



Eyes On Flies

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Saltwater fly rodders and many freshwater fly fishermen discovered early that streamer or bucktail flies with eyes tend to catch more fish. Early freshwater tiers used jungle cock nail feathers or similar materials to simulate eyes. Saltwater fly tiers have come up with many great ways to add eyes to flies to improve their success rate.

Most saltwater gamefish use visual clues to discover and capture their prey. Things usually move quickly in a marine environment and these predators often rely on “targets” to help them identify and capture prey. Obvious eyes are one of the most prominent cues predatory fish can use to locate and orient toward potential prey. Using an "eyes on the flies" strategy takes advantage of this fact. The following list includes several methods for assisting the predators in locating your "prey."

Eyes on the Head

Complete the thread-wrapped head on the fly, making it a little larger than usual. Apply a good coat of head cement and let it dry. On light-colored tying thread heads (white or yellow), the tier may simply apply a dot of black from a permanent marker (e.g. a Sharpie). On darker heads, first apply a dot of yellow or white paint (paint pens are useful for this). Once the first color has dried, put a dot of black or red paint in the center as a pupil. Some tiers like to use a three-layer approach with a black dot centered in a red dot centered in the lighter iris color. Once the paint has dried, coat the entire head with 5-minute epoxy or a hard, clear nail polish (e.g. Hard as Nails). This sealer coat enhances both the appearance and the durability of the eyes.

Bigger Eyes

Select a matched pair of rounded duck or pheasant body feathers, sized to match the pattern. For very small flies, use cheek or marginal wing feathers. Coat the center of feather with a flexible cement or head cement to seal the fibers together and allow it to dry completely. Apply a dot of light paint to the center of each feather as an iris and allow that to dry. Nail heads, small dowels or similar tools make excellent applicators for this purpose. Complete the eye with a pupil as above. Coat the sealed portion of the feathers with head cement or epoxy. Once the cheek and eye combinations are dry, position them and tie them in as cheeks on the fly.

Molded Eyes

These eyes are available in several styles and patterns. Stick-on, prismatic eyes are available from many suppliers and tackle shops. Available in sheets and in several colors, they add flash and attractiveness to

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the fly. With an adhesive back, they are simple to apply, either directly to the head or to a cheek feather. If applied on a cheek feather, be sure to prepare the base as it was above. Remember to coat with head cement or epoxy to increase durability.

Molded plastic or glass eyes are also available with or without stems from most craft stores. These eyes can be attached either with the stem intact or by trimming it or breaking it off using silicone cements. Leaving a bit of the stem attached when working with clipped hair or wool heads provides a bit more adhesion surface.

Bead Chain Eyes

Eyes can be made effectively from bead chains. These are available in a wide variety of sizes and colors - chrome, brass, copper, black. The beads are simply clipped off in pairs and bound to the top of the hook shank with a figure 8 wrap. The bead chain eyes can be left in their original finish and coated with epoxy or another sealer to prevent tarnishing in the salt water. Other tiers like to paint the beads in a red, yellow or white, adding pupils in the vicinity of the holes. Either way is effective. In addition to the added attractiveness of the flies, bead chain eyes add a little bit of weight to the fly aiding in getting it down to the fish. They may also cause the fly to ride with the hook point up, helping to avoid snags on bottom structure or weeds. Bead chain eyes can be obtained from supply houses, but they may be cheaper from hardware and plumbing supply stores.

Bead Eyes

Brass bead heads have become quite popular with freshwater tiers. They come in a wide variety of sizes and in several finishes -- chrome, brass, copper and black. These eyes are slipped over the point of the hook and attached at the head before the rest of the fly is tied. The fly fishers' answer to a light jig, these flies sink well and have an erratic action on retrieve. The size of salt water hook shanks limits the utility of brass beads to the larger sizes of beads and the smaller hook sizes and lighter wires, but they are useful in limited conditions. Like bead chains, these eyes can be left in their basic finish or painted at the tier's whim and desire. Remember to seal the eyes with epoxy, head cement or another material to prevent tarnishing.

Lead or Brass Dumbbell Eyes

Dumbbell shaped eyes are available in several sizes in either brass or lead. Some manufacturers supply eyes that are pre-painted at a higher cost, and most manufacturers have eyes in unfinished lead, brass, nicked brass, or black finishes. These eyes were popularized by the revolutionary Clouser Deep Minnow, a smallmouth bass fly that has found its way into the salt. The eyes are selected for weight and size and bound to the top of the shank with a figure 8 wrap. Most tiers like to add a drop of epoxy to aid in keeping the eyes in place. With the eyes on the top of the shank, the fly rides hook point up, avoiding many snags. The heavy head gives it a jiggling action on a stripped retrieve, and the weight gets the fly deep quickly. These eyes give a realistic effect when painted with enamel or adorned with stick-on eyes. Once again, use epoxy over them to protect the finish and prevent tarnish.

Doll Eyes

Plastic doll eyes are ideal for many larger flies, hair bugs and big game patterns. They are relatively inexpensive and readily available in many sizes from craft stores. They are usually glued on with a waterproof super glue or epoxy. The surface of the fly or popper is sealed with head cement, a gap-filling glue or silicone sealant first. Once that surface preparation is dried, the eyes are glued in place. For tiers with large fingers, handling the smaller eyes can be a challenge. Applying a bit of tacky wax to a small piece of dowel or adhering a narrow strip of stick-on notepaper to the eye can allow the eye to be handled without dipping the fingers in the glue. These eyes, too, can be coated with epoxy to increase their durability.

Monofilament Eyes

Some eyes, like those of shrimp and crabs, are best imitated with monofilament eyes. These can be purchased or prepared by melting heavy monofilament segments to produce stalked balls of amber, brown or black material. The stems of the eyes are simply bound in place, leaving the eyes in the appropriate position.

Experiment with these methods and with several color combinations to see which ones work best in your area. Most saltwater fly fishermen agree that eyes are one of the factors essential to increasing angling success on nearly every species.