

Small Fly Techniques: Some Considerations...

By Wayne Luallen

Planning the fly...

When tying any fly, but especially small flies, plan the fly out mentally (or even on paper) in advance. The more that thread wraps and material placement are accounted for prior to application, the better the end product will be. Haphazard application yields a haphazard fly. More wraps of thread required because of poor planning creates bulk, not strength; ugliness, not beauty; imbalance, not proportion. The preplanned fly anticipates problem areas and deals with them before they become mistakes.

Materials...

Clean materials are vital toward achieving a quality product. This is true with all sizes of flies, but a critical consideration for small flies. If a tackiness is desired, introduce it yourself with wax (or possibly a paste fly floatant for dry flies.) Damp fingers work wonders, generally superior to wax when tying small flies. Wax adds bulk and weight, both of which are enemies of the small fly.

Selection of materials for any fly, particularly the small fly, must not only be properly cleaned, but also of the best quality as well as appropriate for that size fly. Alternate materials may be required in order for a fly to simply be tied, much less function properly. Note the problems encountered when reducing a Royal Wulff from the normally fished sizes of #10-16 down to #20-24: Will a standard wire hook be strong enough for the fishing situation required? Possibly a stouter wire hook is called for. What sort of thread should be used? How about 8/0 Uni thread or possibly 12/0 Giorgio Benecchi's Products thread? What about "Spider Web" monofilament thread? Would it be appropriate here? What sort of material should be used for the wing, standard calf tail? How about calf body or possibly African Goat? What is wrong with buck tail? Is it too even in taper to provide a fine tip, yet still have body from just beneath the tip to the tie in point? What about the tail material; can moose or elk body still be used? How about a small African deer such as Blessed Bok, Dik Dik, or Mouse Deer? Where does one find herl small enough in barbule length to be appropriate for a smaller fly? How about from the shorter barbed, long barbs found on the lower half of a peacock sword? Will scarlet floss look red on such a small fly or will it appear too dark? How about trying a few strands of "flame" Fly Master thread? What about the hackle? Luckily

today there are excellent genetic hackles that can provide sizes needed.

What should be used for a small fly that calls for marabou? Standard turkey marabou often is too bulky for smaller flies. Consider using the plumulaceous material found at the base of smaller feathers such as hen saddle and neck feathers, as well as that found on pheasant body feathers.

Would it be appropriate to use a coarse dubbing material on smaller flies? In some applications the answer would be "yes." In other applications the answer would be "no." Pre-planning and practice will provide the answer.

For small crippled midges when Zelon would be appropriate in larger caddis and mayflies, might it be appropriate to use Antron yarn?

On and on it can go, but the point is the tier must be willing to exchange conventional materials for what may be unconventional. Creativity with small flies shows foresight, and negates the possibility of wishing for hindsight.

Thread...

A somewhat general rule to follow is that as the fly size is reduced, so should the thread diameter. Shop for a flat floss like thread. The tier then can choose whether to have a flat or round thread simply by twisting or untwisting the thread. (Monofilament threads are round whether twisted or not. In my opinion there are more disadvantages to their use than advantages.) Note the texture of the thread. Some are very slick and some have a coarse texture. There are advantages and disadvantages to be discovered in both. Do not necessarily select thread size by the label. Some labeled 6/0 may compare in diameter more closely to other threads labeled 3/0. Some 12/0 thread matches closely to another brand listed as 8/0. Strength of various threads varies considerably, and not necessarily by diameter. Consider what Eric Otzinger does. When he desires a truly narrow diameter thread, he unspools several inches of pre-waxed floss, separates out with a bodkin 6-10 fibers (or whatever he wants) and trims away all the other material. He then rolls the remaining "thread" back onto his bobbin and is ready to tie with very flat, fine diameter, reasonably strong thread for fine, detail tying work.

Some years ago, Lefty Kreh introduced to me the concept of counter-spinning the bobbin holder to flatten the thread. Since then I have discovered numerous applications. Most thread (though not all) is twisted as it is wound onto the spool at the factory. All thread with a factory twist that I have worked with is twisted in a clockwise direction (when viewing the suspended bobbin holder from above.) Winding the thread from a bobbin holder onto the hook in

the conventional direction (i.e., over the top of the hook and away) will give the thread a clockwise twist for the right hand tier. The opposite applies for the left hand tier. For the right hand tier, a factory twisted thread (such as Fly Master and Uni) will become even more twisted. For the left hand tier, some of the factory twist will actually be removed as thread is wound onto the hook.

Flat thread is broader and therefore covers more area per wrap than does twisted. There is less bulk per wrap with flat thread. Twisted thread is actually a bit stronger since the fibers grip one another. Too much twist can prove detrimental due to the thread becoming too stressed and ultimately breaking. Twisted thread will actually cut into (and even through some) materials. Flat thread can reduce and control flare of materials such as deer, antelope, etc. Under equal pull, twisted thread has more pressure per wrap since a given amount of pressure is dispersed over a smaller surface area. (The principle compares to the pain delivered by a ladies spike heel upon one's foot versus that delivered by a flat soled shoe.) When choosing a hair material such as deer and antelope, also choose the proper thread size and whether or not the thread should be twisted. A softer hair tied with fine diameter thread that is twisted can actually be cut. A wider diameter thread untwisted may be too bulky. A narrow diameter untwisted thread may not be strong enough.

Dubbing onto flat thread has several advantages. Once dubbed, the yarn rope can be slid against the edge of a finger up or down the thread to a desired position. If dubbed onto twisted thread, attempting to slide the yarn rope will bunch it. If a very sparse dub is required, first dub lightly onto flat thread, then twist clockwise (for the right hand tier) so that the dub is locked into the thread, then wrap. (Due to the twist in the thread created by winding, dub in the direction of the twist; clockwise for the right hand tier and anticlockwise for the left hand tier. If dubbed opposite to this, the yarn will loosen with every wrap around the shank.

Flat thread wraps slightly separated offer more security than do several wraps (twisted or flat) on top of one another. The separation reduces hinging of the material secured. The flat thread reduces bulk; an important consideration in small flies.

Flat thread allows for exact placement of soft loops with the thread falling directly onto the material. If it is desired that the thread loop (turn) toward the left (i.e., the tier is right handed, desiring to place a loop under the tail to lift and/or separate tail barbs) spin the bobbin holder in an anticlockwise direction. If it is desired that the thread loop (turn) to the right (i.e., the tier is

right handed and wishes to form a loop for a half-hitch to be simply pushed into place over the hook eye) spin the bobbin holder in a clockwise direction. The amount of spin determines the extent of the "kick" or twist in the loop formed.

Flat thread allows a tapered, precise, secure whip finish in fewer wraps when finished with wraps going from the direction of the hook bend toward the eye. (Whip finishing with wraps going the opposite direction allows the knot to build up onto itself, which later in use may become untied.) For a secure knot, pull the thread end toward the bend, not downward, nor back and forth. René and Bonnie Harrop proved to my satisfaction some years ago that when properly whip finished, most flies do not require head cement. Head cement adds a bit of weight, potentially closes the hook eye, and may drink back into the fly such that materials become matted and/or stiffened undesirably.

There are times when it is preferable to have a slick surface adjacent to the material being applied. The hook shank supplies as slick a surface as the tier has to work with. At other times it is preferable to have a surface of friction and thread is excellent at providing this. When friction is required, generally a smooth, even surface will prove more useful than a rough, uneven one. To accomplish this smooth surface of friction, begin with a jam knot, but do not remove the waste stub of thread. Next, be sure to counter spin the bobbin holder away from any twist in the thread. As the thread is wound over the hook shank, hold the waste stub at a 45-60 degree angle from the shank so that as each wrap goes around the hook, it slides into position adjacent the previous wrap. This method will prove very fast and as a result will give a completely smooth surface. The process is less easy to accomplish if the fly requires the thread base to proceed from the back to the front (as it often does with smaller flies in order to reduce bulk.) In this case, the simplest method is to wind carefully forward with untwisted thread and ignore the waste stub until it is appropriate to trim it off. If control of the waste stub position is desired, pull tension on each thread wrap toward the stub. It is not necessary to hold the stub out of the way with the free hand. (To keep a material from rotating around the shank, wrap 360 degrees from it, and then place tension on the thread wraps. The further away from the material thread pressure is applied, the less the influence of thread stretch, typically found in today's nylon tying threads, will have on the material.)

Another idea that Lefty Kreh suggested is the method of removing waste thread. Instead of cutting the thread with scissor action, separate the scissor

points very slightly, pull on the waste stub of thread, and push the separated blades up into the thread at the point to be trimmed off. As demanded by a small fly, very fine pointed, sharp scissors will slice the thread, but will not cut any materials that are not held in resistance at both ends (i.e., hackle barbs, dubbing, etc.) These materials simply slide out of the way. This approach is far cleaner than cutting with scissors or sliding the side of one blade against the thread since with the tips it is possible to get closer to the work. Also with nylon thread, the stretch inherent to it will snap the waste stub back up out of sight under prior thread wraps. (Note: Kevlar thread will not stretch, therefore it will not trim as cleanly as nylon.) Tying materials may also be removed this way. For example if peacock herl is wound from front to back and secured with wire wound over it, the waste end of herl must somehow be removed. If it is snapped off by hand, it may pull loose from the last wrap of wire over it. If it is cut off, either a stub will be left or some of the previously wrapped herl barbules will be trimmed off. By slicing it off under tension with slightly separated scissor points, no inappropriate material is left behind nor does the herl come free of the wire. Hackle points can be trimmed this way as well along with numerous other such materials. Avoid this approach with stouter and/or thicker materials.

Stacking Hair...

When stacking hair for small flies, it is important that the material be clean. Otherwise the inherent oil and dirt holds the hairs and does not let them slip upon one another to allow an even stack.

It is desirable to stack most types of hair twice before accepting the material to mount on the fly. It may seem obvious, but as a reminder, always first remove the underfur as well as some of the shorter hairs before stacking. If the piece of hair (i.e., deer, elk, etc.) has underfur in abundance and/or the underfur has a length in excess of 1/3 that of the useable hair, do not waste time attempting to stack the piece. It simply is not worth the effort. No matter how devoted the effort to remove it, some underfur will remain reducing the propensity of achieving a desirable stack. The remaining underfur will also assist in water retention in the fly. (Keep this in mind for sinking flies such as sculpin patterns with deer hair heads when it may prove to advantage.) The first stack follows this and begins the evening process. Before the second stack, remove the hair, cut off the now uneven butts and stack again. Uneven hair tends to allow the heavier, larger diameter, longer hair hold back the remaining shorter, smaller diameter, lighter hair so that the latter will not tap down evenly. By cutting the butts even, the overall length and weight of the material essentially

equalize.

In stacking hair, remember, the purpose is not to sound like one is building a house. All that is usually necessary is a gentle tapping of the stacker angled at about 45 degrees. If the hair is straight, free of oil, dirt and underfur, this method will allow it to align evenly along the wall of the stacker. If the hair has a variety of lengths within the bundle and/or is curly, other steps must be followed. Hair that is not curly, but has a uniform curve presents its own problems.

Hair consisting of a variety of lengths within the bundle should be initially stacked by firmly tapping the stacker in a vertical direction. Remove the bundle, trim the lengths to achieve more equality of weight within the bundle (as discussed above) and restack with gentle tapping angled at about 45 degrees.

For hair with curl (i.e., calf tail, buck tail, etc.) cleanliness is vital to an even stack. First comb out the shorter, smaller diameter hairs. Hand stack the bundle to loosen up the bunch. Then loosely place the bundle into the stacker and tap down as described for hair of uneven length, trim, and restack with gentle tapping angled at about 45 degrees.

Straight hair with a uniform curve stacks better if the following steps are observed. First stack as described for hair with a variety of lengths and trim to achieve more equality of hair length within the bundle. Though the curve is of the same degree of arch for all hairs, longer hairs have more length of curve than do shorter hairs. By giving the bundle equality of length and curve, the hair will stack more evenly. A uniform curve may serve to advantage in a fly and can be retained by careful stacking. A fly with a deer hair wing that curves down over the fly body, or a tail of elk hair that curves upward can improve the appearance and function of the fly. If desired, it is also possible by hand manipulation to bend and straighten the hair prior to stacking.

The size of the fly should determine the size of the material to be used. For instance, most any reasonable calf tail will suffice for a Royal Wulff having a hook size of #12 as long as the hair is clean. For the same fly in #16, hair selection becomes more critical. It may be appropriate to consider calf body, or perhaps straighter calf tail with hairs very equal in length. If the same fly happened to be tied on a #22 hook, or perhaps another entirely different material would be chosen, such as African Goat body hair. Another similar comparison can be made with a Comparadun. If the fly to be tied is a #14-16,

an appropriately marked clump from White Tail Deer body (never deer mask) will usually suffice. If the fly is a #20-22, consider using Antelope body hair. Take a look at the useful portion of both under low magnification, and it will become readily apparent why each has its place.

When removing hair from the stacker, handle it as minimally as possible. The more it is handled, the more the hair becomes misaligned. This may or may not be desired. (Some prefer the calf tail wings on a Wulff dry fly to be a bit uneven. If properly stacked, the tips will actually form a perfectly flat plane. Slight handling will throw the bundle askew just enough to give the fly the desired look.) Also consider with which hand to remove the bundle from the stacker. Are the tips to point to the front or the back? If indiscriminately removed, rotated, and manipulated to the right direction, for smaller flies the hair will be uneven enough to generally require restacking.

Broken or otherwise obstreperous uneven hair can generally be removed from the bundle by fanning the hair, pushing the contrary hair away from the bunch, grasping, and pulling out. (This is possible because broken hair is stiffer at the "tip" than unbroken hair, and visibly uneven hair is usually a bit longer than the rest.) Removal may unstack the bundle though, since the scales of the hair lay like shingles overlapping with edges protruding toward the tip so that friction goes against removing in that direction. If it can be discovered at the butts which hair is the contrary one, it is far more easy to pull the hair from this direction of the bundle. To prove this, take a single hair of deer and hold it in thumb and index finger of one hand by the tip, and the same with the other hand by the butt. Under equal pressure, without breaking the hair, pull hands apart and note that the tip comes free every time. This is not due to the taper or slick, hardness of the tip. (To prove that it is not the taper, trim it away and try again.) Scales are present on all fur and hair. It seems that the purpose of these scales is to help dirt work up to the top of the hair rather than allow it to mat down into it. Is it a wonder why buck tail is so hard to stack? There are several reasons such as dirt and oil, hairs of various length and weight, besides the added conflict produced by scales. (For more information on scales and a myriad of other tying wonders, see "Fly Tying Methods" by Darrel Martin, Nick Lyons Books, 1987, Chapter 5 -"Hairs and Furs", pp. 73-84. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.)

All manner of materials can be stacked besides those considered conventional. Cock feather barbs stack well, as long as they are trimmed from the hackle rachis and have preferably no barbules on each barb. Many types

of guard hairs stack well (i.e., mink, muskrat, badger.) It may prove appropriate to even stack some synthetics. As with all aspects of tying small flies, let imagination be the guide.