

Wet Fly Workshop

**Featuring Traditional Wet Fly and
Soft Hackle Wet Fly Tying and Instruction**

Saturday February 9, 2019

Sponsored by Potomac Valley Fly Fishers



Guidance in Tying Wet Flies (and Artificial Flies in General)

- Think proportions when tying in any materials.
 - Examples: the tail of a wet fly should not be longer than the hook shank and the wing of a traditional winged wet fly should not extend beyond the hook bend.
- Order of importance in tying any fly:
 - #1 Presentation – the fly that you tie needs to be presented to the fish in a manner that the fish would normally experience the natural fly, e.g. rising in the current, drifting with the current, crossing the current
 - #2 Size – tie each fly in a series of sizes which most closely match the size of the naturals. As an example tie a March Brown wet fly in sizes 12 & 14. Tie Pheasant Tail wet fly in 12, 14, & 16.
 - #3 Color – if trying to imitate a natural insect choose muted colors; brown, black, grey, or olive for insects that hatch during winter and spring months. Then use brighter colors to tie imitations for flies that hatch progressively spring through summer; tan, yellow, crème, or white. For attractor wet flies (e.g. Royal Coachmen) choose brighter colors to get attention of the fish; incorporate red, pink, chartreuse, or white into the patterns. There are hundreds of wet fly patterns that use these colors. (** FYI, it is commonly thought that attractor patterns work because fish don't recognize the fly as part of its normal diet and they inhale the fly because they can't discriminate whether it is food or not.*)
- In tying almost any fly (particularly wet flies) it is not so important that you use the same, identical materials that were used by the originator of the fly. As an example, if the original fly listed snipe feathers and crimson silk, you can substitute black hen, blackbird flank or dark red or reddish purple thread.
- When considering what color thread should be used for tying a wet fly, traditionally dark brown or black will suffice since essentially all of the wrapping thread is covered by the body materials. Perhaps the exception to this generality is when tying a light colored wet fly. In this case select a wrapping thread color which will not mute the color of the abdomen, e.g. yellow thread with a yellow body.
- When you are tying a particular pattern (e.g. partridge and orange) also tie the same pattern with slight modifications in color of either the body or the soft hackle material.
- While any soft hackle can be tied only with an abdomen, consider tying some with a thorax which is represented by the dubbing ball that sits immediately behind the soft hackle feather. This variant of the pattern is more realistic of the form of the natural insect, but also the dubbing ball provides support to the hackle fibers while exhibiting a life-like quality to the fly.
- Lastly, don't be afraid to be creative. Fly tying is an art (in itself) giving each one of us the opportunity to be an artist. "Beauty of the fly is in the eye of the beholder". There have been hundreds of 'ugly' fly patterns that have been used to catch fish.
- Don't be afraid to ask for advice or critique. All accomplished fly tyers are willing to share his/her knowledge with others. Have fun! We never stop learning, particularly when it comes to tying artificial flies.

D.F. February 2019.

Soft Hackle Flies (by Sylvester Nemes)

- Partridge and Orange
- Partridge and Green
- Partridge and Yellow
- Tup's Indispensible
- Iron Blue Dun
- Snipe and purple
- Pheasant Tail
- Snipe and Yellow
- March brown spider
- Grouse and orange
- Starling and herl
- Cumberland
- Brown Drake
- Professor

Materials for Soft Hackle (Wet) Flies

Fly	Thread	Tail	Body	Thorax	Rib	Hackle	Wing	Hook size/Other
Partridge and Orange	Orange or light brown	none	Orange silk floss		None or fine copper	Brown partridge	none	12-16
Partridge and Green	Brown, black	none	Green silk floss		None or fine silver	Grey partridge	none	12-16
Partridge and Yellow	Yellow, Brown,	none	Yellow silk floss		None or fine silver	Brown or grey partridge	none	12-16
Tup's Indispensible	Yellow	none	2/3 yellow silk floss	Light pink and orange fur	None	Light partridge	None	
Iron Blue Dun	Light grey or blue	4-5 white hen fibers	Mole's fur spun on red silk thread		none	Starling (black hen hackle)	None	Tag of Red tying silk/thread
Snipe and purple	Dark grey, black	none	Purple silk floss		none	Starling (black hen hackle)	None	12-16
Pheasant tail	Brown		2-3 herls from center tail wrapped together		Fine gold/copper wire	Brown or grey partridge		
Snipe and yellow	Yellow	none	Yellow silk floss			Starling (black hen hackle)	None	
Grouse and Orange	Orange, brown	None	Orange silk floss			Black and orange grouse or woodcock	None	
March Brown Spider	Orange	none	Mixed hair from rabbit face (Hare's ear dubbing)		Narrow gold	Brown partridge	None	Size 12

Starling and Herl	black		Peacock herl			Starling (black hen hackle)	None	
Cumberland	Red, orange	None	Red or orange silk floss		Narrow gold	Medium partridge	None	
Brown Drake	Brown		Dark brown floss	Darkest Hare's face		Dark brown partridge	None	
Black Spider	Black	None	Black silk			Black Hen	None	12-18
Red Tag	Black	Red wool	Peacock herl		none	red	None	Tag is red wool
Pink lady	Black	Speckled hen hackle	Pink wool		none	Speckled hen hackle	None	8-10
Professor	brown	none	Yellow floss silk			Fine red or black hackle	Brown mallard	

Wet flies for Maryland, Tennessee and Kentucky (William A. Orenchain)

- Coachman*
- Royal Coachman
- Professor
- Gray Drake
- Brown Hackle
- Black Hackle
- March Brown
- Chantrey

Wet flies for Virginia and West Virginia (James Bumgardner, Jr. , F.R. Webb & Neil Robinson & Ed Bowly)

- Queen of the Waters
- Coachman
- Black Gnat
- White Miller
- Cow Dung
- Montreal
- Scarlet

Wet Flies for Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware (J.B. Chandler, M.E. Doyle, C.A. Babcock, J.C. Biddle and J.M. Anderson, H.H. Lane)

- Red Fox
- Stone fly
- Cow Dung
- Black Gnat
- Queen of the Waters
- Coachman
- Grizzly king
- Great Dun
- White Miller
- Silver Doctor
- Yellow Sally
- Montreal
- Polka
- Royal Coachman
- Hamlin
- Grizzly King

*Note flies printed in red are popular for use across the Mid-Atlantic States.

Materials for Tying Traditional Wet Flies

Pattern	Thread	Tail	Body	Rib	Hackle	Wing	Hook/Other
Coachman	Black	none	Peacock herl	none	Red hen	White goose	12-14
Royal coachman	black	Golden pheasant tippet	Bronze peacock herl	none	Red hen	White goose	8-14
Lead wing coachman	Brown, black	none	Peacock herl	none	brown	Grey duck	
Brown hackle	brown	none	peacock	none	Brown hen hackle	none	
March brown	Black or brown	Partridge fibers	Hare's ear fibers or dubbing	Gold wire	Brown partridge	Hen pheasant wing tips	8-14
Queen of the Waters	brown	none	Orange floss	Palmered hen brown	Brown hen	mallard	
White miller	red	Red thread tag	White wool coiled	twisted wool	white	White duck	
Grey drake	brown	Black hackle fibers	White floss	Black thread	white	Mallard quill	
Cow dung	black	none	Peacock herl	none	Light red	Light brown hen quill	12-14
Montreal	black	Red hackle fibers	Claret floss	Flat gold tinsel	Claret hen	Brown mottled hen	8-12
Black gnat	black	none	Black dubbing fine	none	Black hen	Black goose	
Grizzly king	Black/green	Red dyed goose, hen	Bright Green fur	Oval (round) gold tinsel	Grizzly hen	Speckled mallard	8-12
Great dun	black	Dark dun	Black dubbing	none	Black hen	Black goose	
Yellow sally	brown	3 dark cock fibers	White dubbing	Yellow silk floss	yellow	Yellow duck quill	
March brown	brown	Chestnut brown hackle	Dark brown dubbing	Gold tinsel	Chestnut brown	Turkey quill	

Professor	brown	Red hackle fibers	Yellow floss	Grey thread	Light brown	Mallard	
Chantrey	brown	none	peacock	none	Light brown	Turkey tail	
Alder	black	none	peacock	none	Brown hen or cock	Turkey tail	

About Wet Flies and Wet Fly Fishing (compiled from our wonderful internet)

When did Wet Fly Fishing Develop?

In 1496, "[The Treatyse of Fysshynge Wyth an Angle](#)", thought to be written by nun Dame Juliana Berners, was first published article on Fly Fishing. It was part of a gentleman's sporting journal, "The Booke of St. Albans". Although earlier manuscripts have been discovered, this is the oldest existing English publication about the sport of fly fishing. In it, she described how to make all the equipment needed to fly fish, including twelve flies for trout fishing. These flies covered all four seasons. The flies were tied with wings swept to the back, and designed to be fished subsurface. Interestingly, it wasn't until nearly four hundred years later that improvements in hooks and lines made dry fly fishing feasible.

Once dry fly fishing was introduced in the late 1800's, it became quite the rage. In fact, under the influence of Frederick Halford, the use of subsurface flies of any kind was not permissible on English chalk streams for several decades. Anyone caught doing so was banned from the fishing clubs that owned and controlled the streams. This was a fate worse than death for a true English gentleman!

The sport of fly fishing spread to America in the 1800's. With the exception of the gaudy, feathered streamers used for Atlantic salmon and lake-bound brook trout, early American fly fishers emulated their English brethren and primarily fished the dry fly. However, our freestone streams offered challenges not present on the English chalk streams (see "[The Dry Fly & Fast Water](#)", by [George LaBranche](#), published 1914). This led to the development of flies that could better stay afloat in our faster waters.

In 1933, Edward R. Hewitt, an accomplished American fly fisherman, wrote "[The Handbook of Fly Fishing](#)". Included in this handbook is reference to the skilled manipulation of the wet fly in comparison to that of dry fly fishing. (summary taken from Simpson Fly Fishing the Endless Pursuit of Trout; <http://simpsonflyfishing.com/fishing-wet-flies/>)

Return of the Wet Fly

Despite the recognition of the advantages of fishing with a wet fly, it wasn't until 1975, when Sylvester Nemes wrote "[The Soft-Hackled Fly](#)", that wet-fly fishing began to enjoy a gradual return to general usage. Below are some of his insightful observations that started the rediscovery of the wet fly-

"Fishing under the surface, the angler wants the barest resemblance to the dozens of different kinds of nymphs or pupae, because he can never see or know what is really happening down there. Any sunk fly, to be good, must transform itself in the water into something alive, something suggestive and moving, something that looks good to eat."

"As the fly floats downstream, the barbs close in and out, squirm against the body of the fly, and react in a life-like way to every little kind of pressure."

"Without wings, the fly has no top or bottom, and will look the same to the fish no matter what side is up." (also abstracted from <http://simpsonflyfishing.com/fishing-wet-flies/>)

When was the Soft Hackle Wet Fly Introduced?

While soft hackle wet flies may have been around for centuries, it was G.E.M. Skues who first defined **soft-hackled wet flies** in 1910 as "*First there is a sparse body, dressed with silk only, with or without wire ribbing or lightly dressed with soft hackle, two turns at the outside...*"

What is a Wet Fly and What Does it Imitate?

Wet flies fall into various categories, such as the larval and pupal forms of aquatic insects; others imitate swamped still-born flies or even drowned adults. Some wet flies even imitate drowned terrestrials like beetles. In a sense the term “wet flies” is used to describe any fly that imitates an aquatic insect or small vertebrate found beneath the water surface.

Trout wet flies are particularly useful for imitating a common behavior of the fish, which is the fact that the fish finds most of its food beneath the surface of the water. It does this sometimes by grubbing around the weed beds or by rising in the water to take nymphs and pupae on their way to the surface. While Wet flies fall into various categories, such as the larval and pupal forms of aquatic insects; others imitate swamped still-born flies or even drowned adults. Some wet flies imitate drowned terrestrials like beetles. Some so-called attractor flies do not represent anything in the natural world; these flashy creatures are designed so as to stimulate the trout and tempt it to take the bait out of curiosity or anger. Other types of wet flies have a silvery body and can emulate small fry.

Is a “Soft Hackle” Fly a type of Wet Fly?

Typical traditional wet flies are winged and incorporated a backward-sloping wing, whereas soft-hackled wet flies are customarily wingless and incorporate hen hackle or another form of collar that pulsates as the fly is swept along or retrieved through the water.

Why Would a Fish be Attracted to a Wet Fly?

Trout do see subsurface insects with and without wings. Some flies begin to hatch below the water surface. Some up-winged flies swim or crawl beneath the surface as adult spinners in order to lay egg. Often duns & spinners are swamped by the current and forced under the water surface. Emerging duns that have been unable to get rid of their nymphal case or at the time of emerging are drowned when they float under rough water that is flowing over a large rock or ledge are also hunted by the fish. The trout on purpose lurk in slack water near eddies and small plunge pools to look out for these type of snacks. Clearly a trout does see a variety of insects under the surface at certain times of the year so the fly fisher should carry a selection of different colored wet flies for when the fish are not taking from the surface.

How Do I Fish a Soft-Hackle Wet Fly?

Probably the most common way to fish a soft-hackle wet fly is to cast it across and slightly downstream, letting it sink and then swing in the current, rising with the tightening line much as a natural rises to the surface before hatching (this maneuver is also referred to as the Leisenring Lift). It's on this rise that fish usually strike. Another productive method is to cast the fly upstream on a short cast and then let it dead-drift back to you just under the surface (or, if tied on a light-wire hook, in the surface film). On lakes and ponds a soft hackle fly cast in front of a cruising trout and then twitched slightly can be absolutely deadly. Many soft-hackle fly anglers, especially in Europe, favor fishing two or three of these flies (of different colors and sizes) at a time.

All of the following might be considered a wet fly, because all imitate a food source (e.g. aquatic insect or minnow) found beneath the surface of the water. However, fly tiers traditionally have given these “wet flies” more specific names; based largely on their shape or structure and where they originated.

Below see the similarities and differences between the respective “Wet Flies”



A typical soft hackle has no tail, a slim abdomen, and a collar of hen (or soft) hackle.



A hackled wet fly may or may not have a tail but incorporates more and somewhat stiffer hackle at the collar.



A Winged wet fly generally has a tail and a prominent wing. Thousands of different wet fly patterns have been developed over the past several hundred years. Fly patterns used for salmon fishing are typically winged wet flies.



A Spider is a subgroup of soft-hackled wet fly. Many Tenkara flies have similar characteristics to the spider, except the hackle faces forward.



A Buzzer is perhaps the simplest wet fly pattern, sharing characteristics and form with that of small nymphs and caddis pupae.



Compare the Standard nymph with several of the above wet fly patterns. It lacks wings and/or hackle.

Why are some wet flies tied in natural colors while others are quite colorful?

Traditional wet flies are tied using natural colored materials. This is derived from the English patterns, which were used for a variety of species including brown trout. When wet flies made their way to America they transformed to more colorful patterns used to lure brook trout, and salmon. Both styles continue to work today for a variety of fish including warm water species.

What contributed to the success of wet flies in America?

Traditional wet flies ruled the waters for most of fly fishing history. For over 100 years the sale of wet flies dominated the commercial market for trout flies. In early America these patterns were used exclusively for Brook Trout, Atlantic Salmon, and Grayling. Wet flies were later used with great success to catch browns, rainbows, and steelhead trout. Classic wet fly patterns are still very effective, yet tying and fishing these flies had begun falling out of fashion in the 1960's.

Consider this, often nymph fishing is productive not because you are matching the nymph but because you are in the trout's zone at the right speed. If this is the case then using a nymph is productive because it's something to eat and in the trout's face. Speed (pace) of the presentation dictates the strike as much as the fly (color, size, action, and imitation). This is especially true when fishing over hatchery raised trout.

Sometimes wet flies are used as like a lure. Just as a green weenie is used beneath a bobber, a colorful wet fly is used to swing through the water like a blade spinner (e.g. Panther Martin). Other times wets are used like a natural. Just as a greased Sulphur nymph is used in the surface film, a Greenwell's Glory wet can be used with a Leisenring lift to mimic emerging flies.

(from <https://www.paflyguide.com/2016/04/22/wet-fly-fishing-whats-old-is-new-again/>)

Step by Step Instruction for Tying a Traditional Tailed and Winged Wet Fly

1. Choose a short shank (3x) wide gap wet fly or nymph hook.
2. Start wrapping the thread shortly behind the hook eye and proceed wrapping the thread to the bend of the hook.
3. At this point secure several hackle fibers (whatever material chosen for the pattern) with 2-3 thread wraps.
4. (If the abdomen of the fly is to be ribbed, tie in the ribbing at this point with thread wraps and with the long portion of the ribbing material extending beyond the rear of the fly).
5. Next dub the thread with whatever material (e.g. rabbit dubbing) and wrap the dubbed thread forward creating a "somewhat football shaped <==> abdomen". The dubbed thread should stop approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ rear of the hook eye, thus allowing room for applying hackle and wings on the wet fly.
6. (If the fly is to be segmented via ribbing material, it can be counter-wrapped forward at this point and secured with the tying thread. And cut off the remainder of the ribbing material not applied to the fly).
7. Prepare a hen hackle feather (e.g. speckled hen)
 - a. by removing the fluff from the butt end of the feather,
 - b. then as you hold the feather by the tip stroke back the majority of the feather fibers toward the butt of the feather.
 - c. clip off a very small piece of the feather tip creating a diamond shaped tip on the feather.
8. Secure the prepared hackle feather by the diamond-shaped tip on the top of the hook with several thread wraps.
9. Wrap the feather around the hook $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 times, stroking the fibers to the rear of the hook with each wrap of the feather.
10. Secure the remaining portion of the feather with several thread wraps, cut off the excess feather.
11. Choose a relatively stiff bird feather (e.g. duck, goose, pheasant) and select two symmetrical (i.e. left and right) feather sections that are $\sim 1/4$ " in width. Cut off the feather stem the 'mirrored feather sections'.
12. Match the two feather sections and 'sandwich – together' the two pieces between your thumb and first finger. Then hold the two pieces on top of the fly with the feather tips reaching to the rear of the fly no further than at the start of the hook bend.
13. Secure the feather pieces by:
 - a. making a single light wrap of thread around the hook shank, followed by a second wrap in which the thread is pulled straight down toward the tying bench (it is important that you firmly hold the feather fibers tightly throughout this tying in step).
 - b. Make several additional thread wraps forward toward the eye.
14. Clip off the remainder of the feather butts and complete the forming the head of the fly by tying down all cut feather butts thus shaping the head of the fly with a taper, finally cutting off the thread.

*An example of a wet fly tied via the instructions above would be a March Brown wet fly.

Step by Step (Generalized) Instructions for Tying a Tail-less Soft Hackle Wet Fly

- 1. Choose a short shank (3x) wide gap wet fly or nymph hook.**
- 2. Start thread on the hook shortly behind the hook eye and make several wraps toward the bend (approximately to $\frac{1}{4}$ of the shank length).**
- 3. Secure at this point whatever material is going to be used for the abdomen of the fly (e.g. colored floss, peacock herl).**
- 4. Wrap the tying thread over the floss or peacock, stopping at the bend of the hook thus securing the body material along with the tying thread.**
- 5. Then wrap the tying thread forward again to a point approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ shank length to the rear of the hook eye.**
- 6. Wrap the body material forward and secure it with the tying thread where it is now located (i.e. $\frac{1}{4}$ shank length rear of the hook eye).**
- 7. Lightly dub the tying thread and using the 'dubbed' thread create a very small hump* of dubbing at this point (i.e. $\frac{1}{4}$ shank length rear of the hook eye).**
- 8. Prepare a soft hackle feather (e.g. grouse, partridge)**
 - a. by removing the fluff from the butt end of the feather,**
 - b. then as you hold the feather by the tip stroke back the majority of the feather fibers toward the butt of the feather.**
 - c. clip off a very small piece of the feather tip creating a diamond shaped tip on the feather.**
- 9. Secure the prepared hackle feather by the diamond-shaped tip on the top of the hook with several thread wraps.**
- 10. Wrap the feather around the hook $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 times, stroking the fibers to the rear of the hook with each wrap of the feather.**
- 11. Secure the remaining portion of the feather with several thread wraps, cut off the excess feather.**
- 12. Finish the head of the fly with thread wraps to make a conical shaped head. (Note: at this point the hackle fibers should be both secure and flared to the rear of the fly).**

*the hump of dubbing will serve as a wedge to hold the hackle in an upright position.

Instructional videos for tying traditional wet flies and soft hackle wet flies available on the Internet

Traditional Wet Fly

- Tie a Pheasant Tail Wet Fly – www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxXX8agug
- Tie a March Brown Wet Fly with David Strawhorn – www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAwqGDJRL1M

Simple tailless Wet Fly

- Brian McManus – Tying a Simple and Effective Wet Fly – www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHXKNjsFUcl

Soft Hackle Wet flies

- Soft Hackle Pheasant tail – www.youtube.com/watch?v=osYIKO2isFU
- Peacock and Partridge – www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvALYNOA6Q