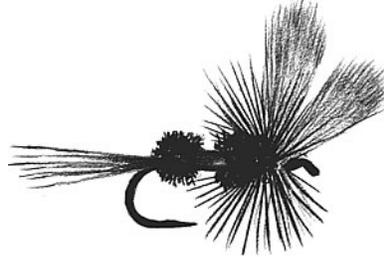


Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

The Wulff patterns

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Comments by Jim Abbs

Perhaps the best known fly fisherman in the world is Lee Wulff. His fame is justified. Practically every modern fly angler uses one or more of Lee Wulff's innovations. He designed and sold the first fly fishing vests, championed reeling with the left hand on fly reels (so the rod was in the stronger right hand), invented the first palming spool fly reels, introduced the fly-O casting practice rigs, popularized the "riffing hitch" for salmon fishing and designed the popular triangle taper lines. However, Lee Wulff's best-known innovations were in his flies.

Nowhere is practical need a clearer motivator than Wulff's attempts to improve fly patterns. In writing about the development of the Wulff patterns---and these were the first flies to use hair for fly wings and tails---his innovations reflected his engineering education. The story starts almost 70 years ago. Almost all dry flies available in the winter of 1929/30 were, according to Wulff, anemic and too delicate, which he ascribed to their British tradition. The reason for very slim flies was that if a fly was too bulky the feather materials did not have the buoyancy to hold it up. A very popular pattern, for example, was the Fanwing Coachman that not only twisted the leader but also sunk at the tail due to the golden pheasant tail fibers used. Wulff also noted that dry flies with wings and tails of feathers get slimed up and are not very durable. To Wulff, the solution was obvious---use bucktail for tails and wings.

The first Wulff flies were tied to imitate the Isonychia (Gray Drake) and Green Drake hatches in the Catskills. Wulff first fished these patterns with his regular fishing companion, Dan Bailey, who was then a science teacher in Brooklyn. In those early trials with these new patterns, Lee's was not disappointed. He found that the fish seemed to prefer the bulkier flies that "looked more" like the naturals than the more anemic patterns then popular. With respect to durability, the hairwing flies also excelled. Wulff reports he caught 51 trout on one Gray Wulff fly in an early outing, needing only to "grease up the fly for every 5-6 fish". The first patterns included the Gray Wulff, White Wulff and Royal Wulff.

Interestingly, these flies were named Wulffs at the insistence of Dan Bailey, who was even then selling flies commercially. It was also with Bailey that Lee worked out the materials for several other Wulff patterns, including the Grizzly Wulff, Black Wulff, Brown Wulff and Blonde Wulff. The tying

instructions for the Wulff patterns vary somewhat throughout the tying literature. Lee Wulff agreed with this philosophy, always noting that these flies were a general kind of fly, not a particular pattern. What is described here is a combination of Lee Wulff's original instructions, along with comments on changes or improvements made by other tyers.

MATERIALS

Hook: Mustad 94840 (8-18); Some tyers use a heavier hook, like the Mustad 7957B

Thread: 6/0 with a color varying with the pattern (i.e., gray for the Gray Wulff, Black for the White Wulff, Brown for the Royal Wulff).

Wings: Originally bucktail, but now most commonly calftail, with colors varying with the pattern (white for White Wulff, Royal Wulff, Brown for Brown Wulff. Gray Wulff and Grizzly Wulff are still tied with natural deer hair body)

Tail: Originally bucktail, but now varied with the pattern, with deer body hair or white calf tail, often the same material as the wings (including color). Moose and bear are also used in some patterns (the Brown Wulff).

Body: Originally rabbit, but now varied fur or poly with color varying with the particular fly (white for White Wulff, Black for Black Wulff, Royal Coachman style-peacock herl and red silk for the Royal Wulff).

Hackle: Varied in color with pattern-Brown for the Royal Wulff, Badger for the White Wulff, Light Ginger for the Blonde Wulff, etc.

TYING STEPS (with text directly from instructions by Lee Wulff and my comments in brackets).

1. "begin the thread near the hook eye, wind down the shank to the bend and return back up the shank to the start. At this point, lacquer may be applied to give a good bond between the thread and hook shank, which will prevent the twisting of thread and materials as the fly is tied. " [Lee was obviously interested in a very durable fly]

2. "Select bucktail to be used for the tail, and match the fine ends of the hair so they are as even as possible. This can be done by pulling out the longer hairs and resetting them so they are even with the tips of the others or by placing the hairs in a narrow container, such as a cartridge shell, and tapping the container gently on the tabletop. Hair-evening tools for fly-tying are also available for this purpose." [These instructions apply as well to calf tail or other more recently preferred materials. For calf tail, combing ensures a more uniform bunch of hair, at least regarding length. Some tiers tie the wings on before the tail]

3. "Place the tail along the hook shank with the tips extending beyond the bend of the hook. [tail should be length of hook shank] Wrap the thread down to the bend of the hook, and clip off the excess hair near the eye of the hook. Apply a drop of lacquer to the thread wraps along the hook shank; the lacquer will

penetrate to the hook and also remain on the thread to help set the angora-wool body tightly when it is applied in the next step. Good setting of the body makes for long life in a fly." [These instructions apply as well to other body materials]

4. "Tie in a length of angora wool at the head and wrap the thread to the bend and back to the head. Wrap the angora wool forward, forming the proper shape of body, and tie it off at the head. As you are winding the angora, also rotate the material to avoid twisting it, forming a smooth body." [Angora may refer to rabbit or a particular breed of rabbit..dubbing with domestic common rabbit fur or poly will work in the same way, although rabbit absorbs water]

5. "Select the bucktail to be used for the wings and even the tips in the same manner that you evened the tips of the bucktail used for the tail. Lay the bucktail over the shank with the tips facing forward over the hook eye." [Some tiers put the tips facing backward. In either case it is most important to support the wings with thread after tying in] "Tie the hair in, then bring the thread in front of the wings and make them stand up vertically by building up a wall of thread in front of the bucktail."

6." By splitting the hair into two wings and winding between and around at the base, the wings are set into the right position." [Most tiers do a figure eight around the wings and then wrap each wing separately] "A drop or two of lacquer should be applied between the wings at their base. The lacquer will penetrate the hair and thread and set the wings securely to the hook."

7." The lacquer should still be soft as the hackles are wound, which will set the hackle fibers securely in place. Saddle hackles, which I prefer, are usually strong of fiber but without great strength where the fibers join the hackle stem. [It is common for most modern fly tiers to use dry fly rather than saddle hackle] Setting their bases in lacquer makes a durable fly." [If one uses dry fly hackle this extra cement may not be necessary]

8. "Two long saddle hackles are used for the standard Wulff. After you tie them in, bring the first one back between the wings and wind it around the shank close behind the wings until it is just long enough to pass between the two upright wings again. Bring it between the wings and hold it at the hook-eye between your forefinger and thumb. Wind the second hackle around the shank in front of the wings to the hackle's tip. Wrap the tying thread over the two hackle tips, trim excess, whip finish and lacquer the head." [Wulff goes on explain that on smaller hooks he may use less hackle. The amount of hackle would also be dependent upon the water being fished.]

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