

Fish Alaska All-Tackle

STORY BY
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PHOTOS BY
TROY A BUZALSKY & LARRY LARUE

THE ART OF COLOR MANAGEMENT

There's Excitement in the Air

When your rod tip buries and you set the hook there's excitement in the air. When you see a net fly you know there's excitement in the air. And when you talk to Larry LaRue about his hobby of custom-painting spinners, plugs, wobblers, and flashers, there is little doubt there's excitement in the air.

This passion isn't driven by his imagination and application of specialized paints and finishes; it's not about making one-of-a-kind art out of the ordinary; it's truly about creating the best fish-catching lures based on color management, because as LaRue is quick to remind, "Color matters!"

Larry is not your typical fisherman and he's not your typical tackle crafter. He's a retired Gulf War Veteran who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. As he says, "I use my fishing hobby and my custom lure making as a way to find internal peace." Larry's proud of his military service and accomplishments but now focuses all his energy on being a better fisherman, and to be a better fisherman you must understand not only how fish think and react, but how they see.

Larry's first fishing partner and mentor was the late Fred Trowbridge Sr., who was the most fish-catching non-guide in the Portland area. Fred was fanatical about lure and plug selection, often carrying more than 1,000 spinner blades in his tackle box in order to be prepared for any situation the fishing gods threw his way. Fred shared much of his fishing knowledge with Larry, who has expanded his learning curve after meeting Phil Rabideau, consultant for Mepps Lures and author of *The Master Angler: Using Color Technology to Catch More Fish*.

To better comprehend color technology there are a few elements that need to be understood. First off, fish see different than humans, primarily absorbing green and blue colorations; humans see blue, green and red. The color of a lure can be impacted by the color of water, and water can be cat-

A collection of Larry LaRue Looney Lures under different lighting conditions that mimic water conditions. From the top:: Natural white light, Green Water, Blue Water, and Turbid Water (red).





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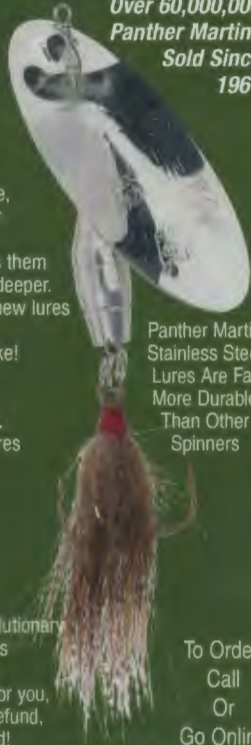
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Larry LaRue sets up to customize lures.

Below: The bottom of a lure must provide contrast with the background so the fish can easily see it.

egorized into three colors: blue, green, and turbid. Blue water is just that; it's blue in color because of the lack of impurities changing its light-absorbing capability. Green water is colored from algae or glacier melt. Turbid water is tannin- or tea-colored water we see in streams and ponds caused by plant decomposition. Obviously, the water's color drastically changes a lure's underwater color; for example in blue water the color red is quickly filtered out, making the lure appear black.

Light conditions also affect a lure's underwater color and play a critical role in establishing a background. An underwater lure absorbs indirect lighting caused by the water's color, depth, particulate matter and light intensity. The deeper the lure the less light penetration. This indirect lighting is

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affected by the outside light source, which could be direct sunlight, overcast conditions, morning light, high noon light, shade or even rain. An important consideration in lure selection is the background the lure will be presented against. A lure must contrast with its background for best visibility, and the background is determined by light and water conditions.

The water's temperature also plays an important function in a lure's color selection. There are three categories of water temperature, cold, cool, and warm, and each fish species fits into this matrix differently. For example, a coho salmon has an optimum (cool) temperature range of 52-57 degrees. Anything below this range is considered cold water, and anything above this range is warm. The optimum temperature for Chinook is 53-55 degrees and steelhead 46-54 degrees. As a rule of thumb, the colder the water the brighter the lure, the warmer the water the less bright the lure. Phil calls this "toning down" your brightness.



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"If the fish are there and you're not catching, you're probably too bright," explains Rabideau. "Fish don't have eyelids, and their eyes do not dilate or constrict like humans, so their natural response is to put distance between brightness."

If you had a tackle box filled with lures of every color combination and closed your eyes and selected one lure, Phil Rabideau would tell you your chances of selecting the right lure for that water condition would be 3%. That doesn't mean you can't catch fish with that selection, it's just not the optimal choice.

"I'll take the 97% probability over guesswork" he continued. "It's the difference between a high-odds or low-odds choice." Remember, even a blind squirrel can find a nut, and fisherman accidentally hook their prey often enough, not having a clue on why they were successful.

A lure, whether it's a spinner, spoon, wobbler or plug, has six key attributes, Color, Motion, Smell, Sound, Brightness, and Shape. The *Master Angler* author suggests the two most important factors in lure selection should be color and brightness. "As a lifelong engineer who has studied fish behavior, color and brightness are the two attributes that make a lure most effective." Indeed smell, motion, sound, and size and shape are factors, but fish are sight-feeders first, and that's why color matters, because if the fish can't easily see the offering, the lure is ineffective.

With years of intensely-focused fishing experience under his belt, and while under the ever critical eye of Phil Rabideau, who Larry affectionately calls "Dr. Phil," Larry has learned the importance of applying color technology to his lure craft. Larry started painting spinner blades, copying the tried-and-true versions he and Fred had so much success with. "Fred always would tell us to use greens near the salt, and switch to reds upriver," he explained.

Although that is still a very good application, there is much more to color selection, and much more to make a lure and its color combination a success. Larry now focuses on not just the color, but the contrast, and how the lure's colors interact when the lure performs. "A baitfish has natural camouflage," Larue continued. "That camouflage helps hide the baitfish; it's Mother Nature's way of protecting the fish." Because fish are

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sight-feeders a lure must contrast with its background. LaRue designs his patterns to perform without a camouflage element so they contrast, making them easier for the fish to see.

Through scientific research and applied applications, LaRue suggests a few go-to colors for certain situations, all based on optimum (cool) water temperature. In shallow blue water, consider silvers and gold plates, white, fluorescent green, and fluorescent chartreuse.

If the fish are staged to spawn add fluorescent red to your list. In green water, silver, luminescent (glow in the dark) white, black, fluorescent chartreuse and red all work well. Turbid water limits a fish's ability to see long-range, so consider gold plate, black, and fluorescent chartreuse. In cold-water applications you can step up the brightness, but more importantly, as water warms, LaRue emphasizes to "tone down" your offering, and remember, depth is also a factor.

There is not one best color, or one go-



A collection of painted Kwikfish laying on top of a color wave chart.

to lure, so Larue carefully and artfully designs his lures, always thoughtful of its application under certain conditions. "I like to use iridescent, fluorescent, glow-in-the dark, neon, pearls, and candy paints in my designs," shares LaRue. "There are times when orange is a good color, and times when fluorescent orange is a better color." Larry's lures, proudly marketed under the name "Looney Lures," have evolved from one-of-a-kind creations to fish catching combinations with an artistic flare. A few of Larry's most recent Kwikfish feature artfully air-

brushed skulls and playing cards. These artistic elements not only look beautiful, they have a purpose, providing the contrast the lure needs to be seen.

If you want to add to your fishing excitement—and effectiveness—use color management when you select your next lure from the box.

Larry Larue started crafting custom lures within the last five years. When he started painting his spinner blades they were good, much like the patterns he was copying. As his skills and abilities improved, his lures were better, showing creativity and artistic ability. Larry has taken his passion for lure design and custom application to the next level, and as "Dr. Phil" told his mentee recently, "These are not only beautiful, these are the BEST I have ever seen." For more information on Looney Lures contact Larry LaRue at Larry.larue@us.army.mil.

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