The Small Stream Soft Hackle

Ed Herbst

Trout in small mountain streams eat what's available and research throughout the world shows that what is mostly available is *Baetis* nymphs and black fly (*Simulid*) larvae.

The reason for this is that these two species are predominant in terms of behavioural drift with the main drift occurring at dusk and a smaller level occurring at dawn.

South African fly fishers have used stomach pumps on bigger trout - bigger than 12 inches - for years and the results confirm the scientific research.

Staple trout foods in freestone streams: *Baetis* nymphs and blackfly larvae

The failure to recognise the role of black fly larvae in trout diet is a universal situation as I pointed in several articles on Tom Sutcliffe's Spirit of Flyfishing website. I attribute this to the fact that imitation proved almost impossible until the UV light-cured acrylic resins became available to fly tyers.

The Small Stream Soft Hackle is premised on a singular common factor in both blue wing olive mayflies and black fly. At different stages of their development each contains a significant trigger – a bubble of air which looks like mercury.

In the black fly it occurs during emergence when the adult is sheathed in air and you can see the process in this fascinating video clip.

See also the photographs by Dwight Kuhn.

In the Blue-Winged Olive it occurs during the egg laying process which occurs underwater. The female crawls into the water and deposits small patches of eggs under rocks on the stream bed. As part of the process the *Baetis* female is almost always accompanied by the male because there is safety in numbers and this ensures that there is 50% chance that predators will take the male leaving the female to lay eggs.

A bubble of air is captured between the wings in this process which can be seen in a fascinating underwater video by Ralph and Lisa Cutter.

The ovipositing Baetis female as filmed by Ralph and Lisa Cutter – note the air bubble between the wings.

South African entomologist, Helen Barber-James saw this happening and placed the rock on the bank where the insect continued to lay eggs.

What that means is that the “mercury” bubble is seen constantly by trout and this is what the Small Stream Soft Hackle seeks to emulate.

Silver lined glass beads perfectly mimic this bubble and they form the foundation of Pat Dorsey’s Mercury series of nymph patterns as outlined in his book, *Tying and Fishing the Tailwater Flies*.

The arrival on the market of 1.5 mm beads in brass and tungsten which also imitate the air bubble provides more opportunity in terms of sink rate.

I have always been fascinated by the patterns developed by subsistence anglers centuries ago and in designing the Small Stream Soft Hackle I was guided by the forward-facing patterns of Tenkara anglers in Japan and by the Valsesiana flies developed in the Po valley in Italy.

I wanted a soft hackle that would have lots of movement and would also encase the bead. To my delight I found what I was looking for in CDC oiler puffs. This feather lacks a quill and is thus easy to distribute around the bead. I am not aware of this feather being used by soft hackle fanatics but I believe it is ideal.

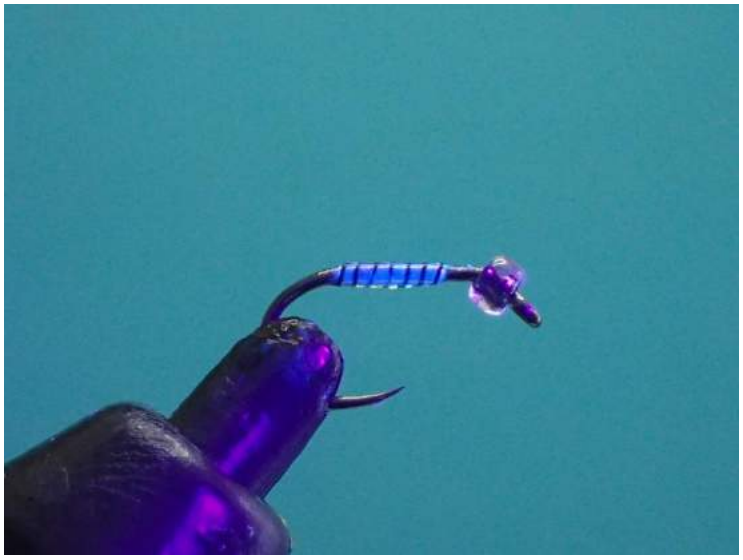
The body is the result of my experiments with UV light-cured resins to emulate the black fly larva. Brassie bodies are opaque but I found that by separating the wire wraps I added depth to the fly. The first coating of the body is with Loon fluorescing UV acrylic resin which is cured with a UV torch. It is not very durable however so the next coating, a protective one, is with Sally Hansen’s Megashine nail polish which dries within a minute and contains tiny specks of reflecting material. Deer Creek Fine resin fluoresces almost as much and is more durable. To secure the wire to the hook shank I use a tiny layer of superglue.

To push the hackle forward and add more life I use a technique for the thorax which I call “plaiting” – wrapping herl around a dubbed thread. Gary LaFontaine used this in his Double Magic nymphs. In this fly I combine peacock herl and fine strands of black Ice Wing material in the thorax which pushes the CDC feather forward to encompass the bead. This is a broad spectrum imitation because by the time a mayfly, crane fly, Netwing midge or other adult aquatic insect reaches you after traversing the lip currents at the tail of several pools upstream of you, it is a crumpled mess and looks like what you find in the lint trap of your washing machine.

My preferred thread is black Semperfli Spyder thread followed by Veevus 16/0

My preferred hook is a #16 Dohiku HDN SP which is available from John Yelland at Upstream in Cape Town or the #16 TMC 108SP BL ‘Dolphin Shank’ which is available from Frontier Fly Fishing in Johannesburg. Both designs drift hook-point-up like a jig hook but without occluding the hook gape as much.

A pearl bead on the Dohiku 302 hook



The body fluorescing strongly under UV light

Attaching the UV puff feather – clip away the tip

The Hareline Ice Wing material is brushed against the waxed thread

The peacock herl is wound round the thread, trapping the lightly dubbed Ice Wing material

Wet the feather and pull it forward over the bead. Wrap the peacock herl/Ice wing combination forward to the CDC feather and whip finish behind the feather

The finished fly

A Small Stream Soft Hackle using a black CDC puff and a silver 1.5 mm tungsten bead for deeper water and faster currents

Professional fly tyer Marcel Terblanche has found that the CDC puff holds the fly in a near-vertical position and he says the trout on the Smalblaar have signalled their approval of the pattern which has now found a permanent place in his fly box.

Other articles which provide useful information on the diet of small stream trout are *Trout in the Fynbos Biome*, *Why fish hoppers in autumn?* and *Trout diet in small mountain streams.*