

A squirrel skin provides all the material for a dynamite nymph pattern.

Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph

DAVE WHITLOCK

“WHAT HALF-DOZEN or dozen trout fly patterns would you pick or recommend if they were the only flies you could use?”

This is the question I am asked most frequently by fishing writers, shop owners, clinic audiences and fly-fishing school students. Picking a dozen or so flies would not be a problem, but what would I use if limited to a single pattern? That question is much more thought provoking and difficult to answer.

If restricted to one fly pattern, the Muddler Minnow would be my choice, in a range of sizes. Yet the muddler is not the fly I use most consistently, and it is not the most productive fly I fish. Nor is it the single fly design I receive the most questions about each year.

My Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph (RFSH) is *the* most consistently effective fly I have ever used for all species of trout, char and whitefish, both in numbers caught and size. Even more significant, this nymph seems to be a fly that, like the classic Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear nymph, Adams dry fly and Woolly Bugger streamer, performs well for most fly fishers in most waters. For instance, over the four-year period I have conducted the L. L. Bean Fly-Fishing School it has been the student's most productive fly for landlocked salmon, brook, and rainbow trout.

Productivity and Confidence

THIS NYMPH HAS BEEN a key ingredient in both my nymph-fishing enthusiasm and confidence in the suggestive theory of fly tying. As so often happens, I discovered the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph by accident.

When I first began tying soft, fur-bodied nymphs I was most influenced by the flies tied and fished by Thom Green, Ted Trueblood and Polly Rosborough. But I lacked the furs they often recommended, such as otter,

DAVE WHITLOCK, writer, fly-tier and fly-fishing instructor, lives in Norfolk, Ark.

mink, seal, hare's ear and beaver. I substituted local gray and red fox squirrels, muskrat and rabbit, but seriously lacked the confidence that these would have the same magically effective qualities of the three master's nymphs.

The RFSH Nymph was immediately effective and my confidence increased. As the years have passed, I have been fortunate enough to gain a fine inventory of furs, synthetic dubbing and other useful fly materials, so I constantly put the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph through comparison tests against other patterns tied with these materials. I am convinced from my experiments that there is no single nymph pattern superior to my squirrel-hair pattern as an all-purpose nymph.

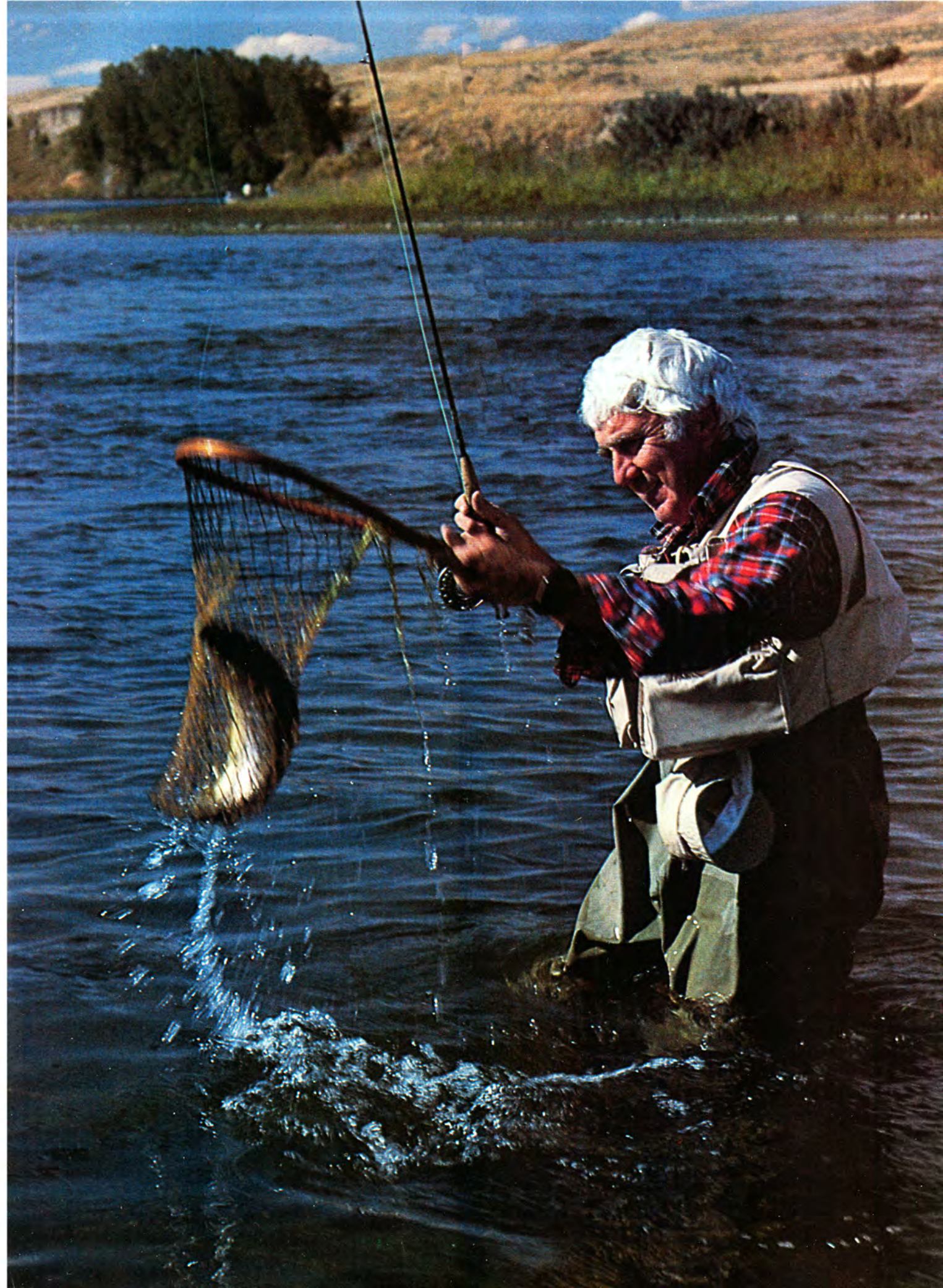
For whatever reason, it often outfishes specific local “killer” patterns, particularly for larger trout. I'm sure in some situations its effectiveness is purely because of the Squirrel-Hair Nymph pattern and my manner of fishing: It's something new to these fish. Sometimes fish build a selective resistance after seeing the same patterns many times.

Whatever the reason, my old faithful Squirrel-Hair Nymph has saved my neck and reputation on numerous occasions during several decades.

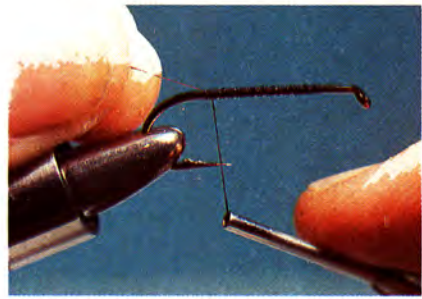
Impressionistic Imitation

THE RED FOX SQUIRREL-HAIR Nymph in its pattern and form is an impressionistic fly made that way by design. This means it looks alive, vulnerable and very edible to fish. A trout, actively feeding or not, seldom ignores such a morsel swimming or drifting toward it. By maintaining its unique material pattern while varying its size and profile, you can make the nymph closely mimic numerous trout foods: certain species of mayflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, midges, damselflies, scuds, sowbugs and crayfish. The nymph is a tempting tidbit regardless of what a particular fish is preparing to dine

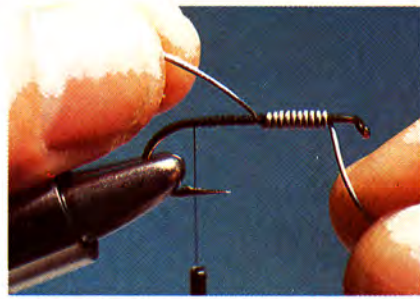
DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTO



Squirrel Nymph . . .



1. Attach thread near hook eye and wrap back to bend.



2. Wrap lead wire onto front portion of hook shank.



3. Tie in a tail of squirrel back hair at rear of hook.



4. Tie in tinsel ribbing at rear of hook.



5. Coat hook shank, including lead, with Dave's Flexament.



6. Dub abdomen of squirrel-belly synthetic blend.



7. Wind ribbing forward, tie off and cut excess.



8. Dub squirrel-back synthetic blend thorax.



9. Whip finish head. Cut thread.



10. Tease squirrel-hair fibers free with dubbing needle.



11. Trim long hair fibers, but don't overdo it. Shaggy appearance is most effective.



12. Apply bead cement.

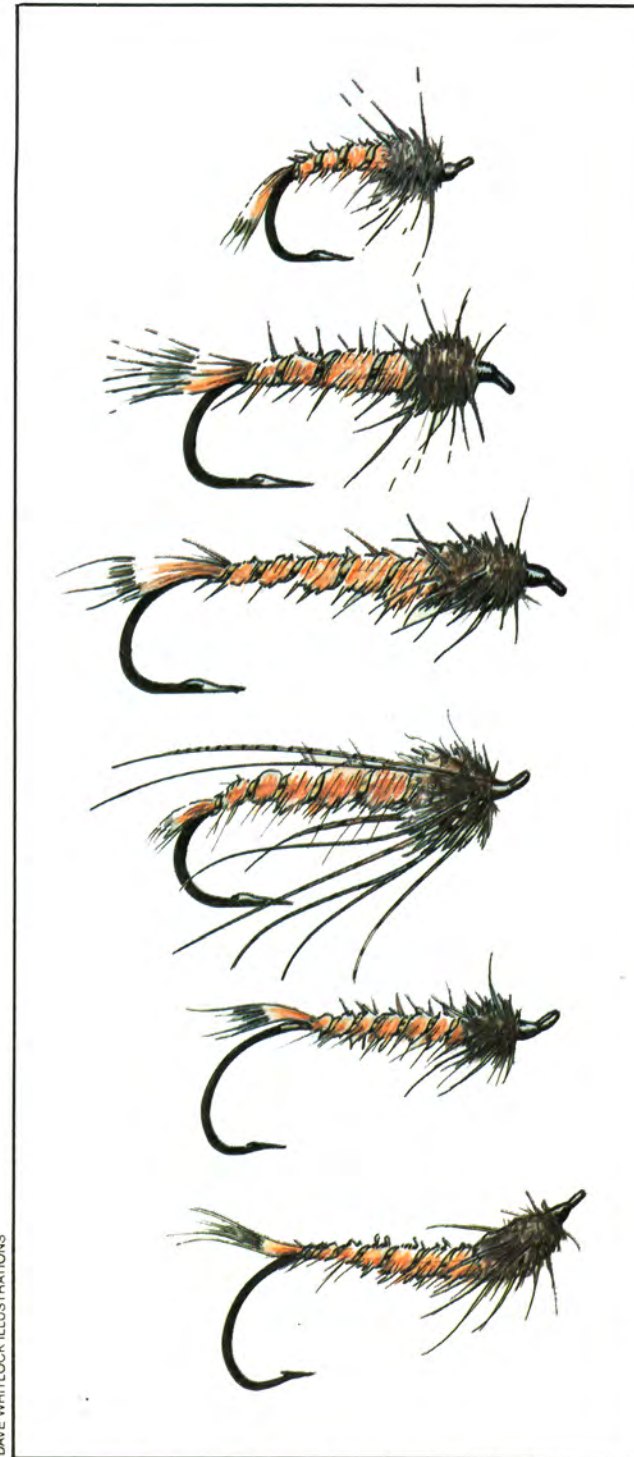


13. Finished RFSH Nymph.



When fished, the RFSH Nymph develops a roughness that gives it a halo of light, increasing its effectiveness.

DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATIONS



Variations on a theme. The same fly tied in different styles.

a spicy spectrum of tan, cream, grey, black, and white fox-squirrel back fur. I blend each fur with a matching glossy synthetic fiber and thinly rib the fly with gold wire or oval tinsel. This combination gives the pattern the light natural cast so common in natural aquatic insects and crustacea, especially during the instar or softshell stage (during exoskeleton/skin replacement) that trout seem to prefer. The soft texture of the fur further enhances this natural image and attractiveness to fish. Water, air bubbles and light on the fur and tinsel body create additional halos of visual liveliness and movement.

The wear and natural odor absorption of extended use increases the nymph's effectiveness. The dubbed body also has a Velcro-like holding effect on a biting fish's teeth.

Tying Tips

FOR THE STANDARD or original Squirrel-Hair Nymph use a 2XL hook. Weight the shank with lead or copper wire (wire diameter equal to the hook wire diameter) wrapped over the middle half of the shank (a necessity).

The tail is a small tuft of three or four guard hairs and underfur. The tail's length is equal to 1/2 the shank's length and actually represents both the body extension past the bend of the hook and the tail appendages. Leave only the tan base exposed (tie down the grey base hair found next to the skin). This will give the same color extension to the abdomen and tail base.

The abdomen can be 1/2 or 2/3 the hook shank length, tapering to a thicker diameter forward over the lead wraps. On very small sizes (#14-#18) I clip off long free ends of the guard hairs on the abdomen to help the nymph sink. For hook sizes #16 and smaller I use the finest, shortest squirrel hair or substitute bleached beaver for the abdomen and ground squirrel or chipmunk for the thorax.

For the rib on the smaller sizes (#16-#20) I use gold wire. For #14-#10 hooks I use the smallest size oval tinsel (size 18) and from #8 to #2, I use size 16 or 14 oval tinsel. The rib does not necessarily suggest body segmentation when wrapped over the dubbing. It gives a definite illusion of transparency and lifelike movement to the nymph under the water.

The thorax should be enlarged compared to the abdomen and should be loosely wound so that guard-hair tips will radiate off this section to simulate legs, wing cases, antennae and gills. When I wish to simulate the larger, leggy stoneflies, damsel nymphs and caddis pupae I make one turn of soft webby cree, dark grizzly or brown partridge feathers immediately in front of the thorax and trim off all but six or eight of the fibers.

For natural shapes other than those that can be tied on 2XL hooks, use longer or shorter shanks. Smaller long-shank hooks also have the advantage of hooking with less strike pressure and they seldom hang up when bounced over the bottom. If the nymph must be fished where hangups occur, add a nylon loop snag-guard to the nymph.

Exact imitation of the color of this nymph is not necessary, minor variations in body colors seem to make little difference. At times I even mix additional bits of olive, fluorescent orange, fluorescent green, red and black into the dubbing for a wider color choice to cope with water color, clarity, natural colors and other variations.

on. If presented and fished like a specific live food, say an emerging caddis pupa or a swimming scud, the fly becomes more actively imitative rather than passively suggestive. (For additional information on how I fish this nymph refer to the March and May 1984 issues of FFM for my two-part article on nymphing, "The Whitlock Nymphing System.")

The material used to tie the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph is most responsible for the fly's effectiveness. It is tied with rich orange-tan red fox-squirrel belly fur and

DAVE WHITLOCK PHOTOS



A single red fox squirrel skin provides the primary material for Dave's RFSH Nymph (above). Synthetic sparkle dubbing may be added to squirrel hair (above right).



The Whitlock RFSH Nymph tied in different styles is taken for various aquatic insects by trout around the country.

Squirrel Skins

RED FOX SQUIRRELS are one of the three most abundant legal game animals in this country. Fox squirrels are more abundant than rabbits in most forested states. Popularizing their skins for nymph tying is not about to threaten their numbers. Actually, it makes use of a wasted resource...and they are delicious to eat!

Fox squirrels are most abundant in the east, midwest and in the Ohio and Mississippi river drainage systems. You can buy hides from fly material dealers, although once this nymph and other squirrel hair patterns become popular most dealers will stock supplies. Local hunters and trappers are another ideal source. I have run ads in local newspapers for the skins with bountiful results from local hunters. City, park and rural road-kills are also an excellent and free source of fox squirrels.

I skin the squirrels and preserve them as follows. Cut the feet off and make an incision from the top of the tail base to the top of the head. Then skin the hide away in one piece. *This back hide-splitting method insures that the most possible amount of the less abundant belly fur is saved for*

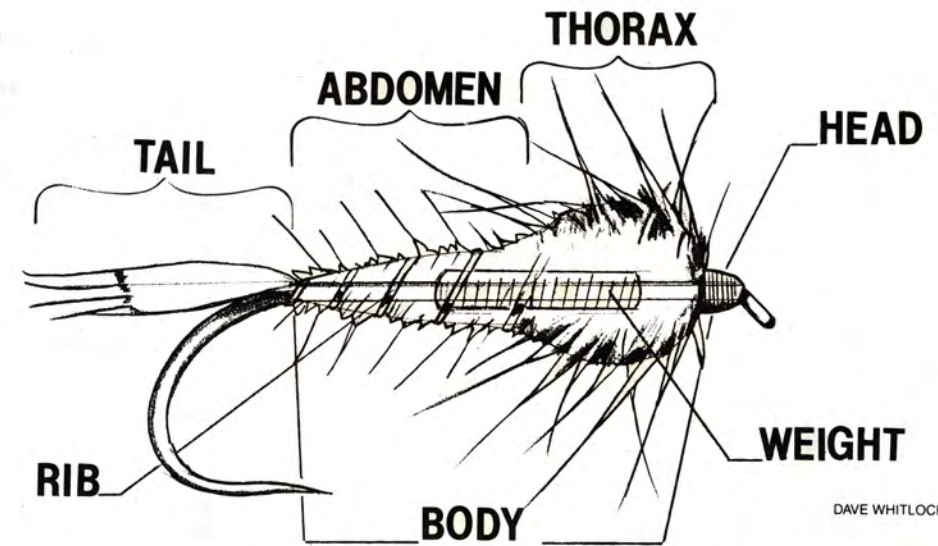
tying use. Remove any excess fat from the hide. Stick and stretch the wet skin down on a piece of stiff cardboard box. Allow it to dry a week or two. Peel the hide off the cardboard and rub the hide side with powdered borax or salt. Store it in a cool, dry place.

Tanned squirrel hides are neat, provided you can find a friend or tannery to process the skins. Tanned grey or red fox skins make fine small Zonker fur strips. Shave tanned squirrel skin can be used for the buckskin nymph series.

Dubbing Blends

FOR DUBBING, shave the fur directly off the hide with electric hair clippers used for human or animal grooming. Cut some of the back hide into convenient 1/2-inch-wide strips for tailing material.

The brindle-barred back hair of the gray or red fox squirrel also makes a marvelous addition for blending with natural hair or synthetic fibers of one plain color. Blending gives the dubbing more character and a better natural, lifelike look. Squirrel fur also takes most dyes



DAVE WHITLOCK ILLUSTRATION

Cutaway drawing of Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph.

quickly, so tinting it olive, yellow, gold and brown makes it even more versatile.

Young squirrels have finer, softer fur for dubbing smaller nymphs. Hair from summer-killed squirrels is too thin, short and wiry for ideal dubbing. Late fall and winter hides have the longest hair and are densely furred with best dubbing. If you find squirrel hair that seems too short or grainy for easy dubbing, simply blend it with a small amount of longer rabbit or muskrat fur or soft synthetic fibers. This makes the squirrel hair dub easier on thread and hooks.

To catch more fish with the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph, sharpen the hook's point and bend down the barb! This assures more consistent hooking, much simpler unhooking, and it reduces trout-handling damage for faster fish recovery and releases.

As we perfect our capability to catch more trout on flies, we must also resolve to use better ways to recycle them! Increased knowledge and the availability of more effective fly designs can actually depress fish populations if they are not used with careful consideration. We will all catch and enjoy more trout, salmon, grayling, steelhead, char and whitefish on this amazing nymph if we practice catch and release.

TAIL: Small tuft of back fur from red fox squirrel skin. Tail is approximately 1/2 of the hook shank length.

NOTE: *Squirrel tail hair is completely unsatisfactory for this nymph's body or tail!* Hair from the animal's body, not the tail, must be used. That is why I insist on calling it the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph. Many tyers have confused this nymph with one of the many squirrel-tail patterns.

Body Dubbing

BLEND FUR AND SYNTHETIC sparkle dubbing in a 60:40 ratio (natural to synthetic) for the abdomen and in a 70:30 ratio for the thorax for the best dubbing properties.

For the thorax blend, cut or shave the back hair off the skin and mix it thoroughly in a small coffee-grinder-type blender. Cut yarn or synthetic dubbing into 3/8- to 1/2-inch lengths. Place the synthetic in the blender and mix it thoroughly. Now take a proper 70/30 portion of fur and synthetic and blend those together.

For the abdomen blend, cut or shave belly hair off the skin and repeat the procedure outlined above except for the belly fur synthetic color and the 60:40 fur to synthetic ratio.

No wing case is necessary. My original RFSH nymph had a mottled dark brown wing case but tests have proven the fly is as effective, or even more effective, without the wing case. The RFSH nymph should be tied "in the round," without a wing case.

If red fox squirrel is not available, lightly dye grey fox squirrel with a tangerine or orange dye. You may substitute hare's mask for back fur and bleached muskrat, beaver or Australian opossum for belly fur. When bleached medium grey fur first changes to a color similar to the red fox squirrel's belly.

For fly fishers who do not tie nymphs, my standard Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph in a wide range of sizes is manufactured by Umpqua Feather Merchants and is available in or can be ordered from most fly shops. Or you could take a copy of this article to any professional tier and have them custom tie whatever you need.

Dave Whitlock's Standard Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph

HOOK: Mustad 9671 or Tiemco Nymph Hook, #2 to #18.

THREAD: Black or dark brown nylon.

CEMENT: Dave's Flexament.

WEIGHT: Lead or copper wire.

ABDOMEN: Belly fur from red fox squirrel skin, may be blended with synthetic sparkle dubbing. Abdomen should be 1/2 to 2/3 of the overall body length.

THORAX: Back fur from red fox squirrel skin, may be blended with synthetic sparkle dubbing. Thorax should be 1/2 to 1/3 of the overall body length.

RIB: Gold wire or oval tinsel.

How To Take Sipping Risers

JULY 1985 \$2.95/£1.25

14323

FLY FISHERMAN

BASS AFTER DARK

Fly-Fishing Collectibles

**The Henry's Fork
Can Be Easy**

**THE HOUSATONIC
TROUT REVIVAL**



Pre-Tail Nymph