RECIPE FOR FISH:
TAKE ONE BEAD-HEAD PHEASANT TAIL NYMPH...

BY TERESA HENDRIX

GIVE A MAN A FISH, and he's got dinner. Teach a man to fish, and he's got a great way to see some of the most pristine places in the world, study ecosystems, and get dinner.

At least if you teach him to fly fish, which is what Mark Shelton does. Shelton, the associate dean of the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences since 1997, is an expert fly fisherman.

Fly fishing is the sport of casting an often elaborately made "fly"—feathers, strings, knots and other things made to look like a bug. The kind of bug that—dancing across the water in a mountain stream or lake—would make a fish bite.

Shelton has fished his way through crystal streams in Oregon, Washington, Montana, Canada and Alaska—sometimes backpacking in, sometimes horse-packing in. He's been up and down California's Sierras, and as far afield as Ireland and New Zealand.

Trying to snag brown trout in the waters of New Zealand has been the toughest so far. "We got no fish, three days in a row," Shelton recalls.

This, despite the fact that Shelton's college studies give him an edge in the fly fishing world. Shelton holds three degrees in entomology, the study of insects. He's also a certified entomologist, an expert in bugs.

"I do think it helps," Shelton said of his entomology training. "Particularly when I'm in a new area, I turn over rocks to see what's under there, I check the spider webs for insects. I try to find out what the fish are feeding on and then cast accordingly."

His studies in entomology have also provided him with a good memory for what insects are likely to be feeding fish in which geographic region.

Shelton's background originally gave him a flair for fly tying, too. For each simulated bait bug, there's a "recipe." Tying the ingredients together to form a faux-bug can take anywhere from five minutes to over an hour. Though he's still an avid fly fisherman, Shelton stopped tying his own flies about 15 years ago—the same time high-quality, low-priced, handmade flies started showing up on the Internet.

It's the fishing, not the tying, that's Shelton's passion. He now teaches fly fishing courses through Cal Poly Continuing Education. A special private lesson he offered as an item for a charity auction recently went for $150.

He was a bit bemused by the bid but is perfectly happy to spread the love of the sport.

"I've been fly fishing since I was 14. I grew up in Modesto and started out fishing for bluegill and bass on the Tuolumne River. It's just very peaceful. They call it the quiet sport," Shelton explained.

"When you're fly fishing, it puts you in beautiful spots. You're out in the middle of nature, far away from most everything, in very pristine areas. It's very tranquil," he said.

But make no mistake. Fly fishing isn't just about being out in the wilderness, in the middle of a mountain stream, surrounded by clean air, meadow and forest and nothing but the sound of the rushing water. It also has to include catching a fish.

"It's about the fish," Shelton said with a smile.

If he could only have one fly, what would it be?

"The bead-head pheasant tail nymph," he explained. "It's a good mayfly imitation."


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