

## In the eye of the beholder

By Ian Cox

A recent article by Gordon Van der Spuy got me thinking about hooks again. Gordon says he is going to follow up his article with another about the best hooks for the job so I won't steal his thunder with my thoughts on that subject. What caught my attention, however, was his observation that Tim Rolston prefers straight eyed hooks and does not think up- eyed hooks are worth a damn. This raised the obvious question why bend the eye of a trout hook at all?



The answer is that there is no reason why one should. It is now a meaningless affectation that has more to do with habit than utility. You see although eyed hooks date back to antiquity they were not very popular. The problem was that horse mane which was the tippet choice of yore doesn't knot very well. Thus until we found a better tippet material, common sense required that one whipped the tippet onto the shank hook. This was known as snelling.



The introduction of catgut leaders changed this though not without a considerable degree of resistance from the fishing fraternity. Eyed hooks were initially viewed with suspicion so much so that it took years before the obvious superiority of the eyed hook caught on. The adherents of the old school fought a determined rearguard action; witness the fact that classic salmon flies are still tied with a catgut loop rather than the infinitely more sensible eye.



The practice of bending the eye was all about knot strength. You see the practice of looping the line behind the eye provide a strong and very simple method of securing the hook to its leader. As H. Cholmondeley-Pennell enthused back in 1886: *For attachment to a bare hook I have been hitherto in the habit of using a very ingenious knot invented by Major Turle, and known under his name. Attached to*

*the turn-down eyed hook it answers excellently well, as I can testify from experience, having used nothing else for many weeks in sea and river fishing, when the catch amounted to some thousands of whiting, mackerel, gurnets, flat-fish, &c., and also in legering and float-fishing on the Thames and Norfolk Broads for bream, roach, barbel, chub, perch, and gudgeon. Fishing was somewhat more productive in those days! The turtle knot became popular throughout the world. It is the reason why Catskill dry flies are traditionally tied off about 1 mm before the eye. The resultant gap is there to accommodate Major Turle's knot.*



This is the knot that is used at the beginning of “A river runs through it.” For a wonderful story of how this almost didn’t happen click [here](#).

It made sense therefore to bend the eye of the hook so as to ensure that the leader ran straight into the knot. The earliest turle style hooks were made with the eye bent down but it did not take long for a fly fisher to postulate that a dry fly would float better if the leader came off the top of the hook and so the up eyed dry fly hook was born.

Very few people use the turle knot today so one would expect the need for the bent eyed hook to have fallen away. However this has not been the case. Though there is no longer any practical basis for this, the adage that one tied dries on a bent up eye and wets on a hook with the eye bent down was still regarded as gospel when I started fishing in the late 1960’s. . The practice of using an up eyed hook for dry flies is now falling away However trout flies are in general still tied on a bent eyed hook.

A whole new hokus pocus has become associated with this. Thus it has been suggested that the bent eye aids the hook up. This is pure bunkum. The truth is much more mundane. While trout anglers easily fall prey to every geegaw known to human imagination, the truth is that they dislike change. Think I am wrong trawl through a trout fishing catalogue from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. You will be surprised how much that is in those ancient tomes is still be punted today as the latest and greatest essential aid to a good day on the water.

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