

**From: *Trout* by Ernest Schweibert (Andre Deutsch, 1979)**

**Chapter 4: 'The theory and practice of modern fly dressing'.**

Variant-type flies originated on the rivers of Yorkshire in 1875, where sparse wet flies had always been tied, and it is logical that dry flies with exaggeratedly long hackle fibers should evolve there. Doctor William Baigent originated the variant-style dry fly, and evolved a series of twelve patterns that became known commercially as Refracta flies. Baigent believed that the shiny fibers of his long gamecock hackles created the illusion of fluttering life, as well as floating his flies easily on relatively swift currents. The Refracta series mixed hackle colors, or used badger and furnace hackles. The dark colors were intended to suggest the legs, and the longer fibers created both the illusion of fluttering and a distorted refraction in the surface film that could deceive a selective fish. Baigent's flies included four spinner imitations and eight variants of different subimago patterns.

His flies included the basic insect colors found on British rivers, and I can remember the baskets of heavy trout we took in my Colorado boyhood summers after the Second World War, using exquisite Baigent Red Variants that arrived in elegant little Hardy boxes.

Baigent variants were conventional flies with upright divided wings, bodies, tails, and hackles of exaggerated-length fibers. Bergman advocated multicolor variants, long-hackled patterns dressed of radically different hackle colors that originated with Albert Barrell on the Housatonic at Pittsfield. Bergman defined the variant-type fly as having long hackle fibers, tails, foreshortened bodies, and slightly undersized wings. His definition has not survived past midcentury, however, since Flick patterns like the Gray Fox and Dun Variants completely omit wings, and famous western dressings like the Donnelly Dark and Donnelly Light Variants have rather long hackle-point wings. These western flies are the work of Roy Donnelly, who lives on the Pacific Coast and developed his Variants in the Jackson Hole country of Wyoming. The late Bob Carmichael, who operated a famous tackle shop at Moose Crossing in the halcyon Wyoming days after the Second World War, used to rate the two Donnelly Variants essential flies for any western dry-fly man.

*Donnelly developed his Variants in Jackson Hole fishing with us, Carmichael explained the summer before his death. But the credit for them is entirely his—they're a little like the Dark and Light Cahills for you boys back east.*

*They're that good?* I asked.

*Bet your sweet ass.* Carmichael grumbled happily. *Wouldn't step into the Snake or Gros Ventre without them.'*

Carmichael was right about his Donnelly variants.

Such flies have superb floating qualities for their hook sizes, and it is understandable that they would prove popular on strong swift-flowing rivers. They are most effective during hatches of big fluttering insects, and are often deadly on meadow streams having good numbers of clumsy, long-legged crane-flies. The success of the Flick patterns on large eastern waters like the Upper Connecticut, Esopus, Delaware, West Canada, Neversink, Lower Beaverkill and the West Branch of the Ausable are ample proof of the theory. The Donnely variants are equally popular on heavy western Rivers like the Yellowstone, Big Hole, Madison, Snake, Beaverhead, Gros Ventre, and Salmon, and such long-hackled flies are superb big-water patterns.

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**From: *The Fishing in Print – A Guided Tour Through Five Centuries of Angling Literature* by Arnold Gingrich (Winchester Press, 1974)**

### **Chapter 15: 'Jennings and the future'.**

The finest hackle for Variants comes from a breed of birds called the Old English Blue Game, but there are only a few such birds in this country.

The diameter of the artificial should approximate the wingspread of the natural insect, which is about one inch.

With this type of fly the hackle is the most important part, as it suggest the wings of the natural insect in motion, that rapid fluttering which precedes the actual take-off and poses the problem of now or never, which the trout has a hard time resisting. The original Ay can actually be attributed to an Englishman, Doctor Baigent, although the American version is heavier hackled. Dr. Baigent worked on a problem of Ay design which he called "altered refraction."

The writer corresponded with the doctor, but did not grasp the import of what Dr. Baigent was trying to do until sometime later. Apparently, Dr. Baigent knew that light reflected from, or passing around, narrow filaments such as the wing veins legs and tail of a natural insect, and subsequently being bent or refracted as it entered the water, would show tiny bands of colored light, i.e., red or blue on either side of the filaments. Undoubtedly what Baigent was trying to do was to reduce the visibility and therefore the falsity of the artificial by using a hackle that contained pigments which would neutralize the effects of this particular lighting. In other words, red pigment neutralizes a red light, and blue pigment neutralizes a blue light.

A step by step tying sequence for the Grey Fox Variant can be found [here](#).



A Grey Fox variant tied by Mitsugu Bizen – visit his website [here](#)