucktail under the hook as a collar. A veil with a mix of several colors of bucktail will produce a rainbow effect on the bottom and both sides. The collar should be tied sparse and should flare slightly, adding some girth.
- 5 Tie in a long olive saddle hackle, tied flat, for the wing. Top off the fly with a Silver Doctor fluorescent-blue hackle tip, tied flat.
- 6 Finish the fly by adding the jungle-cock eyes. Whip-finish, and clip the thread.

Note: The fly shown here, and all the flies included with this article, were dressed to Ken Abrames's specifications by Joe Cordeiro of Silver Lake Flies. You can reach Joe Cordeiro at (781) 293-9134 or cord4joe@netscape.net.

FLATWING HOOKS

Ken Abrames favors short-shank hooks for his flatwings. The shorter shank makes the fly lighter so that it suspends nicely in the water. Also, having the hook point closer to the ring eye yields better hooksets, and the point seats in the fish's mouth securely and gives the angler an advantage during the fight. The Eagle Claw 253NA and the 254NA are Abrames's hooks of choice, in sizes ranging from 3/0 to 5/0. Smaller flatwings such as Ray's Fly are tied on Eagle Claw 254 NA hooks in sizes 6 to 1. Other excellent hooks are Gamakatsu and Owner Aki models.

—T.K.

has adapted several sculptural ideas to his fly tying: silhouette rather than solid mass, length rather than thickness, transparency rather than opacity.

ENGINEERING A FLATWING

To paraphrase Roderick Haig-Brown, a fly is an idea, a solution to an angling problem. The pattern is important, and its presentation is critical. Size is more important than pattern, and silhouette is as important as color. Abrames's flatwings were designed around these principles.

Abrames uses a color wheel for his painting, and also for his fly construction. How color interacts with the natural

environment is an important part of his fly-tying philosophy. The color wheel revolves, if you will, around three distinct hues: red, yellow, and blue. If you vary the amount of these colors, you can make every other color.

Medium olive, for instance, is mostly yellow and a little blue to get green, and then some red to neutralize the green to olive. Similarly, if you change the order and the amounts of those colors, you'll get a different result. Say you add yellow and red to get orange, and then add blue to darken the shade: you'll get brown. Further, black and white are not colors; they are either the absorption (black) or the reflection (white) of every color.

The difference in the approach, then, is that whereas many fly tiers will reach for a dyed-olive bucktail, Abrames blends appropriate amounts of red, yellow, and blue bucktail to achieve olive.

Why? Because the colors of baitfish vary as the water conditions change. "Many people think of color as uniform, like a painted wall," Abrames once told me. "In nature, color never appears flat, and it changes depending on the strength of the natural light."

There are also metallic colors that are opaque and don't let light pass through them. The base of silver is white, chrome is black, gold is green, and copper is brown. Light reflection is the principal catalyst changing white to silver, black to chrome, and so forth. A smooth surface reflects the light like a mirror; an uneven surface makes the light sparkle. Flashabou is smooth, while Krystal Flash is uneven, or faceted. And so Abrames uses some sparse, flashy materials such as Krystal Flash or Flashabou to serve as condiments to the meal he presents to the fish. Just a hint of flash draws attention to the fly in the same way that a scent of a grilled steak signifies a cookout.

Following this line of thinking, to tie a fly that truly imitates bait, you first must observe the baitfish not just in your hand but also in the water. Watch the way that light interacts with the bait, the way the bait adapts different tones as it drifts over the sandy bottoms, the green kelp, or the black mussel beds. You'll see the baitfish change color as it twists to escape a striped bass or as it ducks into the shadow of a jetty. If your fly does the same, you're likely to catch more and bigger fish.

DRESSING FLATWINGS

Once you've selected the colors for a pattern, how you assemble that fly is very important. Abrames favors a sparse tying method that allows light as well as water to circulate through the fly. He adds a bucktail tail at the bend of the hook to support his saddle hackles. On some patterns, he'll add a dubbed "pillow" to cushion the stem of the hackle so that it properly seats on the hook shank and lays perfectly flat. He'll then wrap a body of Mylar or braid. In the wing, he'll intersperse his colors.

Abrames uses a variety of bucktails, as well as sparse amounts of flash, to arrive at the desired shade for the finished fly. The amount of collar and wing materials vary

PHOTO: TOM KEER



Need any proof that a flatwing streamer will catch big fish? How about this 15-pound striped bass?



The R.L.S. Crazy Menhaden (top) and the R.L.S. Orange and Blue Squidazzle are just two of the many inventive flatwings developed by Ken Abrames. The flies suggest the illusion of life in an impressionistic manner.

according to how big he wants to make the fly's profile. Add a pair of jungle-cock eyes for tradition and to naturally imitate a baitfish's eye, and you're done. What results is a blending of colors that responds naturally to the change of shades of ambient light and causes the streamer to exhibit lifelike baitfish characteristics.

MOVEMENT AND MATERIALS

The materials used in a fly will affect its movement. For example, natural materials have a spine, and synthetic materials do not; as a result, natural materials retain their shape while synthetic materials tend to droop and tangle, working best only when the fly is retrieved.

Sparsely tied patterns reveal the variety of colors in a baitfish and appear quite lifelike. A flatwing tied Abrames-style, therefore, moves well when at rest, not only when retrieved (as is often the case with standard streamer patterns). These flatwings suggest the illusion of life rather than serve as direct copies of bait. Think of Abrames's style as impressionism versus realism.

Abrames has spent years trying to find the right hackles for his flatwings. He doesn't like short, stubby feathers because they have a thick stem and generally don't swim

well in the water. He's gone to a long, flexible hackle that moves better in current. Hackle lengths vary according to the bait being imitated, generally ranging from three or four inches for a silverside or a sand eel to 15 inches for adult herring, mackerel, or menhaden.

How many feathers go into a pattern? Tiers can use one, two, or three feathers in a variety of lengths to imitate any type of baitfish. One-feather flatwings work great for patterns meant to suggest small baitfish such as silversides or sand eels. Two-feather flatwings are fine for midsize baitfish patterns like small herring and menhaden. Three-feather flatwings excel on patterns mimicking big baitfish such as squids, adult herring, menhaden, and mackerel. By varying the length of the hackle you use, you can closely approximate the size of the baitfish in the water.

Flatwings are template flies. Ken Abrames outlines several dozen in his book *A Perfect Fish*, but remember that the tying possibilities are endless. Start out with some proven patterns and then experiment with your own. You'll be glad you did.

Tom Keer is a freelance writer who lives in Boston. His articles have appeared in many fly-fishing publications, including Saltwater Fly Fishing.