Soft-Hackle Flies for Summer Steelhead

By Dennis P. Lee

THE KLAMATH RIVER'S SUMMER STEELHEAD RUN CAN BEGIN AS EARLY AS JULY, BUT THE MAJORITY OF FISH TYPICALLY ENTER THE RIVER IN LATE AUGUST AND EARLY SEPTEMBER. THIS IS THE PERFECT TIME TO FISH A FLOATING LINE, AND THESE STEELHEAD WILL FALL FOR SOFT-HACKLE PATTERNS LIKE THE ONE ABOVE.

As I turned off the paved road and onto the unimproved track that wound across the large gravel bar, the absence of vehicles and anglers in the area was surprising for mid-September. I have always felt that the late summer and early fall period is a great time to fish the middle reaches of the Klamath River. The weather is pleasant, the hardwood trees are just starting to show their fall colors, and the river is usually in great shape for fly fishing. I was searching for half-pounders and larger adult steelhead migrating to holding and spawning areas in the upper watershed.

The Klamath River half-pounder run first enters fresh water in August and peaks around the first of September, while some adult fish may enter the river as early as July, most enter in late August and early September, as well, although some will continue to enter the river through October. Normally, gravel bars that provide easy access to runs that fish well are occupied by at least a couple of anglers at this time of year. I saw no one and wondered if I had missed some special California Fish and Game Commission drought angling closure while out of Internet and cell phone coverage. Ignoring that possibility and looking forward to having the river to myself, I continued along the rocky, unimproved road to the downstream expanse of gravel and streamside willows.

I parked my Ford F-250 Super Duty and Lance cab-over camper just off the well-worn tire tracks. An old fire ring suggested someone had been using the area, but maybe they were not fishing. After pulling on waders and wading boots and assembling my rod, I locked the truck and camper and headed along a worn game trail through the willows and blackberries to the river.

I was fishing with what has become my favorite Klamath River two-handed rod, Gary Anderson's 1305-4 four-piece, 13 feet in length, which performs extremely well with a 34-foot, 340-grain floating Scandinavian shooting head backed with monofilament running line. I call it the "Klamath Cannon," and Gary has come out with an even lighter higher-modulus graphite model the same length and line weight that he calls the "Rogue Rocket."

I had attached a 15-foot leader with a 3-foot-long 6-pound tippet, making a total of 18 feet. I knotted on one of my favorite soft-hackle flies, a simple gray grouse-and-black pattern, size 8 and unweighted. In England, soft-hackle flies are sometime called "spiders," and for trout are often fished on a cast of up to three flies. However, I prefer to use only one fly on my tippet when fishing for summer steelhead.

The river was flowing about 1,400 cubic feet per second, perfect for summer steelhead fishing with a floating line. The weather was typical for this time of year, cool in the early morning, requiring a jacket, but warming in the afternoon. Surprisingly, the

river was clear, not the brown typical of past seasons. Likely, several years of drought like conditions and low stream flows had reduced the outflow from the upper-river pasturelands before entering the Klamath Marsh, north of the town of Chiloquin, Oregon. The river flowing out of the marsh usually has a dark-brown tannic color high in dissolved plant substances and usually does not clear. The Klamath River basin is also often plagued with toxic blue-green algae blooms during the summer and early fall months, when temperatures rise and water quality is favorable for algae growth.

The sun was just starting to set behind the mountains as I scanned the pool's tail out from the gravel shore. This particular tai lout was fairly wide and at the end of a very long pool. It emptied into a narrow and steep wave train with a couple of large boulders at the bottom. Tai louts like this one are favorite holding areas for both half-pounders and adult steelhead as they migrate through high-gradient reaches of the river.

I needed to wade out about 40 feet through a shallow section that would allow me to cover the holding water with 60-to-80-foot casts. The rocky bottom was relatively easy wading, but slick. My wading ability has diminished with age, and I now carry and often use a collapsible wading staff.

Following advice from John Hazel at Deschutes Anglers, my first casts were with just the leader and a few feet of line out of the tip top. There is a good possibility that a steelhead will be holding close on your side of the river. I made subsequent casts by pulling a few more feet of line from the reel. As I worked line out, I used a single Spey cast to cover the near fishing area. Once I had about 30 feet of running line out and had covered the holding water, I started working downstream a couple steps after each cast.

When fishing a floating line for summer steelhead, my casts are usually made across and slightly downstream. Occasionally, when fishing a soft-hackle fly, I cast slightly upstream to allow the fly to drift naturally in the current, somewhat reminiscent of the Atlantic salmon greased-line technique. I also try to make sure the fly and leader turn over completely and start fishing immediately. If I want to reduce belly in the line, I increase the downstream angle or make a reach cast, holding the rod upstream as the running line shoots through the guides.

Once the fly, leader, and line are on the water, I may pull in a little line to tighten the connection with the fly or make upstream mends in the floating shooting head in an effort to slow the fly's progress as it swings across a tail out. Mending is done only to reduce line belly, allowing the fly to drift more naturally. Slowing it down also allows the soft hackles of the fly to move in a lifelike manner. The rod tip follows the line through the drift, helping keep constant contact with the fly.

At the end of the swing, I like to let the fly dangle downstream for a few moments, sometimes giving a few twitches to the line, just in case a fish has followed the fly and might take it on the hang. If I don't get a hit or hook a fish after fishing to the end of a run or tail out, but have confidence fish are around, I will wade out and walk back upstream, starting at the top again, but usually changing the fly pattern.

Fortunately, I did not have to work my all the way down this particular tail out before hooking my first half-pounder. The fish took the soft-hackle fly about midway through the drift, just after a mend. It made a couple of short runs, jumped, and easily came to hand for release. A summer steelhead take on a tight line is electrifying, and there is no mistaking the grab. My first half-pounder this evening was about 14 inches in length and as bright as a newly minted silver dollar. Since half-pounders do not become sexually mature on their first return to fresh water, they typically do not exhibit the rose or pinkish colors of rainbow trout or adult steelhead as they become sexually mature.

A NICELY COLORED MALE KLAMATH RIVER SUMMER STEELHEAD TAKEN ON A SOFT-HACKLED FLY.

After releasing the fish, I checked the fly and leader and began working out the line with a downstream switch cast for another cast and swing through the tail out. When fishing river left, I often use a snap-T or circle cast to set up the anchor, since I am not as proficient with the single Spey when making longer casts.

Another cast across and slightly downstream, followed with an upstream mend, and the soft hackled fly was swinging through the center of the tail out. A hard pull on the line and the heavy weight let me know I had hooked an adult steelhead. The fish ran upstream and across the tail out, followed with a spectacular jump that cleared the water. I estimated the fish to be about six pounds, the largest steelhead I have hooked on the Klamath River. Since first fishing the Klamath River in 1968, most of the adult summer steelhead I have taken have been two and a half to four pounds, with larger fish being infrequent.

I kept a tight line on the steelhead with the 13-foot rod. Unfortunately, while the longer rod provides better line and fly control and a little more casting distance, it also gives the fish more leverage. Also, it becomes more difficult to bring a large fish to hand while standing in waist-deep water, especially with a 6-pound tippet.

As an alternative, I carefully worked my way backward toward the shoreline, allowing the steelhead to make short runs toward deeper water. Finally, the fish came into the shallows, and as it rolled over, I quickly moved to the fish and reached down to remove the small soft-hackle fly. I stared at the beautiful steelhead, which was just starting to show a pink blush on the gill plates and along the sides. As I held it upright and released it, the fish swam quickly across the shallows and disappeared into the deeper water.

The evening ended with a several more half-pounders and adult steelhead to hand, all taken on similar small soft-hackle flies fished on a long leader and floating line. Uncharacteristically, I quit fishing early, not waiting until the bats were flying. The opportunity to take several fish from a beautiful reach of river using a favorite method meant the evening already had been a success.

Some History

The origin of soft-hackle flies goes back several centuries. Robert L. Smith, in his beautifully illustrated 2015 book, *The North Country Fly: Yorkshire's Soft Hackle Tradition*, provides the most complete account of the early origins of soft-hackle flies. In the first chapter, Smith describes the beginnings of the North Country school of tying soft-hackle flies in Yorkshire, England) beginning with the earliest patterns imported to England by the Romans, on through what he describes as "the Modern Masters." Subsequent chapters cover entomology and representation, seasons, dressing, and fishing techniques.

The history of soft-hackle fly patterns tied for trout and steelhead in the West is of considerably more recent vintage. I have used soft-hackle flies to take half-pounders and adult steelhead from Northern California and Southern Oregon rivers for several decades, but I do not claim any credit for their use for summer steelhead, and several modern writers have written about soft-hackle flies.

In 1975, Sylvester Nemes, in his first book, *The Soft Hackled Fly: A Trout Fisherman's Guide*, declared: "A minor revolution has been taking place during the last few years in the

style of fly fishing for steelhead as practiced in the west. The style has been turned topsy-turvy from big, heavy-weight flies, sinking shooting heads; to small, sparsely dressed, unweighted flies, and the floating or greased line."

In the early 1970s, Brad Jackson, one of the original partners of The Fly Shop in Redding, and I experimented with buggy patterns resembling soft-hackle patterns when we lived on California's North Coast. We even wrote an article for *Salmon Trout Steelheader* magazine that highlighted patterns we tied for the Rogue, Klamath, and Trinity Rivers. The flies were simple creations, tied with a short fiber tail, dubbed seal fur body, and hackle collar of a soft hen, partridge, or similar feather. Our patterns were reminiscent of earlier wingless patterns created for Northern California steelhead rivers such as Lloyd Silvius's Brindle Bug, Arnold Arana's Burlap, John Borsia's Orleans Barber, popularized by Eureka fly tyer Jim Pray, the Brown Hackle Peacock and Gray Hackle Peacock patterns, and the Pecwan Nymph. All of these early patterns were designed as a simple wingless nymph like patterns. Brad and I usually fished for half-pounders and adult steelhead using our soft-hackle patterns from late August through October using sink-tip or full floating lines and 7-weight or 8-weight single-handed rods.

However, Brad and I were not the only fly anglers experimenting with soft-hackle flies for summer steelhead. In the wingless style of soft-hackle fly, Bob Arnold, in his 1995 book, *Steelhead and the Floating Line: A Meditation*, included a plate of 15 different steelhead flies, including a pattern he called the "Spade." The fly was originally a specific pattern, but the name became synonymous with a number of variations similar to the wingless hackled patterns of the 1950s and 1960s for the Klamath and Trinity Rivers. Arnold reportedly designed his Spade fly in 1964 for summer steelhead fishing on the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River. Arnold's original pattern included a tail of deer body hair tied in a small bunch that is not allowed to splay or flair, a body of fine black chenille, and a soft grizzly hackle tied as a collar. Arnold first tied the pattern on a Sealey 1736J black, up-turned-eye hook with a slightly shorter shank, which created a short, compact fly with a larger hook gape. He indicated he wanted a less obtrusive pattern to present to Stillaguamish River summer steelhead during low-water periods.

Other authors have written and published books on soft-hackle flies or included them in books describing wet-fly fishing techniques. And other names have also been used to describe soft-hackle flies. In *The Art of Tying the Wet Fly and Fishing the Flymph*, first published in 1971, Vernon S. Hidy coined the word "flymph" for what was basically a soft-hackle pattern. Hidy defined the flymph as "a wingless artificial fly with a soft, translucent body of fur or wool which blends with the under color of the tying silk when wet, utilizing hackle fibers easily activated by the currents to give the effect of an insect alive in the water, and strategically cast diagonally upstream or across for the trout to take just below or within a few inches of the surface film." The term "flymph" is still occasionally seen in print, but did not become popular with the Northern California fly-fishing fraternity as a common name to describe soft-hackle flies.

In *The Soft-Hackled Fly*, Sylvester Nemes declared that the term "soft-hackled fly" applied to "a class of wingless, subaqueous flies, the hackles of which come mostly from birds such as partridge, woodcock, grouse, snipe, and starling." Nemes also said that he first saw a soft-hackle fly about 1960 in Paul H. Young's fly shop in Detroit, Michigan. Young called the flies "P.H.Y. Partridge Spiders." He reported that in Young's catalogue, the flies were advertised to be "fished like a nymph. This is one of the best all-around wet flies I have ever used. Fished down and across stream, they take trout. Hackles lay back along the hook, and crawl or work in the current."

Nemes also published *The Soft Hackled Fly Addict* in 1993 and a third book, *Two Centuries of Soft Hackled Flies: A Survey of the Literature Complete with Original Patterns, 1747–Present* in 2006. He also updated his 1975 book

with a new edition *The Soft-Hackled Fly and Tiny Soft Hackles: A Trout Fisherman's Guide*. The 2006 revised edition includes colorful experiences at home and abroad, a history of the soft-hackle fly, illustrated step-by-step instructions for tying the flies, and descriptions of his technique of fishing the flies.

Western fly-fishing authors were also writing about soft-hackle flies. Dave Hughes, the Oregon fly angler and author of more than 20 books on fly fishing and tying, included soft-hackle flies in this 1995 book *Wet Flies: Tying and Fishing Soft-Hackles, Winged and Wingless Wets, and Fuzzy Nymphs*. And more recently, RIO Products produced a how-to video in 2016 titled *How to Fish a Soft Hackle* for trout in rivers. The video is narrated by Simon Gawesworth, who works for RIO in Idaho, where he designs and tests fly lines, as well as being the marketing manager for RIO. Many of Simon's suggestions for fishing soft-hackle flies for trout can be applied to summer steelhead.

SOFT-HACKLED FLIES CAN BE TIED WITH A VARIETY OF BODY MAERIALS AND FEATHER HACKLES, LIMITED ONLY BY ONE'S IMAGATION

Materials Then and Now

Early soft-hackle flies were usually tied on small, trout-sized, short-shank, round-bend hooks with ring eyes. For summer steelhead, larger sizes are more appropriate and usually range from size 6 to as small as size 12. I like a round-bend hook with a ring eye for my summer steelhead soft-hackle flies. Today's modern hooks are sharp, strong, and usually have a very small, unobtrusive barb that can be easily mashed down. When I fish a fly with a ring-eyed hook, I like to attach the fly to the tippet using a loop knot such as the Duncan Loop or Uni Knot.

In the early North Country tradition, a tail is usually omitted on soft-hackle patterns. The inclusion or exclusion of a tail is mostly a matter of preference. However, a tail composed of a few whisks of hackle fiber may visually balance the fly.

North Country soft-hackle flies were sometimes identified by the materials used for the fly's construction, for example, the Partridge and Orange or Snipe and Purple. Bodies were often simply various colors of silk tying thread. In some instances, a small amount of natural dubbing was applied to the silk to create a more translucent, buggy appearance. Bodies were occasionally ribbed with fine wire or a contrasting silk thread. Similar materials and methods make effective flies for summer steelhead, although today's fly tyer have many more choices of natural and artificial materials for bodies. I like to include a small tag of silver or gold tinsel on my soft-hackle patterns in the tradition of West Coast steelhead flies.

Early soft-hackle fly hackles were tied using feathers from a variety of small game birds and occasionally using poultry hackles, with the hackles meant to imitate the wings and legs of insects. The feather hackle was tied in by the base near the hook eye, and after the body was finished, were wound with two or more turns. The ends of the hackle fibers usually extend just past the end of the hook. Some early patterns incorporated a small thorax of peacock herl or ball of fur and occasionally a peacock herl head. The head of the fly is usually finished with a couple of turns of the tying thread and kept neat and small. A small drop of head cement on the thread head will secure the fly.

Patterns similar to the soft-hackle flies tied for trout are effective for summer steelhead. Body materials and hackles for half-pounder and other summer steelhead soft-

hackle flies are limitless. The body can be constructed using colored tying thread or wound using a variety of natural furs, such as rabbit, beaver, mink, or fox. In addition, feather barbs, the long filament extending from the feather stem, can be wound on wire or the tying thread to create unique, lifelike bodies. Soft-hackle flies with fur or feather bodies can be over wound with fine wire or tinsel to make the fly more durable. Artificial dubbing, tinsel, or other types of stranded material can also be used for the fly body. Hen necks, partridge, grouse, ring neck pheasant, and even waterfowl feathers make excellent hackles. Make sure the hackle is long and supple, not stiff, and will pulsate in the current.

In fresh water, half-pounders and adult summer steelhead will feed on a variety of items. Unlike resident trout, they do not become conditioned to a particular insect emergence and appear to be more opportunistic. Aquatic insects are commonly taken and include the nymphs and adults of stoneflies, mayflies, and caddisflies. Although soft-hackle flies do not represent exact imitations of any of these insects, their generic form and imitation make them an excellent fly choice for summertime steelhead fly fishing.

THESE SOFT-HACKLED STEELHAD FLIES ARE TIED ON DAIICHI'S ALEX JACKSON HOOKS WHICH HAVE AN UPTURNED EYE AND GRACEFUL BEND. THE PATTERNS ARE STLIZED FOR HALF-POUNDER AND ADULT STEELHEAD.

Although soft-hackle flies were conceived several hundred years ago, they remain a staple pattern in many trout anglers' fly boxes. More importunately for steelhead anglers, they are an effective pattern for summer steelhead, especially when fished on a floating line and light leader. Long gone are the days of heavy sinking heads and 8-weight and 9-weight single-handed rods for summer steelhead. Today's modern summer steelhead angler can be effective with a light two-handed rod, floating shooting head in the Scandinavian style, and soft-hackled flies fished only a few inches under the water's surface.

Central Valley Steelhead

I have extolled the virtues of using soft-hackle flies for summer steelhead on Northern California and Southern Oregon steelhead rivers, but anglers who fish Central Valley rivers for steelhead have a unique opportunity in the spring. Many anglers are aware of a small and somewhat inconsistent run of steelhead/rainbow trout in the American and Feather Rivers. The fish range from 12 to 20 inches, although I have heard reports of larger fish. Most of the fish have an adipose fin, indicating they are likely wild or naturally spawned fish. The origin of these fish is unknown, but some fishery scientists have suggested steelhead resembling half-pounders might be fish that migrate only as far as the California Delta, and they use the terms "weakly anadromous" or "migratory resident" to describe this life history.

These fish enter the rivers about the time the redbud starts to bloom in the valley and can be found holding in typical steelhead runs. Efforts to trap these fish at hatcheries have been unsuccessful, so most reports come from anglers. Scale analysis demonstrates that the fish show a consistent growth pattern and do not exhibit the slower freshwater and faster ocean growth periods of the half-pounders of the Rogue and Klamath Rivers. The fish appear to be sexually immature and may be from natural-spawning steelhead that migrate downstream the previous fall and return to the river on a springtime feeding migration. They also may be migrants from the large resident

trout population in the Sacramento River. Some anglers call these springtime fish "half-pounders" or "blue backs." As I described in my book *The Half-Pounder: A Steelhead Trout Life History and Fly Fishing*, neither name is truly appropriate, based on their life history. Maybe "*spring-run steelhead*" might be more appropriate and accurate.

A few years ago, during late March, I was fishing one of my favorite runs on the American River, searching for these springtime rainbow trout. I was fishing with a Gary Anderson model 1255-4, a 12-foot 5-inch 5-weight two-handed rod equipped with a floating Scandinavian shooting head with monofilament running line, an 18-foot leader, and a small soft-hackle fly. My casts were slightly down and across, making upstream mends as necessary to slow the drift and work the fly slowly across the run. I knew the unweighted fly was fishing only a few inches under the surface.

As I made my way down the run to what I thought was the best holding area, I felt a strong pull about halfway through the swing. Pulling back on the rod to set the hook, I felt the weight of the fish and knew it was not the smallish springtime fish I was expecting. Feeling the hook, the fish turned and began a long, hard run directly downstream. As the backing began to appear, the line suddenly went limp — the fish had come unhooked. I never saw the fish, but I suspected it might have been a spent winter steelhead or maybe one of those larger spring fish about which I had occasionally heard stories. Nonetheless, I was delighted to have hooked the large fish, even though it was not landed, and I was happier it took one of my small soft-hackle patterns.