

Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

March, 2000- Beadhead Nymphs



Clever heads fish gold heads: Europe leads the way with beadheads

By Jim Abbs

One widespread fashion in underwater flies over the last 10 or so years---for trout, steelhead, panfish or even bass -- is to add a metal bead just behind the hook eye. This bead is in lieu of a head and very often is brass, but not necessarily. Indeed, many conventional sub-surface flies are now available in both a bead head and a traditional version, including famous flies like the Hare's ear, Pheasant tail, Serendipity, the Prince Nymph, Whitlock's red squirrel nymph, the Caddis larva, Woolly Bugger and others. In fact, some hook manufacturers have even started offering hooks made especially to accommodate a bead, with a shape that makes it easier to slide the bead over the hook point and up behind the eye.

At first this bead head phenomenon seems like a fad, but it has become very popular among experts and novices alike. Many fly anglers claim bead head flies are simply more effective than an identical pattern tied without the bead. Bead head flies did not originate in North America. The first bead head flies were developed by a well-known Austrian fly fisher named Roman Moser and tested on the Austrian River Traun -- in the 1970's the Traun was famous as a grayling river. Moser called these flies Gold Heads and even coined a saying... "Clever heads fish Gold Heads". The bead heads were first seen in the U.S. in the fly boxes of travelling anglers like Bas Verschoor of Holland, who writes, " I took my first beadhead nymphs with me to Montana and Idaho in July/August 1982. There I showed them to flyfishers and tackle shop owners. They all gave me strange looks, asking me with some disbelief ... 'Can you really catch fish on these?'" "I fished the Gallatin, the Yellowstone and the Madison with them, and. literally 'knocked 'em dead!' I took a 58 cm, (23.2 inch) brown trout on the Madison, between Hebgen and Quake Lake... a fish I'll never forget. Yes, Sir.... I'm a beadman all the way!" says Bas.

While the reasons for bead head effectiveness are uncertain, there are of course several "theories". One theory is that the brass-colored bead head adds a critical bit of flash to the fly and it is simply not possible to get that same effect with conventional materials. Indeed, nymph tiers have long used gold tinsel and wire ribbing in their nymph patterns. But how can reflection off a shiny hard spherical head help imitate an insect? Perhaps it is well to keep in mind that the

exoskeletons of many insects are very smooth and shiny, composed of a material called chitin. Soft materials don't reflect light, despite their exalted reputation for looking "buggy". The bead head reflects light in all directions because of its shape, perhaps like the curved and multifaceted surfaces of insect bodies. It also has been argued that the bead looks like the air bubble released by many emerging insects in their final rise to the surface. In fact, even one version of the classic Water Boatman now is promoted with a bead in the back of the fly. Emerging insects are apparently very popular with fish because of their vulnerability and the fact that they simply are more nutritious (because of the impending mating) than insects in earlier stages. Another probable factor in the effectiveness of bead flies is the fact that a bead head offers weight to the fly that is concentrated at one end. The bead head fly thus has an out-of-balance center of gravity, just like a jig. As it is buffeted along with the current or stripped in by the fly fisher, it rocks and wiggles like a living-swimming creature, perhaps in a fashion that makes jigs so very effective.

No matter what the reasons, it would seem that most trout and warmwater fly anglers should consider adding beads to some of their favorite flies. This month's fly of the month is thus a bead head nymph, with an emphasis on the bead, including how to tie it in securely, bead color, positioning, material and size.

A NOTE ABOUT BEADS

Beads are available in several different colors, sizes and materials. The basic colors are brass, copper, gold, black and silver (or nickel). Beads are generally brass or tungsten, although some are available in stainless steel. The bead material influence how fast your fly sinks. More dense materials sink faster. Brass is less dense than steel and tungsten is the most dense. Size of the bead you choose depends on the effect you are trying to achieve and the size of your hook. Small beads will not fit on big hooks and very large beads may be poor imitations of an insect's head on a small hook. Beads are available in sizes ranging from 3/32 of an inch to 7/32 of an inch. While the size of the bead you use for any given fly is a matter of taste and experimentation, the smallest beads (3/32") are recommended for hooks size 16 to 18, while the largest beads (6/32) are said to work best with hooks up to size 6.

MATERIALS

Hook: Nymph hook, 1X to 3X long (Mustad 9671 or 9672, or equivalent)

Thread: Black, gray to tan

Head: Bead head, chosen to match hook size (see A Note About Beads)

Tail: Speckled partridge, wood duck flank, or rabbit guard hairs

Body: Dubbed rabbit face or ear fur (with guard hairs and underfur)

Wing case: Dark turkey tail

Legs: Picked out dubbing

TYING STEPS

1. Pass the bead from the hook point to a position behind the eye. This may require a little manipulation, including bending down the barb of the hook (not a bad idea in any case!). Once on the hook, it is important to get the bead to fit tightly. If the bead is not properly secured it will almost certainly loosen as you cast it. The stress put on the bead by casting will make it into a small compression piston that squeezes your fly to a much shorter length - not good. There are several ways to get a tight fit between the hook and the bead. One way is to wrap the hook behind the eye, put cement on the wrappings and slide the bead over the thread. This requires that you whip finish and cut the thread. Other tyers prefer to slide the bead over the naked hook and superglue it in place, while yet others secure it by wrapping a bump of thread and/or body material just behind the hook. A combination of these techniques can also be used.
2. Tie in a bunch of hare's fur, partridge or wood duck flank for the tail in a conventional manner.
3. Tie in a gold wire or tinsel and dub some hare's face or ear fur on to the thread.
4. Wind the fur-dubbed thread up the hook shank about 50% of the way. Wind the gold rib up to the end of the dubbing - tie down and cut.
5. Tie in a piece of dark turkey tail feather (optional)
6. Dub the remaining segment of the hook shank up to the back of the bead.
7. Bring the turkey feather forward over the top and tie off. Trim, whip finish behind the bead and cement.
8. Tie a second, third and fourth version of the same fly with different colored and different density (brass versus tungsten) beads.
9. Buy stock in a company that makes metal beads.

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