

Masters at the Bench

Garrett Lesko/By Glenn Zinkus



It's that magic time on the local farm pond. The sun just dropped below the horizon and the sky glows a brilliant salmon-orange in the west. Everything remains visible in the gloaming, well lit by the summer dusk, but it's only a matter of minutes before that changes. All is still until a loud *galooop* interrupts the water's serene surface and ripples radiate away from the rise form. That explosive rise rarefies the air, fills you with anticipation. You make the cast and the fly lands with a gentle plop. Although it should be expected, you are surprised when a V-shaped wake zeroes in on the deer-hair bass bug at the end of your tippet.

Such scenes reverberate in the psyche of West Coast deer-hair bug maestro Garrett Lesko. He designs confidence flies for these situations, and crafts them with remarkable skill and artistry.

Lesko's fly-fishing odyssey began with a school-sponsored trip to Oregon's Odell Lake. One of Lesko's friends had brought along a fly rod and float tube. Lesko caught his first fish on a fly that day. This brief encounter was all it took for the fly-fishing bug to hook him. Later that summer, the fledgling fly tier found his father's old Thompson C-clamp vise in the garage, along with some fly-tying tools and assorted materials. While visiting his local fly shop in Albany, Oregon (Two Rivers Fly Shop), he acquired a more extensive fly-tying kit. He recalls, "I picked up books from library, watched clips on YouTube, and my friend gave some pointers. I took these first steps. Essentially everything else was self-taught."

Lesko tied countless flies that first year, learning a great deal by trial and error. Not all of these first flies were up to snuff; proportions were off, sometimes colors were off, and the flies were not always tied on the correct hook. But he was improving, his flies rapidly becoming more refined, his techniques more precise. Soon he moved on to more advanced, more interesting flies—and became infatuated with spinning deer hair. Lesko has mastered the art of spinning and trimming deer hair to create bedazzling creations for warm-water fish.

This fly-tying niche is practiced by only a few, and fewer still are considered masters of the art; among them is Pat Cohen, who has served as Lesko's primary mentor in the craft of spinning, stacking, and trimming deer hair to create beautiful bass bugs. Garrett says that Larry Dahlberg, who developed the Dahlberg Diver in the 1970s, perhaps can be considered the grandfather of deer-hair stacking, while Cohen is likely the best-known practitioner of the technique. Stacking deer hair differs significantly from spinning deer hair. In stacking, the hair is densely tied and compressed, and the tier can add triple or quadruple the amount of deer hair on a fly that is possible in spinning, resulting in denser flies that stand up to repeated attacks by bass and even toothy critters such as pike and muskies.

Once he'd mastered the primary techniques of fly tying, Lesko dedicated his fly-tying time to constructing stacked-deer-hair flies. He studied instructional DVDs, inspected endless packages of hair, and purchased and practiced with tools specifically designed for working with deer hair. He dedicated a year to tying deer-hair divers.

Meanwhile, Lesko's interest in tying bass bugs spurred his interest in fishing for bass. He soon learned that, compared with other fish—trout and steelhead, for example—there was a dearth of information about specialized strategies and tactics for targeting bass. Fly recommendations

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generally included the usual cast of ubiquitous characters: Clouser Minnows, Woolly Buggers, and generic poppers. Right from the start, Lesko endeavored to tie all of his bass flies, and he continues to do so.

He has long supported the local fly shops, but not for the flies. As an

increasingly avid bass angler, Lesko would frequent the fly shops looking for examples of bass patterns, but these flies never satisfied his desire for a certain level of perfectionism. Commercially tied bass patterns, what few he could find in the shops, could never hope to do so. And in the

cold-water-centric Pacific Northwest, he quickly noticed that fly-shop-bin bass flies did not display the same ingenuity and quality as the trout and steelhead flies sharing bin space. The hair quality was variable, the hair was not packed densely enough, and the flies couldn't hope to withstand the rigors of a lot of fishing.

Lesko continued to perfect his hair-pattern techniques, and one of the first things he learned is that not all deer hair is created equal. To reach the level of expertise seen in Lesko's flies today, choosing the best hair for the job is critical (and that applies to any aspect of fly tying, whether you're whipping up an Elk Hair Caddis or crafting a complex bass bug).

For stacking deer hair, Lesko searches for long, thick deer belly hair with a tacky texture. The hair itself is hollow and should feel spongy. With a patch of hide in your hand, push a thumb against the hair, pressing it down against the leather. Is it resilient?

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Does it bounce back like a sponge? That's the hair that will produce the best results. Lesko advises that fly tiers always select the best hair, rather than just grabbing the first bag of deer hair off the pegs at the local shop. The hair of deer harvested during different seasons has different characteristics; deer harvested during winter provide the best hair.

Lesko is an avid fly fisher, but he considers himself a fly tier first and an angler second. That does not diminish his eagerness to cast a fly rod, and he takes advantage of the myriad angling opportunities throughout his home state of Oregon, targeting not only bass, but also trout and steelhead, as well as rockfish and other saltwater species (he fishes from coastal jetties). He relishes summertime, when waters turn tepid and bass feed frequently and dominate his time. He says his favorite local bass waters can produce 100-fish days.

When not concocting his latest creations at home or testing them on local bass waters, Lesko enjoys demonstrat-

ing his techniques at fly-fishing and fly-tying events. Young, enthusiastic, and gregarious, he always attracts a crowd, and his fly tying is a show in and of itself, with colorful deer hair flying everywhere. To the amazement of onlookers, Lesko cinches down on a thin strand of gossamer thread, densely packing deer hair until he arrives at a complex and beguiling—and highly effective—bass fly.

Lesko (www.thestickfish.com) ties commercially, too, mostly for individual clients rather than shops. Each fly takes about 45 minutes to finish, so selling them at a wholesale price isn't viable. He calls himself a "destination tier," sending his patterns around the world with globe-trotting anglers

targeting not only warm-water species, but also taimen in Mongolia, steelhead in Russia, giant trout in Argentina, and just about everything that swims in Alaska.

But close-to-home bass remain Lesko's obsession, not to mention his proving ground, and to date they have inspired some truly beautiful and effective creations. ➤

Glenn Zinkus is an Oregon-based freelance writer and photographer.



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