

December 2011



Driftless Days . . .

Nearly everyone who fly fishes and ties their own flies ends up with at least a pattern or two they can almost call their own. Sometimes patterns might be simple derivations of other standard patterns, or they might combine preferred nuances of a number of standard patterns all rolled into one unique fly. Occasionally they are truly innovative and unlike anything else available through normal retailers, though I don't think that happens quite so often as one might guess. Trout flies have been tied for about six hundred years now, and I think it's rather difficult to come up with patterns that can really be called entirely new. And perhaps there's no real reason to do so.

The main reason I tie trout flies is to catch trout. I like to think it's less expensive than buying them, but when I look around my fly tying shop, I find it hard to believe that's really true. Whatever fly I happen to tie, I like it to be able to withstand at least a few strikes and played fish without coming apart, so durability means something to me as well.

A well-tied trout fly must always be free of tying materials at the eyelet so that the angler can attach it to tippet material in low-light situations. That is one of the more challenging dilemmas the beginning tier faces, though he or she will learn it eventually by default. If the angler cannot tie the fly to a tippet line the fly becomes frustratingly worthless, especially when trout are rising as far as one can see and there's not much daylight left to take advantage of the hatch or spinner fall.



I can think of four patterns I tie that at least I can say I cannot buy anywhere. One is a wooly bugger, which uses an unusual color scheme and employs at least one non-standard tying procedure. Another is my hopper pattern, which involves a number of features from other patterns I've liked over the years. That happens to be the most complicated fly I presently tie, taking almost twenty minutes to complete. A third pattern is my cricket, which morphed into its present state in a fashion similar to my hopper.

None of these patterns are particularly great, innovative or marketable to my knowledge. They simply work very well for me and that's why I like them. Confidence in one's flies makes a world of difference in catching trout. My particular patterns and tying preferences might be entirely worthless to another angler.

I've called a fourth unusual pattern a "Thread Wrap". I've caught quite a few trout with it over the past two or three years, so I've decided I like it.

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One of the main northeast Iowa hatches for which I use the Thread Wrap is the Blue Wing Olive, which comes off mainly in the spring and fall seasons. Blue Wings love cold water and seem to prefer traditionally lousy weather, so March and October are the months during which they are most prolific. Some say rainy, cloudy and dismal conditions precipitate Blue Wing Olive hatches, and I generally don't disagree with that. Mayfly duns do not have the ability to eat or drink and can tend to live a little longer in damp conditions, as they don't die from dehydration so quickly and thus have better odds of completing the mating cycle. On the other hand, they are more exposed to predators (such as trout) during damp conditions because they can't get off the water as quickly as they can when the sun is out,



specifically because their wings dry too slowly. So perhaps it's a draw as to which conditions work out best for the species. I usually prefer nice sunny days for my Blue Wing hatches, if for no other reasons than the sun feels good when it's cold and I can see my pattern on the water better in sunlight. I recently landed an embarrassing number of trout on a nearby stream during an October late morning and early afternoon venture without a cloud in the sky. To my way of thinking, a sunny day is not a very good excuse to skip an October or November Blue Wing Olive hatch. A good approach and presentation, and a good pattern, will definitely take care of sunshine.

In October I was fishing a good northeast Iowa stream with a friend who was getting frustrated by the fact that trout were not readily taking his normally effective Blue Wing Olive pattern. If I covered trout that refused his fly with the Thread Wrap, they'd strike. That was quite interesting. It was clear that rising fish preferred the more delicate and diminutive Thread Wrap over his bulkier dubbed Blue Wing pattern. With all due respects to Theodore Gordon, I have found the same phenomenon to be the case even when comparing the Thread Wrap to a more streamlined quill pattern. There is no doubt in my mind that the Thread Wrap is an excellent Blue Wing spinner pattern as well. It works superbly during spinner falls in slow or slack water, which can indeed be extremely difficult and technical fishing and a good test for any pattern.



Another friend, in mentioning the huge Blue Wing Olive hatches of this past October, said that his dry fly patterns were not working so well toward the end of the month. He thought either that trout were tired of looking at his patterns, or that they were becoming more selective as the month wore on. Or both. He's retired and fishes a great deal, so I'm always interested in his

observations. But I was having no such problem with my Thread Wrap patterns. In fact, they worked well into November and my strike numbers consistently remained extremely high.

I'm certainly not bragging about the pattern, however. It took me twenty years to figure it out, so a case could be made for the fact that I'm slow on the uptake. That's what my wife seems to



think, at least as concerns non-angling matters. And sometimes patterns work for a season or two before losing their effectiveness, though I haven't found that to be the case so much on northeast Iowa streams, where fishing pressure is not as great as it is in more famous locales.

Personally, I'm not certain trout *ever* learn to distrust any particular pattern when it's fished properly during an appropriate hatch. What I think trout are sensitive to is angler pressure. When it seems as though trout distrust a pattern, they more probably distrust the movements of the angler, rod, fly line and leader, assuming the

fisherman has a reasonably correct pattern in use.

Though I haven't researched it recently, I know there are various thread wrap patterns on the web and in fly tying books. It's possible I could find one that is exactly like the one I came up with on my own, a rather common phenomenon.

The wheel does not really need to be reinvented, but it seems to be fun trying.

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I tie my Thread Wraps in four sizes, #18-#24. I normally use the #24 for trico hatches, though I might try to fish a #20 or a #22 during a trico hatch if I can get away with it. I often use the #24 pattern for midges as well, particularly during the winter. The #20 and #22 patterns often work for off-the-cuff *baetis* hatches throughout the fishing year. The main size I use for both spring and autumn Blue Wing Olive hatches is the #18, and I catch the vast majority of my Thread Wrap trout with that particular size.

On the #18 pattern, I use both grizzly and brown hackle behind the head, just as one would do for a standard Adams fly. On the #20 through #24 patterns, I skip the brown hackle and just use grizzly. I don't use a wing set for any of my Thread Wrap patterns, even the #18. I haven't done that for many years now on small flies, though any tier is certainly welcome to mount wing sets on small flies if he or she wishes to. Lee Wulff said that wing sets are not necessary for flies #18 or smaller, and I guess I simply agree. Wing sets on small flies do not seem to make any difference to trout, so I feel they are unnecessary and perhaps even detrimental.

At this juncture, the best hackle feathers I've found for my own tying style are Whiting. I now purchase nearly all of my hackle feathers in Whiting 100 Packs, which gives me almost perfectly sized hackle feathers every time I tie a fly. I also think they are cost effective, as there is absolutely no waste of feather. I use the #18 Brown and Grizzly Whiting 100 Pack feathers for my #18 Thread Wraps, and I use the #20 Grizzly Whiting 100 Pack feathers for Thread Wraps in sizes #20 through #24. I prefer the #22 and #24 Thread Wraps to be over-hackled with #20 feathers, as I can see them much better on the water that way.

On all my dry flies, I use standard-length fine-wire Dai-Riki hooks. To my knowledge, Dai-Riki does not make a #24 hook so for that size I normally purchase whatever I can find, usually a Tiemco.

I exaggerate my tails much more so than some tiers. I think it helps with balancing the fly on the water, and some anglers, myself included, believe that an elongated tail helps during spinner falls. I use black 8/0 Uni-Thread for my Thread Wrap bodies, which is of particular importance for the smaller trico patterns. I prefer black thread for all of the sizes I tie, but one could certainly substitute a different colored thread if desirable. With a fly of this type, the main items the trout sees from below are the tail and the legs (or the shoulder hackles), so body coloring is perhaps not important. The rest of the fly appears as a silhouette to the trout, that general dry fly concept being explored, experimented with and touted by the great Vincent Marinaro.



As mentioned earlier, Thread Wrap patterns work marvelously in flat or still water. If trout are on the take and do not strike immediately when the fly lands on the water, a gentle twitch or two mimicking a fly either being blown by the wind or attempting to get off the water can be very effective.

In my case, I use 6X tippet for #18s, and 7X tippet for #20s through #24s. I will occasionally use 6X tippet for a #20, but only if the fly has come out of the vise particularly over-hackled.

I've found this particular Thread Wrap pattern to be very effective on all Driftless area streams. My largest trout taken on Wisconsin's Rush River, a 16 1/4" Brown, went for the #18 Thread Wrap between two thunderstorms.

And it only takes a minute or two to tie the fly.

Be Vigilant!

*"Red" Canoe
Trout Unlimited
Iowa Driftless Chapter*

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