

# Fishing soft hackle flies - lessons learned

Sean Mills

"The common theme is that all of these flies have soft, bird-feather hackle collars, the movement of which makes them incredibly attractive to fish". *Tying and fishing soft-hackled nymphs*, Allen McGee, Frank Amato Publishers, 2007.

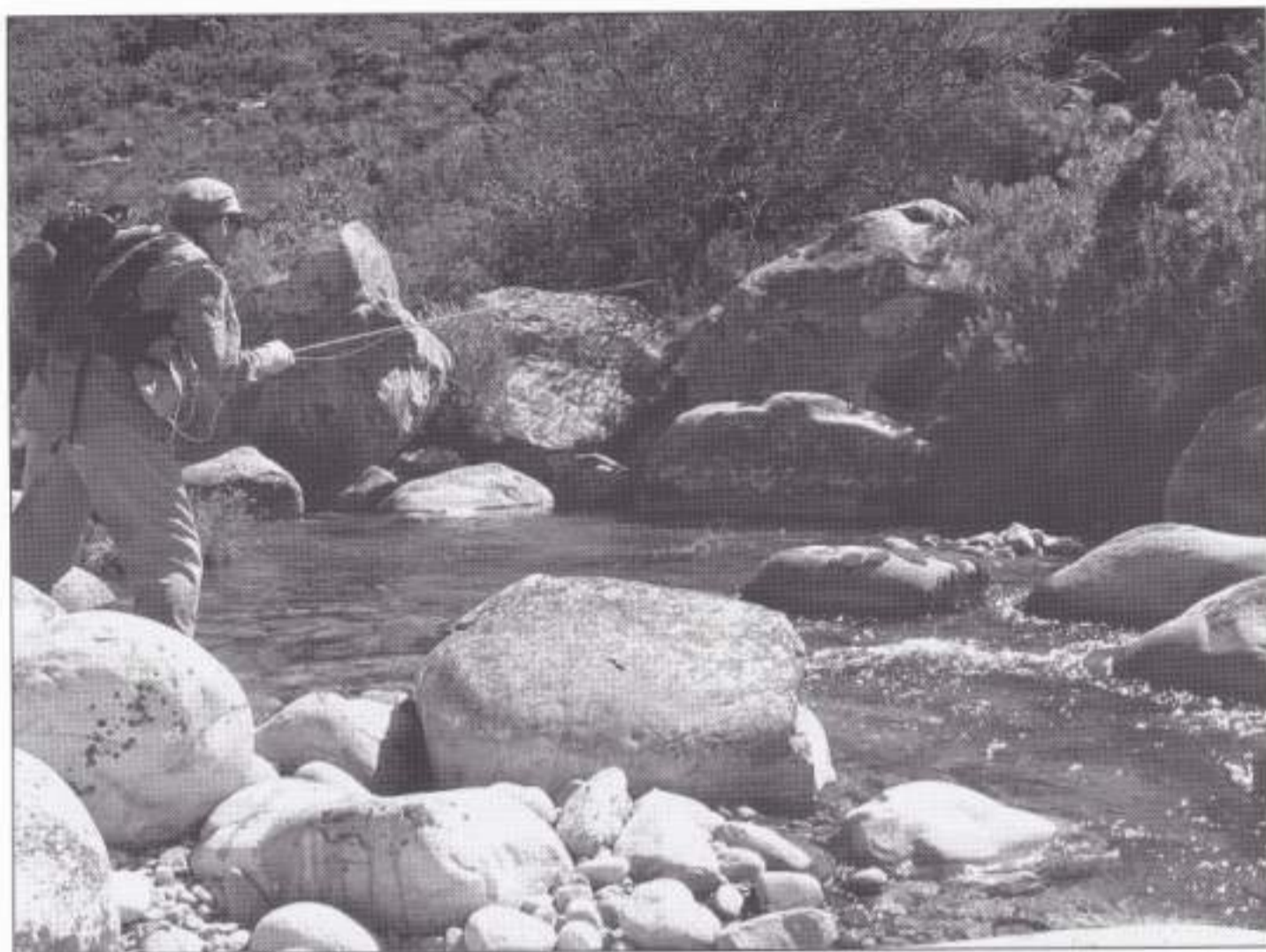
I started my love affair with soft hackle flies – often called North Country Spiders in their country of origin, Great Britain - many years ago after having read about them in English and American books and magazines. I first tried a soft hackle fly on the Smalblaar River more than a decade ago. Quite frankly, I did not know how to fish a wet fly in the British manner and usually fished them in conjunction with a dry fly or with a nymph. I tied my first soft hackles using guinea fowl feathers and black rabbit fur for a dubbed body.

The fly was tied on a #16 hook and I fished it on a New Zealand rig, attaching it to the bend of the hook on a parachute dry fly. It only took two drifts through a promising run before I connected with a 17-inch rainbow that latched onto the wet fly. What made this so amazing for me is that it had been a really tough day with very few trout showing and the ferocity with which the trout took the spider pattern blew me away. From that point on, whenever the fishing got really tough, I put on the soft hackle (usually black and #16) behind the dry fly and this tactic really saved the day for me many times, often resulting in some larger than average fish.

A few years later and I had brown, orange, red and black soft hackle flies in my box ranging from #10 - 16. They proved equally effective on dams. I fished at Bovlakte in Barrydale for a weekend when the fishing was really tough. I could see that the trout were head and tailing, indicating that they were eating midge pupae. None of the conventional patterns that I was using were working. I changed to #8 Black Fritz streamer and caught a brace of trout before it went quiet again. Then I had bright idea; attach a #14 black soft hackle to the Fritz. After that, it was almost too easy ... almost. (Can it ever be too easy?)

Thereafter, I kept that little trick up my sleeve and it worked like a dream on midge-eating trout. Several years later I fished a dam near Stanford that contained trout weighing from four to 11 pounds and was having a very difficult time. I caught two fish on a big Mrs Simpson (there were lots of small bluegill in the lake) but then everything went quiet and the takes ceased. After a while, I changed to 4x tippet and tied on a black and then an orange soft hackle. I would cast it out on a floating line and let it sink. The spider patterns never reached the bottom and takes were signalled by a long, slow pull as the trout confidently swam off with the fraudulent fly in their mouths. I caught 15 that day up to nine pounds, mostly on the orange soft hackle in size 14.

In 2003 I fished with the Western Province flyfishing team at Ugie in the national competition held there. To be honest, I had a lousy competition and it was the end of my competi-



*Sean Mills practising what his DVD preaches and fishing a team of soft hackle flies.*

tive fly fishing career. I was demotivated and disappointed with my performance. It was then that it dawned on me that I flyfish for fun, not to prove anything (there are those who thrive on competition, and they make very good competitive fishers, but it is not an ethos I subscribe to when it comes to angling). However, during the competition, I met the captain of the Italian national team, Edoardo Ferrero, who was invited along by CPS member Korrie Broos. ( See *The best and worst of it* by Tom Sutcliffe, *Piscator* No 135, November 2003). Italy is among the top teams in international flyfishing competitions and Edoardo (who has won his fair share of individual medals), taught us a great deal on that that trip. The defining moment for me, however, was watching him fish a section of the river that he had just fished through half an hour previously while demonstrating tactics to another team. He was using a telescopic rod that he could extend from seven to 12 foot by adjusting the length of the mid and tip sections. He started out Czech nymphing a deep run and hooked two fish, and then he moved upstream by five metres and changed his rig to two soft hackle flies. Saying: "Ideal water for soft hackle", he proceeded to hook and land a trout. Several fly and tactic changes later and he had fished through the run - about 100 metres - and he must have hooked 15 trout in a section that he had already fished only half an hour before! But when he came to Cape Town and announced that our streams were ideal for the soft hackle approach - of which the Italians are amongst the worlds leading proponents - I really took notice. (Recently when Czech nymphing originator Jiri Klima (Czech fly fishing coach and known internationally as the River God) came to Cape Town (also brought over by Korrie Broos), he said the same thing!)

Soft hackle patterns are usually fished two or three at a time on a 10 to 12 foot leader using

a fairly soft-actioned nine to 10 foot rod. The flies traditionally are cast across and down stream and then allowed to swing with the current and, very importantly, the rod tip is held high to cushion any takes. Fished this way, these flies are deadly. However, this is not the only way to fish them. Over 150 years ago, WC Stewart wrote a book called *The Practical Angler*. In it he talks about fishing soft hackle spiders upstream with a dead drift. Very short drifts were used with at least three flies on a cast.

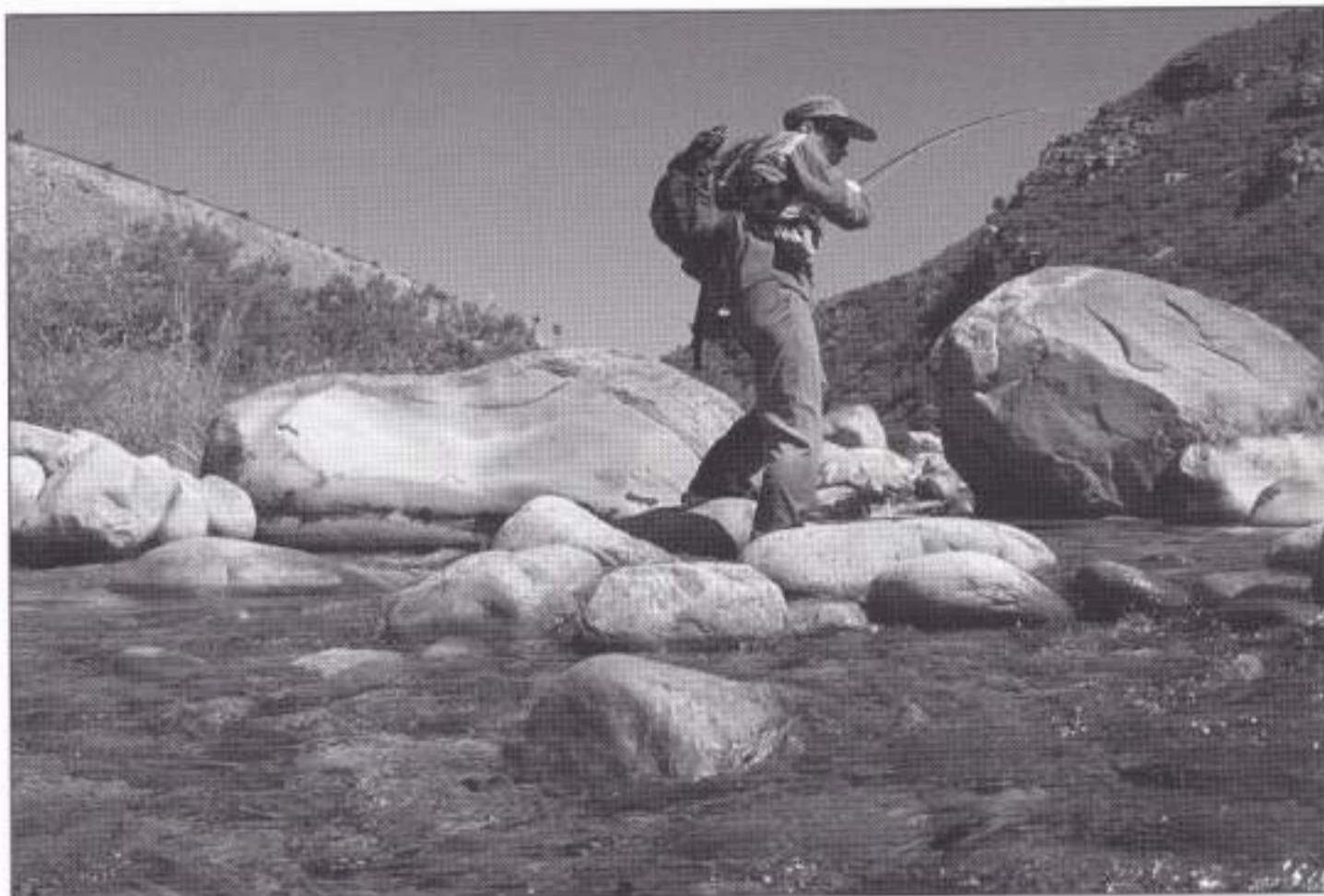
I started to fish soft hackle flies 'properly' about three years ago, usually on a 10-foot leader with a point fly and one or two droppers. I fished them downstream, down and across, dead drift across stream, upstream dead drift, upstream twitched, across stream dead drift, then twitched and then finally stripped back etc. I did not restrict myself to a single method, but combined them as the circumstances required. This just made sense to me. I suppose I have always been a 'sneaky angler' but this for me is what fly fishing is all about, fooling the trout. If that means stripping a soft hackle fly through a run to entice a fish out of cover, then, heck, I'll do it!

Most importantly, I started to catch fish, lots of fish and, often, fish of size. Above all I learnt that no matter what technique you use with these flies, always keep the rod tip up! The more line that you can keep off the water, the better and when a trout takes one of the spider flies, it does so with the intention to kill it! Stabbing takes are the order of the day. If you keep the rod tip too low, you are in danger of being broken off.

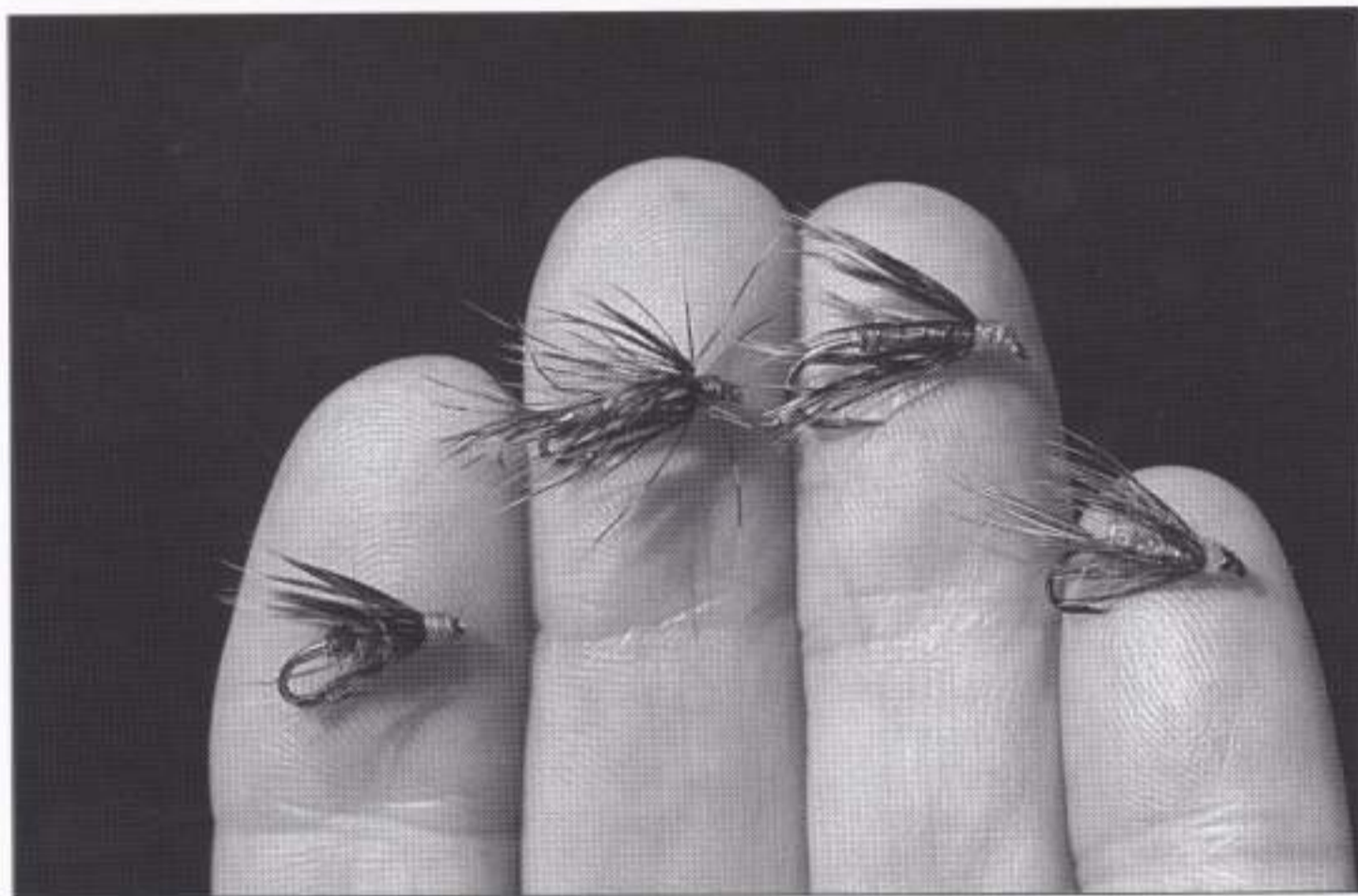
When river fishing, I use a leader comprising one metre of .40mm (.15"/02x) of Maxima Ultra Green to which I tie a loop. I then add 5x tippet to which I attach my droppers (also 5X tippet) using a three-turn water knot. My dropper length is, at most, 12 cms. Total length of the leader is normally 10 foot. I like using Rio Powerflex tippet because it has excellent knot strength, good abrasion resistance and it is a supple mono that facilitates drag-free drifts.

I use a 7 foot 6 inch to 8 foot 6 inch, three weight rod for Cape streams depending on how big the section is that I am fishing. Shorter rods give you better accuracy and are good in tight bush, while longer rods help you to mend line more easily and keep more line off the water. A longer rod is better for this technique, but I don't always set out to just fish soft hackles. In a day I will often fish a dry fly upstream or downstream, fish a dry and a nymph, high-stick nymph, fish two or three soft hackles, fish a streamer on its own or with a nymph or soft hackle behind it, fish two or three dry flies at once, fish a dry fly and emerger at the same time or fish a soft hackle behind a dry fly. Versatility is the keyword and it is one of the reasons why I often have a successful day's fishing no matter what the conditions or water level.

The interesting thing about soft hackle patterns is the fact that they are in some instances more than 300 years old. Such traditional patterns include the snipe and purple (reputed to be one of the best), march brown, snipe bloa, partridge and orange, starling bloa, dark needle, black spider, dun spider, Greenwell's spider, brown owl, water hen bloa and the hares ear (soft hackle version). There are many theories and debates as to what these flies represent to the fish. Personally, having closely examined a lot of insects drifting along the stream, it becomes apparent to me that when an insect lands on the water, it is often a mess of legs and wings and insects like the caddis as it comes up to hatch and is perfectly



*Sean Mills fishes his soft hackle flies with a variety of retrieves as circumstances dictate - from dead drift to fast stripping.*



*Sean ties his soft hackle flies on #12 - 16 hooks, usually using hen hackles, orange thread and dubbed fur bodies. The fly on the right, tied by Edoardo Ferrero, has tails of cock pheasant tail fibres, a sparse hare's ear body ribbed with fine gold tinsel, a partridge hackle and a head of finely dubbed orange fur.*