Introduction to a new edition of The Soft Hackled Fly

I am happy to write the introduction for this new edition of "The Soft Hackled Fly", and to include a few words about their use in slightly abreviated form as tiny soft hackles. Long since my book on soft hackles was first published in 1975, fly fishing has changed dramatically. Anglers just cant get enough of it during the prescribed periods allocated to it in their US home waters and are now finding ways to extend their seasons and their happiness in any way they can in home waters and in far-a-way waters in far-away-lands.. Of course, the advent of jet travel has helped anglers fill these desires by transporting them to other fly fishing waters for many different kinds of fish in many different lands and continents.

Midge fishing or fishing with very tiny flies belongs to this quest. It is a relatively new method which has grown with the sport. Not too long ago, anglers and angling writers used to say you'll never catch trout feeding on those tiny insects. Jointly, they were called the fisherman's curse, and other dirty and derogatory names because trout were feeding on them voraciously and all an angler could do was to watch them feed and thumb their noses at them.

Anglers and angling literature bad mouthed the tiny insects. They called them smuts and midges and no see ums and other unprintable words. Still, several good books came out recently, clearly identifying the insects and giving instructions on how to tie and fish the new tiny fly patterns presented in these books. They are "Micropatterns, Tying and Fishng the Small Fly" by Darrel Martin, "Small Fly Adventures in the West" by Neale Streeks, "Tying Small Flies" by Ed Engle, and "In the Ring of the Rise," by Vincent C. Marinaro, and others.. So, little by little, and in river by river, anglers went smaller and smaller, lightened their rods and reels, lines and leaders and flies which are currently known simply as midges. Many of them can hardly be called trout flies, but resemble the insects in the larval stage. Many of them are simply made with wrappings of silk, fur, tinsel and plastic with no hackle, or with just a little bump at the front of the fly where the head of the insect is supposed to be. Their position in the stream is debatable. Without hackles of any kind, many of them are not on the surface, but just below it. The important thing, it seems, is to tie them small enough and not worry about whether the fly floats or sinks. If it looks a little "wormy" the trout will find it.

I touched on tying and fishing tiny soft-hackled flies in two of my earlier books, "Soft Hackled Fly Imitations" and "Spinners," by developing patterns such as tricos, baetis, centroptilum, caenis, tricos, and other midge patterns and we will reach into both of those books again to include patterns, information and photographs for this new work on tiny soft-hackled flies. After reading about these flies and tied and fished a dozen or so of these new patterns in the soft hackled style, I feel they will become useful and important to the many anglers who are now hooked on fishing in this manner. --30--

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BAETIS

I used to wonder why T. E. Pritt, Edmonds and Lee, and other earlier fly-fishing writers included more than one artificial to imitate a certain species of trout flies. Pritt had five March Browns, four Iron Blue Duns and two sets of two each to imitate other insects. Edmonds and Lee, too, listed two flies each to represent three different insects. Halford, in his first book, "FLOATING FLIES AND HOW TO DRESS THEM", really covered the bases for a Baetis fly with 7 patterns. They were the Rough Olive, India-rubber Olive, Datached Olive, Dark Olive Quill, Pale Olive Quill and Pale Olive Dun.

Except for the Detached Olive, the patterns look pretty much alike, and it would have to be a very smart trout, indeed, that could chooe one from the other based solely on the visual differences. Halford wasn't too sure about an imitation for the Iron Blue Dun either, because for that insect he listed five artificial patterns, one of whcih featured the wonderfully allusive, but rather indefinite description, "the October tint of iron blue." In later books, the father of modern dry fly fishing drastically reduced the number of artificials.

Well, now, after trying to design a new, tiny soft-hackled fly or finding old patterns which were good, wet/dry imitations of the Baetis, I know why those writers (and I'm sure many others) included more than one artificial to imitate a certain insect--because in this chapter I have four. And that may not be enough

Before I show you these four patterns, I would like to describe the insects we're imitating in this chapter. This descriptive excursion is necessary because of the confusion over Baetis,and Blue-winged Olive. Here in Montana, all the mayflies with olive bodies and leaden gray, dun wings are called Baetis, including the Blue-winged Olive, which according to some 'hatch' books is not a Baetis, but is an Ephemerella. The description, Blue-Winged Olive is losing its meaning, while Baetis is taking over. In the east and midwest, however, most of the trout flies of the same general coloring in bodies and wings are called Blue-winged Olive, while the word, Baetis is not used at all as the most accepted common name. In fact, in HATCHES II, by Al Caucci and Bob Nastasi, blue-winged olive is listed as the "Most accepted common name" for 12 species in the east and midwest, while the word, *Baetis,* is not shown once as the "most accepted common name."

It's easy to see the source of the confusion between the two species. The color olive is the dominant body color of most of the species in the *Baetis* genus. And the body color of the Blue-winged Olive is, you guessed it, olive. Both the Blue-winged Olive and the Baetis flies also have dun-colored (lighter or darker) wings, making it even easier to lump them all together in the Baetis group. We are experiencing this kind of difficulty in fly nomenclature because of the

trend to call flies by their scientific names...not their generic names. In England, anglers still call *Baetis,* "olives." And they call the Blue-winged Olive, "Blue-winged Olive." In 1986, when fishing the Test Riiver, I had a lengthy conversation with the river keeper of the Leckford Club. He said the American anglers he met were using so much Latin in their conversations, he coulldn't understand them at all. I feel the scientific names should return to the easier, friendlier, descriptive names.

In addition to size, and the color of bodies and wings, there is, of course, another way to identify trout insects; by the time of the year they make their appearances. And we can use this method to distinguish between the two flies in this chapter. The true *Baetis* or olive is the first and last Mayfly you'll see in Montana. It is small (18 and under) and can be fished as early as February and as late as November. The flies seem to like nasty weather--dark, scudding clouds, rain, and even light snow. Tell a fellow angler a certain day was a *"Baetis kind of day",* and he'll know exactly what you're talking about. "Becausse hatches can occur in the worst climatic conditions and because there are two yearly generations, the survival of the species is ensure," said Charles Gaidy in his impressive study, EPHEMERAS 'MAYFLIES' NATURALS AND ARIFICIALS.

The Blue-winged Olive is basically a summer fly and has three tails while the *Baetis* have only two. The Blue-winged Oliveappers to be larger than the *Baetis* because its wings are overlylarge for its body. The pattern's unique history begins with Halford under that name in FLOATING FLIES. The dressing was as follows: Wings: Pale Coot, upright. Body: Peacock quill dyed a medium olive. Hackle and tail: same medium olive. In Halford's book, the natural fly was to hatch chiefly in the eveningsduring the latter part of July, throughout August and occasionally even into September. In many books about the fly, the most popular and deadliest pattern to use during the evening rise was the Orange Quill, made popular by Skues. Here is the dressing: Wings: Pale starling. Hackle: Bright red cock. Tail: Same color.
Body: Pale condor quill, stripped and dyed hot orange.

A hot orange colored fly to imitate the somber, olive body/ leaden wing insect? They have got to be kidding, I used to think. Then recently in SUNSHINE AND THE DRY FLY, by J. W. Dunne, I read the following: "Late in the evening, in the middle of a furious rise (of blue-winged ollives), you will have to abandonfishing, hasten through the darkness to the nearest plank bridge, spear your rod, get out on to the board, and, kneeling there, peer closely and intently at the black water hurrying beneath. Then you will see gliding swiftly by amid the hatching duns, a spinner with big, flat-spread, oddly whitish-looking wings, between which the red body looks queerly stumpy and diminutive. Red body, did I say? Yes, red--red as any lobster. For your sacrifice of an evening's fishing will have had, at any rate, this little reward:

that there, right beneath your eyes, will be the 'orange quill.'"

Now, that's a neat little British twist: fishing the dun with a spinner because they both appear on the water at the same time, and it seems the trout prefer the spinner. I can't recall ever seeing that kind of fishing instruction in American fly fishing lilterature.

It was on the Bighorn again that Hale Harris and Steve Hilbers of the Bighorn Trout Shop in Fort Smith, and I, worked out the first of the four *Baetis* patterns in this chapter. It was during a four-day stretch in mid-May 1988. Both of these young men are professional guides and fly tyers and furnish practically all of the flies they sell in their shop. They are also firm believers in the soft-hackled fly and frequently fish the old, general patterns and a lot of new ones they have developed themselves. One of these is the Starling and Olive dressed as follows:

1. STARLING AND OLIVE

Hooks: 18 or 20.

Tying Thread: Danville Olive.

Body: Danville olive thread built up from the tail into a thin sloping taper.

Ribbing: Yellow silk.

Thorax: Tiny bunch of mole.

Hackle: Starling, three or four wraps. (Include at least one or two wraps of the dull, base side of the hackle.)

It was with this fly that I started fishing the *Baetis* hatch on the Bighorn above the Three Mile access. Once the hatch starts, the browns gather in tight, little pods. The rises are slow, and deliberate, the trout seeming to do a little hula with their bodies when they go back into the water. Might they be showing off?

My spot was occupied by a young angler who was flailing awy unnsuccessfully at the pod of free-rising fish. I found another pod below him, and on the first cast upstream, I took my first brown trout on the new Starling and Olive. The I took another and was feeling magnanimous. I yelled to the your lad, (his name was Brad Bohen) who saw what I was doing. Did he want to try one of the new Soft-hackle *Baetis* ? Yes. Yes, indeed! (I was not being uncharacteristically or merely altruistic--I also wanted a second tester of the new soft-hackled Baetis.) And on his first cast with the fly, he had a brown. Then we took turns hooking and landing these fish until we exhausted our pods and the hatch was over.

I left the Bighorn convinced the Starling and Olive was the best artificial fly ever to come down the stream. And I couldn't wait to try it on my favorite piece of water on the Madison trophy section below Raynold's Pass bridge. The Madison here, too, is famous for its *Baetis* hatches at this time of the year. I chose a day soon after the Bighorn outing that looked like the ideal Baetis day. It was cold and gray, with low fast moving clouds, threatening rain or snow at

any time. The pool I had in mind was not occupied, and the hatch had not started yet. I waited patiengly, feeling a little smug because I knew I was going to slaghter those fish. Then the hatch started, and the trout joined in. On the water, the *Baetis* looked just like the Bighorn *Baetis,* maybe a shade smaller, but I had the soft-hackled *Baetis* in 18's too. So I put on an 18 and made my first cast.

Nothing. Well, you can't always take a trophy fish on your first cast. So I cast again, the fly passing right over the noses of at least three feeding trout. Again. Again. And again. And nothing. Drag free. With drag. A bigger fly. It made no difference. Those fish wouldn't take that fly in a million years. I happered at them for two hours. I couldn't believe it. In finally quit, confirming the age-old belief that there is nothing certain in fly fishing.

It was that frustrating experience that made me decide. I could not cover *Baetis* with only one fly pattern in a written work on new soft hackles. Yet, when this work started taking shape in 1986, I was sure only one pattern per species would do, and it was going to be the quintessential soft-hackle fly for the Baetis, Pale morning Dun, Midge, Caddis, Green Drake, or whatever fly I had access to and chose to cover in this book. To be honest, had the Bighorn *Baetis* worked on the Madison and other Montana waters, I probably would have believed it to be the quintessential pattern, and would have left well-enough alone.

But it didn't and I couldn't. So here is the second *Baetis* pattern.

2. STARLING AND PHEASANT

HOOKS: 16, 18, 20, Tiemco 100 or Dai-Riki 305.

Body: Barbs (three for a 16, two for 18 and one or two for a 20) from the center tail of a rooster pheasant, wound on the hook together with thin copper wrie, as in theSoft-Hackled Pheasant Tail or traditional nymph.

HACKLE: Starling, three or four wraps of the lighter, dun-colored, down-base part of the feather.

This fly belongs as much to Paul Brown as it does to me. We designed it sometime before 1983 as a nymph/dun *Baetis I*mitations on the Henry's Fork in Idaho. The fly is influenced by Frank Sawyer's pheasant tail nymph--one of Paul's favorite subsurface flies on that river and others where the *Baetis* prevail. The Sawyer nymph is Paul's sheet anchor, and he often starts fishing this fly when the *Baetis* are on. Paaul says, "Fishing the Sawyer nymph, I thought I was in possesion of the Holy Grail of *Baetis* imitations. There were times, however, when the fish would not accept it dead-drift and then I would move it slightly when I thought it was close to the fish and this would encourage them totakeit. As I think back to Frank's book, NYMPHS AND THE TROUT, he too, would raise the nymph at a speed he figured was the nymph's

speed and this would get the fish to take it.

"There were times when the fish would not take the Sawyer nymph fished either dead-drift or moved. I couldn't believe that this great fly could ever fail me, and I looked closely into the water to see if there might be another insect present. I never found any and finally reasoned either the fish were taking a drowned *Baetis* dun underwater or in the film, or they were feeding on submerged egg-laying females (Entomologists have reported female spinners of *Baetis* and closely related genera deposit their eggs underwater by crawling down rocks, weed, waders, or whatever) in preference to the duns which were everywhere in evidence.

"One of my first alterations to the Sawyer nymph was a loosely wound dubbing of medium-dark hare's mask at the thorax and the change from a wet fly hook to a dry fly one. I reasoned the hare's fur represented the wings folded closely along the bodies of the females.) I also wanted the fly to stay fairly close to the surface. Although this fly worked at times below exposed weed beds, it was not the answer I was look for.

"I began to think about soft-hackled patterns that might duplicate the color of the wings of the natural when the starling came to mind. The feathers were small enough for 20s and 22s, but at first glance they seemed too dark. But wait. At the base of the feather is a downy, filmy kind of marabou like fuzz which comes very close to the color of the wings of the *Baetis* duns.

I tied a few of these wet duns and tried them the first chance I got. My subsequent experience with the Starling and Pheasant is that it is often effective when you cannot induce the trout to accept a conventional Sawyer nymph."

I also fished the Starling and Pheasnt for the first time on the big water of the Henry's Forkdicove tp reach-casting and reach/swing casting with the new soft-hackled fly imitations because you can move above the fish in almost any direction to obtain the desired drift. With the Starling and Pheasant, I caught many Henry's Fork trout. But, alas, never any of the giant rainbows the river is famous for.

The giant fish story with this fly belongs to Pat Daly, who fished the Henry's Fork with me during the late fall of 1983. I tied some Starling and Phpeasant 16's in the car and gave him a couple to try out. The next day we were in Yellowstone Park on the Madison. We separated, but remined within sight of one another. It was a classic *Baetis* day, again: cold rain, low gray clouds, and leadensky. In the middle of some of my fishing, I looked downstream and saw him h;ook a fish. I turned away thinking he would fight it and release it in a short time. The fight lasted much longer than usual and he started to make his was across the river toward my bank, the well-raveled one. "He's got as nice fish,' I thought, 'but the river's full of nice fish at this time of year...' and went on fishing. Meanwhile, he kept on cooming still holding onto the big fish and nearing the bank, where his wife and mine were now standing cheering him on. I couldn't stand

it any longer and got out, ran two hundred yards down to him and saw what he was holding on to. It was a brown, quite subdued, ready for release, perhaps 24 to 26 inches long. Pat was quite subdued too, so I stepped into the water and reached down to remove the fly and saw there on of Starling and Pheasant soft hackles stuck firmly in the scissors of this giant trout.

The third soft-hackled fly imitation for the *Baetis* is the Waterhen-Bloa, a very old and still popular *Baetis* imitation throughout Yorkshire and Scotland. It is number 8 in Pritt's list and number 2 in the list of Edmonds and Lee. The word, Bloa signifies leaden skies.

3. WATERHEN-BLOA

My dressing is as follows:

Hook: 18 dry fly hook.

Tying thread: Pearsall's yellow.

Body: A light dusting of muskrat fur on the well-waxed tying thread, tapered slightly toward the front of the fly. It can also be made by wrapping the entire hook shank with the yellow silk as a base, then, starting at the rear, coming forward with the dubbed thread in separate, spaced windings that creates the appearance of a well-ribbed body.

Hackle: Two wraps of a small perly gray feather with white tips from the under side of thewing of a waterhen, (moorhen or American coot) set well back from the eye of the hook. Blue dun hen can also be used.

Tail: 5 or 6 filaments of clear, crinkly poly cut short. Pritt's tie is the same except for the position of the hackle and the tail. Edmonds and Lee's tie specifies mole fur for the dubbing, which is considerably darker than the muskrat.

The spring creeks near Livingston have excellent hatches of the Baetis and Blue-winged Olive. The small dark *Baetis* appears in early March, disappears around the middle of May, and returns around the middle of September (in an even smaller size,) and is fishable throughout December. The Blue-winged Olive appears around the end of June and lasts until around the middle of October. The hatches come and go like clockwork because of the constancy of the temperature and chemistry of the water. One could not find a more fitting laboratory for new fly patterns than DePuy's spring creek.

The most memorable experience with the Waterhen-Bloa occured in early October, 1989 when I fished Depuy's with Barry Serviente, owner of Angler's Art. It was very cold, with rain and snow showing intermittly. I was armed with soft-hackled midges, some new Tricos and Waterhen-Bloas in 18's tied not with waterhen hackles, but with blue-dun hen hackles from a newly purchased Hoffman neck. We fished at the Blue Gate where by 11 a.m, or so the Baetis really started coming down. The conditions were perfect. And what I proceeded to do was take a lot of trout. No matter where I put the fly, trout took it. I was using a 7X leader and I began

to get reckless. In quick succession, I broke off 4 or 5 bloas and finally ran out of the pattern, the hatch in full swing. Now what? Run into Dan Bailey' store in Livingston and tie more, that's what. I felt strange sitting there with 30 or so women tiers, all of them thinking I might be stealing their jobs. One of them found the materials I needed, and in 10 or 15 minutes I tied another 4 waterhen-bloas and was back on Montana 89 racing towards Depuy. I found Barry still at the Blue Gate, slugging away and taking a fish now and then, and started below him, where the new flies resumed their outstanding performances.

Barry wrote with obvious tongue in cheek, his own version of this day's fishing in his new catalog, (March 1990). "I watched, in awe, as Syl tested a new soft-hackled pattern on DePuy's Spring Creek new Livingston, MT, this past fall. Using a 3 weight rod he made a 60' cast quatering downstream. The backcast missed the hest high weeds and the fly landed three feet ahead of the trout feeding in a backwater on the other side of the stream. After such a presentation with a prototype fly there was no way the trout was going to refuse." Aw, gee, shuck Barry, the cast was only 40 feet and it was the fly not the driver, credit where credit is due.

The fourth soft-hackled imitation in this chapter is called simply Blue-winged Olive and was developed by Tedd Ward who has fished the fly successfully for many seasons mainly on the Beaverkill. II have done quite well with the pattern, myslef, which is the reason it is included here instead of in the appendix, where all of his fly patterns, developed for Catskill waters, are included. The dressing is:

4. BLUE-WINGED OLIVE

Hooks: 18, 20, medium to light wire.

Tying thread: Danville olive.

Body: Barbs from a grey goose quill feather, or other similar, large quill feather or hackle.

Rib: Olive silk.

Hackle: Blue dun hen.

The grey goose, herl body with the olive rib looks similar to the lightly dubbed muskrat body in the Waterhen Bloa, and provides an alternative to tying the pattern. Tedd has said the fly is not only more effective on the Beaverkill, but can be fished with less fuss than other patterns for the Blue-winged Olive on the classic eastern rivers.

I would like to add one more pattern to this list which was included in my book, SPINNERS. I had phenominal luck with this fly after the book was published, and I'm happy to

be able to bring it back in this printing of tiny soft hackles. I should add that it can be used almost anytime, and that you don't have to wait for spinners to be on the water. The fly is called Syl's Gold Plated Spinner.

Hook: 18 or 20.

Body: Danville pale yellow tying thread, plated with thin, gold wire. Come up the hook with the thread, then the wire in close, solid wraps.

Hackle: Rusty edge or reddish ginger.

Tail: Two or three barbs from a golden pheasant rooster topping feather.

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