

*Why you should add an "elusive ball
of quicksilver to your batch of
fur and feather"*



A Touch of Sparkle

GARY LAFONTAINE

EVEN IF SELECTIVITY, the phenomenon that inspires fly fishermen to carry an incredible array of patterns, did not exist there still is a place for Sparkle Yarn in fly tying. The bright filaments of the yarn certainly add to the beauty and effectiveness of even fancy flies. But the fact that fish do feed selectively make this yarn more than a pretty oddity. It explains not only why this material is valuable on so many patterns but also why it has become the fly tying rage of the past few years.

Trout feed selectively when they are conditioned to recognize certain repetitive occurrences, usually a hatch (or in the case of terrestrials, a fall) of insects. The fish see the same food form over and over until they respond only to the visual clues of one insect, and then they tend to ignore anything different.

The most important characteristic of any insect is the one that a trout notices first. There is usually one trait that is distinguishable at a greater distance than any other. Which trait it is will vary with different food types—for example, if the insect is large the fish may initially recognize it by its size. With a different insect the fish might notice the color, the shape, or the motion of the animal. The first recognizable trait, known as the triggering characteristic, is the most important feature because a trout decides to move his position to intercept an item when he sees this visual clue.

How selectively trout feed depends in part on how distinctive the visual characteristics of the insect are—if the bug type is drab in color, average in size, and ordinary in shape trout may focus on it, but they will also take other insect types that drift near them. However, if one characteristic is very distinctive, making the bug greatly different from the normal drift and flotsam in the water, the trout take that food to the exclusion of anything else. The more distinctive the triggering trait the more rigidly selective the pattern of feeding. In extreme situations there is almost a 100 percent selective response.

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And what is the most distinctive trait of an insect? When present the most unusual characteristic is the brightness caused by trapped air bubbles. Insects carry bubbles of air in two ways: the adults of certain insects, when they crawl or swim underwater, keep a bubble plastered around themselves as an air supply; and the pupae of certain insects, when they emerge, generate bubbles inside a thin, transparent sheath that completely covers their bodies. However it is caused, the silvery coat of air is so distinctive that fish cannot mistake the insect for a glob of debris—or any other food form. Whenever there is any natural brightness from light reflecting off the air bubbles of an insect, the matching fly must also exhibit a bit of sparkle. The pattern that fails to mimic this glitter is almost totally useless.

Bubbles

THE BEST THEORISTS OF AMERICAN fly fishing have always understood the importance of simulating the brightness of air. Some fly tyers experimented with flies designed to capture and hold actual air bubbles. Preston Jennings devised fancy Atlantic Salmon patterns that carried air in the surface film. Sid Gordon, attempting to imitate egg-laying caddisfly adults that plunge underwater, greased his sinking patterns with floatant to achieve this effect with his appropriately named Wet-Dry Fly. Pete Hidy, well aware of the value of the bright, silvery appearance of air, also developed a pattern that could capture bubbles and hold them underwater. All of these great fly tiers felt that their patterns only partially, or temporarily, mimicked the sparkling appearance of bright insects, but the magic of the effect, the hydrofuge principle, was so evident that even a moment of natural glitter during a presentation was better than nothing.

Sid Gordon, through his classic *How to Fish from Top to Bottom*, was one of my early fly-fishing heroes. He answered many questions in his book, but he also presented his readers with challenges by admitting that there were problems for which he had no solutions. "I have not yet succeeded in finding fly-tying material that will exactly imitate the bubble," he wrote. "I just cannot seem to



R. VALENTINE ATKINSON PHOTO

A caddisfly frees itself from the pupal membrane that holds tiny air bubbles which help float the emerger to the surface. Sparkle yarn simulates the bubbles that attract trout's attention.

create perfectly that quicksilver effect, that airy, shiny envelope of air around its body and wings which I see so plainly in the living, swimming insect as it works its way to the bottom. Sometimes I get so frustrated thinking about it that I feel like smashing a thermometer in the hope of fastening a drop of its mercury to the body of one of the flies I am tying. But how do you wrap an elusive ball of quicksilver around a batch of fur and feather?"

The materials that might have satisfied Sid Gordon were not developed during his lifetime. The discovery of Antron nylon and Creslan orlon, generically known as Sparkle Yarn, provided a product for fly tiers that recreated the "quicksilver effect" of the air-enclosed insect. In laboratory tests, light reflected from the clear filaments of Sparkle Yarn matched the light bouncing off air bubbles exactly.

Here at last is a fly material to mimic the natural brightness of certain insects for more than just a few moments. If tiers such as Preston Jennings, Sid Gordon, and Pete Hidy—who strived so hard to create the effect of trapped air bubbles for even a second—were right, patterns incorporating Sparkle Yarn should possess special qualities.

On the trout stream, the Deep Sparkle Pupa and the Emergent Sparkle Pupa both tied with sparkle yarn, quickly proved that they worked not only as imitations of bright emerging caddisfly pupae but also as general searching patterns. They changed a caddisfly hatch from a lesson in frustration, where even a skilled angler might be overjoyed with five trout in an evening, into the fish-catching circus it should be for the fly fisherman. A good angler could take one rising trout after another as they rose confidently to the fly. And on days when trout refused to come to the surface for any other fly the fish often responded enthusiastically to the Sparkle Pupa patterns.

Oddly enough there was a noticeable difference in the effectiveness of the two patterns. The Deep Pupa was only very good—it only did everything expected of it. But the Emergent Pupa performed so effectively at times, it was obviously more than just the perfect imitation. For some reason the Emergent pattern, floating semi-dry in the surface film, often worked as an attractor. This fly, imbued

with some odd quality by the Sparkle Yarn body, caught trout in situations where it was not supposed to fool trout.

As an avowed presentationist it was difficult for me to accept this. It was my belief that without the right action and placement, no fly should work well—the quality of imitation should make a difference only during a correct presentation. With an attitude like this it was very easy for me to outsmart myself by using the Emergent only during caddisfly hatches. Other fly fishermen, however, quickly demonstrated the general effectiveness of the Sparkle Pupa patterns all across the country.

The numerous "hero" incidents, of course, had little to do with specific flies. The credit belonged to the yarn. It not only sparkled in the water; in the semi-dry Emergent it did something else to account for the remarkable catches.

Sparkle Yarn is bright because it reflects more light than regular yarn. The filaments of nylon or orlon are not round like ordinary fibers of the same composition. They are triangular, and the three flat surfaces bounce back most of the light rays striking them.

An additional feature of both Antron nylon and Creslan orlon, is that the individual filaments do not cling together. Even when wet, they resist matting, each fiber retaining space around itself, and when a Sparkle Yarn fly floats on the surface these free filaments attract clinging bubbles. The fly becomes wreathed in a silvery garment of air. Instead of pulling along a bubble for a brief moment the Emergent Pupa draws the globules of air around itself, the same way the rough adult insect gathers them, and creates a lasting hydrofuge.

Maybe the bubbles, breaking away from the fly and leaving a glittering trail, recreate the fuss of a kicking insect. Some of the larger terrestrial bugs, with beating legs and thrashing wings, push a lot of air below the surface. It is this struggle by an insect, more than the outline of the body on the water, that triggers such enthusiastic attacks. The Emergent Pupa probably simulates "commotion"—appearing movement without having to move—rather than anything specific. By embodying a concept instead of a particular form it becomes the ultimate attractor in certain situations.

Tough Situations

THE FINE ENGLISH FLY FISHERMAN, Robert Ince, often amazes his fellow countrymen by catching trout in calm conditions on Grafham Reservoir. Most English lake fishermen prefer a wind-riffled surface; and if the water is flat they retire to the bank because they do not believe that trout, even rising ones, can be caught at such times. But Rob, who probably uses and understands the Emergent Pupa better than anyone else (including me), simply casts the fly out and lets it sit, without twitching or retrieving it, and waits for a cruising fish to find it. The fly is so unusual in appearance, with its cluster of bubbles, that trout do find it and in Rob's words, ". . . rush to take it (quite incredible). Especially brown trout." Through his on-the-water demonstrations, club lectures, and magazine articles, Robert Ince has single-handedly made the Emergent Sparkle Pupa the hottest fly in England.

The fact that the Emergent Pupa performs well during flat-water conditions on reservoirs is no fluke. Most of its greatest catches occur in what are usually considered the toughest fishing situations—clear and smooth water (and if it is slow-moving so much the better). On streams and rivers like Vermont's Battenkill, Michigan's AuSable, Idaho's Henrys Fork and California's Fall River, all waters with clear, slow-water stretches and notably discriminating trout, it frequently makes fishing seem very easy.

Why does this fly work best in tough situations? The silvery glitter of Sparkle Yarn stands out clearly on gentle flows because there are few natural bubbles in calm water. In riffles, where the tumbling action loads the surface with bubbles, the Sparkle pattern is just one more bright splotch. The Emergent Pupa does very well in rough water, but only if there is an actual hatch of caddisfly pupae in progress. Then the trout are looking up and searching for silvery blobs in the current. In flat water the fly is so distinctively bright that fish do not have to hunt for it—they *cannot miss it*.

So patterns tied with Sparkle Yarn are not miracle flies. They are so effective at certain times and in certain places that they seemingly deserve some special title, but fortunately a "miracle fly"—one that works everytime and everywhere is an impossibility. Fly fishermen will always need a variety of patterns in their boxes for two reasons: (1) selectivity—trout feed selectively on many different forms of prey and each food type requires an effective imitation, and (2) water—different flies are suited to different types of water (for example; one mayfly imitation might do well in a flat pool while another, tied differently but designed to match the same insect, might do better on a broken riffle). The Deep Pupa and Emergent Pupa patterns work best in smooth waters as attractors or during a caddisfly hatch as imitators.

Sparkling Future

IN THE FUTURE MOST ADVANCES in fly tying will come with the use of new materials. Sparkle Yarn, for example, provides a possible solution to many problems that have long perplexed fishermen. Testing will eventually prove it suitable for some imitations (or attractors) and unsuitable for others.

Since my introduction of Sparkle Yarn nearly 12 years ago many people have been experimenting with this material—the fine Finnish tier, Simo Lumme, uses it on his version of a caddisfly pupa; Gary Borger makes the body of his Devil Bug, a skittering imitation for an active adult caddisfly, with Sparkle Yarn; Myron Schulman of Connecticut ties a very effective Case-House Caddis, the brightness of the filaments simulating the glittering stones in the cases of some caddisfly larvae. Dick Nelson, who ties at every FFF Conclave, has certainly proven that Sparkle Yarn is valuable for more than just caddisfly imitations, not only with his superb Aztec streamers but with numerous fresh-water and salt-water creations.

The regular Sparkle Yarn, which comes in skeins from yarn shops or in smaller quantity on cards from fly shops, is a mixture of both clear and dyed filaments. The yarn is perfect for pupal imitations because natural aquatic pupae, whether caddisfly (Trichoptera) or two-winged fly (Diptera), show that splotchy mix of brightness and solid color. The clear filaments, however, are better if used alone for insects that surround themselves with a real air bubble. This pure material, translucent and bright, adds even another dimension to fly tying imitation.

One of my patterns, the Diving Caddis, has a body of dubbed Sparkle Yarn but also an overwing of the clear Antron or Creslan filaments. This wet fly, an imitation of the adult female caddisfly that crawls or swims underwater to lay eggs, has to be brighter than a pupa pattern. The bright filaments of clear yarn finally achieve the total "quicksilver" effect on a subsurface pattern that Sid Gordon sought with his Wet-Dry Fly.

An even more exciting application for the clear filaments is on a new series of mayfly spinner imitations. The glassine wings of spent mayflies have always been a vexing problem for fly fishermen. The wings are not just translucent; the bottom of these wings are pleated and when they spread flush on the surface they collect tiny air bubbles underneath them. Opaque materials such as hackle fibers and polypropylene have served as poor copies of translucent wings at best—and they do not begin to simulate the cluster of bubbles. The clear filaments of Sparkle Yarn easily meet both of the needs for good imitation, providing the translucence and the real air globules. A clear-winged fly with a body color matching the natural mayfly is deadly during an actual spinner fall, but in larger sizes, on a 12 or 14 hook, this is another pattern that is also supremely effective for searching the water.

It has always been my intent to use Sparkle Yarn, or any other fly tying material, purposefully. On many of my patterns, like the Diving Water Boatman and the Float-Rite Midge Pupa, it is only one part of the imitative concept. It adds a bit of sparkle without dominating—and thus destroying—the overall effect of these flies. On some of my patterns the yarn is used not to imitate but to attract (for example, on a series of cork bass poppers), but even here testing often proves that too much brightness decreases the effectiveness of the flies. So often it seems that attraction is simply mildly exaggerated imitation. This means that the key for using any fly tying material wisely is knowing roughly how it recreates those triggering characteristics of natural food items.

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