Chapter 10: CHREATING YOUR OWN SOFT-HACKLED FLY SOLUTIONS

"The great point, then, in fly-dressing, is to make the artificial fly resemble the natural insect in shape, and the great characteristic of all river insects is extreme lightness and neatness of form."

THE PRACTICAL ANGLER, By W. C. Stewart, 1961. First published 1857.

In his letter with his introduction, Dave Hughes suggested a concluding chapter which might help the reader design his own soft-hackled flies as imitations of trout insects in his own rivers and still waters. As Dave points out, the book does not cover everybody's favorite hatches. Indeed, there would have been even fewer patterns if my friend, Tedd Ward, had not contributed those he developed for eastern waters. This illustrates the major problem facing anyone doing a book like this; something important is always going to be left out. This fishing country of ours is just too large. A pattern book, or a hatch book will always offer the greatest coverage of the more popular rivers and flies, and the more easily reached, easily studied waters and insects.

So, the suggestion is a good one. And because the basic soft-hackled imitation is so simple, I believe it should not be too difficult for an experienced fly fisherman and tyer to

design his own imitations, using the book and the following information as guides.

The first thing I would recommend is a perusal of some of the literature on the soft-hackled fly. See THE ART OF TYING THE WET FLY & FISHING THE FLYMPH, by James E. Leisenring and Vernon S. Hidy. I would also suggest WESTERN HATCHES by Rick Haefele and Dave Hughes, for the advance work they did in adapting the design of soft-hackled flies to artificials in their book. My first book, THE SOFT-HACKLED FLY, now available as a reprint, would also be helpful because it contains 14 traditional patterns, tying instructions and a short history of the fly, the last of which offers many other research sources.

Next, the reader should collect some of the following materials: an entire partridge skin including the very small hackles near the head of the bird; hen necks in as many colors as possible, including grizzly, off-white, light dun, medium dun and dark dun, (some low cost Indian rooster necks and dry fly necks of lesser quality may do); starling skin or loose hackles; (don't overlook hackles from locally available game birds such as grouse, woodcock, quail, waterhen or local coot, rooster and hen pheasants, and other shore birds and waterfowl); sparkle poly material for shuck tails; and dubbing.

Over the years, hen necks have not been widely available because there simply has not been a market for them, except in

England. However, I have talked recently (December, 90) with some of the major hackle growers in this country who said the demand for hen necks has increased during the last 2 or 3 years. This may be due to tyers using the hackles as wings, or, perhaps, they are already tying "damp" emerger imitations with hen hackles, just as I am doing in this book. Whatever the reason, and, I hope, through my urging, Metz, Keough and Hebert are increasing production of hen necks. Metz will have 10,000 available by the spring of 91, in black, cream, dun, furnace and grizzly. Keough, who bought Colorado Quality Hackle, will have 3000/4000 available at the same time in grizzly, cream, ginger, blue dun and honey dun. And Hebert will also have dun and honey dun. Nobody seemed to know much about the white-with-rusty-edge, but a fine honey dun hackle with a smokey blue center and honey or gold-colored edges can be used instead of the white-with-rusty-edge for your experimental imitations of flies like pale morning duns and spinners. (If you cannot find white-with-rusty-edge or other hen hackles suggested in this book immediately, write me at PO Box 3782, Bozeman, MT 59772 for small amounts to tide you over.)

You can learn quite a bit about your local hatches without actually seeing the insects by obtaining popular fly patterns from your local fly shops. These patterns will give you a good idea of what the body color should be, which is a good place to start the design of a new soft-hackled fly imitation. I decided to use the sparkle poly tail on my new Mayflies after seeing sparkle duns in various fly shops in Montana. If you have the

opportunity to study closely the insects you hope to imitate, carry a low power magnifying glass and a few bits of body dubbings so that you can set the samples right next to the real fly for a comparison. You could go even further and photograph the fly with a macro lens, then try matching body color at your leisure.

You will find a greater variance in the body color of mayflies than in the wing color. Most of the wings are dun colored, ranging from pale gray to dark gray with tinges of yellow, olive, brown and green. If I were limited to just one hen neck, it would be a medium dun hen, from which, I believe, most of the mayfly emerger patterns in this book, and others which you may discover, could be tied successfully.

I would also recommend having available any one of the newer "hatch" books for reference, although I enjoy pouring over the older literature for tying and fishing hints, of which there is far more than one may realize.

The great advantage one will have in creating his own patterns is in being able to match more closely the size and form and hues and colors of the insects trout feed on in one's favorite water. As I tried to point out in chapter 4, one fly worked extremely well on one river which failed miserably on another. I'm convinced insects of the same species or genera can be bigger or smaller and of varying color shades from one river to another, even when rivers are quite close to each other. We know

trout take on the coloring in their flesh from the foods they eat and from the chemicals found in their river. Shouldn't those same things affect the color and size of the insects which grow in the same river?

So, let us design a soft-hackled imitation, an emerger, of a Mayfly not in the book. We'll choose a <u>Paraleptophlebia</u> or Mahogany dun which I intended to include, but somehow passed by. The general appearance of the species according to HATCHES II is as follows: "dark brown or mahogany bodies and pale-to-medium gray wings, which seem solid in color (lacking conspicuous venation or mottling found in other species)."

Except for the size of insect, that's all we need to know for a soft-hackled imitation. So, let's start with five or six strands of clear sparkle poly for a tail. This materials comes in colors, too, and you may prefer a color which matches the body. You may also use traditional hackle barbs for the tail or try the fly without one. Before starting this book, I didn't believe in tails of any kind on general soft-hackled flies. This new series, however, is meant to be fished higher in the stream, and this easily tied tail helps in this matter. Since most of these new flies are emerger imitations, the poly tail can be taken for a trailing nymph shuck, which was the reason it was included in sparkle dun patterns created by someone else.

For the body, we have a choice of dubbing, cock pheasant

or turkey herls, tying thread or floss. Today, dubbing comes in far more colors than thread and floss, so for some body colors, dubbing may be the only answer, even though it produces a rougher. more hairy body than thread or floss. Dark brown tying thread is not too hard too find. Danville has one called tobacco brown, so we'll try it on this fly and rib it with yellow silk or thin gold wire. Taper the thread on the hook to a point about two thirds from the bend in the thoracic style of the other patterns. and follow with your choice of ribbing. Danville winds quite flat permitting a nice, smooth body. For the ribbing, I like Pearsall's silk because it is a braided material which is more prominent. Depending on what you can find out about your local hatch of Mahogany Duns, you may want to use a different ribbing and perhaps even a different body material. You could even try a body with brown dubbing, or one with herls. These flies are quick and easy to tie, so it might be a good idea to make two or three of each style and try them all when the hatch appears. Trout will see something which strikes their fancy more in one pattern than another, but we mere mortals will not be able to tell what that is.

Now, we'll choose a hackle which, on this style of fly, will act as both the wings and the legs of the insect. We have a choice between a hen hackle and a game bird hackle. Hen hackles are generally straighter, thinner and longer; easier to handle with hackle pliers. Hen necks should be easier to get than some game bird hackles which must be imported from England. (Hackle farmers must raise a lot of hen chickens to get their few prime

roosters.) There is no need to overhackle the fly as tiers tend to do with dry flies. If you use a hen hackle, four or five turns will be sufficient.

Using bird hackles, one is limited to two or three turns, although body and wing feathers from grouse, waterhen, snipe, plover, jackdaw and woodcock all bear close resemblence to the color, and in some cases, even the texture, of the wings of dun flies.

The proportion of the hackle to the body is important, but not critical. The hackle barbs should not be much longer than the bend of the hook. However, if you tie the fly in the Glanrhos style (chapter 3), the wing should be a little longer than the bend of the hook.

Well, I believe this imitation of a Mahogany Dun might work admirably during a hatch of that mayfly. When it comes, it's easy to check the imitation against the real thing by looking away from the fly on the water for a moment, then looking back at it. If you you can't readily pick out your imitation from the naturals on the water, there's a good chance you have designed an effective fly. If your first fly fails, try a smaller one in the same body and hackle before turning to darker or lighter hackles and bodies. Compare your imitation to real flies.

You'll find them caught in the eddies on exposed weed beds, in coves and backwaters. Get down on your hands and knees and lay

your imitation close to the fly struggling to get free. You'll see immediately what you did wrong.

For Mayfly spinner patterns in your fishing backyard, I would stay with the formula established in chapter 8, including the use of the white-with-rusty-edge, or dun-with-rusty-edge hen hackle on all the patterns. Body colors would have to be changed to match, of course, but there are far fewer spinner body colors to worry about than dun.

For Caddis patterns, I would experiment with my traditional soft-hackled patterns which have been recommended as excellent Caddis pupa imitations by other writers. Start with a Partridge and Orange thorax fly, as follows:

Size: To match.

Tying thread: Orange.

Body: Orange tying thread, down and back once.

Thorax: A small tuft or ball of hare's face.

Hackle: Light or dark partridge, no more than two wraps.

Tie the same fly in green, yellow and brown as imitations of Caddis on your streams, and darken or lighten the hackle to match the wings of the pupa. Fish the fly upstream or downstream, with or without drag, blind or at rising targets. The Mother's Day Caddis in chapter two can also be altered in color to match your Caddis, but I would keep the style and profile. You could even tie it as a dry fly with the addition of a small, grizzly cock

hackle just behind the mole fur head.

In conclusion, I live near some of the finest stone fly water in the country, yet I cannot get excited about fishing this monstrous fly, although I know that very large trout come to it in one artificial form or another. This does not mean that a soft-hackled fly could not be designed as an effective imitation of the stonefly. In fact, older literature places the Partridge and Orange at the head of the list of stonefly imitations. And I have fished a size 14 Partridge and Yellow quite successfully as an imitation of the Yellow Sally. But I never tried a soft hackle for the big one and one half inch long creature until July, 1988, when I tied some Partridge and Orange Thoraxes on size 4 and 6. I used the big brown-barred flank feathers from the bird and orange floss for the body together with a large, loose thorax of dark hare's face under the hackle. It was opening day on the Yellowstone in the park, and there was a good hatch of the ugly critters which brought up many hungry Cutthroats. After a couple of casts, I thought I needed an indicator because the big, rank fly sank like a rock. So, I tied in a dropper and added a large, floating Goofus Bug to it, giving the fish a choice. Three times in a row they took the Partridge and Orange, pulling the Goofus Bug down and out of sight like a 25-cent red-yellow-and-blue bobber.

Chapter 8: The Rusty Spinner

It's very possible to fish a spinner fall successfully without ever getting a look at the bug you're imitating so carefully. //

SEX, DEATH, AND FLY-FISHING, By John Gierach, 1990

It was Art Flick who wrote in NEW STREAMSIDE GUIDE, 1969, "For every species of may flies that exists, there is of course, a spinner, and it is my sincere belief that they are not worth bothering with on the whole."

The first part of that statement deserves commendation for its succinctness. The second part, however, may be off the mark because I have found a Soft-hackled Spinner which is very well worth bothering with, specially when (A) trout feed on the surface with splashy rises; (B) it is nigh impossible to ascertain what they are feeding on; (C) it is the last hour of the summer fishing day.

Not only Flick, but many other angling authors, ancient and contemporary, have neglected the spinner. Where the patterns for mayfly duns seem endless, there is only a handful of spinner patterns that appear at all in angling literature. According to Flick's statement, there should be as many spinner patterns as there are dun, and there should be just as many opportunities to catch trout on spinners as on duns. In both cases, there aren't, and it's easy to see why.

Mayfly dun emergence is, by and large, a highly visible daytime activity which takes place in a fairly concentrated space. The hatches occur with some regularity and can be studied and observed repeatedly. From this, artificial patterns can be designed, fishing methods suggested and emergence times and dates predicted.

Not so with the spinner. All the entomologists tell us is that the duns fly some distance from the water, (never how far), hide under leaves of trees or on blades of grass (never how long) ripening into the imagines; that at the right and proper time (never when) they shed their outer skins, fly back to the water or near it, select members of the opposite sex, and mate. Think how many dun emergence charts you've seen. How many spinner mating or falling charts have you seen? That's right. None.

After mating, the female has to get back to the water from whence she came to lay her eggs or eventually there would be no more of her ilk in her part of the river. It would be interesting to know what percentage of this or that dun survives the trout, the birds, the weather or whatever, to return as a male or female spinner. J. C. Mottram must have thought about this too when he wrote the following in THOUGHTS ON ANGLING, (ND). "THE CHANGE FROM DUN TO SPINNER.--In March, and especially in April, millions of duns hatch out, yet it is rare to see any spinners dancing until the middle of May or until some really warm weather occurs.

What happens to all those millions of duns? Do they die? Do they change to spinners and then die? Do they survive until the hot weather comes?" Later. "THE HABITS OF SPINNERS.—The migration of spinners is an interesting behaviour. It has been seen that the nymphs are continually drifting down-stream, from one foothold to another, so that they will hatch a long way below the place where the eggs were laid. If there were not some counteraction to this down-stream migration the insects would soon be lost in the sea; this is prevented by an up-stream migration of the female spinners after mating and when about to lay eggs.

"At the end of July or early in August the migration of the Sherry spinner is to be seen on any calm evening; it begins about eight o'clock and lasts for forty-five minutes. The flies move up-stream at a regular speed of about four miles an hour, so they will fly up-stream about three miles before egg-laying."

And, "Once more it is evident that much remains to be found out about the life histories of these delicate and harmless insects."

Even if we knew more, we still would be faced with the problem of tying the spinner, for no creature in nature is as light and delicate. Listen to Vincent C. Marinaro in A MODERN DRY-FLY CODE. "The wings of spinners have always been the despair of every flytier who has attempted to imitate them.

Everything imaginable has been tried in an attempt to reproduce their glossy transparent appearance." He lists failed wing materials: hackle points, hackle fibres, cellophane and something called fishskin. The new synthetic materials such as poly yarns suggested for today's wings of spinners are just as useless. The material is too solid. To the trout, the fly must look like a floating, wooden cross.

There is much written in favor of no wing at all. Frederic M. Halford, "DRY FLY FISHING", 1889. "This flat-winged state in which they appear on the water is to my mind one of the strongest arguments in favour of dressing spinners hackle or buzz fashion." (without wings).

Col. E. W. Harding, THE FLY FISHER & THE TROUT'S POINT OF VIEW, 1931. "The body of the spinner is more likely to be on the water, or rather in the surface film, so that its right colouring is more important. Secondly, its wings are far more transparent than those of the dun and in this instance the plain hackled fly is almost certainly a better representation than a fly winged with fibres of wing feather."

Eric Tavener, "TROUT FISHING FROM ALL ANGLES" 1933. "The spinner of this pale watery (July Dun) when it is spent is well imitated by the Pheasant tail (no wing) and by the Rusty Spinner (no wing) dressed on a double cipher hook.....

"Pheasant Tail

Hook: 0, 00. (15 and 16)

Silk: hot orange.

Whisks: honey-dun cock.

Body: three or four strands from the ruddy tail feather of a cock pheasant wound as a herl.

Ribbing: fine gold wire.

Hackle: sharp, bright blue, or honey-dun, or rusty dun cock.

"Rusty Spinner.

Hook: 1 (14).

Silk: hot orange.

Body: deep red chestnut pig's wool, ribbed with fine gold wire.

Hackle: rusty blue dun cock.

Whisks: three strands of honey-dun cock, spade feather (Skues)."

Doug Swisher and Carl Richards, TYING THE SWISHER/RICHARDS FLIES, 1977, "One variation of the Hen Spinner is called the No-Wing Spinner. It is tied without any wings at all, and is used in situations where the hyaline wings of the spinner are all but invisible to the trout. Thus the complete absence of wings makes a better imitation than does a wing that is too obvious..."

Not the word, 'obvious', but its antithesis is what we

might be looking for in the way of a hackle for the spinner, something that's there but can hardly be seen, something which will help keep the artificial spinner up in the surface film just long enough for a fish to see it and take it. Such a hackle could be called achromatic, that is to say having no color at all. Such a hackle is the white with rusty edge, a very common and inexpensive hen hackle which I used on the Soft-hackled Pale Morning Dun in Chapter 3. The hackle center is not truly white, but ranges from white to pale blue dun. The 'rusty' edges can best be defined as a sparkling gold, which is very difficult to see under certain light. Before I give you the complete dressing of the Soft-hackled Rusty Spinner let me include a quote from A BOOK OF TROUT FLIES, 1970, by Preston J. Jennings, which helps to explain my choice of a hen hackle for this fly. "Hen hackles are useless for the ordinary patterns of dry flies, as the barbs are too weak to properly support the weight of the hook. There are some types of flies where this kind of hackle can be used to advantage, such as Spent Mayflies which lie prone on the surface film of the stream. In this type of fly the hackle is not intended to support the fly above the surface of the water, but allows it to sink into the surface film, in the same manner a natural Spent Mayfly floats. The hackle, being soft, sinks into the water and moves about with every influence of the current."

Here is the dressing for the soft-hackled Rusty Spinner.

Size: 15, 17, 19 Tiemco 102Y.

Tying thread: Orange or hot orange.

Body: Rusty dubbing, (Sprectrum #46, Hareline #23, or similar), thin tapered body with a decided hump or expansion just before the hackle, for two thirds of hook shank.

Ribbing: Thinnest, gold wire. (Optional)

Hackle: Hen, white with rusty edge, or any splotched, light colored, hen hackle. Three or four wraps, tied angling back slightly.

Head: Rusty dubbing up against the hackle.

Tail: A few strands of sparkle poly material.

Earlier, I gave the dresssing for the Pheasant tail from Taverner's book to illustrate the point that many spinner patterns were tied without wings. This fly will perform almost as well as the rusty spinner soft-hackle. My recipe is almost the same except as noted in the following:

Size: 15, 17, 19 Tiemco 102Y.

Tying thread: Orange or hot orange.

Body: Three or four herls from ruddy or golden brown center tail feather of a rooster pheasant, up to two thirds of the hook shank.

Ribbing: Finest gold wire.

Hackle: White with rusty edge. Three or four wraps angling back slightly.

Head: One or two turns of a single pheasant herl up against the hackle.

Tail: A few strands of clear, sparkle poly.

If ever there was a fly truly suited to soft-hackled fly design, this spinner is it: simple design, short body, sparse, emollient hackle, quick and easy to tie. Easy to fish, too, as we shall see further down the path. Yes, the rusty spinner could be the archetype of this kind of fly fishing, the borderline between dry and wet; "half floating", half sinking; half in, half out; or a "rather damp" fly as Harding called it.

The Spinner was rather late coming into the fold of soft-hackled fly imitations. It did not exist before June, 1989.

There were two harbingers of its coming, however. One came through Herb Myer when he said the Soft-hackled Pale Morning Dun reminded him of a spinner, (Chapter 3). And the other came when Dave Hall caught three large rainbows at dark on the Henry's Fork with the same fly, the trout probably mistaking it for a spinner (Chapter 3).

From these, I talked to Lisa Keckeissen, Henry's Fork professional fly tyer, about designing a rusty spinner using the same hackle. She thought it was a good idea, suggested the body and tied the first one in her shop the morning after Dave's experience.

The first inkling I had after that that the fly would work on the swing (as well as dead drift) was on the Madison catchand-release water sometime in late July. I was in one of my favorite riffles fishing the <u>Baetis</u> and heading towards the last hour of the day. In the middle of the riffle, in the fastest part of it,

I saw two fish, one after another slash wildly at something but was not able to tell what. On a hunch I put on a new, Soft-hackled Rusty spinner and just threw it at the fish, not minding about drag, and one of them took it so fiercely, he broke me instantly. I went to 4X and tried again. His partner took the fly with the same vigor, hooking himself and was landed and released, a brown in the 12 to 14 inch range.

I didn't think much about the incident until the first of August, when I fished the Gallatin one evening with a friend and his wife. She had just started fishing and I offered to help her try to catch a trout.

By the side of a lovely, broad riffle, I started her with a Mother's Day Caddis because Caddis flies were buzzing around our heads and a few trout were rising splashily. She cast the fly several times, but nothing happened. I decided to change her fly to a Soft-hackled Pheasant Tail with a partridge hackle on the front, and immediately, she started getting pulls on the fly, hooking and landing a small trout.

Just before dark, many more fish started feeding across the riffle with the same splashy rises. I saw nothing in the air and nothing on the water. I was bent over as close to the water as possible, my two hands on my thighs when the message from a benevolent piscatorial saint appeared on my left thumb. It was a spinner, not spent, the wings still partially upright, clear as

glass. Had I turned her over, I probably would have seen the egg sac. Now, I knew what the trout were feeding on, and why the lady's Pheasant Tail attracted some trout, but it was too late, darkness was on us.

I came back alone the next evening equipped with several Soft-hackled Rusty Spinners. Just before dark, the trout started. One was feeding in knee deep water just below me. I got on my hands and bent forward as far as I could go and peered closely at the surface. I still could not see anything coming down, yet when I stood up the trout began to feed below me! I turned around, threw the Rusty Spinner at him with less than a foot of line through the tip top, and he took it greedily.

The big guys were out in the middle of the riffle, however, and now I went after them. Some of them were almost out of reach with my Winston 3 weight, but when I could reach them with the fly, most of them took it hard as soon as the spinner hit the water. Those fish were unapproachable from any other position in the river. From below, the required, long cast would mean no control of the fly once it hit the fast, choppy water. There was a high bank and trees on the other side. And there was no standing in the hip deep, fast water straight above.

Since then, the Soft-hackled Rusty Spinner has become my standard medicine for evening fishing in Montana during late summer. It has solved the perplexing problems of the invisible fly, splashy rises and long distance fish. It'll fish blind. On

the swing. And up or down with no drag.

The Soft-hackled Rusty Spinner saved an evening for Frank Bell on the Madison. Doug Vanerka took an 18 inch brown on the Missouri with it during an evening when three of us had over 20 fish with the same fly. And Mike Langford taking Skues' tip, "that during the rise of any kind of dun, its spinner will often take as well as, if not better than, the subimago pattern." fished the fly successfully during a hatch of <u>Baetis</u> duns on a private spring creek near Bozeman, Montana.

One of the writers I read before starting this chapter thought trout did not dine on spinners because they had no nutritive value left in their diaphonous forms. Another writer thought the fish were able to detect and select egg-bearing females (there really is no reason for males to return to the water after mating) because along with whatever was left of the good, old girl as food, there was also a small mouthful of fresh, newly fertilized eggs which made the chase even more tempting and satisfying.

Now, after seeing quite a few trout slash at spinners and take my offering, (not all the rises to the Soft-hackled Spinner are like that) I think that trout do know the difference between the female about to discharge some or all her eggs on the surface and spent spinners floating down the stream inertly. The rise forms are different. For the fresh, live spinner the rise is urgent, desparate, last chance. For the spent, dying or

dead, <u>sans oeuf</u>, the rise is slow, lazy, couldn't care less.

And, it seems the trout throws away caution with the first, not caring if the imitation is dragging; but not falling for a dragging imitation of the latter because it is not accustomed to seeing those spinners act that way.