

JANUARY, 2000- THE WHISTLER: Exploiting the pusher detector



By Jim Abbs

In the early 1960's, a neuroscientist at MIT did some revolutionary work on the brain functions that make frogs so efficient in catching bugs. This work.. published under the title, "What the frog's eye tells the frog's brain" revealed some special features about the way that wild creatures use their vision sense to detect and capture food. The basic finding was that the frog has a fast hard wired neural system to very efficiently identify bugs and capture them with its lightning tongue. The frogs were said to have built-in "bug detectors". Work by other scientists discovered similar sensory detectors in other critters as well, even in humans for speech.

This classic work has a critical message for designers of fly patterns. The frog bug detectors are activated by only a few key bug-like features such as movement, size and maybe shape. Importantly, the frog does NOT do a detailed analysis of its prey, but rather focuses on only a couple of key elements. The implications to fly success are obvious. The sparkle (antron) in Gary LaFontaine's caddis pupa is probably one such key element. Flies designed by Gary LaFontaine, Doug Swisher, Charlie Brooks and many others also clearly are based, perhaps unknowingly, upon these kinds of focused neural detectors.

Much of the focus of fly design is on their visual features, perhaps a result of our narrow human perspective. However, fish also have very keen senses smell and vibration. Fish, after all do feed when visual cues are not available, such as in turbid water and at night. Vibration sense includes low frequency disturbances that humans cannot hear, as well as so-called sound (which we can hear). Don Blanton's Whistler is said to create special disturbances in the water by virtue of its heavily wound hackle collar. The term used by some is that the Whistler pushes the water and that is what the fish respond to. In fact, this fly originally was developed for striped bass in San Francisco Bay, where the visibility is generally less than 3 feet. Today, however, it is used on both coasts and a slightly different version is a favorite for tarpon in the Florida Keys.

MATERIALS

HOOK: Mustad 9175 or equivalent a Short shank saltwater hook, size 2/0 to 3/0.

EYES: Large to extra-large silver bead chain (1/4 inch diameter)

THREAD: Red Flymaster

WING: A couple of bunches of crinkly white bucktail, with bunches of red bucktail on the sides and silver flashabou and crystal flash on top.

UNDERBODY/WEIGHT: 8-10 turns of .031 lead wire

BODY: Rear 1/3 - 2-3 turns of red chenille,

COLLAR: Wide using three wide, webby white saddle or neck hackle,

HEAD: Red tying tread, several turns in front and in back of bead-chain optics.

TYING STEPS

1. Secure the tying thread, tie in the bead chain eyes directly behind the eye and wind the thread back to

the bend of the hook. Use a figure eight to make sure the eyes are secure and cement the wraps.

2. Put 8-10 wraps of lead wire behind the eyes, secure the lead with thread and cement the lead and the thread. Wind the thread back to the bend of the hook.

3. Tie in a 3-1/2" to 4-1/2" long bunch of crinkly white bucktail near the back of the hook. Trim the butts, cement, and tie them down tightly.

3. Take the white bucktail (about the diameter of a pencil) and tie it in at the bend of the hook. Taper the butts to make a smooth edge and cement.

4. Tie in 25-30 strands of flashbou on top of the bucktail, extending it an inch beyond the bucktail.

5. On top of the flashabou, tie in another bunch of white bucktail. The full wing should be arrowhead shape (extending above and below the plane of the hook shank). Remember to leave room for the red chenille body and hackle collar. This is a short shank hook!

6. Tie in the cheeks of red bucktail; crystal flash could be added on the sides of the wings as well (not part of the original pattern).

7. Over all the wing tie downs, tie in the end of the red chenille, make 2-3 wraps, tie it off and trim.

8. Tie in the three saddle hackles, one a time, leaving as much soft material on the feather as possible.

These hackles are tied in as a palmer between the end of the red chenille and the bead chain eyes. It is good to reinforce the saddle hackle with thread as they are wrapped.

8. Wrap sufficient thread over the hackle tips (behind the bead chain eyes) to make sure the hackle is secure. Continue to wrap the thread forward, up behind the hook eye. Cement all the final wraps, behind and in front of the eyes. Go push some water!

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