

## **Fishing for George**

By Capt. Steve Elkins

When the dog behaviorist visited to make sense of our neurotic dog, he also looked at our cat and said, in the scientific jargon of the highly educated, “If you look at how long your cat’s whiskers are, you can tell he’s getting (and puffed out his cheeks).” We had a brief discussion about the way a cat’s whiskers are a lot like curb feelers and will tell a cat whether his body will fit through a tight space, since his whiskers are roughly the same width as his belly.

We have only had George for six months, but I had also noticed that he had put on a few pounds. For an indoor cat, George is moderately active. He chases lizards and charges around the house in the possessed way that cats do for no apparent reason, arching his back and galloping sideways down our long hallway to win the race to the bedroom – a race in which only George is participating. I have never seen George actually walk down the hallway. He helps out with household projects like making beds, stalking our dog, and lying on my wife’s laptop computer while she’s trying to type. He has idly chewed on most of the plants in the house; now most of them look shredded and pitiful, but there is no sense in replacing them because George would eat the replacement plants as well.

At night, George fetches playing cards (and retrieves them) when we throw them for him. A few flicks of the index finger against a playing card will bring George galloping down the hallway and into the bedroom, where he will leap onto the bed and wait like a retriever for a card to be thrown. I have learned to throw a playing card a long way in six months. George will wait on the bed, ready to pounce. You can see the concentration on his face, and he tenses like a cheetah stalking his prey. When the card is thrown, George dives off the bed after it in a flurry of fur and claws. I think he would go the very gates of Hell to get to a playing card. He pounces on it and, after making sure it is satisfactorily dead, lifts up one corner of the card with one paw while holding the rest of the card down with the other paw. He grabs the card in his mouth and triumphantly returns to his perch on the bed and drops it at my hand to be thrown again. This could continue all night.

The fact is I had been feeding George too much. Just like raising children, raising a cat is a process of trial and error, and I had made an error. Now my cat was beginning to resemble an orange and white throw pillow. First I cut back the amount of food I was feeding him, and then I tried to devise a plan to help George lose some weight.

He likes to play with string and my niece Rachel has walked through the house with a piece of string dragging behind her; one end of it in her hand, and George wildly attacking the other end. He will get such a good grip on the string that he will try to run off with it, leaping and shaking his head like a largemouth bass that has just taken a lure. This gave me an idea...

When I was very young, my dad told me about an incident in which he had been getting his fishing gear ready for a trip to the pier, and had ‘accidentally’ hooked his cat while practice-casting in his bedroom. I can empathize with a cat that would attack a fishing lure. I can also empathize with a 10-year-old boy that would practice fishing in his bedroom. My heart went out to the poor cat that had to have a hook removed, but the fisherman in me couldn’t help but wonder, “So how was the fight?”

Minus the hook, now was my chance to find out!

I walked out to my garage where I found my fly rod, already rigged with a green, white, and black popping plug that I used to fish for largemouth bass in my friend’s lake during the Witching Hour – the time in the early evening when the light gets a little brighter and a little greener on the lake, and the air is warm and calm...the time when the best fishing occurs. In late spring and early summer in Northeast Florida, this can happen almost every day, but I digress.

I took a small pair of wire cutters and clipped off the hook, and my rig was complete. Now I had the perfect cat exercise machine: an eight-foot, 5-6 weight fly rod and a hookless popping plug. This was going to be great! I proudly returned to the living room with my gear.

I should explain that my living room is unique in that it has a very tall, cedar-paneled ceiling. It slopes from about 9 feet on one end to about 20 feet on the other end. The room itself is about 30 feet square. Lots of room for flycasting.

There was no sign of George, so I picked up one of the many chewed playing cards that one can find anywhere in our house, and flicked it once with my finger. I wonder if this would work on a trout. I heard him immediately, galloping down the hallway from the bedroom, claws digging into the carpet as he took the turn into the living room at full speed, slight slip on the tile floor where the rug ends and he slammed into the wall under the front window, thus announcing his presence in the usual way. The collision didn’t faze him at all. He was wound tighter than a drum and he was going to attack something.

With George watching intently, I stood in the middle of the living room and shook the plug in the air over his head to get his attention. I learned later that this technique is actually called ‘high-sticking’ and is a common practice on small trout streams – although on a trout stream the point is to keep most of your line out of the water so your fly will have a realistic drift.

I intended to actually cast the plug for him, but I never got the chance. George leaped straight upward at the plug, executing an ungainly, but effective, twisting attack that caught the plug between his front paws and his mouth about four feet off the floor. He landed on the tile floor with the plug in his mouth just as I instinctively drew back on the flyrod as though to set the hook that didn’t exist. George held onto the plug and began the same wild shaking and clawing that I had seen him do with Rachel and the string.

Then, realizing that the plug might get away, he took off back down the hallway with the plug in his teeth. The drag on the reel began to sing as George stripped off line. He made it most of the way toward the bedroom when I palmed the reel to stop it from paying out line and began to reel him in. Or to *try* to reel him in, which was more like it.

I once caught a largemouth bass that weighed six pounds on this same flyrod. With this same rig, in fact. After the initial hookup and the excitement of the leaping, splashing, struggling fish, the bass dove and rest of the fight was much like reeling in a bale of hay. The last time I weighed George on our bathroom scale, he weighed 11 pounds. So the fight was fairly uneventful for the next few moments, with George's claws dug in to the hallway carpet and me leaning back against the flyrod, around the corner in the living room. Through the action of the flyrod I could feel him shaking his head but there was little give in the line. I figured the fight would end there because I was unable to reel in any more line. The stalemate soon ended when George decided to give a little and I was able to recover some of the line that he had stripped off. After a few more moments of this, I saw George's head coming slowly around the corner from the hallway to the living room, still struggling and clawing to keep his grip on the plug which now looked wet and mangled. Between us, about 10 feet away from me, sat a leather chair and a wooden end table. George jumped toward me onto the back of the chair, momentarily slacking the line and I reeled quickly and leaned back to take up the slack.

At this point, George applied a technique that I should have seen coming, but I have to admit I did not expect. With the flyrod bent against his weight, he picked that very instant to let go of the plug.

When I was 12, I was playing tennis at school with some friends. An older kid on the next court served a tennis ball that flew right at me but I didn't see it until the instant before impact. I looked up and there it was, suspended inches in front of my eye for what seemed like a long time before it plowed into my face and knocked me off my feet. Although I don't remember anything else about that day, I will always remember seeing the tennis ball right in front of me, knowing it was going to hit me, and knowing there was nothing I could do about it.

Cut to the plug, which now did the same thing. In an instant, the plug crossed the room directly at my face, rapidly growing in size and splatting against my forehead before I could react or even close my eyes. Suddenly I was not having any fun. I sat down hard on the floor, seeing stars, to recover from the blow, and George reattacked. The plug had bounced off of my forehead and fallen to the ground behind me, leaving me directly between the cat and the plug. George clawed his way over me to get to the plug, and then took off back down the hallway with it in his mouth, once again peeling off line from the reel that was still in my hand.

Infinitely wiser now than I had been a few minutes before, I decided that this was probably not a good idea, so I reeled my way toward the cat, across the living room and down the hall, making sure I didn't put any pressure on the line, lest I make the same painful mistake again. With all the line recovered and the cat, thankfully, having released

the plug, I put my flyrod back in the garage and decided that George had had enough fishing for the day. We went back to fetching cards.