

Hookin' Women into Fisheries Conservation

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Fly image above from www.davewhitlock.com

Gazing out over the North Branch of the Au Sable River in the early morning light, fly rod in hand, Tom Sadler beams. A dense fog shrouds the river and fish rise, making soft plinking sounds on the surface—perfect conditions to teach a beginner's class. Sadler, an internationally-recognized fly fishing instructor from Charlottesville, Virginia, is here to teach his fourth annual cohort of MSU Fly Gals. His new students are all women with different disciplinary and recreational backgrounds from the MSU Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and even the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). They assemble at the shore for their first lesson.

Small Fry: the beginnings of MSU Fly Gals

Dr. Bill Taylor met Sadler through the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council, an advisory committee for the USFWS whose mission is to promote the conservation and awareness of valuable aquatic resources that support and enhance recreational

fishing opportunities. Taylor and his long time friend and colleague, Bill Demmer, the executive Vice President for Conservation and Education of the Boone and Crockett Club, had been discussing ways to get more women actively involved in outdoor recreational activities. They hoped that Sadler could help them make this dream a reality.

USFWS recently estimated that recreational anglers spend \$40.6 billion annually on trips, equipment, licenses, and other related items. The State of Michigan uses this fisheries-related generated revenue (from excise taxes and license sales) to manage and conserve the state's fisheries, an important natural and economic resource.

Therefore, Taylor and Demmer hoped to increase local participation in fishing, as well as raise awareness of fisheries resources and conservation funding, by launching the MSU Fly Gals program. "We wanted to provide those who were not raised in the tradition with an opportunity to experience fly fishing," says Demmer. "MSU Fly Gals instills a love and sense of advocacy for the

resources," adds Taylor.

What better place to learn than on the banks of the famed North Branch of the Au Sable River, a blue ribbon trout stream and the birthplace of Trout Unlimited? Demmer and Taylor invited Sadler and the inaugural class of Fly Gals up to Demmer's Big Creek Lodge for three days in the summer of 2007.

The first evening, the Fly Gals, many of whom had never held a fly rod before, arrived to a "trout opener" style party, a traditional celebration at the opening of the fishing season, where the Fly Gals quickly started to form friendships and professional networks that have persisted well beyond their three-day program.

On the second day, Sadler taught the Fly Gals initial lessons on fly rod anatomy, basic casting, tying knots, and essential fly



Learning to tie flies



2010 MSU Fly Gals



Au Sable brook trout

fishing gear. The group spent their final day on the river practicing their new skills. "Our vision of sharing the fly fishing experience and inspiring a new group of individuals into the sport was off to a great start," says Demmer. "It has brought great joy to me to introduce a love of my life, the sport of fly fishing, to a most appreciative audience!"

The participants shared his sentiments. "I've had an extremely positive experience," says Dr. Dana Infante, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and a member of the Fly Gals inaugural cohort. "Fly Gals has moved me from a brand new fly fisher to someone who can actually catch a fish with a rod. It's made me confident enough to go into a fly shop, fish on my own, and even teach others."

Keeping it Reel: the evolution of MSU Fly Gals

Leaders and participants have both noticed some additional benefits of the fishing curriculum.

"I came away from the experience with tips on both backcasting and surviving grad school," says Kiira Siitari, M.S. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and 2010 Fly Gal. The program brings together a group of women who share a

curiosity and passion for the natural world and unites them with a shared goal—learning to fish—in a beautiful setting, away from the traditional academic environment.

Participants share ideas and grow together, learning as much from each other about fisheries issues as from Sadler about fly fishing. "There's an energy with MSU Fly Gals that arises when enthusiastic individuals, with a common interest in natural resource conservation, bond over the shared experience of fly fishing," says Andrea Jaeger Miehl, Ph.D. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and member of the 2009 Fly Gals cohort.

The program "links you into a professional network on a personal level," says Infante. Chiara Zuccarino-Crowe, Ph.D. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and 2010 Fly Gal, agrees. "The program presents an opportunity to build a network with relationships that are much stronger because everyone has this shared special experience that goes well beyond typical academic and professional associations."

The conservation legacy of Fly Gals has matured as new elements have been added to the program: float trips on the North Branch, guest speakers (most recently, Jim Martin, the Conservation Director of the Berkley Conservation Institute), tours of Fuller's historic North Branch Outing Club, and even an "instructor class" for early cohorts of Fly Gals to help teach the skills they've learned.

These experiences enrich the

program with a sense of place and purpose. "This is not just fishing to fish," Taylor explains. "Through MSU Fly Gals, we are developing a passion and stewardship for our fisheries resources. These 'gals' will save the future of fisheries!"

The Trophy Fish: the future of MSU Fly Gals

According to a 2010 Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation report, women currently make up 25.2% of all fly fishing participants and represent the fastest growing segment of the fly fishing industry. This statistic makes programs like MSU Fly Gals all the more valuable. "This program empowers women to know that they are capable, especially in a sport that has been historically dominated by men," says Jacqui Fenner, M.S. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and 2010 Fly Gal.

So far, 28 women have participated in the Fly Gals program and plans for the 2011 cohort of Fly Gals are well underway.

As he gazes out over the newest Fly Gals' first casts, Sadler is proud. The weekend has been peppered with lively discussions and debates about natural resource issues around the dinner table, on the river's edge, and during fly tying sessions. He is impressed with the knowledge and passion the participants bring to the field of fisheries conservation. "We are building a cadre of fly fishers who know a lot more than just how to cast a fly rod. These Fly Gals will be a great asset wherever they wind up."



North Branch float trip



Practicing catch and release



Casting lessons