

North Country Angling

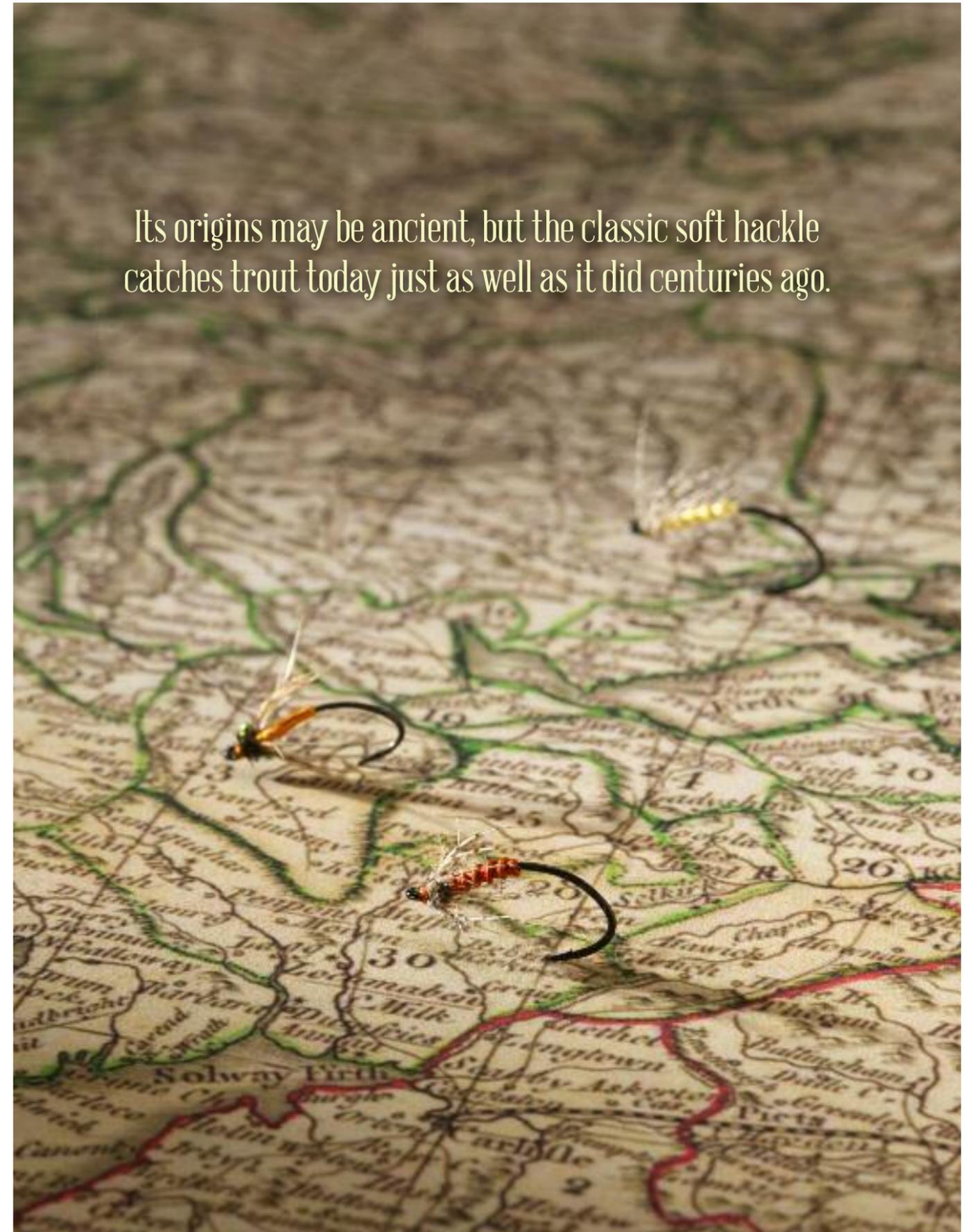


for Southern Appalachian Trout

written by Neil Norman
photographed by Melissa McGaw

I wind brown silk up the shank of the hook and tie it off just behind the eye, select an iridescent blackish-purple hackle from a starling's shoulder, tie in the tip, wind the feather around the shank twice (exactly twice) and tie it off. In the early season this little fly will pass for a stonefly; a month or so later and on a smaller hook, a caddis pupa. It will suggest something terrestrial during dog days. Only the trout knows what. I whip finish and lacquer the head of the fly—the Black Spider—the “most killing imitation” that Edinburgh attorney W.C. Stewart claimed he ever fished. Stewart often gets credit for originating the Black Spider because he wrote about it first, but he acknowledged that James Baillie, another Scottish angler, introduced him to it. Whoever taught Baillie to dress the Black Spider is impossible to know now.

Its origins may be ancient, but the classic soft hackle catches trout today just as well as it did centuries ago.

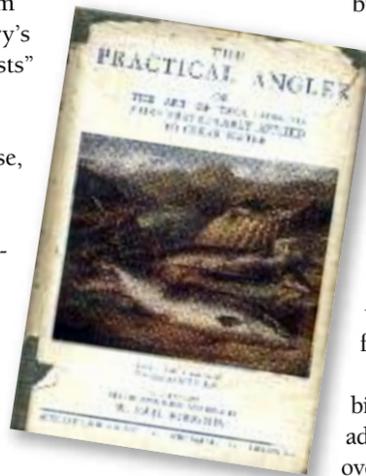


What is most telling about the fly's lineage is not its association with some famous angler or guide who created it, branded it and sold it. That is the modern way. The origins of the Black Spider are instead most evident in its simplicity. Its sparseness harks back to an angling heritage that first flourished time out of mind on the burns and lochs of the Scottish Uplands and farther south, on the Lake District tarns and on rivers like the Ure, Border Esk, and Wharfe that brawl through the stony North Country dales of England. Their names might be unfamiliar, but the setting cannot be entirely foreign to anyone who knows the pastoral wash of the New River or the force of the Oconaluftee draining the crags of the Great Smoky Mountains. In Southern Appalachia anglers dappled bushy flies palmered with hackles from local birds, most famously the yellow-shafted flicker or "Yallerhammer," as our highlanders put it. The North Country tradition might easily be the home of our own traditions. Anglers there paired slender bodies with the hackles of their native game birds to create the flies that have attracted wild Yorkshire and Scottish brown trout for centuries. What worked for North Country trout will also work for North Carolina's trout.

As much as anglers pay homage to tradition, we are fascinated by passing fads. Sometimes these fads become innovations that end in accepted convention. Monofilament made soaked silkworm gut obsolete. Fiberglass supplanted bamboo until graphite pushed them both aside. A mid-nineteenth century fad began with a small group of anglers in southern Britain whose method intentionally challenged the Northern tradition. These new dry fly anglers—"purists," as they liked to call themselves—decreed that the floating fly fished upstream to clear rise forms was the only sporting way to take a trout. It was a more genteel method, they argued, more challenging, more ethical, more scientific and infinitely more effective for catching trout than fishing a fly wet. Their claims were just different ways of saying they wanted to innovate angling everywhere with an approach best suited to their Hampshire streams, where languid

currents rise from springs that filter through underground chalk, interlacing themselves into ripples that unravel into clear, deep channels, gliding over sandy bottoms and swelling around weed beds so dense they must be pruned seasonally. There mayflies can work themselves free of their nymphal shucks slowly, and trout can sip them casually off the top of the water. There, too, dry-fly anglers began to cast floating flies upstream on long lines to mimic the labors of the hatching mayfly caught in the surface film of the river.

But the tactics of the North Country anglers were no less tailored to the rigors of their waters, where rivers shoot past gray boulders, course white into wide pools, and trace a riffled track over cobbled river beds. Unlike the gin-clear chalk streams of Hampshire, North Country streams swell and discolor after a spate, like freestone creeks in North Carolina, reshaping the habitat for a host of insects, mostly stoneflies. As a consequence, North Country trout are somewhat more opportunistic than their southern cousins, but they still respond best to flies that seem familiar, to dressings that could share the river with them as living insects. Dry-fly anglers in southern England dismissed the North Country spiders and techniques as provincial, but their favorite fishing beats were an easy train ride southwest from London, the country's center. These "purists" deemed the North Country tradition less sporting because, they argued, it was less challenging for the angler: Yorkshire flies were not invested in the sort of exacting imitation as floating flies, and anglers'



William C. Stewart's "Practical Angler," written more than 150 years ago, remains a seminal work on fishing with soft hackles.

willingness to present flies downstream was crude and unbecoming an accomplished fisherman. But to brand the Yorkshire anglers who touted the soft hackle in the 19th century as backward was to misunderstand them, their tackle and their techniques entirely. Two authors in particular, W.C. Stewart and T. E. Pritt defended the North Country tradition against the 19th-century dry fly. Their defense then still recommends the soft-hackled fly for anglers now.

Southern English anglers argued that their chalk streams naturally bred more selective trout. Since their trout got a long look at the rising mayfly, those anglers advocated dressings that would imitate specific insects as realistically as possible, which required the angler to be a sort of gentleman-naturalist who dressed patterns informed by careful observation of the hatch in its subimago and imago stages. The attempt at precision that defined their imitative ends, and which remains with us today, made a broad stock of local and foreign fly-tying materials necessary. Their home was not only the center of the country, after all, but also of the British Empire. Their fly-tying supplies had cosmopolitan associations. One of their favorite hackles was the scarce, blue Andalusian cock from Spain, a Mediterranean fowl that provided glassy, dun hackles. They also used the feathers of exotic birds like the Cochin chicken and greater adjutant stork that were both becoming increasingly available through British trade with Southeast Asia. Their choices in hackles marked a departure from the mainstays of North Country soft hackles. Red grouse, partridge, snipe, dotterel, coot and other local birds became winging, no longer the traditional foundation of a suggestive dressing.

Nevertheless, these common land-bird hackles offered specific, imitative advantages for North Country insects over the overly-complicated imitations of the dry fly anglers. T. E. Pritt outlined the benefits in his "Yorkshire Trout Flies" (1885), before republishing the book a year later with a more inclusive title,

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Two traditional North Country soft hackles, Michael Theakston's Spiral Brown Drake (top) and T.E. Pritt's Dark Snipe are as effective today as they were in the 19th century. Norman tied these flies on sizes 16 (top) and 18 Gamakatsu C13U dry-fly hooks.

"North Country Flies" (1886). It remains the defining text of the North Country style. Pritt explained that trout "undoubtedly take a hackled fly for the insect just rising from the pupa in a half-drowned state; and the opening and closing of the fibres of the feathers give it an appearance of vitality." The softness of the hackle gives life to the imitation, and the color and patterning suggest the dominant attributes of the hatching insect, the marking of its wings and legs or even its abdominal barring and tint. Yorkshire spiders naturally sink to the position of an emergent insect, somewhere between the nymphal and subimago forms, and they suggest stoneflies riding the current to the edge or mayflies in a struggle to rise. The simplicity of traditional soft hackles belies the imitative intent of their originators, who thought that suggesting life through a fly's dressing was more important than trying to mimic each part of the insect.

As angling editor of the *Yorkshire Weekly Post*, Pritt maintained a close connection with the North Country tradition that his book reflects, and he had a reputation as the angler who once landed 300 trout in 12 days. His book lists 62 patterns and recommends

the times when they will best match the hatches they are dressed to suggest. Pritt often took his etymological cues from the work of other North Country anglers such as Michael Theakston, an amateur entomologist who took on the arduous task of creating his own, non-Linnaean system to classify stream-born insects. Pritt noted, for instance, that the dressing for his Orange Partridge (No. 32) derived from Theakston's Spiral Brown Drake. In "A List of Natural Flies" (1853), Theakston described this mayfly as having wings that were "a light brown ground, with strong longitudinal dark lines crossed into squares, with small ones" and a body that was "a darkish ashy brown, with a ring of light on each joint, and light line runs along each side; whisks and legs, a brown, dim transparency; eyes, some gogling and come cased; as the season advances they shew distinctly the slanting dark lines along the sides." Theakston's dressing for the Spiral Brown Drake was as simple as his identification of the insect is exact. Rather than imitating the lateral abdominal lines or the eyes, Theakston preferred a simple silk body in orange or yellow, a slight hare's ear thorax, and partridge hackle. The Yorkshire

tradition these authors exemplified was just as invested in imitation as the new Southern dry fly, but Northerners accomplished their imitative ends suggestively, dressing flies that gave the impression of life, instead of trying to mirror it.

Many of the patterns Pritt included in "North-Country Flies" can serve the same imitative ends in Southern Appalachian streams. Tied sparsely, all of them will catch fish. The same yellow- and orange-bodied fish well in our streams tied from size 10 to as small a fly as the partridge hackle allows. Three of Pritt's patterns are especially worth carrying as general flies.

Many North Country dressings, like the Winter Brown (No. 3), use a herl head rather than a thorax. The effect is not unlike the sparkle of the modern bead head, only subtler and without the additional weight.

"WINGS.—Hackled with a feather from the inside of a Woodcock's wing.

"BODY.—Orange silk—not too bright.

"HEAD.—Peacock herl."

Pritt's Dark Snipe (No. 10) is, like Stewart's beloved Black Spider, a quintessential soft hackle. In smaller sizes, 18 and 20, it will catch fish in the riffles and glides of free-stone streams and tailraces year-round:

"WINGS.—Hackled with a feather from the outside of a Snipe's wing.

"BODY.—Purple silk."

Since North Country anglers sought to suggest life in their flies, a thinly-dubbed, translucent fur body sometimes took the place of bare silk. Pritt's fur-bodied Snipe Bloa (No. 29) is particularly effective on overcast days and works best in sizes 14 through 18:

"WINGS.—Hackled with feather from under Snipe's wing.

"BODY.—Yellow silk, with a sparse dubbing of Mole's fur, but not sufficient to hide the yellow body."

North Country patterns are adaptable, and materials can be easily substituted. Muskrat can replace mole, and starling undercoverts work for snipe. Pritt advised anglers to be equally versatile, to match their approach to the fishing conditions and to the hatching insects. He argued that "everything

depends upon the size of the river, the condition of the water, and the nature of the bait. To fish up stream is an unnecessary labour in discoloured water, and to fish down stream in a clear water is to court both disappointment and ridicule." Fishing downstream at all, however, evoked the ridicule of Southern anglers. They associated downstream angling with traditional wet fly methods: heavily winged, heavily hackled, non-imitative lures were fished so that they would swing unnaturally across the current. When they fished downstream, North Country anglers were merely fishing the water, Southern anglers argued, rather than fishing for trout. It was not pretty or effective or sporting—it was not their chalk-stream sight fishing.

The dry fly anglers' criticism overlooked the challenges that fishing the water presents, knowing the trout's habitat well enough to read it, detecting a subsurface take and setting the hook on what is essentially an invisible fish. In "The Practical Angler" (1857), Stewart applied the upstream dry fly method to fishing soft-hackled flies in the Border streams of southern Scotland. Like Pritt, Stewart believed that sparsely hackled flies with slim bodies best imitated living insects, but he stressed presentation as an integral part of imitation. He preferred to fish aggressively, with short, upstream casts from a stiff rod, using a silk line dressed heavily to float high on the water. While it might be well-suited to the swift streams of the Scottish border, Stewart's aggressive style is also the only style for the angler who would "kill at least twelve pounds weight of trout" per day, which Stewart famously asserted should be the goal of any competent angler. He had a reputation for taking his 12 pounds regularly, fishing with baits like live nymphs, worms and minnows, but he preferred soft-hackled flies.

Stewart observed that an upstream presentation made stalking the trout easier, since the angler would go unseen, and the water would be less disturbed by the angler's approach. Hooking a fish would be easier, too, he argued, because of the direction of the drift and angle of the strike. More importantly, the angler who fished spiders upstream could "better adapt the motions

of his flies to those of the natural insect." Fishing downstream, the angler was likely to pull a fly across the current at improbable, unnatural angles or to make the mistake of twitching the fly to suggest the motion of a hatching insect. Simulating life is the job of the fly, since the "appearance of life is certainly a great temptation to a trout, but it may be much better accomplished by dressing the flies of soft materials, which the water can agitate, and thus create a natural motion of the legs of wings of the fly, than by dragging them by jumps of a foot at a time across and up a roaring stream." Stewart believed the fly could only do its job cast upstream into a current that would wash its feathers and fur wriggling like an insect into the mouth of a trout.

Another element of presentation for Stewart was the number of flies on the line. He advocated fishing droppers according to the size of the stream, and by way of offering a guideline, Stewart noted that "some anglers never use more than three, while others occasionally use a dozen." Catching 12 pounds of fish per day seems more conceivable when fishing 12 flies at once, but for most medium-sized streams, Stewart suggested three or four flies, one of which would invariably be the Black Spider. "We were first shown it by James Baillie," Stewart recalled, "and have never been without one on our line since."



The little pasture creek meanders under overhanging shrubs and against cut banks. A few darkish mayflies are coming off sporadically in the tail of pool where I crouch, but the evening is dimming too fast for me to identify them exactly. I knot a size 18 fly with a chocolate-brown silk body and starling hackle to a 6x tippet, cast it upstream and follow the drift back downstream until the line tightens. The Black Spider will pass for this hatch, too. ♦

Neil Norman is pursuing a Ph.D. in English and maintains a blog, *Soft Hackles, Tight Lines* (softhacklepatternbook.blogspot.com).



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