



Dr. Baigent and the Long-Hackled Fly

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It was my first north-western hatch. I had just moved to Oregon the previous fall and, in addition to starting my graduate studies, I was busy learning the nuances of a new culture, including the subtleties of new rivers, new hatches, and the behavior of resident trout and migratory salmon, steelhead, and sea-run cutthroat. On a beautiful afternoon in March 1975, I was anxious to get outside after enduring the grayness of a western Oregon winter. I didn't yet know many streams and I only had the afternoon at my disposal, so I headed to a nearby river on the west slope of the Cascades that I had visited in the fall.

I had already learned that most of these west-slope streams were not as promising as they first appeared. Draining watersheds of volcanically derived rock, their productivity is generally low and they do not support large fish populations. Indeed, the migratory behavior of salmon and steelhead may have originally evolved because these rivers, while containing an abundance of excellent spawning habitat, do not provide enough food for decent numbers of adult fish.

But on this afternoon there was an apparent abundance of fish and food. Shortly after I arrived, a rather large, mottled brown mayfly began emerging and fish started rising. I collected a few flies and later determined that they were Western March Browns, mayflies that look similar to the famous Eastern or American March Browns, but are actually of a different genus and only distantly related. (To add to the confusion, the name March Brown is derived from a third, unrelated English mayfly. Unlike the fly found in the eastern United

States, which typically hatches in May, the western fly does at least follow its namesake and hatches in March.)

I had not had the time to tie many flies since arriving in the northwest, but I poked around my fly boxes, found a reasonable imitation, and began catching fish. The hatch persisted and provided a fine afternoon of fishing. The rainbows were not large and there were a good many whitefish in the mix, but the fishing and the nice weather made for a satisfying day. And the fly I used was an old friend from the Catskills, Art Flick's version of the Gray Fox Variant.

In fly tying, the term "variant" is used in two distinct ways, one to describe a type of hackle neck, the other to describe a type of fly. In both cases the usage fits the common meaning of the word, and nothing would require or prevent a tier from using a variant hackle to tie a variant fly, but the uses are otherwise unrelated.

A variant hackle neck is a genetic deviant, a multicolored neck that doesn't fit any of the classic, pure color categories of dun, brown, ginger, and the like. Because individual variant necks are often unique, they are rarely listed as a component in published dressings for fly patterns or used to tie flies sold commercially. Regardless, their natural variegations can produce wonderful, life-like effects in both dry and subsurface flies.

A variant fly, regardless of hackle color, is a dry fly tied with proportions that deviate from commonly accepted standards. Specifically, the hackle and tail are tied long, the equivalent of a normally proportioned fly several hook sizes larger. The fly style emerged in Yorkshire in the late 19th century, during the same period when Halford and his disciples were developing the tenets for tying and fishing the modern dry fly on classic English chalk streams. Dr. William Baigent, an ardent tier from Northallerton, provided an alternative. He studied theories of light refraction and believed that optical patterns created by long-hackled dry flies provide a better imitation of fluttering wings than conventional flies. The long-hackled flies also floated well on swift currents and were less likely to spook trout in quiet water because they settled gently on the surface. He developed about a dozen fly patterns intended to imitate common local insects. The flies came to be known as "variants" to indicate that their proportions deviated from conventional standards. He later produced a series of flies that were marketed commercially by Hardy's as Refracta flies. These variants used dark-centered badger or furnace hackle or employed hackles of mixed length a short hackle to represent legs and a longer hackle to provide optical and floating qualities.

Several American tiers have experimented with the variant theme. Ray Bergman tied patterns with short wings, and he and Albert Barrell of Massachusetts preferred flies with two or more different colored hackles and short bodies. They often tied variants on short-shanked hooks, but most tiers used regular dry fly hooks to avoid the loss of hooking leverage associated with shorter shanks. Roy Donnelly developed the Donnelly Light and

Dark Variants, flies with hackle-point wings that were popular in Wyoming's Teton country in the years after World War II.

The American with the most influence on the development of variants, however, was Preston Jennings. He corresponded with Baigent, and in 1935 popularized several variant patterns in his groundbreaking *A Book of Trout Flies*, essentially the first American book to include systematic identification of important aquatic insects and corresponding specific imitations. He described three long-hackled flies, the Blue, Cream, and Gray Fox Variants. All lacked wings and had bodies of gold or silver tinsel to add a little sparkle. Jennings liked to use variants when skittish fish were feeding in flat water at the tail of pools and specifically mentions using his Gray Fox Variant in this manner as an imitation of the Eastern Green Drake. This fly has a ginger tail, gold tinsel body, and a two-part hackle of ginger faced with grizzly.

Art Flick was heavily influenced by Jennings, and among the imitative flies in his famous *Streamside Guide to Naturals and their Imitations*, includes three variant flies, all modifications of Jennings' patterns. Flick lists one of these flies, his own version of the Gray Fox Variant, as an imitation of the Eastern Green Drake, but the fly was much more than that to Art. It became his favorite fly, and he used it far more than any other as a general searching pattern.

Flick gives Preston Jennings credit for his influence but considered his own version of the fly to be superior to Jennings'. Art's Gray Fox Variant (see photo) has no wings, a ginger tail, and a mix of three different colored hackles: dark ginger, grizzly, and light ginger. Unlike Jennings' fly, the hackles are mixed together and do not form distinct color bands. As with all hackle, the feathers should be wrapped individually and not all at the same time. He could not explain why, but Art firmly believed that the fly worked best if the hackles were wound in the order given above. The fly's body is made from the stripped stem of a light ginger hackle, a body style originated by Flick. The quill provides a segmented look, a natural taper, and in many regions has now superseded the use of stripped peacock quill for dry fly bodies. Art sometimes tied this fly in very large sizes, but it is also useful in smaller versions, including ones, like the fly in the photo, where the hackle is only slightly oversized.

The hackle mix in Flick's fly provides a variegated, buggy look that is highly effective. And as I learned that March day in Oregon many years ago, the fly's utility extends far beyond its original intended use as an imitation of the Eastern Green Drake. The west slope of the Cascades is far from the Catskills and any populations of the Eastern Green Drake, but the fish feeding that day didn't seem to care. It looked just like a Western March Brown to them.