

The search for a leech pattern that beats all others

THE PERFECT LEECH FLY

JIM VINCENT

I LOVE HOW MARABOU JIGS have a tantalizing up-and-down undulating motion that can entice an attack from almost any gamefish. But over the years I have learned to hate using jigs on a fly rod. Their tackle classification is more properly with lures, and I always felt guilty using them on a fly rod. It's been several years since I've made that awkward lobbing cast required to cast a heavy jig, but I still fish a fly that is similar to a jig with its underwater action and effectiveness. My search for such a fly—the perfect leech fly—began several years ago.

One late autumn a few years back I met Bob Clay, a British Columbian steelhead guide who used brown-and-white marabou leeches tied on straight-shank hooks and cast with high-density high-speed shooting-tapers. After Bob outfished me for several mornings, I had to try his leech fly.

A marabou streamer is not new. Al Knudson developed a white marabou fly for high and discolored water and winter steelhead on the Rogue River during the late 1930s. His white marabou was as long as six inches and tied on a #7/0 Carlisle hook. It's understated and almost as murderous to cast as a lead-head jig. Bob Clay's fly is a little easier to cast, since it's tied on a #2/0 hook.

The following steelhead season I started tying long black and yellow marabou on #2/0 hooks sometimes with a touch of Flashabou and bead-chain eyes as in a conventional fly. I would strip off the marabou from its stem and tie it in bunches on top of the #2/0 hook. It still took a 9- or 10-weight rod to cast this fly. By this time leeches were catching on, and the following year I noticed other steelheaders were reviving the old 1950s pattern called the Egg Sucking Leech. This was originally a seal-hair leech with a red or orange chenille head.

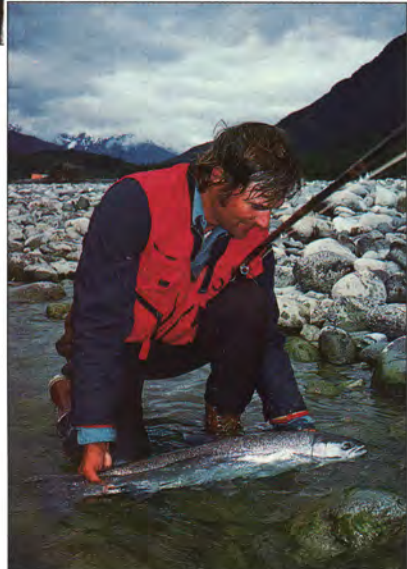
It amazes me how effective leeches are for steelhead, rainbows, and especially brown trout. The patterns even work during the normally slow midday periods when the sun is high. Also, an Atlantic salmon fly fisherman friend told me that leeches are deadly on that species, too. And not only are leech patterns effective in high dirty water, but when they are tied sparsely, they are superb in clear water. I've even caught steelhead on leech patterns at night.

For some reason leech flies are deadly on steelhead, and they entice Atlantic salmon, rainbows, and brown trout to strike even during midday, high sunlight conditions. Jim Vincent photo.





THE PERFECT LEECH PATTERNS



A leech fly is a tough act to follow. I'd hate to go through a pool behind another angler who was using one.

A few years ago, as we sat around a campfire one night, my friends Jerry Mahoney and Bob French told me they were going to fish a particular pool, one of the most crowded sections of the river we were fishing. A certain hard-core steelhead bum had been making forays to this heavily fished pool long before daylight, so that he could be the first to fish the water. Normally I don't play the dawn-patrol game of trying to be first through the water, but it had been several days since I'd had a hookup and I wanted to beat everyone to the water at least once.

I set the alarm for 4 A.M. and arrived at the pool first. I was sipping a cup of coffee from my Thermos in the darkness, basking in neoprenes in the below-freezing

temperatures, when I saw a pair of headlights. I thought, here comes Steelhead Bob, the competition. When the vehicle stopped across the river, I could barely make out a couple of shadows in the coal black darkness. I stood up to let them know that I was there and began to cast. On my first cast I hooked a 15-pound hen that leaped three feet clear of the water. I couldn't believe it. I heard laughter and recognized Jerry and Bob's voices. Jerry said, "I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't here."

A few minutes later I hooked another steelhead. It was as black outside as October can be before 5 A.M. After that fish fix, as the light grew, I picked up my camera and followed three well-known steelheaders through the run. They caught a couple of fish, then made another pass but got no further yanks. At 11:30 A.M. they gave up and headed to other pools. I decided to go through the run again with the leech, and immediately I had a fish. Two hours later I'd hooked seven more steelhead.

One problem with this type of leech fly is that if the marabou is too long, it will foul under the bend of the hook. You must keep checking the fly to make sure it is not fouled. Another disadvantage of using a long marabou fly is that often you get short-striking fish that grab only the trailing marabou.

Another steelhead angler was helpful in my search for the perfect leech pattern. Terry Roelofs, professor of fisheries at Humboldt State in northern California, is an avid fly fisherman who was using a marabou leech on a tandem hook arrangement. The front portion of the fly was tied onto the shank of a regular #4 hook (he cut the hook portion off with a pair of wire snippers), and the rear portion was a Gitzigami bait hook. The hooks were separated by a 1 1/2-inch piece of 50-pound dacron. The forward piece of dacron was laid across the front hook

BUNNY LEECH 1



HOOK: Eagle Claw L1197, #2-#1.
 THREAD: Heavy.
 TAIL: Small bunch of orange crystal flash strands 1/2 the length of the shank.
 BODY: Thin black strip of rabbit fur wound around the hook shank.
 TOPPING: Six strands of orange crystal flash over the rabbit, slightly flared.

BUNNY LEECH 2



HOOK: Eagle Claw L1197, #2-#1.
 THREAD: Heavy.
 TAIL: Optional crystal flash.
 BODY: 2/3 black rabbit, 1/3 orange rabbit fur strip wrapped around the hook shank.
 TOPPING: Optional six strands of orange crystal flash over the rabbit, slightly flared.

MARABOU LEECH 1



HOOK: Tiemco 7999, #4-#1/0.
 THREAD: Heavy.
 BODY: Clumps of black marabou and yellow marabou; 2/3 black, 1/3 yellow.
 EYES: Optional bead-chain.

MARABOU LEECH 2



HOOK: Mustad 90240; cut the hook with wire clippers at the bend. Gitzigami curved bait hook, #6. Snell the bait hook with 30- to 50-pound dacron. Leave one inch between the bait hook and the Mustad hook that has been cut. With fly-tying thread tie down another 1/2-inch of dacron and cement.
 BODY: Any color combination of marabou tied along the forward Mustad shank and one inch of dacron line.

shank and tied down with tying thread. The other end was snelled onto the razor-sharp bait hook. Marabou was tied all the way along this arrangement. Not only is this fly superior for side-to-side action, because of the flexible dacron, but it even has a vertical action much like a jig, and short-striking fish (a problem with long straight hooks) are not a problem.

Terry learned this fly pattern from Mike Montagne, the four-strip bamboo fly rod craftsman. The disadvantage of this marabou fly is that it's as time-consuming to tie as the leech on the straight hook. Often when we are fishing deep for steelhead, our flies snag the river bottom and break off, so it's important for a leech pattern to be quick and easy to tie.

My search for the perfect leech pattern continued.

Three years ago fellow trout fisherman and steelheader John Boisvert showed me his leech pattern. It was made of rabbit fur. Instead of tying a strip of rabbit fur horizontally on the hook like a Zonker, John cut a rabbit-fur skin with a sharp single-edge razor blade into thin 1/16-inch to 1/8-inch strips and wound these strips around the hook. The rabbit skin must be very thin to do this. John refined this technique by mixing strips of different colors. Some of his patterns have a black rear body and an orange throat; others, for glacial silted rivers, have chartreuse green as the predominant color. His flies have a very effective pulsating action in the water, and they are the easiest and fastest leech pattern to tie. This is an advantage when the action is hot and



Whether you are fishing for steelhead, black bass, rainbow trout, or browns, always keep a "Rude and Crude" box of leech flies and other uglies as a last resort.

you're leaving your creations on the river bottom because you are fishing so deep. The main benefit of this pattern is that the wound strip of rabbit fur does not foul around the bend of the hook like the marabou leech.

I asked fly-tying guru Andre Puyans if he'd ever seen this technique before. He told me that 20 years ago a few fly fishermen who fished regularly at Henry's Lake in Idaho used a fly called the Thunder Bug, which was made from strips of different animal hair wound around a Mustad 6X-long 3665A hook. In the early 1970s fly-fishing instructor Mel Krieger brought back a bunny leech type of fly he'd learned from a friend in New Zealand. Mel wrapped the rabbit fur around the hook shank also, and he created some effective leech patterns for largemouth bass.

So what is the perfect leech pattern? For trout and steelhead I now tie only patterns with the rabbit-fur strip wound around the hook. If conditions include high sun during midsummer days and I can't get a strike in any other way, a leech fly is my first choice. A leech is not the ultimate fly, but it can entice a strike under most conditions.

From a high vantage point along an Oregon river I've seen summer steelhead resting in a pool. From my high perch I've watched as an angler cast a leech toward the fish and the fish either grabbed the leech fly or spooked immediately. A leech is a tough act to follow. I'd hate to go through a pool behind another angler who was using

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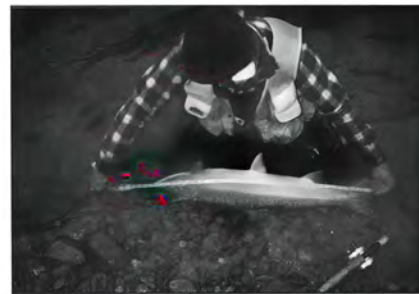
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a leech fly. I'd lose faith, calculating that the other angler had caught all the taking fish and that any other fish in the pool would have a severe case of lock-jaw. I'd move to another pool to try my own leech fly.



I use my leech flies when I absolutely need a fish fix.

Whether I'm fishing for black bass, rainbow or brown trout, or steelhead, the rabbit-fur leech fly is in a box hidden in my fishing vest. This box is labeled "Rude and Crude." I use the leeches in that box for those bright and



On sunny tough days, when steelhead normally don't take the fly well, flies from the "Rude and Crude" box can turn fish on.

sunny tough fishing days when the fish disdain most other impostors. I use them only when I absolutely need a fish fix, because it's too easy and deadly to make a habit.

My search for the perfect leech pattern ended with the wound rabbit-fur leech fly, which I believe represents perfection of a sort.

JIM VINCENT is a freelance writer and photographer who owns Rio Recreational Products, which sells leaders, tippets, and other fly-fishing products. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona.



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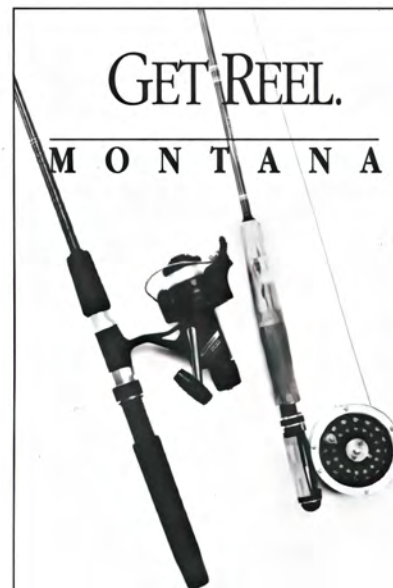
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