

## TYING THE SOFT HACKLE SPIDER

By Ed Herbst

Gordon McKay's fine article is one which has long needed to be written. After a successful day with the Stewart Black Spider on the Holsloot about two year's ago, I remember being struck by the thought that this pattern linked me to a man who had died long before I was born and how he would have been pleased that a fly invented in a different time, country and circumstance was still proving successful far from its place of origin. Stewart's spider is the ultimate in simplicity. He tied the silk on at the eye, wrapped the feather round the thread, wound the combined thread and feather halfway down the shank and tied it off. The modern fly tyer will find the wide-gape Matarelli whip finisher handy for the last step.

The traditional Scottish soft hackle fly is elegant in its sparse simplicity, reflecting, say some, the national norms and mores of frugality and modesty. But there was a more pragmatic reason for a design which is utterly functional and time-proven. As W.H. Lawrie said in his book, *Scottish Trout Flies - An Analysis and Compendium* (Frederick Muller 1966) "The aim was to simulate living insects - hatching flies, drowning flies, nymphs and larvae - in form, colour and size, and do so in such a way that the representations would be readily submersible and swim well in the tumbling waters of fast-flowing rivers. It is this quality of submersibility which has governed trout fly designs in Scotland as far back as can be traced. Submersibility, together with what is known as a good 'entry' established a general preference for fly dressing materials that would readily absorb water and also spare application of those materials in dressing a wet fly."

As a result the traditional soft hackle fly had a slender body which ended above the hook point and the fur was 'misted' onto the thread in such small quantities that the thread colour could be seen through the dubbing. One way to do this is to apply one of the new super-tacky waxes such as Loon Swax (available from the Flyfisherman or Upstream) to the thread and then brush the dubbing as lightly as possible against the waxed thread so that the faintest film of fur adheres to it.

Inevitably, as time went on, the simple patterns espoused by Stewart evolved. In 1885 Thomas Evan Pritt, angling editor of the Yorkshire Evening Post, published *Yorkshire Trout Flies* which quickly sold out and was reprinted in revised form a year later as *North Country Flies*. In 1916 Harfield Edmonds and Norman Lee published *Brook and River Trouting* and both books are regarded as important milestones in the recorded chronology of soft-hackled patterns. Each book contains patterns with heads of peacock or magpie herl.

Another evolutionary step was the addition of a fur or peacock herl thorax behind the hackle to give the fly more body and to help the hackle to stand proud and give it more 'kick'. The first fly with a thorax to gain any prominence was the Tups Indispensable, a dry fly sent by Devon fly dresser, R.S. Austin, to G.E.M. Skues in 1900. Skues noticed that, when this fly sank, it looked very much like a mayfly nymph and was readily taken by trout. From this chance observation modern day nymphing methods and tying styles evolved.

A recent invention is the addition of a tail of sparkle poly or Z-lon to imitate the nymphal shuck of still-born mayfly duns. This style was evolved by Craig Matthews and John Juracek in the Yellowstone area of Montana in the mid-eighties. Although originally a feature on dry flies, it has been incorporated in recent soft hackle patterns by Sylvester Nemes whose books, *The Soft - Hackle Fly*, *The Soft - Hackle Fly Addict* and *Soft-Hackle Fly Imitations* (copies of which are in the library) did much to popularise such flies in the USA.

In the early seventies Ken Sinfoil, head bailiff at Weir Wood Reservoir in England designed a streamer to imitate the almost transparent pinhead fry on which trout were feeding in the shallows. To imitate this translucence he wound a thin strip of plastic (polythene) over an underbody of silver tinsel. Since then the concept of a plastic overbody has been widely used, most often in buzzer imitations but also by British angling writer, John Goddard, in his PVC nymph. The PVC provides two useful functions, creating translucence and adding a protective covering to the fly.

Partridge is one of the most popular hackles for spider patterns but it has the disadvantage for small patterns in that the quill is rather thick. Hen hackles are increasingly finding favour with tyers because they have thinner quills. I am also very partial to the barred feathers from the Egyptian Goose and other wildfowl for soft hackles. To achieve the necessary sparseness, first



strip the fibres from one side of the feather and then tie it in by its tip, winding on one turn only. The closer the fibres are to each other the more they will mat together and inhibit movement. To avoid this, leave a little space between the body and where you tie the hackle in. Wind the hackle back toward the body and leave it hanging. Take the thread through the hackle, carefully avoiding tying down any fibres, back to the body and then forward through the hackle again before whip finishing at the eye. In this way the hackle is separated by thread wraps and also strengthened.

Ideally the tips of the soft hackle should reach no further than the bend of the hook but for size 16 and smaller flies it is difficult to find hackles small enough. The solution is to strip the fibres from the quill and tie them in a little back from the hook eye. Measure them for length and let the thread distribute them around the hook shank. Dub the body up to the hackle tie-in point, take the thread through the hackle and then fold the hackle fibres back over the body and fix them in position before doing the whip finish.

Let us construct a generic soft-hackle pattern, incorporating as many of the proven traditional and modern materials as possible so as to imitate our most common mayfly nymph, the Chestnut Dun (*Castanophlebia calida*). This nymph has very prominent gills which we will imitate by combining brown marabou with the body material which is pheasant tail.

Hook: Size 14 wet fly

Tail: Four or five sparkle poly of Z-Ion fibres

Body: Pheasant tail combined with brown marabou

Rib: Fine copper wire

Overbody: Thin strip of clear plastic

Thorax: Hare's ear mixed with antron

Hackle: Speckled partridge, hen or Egyptian Goose feather

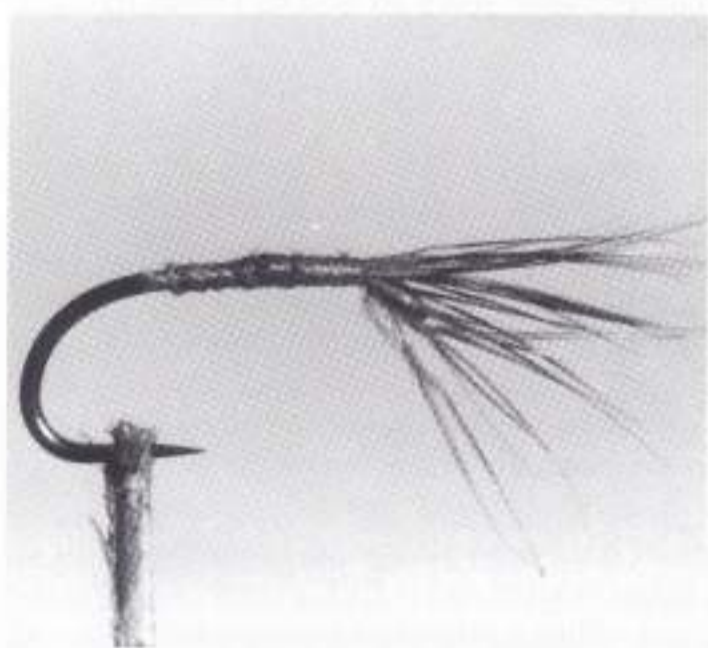
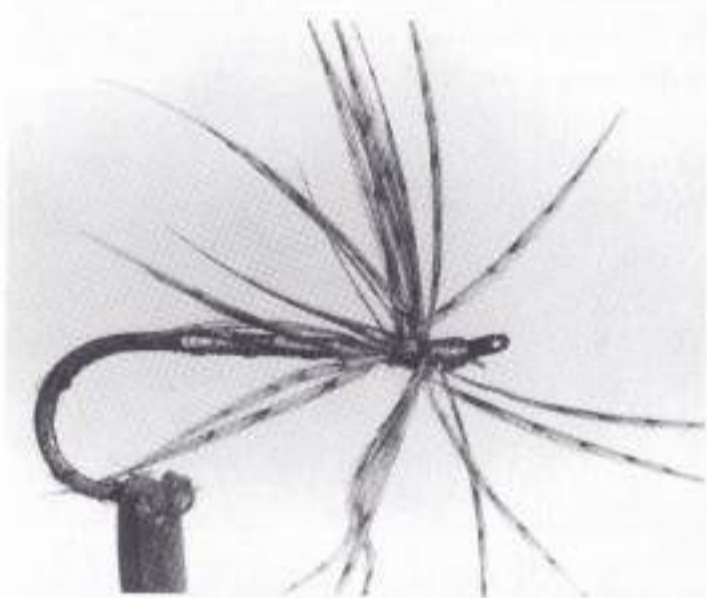
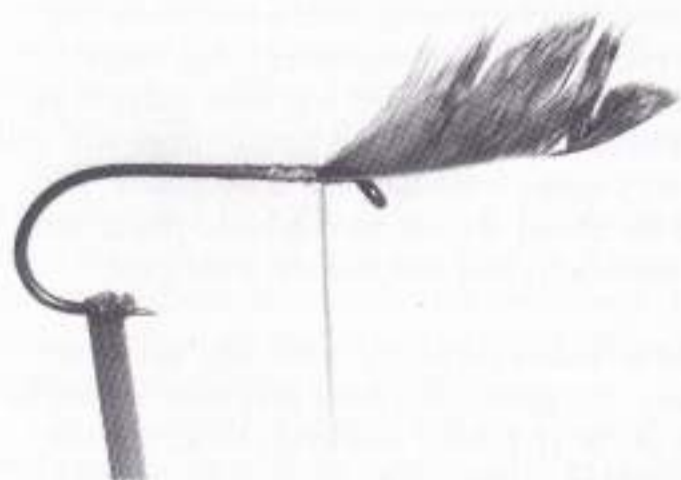
Head: One strand of peacock herl tied in by tip and wound round thread.

Tie in the tail followed by the pheasant tail, marabou and copper wire rib. Wind the combined pheasant tail and marabou forward and tie off. Counter-rib in the opposite direction with the copper wire and tie off. Tie in the plastic strip in thorax region and wind back to tail in open spirals and then back to the thorax area again before tying off. (The reason for this is that if you tie in too many materials at the tail you create a bump there and it is accordingly difficult to achieve a nice tapered body.) Dub a thorax of hare's ear and antron. Tie the hackle in by the tip and wind on. Tie off the hackle and create a small neat head with the peacock herl.

What you have created is a fly with a multitude of attractive facets, a fly with movement, sparkle and translucence which you can fish with confidence in rivers and dams anywhere. In principle however it differs little from the edicts which W.C. Stewart espoused so eloquently more than a century ago.

For members interested in learning more about soft hackle flies, books in the library by Sylvester Nemes and W.S. Roger Fogg provide an excellent reference.





*Soft Hackles: Stewart's Black Spider (top); a traditional soft hackle as tied by Sylvester Nemes (middle left) and a more modern interpretation (middle right); bottom, a method of tying small soft hackles. Pictures by Neil Hodges*