

Royal Lineage

“The jauntness and efficacy of the Royal Wulff has a western, freestoner kind of beauty; it works so well that a whole school of sophisticated anglers will do anything to keep from using it.”

—Thomas McGuane, “The Longest Silence”



Size 10 Royal Wulff with CDC wings tied by F.S. “Buck” Ryan of Flies For Rivers.

Written by **Jim Wilson** & Photographed by **Melissa McGaw**

Nearly 85 years after its descent from a great American pattern, the Royal Wulff continues to land fish and puzzle those who would find logic in its design

Whether you fish a Royal Wulff or even deign to carry one in your fly box might depend upon your view of what a trout fly should be. If you are of a mind that a fly should imitate an insect at some stage of its life, then you’ll not find much comfort with a Royal Wulff. If you are a generalist, one who likes a fly that gives an impression of insect life, such as an Adams, a Humpy or a Partridge and Orange, then the Royal Wulff will be more to your liking.

Except, of course, that the Royal Wulff, more than most attractor flies, gives no general imitation of any insect. It fits into John Waller Hills’ description of fancy flies (“A History of Fly Fishing for Trout,” 1921), those “which imitate not a species or a genus nor a group, but fly life generally.” Although the Royal Wulff is about the shape of a mayfly dun, it is, as Lee Wulff famously described it, “strawberry shortcake” for trout.

And it’s not only for trout. The Royal Wulff has long been popular for salmon, and it will catch largemouth bass and panfish as well.

The Royal is one of the Wulff series (Gray then White preceded it) that Lee Wulff developed around 1930. Although all of the flies in the Wulff series caught trout when introduced, the one complaint about them from some quarters even then was they did not imitate a specific insect. Preston Jennings, who in 1935 published the classic “A Book of Trout Flies,” the first American attempt to take an academic approach to trout and insects, fished Wulff’s flies and was impressed with the way they landed trout, but would not include them in his book because they did not represent any particular insect. It’s a puzzlement that confounds some people today.

Others of us simply tie on a Royal Wulff and catch fish. The largest trout I ever caught, a 19-inch rainbow, took a size 12 Royal Wulff at the edge of the foam line at the head of pool one cloudy December afternoon. I was using the Wulff as part of a dry-dropper combination, with a size 16 Gold-Ribbed Hare’s Ear on the bottom. I thought I was fishing the Hare’s Ear; the rainbow thought otherwise.



RYAN HOUSTON

It is impossible to talk of the Royal Wulff without speaking of its ancestor, the Royal Coachman, the wet fly that angling historian Paul Schullery has called “the first great American fly pattern” (“Royal Coachman: The Lore and Legends of Fly Fishing,” 1999). The Royal Coachman was born of the Coachman, a British pattern that has existed since at least 1825 and was first tied by Tom Bosworth, who, properly enough, was coachman to George IV, William IV and Victoria.

John Kirkbride, in “The Northern Angler” (1837), gives what is still the standard dressing: “The body is made of copper-coloured peacock harle; it must be tipped at the tail with gold; put on a red hackle under the wings; and make the wings of a white feather from the under-side of a wild-duck’s wing.”

Although this original Coachman wet fly lacked the flash of the future Royal Coachman, some of the essential elements were there in the peacock herl, reddish-brown hackle and white wings. The Coachman remained a popular fly throughout the 19th century, as evidenced by the number of anglers who proclaimed their affection for it in Mary Orvis Marbury’s “Favorite Flies and Their Histories” (1892). “The Coachman is, perhaps, the most general favorite of any fly used in America,” Marbury wrote.

The Coachman has produced any number of variations, prior to and after the Royal Coachman, such as the Leadwing Coachman, Red Tag, Coachman Trude and Hackle-Point Coachman. Although the number of flies with peacock herl bodies is legion, it doesn’t take much imagination to see the similarities between the old Coachman and one of the world’s great modern flies, the Prince nymph.

In 1878 John Haily, a professional fly-tier in New York, sent some examples of a new Coachman he had tied for a client to Charles Orvis. The angler liked the Coachman very much, but wanted a more durable fly. Haily added a band of red silk midway the peacock herl and added a tail of wood duck fibers.

Charles’ brother L.C. Orvis christened the new fly the “Royal” Coachman for its stylish dress.

Although the Royal Coachman was much different from the Coachman, Schullery points out that it was similar in colorful dressing to 30 flies pictured in Marbury’s book. (Marbury also included the Gilt Coachman and the Orange Coachman and mentioned but did



(Counter clockwise from top left) The Coachman (tied by Neil Norman) was the progenitor of the line and dates from at least 1825. The Royal Coachman wet fly was the first great American pattern, and the Royal Coachman dry remains a deadly brook trout fly. The Royal Wulff is one of the finest attractor patterns of all time.

not illustrate the Silver Coachman.) “Most of them are long forgotten,” Schullery writes, “further evidence that there is something special and durable about the fly that Haily invented.”

The next development in the Royal Coachman occurred in the early part of the 20th century when it was converted into a dry fly, the Fan-Wing Royal Coachman. That fly is attributed to Theodore Gordon, although Gordon, an avid hatch-matcher, was not fond of the Royal Coachman wet or dry. He thought for a time that the dry-fly version resembled a flying ant, although like many other anglers, he was never quite sure what the fly was supposed to represent.

Schullery explains the dilemma: “To the hard-core hatch matcher, the Royal Coachman was, in the words of Ted Leeson, ‘an act of vandalism, a grotesque violence perpetrated on a fly box.’ The Royal Coachman didn’t make sense to these people because they couldn’t imagine how it made any sense to

trout. That they took it, often quite eagerly, was not reason enough for many fishermen, then or now.”

Although the fan-wing version was a very effective fly, the wings were delicate and tended to helicopter when cast and twist an angler’s line, especially once they got a little trout slime on them. That led to another innovation, when in 1930 an angler named L.Q. Quackenbush asked his friend and noted Catskill fly-tier Reuben Cross to beef up the Fan-Wing Royal. Cross came up with the Hair-Wing Royal Coachman, replacing the feather wings with white hair from an impala, according to the story. Cross retained the wood duck tail of the original, although that came to be replaced by golden pheasant tippets. The fly became known, and is still called in lore, the “Quack” Coachman.

At approximately the same time, Lee Wulff, one of the seminal figures of 20th century fly-fishing, created the Royal Wulff, which would set off a minor controversy among fly-tiers and angling historians that lingers until today over who deserves credit for the Royal Wulff. The two flies, Cross’ and Wulff’s were similar, although the tails were different and the Wulff fly was much more robust. Photographs of original Cross-tied hair-wings reveal slimmer, more delicate flies, as befit their Catskills origins and Cross’ style.

Wulff preferred bucktail for his flies’ wings, but calf tail or calf body hair has become the accepted dressing, although some fly dressers use CDC feathers for the wings. The bucktail wings disappeared, Orvis spokesman Tom Rosenbauer said, simply because “they looked like hell.” The tails have remained bucktail, although some tiers prefer moose hair.

Time and custom quickly left the Quack Coachman and the Fan-Wing Royal Coachman in the pages of angling history, but the Royal Coachman dry fly with hackle-point wings still lives on. Considering the fly’s history, it’s not surprising that Orvis sells both the Coachman dry with hackle points

FLY TYING PATTERNS

Royal Wulff

<i>Hook</i>	Standard dry fly, 10-18
<i>Thread</i>	Black, 6/0 or 8/0
<i>Wings</i>	White calf tail, upright and divided
<i>Tail</i>	Brown bucktail
<i>Body</i>	Peacock herl with center band of red floss
<i>Hackle</i>	Coachman brown

Royal Coachman Wet

<i>Hook</i>	Standard wet fly, 10-18
<i>Thread</i>	Black, 6/0 or 8/0
<i>Tail</i>	Golden pheasant tippet fibers
<i>Wings</i>	White mallard quill, splayed
<i>Body</i>	Peacock herl with center band of red floss
<i>Hackle</i>	Dark brown hen

Royal Coachman Dry

<i>Hook</i>	Standard dry fly, 10-20
<i>Thread</i>	Black, 6/0 or 8/0
<i>Tail</i>	Golden pheasant tippet fibers
<i>Wings</i>	White duck quill, upright and divided
<i>Body</i>	Peacock herl with center band of red floss
<i>Hackle</i>	Coachman brown

Coachman Wet

<i>Hook</i>	Standard wet, 10-16
<i>Thread</i>	Black, 8/0
<i>Tag</i>	Flat gold tinsel
<i>Body</i>	Peacock herl
<i>Hackle</i>	Dark brown hen
<i>Wing</i>	White duck quill

and the Royal Wulff. The Coachman dry is still popular in New England for brook trout, Rosenbauer said.

“Over the years we’ve had to drop a number of great old flies because no one was buying them anymore,” Rosenbauer said. “We keep the Royal Coachman in stock because people keep buying it.”

Roger Lowe in his “Fly Pattern Guide to the Great Smoky Mountains” (2005) also lists the Royal Coachman dry as a favorite for North Carolina brookies, along with a variant, which replaces the red silk and the forward band of peacock herl with orange ostrich herl.

The Royal Coachman remains with us primarily through its descendants, those many flies that trace their lineage back to this one great American design. The Royal Wulff is at the top of the list, but there are any number of patterns that owe their birth to the Royal Coachman. A short list would include the Royal Trude, the Parachute Royal Coachman, Royal Stimulator, Wright’s Royal, Dr. Kirgen (first tied by Leonard Halladay, who developed the Adams), Royal Coachman Trude, Old Gray Mare, GTH Variant (a mixed parentage of the Royal Wulff, a Humpy and a House and Lot) and Beetle Bug. There are even soft-hackled versions of the Royal Coachman (Scottish tier Davie McPhail makes a beautiful example of this fly) and a tenkara Royal Wulff.

History aside, the overarching question about the Royal Wulff and the Royal Coachman is why they have caught trout so successfully for nearly 140 years. In 1956, Jennings believed he had solved the mystery of the Royal Coachman and published a story in *Esquire* magazine, “There IS a Royal Coachman,” explaining his theory that the wet fly imitated *Isonychia* bicolor nymphs. Arnold Gingrich, founding editor of *Esquire* and a dedicated fly-fisherman, wrote that Jennings should be elected president simply because he had seemingly solved the riddle of the Royal Coachman.

Jennings, who created a nymph pattern using Royal Coachman colors, concluded: “For late-evening fishing, tie on a Royal Coachman Wet or Dry, and the chances are you will take fish; besides, you will be a purist of the first water, for the natural insect does exist.”

As Schullery points out, however, the *Isonychia* connection is only a small part of the fly’s attraction, because the Royal Coachman also works well when there are no insects on the water that resemble it.

John Gierach, probably the most popular fly-fishing writer around these days, makes a similar point about the Royal Wulff in “Good Flies” (2000): “I wish I could describe when and where a Royal Wulff will catch fish, but that’s pretty much unpredictable. I’ve had them work when there were no bugs on the water and no fish rising, but I’ve also had

the Royal Coachman, and by association, the Royal Wulff.

Curry writes: “I will now be so bold as to suggest that . . . the white, highly UVR [ultraviolet reflecting] wing in conjunction with the UV absorbent peacock herl provides all the visibility and feeding triggers that a trout needs. The key, then, to the perennial success of the Royal Coachman series of flies is its UV signature. The same might be said for the Coachman, Prince Nymph, and Zug Bug—all very ‘taking’ patterns, all sharing certain UV characteristics.”

One of the simple answers given for the success of the Royal Wulff, at least among anglers, is that it is a very visible fly.



How Well Do Trout See?
See *Nature’s Ways*, page 43.

them work better than a more accurate fly during a hatch. It’s a mystery.”

Gierach admitted to once having a problem with the Royal Wulff. “For years I tried not to like the Royal Wulff. I prefer flies that look something like real bugs. . . . But the Royal Wulff probably ties with the Adams as the most popular dry fly of the past fifty years, and you just shouldn’t ignore something like that. Also, fishing a pattern that works even though it violates all your well-considered beliefs about flies seems profound and has a way of putting things into perspective.”

A recent theory about the success of the Royal Coachman, the Royal Wulff and a number of other flies that have a history of success can be found in F. Reed Curry’s “The New Scientific Angling: Trout and Ultraviolet Vision” (2009). Trout, like many other animals, can detect ultraviolet light, although there is some disagreement among biologists as to how much, if any, ultraviolet vision salmonids retain as they age. With dozens of photographs, Curry illustrates these flies as seen in visible light and ultraviolet. The results in many cases are startling, particularly with

The Royal Wulff, like any fly, is not the answer for every angling situation. There are times when it will work and times when it will not. It is a wonderfully successful searching fly in rough waters when there is no hatch or when there are few insects about, which describes a good portion of our North Carolina streams.

The questions that remains, however, is why has the Royal Wulff remained so successful for so long when so many other flies have passed into history. Most of the patterns in Marbury’s encyclopedic compilation are foreign to modern anglers. One, the Alexandra, was so successful, such a killing fly, that it was banned on some British rivers. Marbury says “it may not be properly called an artificial fly” because it is a minnow imitation. And the Alexandra so thoroughly offended Frederick Halford, the late 19th century champion of the dry fly, that he cursed it “as a dreadful scourge to any water.” Yet, the Alexandra withered away and is today an historical artifact.

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JOEL ARRINGTON

indeed. That’s one reason I fish it. I can see a Wulff into early twilight. But I also can see a Parachute Adams, an Ausable Wulff, a Trude, a Parachute Hare’s Ear or a Klinkhammer among others.

For anglers, as trivial as it sounds, part of the popularity stems from the name. No matter how democratic one might be, the word “royal” always carries some allure. (Surely L.C. Orvis stumbled upon a moment of marketing genius when he christened Haily’s improved Coachman “royal.”) Add to royal the name of Wulff, a towering figure in fly-fishing and you have a winning combination, for which we can thank Wulff’s longtime pal Dan Bailey, since Wulff’s original name for the fly was the Bucktail Coachman—certainly not much panache there.

So we can see the Wulff on the water, its name is pleasing to the ear, but so what? Other flies have Wulff or royal in their names, but haven’t had nearly the success of the Royal Wulff. Simply put, the fly catches fish. And because of that anglers have put their faith in it and developed confidence in it. There are anglers who fish the Royal Wulff (or some

other fly) to the exclusion of everything else. These fellows match every hatch with their favorite fly, be it Wulff, Adams or Grizzly King. There’s an old saying: Beware the man with one gun or one fly. The intimation is that he knows how to use it.

Dave Hughes, author and fly-tier, says in “Trout Flies: The Tiers Reference” (1999): “If you look, you’ll nearly always find a logical reason behind the success of a searching fly.”

And Hughes perhaps comes as close as any to explaining the mystery of the Royal Wulff in the same book when he relates an anecdote from a visit to a biological field station where scientists had dug a trench beside a trout stream and installed a viewing window. Hughes and a friend watched in vain one day for trout or insects, but seeing none, decided one of them should cast a Royal Wulff while the other watched from the trout’s point of view.

“The white wing was disembodied from beneath,” Hughes writes. “It did not show much. The surprising thing was the way the bands of peacock herl and red floss that make up the body of the fly melded themselves into segments of dark olive and dark brown. The

The Royal Wulff is a great searching pattern on rough waters. In many of North Carolina’s freestone streams, it can be teamed successfully with a hard-bodied ant for a productive day of fishing.

Royal Wulff seen from beneath the water where trout lurk looks little like the fly held in the hand. That is perhaps key in understanding its success: It looks great to us above the water and gives us confidence when we cast it, yet it also looks buggy and edible when viewed from beneath by the trout.”

So what we have is a fly that looks good in the hand and in the water, pleasing both to the angler and the trout. Is that merely a happy accident or the product of genius? The only true answer to the mystery of this fly would have to come from trout, and they’re not talking, except when they take the Royal Wulff once again. ♡

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