

# Clinic

## STAYING SHARP

Learn to sharpen your own hooks and combat the dulling effects of fly fishing in the salt.

**T**HERE ARE ENOUGH CHALLENGES in landing a fish, so why add a dull hook to the list? Improperly maintained hooks rank among the leading reasons that fish don't make it onto the beach or into the boat. You've put your time in targeting the best tides, the right moon phase, and the proper fly, so take an extra few minutes to hone your edge.

The ocean is a tough place. From oyster beds in the Southeast to jetties and mussel beds along the Mid-Atlantic and rocks and ledges in New England, your hook regularly takes a beating. For the most part, saltwater fish have tough mouths, which also can wear down points. And hooks can even get dull if you over-sharpen them because grinding creates heat, which reduces the hook's temper, and points can bend or break easily if they've been overworked.

To properly sharpen your hook, you'll need to first pick the right tool for the job. Files and stones are the most practical because they occupy a minimum of space. While there are a lot of files on the market, saltwater anglers favor flat or triangular steel models. Flat files come in single- or double-sided versions with fine, medium, or coarse cutting edges. Triangular files are smaller, a feature that allows anglers to get into all the tight areas of the hook. Some files have diamond grit, which offers a precision cut. Files remove a good amount of blunted metal from a hook.



Whether you use a triangular file (above) or a flat file, you'll sharpen a hook with the same motions. Set the left side of the hook at a 10- to 15-degree angle to the file, and pull the hook toward you. Give it several passes. File the right side of the hook in the same manner, but push the hook away from you. A few slightly angled strokes on the underside finishes the sharpening.



There are two types of stones natural or artificial. Natural stones come from quarries, while artificial stones are made from silicon carbide or aluminum oxide. Artificial stones often have bonded-on abrasives to give a faster cut, like the diamond grit on a file. Some stones have grooves that allow for tracked sharpening. Stones are excellent for adding a razor sharpness to a saltwater hook.

### How to Sharpen

The first step is to clean your file or stone. Oftentimes you'll have fish scales, salt-residue, or rust that reduce the depth of the file blades or skunk the stone's

surface. You won't get a good cut with a dirty file or stone. Some files come treated with a rust inhibitor, but if not, keep them oiled with Boeshield T-9 and stored in a ziplock bag. Then you are ready to proceed:

*Check the hook's sharpness.* If your hook is really banged up, you might need a combination of file and stone to restore the proper edge.

*Review the hook's shape.* Look at the hook's point to get a baseline for sharpening, and follow the way the hook was ground.

*Get a grip.* Position your fly on a 10- to 15-degree angle and pull down the

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**Wrong:** Oversharpened point is rounded over.

**Right:** Three-sided sharpening gives the best point.

2  
1  
3

The point on the left illustrates a rounded hook that has seen many sharpenings over time or one really poor one angled too directly against the file. The hook on the right is how a point should look after a proper three-sided sharpening that shaves an edge on the left, right, and bottom sides.

file or stone toward you on the left edge of the hook. Continue to sharpen with the same motion in one direction; moving your fly back and forth creates a dull hook. After the edge forms, add the same motion to the right side of the hook, pushing the point away from you

scratches your nail, hit it again.

There comes a stage where your hook has been sharpened so often that the edges become rounded. After multiple sharpenings, you also will have removed enough metal from the hook to reduce its strength. That's probably a good time

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

**T**here are a lot of different types of hooks to choose from, not just stainless and non-stainless. Nowadays, there are also chemically sharpened as well as laser-sharpened hooks. The fancier styles usually cost more. There are also two types of points that are popular among saltwater fly tiers. Here are some pros and cons of each.

### ■ STYLES

**Non-stainless:** Hard finish, easy to sharpen, and holds an edge. They are least expensive, but will rust with age.

**Stainless:** Mostly rustproof and moderately expensive. However, stainless is softer, bends easily, and needs regular sharpening.

**Chemical/Laser:** These are sharp out of the box and have multiple edges. But excessive sharpening may reduce performance, and they are the most expensive.

### ■ POINTS

**Cutting Edge:** These points are three-sided and are commonly known as spear or knife-edge points.

**Conical Point:** Also known as needle points for their rounded shape due to being ground on.

along the file. Finish off with a similar number of passes on the bottom of the hook. Don't press too hard; instead, use a consistent pulling motion.

*Smooth the edges.* Use a stone to polish the edges and to remove any additional metal burrs.

*Test for sharpness.* Pull the hook along the edge of your thumbnail. If the point digs in easily, it's sharp. If it

to spin up a fly on a new hook with plenty of strength. And if you tie your own flies, always debarb and sharpen your hook before you take your first turn of thread. It's better to discover a fractured point before you invest a lot of time. ■

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