



The Foam Buster a 'catchy' popping bug

Smithwick
excited about
new popper

BY BILL SARGENT
FLORIDA TODAY

MERRITT ISLAND — In his 45 years as a fly tier, Merritt Island's Bob Smithwick has tied thousands of fishing flies in dozens of varying patterns.

His custom-made Smithwick Poppers are distinguished as some of the most professional in the business, and his sinking spiders have an unequaled reputation for attracting everything from big copperhead bluegills to tiny stumpknockers.

As a lifetime flyrodder who grew up fishing on the Roanoke River and in Albemarle Sound, the 73-year-old retired Brevard County high school coach and science teacher has fished his patterns from the St. Johns River to Alaska.

So, it's a little surprising when a veteran who has seen and done it all like Smithwick fills with exuberance when he starts talking about the new popper he developed by chance at his fly tying bench in a back room of his Merritt Island home.

He calls it the Foam Buster Popper.

"I was just tinkering around with some pieces of foam one day and I got this idea," said Smithwick, his high-pitched North Carolina drawl trailing off with his characteristic laugh. "It's just as effective on bass as any popper and the smaller sizes get the panfish."

"It's because of the erratic action," he said, holding a couple of the humpbacked poppers in his hands. "It'll pop like a popper in the way I tie the head, or you can just make it gurgle along the surface."

Smithwick and Nolan Smith, a long-time fly fishing buddy from Arcadia put the new popper to a test a couple weeks ago on the assortment of exotics and native fish in the freshwater canals in the South Florida Everglades.

In two days, totaling 13 hours of fly fishing in the Miami Canal out of Holiday Park off U.S. 27, Smithwick and Smith caught and released 95 bass to 4 pounds and 325 panfish. Their list of panfish included Oscars to near 2 pounds, other cichlids, plus bluegill, warmouth and even a few unwanted gar and mudfish.

"It made me a believer that this popper will catch anything that swims," Smithwick laughed.

Nothing in the fly pattern books resembles Smithwick's Foam Buster.

"No one else ties it unless I show them," Smithwick grinned. "If people want to learn how to tie it I'll teach them."



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Veteran fly tier. Bob Smithwick of Merritt Island has been a custom fly tier for 45 years and he has fished from Florida to Alaska. Recently he developed a new pattern he calls the Foam Buster Popper and he says it might be the best of the dozens of other patterns he has tied over the years.

The main body of the fly makes it unique. It consists of a 2- to 2½-inch long piece of 1/16th or 1/8th thickness flat foam which is cut into ¼-inch widths and tapered to a head of about ½-inch in width. The strip resembles the side view of a golf tee.

He buys the 8x10 sheets of foam in a dozen different colors in craft departments at Wal-Mart stores.

Smithwick, who teaches fly tying and calls himself a "backyard fly tier," ties the popper in four sizes, numbers 4, 6, 8, and 10, using the thinner and shorter pieces of foam for the smaller flies.

After the initial step of wrapping the hook shank solid with fly tying thread for a consistent base, Smithwick attaches a ¾-inch to 1-inch tail, which sometimes includes a couple strands of Krystal Flash, starting the wrap at the base of the barb. For the tail he uses calf tail, squirrel tail, marabou or sometimes

FishHair.

The color of the tail will coordinate or sometimes contrast with the color of the foam body.

"It just depends on what I think looks good," he says with another laugh.

Smithwick attaches unweighted pearl bead eyes — also from Wal-Mart craft departments — to some of the flies. On others he simply paints black eyes on the side of the head.

Then the foam body is placed on top of the shank and secured at several points with thread wraps. The foam is folded first to form a humped back and then to form the broader head of the fly, each time tightened with thread wraps.

In one last step the rubber legs are attached and he applies epoxy to the thread on the underside of the popper. Legs are used on most freshwater poppers and sinking bugs as attractors and as stabilizers on surface baits.

"Really, the final step is shaping the head any way you want," Smithwick explained. "Sometimes I just clip away. Other times I leave it good and wide for a better pop."

"The beauty of this popper," he added, "is if you don't like the way the bug is working you can always clip more off the head."

Smithwick makes the Foam Buster in multiple color combinations and solids, including black, white and chartreuse, a proven color for many of Florida's tannin-rich lakes.

"Orange has been a good color for me. I don't know why," he said. "Everyone has their favorites."

Smithwick doesn't sell his flies in stores.

"I only sell them to my friends just to cover my materials," he said. "I'd rather show people how to tie flies themselves."

He's serious. Call Smithwick at 452-8384. ■

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