

Masters at the Bench

John Kreft / By Glenn Zinkus



Beetle Bailey



Clark's Lady Stone



X-Caddis



RiverKeeper Green Drake Soft Hackle Cripple



RiverKeeper Stonefly Nymph



Casual Dress



Olive Perdigon



Braided Butt Damsel Variant



RiverKeeper Callibaetis Emerger



McPhail's Golden Stonefly Nymph



PT Perdigon Variant



Green Drake Sparkle Dun

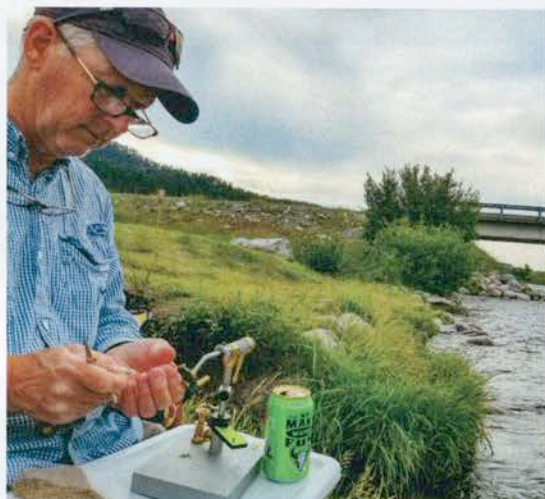


PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN KREFT

When the going gets tough, the tough invent new fly patterns right on the spot. Here, John Kreft whips up a few flies to tackle challenging trout on Montana's Madison River.

Anglers often repeat the adage that wild trout live in beautiful places and deserve beautiful flies. John Kreft's precisely detailed flies meet that latter criteria. The Sisters, Oregon, resident says "there is something beautiful" about flies that are easy to tie and can dupe difficult-to-catch fish. He considers such patterns elegant. Kreft enjoys learning about all sorts of flies and fly-tying genres, and passing what he discovers on to others, both in person and through his website, www.riverkeeperflies.com.

Kreft's passion for the sport began around 1970, when an avid fly-fishing friend compelled him to pick up a fly rod. He lived in Salem, Oregon, at the time, and his immersion in fly angling began on the nearby Little North Santiam River. He was mesmerized by the process of fly fishing—the fluid beauty of the cast, the creative process of crafting insect imitations on a tiny hook, and then catching trout on those flies. He was a teenager at the time, and eager to learn the art of fly tying as well as expand his explorations of the area's many excellent waters. Obtaining his driver's license hastened both objectives.

About a year later, he discovered Doughton's Hardware, a longtime fixture in downtown Salem. In those days, hardware stores often sold sporting goods, and Doughton's had garbage cans filled with fly rods and blanks, bins brimming with locally tied flies, and glass-encased counters filled with reels and other accoutrements. One day, Wayne Doughton, the owner, sold Kreft a Thompson Model A vise, four sample fly patterns, and the tools and materials he would need to replicate those flies. Further, he told him to "stop by my house on Sunday and I'll teach you to tie those patterns."

Kreft was off to a good start, and within a few years his interest was further fueled by the burgeoning fly-fishing businesses in western Oregon: Kaufmann's Streamborn fly shop was going strong in Tigard, and McNeese's Fly Shop had recently opened in Salem (in 1977). Kreft drew substantial information and inspiration from Randall Kaufmann's books and from seminars held at McNeese's.

About two hours east of Salem, and across the Cascade Range, the Metolius River became one of Kreft's favorite fisheries, its aquarium-like flows serving up an excellent education in spring-creek fly fishing. But "life gets in the way sometimes," says Kreft, explaining that marriage, two young children, and work forced something of a hiatus from fly fishing in the mid-1980s. He soon returned to his favorite sport, however, and opened new chapters in his fly-tying journey. He struck a valuable deal, trading drifting and fishing the North Santiam River for fly-tying instruction from Gary Mudge, a Salem commercial tier. He also took classes at the late-1990s iteration of McNeese's, then called Creekside and owned by local guide Rich Youngers. Kreft became adept at virtually all kinds of flies. His skills warranted a coveted slot as a demonstration tier at the annual Northwest Fly Tyer & Fly Fishing Expo, so Youngers facilitated his participation in the event starting around 2008.

Tying at the expo led Kreft to helping organize the event. He served as chairman of the expo from 2011 through 2016, and as treasurer of the Oregon Council of the Federation of Fly Fishers (now called Fly Fishers International, or FFI) and the expo in 2016 and 2017. Appreciative of his productive volunteer service, the council awarded him with both the Federator of the Year and the Oregon Council Award of Excellence in 2016; for his fly-tying expertise and acumen as a demonstration tier, the council honored him as the Stan Walters Memorial Fly Tyer of the Year in 2017.

Kreft embraces the call to teach others the conjoined arts of fly tying and fly fishing. His station at the annual expo in Albany, Oregon, always draws a crowd as he concisely and expertly narrates his work and explains his tying techniques.

The expo appearances led him to showcase his skills at other regional events, such as the Western Idaho Fly Fishing Expo, the FFI Fly Fishing Fair, and the Pacific Northwest Fly Tyers Rendezvous. He's also helped with the Central Oregon Flyfishers Winter Fly Tying group, youth fly fishing with the Next Cast Flyfishers, Central



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN KREFT

Oregonian John Kreft is always eager to share his fly-tying expertise, and especially enjoys helping beginners hone their skills. He often appears as a demonstration tier at expos and other events. Here, Kreft takes a brief timeout from tying at the 2016 Fly Fishers International Fly Fishing Fair in Bend, Oregon.

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His flawlessly dressed flies have garnered a customer base, so Kreft also ties flies commercially. In total, he churns out about 2,000 flies per year. Mostly he ties patterns created by others, across a wide spectrum of styles, but he applies his own ideas about materials and proportions. His flies tend to be sparser than those found in fly shop bins because that's what he sees in the natural insects these patterns seek to imitate. He studies the aquatic realm and also shoots close-up photos to learn more about trout foods.

Naturally, Kreft also designs his own patterns. Among his originals are variations of a Soft Hackle Cripple (as seen on the masthead of his website), although he credits his wife, Karen, with the idea that inspired this fly. One day on the Metolius River, when she was catching fish, and he wasn't, Kreft asked, "What are you using?"

"One of your Soft Hackle Cripples," she replied, which left him scratching his head—because at the time he didn't tie Soft Hackle Cripples. It turned out that Karen had been heeding her husband's mantra: the river speaks to you, if you listen. She had noticed the numerous drifting mayflies, their wings stuck in the surface film, and, looking through her box, decided a soft-hackle wet fly had the right profile. So she fished it as a dry fly.

Later, back at the tying bench, Kreft went to work on a new Soft Hackle Cripple. He developed several iterations on light-wire hooks and experimented with hackle colors and hackle density. Eventually he got it just right. His Soft Hackle Cripple is an excellent imitation of a mayfly dun trapped in the surface film, and he ties it in a variety of sizes and colors to match different species. His innovations with mayfly patterns don't end there. He loves fishing for rising trout, and his RiverKeeper *Callibaetis* Emerger sits in the surface film, using CDC for buoyancy. It mimics an emerging *Callibaetis* pulling its wings out of the nymphal shuck. Kreft offers an informative CDC primer on his website, including a story on why ducks float.

When he's not fishing the Metolius or other central Oregon waters, Kreft enjoys traveling to other well-known fisheries and makes annual (and sometimes more than once) summer expeditions to Montana, Idaho, and other states. These summer sojourns have become traditions for the Krefts since John retired in 2017. They frequent Yellowstone National Park; John says, "Spending time in the northwest corner of the park helps us with our Zen."

Peeking into John Kreft's fly-tying and fly-fishing world is educational and entertaining, and as easy as logging on to his website, which contains a wealth of details. He adds new material weekly—and you might need a week just to scratch the surface.

Glenn Zinkus, who lives in Corvallis, Oregon, is a regular contributor to American Fly Fishing magazine.



PHOTO BY JOHN KREFT

The innovative Riverkeeper Soft Hackle Emerger is one of John Kreft's deadliest original patterns, though his wife, Karen, actually came up with the idea when she fished a soft-hackle wet fly on the surface during a mayfly hatch on Oregon's Metolius River.