Make your Own Balsa Wood Popper

by Leroy Cook
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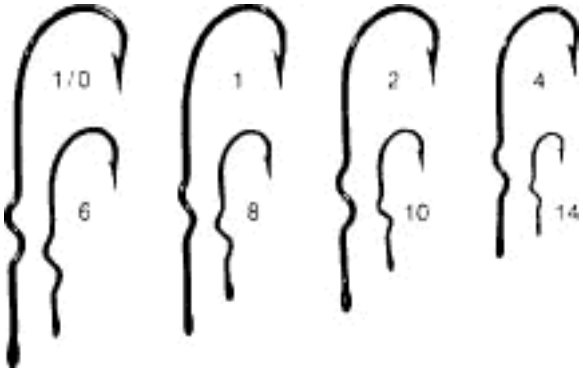
I was tying some flies for a trip to the Clearwater in September when a friend sent me an image of a a small skater. After looking at the image of the fly, I was having a hard time understanding how he got the fly to have such a smooth and distinctive body. At first, I thought it was deer hair coated with a UV resin. After closer inspection, I figured out the body was a made out of some type of cork, wood or corkie float, etc. So, I decided to try to make a few. Hence, the inspiration for writing this article. I am not so sure I will ever use it on Steelhead, but it has given me some ideas for Silvers in the ocean.

Lets Talk Hooks:

First and foremost, you can use any hook to tie a popper. But, there are many popper type hooks you can buy. It is just a matter of your own preference. Here are just a few. However, the most critical aspect of a “popper” type hooks is that once it is glued to the hook, it does not rotate.

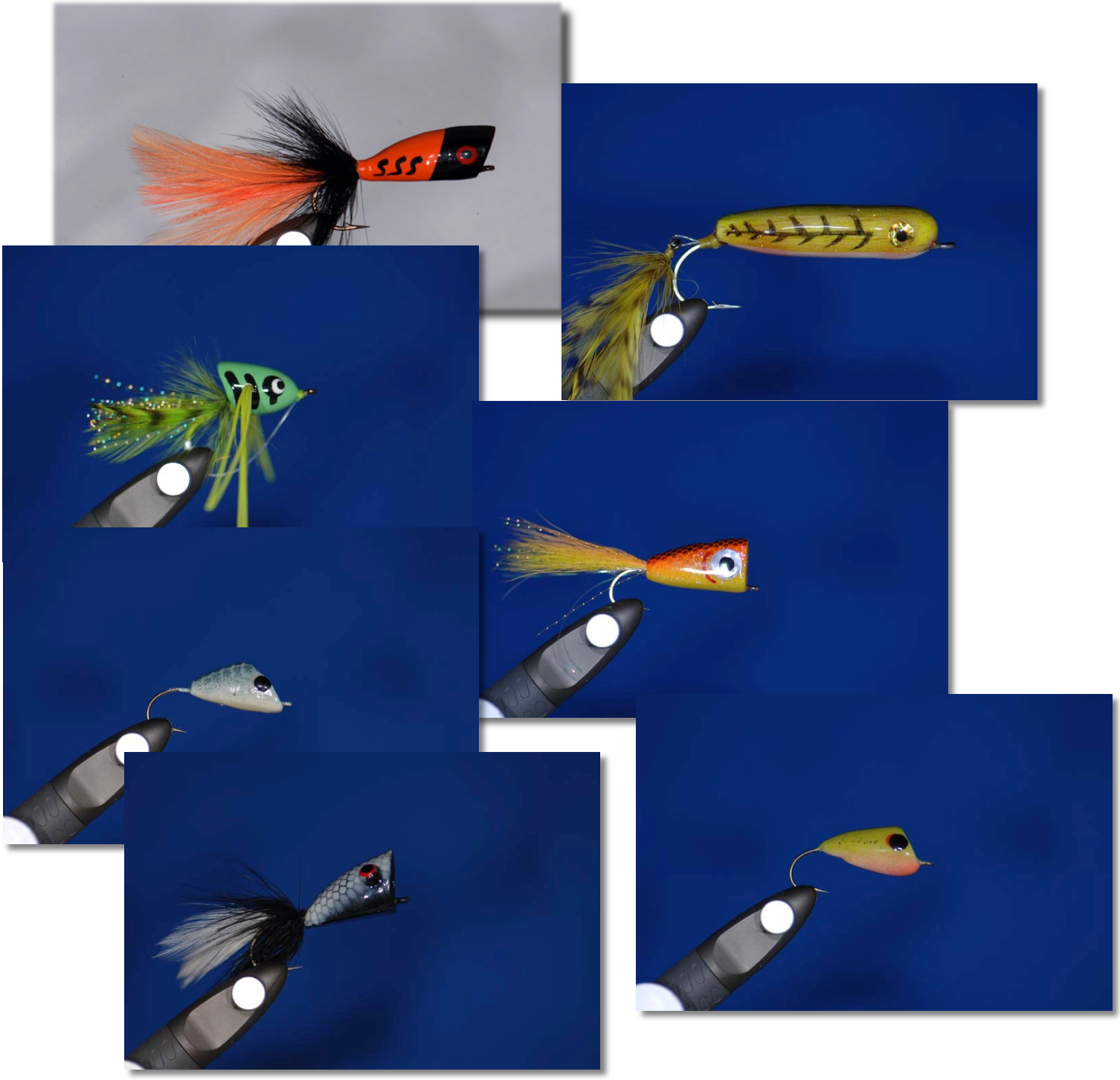
If you are unable to get popper hooks, you can use any hook and by laying down a solid thread foundation and using either super glue or epoxy to seal the hook inside the popper.



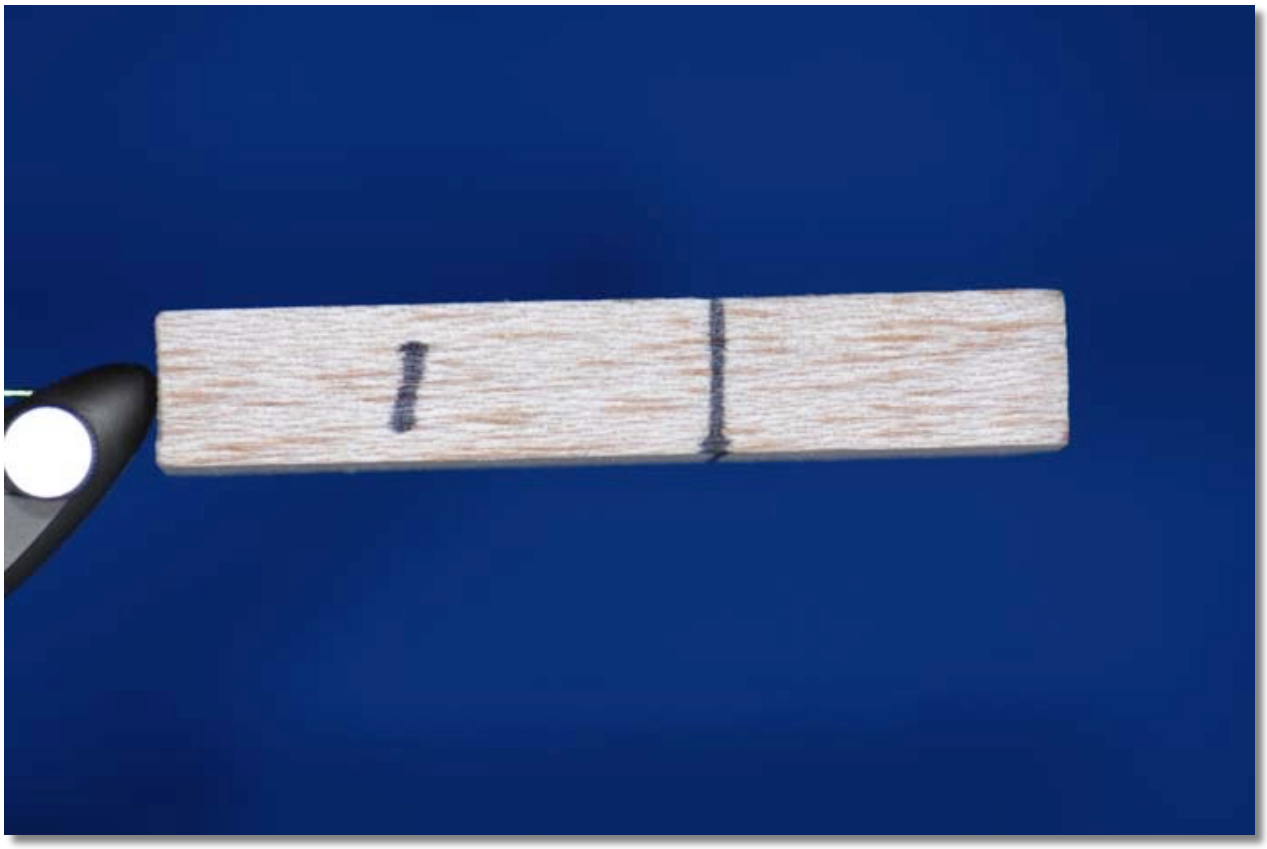
Mustad 33903 Ringed, bronzed, special kink in an extra long shank popper hook.

Waspsi Popper Hook

The start to creating your popper is to determine the style. Below are just a few different styles to consider; but you are only limited by your imagination.



Carving a balsa wood popper.



Step 1: Determine the size you want your popper to be. Bigger is better…… Bigger Fish! Thebalsa wood shown above is a3 ½ inch piece of ¾ x ¾ inch strip which easily be found online or at most craft stores. The number on the popper denotes the step. I have drawn a line on the balsa wood to define the length of the popper.

The second step is to shape the popper. Using an X-acto knife or any other sharp knife, make small cuts at the back of the popper. When you are learning how to carve, go with just small cuts. When carving try to maintain a flat bottom. (That is, only carve on 3 sides of your popper). It can be helpful to actually sketch out the final design on the balsa wood.

I have omitted one picture from the sequence because, it did not really add any value. You continue removing excess balsa wood and your popper begins to take shape. Go slowly.

Slowly make the final adjustments to your creation by making smaller cuts and trying to make sure you have symmetry left side vs right side of your popper. The final few cuts are the most critical, if you make a mistake here, it may be hard to recover.

You are almost done. Using a small file, an emery board or 600 grit sandpaper, begin to smooth out the all the irregularities and imperfections. Continue to sand until it is extremely smooth. Once completed you are now ready to mount the popper on a hook. This is relatively easy. On the flat surface of the popper (i.e. the bottom) using a straight edge and a X-acto knife, or any other cutting instrument you prefer, cut a small slit on the bottom of the popper. (try and get it as close to the center of the back of the popper and the front of the popper. (The more centered it is the easier it is to control the popper on the water) The slit does not have to be any deeper the then depth of the “kink” of your popper hook. Work the hook into the slit and using and using a good glue/epoxy attach your popper to the hook. Once dried, using a wood filler, epoxy or any other sealer coat the popper and again let it dry. Once it is dried re-sand the popper and you are ready to paint it.

Below is a youtube url which starts with a piece of balsa wood and goes through the entire process to a finished popper. It is a great video to understand the basics of making balsa wood poppers.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEDZnc6x0bw