

West Michigan anglers win fly-tying titles

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Chris Soule, Gerry Worden and Jim Reed have more than a little in common. Each loves fly-fishing and tying flies. Each is a member of the Grand River Fly Tyers, a two-year-old chapter of the national Federation of Fly Fishers.

Most notable is that all three gained fame as world champion flytiers this summer. They won 39 of 96 medals given out at the first annual FFF International Fly Tyers competition.

The event drew 156 competitors from countries such as Finland, Denmark, Canada, New Zealand and the Bahamas.

"I was hoping I might get something, but I was not anticipating such a wonderful reaction from the judges who are my fly-tying heroes," said Christopher Soule, 36, of Grand Rapids.

"Those guys are the best in the field. It's nice validation for 16 years of fly tying."

Soule's steelhead streamer fly and bluegill nymph each were chosen as world champions.

Gerry Worden, 58, of Byron Center, said he was delighted by the results. Each tyer competing in the world competition had to tie the same flies as others entering a particular category. They may have submitted bluegill flies, trout flies, salmon flies, bass bugs, steelhead flies or a variety of others. Judges compared one to another in a blind competition where the tyer was not identified.

Worden's spey fly was chosen as the world champion for that category. His Clouser Minnow was also selected as a world champion.

"I really didn't expect to do that well," said Worden, who entered both steelhead and spey flies. The latter is a large colorful fly that originates in Scotland. It is used for fishing Atlantic salmon on the River Spey.

"My reaction was that I wanted to go home and tie 500 more flies," he said.

Jim Reed, 59, of Howell, was no less surprised. He favors flies for warm-water species. He loves the challenge of catching big pike or bass on a surface fly that he has tied. Reed said he hoped to win a medal but came home with five world champion medals. It took him six weeks to tie the six flies he submitted.

"I think it says something for our region," said Reed, speaking of the abundant success the club members had.

Wolf Shrey said that checks with him, too. West Michigan has an abundance of high-caliber tiers. He and his wife, Inge, are two of the four founders of the Grand River Fly Tyers. They started the club after hearing for years that people wanted to know

where they could learn to tie flies.

"Inge and I worked a booth for the Fly Girls at the FFF Conclave and the repeated question was: 'Where is there a local club where someone can meet others, tie flies, exchange stories and go fishing?' So we started the club in 2004."

Shrey said the group had a modest beginning. There were only four members. But the group got recognition from FFF for what it was doing -- developing a chapter whose focus was on fly-tying.

"We got an FFF club achievement award and our membership jumped to 56," Shrey said.

The FFF is well known for its "All Fish, All Waters" creed. Its members come with a wide variety of fly-fishing interests from trout to bluegill to salmon, pike and large saltwater species.

All of the winning tiers said the club has given them an outlet for their interests. The club meets on the first and third Wednesday of every month from September to May at the Gander Mountain Lodge on 28th St. Dues are \$15 a year plus another \$35 for FFF membership.

"No other club in the FFF even came close," said Shrey. "All I could say is, 'Wow!' "

Worden, who retired from Kentwood public schools and today works part time at the Great Lakes Fly Co. in Rockford, said he began tying large streamer and Spey flies because he was drawn to the beauty and history of the flies that originate in the 1800s.

Spey flies were used by aristocrats to hook salmon that might run as large as 80 pounds. They were large and colorful and border on being art.

"Each fly has a beauty and grace that other fishing tackle doesn't have and the spey flies are absolutely gorgeous," Worden said. "I wanted to be able to create something that was beautiful. That I can catch fish on it makes it even more exciting."

Soule says he started tying for more practical reasons. Tying his own flies gave him a creative outlet but also let him save money. He prefers to tie his own designs rather than classic patterns. His "Toxic Dart" series is a bright-colored steelhead nymph that looks like it was exposed to something hot. Ultra-realistic flies also are a favorite. They may never see the water but are sought by collectors.

"It was fun and something I could do while watching the Lions lose on Sundays," Soule said.