

OSPREY FLY BOX

Partridge and Yellow

contributed by

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Years ago I lived in Colorado and had good success fishing its mountain streams with soft hackle wet flies (also known as spiders). I had forgotten about them until recently, but always carried a few. I was fishing on the Skagit river and fish were occasionally rising to something emerging but ignoring my floating flies. I tied on a size 14 Partridge and Yellow soft hackle fly and started getting strong takes, especially during the flurry of activity at dusk (sadly, that does not always happen). Soft hackles are now part of my repertoire and they are often the most successful flies. They are buggy, easy to tie, and versatile.

Soft hackle flies are especially effective when dead drifted in shallow riffles but can also be fished in slower runs or pools. Usually fished on a floating line, they can be fished drag free by casting up and across the current with mends, (on or close to the surface or deeper when tied with a bead head or wire underbody or by using split shot on the leader), on a down and across wet-fly swing, stripped in slowly against the current, on an up-stream cast and drift with retrieve, on a Leisenring lift, on a line fed downstream to feeding fish, or fished as a nymph under an indicator or by high sticking. Twitching the rod or tugging the line can provide enticing action to the fly. Floatant can be applied to the fly so that it stays in the surface film (especially when tied on a dry fly hook), but it continues to attract fish after it sinks.

I did well slowly stripping a size 14 tan soft hackle fly with a small gold bead head on a floating line and copolymer leader last summer at Fawn Lake during the afternoon and evening hatches of mayflies and caddis. Carey Specials and Six Packs prove the utility of larger soft hackle flies in still waters. Soft hackles may be the ultimate beginner's fly, because there is almost no wrong way to fish them, but fishing them most effectively can require fine control of the fly.

Soft hackles are tied with many different body materials. Traditional English soft hackles are impressionistic attractors tied with silk threads and/or floss in various colors, especially orange, yellow, green, olive, purple, and black. Peacock herl or pheasant tail bodies can be very effective, with or without ribbing. Modern synthetics such as Frostbite can be used. Bodies dubbed with furs such as hare's mask or synthetics ("flymphs", with or without tails), or wound with yarn, can imitate many natural insects.

Many standard nymph patterns can be "improved" by adding a soft hackle collar, which can be wound either in front of or

behind a bead (or no bead). The hackle fibers (barbs) should be soft, flexible and webby (not dry fly hackle) to provide movement in the water, preferably with some mottling and/or sheen. Hungarian partridge feathers are often used, taking advantage of the fine barring on the fibers that imitate segments of insect legs, but skins are now difficult to find in stores and the commercial bags of feathers often have frustratingly few suitable feathers. Grouse, starling, woodcock, snipe, hen, pheasant rump, mallard, marabou or chickabou, CDC, and Coq de Leon feathers and even Organza can be used as hackle (sometimes in combination).

In general, select a feather so that the hackle fibers are about the length of the hook or to the barb; if using a dry fly hackle gauge, select feathers for hooks about 2-3 sizes larger. Sometimes, feathers will be too large for the hook and desired fiber length.

There are several ways to reduce the fiber length; for example, see Charlie Craven's site at: <http://www.charliesflyboxinc.com/flybox/details.cfm?parentID=155>.

Allen McGee's beautiful book "Fly Fishing Soft Hackles" (Stackpole, 2017) provides a thorough description of tying and fishing soft hackle flies.

MATERIALS



Hook - Mustad 3906 Sizes 10-16 "14 Used on this fly"

Bead - A small gold bead is optional

Thread - UTC Ultra 140 yellow

Body - Lagartun multistrand French silk floss, yellow

Hackle - Natural Hungarian Partridge feather (brown or gray)

TYING INSTRUCTIONS



1. Prepare the hackle by stripping the fluff off the base of a selected partridge feather (here a bit large). Then stroke the fibers back from the tip toward the base, separating them. Pinch the barb and attach thread to the hook. Tie in the feather behind the eye at the stem, leaving room for the hackle and head. The concave (dull) side should face up or toward the tier (most tiers attach the hackle by the tip usually after forming the body, but I find that more likely to break). Snip off the stem near the point of the hook.

2. Cut a 3-4" piece of silk floss and split it into 2 or 3 strands by slowly pulling on separated ends, allowing it to untwist (for larger or thicker flies, do not split). Tie in a flattened strand behind the gap (for small flies, thread alone can be used after spinning the bobbin counter clockwise to flatten the thread, but the floss adds some appealing shine and translucency). Wrap the thread to the rear of the hook, securing the shaft of the feather and floss.



3. Wrap the thread forward, creating a slightly tapered body with a thickened bump behind the hackle site. This bump will cause the hackle fibers to flair away from the body, providing more action as the fly moves in the water. Alternatively, a dubbed, wrapped peacock herl, or bead thorax can be used to spread the hackle collar.

4. Counter wrap the floss forward with touching wraps and tie off.



5. Using hackle pliers wrap the hackle 1-3 times around the hook, sweeping the fibers back with your fingers, and secure the feather with thread. For sparser flies, use fewer turns and/or strip the fibers from one side of the feather. Pull the hackle fibers back with your thumb and first 2 fingers, and bind with thread wraps.

6. Then create a head, whip finish, and apply head cement.



Tight Lines & Good Luck!