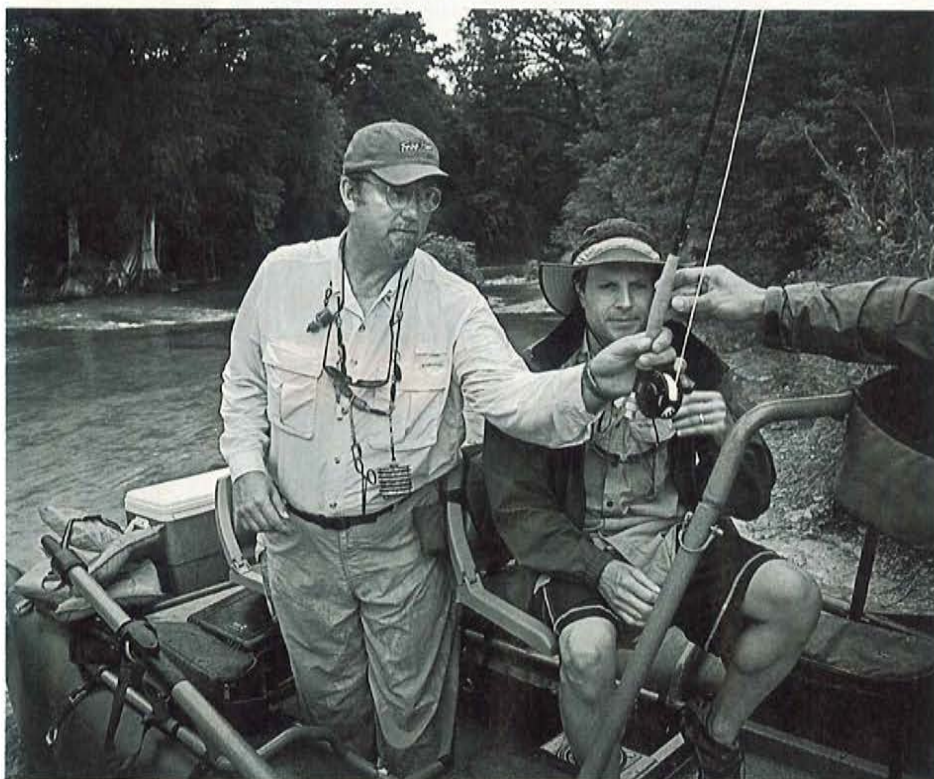




Kevin Hutchison, 45 Fly-fishing Guide



Hutchison, standing, owns Hill Country Flyfishers and is the fly-fishing manager at Sportsman's Finest, in Austin, where he has lived for twenty-plus years. He guides more than one hundred trips a year, helping clients catch a variety of bass, trout, and perch.

Fly-fishing in Texas is underappreciated. When people think of Texas, they think of cowboys and cattle, hunting, and fishing with conventional tackle. That's ingrained in our culture. Fly-fishing is this interloper sport from the outside; people think it's only for trout fishing in the mountains.

But while you can't go on a fishing trip to Colorado and Montana every day, in Texas you can fish year-round. The great thing about Texas rivers, especially in the Hill Country, is that they're unexplored jewels. They're all beautiful, with spring-fed water. And they're all fishable. You can go out on the Llano River in the fall and not see anyone else fishing, let alone fly-fishing. You can

have fifty-fish days with everything from Guadalupe bass to Rio Grande perch.

The first time I tried fly-fishing, I was in Boy Scouts summer camp, and a kid had brought a fly rod with him. I thought it looked so cool. But two thirteen-year-old boys trying to cast an eight-foot rod was a disaster. I didn't pick up a fly rod again until I was twenty. I wish I had a better story, like that I was drawn to catch a spawning rainbow trout with a dry fly on a Colorado stream, but the truth is, I was trying to impress my girlfriend's dad. She had taken me to meet her parents, an event all men dread, and I was determined to find something to talk about. Walking through her parents' ga-

rage, I noticed four fly rods mounted on the wall. I knew that was my in. When I introduced myself, I said, "So, Roger, you like to fly-fish?" That was it. In the dead of winter, in a heavy Indiana snow, Roger took me out for my first real casting lesson. From that point on, I was—pardon the pun—hooked.

For some reason, once I had the proper instruction, I really understood fly-fishing. It made sense to me. Floating beautiful rivers, feeling the line shoot through the rod, setting the hook on a big fish—these are all things that inspired me to make a living at it. Of course, that took a while. I moved to Austin after college with a degree in photography and first worked for a studio doing portraits and weddings. In my free time, I'd float the Hill Country rivers and guide a little bit on the side. Then I started tying my own flies and selling them commercially. I remember the morning I woke up and realized I couldn't pick up my camera anymore. I walked into the studio and quit.

I started giving lectures on fly-fishing, casting, and fly tying, and soon I became a certified casting instructor. I guided on my own for a while, then partnered with a friend to start a business, Hill Country Flyfishers, which I eventually took over. These days my goal is to have about a 60 percent returning customer base. That means a client averages two to three times a year. Some are more regular. I have a heart surgeon from San Antonio who likes to fish with me every month. Another guy just books an August trip on the Llano River because there's no one on the water, he doesn't mind the heat, and he can catch really big fish. Somehow I manage to average three to four trips a week.

Casting is the first thing you have to get comfortable with. There are pretty straightforward mechanics for casting well. You just have to learn them, and if you practice about fifteen minutes a week, you'll be amazed at how good you get. After that, it's about understanding your rig: how to tie knots, how to select the right leaders and tippets. The time to learn all this is not on the water.

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You've got to know how to attach leader to tippet without consulting a book. On game day, it's all about fly selection and finding fish.

A lot of people don't realize this, but bass are hard fish to catch. We're not Okie catfishing out there. Bass will humble you up fast. They're smart and picky about what they go after. But finding fish is simple if you understand that they need three things: protection, the right temperature, and access to food. If you can find an area that has adequate cover, with an easy way to get in and out of the sun, you get to provide the access to food. Then it's about fly selection. This is where the patience comes in. You may have to try a number of flies to see what they like.

I try to think about what it felt like when I was first learning. I tell clients not to worry when they miss a fish, because there's always more river. That can be hard when it's raining sideways and you've been fishing all day, but there is more river and there are more fish. I try to provide everything I can on a trip—even the flies. I tie my own, so they're pocket change to me, whereas if you use store-bought flies, you're throwing away \$2 or \$3 every time you lose one in the brush. You'll be a lot more willing to cast into difficult spots if you're not worrying about the cost of the flies you're using.

In recent years I've noticed a steady rise in women fly-fishers. I think a lot of women are wary of going on a guided trip at first because they don't really want to go off with a guy they don't know for a whole day. I can understand that. But the other reason they don't go, I think, is that the sporting world has told them, "You're just a girl. Don't worry, you don't need to tie your flies on or get the fish off the hook." It really bugs me, because I think women are often better fishers than men. I taught the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman program for Texas Parks and Wildlife for eleven years. I learned quickly that the way women want to learn this sport is, they want you to show them how to do it, make sure they have the technique down, and then be left alone. Women are fun to fish with because the more they catch, the more focused they get. Sometimes guys are the other way around. They start catching, then daydream and end up losing fish because they're not paying attention.

Just because you love fishing doesn't mean you should be an instructor. You have to choose to not make a lot of money, and you have to accept the fact that the people you teach are rarely going to be as good as you want them to be. But I'm addicted to watching people catch fish, whether it's for the first time or for their biggest fish. I'd much rather watch someone catch a fish than me catch one. Which is good, because a guide has to be happy letting go of the rod. ♣

AS TOLD TO JESSICA NORMAN DUPUY ON

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