

Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

November, 2000- The Soft-Hackle



The Soft-Hackle: An old fly, re-invented again and again

By Jim Abbs

Students of history find that brand new ideas are really quite rare. Rather, many new developments are just new additions to old ideas or just old ideas re-cycled. Fly patterns are no exception. Moreover, when certain fly pattern styles turn up again and again, it generally means that the look or the behavior of a group of insects is being especially well-imitated. Perhaps there has been no idea in fly pattern design as enduring as the soft hackle wet fly.

Consider the history of this favorite fly of many modern trout anglers, the soft hackle nymph. In the last decade, Sylvester Nemes published a book called ***The Soft Hackled Addict*** (1993). However, this book was an outgrowth of an earlier book (1975) by Mr. Nemes entitled simply, ***The Soft Hackled Fly***. Mr. Nemes' first book on soft hackles offered a review of the tying of soft hackle flies and their history. According to some sources, Nemes was influenced by Paul Young of Michigan who sold hackled (not winged) nymphs, based upon patterns from a James Leisenring of Pennsylvania. In addition, just a few years before Nemes' book (in 1971), Vernon Hidy worked with that legendary James Leisenring to write yet another book entitled, ***The Art of Tying the Wet Fly and Fishing the Flymph***. This book, also focused on so-called "Soft-hackle nymphs". Hidy's book however was a revised version of a yet earlier book by James Leisenring alone, entitled, ***The Art of Tying the Wet Fly***. So where did Leisenring get his ideas? Leisenring was a student of the English fly tyers and most students of fly pattern history believe that these flies originated in the Border Counties of Britain, in the regions between Northern England and Scotland, maybe as long as 500 years ago.

Obviously while this history is interesting to many, the key question may be why are these simple patterns are so enduring and effective. Basically, Leisenring and his predecessors recognized that trout like to feed on insects that are in the transition stage from nymph form to adult form, sometimes called emergers. These insect forms do not have wings,

leading to the idea of a wet fly without wings, but with legs fully apparent. If these legs are imitated by soft hackle, they move in a natural, enticing way, capturing the quivering natural pattern that makes this fly so effective. There are many specific patterns that belong to the soft-hackle family. The oldest are flies like the Partridge and Green or Partridge and Orange, with other colors used to imitate different species of insects. Other popular flies of the soft-hackle style include The Breadcrust, Carey Special, Tup's Indispensable, Starling Herl, and others. These kinds of flies are thought by some to imitate caddis emergers (Dave Hughes), but other authors report using them very successfully in the early stages of mayfly hatches (Gary Borger). No matter what insects the soft-hackle patterns are supposed to imitate, they are found in the fly boxes of many expert trout anglers. Obviously, soft hackles, because of their universal appeal also represent very good searching patterns when there are no hatches.

The most famous soft hackle flies include patterns that long have been popular in England, including the Partridge and Orange, Partridge and Green and Partridge and Yellow. These fly names refer simply to hackle (partridge) and to the color of the body. The other appeal to soft hackle nymphs is that they are not only deadly, but very easy to tie.

MATERIALS

Hook: Sizes 10-18, Mustad 9671, Tiemco 200, 5262

Thread: Color to match body color

Body: Floss or fur in olive, green, orange, yellow or brown

Thorax: Optional fur dubbing

Legs: Soft fibered feathers from a gray or brown partridge, grouse, hen

TYING STEPS:

1. Lay down a layer of thread back $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance from the eye to the end of the hook. Tie in floss (about 5-7 strands, depending on thickness of body desired) and wrap forward to tie in point. Carry out similar construction with dubbing with body extending from bend of the hook to tie in point.
2. Add thorax, extending over first third of floss body. If the body is constructed from dubbing rather than floss, the thorax can simply be an increased concentration of dubbing in from the tie in point back $\frac{1}{3}$ the distance toward the bend of the hook.
3. Select a large feather with fibers that extend in length from just beyond the eye to the bend of the hook. Some of the soft-hackle flies use shorter or longer fibers, depending upon what you find most effective. A standard soft-hackle would extend about one-half the distance from the back end of the body to the bend.
4. Fold the fibers from the two sides of the quill so both are at right angles to that quill. Pull off those fibers from the quill (another option is to leave the fibers on the quill) with a quantity necessary to give the desired density of hackle.
5. Lay the fibers on one side of the hook and begin to tie them down, slowly distributing the fibers around the hook at the same time. The key to this "distribution wrap" is to keep the tension on the thread fairly low. Apply a second wrap to secure the fibers, pushing the fibers so they are as evenly distributed as possible. Stroke the fibers back toward the hook bend

after each thread wrap.

6. Clip the butt ends of the fibers, whip finish and apply head cement. Go fishing

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You can direct any questions or comments to FOM at flyofthemonth@fedflyfishers.org