




# Perfect Patterns

FOR THE PAST 40 YEARS, BOB POPOVICS HAS CREATED SOME OF  
THE MOST WHIMSICAL — AND DEADLY — SALTWATER FLY DESIGNS



A full-page photograph of a fly fisherman, Bob Popovics, standing in the surf at Island Beach State Park. He is wearing a yellow cap, a white shirt, and olive-green waders. He is in the middle of a cast, with a long, thin line of fly line arched high in the air against a clear blue sky. The ocean is a deep blue with white-capped waves breaking. In the background, a sandy beach and some distant structures are visible under a clear sky.

*A world-class caster, Bob Popovics launches 60 feet of fly line into the surf at New Jersey's Island Beach State Park.*

# A

A stiff easterly mashes sets of frothy green waves into the sand of Island Beach State Park in New Jersey. To our right, beach grasses dance in the breeze atop 30-foot dunes that the wind has scrubbed for a millennium. Aside from our southbound tire tracks in the sand, I imagine the place looks almost identical to what explorer Henry Hudson saw more than 400 years ago.

Fly-tying legend Bob Popovics likes to come here and scan the waves for mullet during the fall run. “It’s best when the sun illuminates the waves from behind so that you can spot the mullet riding down the fronts of those waves,” says Popovics, who is 70. “Let’s head down to the inlet and see what’s happening.”

We pace up and down the beach in Popovics’ four-wheel-drive pickup for the next two hours. He knows this beach as if it were his backyard. “See how the beach falls steeply right there?” he asks. “That’s always been a great spot for bait and stripers. Look farther up, and you can see how the current washes up against the shallower areas of the beach. We had a great year in that spot one year. Albies were crashing everywhere.”

It was nearly 50 years ago that Popovics started fishing this beach. Since those days, he has revolutionized not only the flies anglers use to catch saltwater species around the world, but also the way the flies are tied and the materials used to make them.

Today, when he’s not creating new fly patterns or sharing his knowledge with fly-tyers at shows around the country, he’s here in New Jersey, fishing the beach he loves, whether it’s tossing a cast net for mullet or fishing for stripers, bluefish or albies.

## Native Son

Popovics’ home sits among rows of modest beach houses in Seaside Park, New Jersey. He and his wife, Alexis, have





The entire upper floor of Popovics' home is dedicated to fly tying and fishing. His cat Suzie has the run of the place. In the mid-1980s, Popovics would host Tuesday

evening sessions that drew tyers from hundreds of miles.

lived here since 1984, raising the place several feet after Hurricane Sandy devastated the area in 2012. A couple of flights of stairs lead to the highest level of the house, where his fly-tying room is located. It looks immediately familiar as I recall old magazine photos of fly-fishing gurus Lefty Kreh, Bob Clouser and many others tying here. The warm, wood-paneled room is immaculately tidy, with rows of built-in drawers and shelves for fly-tying materials; a U-shaped tying desk with three vises, tying tools and vividly colored tying materials on it; ceiling-mounted rod racks; and random bottles of silicone sealant and tubes of light-cure acrylic scattered about. Along the walls and angled ceilings are countless fly-fishing and tying pictures that span decades. “That’s Poul Jorgensen right there,” Popovics says. “There’s Lefty and Ed Jaworowski, and over there is Butch Colvin, Cap Colvin’s boy. That’s Bob Church there; he taught me a lot.” In this room, between 1986 and 1992, Popovics would host Tuesday evening get-togethers that drew fly-tyers from hundreds of miles away. “The idea was to share knowledge and have a good time,” he says. “The Internet didn’t exist back then, so guys didn’t have any other way of finding out about new fly patterns or techniques. Guys getting into saltwater fly-fishing were having a hard time because the information just wasn’t out there.” Popovics shows me to the window. “There was an empty lot across the street there where we’d do casting demonstrations and lessons, and

the guy who owned it always made sure the grass was mown for our meetings,” he recalls. “You couldn’t even find a parking spot on our street. It was crazy.” Popovics’ own love of fishing started as a child. Born in 1948, he grew up in South Trenton, New Jersey, and caught carp and perch on the Delaware River. “I’d go hose down my backyard and then catch the nightcrawlers that would come out,” he recalls. “My neighbors used to say, ‘Hey, Bobby, you catchin’ those nightwalkers?’ I always laughed at that. I’d put the worms in cigar boxes, and I would go fishing early in the morning with them.” There also were days when his father and his father’s friends would take him fishing in the New Jersey Highlands. “I was so excited, I’d never sleep the night before a trip,” he says. “What my father instilled most in me was the fun of fishing. He taught me how important the laughter, stories and camaraderie were. It stuck with me for life. For me, it’s always been about making memories, spending time together with friends and, well, laughing. Fishing has always come second.”

### Early Fly Days

We drive down the street from Popovics’ house to grab lunch at a local tavern, where everyone asks him for a fishing report. While he’s best known for fly-fishing today, he didn’t actually get into the sport until he was an adult.

big fly that I could cast easily and catch big stripers with. Before then, we were limited in using smaller flies, and I got tired of catching only the smaller fish. I tied it by stringing a piece of monofilament between two vises and then spinning the thread bobbin around different lengths and colors of bucktail. It was a great fly but was far too labor-intensive — it took hours to tie.” Through the 1970s, Popovics improved his fly-fishing game and got himself noticed. “Lefty Kreh invited me down to Nags Head, North Carolina, in 1971,” Popovics says. “I remember the Polish jokes the most. I’ll slow this one down for Bob’ is what Lefty said while giving a demo in front of me at a swimming pool, and everyone laughed. Despite the ribbing, Lefty changed up my casting, and I became a much better caster.” A tall, stocky man, Popovics is a world-class fly caster and angler. I show him a picture that his friend Tom Lynch took of him casting on Island Beach State Park — launching about 60 feet of fly line in a perfect, tight loop across the surf. Anglers who are considered legends of the sport have seen Popovics cast and been impressed. “Bob notices movements and change when fishing that few others do,” says Ed Jaworowski, a longtime friend, fly-fishing author and renowned casting instructor. “Plus, he’s an amazing caster. He one time walked right past me while we were fishing and caught a striper from the area I was casting to. I never saw it.” Noted angler and fly-pattern innovator Bob Clouser calls Popovics an amazing fisherman. “I’ve fished all over the world with him, and he’s always experimenting with new casting techniques and retrieves he observes from other anglers,” says Clouser, the creator of the Clouser deep minnow fly. “Bob’s about as creative as they come. What’s unique about his tying is that he’s always trying to fix something that’s broken. He is always thinking about how to improve a fly to make it last longer, swim better or catch more fish.”

### Sweets for the Surf

By the mid-70s, Popovics began to grow frustrated with the way bluefish demolished his flies. “Those blitzes didn’t last long, and you’d often only get one shot because after catching one fish, your fly would be trashed,” he says. “By the time you tied on a replacement fly, the blitz was over. So I wanted to figure out a way to have the opportunity to make more than one cast and catch more fish.” Solving that problem would lead Popovics to craft one of his most famous patterns, the Surf Candy. He started experimenting with translucent, two-part epoxies as a way to make his flies more durable, but it wasn’t until the mid- to late ’80s that he mastered the process. Popovics called these early epoxy flies Pop Fleyes, an ode to his name and a play on words describing their painted-on eyes. Those early flies were tied with bucktail and sometimes synthetic piping to denote a lateral line, and they had painted feather gill plates. Though relatively crude, they were more realistic than just about any fly pattern out there. “Durability was the primary objective, but I found the epoxy also added a translucency that mimicked what you see in silversides and other bait,” Popovics says. Eventually, modern materials such as Ultra Hair and Super Hair made their way into the Pop Fleye patterns, making them even more realistic. Then came a name change. “My dad used to eat these candies called Sour Balls made by Charms,” he says. “They had a certain transparency to them, so I decided to change the name from Pop Fleyes to Surf Candy.” Today, that original pattern can be tied to imitate bay anchovy, sand eels, silversides and a litany of other forage fish. In the Cape Lookout false albacore season off North Carolina, the Surf Candy is a battle-tested pattern that sometimes lasts all day under constant attack. Until the Surf Candy, it wasn’t possible to catch 40 or more fish with one fly. Still, not everyone embraced what Popovics was doing. “People used to give Bobby a tough time about those first epoxy flies,” Kreh said



in 2017. “Folks would say that they weren’t flies, but that they were lures. But if you look at what Bobby does, he ties the entire fly first and then adds the epoxy. The tying part is the same. The epoxy is just an add-on. I took those Surf Candies with me all over the world.”

A lot of anglers owe some of their success to the time Popovics spends in the surf in New Jersey. As we’re driving down the beach at Island Beach State Park, Popovics says it’s imperative to understand baitfish if you want to succeed at fly tying, given that so many saltwater patterns don’t resemble anything even close to a fish, yet are still successful.

“For years, I’ve netted mullet, sand eels, bay anchovies, silver-sides, shrimp, squid, crabs ... you name it,” he says. “I observe how they swim and interact with the surf. Making a fly that imitates those actions, colors and movements is what keeps me tying new flies in my mind in the middle of the night. Once I’ve tied them, I get one in the water, retrieve it several times and then keep working on it until it’s exactly what I envisioned.”

Popovics has the video to prove his process. In his tying room are shelf upon shelf of VHS tapes, converted 8mm and other formats, with handwritten labels such as “Harkers 1992” and “Mullet 1973.” He even has an old videocassette player hooked up to a flat-screen television that he can watch while he’s tying. “I film everything, from bait swimming in the surf to striper blitzes and in-water videos of flies I’ve tied,” he says. “I learn something every time I rewatch one of them.”

### Attack of the Siliclones

By the early 1990s, Popovics was experimenting with another synthetic material: silicone sealant. “The silicone flies arose from some failed experiments tying flies with wool fleece,” he says. “I had been using the fleece for a bluefish pattern, which the fish loved, but that didn’t last long. That’s the short side of the story, but that’s how Siliclones came to be. The name comes from the silicone and the animal cloning that was going on at the time. I took wool and tied it in a streamer pattern and then coated it with clear bathtub silicone. Eventually, we adapted the pattern to all sorts of gamefish, including smallmouth and striped bass, as well as others.”

Before long, Popovics was imitating squid, mullet and other baitfish to an impressively realistic effect. He even added sculpted silicone “lips” to his Siliclone patterns, so they swim realistically. They’re affectionately called Pop Lips and resemble traditional swim baits that use lip-like protrusions to induce a swimming motion.

Among Popovics’ other well-known creations are Bob’s Bangers, an improvement on top-water poppers; the Cotton Candy, a large bunker imitation that is easy to cast; and 3D flies, which imitate baitfish in profile, cross section, and from above and below.

### Game-Changer

Popovics’ Hollow Fleye designs represented a breakthrough that continues to inspire fly fishermen today. “There’s no question in my mind that the Hollow Fleye is Bob’s most groundbreaking fly design,” says Blane Chocklett, a Virginia fly angler and tyer who is known for his Gummy Minnow and Game Changer fly patterns. “The beauty of the Hollow Fleye and Beast patterns is that the techniques used to make them can be scaled down or up for all sorts of species. It was a real game-changer for the musky flies we use so widely today, but I’ve tied all sorts of patterns for many different species using the Hollow Fleye technique.”

Popovics says the Hollow Fleye technique enables tyers to create large, broad-bodied flies without a lot of bulk. “It started with the Big Bunker fly and Bucktail Deceiver,” he says. “It was the basis for all sorts of patterns, but most notable is the Beast.”



*The Beast Fleye is as much a work of art as it is something that catches fish.*





*The Surf Candy is Popovics' durable, time-tested epoxy fly, which has taken a long list of gamefish.*

I found detailed explanations about the techniques outlined in Popovics' two books, *Pop Fleyes — Bob Popovics' Approach to Saltwater Fly Design* and *Fleye Design — Techniques, Insights and Patterns*. Folks looking to learn the Popovics' way adore the two titles.

Popovics exudes an eagerness and kindness that seems to be vanishing in the fishing world. He may be one of only a handful of fishing icons who are dedicated to answering every question patiently, enthusiastically and with a smile. "Bob is the single kindest, most approachable and most encouraging celebrity in any field I've ever met," says Jonny King, a fly-fishing writer and longtime friend. "People cling to him, and he is always patient. Bob has often told me that the key to demonstrating anything about tying or fishing publicly is not to show what you can do, but to make sure others realize they can do it, too. He brings no ego to his demos, but rather is always focused on helping people."

When Popovics isn't at fly-fishing shows, tying at home or fishing, you'll most likely find him at his Shady Rest restaurant in Bayville, New Jersey. "I work almost every day of the week, depending on my schedule, and my wife, Alexis, is almost always there," he says. "My dad owned a bar in Trenton from 1947 to 1964, and when we moved down to Bayville, he couldn't keep still. So he built a little pizza parlor on the front of the house. I wasn't supposed to be so far away from the base, but I spent most weekends away from Camp Lejeune helping at the restaurant back then. I'd drive back Sunday. My wife and I bought the place in 1978 and have been working there ever since."

He also spends a great deal of time in the restaurant's garden, pruning and caring for the flowering plants. For Popovics, it seems, getting the smallest details just right is a life endeavor. "Bobby's in that garden for endless hours," Clouser says. "He's meticulous about that garden — maybe more than his fly tying."



*Game on: Bluefish have a difficult time resisting a big Popovics fly.*