

Loop wing flies

Ed Herbst

Rest assured that whatever original ideas you come up with in fly tying are not original. Someone, somewhere, got there before you. The French were tying copper wire and herl nymphs half a century before Frank Sawyer invented his immortal Pheasant Tail nymph, but the combination of materials is normally attributed to him because he was writing in the universal language, English, and also appearing on British television.

Quite who invented loop wing flies is open to question, but two well-known American anglers, Lee Wulff and Andy Puyans, in different designs, created awareness of their possibilities. Later, Gary Borger for dun imitations and Englishman, Neil Patterson for spinners, explored different facets of the design.

Without giving dates, Wulff describes his loop-wing experiments in *Lee Wulff on Flies*, (Stackpole Books, 1980). To disguise the bend of the hook, he had been experimenting with keel hooks which land upside down and hook point up.

"It occurred to me that I could camouflage the hook bend of a grasshopper imitation with a material that would bend back in imitation of the grasshopper's long hind legs. I was about to go to the West again to fish in the country where a grasshopper imitation is one of the deadliest flies throughout the long period from late summer through fall. I was looking for a material for the legs that would be soft, long, springy and would suggest the general appearance of the grasshopper's hind legs.

"A loop of hackle gave the greatest promise, and when I started tying experimental patterns I found with pleasure that the looped hackle was springy and had a scraggly appearance, much like the natural's legs. It would also add flotation to the clipped- deerhair body that I planned to use.

"This looped-hackle hopper worked well for me, and I'm certain that it took some fish that would have been put off by the conspicuous hook bend hanging down from a conventional pattern. The Looped-Hackle Hopper floated well, resting in the surface film, and its legs had a lifelike movement when twitched.

"The looped-hackle idea might have stopped here, with the grasshopper imitation, if I hadn't been doodling on a pad at the International Salmon Advisory Group meeting in Montreal six months later. Suddenly, while thinking of salmon and their various survival problems, the thought flashed through my mind that perhaps the loops of hackle with their strength and springiness had other, better applications. I sketched out a moth with looped-hackle wings, and felt that I had devised, for the first time, a good, durable imitation of the many moths that float along with outspread wings in a delta-shaped configuration.

"As soon as I got home I started to work on moth-like flies with looped-hackle wings. I came up with a spruce moth type of fly and imagined it floating over a big salmon or trout. I was certain from the look of the thing and the way it floated in a bowl of water that any fish would hate to miss a chance of rising to it.

"I made up some moth patterns with two pairs of wings instead of a single pair of wings for better flotation. I wanted the fly to lie flat in the surface film. I made the first bodies out of clipped deerhair, but I found that the wings would float a body of wool or chenille just as well. I tied some with hackle wound around the head of the fly, at the hook eye, and decided that a few turns of hackle there simulated insect legs very well. I like these flies best with grizzly, badger or furnace hackles for the wings, because these materials may give a mottled effect and a striped effect.

"When I gave motion to the fly in the bowl of water the wings had a fine, springy action. They tightened toward the body on the forward move and sprang back into position as soon as the fly came to rest. The action was so good that I decided to try looped hackles on still other types of flies.

"I made some big bass bugs that I knew would be good, and I made up some dragonflies that would float on slender looped- hackle wings and a short spread of bucktail for the tail. Other patterns came to mind, and I tied them as I thought of them. Eventually I used looped hackles on wet flies, streamers and even nymphs. Tied as a short loop in the front of a streamer, the hackles gave a Muddler effect to the head; tied as small forward loops on a heavy, sinking body the hackles made an imitation of a darter. In each of the different patterns illustrated, I counted on the resilience and liveliness of the loop hackle to make a fly that floated or looked better than conventional patterns. It was quite an exciting tying session!

"When I finally floated that original looped-Hackle Spruce Moth over a big salmon, he rose to the fly beautifully, and I felt that old, warm glow that comes when a fly of your own creation excites a good fish into taking. The possibilities of looped hackles for flies are far-reaching, and over the years I expect looped hackles to find a place among the standard patterns for trout, salmon and bass."

Wulff confined his looped-hackle idea to terrestrial insects, hoppers, moths and dragonflies and I have utilised the concept in tying beetles and my Xmas Xaddis (see *Piscator* 129, page 30) using pearlescent embroidery thread (a combination of flashabou mylar plastic inside fluorescent nylon organza wedding dress thread) looped forward on either side of the hook shank and from bend to eye to simulate the heart-shaped and flush-floating wings of such insects.

Californian, Andy Puyans, is credited with applying the loop wing idea to adult mayflies. I first came across the idea in the second (1979) edition of *Modern Fly Techniques* by John Veniard and Donald Downs (A & C Black). Puyans used six fibres of a barred waterfowl feather such as mallard flank to form both the tail and the two upright wings of a mayfly dun imitation. The looped fibres are separated at the hook eye into two wings of three fibres each and the fly is then hackled in the conventional manner.

An interesting variation is contained in Eric Leiser's *The Book Of Fly Patterns* (Alfred A Knopf, 1987), the Loop Wing Paradun. A hackle feather is trimmed of its fibres leaving about half a millimetre of stubble on either side of the quill. This is then tied in an upright loop to simulate the mayfly wing and then parachute-hackled. It provides a very realistic simulation of a mayfly wing, my only reservation being that it would be much stiffer than

Puyans' feather fibre wing and could twist tippets.

British iconoclast, Neil Patterson, took the next logical step – flattening the two loop wings into the horizontal position to form a loop wing spinner and this technique has particular relevance for anglers in the Western Cape where small mayfly spinners and diptera such as net-winged midges and blackfly are particularly prevalent in early spring.

Patterson used the technique for #20 spent *Caenis* imitations and details the technique in his book, *Chalkstream Chronicle* (Merlin Unwin Books, 1995) a copy of which is in the CPS library.

What makes Patterson one of the significant figures in modern fly tying, in my opinion, is that his mind is refreshingly uncluttered by tradition and he is only too happy to utilise, if you will forgive the clichéd buzzword, 'lateral thinking'.

"Tying an artificial *Caenis* pattern using conventional procedures - ones we have been using for over a century - involves the following list of materials: tying thread, hackle fibres for tails, a body material, a rib, wings and a hackle. Six materials, at least. To strap this all down to the hook involves, I calculate, ten procedures.

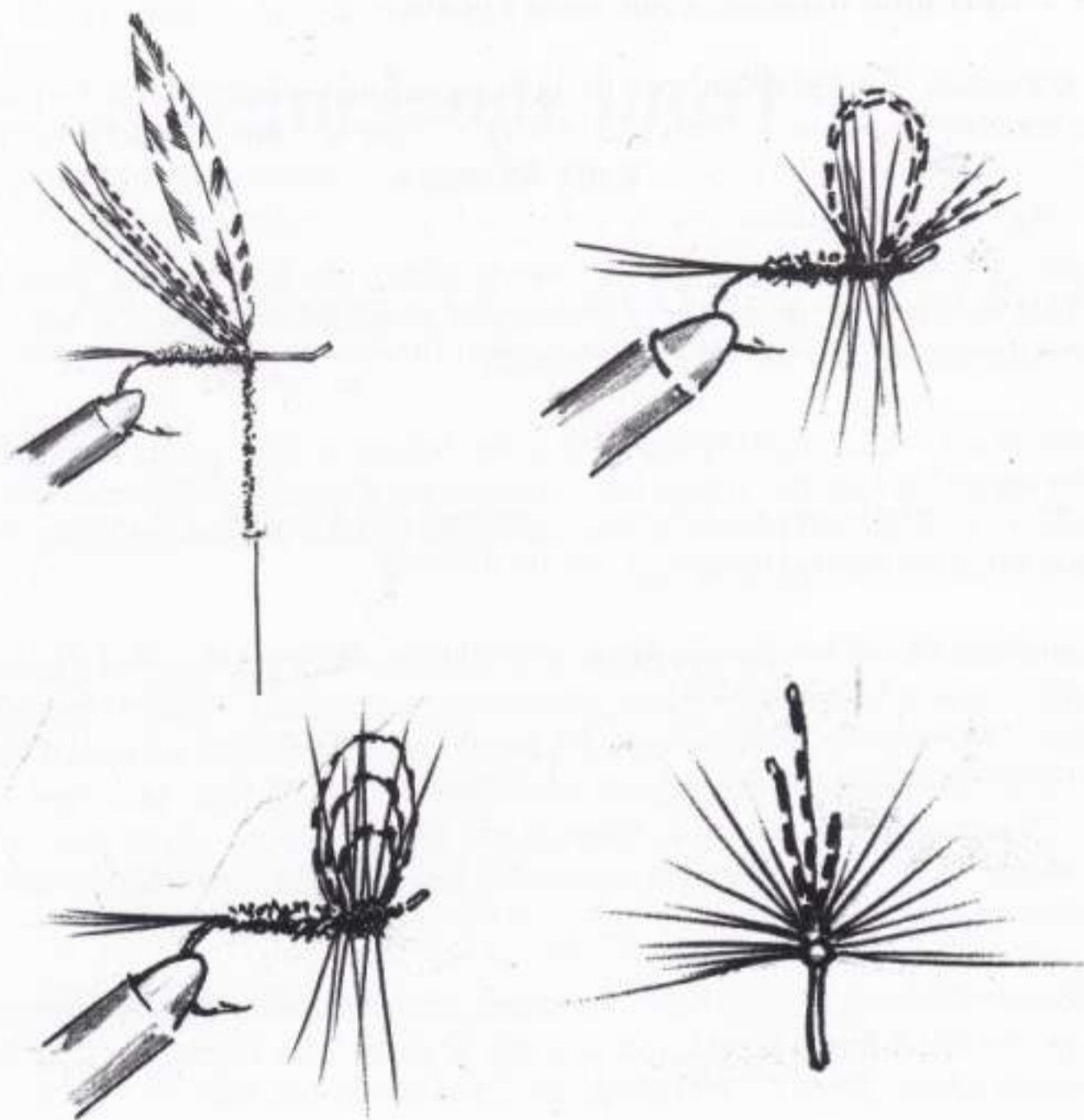
"Hackles are the prime cause of artificials ending up over-dressed and bulky. All a hackle does is support the hook on the surface and imitate legs, and perhaps upright wings. Unless you're specifically imitating the hatched-out dun that uses its legs to keep its bulk high and dry, there's really no other reason for hackles to be there. Anyway, I concluded, if your hook is small and light, it shouldn't need more than picked-out fur to keep it buoyant. And picked-out fur, to my eyes, imitates legs more convincingly and realistically than two or three turns of hackle.

"The only problem I can find with the style of tying in tying my Twenties that I developed and named the Twenties Loop Series is that they have no commercial value. They make tying small flies look too easy. For this reason, they're worthless. But as a foil against an Autumn trout, with a mop for a mouth, they're priceless. For the beauty of a small fly, with no features that a trout can find to criticize, is that when taken, the fly is sipped in with astounding confidence. So much so, it makes you wonder why you don't use the same pattern in the Spring.

"Including tying thread, the Twenties Loop Series involves the use of only three materials. Two threads, and a yarn. The yarn is a white polypropylene. This gives a small fly all the floatability it requires. The threads: one strand of black, one strand of white.

"The tying style reverses flytying logic. In an attempt to minimise tying stages and procedures, I abandoned the traditional 'front to back to front again'. Instead, my new direction is strictly 'front to back' only.

"As far as maximising every material and movement is concerned, the wing material doubles up as tail, the tying silk doubles up as a thorax and body - as does the whip finish which involves you tying off your fly at the tail end, rather than at the eye. And because it's a small fly, the whip finish is made a great deal easier, (and functional), for at the same time



Gary Borger's Loop Wing Dun uses barred fibres from a duck feather such as teal for the wing on small mayfly imitations.

you whip finish you are also forming the body and tying in tails - three procedures condensed into one.

"I promised simplicity."

Gary Borger, in *Designing Trout Flies*, (Tomorrow River Press, 1994) takes Puyans' idea a step further in his 'Loop Wing Dun' which he uses for #18 and smaller imitations. Whereas Puyans used the hackle to encircle and cup the base of the loop wing, Borger places the hackle inside a broad-based loop which folds over the top of the hackle fibres, from the end of the body behind the hackle to the hook eye.

For size 18-22 flies he uses five barred waterfowl feather fibres or sparkle yarn fibres and winds the hackle 'X' style within the loop. "Wind the hackle forward to the head palmer-style in two or three turns. Then wind rearward palmer-style in two or three turns to the rear of the thorax. The forward and rearward wraps should cross and form 'X's'. This X-Wing style of wrapping points the hackle barbs forward and rearward and provides a very secure platform to support the fly on the water. Finish by winding the hackle forward with as many turns as the feather will allow."