

# Understanding Fly Tying Hooks

By Mike Hogue

For many fly tyers, hooks can be very confusing. There are many numbers, sizes and shapes, all of which can be useful to a tyer at any time. To complicate matters, many company names sound similar as well. I'll begin by outlining how hooks are made. Then I will discuss some general terms and define some basic terms which are useful to know and apply to almost every type of hook.

Hooks are made of wire that is drawn. Metal wire is heated and a taper is sometimes added. The hot wire is then turned around a shape. When an eye is turned, it is important that the wire be tapered to allow the eye shape to be formed. The wire is then bent around a curve to create the bend of the hook. The wire is given a nick which creates a barb. The hook wire is then heated again to give it tempering which makes the hook hard and keeps it from bending out of shape.

If the hook is a chemically sharpened hook, the hook is etched with a solvent that creates the point. Next the hook is dipped or sprayed with a coating which reduces or eliminates rust. All hooks have these features: points, eyes, bends and a shank. The bend is the turned part of the hook, the eye is where you attach the line, the point is the end or tip and the shank is the backbone of the hook.

The distance between the hook point and the shank is called the gap. A gap is what holds the fish to the hook and this is perhaps the most important feature.

## Eye shape:

Most hooks have an eye which how we attach the fly to the leaders we use. Hooks which have no eyes are called blind eye hooks and are mostly used only in decorative or artistic type of flies and have limited practical applications. Eyes can be looped or closed. A loop eye is a hook which has wire folded to form a loop. A closed eye is the most common type of eye and is an eye which is turned in a circle.

Eyes can point in several directions. Eyes are pointed up, down or straight ( which is sometimes called a ring eye). Up eyes are commonly found on salmon hooks. Down eyes are typical types of eyes found on dry flies and most wet flies. Ring eyes ( or straight eyes ) which are mostly used on streamer hooks, saltwater, bass hooks and some parachute types of dry hooks.



**Down Eye Hook: Often Abbreviated as DE**



**Straight or Ring Eye: Often Abbreviated as RE**



**Up Eye and Example of a Loop Eye**

## Shape of the Bend



All hooks can be bent and turned into several shapes. Usually when people refer to a hook shape they are referring to the bend. The bend's main purpose is to allow the hook to do its business which is to keep the fish after the fish bites. Bends like eyes have several names and purposes.



**Egg Hook:** This really isn't a bend as so much of a style. A typical egg hook is extra heavy wire, ring eye and a sproat bend. The shank is extra short.



**Model Perfect Bend:** This shape is usually found on dry hooks and many streamer hooks. It is a round bend and it is sometimes called a Viking Bend also.



**Nymph Bend:** These are newer shapes of hooks which are designed to make the fly appear more life like. Sometimes they have a bend shank in which the shank is bent at a 45 degree bend. The shape shown here is useful for bead type flies.



**Sproat Bend:** Sproat hooks are often used in wet flies, soft hackles and bass hooks. Some saltwater hooks have a sproat bend. This bend generally has a small turn or the point is sometimes given an upward slope in the point.



**Scud or Shrimp:** This is a shape used for scuds, caddis emergers, bead flies and for some parachutes. The shape allows the fly to look like a turned down freshwater shrimp or cress bug. One of the more useful hooks.



**York Bend:** This sometimes called a natural bend or living nymph hook. Often used on stoneflies, large nymphs or stimulator type flies. If it is blackened it can be a very useful steelhead and salmon hook.

These bends are not the most common but do exist:

**Sneck bend:** The bend has a square edge to it. Not a common shape, usually found only on old antique hooks.

**Stinger:** A modified type of sproat which has a sharp up arc to the point. Used for mice and deer hair bugs.

**Spey or Bartlett Bend:** This is a combination of the York and the Nymph. The shank has a curve with a small up turn in the eye, York bend. Useful really only for steelhead and salmon flies.

**Circle Hooks:** This bend is nearly a circle in the shape. I strongly feel that these are very bad to use. A circle hook allows folks to keep, sort and capture every fish that swims. I have heard tales of people catching hundreds of fish to find only trophy fish that fit slot limits. If you intend to release a fish, these hooks will tear up a fish's mouth. I don't sell these or recommend them at all.

**Humped Shank or Popper Hooks:** These hooks have humps in the shank which are used for making bass poppers. This keeps the hook from twisting or turning when the hook is glued to a cork or poly popper body. Some newer styles are for saltwater pencil bodies, which have stainless steel wire.

**English Bait Hook:** This is a curved hook with a straight bend near the point. Often used for San Juan worms or Caddis emergers. This hook can cause damage to fish by becoming deeply embedded in the roof of a fish's mouth. If taken too deeply, it will penetrate the back of the brain and cause death to the fish. If you intend to use this hook you should put a Kirby or Reverse in the hook by bending the barb outward by 25 degrees, changing the angle of penetration.

### **Wire Types and Shank Length**

The backbone of the hook is called the shank. Mostly the hook shank is straight, although some spey and nymph shapes have a curved shank to them. The length is measured in eye lengths and several hooks are actually interchangeable. A standard hook length is a typical dry. A 1 XL means that the hook is 1 eye length extra long. 2xl means 2 eye lengths and so on. One feature that some folks are not aware of is hook proportions. All fly hooks are actually interchangeable. For example: a Mustad 9671 and 9672 are actually the same hook just different lengths. A size 14-9671 and a size 16- 9672 are the same length. The gap or distance between the shank and the point are wider for a larger size.

Often this is a really useful thing to know if you are making small flies. You can sometimes jump sizes and increase the gap of the hook to give you better hooking. If you are in a pinch and run out of hooks in one size, you can cheat sizes and sometimes make a fly on bigger hooks. Another good example is using a dry for a nymph, you can bump up the size of the hook if you wanted a longer fly, giving you wider bends.

**HOT TIP:** Here is a really good tip most don't know. If you are fishing small hooks and are getting short strikes, put a Kirby or Reverse in your hook. This changes the angle of penetration of the hook and forces the hook to the outside of fish's mouth, this will increase your take and catch. To put a Kirby in a hook, put the hook in your vise, then push the shank of the hook sideways. This will make the point curve off. If you push the hook one direction it is a Kirby if the point goes the other way it is a Reverse. Don't ask me which is which. If you are on the stream you can do this with a pliers or a hemostat. Be careful bending hooks and don't bend the point. Bending points takes the temper out by heating the metal and this causes the hook to break and fail!

Hooks are made of several types of wire and have several different types of coating. Wire is gauged as fine, standard, heavy, extra heavy and so on. In most instances if you want the fly to float you use a fine wire hook. For sinking applications or swimming type flies you want an extra heavy or heavy wire hook. The types of coating for hooks are outlined below.

**Blackened Or Japaned:** A blackened hook is a hook which is colored black. If you would like to make any hook black you can boil it over a camp stove **OUTSIDE** in castor oil. This stinks and it smokes like mad. You will make a big mess if you do this so please be careful.

**Nickel Plated Hooks:** A newer type of finish which is a black mirror type coating. The color is blackish gray.

**Stainless Steel:** Silver type hooks which are made of stainless steel. Used for pike and saltwater flies.

**Cadmium Plate:** This is a coating which is given to saltwater hooks to keep them from rusting. Mostly used in saltwater.

**Bronze:** Standard wire which is used on most hooks.

### **Sizing**

Hooks are sized in a rather strange way. Most always hooks change sizes in even numbers such as 2, 4, 6 ect. As the numbers increase the size decreases. For example a 10 is smaller than an 8. As the hooks increase in size beyond size 1, the 1/0 or "ought" is added, as the numbers increase here, the size increases. For example 1/0 is smaller than a 2/0 and so on. Where this came from I am really not sure, although most tyers should understand that different companies have different sizes. For example a Mustad size 2 may not be equal in size to a Daiichi size 2.