

The Soft-Hackled Fly

Sylvester Nemes

Witness here the re-birth of a century-old tradition, almost lost to us in the nymph and dry fly frenzy of recent years. An important article, we feel.

FOR MORE THAN 15 YEARS, I HAVE ENJOYED WHAT I BELIEVE to be more good fly fishing than most anglers, primarily because of the almost exclusive use of one basic fly pattern — the soft-hackled fly. I say this, not only because I think I have actually had more fish come to this fly than the typical fly fisherman using dry flies, winged wet flies, nymphs, streamers or bucktails, but because these flies produce more pure satisfaction than any other angling method.

Such a statement, I realize, places me precariously far out on the old piscatorial limb. However, I don't intend it as a challenge — no more than W. C. Stewart meant it as a challenge when he said "fish upstream," or F. M. Halford when he stumped for "dry flies only," or G.E.M. Skues when he issued his mandate to "fish nymphs!"

I make the statement because on many blue-ribbon trout streams in the West and in the upper Midwest the flies have worked well for me when other flies were not working as well for other fishermen.

I am and always have been a friendly angler. Some fishermen, I'm sure, thought I was nosey. I don't believe they lied when they said fishing was poor, so all I had to do was compare my fun — and results — with theirs.

When the less-fortunate angler said he hadn't done well, I always felt sorry for him, because the simple, sober-hued soft hackles were tearing up trout for me up and down the stream. I wanted these fishermen to know that I was using soft hackles, and invariably I would give them three or four — "Here, try these." This was even before I ever thought of writing a book about them.

There are probably many dozens of fishermen to this day with these soft hackles still in their Wheatleys or Perrines, having forgotten where they got them or why, for I have given hundreds of them away. I hope some have been used, and used properly.

In and around Yellowstone Park, I have actually guided novice anglers who couldn't cast decently, who couldn't wade properly, and who couldn't, by themselves and in the hapless manner they were fishing, have taken a single trout in a whole week. In particularly effective areas for these flies — on broad riffles of the Firehole,

for example — I had these men catching trout with their fourth, fifth or sixth cast. On that water, I am so confident of the flies, I think I could stop a tourist's car, drag any of the occupants out of it, and over to the riffle, put the rod in his hand with a soft hackle on the end of it, get behind the bewildered person, guide his hand through the act of casting, and have him on the other end of the trout after several casts.

Well, what new fishing magic does the soft hackle conjure? What is it? What does it represent or imitate? Where did it come from? Were they invented by the keeper of the River Styx, with whom one has to sign a pact to enjoy their effectiveness?

Generically speaking, the soft-hackled fly is one tied with the hackle of any birds such as partridge, grouse, woodcock, snipe, starling or jackdaw. The hackles come from the backs, necks, breasts and from the leading edge of the wings of these birds, where they help streamline the bases of the larger flight feathers of the wings.

The hackles are small and soft, but not floppy like marabou. The flies have no wings and only few patterns have tails. They have no tops nor bottoms, permitting them to balance accurately and to swim smoothly. Bodies of silk floss are short and sparse, with the material just barely covering the wire. When fur dubbing is used, it too is sparse, with the silk thread showing through. Fly sizes are generally small, ranging from #10 down to #16.

I believe the flies perform so well because they imitate or suggest both non-emerging or emerging nymph

Sylvester Nemes began serious fly fishing on England's Test during World War II, and among his war souvenirs was a wife from a nearby Hampshire village. In his work as an advertising photographer he travels the country, fishing as he goes. We have fished with Syl in Michigan and in Colorado, and we have fished with his flies and we have caught fish with them. We hope that this article, and his book The Soft-Hackled Fly (Chatham Press) to be published this fall, will re-kindle an interest in the wet fly and its proper use — almost a lost art form today.



Selection of the writer's favorite soft-hackled flies. Top row: Snipe-and-Yellow; Partridge-and-Yellow; Partridge-and-Green (with fur thorax); and Tups Indispensable. Middle row: Partridge-and-Orange (fur thorax); March Brown Spider; Grouse-and-Orange; Iron Blue Dun. Bottom row: Partridge-and-Yellow (fur thorax); Snipe-and-Purple; Starling-and-Herl; Pheasant Tail; Partridge-and-Green; and the Partridge-and-Orange. Photo by the author.

Photos by Sylvester Nemes



1. Soft-hackled fly in special flow-tank to demonstrate action of the long, loose hackles. This photo shows fly with no drag.



2. Same fly with current (or fly motion) activating hackles.



3. Same fly with full action of water, moving hackle back into streamlined position. Nemes recommends natural action of current to activate hackles rather than heavy jerking by angler.

forms, not only of the *Ephemera* or may fly but also of the pupal forms of the *Trichoptera* or caddis.

Every fly fisherman knows the river is loaded with many different kinds of nymphs or pupae at the same time. Unlike the dry fly fisherman who can see the adult fly on the water's surface, the sunken-fly angler can never know what is really happening down there, so why would he want to imitate one specific type when a suggestive fly like a soft hackle would have the appeal of them all.

To be good, any sunken artificial must transform itself in the water into something alive, something suggestive and moving, something that looks good to eat. Such a fly looks different in the water than it does out of it. The best way to demonstrate this is to look at the soft-hackled fly while dry, then wet it and take another look. The transformation is amazing.

The soft partridge, snipe or starling feathers, with their tapered barbules, mold themselves against the body with the hackle tips toward the tail of the fly. There is a natural lump or thorax created at the front of the fly, by reason of the fast-tapering barbules, which are thicker and closer to the stem of the feather than at the tips.

Moving naturally downstream, with no fly action on the part of the fisherman, these barbules close in and out, squirm against the body of the fly, and react in a life-like way to the slightest pressure. And often, strange and irresistible lights appear and disappear in the ball of the barbules.

The soft-hackled fly usually works when others don't because it is not a nymph, yet not a dun; not a pupae, but still not an adult caddis. The barbules are really too long and too soft and too many to represent the six legs of the nymph. Still, the hackle is everything in these flies, and one could tie the fly with the hackle only and have a killing fly. W. C. Stewart did.

WHERE AND WHEN DID THE SOFT-HACKLED FLY ORIGINATE? In the beginning, of course. It—or one of its breed, the Orange and Partridge pattern—was the first fly in the list of 12 set down by the Dame Juliana Berners, in England, back in 1496, making her tome the first written work in English on fly fishing or any other kind of fishing. The Orange and Partridge was then called the Donne Fly. The British writer J. W. Hills thought it to be the same fly as the Orange and Partridge of today—that is with the hackle wound around the front part of the hook. John McDonald, the contemporary authority on angling lore and literature, disagrees with him and thinks the partridge hackle was tied upright like the wings on modern trout flies.

The Dame's list—including the Donne Fly—was, according to Hills, pirated by Markham, Cotton, Chetnam, Bowlker, Aldam and many others. Hills thought the fly miraculous, imitating or representing not only

a stone fly, but also the nymph of the Blue-Winged Olive, a mayfly, as well. When Hills, fed up with dry-fly-only dictum of F. M. Halford, turned to the sunken-fly fished upstream on the Test around 1930, set into print the following statement:

"One of the softest, most compressible patterns is the partridge hackle, and when this be the reason or not, I consider it the best sunken fly on the Test. Its body of silk can be of many colors. I find the old Cumberland pattern, the orange partridge, best; and next to that the red."

But even before Hills and the final codification of the dry fly by Halford, the soft-hackled fly was probably the most-discussed fly in England and Scotland during the 19th century. I can name sixteen angling authors of that period who included the grouse and other soft-hackled flies in their lists of the most killing patterns. One author liked the partridge fly so well that he tied it with 11 different-colored silk-floss bodies.

Like the complaint of the Englishman in *My Fair Lady*—that in America, Americans had not used English for years—American fly fishers had not used the English soft hackled flies for years. Gordon listed one. Jim Leisenring was on to them. The storied rod-maker Paul Young of Michigan was on to them, too. He called them "PHY Partridge Spiders" and sold them for about 15 cents each with green, yellow and orange bodies. His "less fussing . . . more fishing" brochure said:

"Fished like a nymph, this is one of the best all-around wet flies I ever used. Fish down and across the stream, and take trout. Hackles lay back along the hook when wet, and crawl or work in the current."

There has been recently an evolving renaissance of the soft-hackled fly in American angling literature. McDonald probably helped when he took the Dame's 12 flies apart in *Quill Gordon*. Western angling writer Charles E. Brooks, in his *The Trout and the Stream*, suggests that soft hackles best imitate caddis pupae. And Schwiebert, in *Nymphs*, agrees with this and paints beautiful colored specimens of the pupae in the book. When I first saw those pictures—the slim bodies of green, gold, yellow, brown and orange, and the small drooping wings, and the long floppy, dangling legs extending behind the end of the bodies—I thought they were the closest thing I had ever seen in print to the soft-hackled flies I had been using so rewardingly for so long.

Well, I fished "down and across stream" as Young directed—and I took trout. But I was making the same mistake the average sunken-fly fisherman makes when he jerks the fly through the water and gives it "the strength and agility of an otter."

With advancing middle age, I stopped advancing the fly. This improved its performance. I cast higher into the stream, threw more slack and let out line when the

fly got below me. But I still needed something. I found it in "Jock Scott's" famous book on greased line fishing for salmon. It was called mending.

Mending, as many long-line anglers for migratory fish know so well, is the act of lifting the dragging or bellying part of the line between the angler and the fly, and flipping the line upstream (or down), to compensate for the action of the current, which otherwise quickly causes the fly to drag.

Downstream bellying of the line is more prevalent than upstream, because generally there is more fast water between the fly and the angler. If the current is all in a sheet—that is, with the same velocity from bank to bank—then mending is not required.

I believe that the soft-hackled fly, when used with the mending technique, is the most generally effective way to fish for trout.

Earlier, I said the soft-hackled fly produces more angling satisfaction than any other kind. If one thinks that "fun" is at its highest at the moment of contact with the fish, then he must agree with me. For the take is extremely physical, almost violent. There is no nibbling. The fish has the fly or it doesn't. Nothing matches it, and I would rather take one trout with this method than I would five with either dry fly or upstream nymph (weighted or unweighted).

There are many fly fishermen fishing 15 years or more who have never taken a trout over 16 inches. Fewer anglers have taken trout over 20 inches. If they had been using soft-hackled flies during that time, they might have done at least as well as I did—with a 22-incher from the Madison at Ennis, with several 16-inchers from the Madison in Yellowstone Park, with a 16-incher from the South Branch of the Au Sable, and one from the fly-only water of the Pere Marquette. One fish from the Madison in early October of 1973 was in the 7 or 8-pound class and of Lord knows how many inches—because he *broke the hook* just below the barb of the #12 Pheasant Tail soft-hackled fly I was using.

The same evening, after that frustrating incident, I entered a storied pool on the Madison just inside the Park. It was just past 6:30 p.m. Two anglers were climbing up the bank from the pool. "It's all yours," they said.

The next 45 minutes were the most exciting fishing moments of my life. Using the Partridge and Green, I landed and released two browns and a rainbow between 18 and 20 inches.

After releasing the first fish, the soft-hackle resembled few if any of Nature's creations, but it was then too dark to change. After the second fish, the floss was torn to shreds with just a couple of the barbules still hanging on. And after the third, the hook was practically bare—yet I think I could have taken another if total darkness and the nighttime cold hadn't settled on the river.

As far as I was concerned, that fishing nun, Dame Juliana, was liberated that night. You can be too—with the soft-hackled fly. ■

LATE-SEASON ANGLING • 1975
Volume Six • Number Seven
Price \$1.00

Fly Fisherman

