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OUTDOORS

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Quick-and-dirty half-dozen top the list of essential flies
Karl Licens

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Man's desires for trout flies, to paraphrase an obscure professor of economics on the Boulder campus years ago, are unlimited.

His ability to carry them around is limited.

And finding the balance between unlimited desires (flies) and limited resources (fishing vest pockets in which to carry them) is the crux of practical, if not necessarily economic, fishing.

Whew. So much for academia. What all that really means, I think, is that in the course of an average fishing day, you can't lug around, never mind keep track of, all the fly patterns, new and old, that appear in tackle shops, catalogs, books, magazines and the fertile imaginations of fishermen/fly tiers.

Nor do you have to. For though the business of America is business - and human nature tells us that newer, if not always better at least is newer - a selection of standard patterns in a full range of sizes should see you through nicely on trout waters almost anywhere.

Now, local specialties certainly have their place.

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Variations in color, refinements of tying technique, different combinations of materials to include synthetics, or singular characteristics may combine to produce some hotshot new fly that is positively deadly on a particular water or through a season or two. But it may fall flat on its no-hackle face in a different location or mysteriously lose its effectiveness the next year.

Other standards, however, remain generally effective from water to water and year to year.

Microchip technology might have been designed the better to index one's inventory of trout flies, but lacking a reliable streamsider power source for the PC and a go-anywhere U-Haul trailer to transport all those feathered hooks back and forth, some simplification is necessary.

And so, taking it to the other extreme, here are the Licens All-Stars - a selection of trout flies that have earned their keep, that are proven on waters across the state of Colorado, and if the old vest could hold only a half-dozen patterns, would be indispensable:

GOLD-RIBBED HARE'S EAR: In a range of sizes from 8 to 24, and using the entire range of natural colors on an average hare's mask, this might be the most versatile pattern ever used in Colorado or anywhere else.

Tied large, with the lighter shades of fur, it can simulate a stonefly nymph or large mayfly. In the middle sizes, it's a very convincing immature caddis or mayfly. The smallest versions, with dark fur including guard hairs, look like immature midges to even the ultra-sophisticated Deckers trout.

And don't overlook traditional wet-fly variations, to include soft-hackles.

GRAY MUSKRAT NYMPH: It's easy to tie and it's versatile. It provides important shades of gray missing

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from most hare's masks.

The pattern can be a mayfly nymph or midge, and Gary LaFontaine notwithstanding, it might be the best of emerging caddis imitators known to Arkansas River fisherman.

Once again, a full range of sizes is essential, and muskrat fur generally has a range of lighter and darker shades. Tie a wing case onto a small gray muskrat, and call it an RS2 - an emerger. (The original recipe for Rim Chung's pattern calls for beaver fur.)

WESTERN COACHMAN: Occasionally also called a Western Boatman, it's a variation on traditional coachman patterns that feature bodies tied with peacock herl and usually a white wing. Once again, in sizes ranging from 10 to 18, it can suggest a wide variety of aquatic insects, and has proven effective on rivers ranging from the Gunnison to the South Platte and to a somewhat lesser degree, on still waters.

The Prince nymph can be an effective substitute.

PHEASANT-TAIL NYMPH: OK, got to have it, though we're getting a little top- (bottom?) heavy with nymphs. It's among the best mayfly-nymph imitators out there, and in the smallest sizes, it no doubt also suggests immature midges to selective trout.

ADAMS DRY FLY: Since we're approaching the six-fly limit, the Adams, with its variations, can be the universal, all-purpose dry fly. It's not the best available imitator of any floating insect, but on an impressionistic level, it might suggest them all, with the probable exception of adult stoneflies.

Use an Adams for Baetis mayflies, Tricos and caddis. It can suggest gray midges. It can be an attractor on heavy water, especially with a Wulff wing added. And while we're making modifications, be sure to have the Parachute variety of Adams.

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Once again, a full range of sizes is critical. Have an Adams of some kind in everything from a 12 to 24.

MUDDLER MINNOW: It's a tough choice between the Muddler and a Woolly Bugger for the streamer pattern, but the Muddler is more versatile. It floats. It sinks. It can be dead-drifted or retrieved, usually with equal effectiveness.

The Muddler mostly represents a small fish, but it can also be taken for a grasshopper - even a stonefly. Mini-Muddler variations might be taken for caddis or a great variety of terrestrials.

Karl Licens' outdoors column appears Sunday in the Gazette Telegraph sports section.

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