

# Innovative Fly Tier

Mike Rice/By Glen Zinkus



Hines Cinder

Tan  
First Light  
Clone

Blueback  
Fur Strip  
Deceiver

April's Reign

Cicchetti's  
Sand Eel

Silverback  
Fur Strip  
Deceiver

Green  
First Light  
Clone

April's Reign

Cicchetti's  
Sand Eel

Longrun One

Copperhead Crystal

Olive  
Whitebait

**F**ocus. That attribute describes Mike Rice's approach to fly tying, fly design, and fly fishing. But this focus-driven methodology doesn't deter Rice from any of the pleasure he receives from all things fly fishing—from tying his effective saltwater flies to time on the water observing, testing, and adjusting them.

When Rice contemplates fly design, the old adage "Necessity is the mother of invention" comes to mind. He explains, "When I sit down to tie a new fly or make alterations to one, it is with the intent of building or adapting a fly to a specific purpose. Much of what drives the design and construction of a fly is based on my time fishing with friends who guide or fish a lot, and talking with them about what works or what they desire in a fly."

Some of Rice's trademark flies, including the Yak Hair Deceiver, Fur Strip Deceiver, Dazzle Bait, and others, are examples of this evolutionary style of fly design. His version of the Yak Hair Deceiver developed from his time fishing with a childhood friend who is now a guide in coastal Maine, where the go-to flies need to be big for fishing rocks and big structure. Typical favorites include

oversize Deceivers and Grocery Flies. In many areas of New England (Rice lives in Marshfield, Massachusetts), wind can be a big issue. Fishing in this environment calls for a big fly that can be cast on a 9- or 10-weight rod, that won't foul, and that maintains its profile in the water.

Rice experimented with yak-hair variations for two years, and these experiments culminated in his own version of the Yak Hair Deceiver.

The origins of the Fur Strip Deceiver are rooted in Rice's loathing of feathers. He's a fanatic about feathers matching properly so that "the fly doesn't resemble roadkill before it's even in the water."

Add the time it takes to cull feathers, trim them down, and match them up, and Rice is convinced there must be a better way for a commercial tier to achieve the right effect. The first few Fur Strip Deceivers were tested by Boston Harbor guides after Rice tied some Deceiver-style flies with a bunny strip in place of hackle in his quest for something different. When placed side by side in the water next to a standard Deceiver, the fur-strip version seemed to evoke a more lifelike action. It outperformed the standard hackle version in the same colors. Rice solved the problems with the fur strip fouling on the hook: with

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a regular mono loop/platform-style foul guard, the bunny strip still fouls. With more thinking and tinkering, he developed a monofilament hinge-style guard that holds the strip in place from all sides.

The Dazzle Bait is another fly that was conceived over a beer and conversation with guides; the discussion centered on the best attributes for a simple fly for school-size bluefin tuna (in the days of never-ending schooled-up bluefin). Of primary concern was imitating the 4- to 6-inch sand eels preyed upon by bluefins, but mimicking them with a fly that would stand out from the crowd of naturals. In sight-fishing for bluefins, anglers must cast quickly and accurately because the fish move very quickly. The fly cannot foul, and must be easy to pick up quickly and cast again. Rice worked and reworked the fly. Then he found Deadly Dazzle, a flashy and translucent UV fiber, which he says is "probably the best fish-attracting material I've come across."

He now ties the Dazzle Bait in sizes suitable for Northeast flats fishing and other saltwater situations.

While many of Rice's ideas come from guides and their experience with feeding fish, he also gets insight from collaborations with other fly tiers. He's working now on an East-meets-West approach to fly design, drawing inspiration from the Western steelhead flies tied by April Vokey. He likes the colors and the way materials are tied sparse

Deadly Dazzle, Mirror Image Fiber, and EP Fiber. It all comes down to how the fly needs to perform and what the intended target is. I'm partial to naturals for big fly patterns and synthetics for the smaller. I also find myself using Softex more and more to create flies that are easy to cast, recast, and not foul."

Because I subscribe to the concept of the fishing dog, I had to know the story behind the name of Rice's fly-tying business, Mud Dog Saltwater Flies, [www.muddogflies.com](http://www.muddogflies.com). When Mike dove into the world of commercial fly tying he deliberated long and hard to create just the right name. One day, after a morning of fishing along the Back River in Weymouth, Massachusetts, he was sitting on the bank with his black Labrador, Jack. It was low tide, and Jack was running over the tidal flats, covering himself with mud. Rice knew it was a simple choice after seeing that. Until Jack got ill and eventually passed on, he would lie at Rice's feet every night while Rice created his saltwater masterpieces.

Jack was every bit the soul of the tying business and Rice's fishing buddy. Rice had Jack trained to sit on shore and wait. When Rice inevitably hooked up, Jack would wait until the fish was in and then would very carefully sniff the fish. After the sniff, he'd sit back down and wait for it to happen again. When Rice got his boat, Jack would sit up in the bow and watch the water. Rice swears Jack

could see fish on the flats better than he could. When Jack saw breaking fish, he would stand up and look back over his shoulder, almost as if saying, "Dude, 10 o'clock, 60 feet out, cast now!"

Rice is a fly-fishing and -tying ambassador. I've seen this in action. He is the first to help an angler with patterns and techniques to get into fish, and he will readily hand out the hot fly, with a smile, and say, "Here, try this."

He explains, "My main focus is on aligning myself and this business with people who are concerned with the state of the sport. We need to get people pumped back up on chasing fish with flies.

"There are those of us with great passion for the sport, conservation of the fisheries and resources, and the lifestyle, [and we] need to convey this passion to potential fly fishermen and -women. If I

can impart the excitement that I get when I see the fish, make the cast, get the fish to take, and then get it in with a good release for one person, and that person passes it on to another, then my goal's been achieved."

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Massachusetts angler Mike Rice is best known for designing saltwater streamers such as the Yak Hair Deceiver, Fur Strip Deceiver, and Dazzle Bait.

but with a spread that creates a wider profile, creating a translucent effect that suggests life.

When I look beyond the beautiful ties in a box of Rice's flies, I notice the combined natural and synthetic materials that optimize size, profile, and color to achieve functional, lifelike flies. Rice says, "I like tying with naturals—bunny, bucktail, yak hair, etc.—but I also use synthetics such as