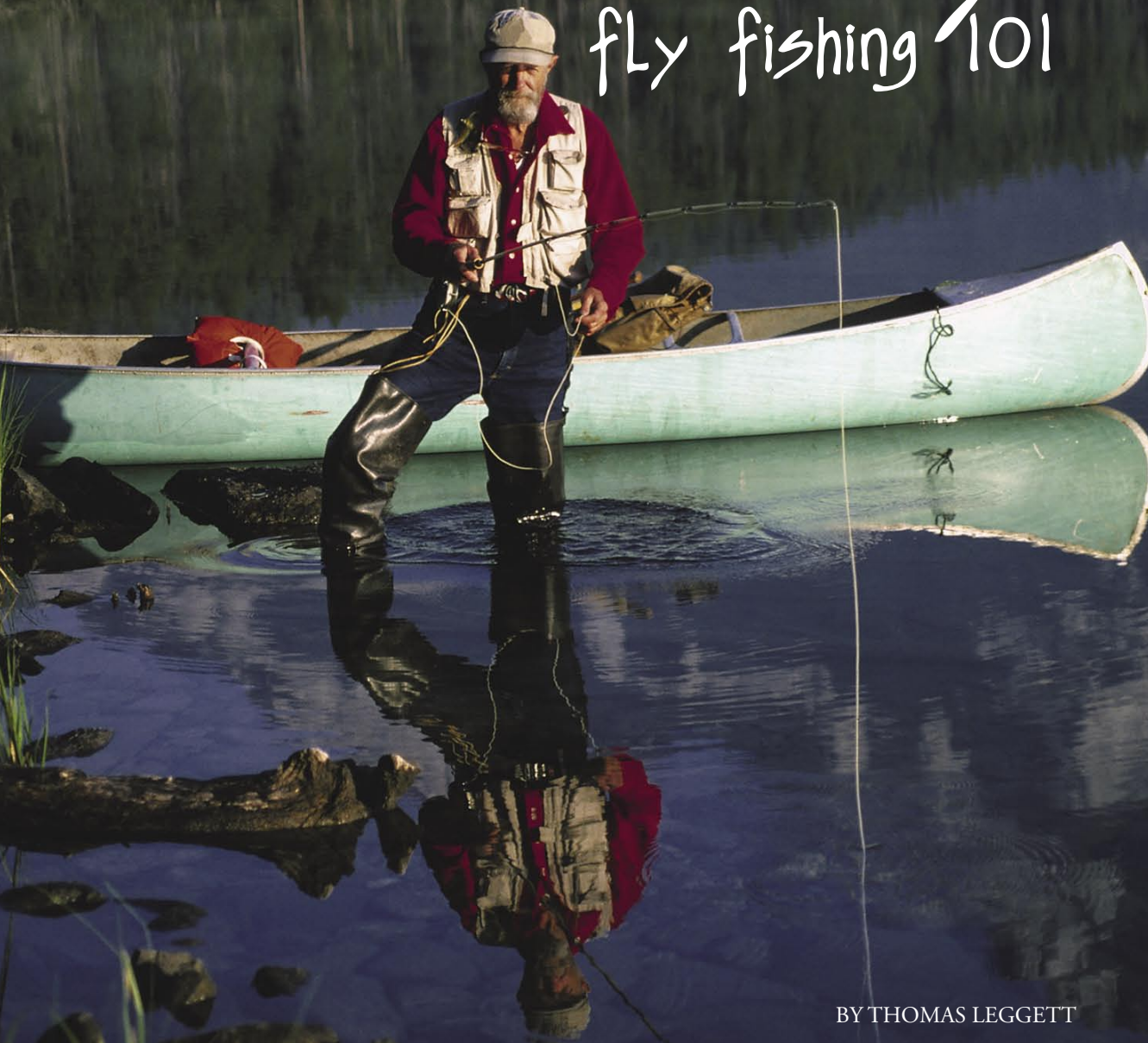


# A WRITER'S fly fishing 101



BY THOMAS LEGGETT



Standing knee-deep in cold, clear stream water, I turn my head and spot a flash of sunlight reflecting from the scales of a mid-sized trout. My eyes follow its shadow into an eddy, where it joins with others like it, as many as eight of them hovering motionless just below the water's surface in the shade of a willow tree.

Letting out some line, I pull back the rod and watch the line extend behind me. Before the fly touches the water, I fling the rod forward, sending the line out in front of me, but my stroke arches like a baseball pitch. The fly slaps the water—whack!—emanating deep ripples from its point of impact, a truly hideous cast. Fortunately, it also falls six or eight feet behind the fish and doesn't scare them.

I try again. This time I'm more careful to keep my stroke level, moving the rod briskly from a 10-to-2 o'clock position. The line lays out straight and the fly gently pats the surface, but again it's off the mark. I repeat the process until I'm lucky enough to lay a fly above the trout. Immediately, I see the white of a trout's mouth as it rises quickly and snaps at the fly.

## I've hooked it!

The fish jerks and struggles for freedom. I pull the yellow line with my left hand while gripping line and rod with my right, drawing the fish closer until I see a pinkish tone among a rainbow of dappled colors on its sides. I can almost grab the fish when suddenly it thrashes, breaking the water's surface, its tail splashing back and forth in the water. Silence. The fish is gone, swimming away to calmer waters, taking its companions with it, leaving me with nothing but my rod, line and chartreuse "wooly bugger" fly. Later, I find out I've at once hooked and lost a Wild Rose Rainbow Trout, one of the most beautiful fish swimming in these Virginia streams.

My experience reminds me of the skill and craftsmanship mastered by seasoned fly fishermen, but despite my misfortune, I've sensed the peace and relaxation the sport brings. I want to learn more, to seek out the subtle differences between various types of fly fishing—coldwater, warmwater and saltwater—and to explore opportunities in our own backyard. Soon, I'm pleasantly surprised to learn that Louisiana offers some of the finest fly fishing in the world.

## Louisiana fly fishing

"What makes the New Orleans area a world class destination for fly fishing is its shallow-water sight fishing for redfish," says Alec Griffin, owner of Uptown Angler. "We have some of the best fly fishing in the world, and people are starting to realize that now."

According to Griffin, Louisiana fly fishermen scour the thick, brackish interior marshes from Lafitte to Myrtle Grove and down to Venice, mostly in search of the area's abundant redfish population. Instead of wading through the coldwater mountain streams of Virginia and the Carolinas, or out West in places like Idaho and Wyoming, Louisianans fish in warm saltwater from flat skiff boats, canoes or kayaks, sometimes in only six inches of water—an approach called "puddling"—often using push poles instead of paddles to avoid scaring the fish by disturbing their natural environment. Unlike conventional tackle fishermen who cast their lures in deep water and wait for a strike from below, fly fishermen are more like hunters, seeing the fish first and trying to snare them by imitating their natural feed.

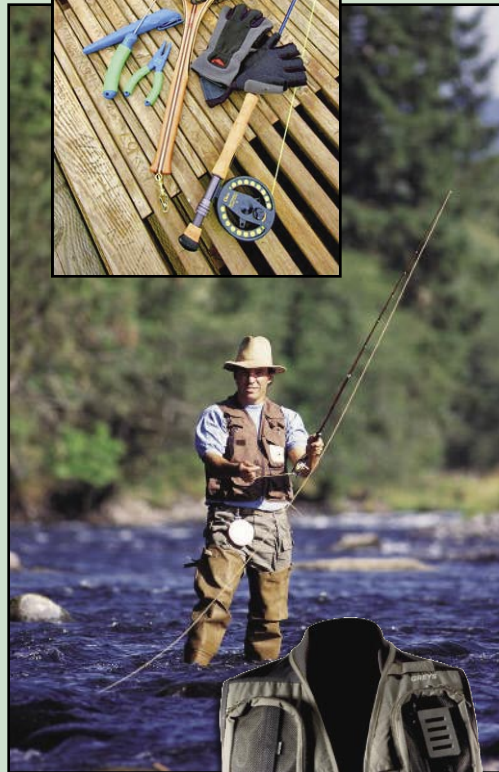
"Fly fishermen experience some of the most exciting fishing in the world here," Griffin says. Coming from a fisherman with thirteen years of experience who moved here from Wyoming, I'm inclined to take him at his word.

## Equipment

Besides obvious differences in terrain and physical approach, Louisiana's warmwater fly fishing differs from coldwater fishing in its equipment. First, Louisianans use a heavier rod and line—a 7 or 8 weight setup rather than 3 or 4—because of the larger fish being targeted. Fly rods and lines are rated by a weight numbering system, integer codes assigned to the actual weight within a given range. While 4 and 5 weights are considered "light" and are used for trout and other freshwater catch, 8 and 9 are "power" weights used for most saltwater species up to 25 pounds.

There are also differences in the types of "fly," a generic term for the fly fishing lure. While the most dedicated fishermen tie their own flies out of animal hair or fine synthetic threads, for less ambitious anglers, there are hundreds of flies available in shops. Because a fly imitates insects common to a particular area under certain conditions, anglers are faced with a seemingly infinite number of fly patterns, and selecting the right ones for the circumstance is essential.

"Usually you want to talk to fishermen in the area where you're fishing and ask what flies are working," says Dan Beckett, an avid fly fisherman from the D.C. area. "Experienced fishermen look to see what kinds of flies or grubs are in the area and pick flies to match them."



According to Beckett, it's also important to use stealth in approaching the fish. "Sometimes you have to crawl up to the stream and rise up slowly so there's no noise or sudden movement. It's really like stalking."

Coldwater trout fishermen most often use "dry flies" designed to float on the water's surface and imitate mayflies, caddisflies, midges or other insects. They also use nymphs, a term for "wet flies" that are weighted to sink below the water's surface. Saltwater anglers in Louisiana, who often target redfish, flounder, black drum, sheepshead and alligator gar, use heavier, more wind-resistant sinking flies that sometimes imitate shrimp or crabs, or floating flies called "poppers" that mimic wounded species. In addition to nymphs, they often use "spoon flies," named for their shape, choosing from flies with names like the "Jitterbee," "Waldner's Spoon Fly," and the "Mardi Gras Mama."

Beginners can buy enough gear to get started for a few hundred dollars but are encouraged to seek out a community of experienced anglers for guidance. According to Joe Kahler, president of Red Stick Fly Fishers in Baton Rouge, fishermen benefit from participating in one of several regional clubs, called "conclaves."

For Kahler, an experienced angler who ties his own flies, fly fishing offers a deep sense of peace, relaxation and satisfaction. "It's very satisfying to catch an 8-pound redfish with a fly I tied the night before," he says. "The sport has a lot of tradition, and there's an almost Zen-like pattern to casting that's something like a spiritual meditation."

## easier than it looks

While none of the experts hide the relative complexity of their sport, they all agree it's not as difficult as many people think.

"Some people try to make it too technical," says Jack Bauer, a third-generation fly fisherman from Bethesda, Maryland. "You need some basic skills, but what matters is - are the fish eating your flies and are you having fun?" Bauer also speaks of the sport's traditional aspects.

"For me, it's in my blood," Bauer says. "To take the bamboo rod my grandfather made and the flies my dad and I tied ourselves from the hair of ducks we killed, and convincing a trout to eat it, is very satisfying."

**To learn more about fly fishing in Louisiana, as well as opportunities with clubs in the area, visit one of several local websites—**

**[www.laflyfish.com](http://www.laflyfish.com), [www.rsff.org](http://www.rsff.org),  
or [www.fishinglouisiana.com](http://www.fishinglouisiana.com). HFM**