

A Seal Substitute With a Curly Tail

By Wayne Luallen with special thanks to Jim Palmersheim

Most of us in fly tying have noticed more than our fair share of dead critters along side of the road. Many of us have actually stopped and picked up a Athing or two. (Some of us have regretted it later!) One such animal that most of us drive right on by is the lowly American Opossum. Opossums have a surprisingly lustrous, thick fur, and are often used, perhaps to the surprise of many, in the clothing fur trade. Jim Palmersheim from Moscow, Idaho pointed out to me the bright translucence of the Opossum's fur, which, admittedly, I had overlooked. There is a sparkle in the intermediate hair that is quite surprising. In my past experience tying flies with this fur, I had only used the soft underfur.

Jim suggested that I ought to consider American Opossum as a substitute or even a replacement in flies that call for Seal. I have used all manner of synthetics and natural materials for seal substitutes including SLF (Synthetic Living Fiber), Seal Lite, Seal-Ex, Aunt Lydia's Rug Yarn, and Angora. Some of these products alone or in combination have provided adequate results, but none are any easier to dub than seal. Jim sent me packets of dyed black natural Seal as well as dyed black Opossum to compare. On first observation you may notice that natural Seal is more lustrous, but don't rule out Opossum on that account alone.

In my Attest I first removed the finest underfur (rather dull), and longest guard hairs, retaining the longer underfur. There is a noticeable reflective quality in this longer fur as well as to some degree in the longest guard hairs. (My removal of the guard hairs was based on my initial premise that it would be more difficult to dub, but don't necessarily disregard them. They certainly add additional coarseness and some sparkle to the dub while not adding a great deal more difficulty to the dubbing process, especially when compared to natural Seal.) I chopped the fur up in various lengths and found that it felted well, spun on the thread easily, and left a wonderfully full, spiculated body on the hook similar to seal. But it still lacked two components of seal, well, perhaps three: 1) natural Seal sparkles brighter than Opossum, 2) Seal is more scraggly and less consistent, and 3) Seal is more difficult to felt and dub. With the addition of a bright synthetic such as SLF to the Opossum, the missing sparkle of natural Seal returns. The real bonus comes with the added felting quality and dubbing ease of American Opossum. The end product is quite amazing and perhaps one you may want to considered.

Natural American Opossum underfur is opaque white. The intermediate underfur is mostly white with a comparatively narrow band of dull black at the tips. The most luster as well as seal-like texture is found immediately under the black tips where the underfur is slightly twisted, ribbon-like, and translucent. The guard hairs are white. The fur takes a dye readily, and if desired the black tips of the intermediate underfur can be bleached.

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