



Comparing a fishing fly to the real thing Nov. 2019, along the Umpqua River.

COURTESY OF UMPQUA VALLEY FLY FISHERS VIA FACEBOOK

TEACHING FLY FISHING AND OTHER SKILLS

DONOVAN BRINK
The News-Review

WINSTON —A group of closeto 20 people gathers around tables in a conference room at the New Hope Fellowship Church in Winston on a Wednesday night.

Among the group on any given night are fly fishing experts and their students: active military, veterans, first responders and healthcare providers. On this particular night, the lesson is tying fishing flies.

At the head of the table, an instructor shows how to tie basic flies, with the demonstration being projected on a screen large enough to see from anywhere in the room.

Fly Fishing Veterans was founded to “give those we serve the tools to help them better manage the mental stressors and physical injuries they have experienced throughout their careers.”

“We teach them how to tie flies,



Volunteer Kelly Walton of Myrtle Creek looks on as US Navy veteran David Bales of Roseburg works on tying a fly during a meeting of the Fly Fishing Veterans group on Sept. 14, in Winston.


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build fly rods, how to cast and, ultimately, take them fishing,” Fly Fishing Veterans founder Doug Myers said.

The idea was born when fishing buddies Jeff McEnroe, Scott Lightcap and Josh Voynick, all from the Umpqua Basin, had discussions on their fishing trips about giving back in some

meaningful way to those who served.

Then, according to the group’s website, McEnroe remembered reading about Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing for disabled veterans and realized the trio could use their fishing talents to help. Reaching out to two other fishing buddies, Jay Carlson



A beautiful example of a freshwater fly.

COURTESY OF THE UMPQUA FEATHER MERCHANTS

and Bryan Deck, the five formed the initial steering committee.

With the Roseburg VA Hospital Campus being in Roseburg, in 2014 the steering committee established the Umpqua Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing Program in Roseburg to serve the disabled veterans throughout the Umpqua Basin.

Today, the Veterans Administration nationally recognizes this therapy and its benefits for our military veterans dealing with suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, Parkinson's Disease and physical injuries.

Myers, who is retired from the United States Air Force, got involved with Project Healing Waters in 2016. At that time, the program served only disabled veterans. Fly Fishing Veterans formed as a veterans division of Umpqua Valley Fly Fishers in 2021 as that group already was an established nonprofit. With that partnership, Fly Fishing Veterans was born.

"This September, Fly Fishing Veterans became a nonprofit incorporation registered charter with Fly Fishers International," Myers said. "We will continue our collaboration with Umpqua Valley Fly Fishers as they have been an outstanding supporter of our veterans and our organization, even that now we are legally two separate organizations."

The group gathers every second and third Wednesday of the month, and the lessons vary. On this night, it was learning to tie flies. Another night might include learning how to build fly


rods, or going into the field behind the church for tips on how to cast.

Of course, there are also occasional fishing trips in the team's 16-foot handicapped accessible drift boat, equipped with a bow that opens up for easy access.

The program was seeing significant growth in events, participation and volunteers in 2019, but the COVID-19 numbers delivered a significant hit to all three. Myers said since 2021, those numbers are gradually starting to rebuild, to the point that the group's board of directors is already planning events for 2023.

This past March, Fly Fishing Veterans teamed up with Umpqua Valley Fly Fishers for their first large tying and casting festival at the Winston Community Center, with the lone cost of entry a nonperishable food item donated to a local food bank. The event featured rod building demonstrations and 44 fly tyers from Eureka, California, to Bellevue, Washington, and beyond.

Myers said a similar event is



Volunteer Erich Gruber of Roseburg, left, works with US Navy veteran Ken Patton of Greenduring a meeting of the Fly Fishing Veterans group on Sept. 14, in Winston.

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planned for September 2023 at an even larger venue.

The core elements of this proven therapy revolve around a means of positive distraction within a positive environment; involving mentoring veterans in the five distinct fly fishing activities of fly tying, rod building, fly casting, fly fishing education and fishing events.

"We teach them how to tie, build rods, teach them to fish and go fishing," Myers said. "They have the tools, knowledge and skills so that when they feel something coming on, they have an outlet to serve as a distraction and help break that cycle."

To learn more about the classes or become a Fly Fishing Veterans volunteer, visit flyfishingveterans.org or email Myers directly at dmyers@flyfishingveterans.org.



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Volunteer Josh Hampton of Sutherlin works on tying a fly during a meeting of the Fly Fishing Veterans group on Sept. 14, in Winston.