

Western Hairflies

by Wayne "Buz" Buszek

From Field & Stream Magazine, March 1954, pages 100-103

Fly tying came to this country from England. It arrived in the East and gradually spread to the West, far from the influence of methods and patterns originating on the Continent. The Western angler, an individualist in his own right, has never been one to favor tradition in his fishing. Living in a land of vast fishing potentialities, he has set about solving his angling problems in a manner to his own liking. Every type of water is available for experiment:

1. Slow, meandering, dry-fly-type meadow streams; 2. Steep, rockbound canyons, home of the native rainbow and with large rivers, fast and swift, treacherous to fish, but dear to the hearts of those adept in the art of deep wading; 3. Other rivers so deep they must be fished from a boat under the guidance of skilled rivermen.

Being a part of all this, and having the desire to spend as much time fishing as possible, the angler in the West is not content to sit at the vise marrying intricate combinations of colors to make a fancy wing. Beauty is not necessary. If a fly catches fish, we use it and are thankful that some enterprising fly tyer happened on the pattern. Many types of fly new to the field have come from the fingers of the Western tyer and angler. Some have lived and others have passed on to happy oblivion. A series that is still gaining popularity among anglers are those flies made of hair, either wholly or in part.

Back in the early part of the century, a Mr. Carter H. Harrison and a party of friends were camped near Big Springs on the Snake River in Idaho. One evening, while sitting in the living room of Mr. A. S. Trude, on whose ranch they were camped, pattern as a joke and present it to from a reddish-colored spaniel concocted a fly on a very large fishing trips. The worsted from a wing was fashioned from the dog hair to finish. This crude pattern tied one with a green body and hooks. A silver tinsel rib was substituted for the squirrel hair. Trude. The next day on the offerings of the standard patterns, Trude was cast to the large cutthroats. They responded with wild abandon. Both the green and the red fly accounted for a great many large trout that day, and from this beginning came the first hairflies.



Harrison decided to make up a Trude. Taking some ravelings and some squirrel hair, he hook used as a gaff on previous rug was tied on for a body, and a hair with a rough hackle of squirrel appealed so much to Harrison he another with red on regular trout added and brown hackle was The fly was named in honor of Mr. Buffalo River, the trout refused all and in desperation the red-bodied

To the north of the Snake in Missoula, Montana, a Mr. Potts, angler and fly tyer, conceived the idea of making flies entirely from hair. Disliking the feather's close clinging to the bodies of his flies in the fast-water rivers he loved to fish, he evolved the use of hair for hackle. Being stiffer than ordinary hackle, the hairs stood out from the body, quivering and vibrating in the waters. In imitating the many underwater nymphs the trout found so irresistible, he mixed various colored hairs, and wove them into a body. These flies proved especially effective and extremely rugged. Their use spread rapidly through the Rocky Mountains.

Probably the most popular pattern that holds its own to this day is the Sandy Mite. Made of brown and white hairs mixed together, braided with an orange or reddish stripe on the belly, and with straw-colored hackle, it purportedly simulates some form of caddis or mayfly nymph. Fish suck this fly deeply when they take it, so the resemblance to some natural food must be remarkably accurate.

Lost in the dim past, but probably traceable to some feather-strewn room near an Oregon stream is the origin of the use of mule deer hair. Disgusted with trying to float his dry flies on the tumbling waters of the McKenzie, Rogue and Willamette, an unknown tyer searched for something that would float his flies, something that would bring them back up after being sucked under, but with enough buoyancy to bob along on the surface. He probably tried many materials before stumbling on the hollow-celled deer hair. It came in various shades of gray and brown, but he was attracted by the moth-gray hairs with multiple shades of brown flecking the tips, and they earned instant favor with the trout in his streams. Tied with upright wings, bucktail wings, spread wings, and some never seen before, they worked and floated far beyond his fondest expectations. Through the years the

patterns have increased in number. Some vary only by a shade of color. Others are so similar as not to merit separate names, but are popular in their makers' own spheres of influence. A few of merit that have held their own through the years are the Light Caddis, The Dark Caddis and the Old Gray Mare. One fly that has gained fame in many of the Western States in recent years is the Horner Deer Hair. A scraggly, chunky-bodied one, made entirely from deer hair with the exception of one Grizzly hackle, it is a killing dry fly. This pattern has been popularized by Jack Horner, one of the West's most skilled dry fly men.

Being addicted to the use of hair winged flies, I was always disappointed with the slim catches during the high-water stages in early spring runoffs. I had used impala hair with fair success; polar bear also met with good and bad luck. Bucktail seemed to be somewhat better, but was still not the answer. Sorting over a shipment of deer hair one day, I found a patch of very white hair that I had been seeking. One flaw was its fragility.

I tied up a half-dozen flies from the new hair and the following weekend gave them a trial. The water was fairly high and tea-colored – not muddy, but far from clear. As it was my intention to use the flies as wet bucktails, I soaked one. Tying it to my tapered leader, I tossed it into the water. The hair, being hollow, stood out at an angle to the hook. The resistance against the current caused it to quiver and shake in a startlingly realistic manner. Best of all, I could see the white hair even as the fly sank deep into the water.

All that remained was the question of whether the trout would accept it. About forty feet upstream, a cascade of white surging water dropped into a rock-girded pool, breaking its back against a sharp rock ledge midway through. Beyond the ledge it turned green, with little blobs of foam dancing on the surface. I flicked the fly upstream and carefully took up line as it swept toward me. Veering out around the rock, it sank deep. I saw a flash of silver and, raising the rod tip, was into a fighting rainbow. Four more fish were taken from this pool before I moved on upstream.

Occasionally, a freak current would hold a bobbing patch of brownish foam in a circling eddy. These for trout, particularly Lock Levens. for the shadow of a salmon fly or needed rest. I wondered, as I cast foam, if the fly would take Lochs the foam erupted and I caught the he turned and took the fly down Living in an area where wet fly



Horner Deer Hair – a killing dry fly and classic example of the hairwing type

hold a bobbing patch of brownish patches always have an attraction Evidently they lie below, watching mayfly settling on the foam for a into the first of these patches of also. It was a short-lived problem; yellow flash of big Loch Leven as with him.

patterns predominate, it took many

a fishless hour before I stumbled fly. Late one afternoon found me gorges on the East Fork of the stream, with glass-smooth granite towering far above the dark pools. Fishing was excellent, and I released several nice trout during the first hour. Evening shadows were extending dark fingers across the pools now, and eagerly I flicked my fly through the “hot spots” of several successive pools. Occasionally there was a flash of silver near the fly, but the trout were picketing me. Approaching another pool, I paused to study the situation. As I stood there in the gathering twilight I noticed an occasional dimple at the edges of the feeding run. Slowly I moved closer to the glide. It was then I saw a few dark insects fluttering over the water. A hatch of caddisflies was on, and the trout were busy collecting these tidbits.

onto the possibilities of the dry deep in one of the shadow-flecked Kaweah River. It is a rugged

I didn't have any fly dressing along that day, but I selected an especially heavily dressed Western Coachman. It had no resemblance to the hatch, but its first float brought immediate action. Several fish were brought to net and released before the others became too wary. Until darkness brought an end to fishing they struck with wild abandon. The initial introduction of this pattern – once the G. P. Coachman, now Western Coachman – was an eventful one. Succeeding seasons added to its usefulness. For over ten years now, it has met all competition in whitewaters, and held its own in quiet stretches. I would make a suggestion to the Eastern angler making his first trip to the waters of the West: Bring your sparsely tied dry flies. They will take fish in many places. When first you see the Western creations, don't wrinkle your nose in disgust. They will take trout for you where your bits of fluff will go unseen. A logical and profitable rule on which I have based my angling career is this one: If they don't see the fly, they won't take it. Give them something big in heavy waters. Give them visibility, flash and action. You will return at night lugging a heavy creel.