



Tying Hackle Wet Flies

Ronald A. Howard Jr.¹

Objectives

Participating young people and adults will:

1. Practice applying dubbed fur bodies
2. Practice applying soft hackle materials
3. Practice tying according to patterns
4. Develop a sense of wet fly proportion
5. Have fun while learning.

Youth Development Objectives

Participating young people will:

1. Enhance fine motor skills
2. Practice following directions and patterns
3. Enhance self-confidence and self concept
4. Practice communication skills

Roles for Teen and Junior Leaders

1. Demonstrate tying procedures
2. Assist participants as needed
3. Evaluate flies with suggestions for improvement
4. Encourage young people as they learn

Potential Parental Involvement

1. See "Roles for Teen and Junior Leaders" above
2. Arrange for or provide teaching location
3. Arrange for or provide materials/ equipment
4. Arrange for or provide transportation
5. Arrange for or provide refreshments
6. Discuss personal experience in fishing

Best Time: Any time of year

Best Location: Well lighted, comfortable setting

Time Required: Approximately 60 minutes

Equipment/Materials

tying vice	hackle pliers
bobbin	bobbin threader
dubbing needle	black tying thread
olive dubbing	muskrat or mole fur
hare's mask	raccoon fur
yellow chenille	grizzly hackle
brown hen hackle	red hackle feather
peacock herl	partridge hackle
fine gold wire	head cement
wet fly hooks	2-3 x long nymph hooks

Safety Considerations

No special considerations

References

See references in introduction

Evaluation Activities/Suggestions

1. Observe personal interactions among youth
2. Observe ability to follow directions
3. Observe tying skills
4. Observe willingness to share skills and experiences

¹ Professor and Extension Specialist, State 4-H Office, 7607 Eastmark Drive, Suite 101, College Station, TX 77843-2473

Lesson Outline

Presentation

- I. Hackle wet flies
 - A. History
 1. Red hackle of ancient times
 - a. Brown hackles
 - b. Red wool body
 2. English patterns
 - a. Teal and orange
 - b. Partridge and orange
 - B. Usually simple ties
 1. Body
 2. Tail
 3. Hackle
 - C. Red hackle peacock
 1. Pattern
 - a. Hook: 8 to 14 wet fly
 - b. Tail: scarlet hackle fibers
 - c. Body: peacock herl
 - d. Hackle: coachman brown hen hackle
 - e. Head: black tying thread
 2. Tying procedure
 - a. Attach thread near bend
 - b. Strip small bunch of red hackle fibers
 - c. Bind red hackle fibers in as a tail
 - d. Attach several peacock herls at bend
 - e. Wind herls and tying thread together
 - f. Wind herl to shoulder area
 - g. Bind herl at shoulder
 - h. Tie in a brown hackle fiber at shoulder
 - I. Wind two to three turns of hackle
 - j. Pull hackle back slightly and bind
 - k. Wind a tapered head and whip finish
 - D. Yellow wooly worm
 1. Pattern
 - a. Hook: 2x-3x long nymph
 - b. Thread: 6/0 black
 - c. Tail: red hackle fibers
 - d. Rib: grizzly hackle, palmered
 - e. Body: yellow chenille
 - f. Head: black tying thread
 2. Tying procedure
 - a. Bind in red hackle fibers for a tail
 - b. Bind in yellow chenille
 - c. Prepare and bind in grizzly hackle
 - d. Carry thread to the shoulder area

Application

Briefly **REVIEW** the history of these simple types of wet flies.

EMPHASIZE the simplicity of the hackle and soft hackle flies, noting that they may be both attractor and imitative flies useful in many kinds of fishing.

LAY OUT the materials required for tying the red hackle peacock, showing each part to the group as you name it. **NOTE** that hooks in the size 8 to 10 class are often easier to use for beginners. If the young people are more experienced or dexterous, smaller sizes can be used.

DEMONSTRATE each step in the tying process. **CIRCULATE** the demonstration fly and leave it in the vise for a model.

Emphasize both proportion and using sparse ties in most tying situations.

SHOW how to strip herl from the feather, how to form a thread cored bundle, and how to trim the ends of the herls as you demonstrate.

SHOW the bright (upper) and dull (under) sides of the feather and how to fix the hackle to the hook.

DEMONSTRATE sweeping back the hackle and tying it so it slopes toward the bend of the hook.

EMPHASIZE the use of several coats of head cement to make an extremely durable fly.

PASS out the materials for the pattern as it is being introduced.

DEMONSTRATE a fly, leaving it in the vise as a model for the participants.

EMPHASIZE binding everything in tightly while holding it in place.

- e. Wind chenille body
 - 1) Bind off at the shoulder
 - 2) Trim closely
 - 3) Wind over trimmed end with thread
- f. Palmer grizzly hackle to shoulder
 - 1) Bind off
 - 2) Trim away excess material
- g. Wind head, whip finish and lacquer
- 3. Variations
 - a. Tail variations
 - 1) Red marabou
 - 2) Red yarn tag
 - 3) Tail matching chenille
 - b. Body variations
 - 1) Chenille in black, olive, red, brown, gray, white, variegated
 - 2) Yarn in similar colors
 - 3) Tinsel rib
 - c. Hackle variations
 - 1) Grizzly hackle
 - 2) Brown hackle
 - 3) Hackle matching body

EMPHASIZE keeping the body smooth, tight and full.

WIND the hackle in open turns, keeping strong tension on the quill, and **BIND** it off at the head in the usual manner.

WIND a smooth head, **WHIP** finish the thread, and **APPLY** a drop of two of lacquer to finish the pattern.

DISPLAY and **DISCUSS** some variations on the general wooly worm pattern.

II. Soft hackled wet flies

A. General pattern

- 1. Body
 - a. Floss or wool
 - b. Fur dubbing
 - c. Poly dubbing
- 2. Hackle
 - a. Soft hen hackles
 - b. Partridge or grouse body feathers
 - c. Teal flank or breast
 - d. Similar feathers
- 3. Tail in some patterns
- 4. Pupal wing cases
 - a. Duck shoulder
 - b. Duck quill sections

SHOW several types of possible body materials.

DISPLAY a variety of hackles including at least those listed above as well as any others that might be useful for patterns in your area.

SHOW participants how to identify and locate the marginal feathers on a duck wing that can be used for wing cases. **NOTE** that other types of wings may be used, with an emphasis on using materials that suggest the insects or other creatures being imitated with the flies.

If they are available, **SHOW** either preserved specimens or photographs of these pupae so the tiers can develop an image of what their flies are imitating.

B. Imitate or suggest caddisfly or midge pupae

III. Partridge hackled caddisfly pupal imitations

A. Dark gray caddis

- 1. Pattern
 - a. Hook - size 8 to 18 wet fly
 - b. Thread - 6/0
 - c. Tail - none
 - d. Body - muskrat or mole fur
 - e. Hackle - brown partridge
 - f. Head - dark gray dubbing
- 2. Tying procedure
 - a. Attach thread near bend of hook

- b. Pluck and prepare fur dubbing
- c. Spin dubbing on thread
- d. Wind dubbing body to shoulder
- e. Attach partridge hackle at tip
- f. Wind one or two turns of hackle
- g. Bind and trim hackle
- h. Spin dark dubbing head
- I. Whip finish threads
- B. Olive caddis pupa
 - 1. Pattern
 - a. Hook: 8-18 wet fly
 - b. Thread: 6/0 dark olive, brown or black
 - c. Body: olive dubbing
 - d. Wing pads: slate duck shoulder
 - e. Head: dark brown dubbing
 - 2. Procedure
 - a. Attach thread at bend of hook
 - b. Spin olive dubbing on thread
 - c. Wind body to shoulder
 - d. Bind in a partridge hackle
 - e. Wind one turn of hackle and tie down
 - f. Pull hackle under the throat and bind
 - g. Bind in two duck shoulder feathers
 - 1) One on each side
 - 2) Below the body, slanting toward bend
 - h. Spin dark brown dubbing on thread
 - I. Wind head
 - j. Whip finish thread

DEMONSTRATE how to pluck the dubbing fur from the skin and to remove the guard hairs. If necessary **SHOW** participants how to roll the material into a small ball and to tease it into a loose spindle for attachment to the tying thread.

DEMONSTRATE the process of spinning dubbing into a yarn-like strand for winding dubbed bodies.

NOTE that tying the hackle in by the tip makes it easier and less bulky to tie the hackles in place.

EMPHASIZE keeping the hackles sparse for best results under nearly all conditions.

DEMONSTRATE where to find and how to obtain the marginal feathers from a duck wing for tying the wing pads.

NOTE that these are easiest to tie in if only one side is tied down at a time. **REMIND** the tiers that they need to hold the feather firmly in place while it is bound tightly in place in order to get it to lie properly.

IV. Other patterns

- A. Hackle flies
 - 1. Gray hackle peacock
 - a. Grizzly hackle
 - b. Peacock body
 - c. Red hackle tail
 - 2. Variations
 - a. Black hackle - black hackle
 - b. Brown hackle - brown hackle
 - c. Body changes
 - 1) Red wool
 - 2) Yellow floss
 - 3) Hare's mask
 - 3. Soft hackle flies
 - a. Teal and orange
 - b. Partridge and orange
- B. Caddis pupa imitations

SHOW an assortment of patterns or tied flies that illustrate some of the variety of patterns that can be tied using these techniques. If any locally popular patterns are available, be sure to **INCLUDE** them.

SHOW a series of patterns or tied flies to illustrate the variety of patterns available.

1. Olive body
2. Tan body
3. Gray body

NOTE that the majority of caddisfly pupae can be imitated by tying a variety of sizes from about size 8 to size 18 in olive, tan and gray bodies with or without wing pads.

V. Fishing them

- A. Traditional wet fly methods
 1. Down and across dead drift
 2. Down and across hand twist
 3. Down and across rod action
 4. Up and across dead drift
 5. Use of two or three fly casts
- B. Emerger or swimming tactics
 1. Dead drift with rod raise
 2. Drift and strip
- C. Hatch value
 1. Caddisfly hatches
 2. Swimming mayfly nymphs
 3. Small stoneflies
- D. Hot zone
 1. Swing from drift to downstream
 2. Often provokes strikes from following fish

DISCUSS the fishing techniques commonly used in fishing these flies and the types of hatches for which these patterns can be used effectively.

Summary Activity

The ideal summary activity is to take the kids fishing with the flies they have tied. Panfishes make an excellent choice for these activities since they are cooperative and seldom overly discriminating in pattern selection or presentation. Alternatively, have a show of the flies tied and allow kids to explain the skills that they have learned. Remember that youth under 12 may find peer competitions threatening and are unable to separate their work from their persons. Use extreme caution on creating a competitive environment in a learning situation!

Lesson Narrative

Hackle wet flies are relatively simple patterns with a long history. Ancient Macedonian writings talk of catching fish with hooks wrapped with red wool and a feather from a "cock's wattles" - a somewhat anatomically misplaced reference to hackle feathers. The red hackle remains today as an old pattern for wet fly anglers. The English developed a array of soft hackled patterns like the teal and orange or partridge and orange which are predecessors to some nymph and pupal patterns of relatively recent vintage. Many of these patterns suggest caddisfly pupae or swimming nymphs and are tied with relatively long, soft, sparse hackles. Those included in this lesson are only a few of the patterns representative of the group, but they include most of the techniques required in tying flies of their type.

Red Hackle Peacock

- Hook: wet fly, size 8 to 14 (e.g. Mustad 3906 or 7957B)
- Tail: scarlet hackle fibers
- Body: peacock herl
- Hackle: coachman brown hen or soft cock hackle
- Head: black tying thread

The red hackle peacock is a modern version of the ancient red hackle. Many variations in both hackle and body materials can be used successfully, and sizes can be adjusted to the fish and situation.

Tying Procedure

Start with a hook of approximately size 10 for ease in tying. Secure the hook in the tying vise with the shank parallel to the tying surface. Attach black tying thread near the bend in the hook in the conventional fashion. Strip a small bunch of scarlet hackle fibers from a dyed hackle feather (a strip of dyed duck or goose quill also may be used), and bind the tail in place. Leave the natural tips of the fibers exposed to the

rear of the fly with the tail about the length of the shank. Attach several peacock herls (3-5) to the hook near the tie down area for the tail and trim the butts. To build a tough body, wind the peacock herls and the tying thread around each other before winding them to form the body. Wind the herl to the shoulder, leaving a small space behind the eye of the hook. Bind in the tips of the herls and trim them carefully. Pluck an appropriately sized hen or soft cock hackle from a coachman brown or fiery brown hackle cape and strip the webber portion from the base. Tie the hackle to the hook at the base of the hackle fibers with the shiny (top) side facing toward you. Hold the hackle firmly in place (to prevent it from turning), and bind it in place with several turns of tying thread. Grasp the tip of the hackle with the hackle pliers and wrap one and one-half or two turns of hackle around the hook. Catch the hackle with several turns of thread to lock it in place and trim the excess feather away with scissors. Slide the thumb and forefinger of the non-dominant hand from the eye toward the tail, pressing the fibers slightly rearward. Wind several turns of thread over their bases to hold the fibers in place. Finish the fly by winding a smoothly tapered head and whip finishing the thread. Trim the thread carefully and apply one or more drops of head cement to secure the tie.

Tying a Yellow Wooly Worm

The yellow wooly worm is a sample of a large group of wooly worm patterns. They have proven themselves in many parts of the world for a wide variety of fishes, although they were originally designed as trout flies. The pattern for the yellow wooly worm follows.

Hook: 2x-3x long nymph
Thread: 6/0 black
Tail: red hackle fibers
Rib: grizzly hackle, palmered
Body: yellow chenille
Head: black tying thread

This pattern is tied from the back forward with several layers of material. Start by attaching the thread near the rear of the shank. Pluck a small bunch of scarlet hackle fibers from a feather. Hold them tightly in place with the natural tips to the rear, and bind them on the hook with several tight wraps of tying thread. Wind over the bases of the fibers to secure them, then catch a piece of yellow chenille with the tying thread. Select a long grizzly hackle with relatively short barbs, and strip away the webby fibers near the base of the quill. Bind the hackle in by its base and trim away the excess quill. Carry the thread forward to the head area, and let it hang. Wind the yellow chenille forward to form a tight body, binding it off and trimming away the excess material at the back of the head area. Wind over the remnant to build a smooth base. Palmer the grizzly hackle forward to the same tie-down area, ribbing the chenille with hackle, but not hiding it with an excess of material. Bind it off and trim away the excess material. Wind a smooth, evenly tapered head, whip finish the thread, and apply a drop or two of head cement to finish the fly.

Variations on this basic pattern are numerous. The tails can be constructed of red marabou, either left long or clipped to a tuft, or of a red yarn tag. If desired, the tail may be matched to the color of the body materials. Body materials may be chenille, yarn or even dubbed materials in black, olive, red, brown, gray, white or variegated colors. I have even made these flies with bright fluorescent colors and contrasting hackles as steelhead patterns that worked effectively. If desired, either oval or flat tinsel may be added as a rib. Grizzly hackle is standard on most of these patterns, but brown is used on many of them, and hackles either matching or contrasting with the body material are also used in some variations. Try some to see how you like them.

Soft Hackled Wet Flies

The general pattern for soft hackled flies includes a body of floss, wool, or fur or poly dubbing with or without ribbing of quill, monofilament, wire or tinsel. The hackles are usually quite long, consisting of soft hen hackles, body feathers from partridge, grouse, woodcock or other game birds, or flank or breast feathers from teal, moorhen or similar birds. Some patterns include a soft tail, and others include wing cases or pads of duck shoulder or quill sections. These patterns suggest caddisfly, fishfly, alder fly or midge pupae. They may suggest some of the mayflies that emerge under water or those that swim

aggressively to the surface before emerging from the nymphal skin, although other patterns may do so more effectively.

Slate Caddis Pupa

The slate caddisfly pupa is one of a few general caddisfly patterns that are useful during caddisfly hatches. It is effective when slate or gray-bodied caddisflies are hatching. The pattern is as follows:

Hook: size 8 to 18 wet fly (many prefer a pattern with a sproat bend)

Thread: 6/0 brown or black thread

Body: muskrat or mole fur, picked to make it rough

Rib: fine gold wire (optional)

Hackle: brown partridge longer than hook shank

Head: dark brown dubbing

Tying Procedure

Clamp a suitable hook in the tying vise in the conventional manner and attach the thread near the start of the bend in the shank. Trim the tag end of the thread. If ribbing is to be used, tie in the ribbing material before applying the body material, and leave the material hanging to the rear of the hook. Pluck a little dark muskrat or mole fur (or similar dubbing material) from the skin, remove the guard hairs, and spin the dubbing materials onto the tying thread. Wind the dubbing evenly to form the body of the fly. On a hook with sproat bend, start the body on the upper part of the bend to put a slight curve in the body. Carry the body forward to the shoulder area, and bind it down. If ribbing is desired, carry that forward in even spirals to the shoulder, tie it off and trim the tag end. Select a brownish partridge body feather with fibers slightly longer than the hook. Strip the feather to its quality fibers, and bind it to the shoulder area close to the feather fibers. Grasp the tip of the hackle with the hackle pliers and wind one and one-half to two turns of hackle (keep it sparse) around the shank. Bind the partridge feather down and trim the tip of the feather away. Using the thumb and forefinger of the other hand, smooth the hackle fibers back over the body of the fly, veiling the body sparsely. Secure them in place with a couple turns of tying thread. Apply a small amount of dark brown dubbing material to the thread, spin it into a yarn and take a turn or two to simulate a head. Wind a small head and whip finish the thread. Apply a drop or two of head cement to seal the threads. After the fly is complete, use a dubbing needle to pick out the dubbing on head and body to create a shaggy appearance.

Olive Caddis Pupa

The olive caddis pupa is another of the generalized caddisfly pupal patterns. It is effective when olive bodied species are hatching. The pattern is as follows:

Hook: 8 to 18 wet fly (many prefer a sproat bend)

Thread: 6/0 dark olive, brown or black

Body: dyed olive rabbit or similar dubbing material

Rib: fine gold or silver wire (optional)

Hackle: brown partridge

Wing cases: slate duck marginal wing feathers or sections of quill

Head: dark brown or black dubbing

Tying Procedure

Select a suitable hook and clamp it securely in the tying vise. Attach the tying thread near bend of hook and tie in a short piece of gold wire as ribbing material. Pluck a small amount of olive fur from a dyed rabbit skin and remove the guard hairs. Spin the dubbing material on the thread and wind it from the bend to the shoulder area, creating a slightly curved body. Bind the material down at the shoulder and carry the ribbing material forward in open spirals to the shoulder area. Bind the ribbing material in place with several turns of thread and trim the excess material away. Trim a brownish partridge hackle with fibers longer than the hook length as above and tie it in at the base. Wind one turn of hackle and tie it off. Trim the remainder of the hackle away. Using the thumb and forefinger of the opposite hand, pull the hackles under the hook and slant them backward as legs. Bind them down with several turns of thread. Select two marginal wing feathers or two small sections of mallard wing quill for pupal wings. Attach each wing one

at a time letting the feather or quill section slope down and back from the shoulder and trying to make them match. After securing the wings in place, select a small amount of dark brown to black dubbing and spin it on the thread. Wind a couple turns of dark dubbing to the eye of the hook to simulate a shaggy head. Bind it down and whip finish the thread. Apply one or two drops of head cement to secure the head in place. Using a dubbing needle, pick out the head and body dubbing to form a shaggy appearance.

Other Hackle Patterns

Traditional hackle flies are relatively common. The gray hackle peacock is similar to the red hackle peacock with the substitution of a grizzly hackle for the brown hackle. A black hackle peacock can be tied by using black hackle. Several modifications of the body material are also used. The most common are red wool and yellow floss, but anything that is attractive to the fish can be used. Some pan fishermen, for example use white, yellow, red or black chenille with matching hackles to make useful panfish flies. A fairly wide array of soft hackle flies are in the literature as well. Green, yellow, orange or black floss and fine ribbing can be combined with many body or flank feathers to produce flies that are useful in some areas for some types of fish. The caddisfly pupal imitations are most commonly tied with olive, slate, hare's mask, or creamy bodies and dark brown to black heads. They may be tied with or without wing cases and are effective both ways.

Fishing Them

Hackle and soft hackle wet flies can be fished by traditional wet fly methods as well as some that are more active. Often they are fished in multiple fly casts, with a tail fly on the end of the tippet and one or two additional flies on droppers above the tail fly. In streams, the flies are commonly cast quartering downstream. The cast is allowed to drift with the current until it begins to drag and pull across the current to a position straight downstream of the rod. The hot spot in the dead drifted wet fly cast is the point at which the fly begins to cut across the current. Another one occurs when the fly pauses downstream of the rod. Many anglers emphasize the downstream stop by working the fly slightly with the rod or short strips with the hand. Often anglers bring the fly in with a hand-twist retrieve or a short stripping retrieve to keep the fly active as long as possible. In some circumstances anglers like to use a more active retrieving method by using an active rod to cause the flies to move erratically. Casting upstream and across may prove effective in achieving a dead drift when fish prefer that type of presentation. In slack water, the angler must impart some action to the fly by stripping the line in either in short pulls or in longer, slower ones. The hand-twist retrieve is also extremely effective to provide a relatively slow, steady retrieve.

Emerging or swimming flies can be fished with the methods described above, but they also can be fished with techniques that imitate swimming nymphs or pupae. One of these is the dead drift with an upward or sideways sweep of the rod to cause the fly to rise fairly rapidly toward the surface. A combination of dead drifting the fly and periodic, long strips to cause the fly to rise and drift alternately is used effectively by some anglers. At times a rapidly pulsed series of strips and drifts can be effective with some species.

Flies of these types may be most effective in caddisfly hatches, but they may be useful in suggesting small swimming mayflies or some of the smaller stoneflies as well. The dark patterns may even be taken as scuds or other small crustaceans.

Exhibit or Sharing Suggestions

1. Prepare a poster, models or photographs to show the steps in tying one or more hackle wet flies.
2. Study fly-fishing books or magazines to see what other types of soft hackled flies might be useful for fish in your area. Share the results of your studies with your group or other interested persons.
3. Prepare a method demonstration on tying a hackle wet fly and present that demonstration in an appropriate setting.
4. Prepare a photographic story of tying a hackled wet fly from the beginning of the tying process to using it in fishing.

5. Record your experiences with tying and using flies in a tying and fishing journal. Share that journal with others in an appropriate setting.
6. Make a series of flies and fly pattern cards that can be exhibited at a fair or similar gathering.
7. Try variations of these patterns to see if you can develop something that works more effectively for the fish in your area. Record your experiments and experimental patterns in a journal and share your findings with others in your group.

Community Service and "Giving Back" Activities

1. Consider ways of helping other young people learn how to tie flies, setting up tying clinics or instructional programs for interested people.
2. Tie a set of flies that can be used as auction items or door prizes in community events or fundraisers.
3. Donate flies to a local fishing program.

Extensions or Ways of Learning More

1. Observe fish and the foods that they eat on your local waters. Using what you know about tying flies, try to develop a pattern that imitates or suggests a food the fish seem to prefer. Research existing fly patterns to see if someone has developed a fly that does what you want. Modify existing patterns or create your own pattern in an attempt to catch the fish you are seeking.
2. Collect stomach contents from fish you like to catch. Observe the contents of those stomachs and record what you find in a notebook. Determine if their food habits are the same all the time or if they change with the time of day and season. Use references to entomology or other fields to assist in identifying what the fish are eating and attempt to create a seasonal reference to their favorite foods.
3. Observe fish actively feeding on a local stream, pond or lake. By careful study, see what they are eating and how they feed. Do they take everything that is a potential food item, or are they selecting something from a set of food choices? What characteristics seem to determine which food items are taken and which ones are rejected? How can that apply to your fly tying efforts?

Links to Other Programs

The link to the rest of the sportfishing program is obvious. Fly tying is a natural link to fly fishing as well as to crafting other types of tackle. Rod building can be a means of having an excellent fly rod at a lower cost. The feathers, furs and other materials needed by a fly tier can lead to interests in hunting, trapping, waterfowl, poultry science or other seemingly unrelated fields. Understanding aquatic ecology as well as keen observation skills are important to success in both tying and fishing flies. This can provide entry into the sciences, either as a future vocation or as an avocational activity. Fishing flies can lead to an interest in several fields of engineering. Tying flies can be a great introduction to economics and marketing for young entrepreneurs. Finally, the hobby of tying flies is both craft and art. It can lead into many other areas of activity from writing and photography to science.