



# MADE FOR THE TAY

Ronnie Irvine's Devon minnows are the result of years of careful craftsmanship

**H**ANDMADE IS better than factory made. Most fishers would agree that's true of flies, but it's also true of lures. At least, it is if Ronnie Irvine makes them.

We first heard about Ronnie's Devon Minnows in conversation with an old friend: "You really should see his minnows," he said. We were sceptical. "They're made of mahogany and he paints them nine times..."

A few days later, half a dozen minnows spilled out of a brown envelope on to our desks. Straight away you could see that they were special. The colour combinations weren't like those of lures bought in sealed plastic packets. The paint gleamed, the fins seemed different, the eyes were beadier.

Ronnie has been making minnows for more than a dozen years. At first, this 51-year-old Blairgowrie butcher turned them just for his friends on Tay beats like Ballathie and Stobhall, but now they're sold into local shops.

What inspired him? Ronnie told us: "A friend, who first taught me to make my own rabbit snares, and then tie my own flies. When it came to wooden Devons, he made me a lathe with a motor and wooden tail stock, which was never very good but I used it for a year or so. Then another friend made me a metal one that I use to this day."

Production begins in Ronnie's shed. He says, "I mainly use tight-grain hardwood, a mahogany, because balsa cracks. I've tried various shapes and found the fish-like one to be best, but I've made others to order – bottle and pencil shapes."

The fins are very flexible and –

according to Ronnie – unbreakable. He has used other plastics but these discolour and break with extreme temperature changes. He uses a handsaw for the fins' groove and they're glued with an araldite that works in sub-zero temperatures. He's thought of most things.

The painting regime is crucial. Ronnie says, "Over the years I've tried many types of primer and paint and jotted down all the mixes and the amount of coats. Some cracked, some reacted with each other. If there's a secret, it's the primer.

"I spend a lot of time on each one. I paint them in the kitchen when I'm watching *Coronation Street*. In fact, my wife often comes in, smells, and says, "What's all this?" and opens all the windows. But you need room temperature and have to paint quickly for them to dry properly."

Ronnie doesn't use masking tape or sprays. He paints freehand with a fine artist's brush. He says, "I put eight or nine coats on each. Then I paint the eyes, glue in the fins and, finally, coat them with lacquer."

How does he decide on the colour combinations? It's experience; fish on the bank. "In the spring, the best colours are a yellow belly, all red, black-and-gold or black-and-pearl. For summer, the all-red one is a killer in the one-and-a-half or two-inch sizes. For the autumn, you can catch salmon on any Devon, but red ones are best."

Ronnie's fished since he was six years old, when he caught his first

salmon at Kercock. His recommended set-up is a 10 ft rod, 18-20 lb Maxima, a first swivel attached to five inches of 15 lb nylon and then a second ball-bearing swivel and then up to 3 ft of 15 lb nylon to the minnow.

Which lead he uses depends on the the river bed. Normally it's a Bouncing Betty (long plastic tube with lead inside) which he attaches directly to the 18-20 lb Maxima with a running swivel so it can slide up and down the line. If snags are likely, he'll use a drilled bullet attached by telephone wire to the running swivel with just three twists so it can break free if snagged. The wire should be shorter than the distance between the swivels so the lead doesn't interfere with the ball-bearing swivel.

Devon minnows have enjoyed a minor resurgence over the past couple of years. Perhaps fishers have become bored of retrieving Flying Cs. Or perhaps there's more craft in the way they are fished and that appeals to traditionally minded fishers. Ronnie's Devons certainly inspire you to fish with them. As he told us, "I can't make them any better."

■ Ronnie Irvine's floating Devons are £4 each (without mounts). Contact him at [minnowman@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:minnowman@hotmail.co.uk)