Tricks, Tips, and Techniques for Fish-Fooling Dry Flies

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Tying flies is rewarding all by itself. Tying flies properly will reward you twice - on the stream, as well as at the vise. I'm not a perfectionist, but I firmly believe that properly tied flies will bring more fish to hand than those that are just "good enough." Professional guides use only high-quality flies, especially when it comes to dry flies. In fact, for certain patterns, I am so picky that I will attach only my own flies to my clients' tippets.

Accomplished fly tyers agree that it takes many hours at the vise to develop an eye for form, proportion, and that just-right mixture of reality and suggestion that constitutes a well-tied dry fly. They will also tell you that over the years, they have developed their own bag of tricks that produce speed and consistency. And it's true: Although tying good flies consistently is daunting, the task can be mastered through repetition and the use of helpful, simple techniques easily transferable to virtually any pattern.

What are the key elements of a quality dry fly? I have four criteria: high-quality materials, correct color and/or hue, representative form, and proper proportion. The first two criteria are self-evident. Form refers to the overall shape of the fly (e.g., abdomen diameter and taper). Proportion is a slightly different concept, relating to the size of one fly part relative to the other parts (e.g., tails are generally equal to the length of the hook shank).

The tips, tricks, and techniques described here are designed to help tyers meet those criteria consistently. They are not all my own ideas. Rather, most have been gleaned from over 40 years' worth of notes and memories from books, periodicals, videos, discussions over beers with accomplished tyers, conducting tying seminars, tying at shows and other events, and running many thousands of bugs through my trusty vise, for my own use and for commercial purposes.

Dry-Fly Tails

Dry-fly tails do more than mimic insect tails. They help keep the fly afloat and riding in the proper plane. As a rule, the tail is tied in just above the back end of the barb. If you have a barbless hook in the vise, visualize that point as if the hook were barbed. You should not vary from this rule unless the pattern recipe says to do so.

The length of the tail should be equal to the shank length of the hook. The shank is the part of the hook extending from behind the eye to a point just above the back of the barb. Longer or shorter tails will result in a disproportionate fly.

When mounting the tail, follow the 45-degree rule. The 45-degree technique works every time, whether using hackle barbs, hair, or synthetics. To begin, your bobbin should be hanging straight down from the tie-in point, creating a 90-degree angle to the axis of the hook shank. Measure your tail fibers

for length and locate the tail tie-in point. With the material in your left hand (assuming you're right-handed), tilt the tail fibers to a 45-degree angle on the side of the hook closer to you, placing it alongside the shank with butts pointing down, thereby bisecting the 90-degree angle. Take one loose wrap around the material and hook, then wind a second, tighter wrap, pulling up and over as you complete the wind. This wrap will pull the material up onto the top of the shank. Keep a death grip on the material. Don't let it move around the hook. The next two wraps should be tight, locking the material in place. Now finish wrapping down the butts. This technique takes some practice, but once mastered will produce tails tied directly on top of the hook, where they belong.

Traditional Catskill-style flies have tails that jut straight to the rear, in line with the shank. Better flotation and a better plane can be achieved by splaying the tail so that it acts like an outrigger. Before tying in the tail itself, tie in a tiny ball of dubbing at the tail tie-in point. Mount the tail just in front of the ball. Take a wind or two to the rear, forcing the tail fibers against the ball. This will cause them to splay evenly outward.

Some recipes call for split tails. Using the dubbing ball mentioned above, tie some tail fibers in on either side of it. If you don't use the dubbing-ball method, leave a thread loop hanging at the tail tie-in point. Once the tail is tied in, divide the fibers with the point of your scissors and pull the thread loop up between the divided segments. Tie the loop down in front of the tail to lock the divided tail in place.

Dry-fly Bodies

Most insects have an abdomen (rear portion) and a thorax - the legs generally protrude from there. Fly-pattern recipes usually specify instructions for both segments. In general, the abdomen will consist of the rear two-thirds of the bug. The thorax will cover the front third. These are not exact measurements. Experienced tyers know where these often-vague lines lie. For the time being, use the two-thirds/one-third principle.

The abdomen will usually be tapered smaller at the tail, gradually increasing in girth toward the thorax. There are a number of ways to achieve a good taper. Some tyers thicken the dubbing rope as they move forward. Others, preferring a tighter body, will wrap dubbing in ever-closer wraps as they move forward. Either way will produce good results. The body's silhouette should be as slim as possible, unless the recipe calls for more bulk than normal (sometimes referred to as a "robust" body).

Articles, even books, have been written on dubbing technique, so there are plenty of resources to go to for instruction, not to mention the Internet. Comprehensive treatment of this source of annoyance and frustration is not possible here, but that's not the intention, anyway. Instead, here are a few simple, but valuable tips. Use as little material as possible - and I mean miniscule amounts. When applying dubbing to the thread, moisten your fingers slightly. (I keep a sponge handy for this purpose.) Twist the dubbing in only one direction; otherwise, you'll hit the undo button. Finally, be sure your hands are clean, especially when using light colors.

Dry-Fly Wings

In my fly-tying classes, I spend a lot of time on wings because students find wings difficult to master. Here is where technique really pays off. Again, comprehensive treatment of this subject is beyond the scope of this article, but we can focus on a few helpful tips and techniques.

Wing placement is often difficult to get right. Obey the Prime Directive: Stay back from the eye of the hook. If you crowd the eye, the wing will be too far forward, hackling will be difficult and forming and tying off a head will be nearly impossible. To achieve consistent wing placement, visualize the one-third point on the shank, that is, one-third of the way down the shank from the eye, and place your bobbin and thread there. That is where almost all dry-fly wings are tied in. Don't vary from that procedure, and practice it.

You will find varying opinions on the subject of wing length in the fly-tying literature. I prefer wings that are just slightly longer than the shank. I believe that prominent wings (assuming proper color and hue) are a strike trigger. As the fly enters the trout's visual window, the highest part of the fly enters first. This will be the wing, assuming that it is noticeably higher than the circle formed by the hackle on flies using hackle. At least it probably gets their attention

To mount dry-fly wings, use the 45-degree technique mentioned above. How to do so will become evident in the following discussion of the various types of dry-fly wings.

If the recipe you're using calls for hair wings, whether the wing will be split or serve as a post for parachute hackling, the first steps are identical. Place the bobbin at the front one-third point of the shank. Clean and stack a small bunch of hair - the amount will vary depending on the hook size. Measure it to be slightly longer than the shank and trim the butts even. With the tips pointing forward and down, use the 45-degree technique to tie in the hair. Be sure to lock it tightly, directly on top. Pull the butts upward and trim them at an angle, tapering down from the front and smaller to the rear. Tie down the butts securely, but leave a few hairs sticking out. Apply a drop of Flexament. Pull the tips upright and put four wraps in front of them. Do not build a shoulder in front of the wing - it's not necessary and creates hackling problems. Instead, take two gathering wraps around the wing base. On the third wrap, pull rearward and catch the thread in the prickly hairs behind the wing. This cocks the wing upward. Trap the thread by wrapping over it, and repeat the process. When done right, the wing will not move. It can be left as a post or split.

If the wing is to be split, separate it into two equal clumps and run a few figure eight wraps through it. Take a couple of wraps at the base of each post and apply a drop of Flexament. If your pattern calls for hackle-point wings, select two evenly sized large hackles from the middle of a rooster cape. Saddle hackles do not work well for wings. Do not strip anything from the stem. Line up the tips evenly and place the convex (shiny) sides together

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With the bobbin at the front one-third point, measure the wings and use the 45-degree technique (tips down and forward) to roll them onto the top of the shank. Tie them down securely and release, then trim and secure the butts. Pull the hackle points upward and rearward. Put two or three wraps in front of them to stand them up. Separate and secure them with two figure-eight wraps. Very few wraps are needed when this step is done right. Fewer wraps mean less weight. Apply a drop of Flexament to the base.

Flies such as the Light Cahill call for split wood duck wings. The simplest way to prepare the feather is to remove the tip by clipping out a piece of the stem. Hold the feather by the butt and stroke everything

upward. Usually this will form a thick and even bunch. <> Use the 45-degree technique to mount the wing. Stand it up and split it as described for hackle-point wings.

The 45-degree technique works perfectly for tented hair wings, too, as long as you hold the hair tightly in place atop the shank while wrapping those first critical turns. Comparadun-style wings also can be tied in with the 45-degree technique, but once the wing is tied in, the procedure differs. Here the wing must be splayed using a thumbnail. Then apply a ball of dubbing in front of the wing to form a thorax and to hold the wing upright. To tie tent-style wings using quill feathers such as turkey tail, the 45-degree technique is unnecessary. Just cut the material to the proper width, apply some Flexament to the tie in point, and tie the wing in with a few wraps. Once it is tied in, coat it entirely with Flexament and trim the rear to length.

Hackling Dry Flies

In general, use only high-quality hackle. I won't add to the saddle-versus-neck-hackle din, except to say that for beginners, saddle hackle seems to be easier to handle.

Whether you are using neck or saddle hackle, it is critical that the hackle barbules match the hook size. Use shank length as a guide unless the hook is longer than standard. A hackle gauge is a good investment.

I recommend four criteria when students ask me how to recognize good hackle. Each feather should have a long sweet spot, a web-free area. The barbules in the sweet spot should be of equal length along the stem. The barbules should be stiff, not soft. Finally, the stem should be pliable - stiff stems are hard to wrap and tend to twist.

Strip all fuzz from the butt to the sweet spot. Don't spread the barbules by stroking downward - it's unnecessary and tends to weaken the connection between barbule and stem.

For standard hackle, tie the hackle stem both in front of and behind the wing <>, leaving a small amount of bare stem showing. This makes the critical first wrap easier. The concave (dull) side of the feather must be facing forward. For parachute hackle, the hackle is mounted in the same manner <>except that the concave (dull) side must face downward.

Before beginning to wrap standard hackle, consider dubbing a thorax area behind and in front of the wing. The soft bed formed by the dubbing will produce a more perpendicular wrap. As a bonus, the dubbing also enhances the body form when viewed from beneath. Here are a few tips. Strip a few barbules from the far side of the stem, no more than about an eighth of an inch. <>Make sure that the hackle is perpendicular to the axis of the hook when beginning the first wind. Grab the tip of the feather with your fingers or hackle pliers and make the first wrap behind the wing. This first wrap is critical. Don't let the stem twist. If the first wrap looks good, wrap a second one in front of the first, behind the wing. Take three close wraps in front of the wing, staying well back from the eye. Tie the hackle down securely and trim the excess. If you are using two hackles (e.g. on an Adams), then weave the second hackle through the first to avoid tying barbules down. If you tied the first hackle off on the bottom of the shank, tie the second one off on the top to balance the hackle.

For parachute hackle, once the wing is posted as described above and the hackle is properly <> tied in, dub a thorax in front of and behind the wing, leaving plenty of bare hook behind the eye. The

concave (dull) side of the feather should be pointing down when tied in. Then strip a few barbules from the far side <>of the stem. Using your fingers or hackle pliers, grab the hackle by the tip and make two or three wraps<> up the wing. Now wrap down, with each successive wrap beneath the previous one, until you are back at the wing base. Bring the hackle around to the close side of the hook <>, and let it hang over the shank using hackle pliers. Trap the hackle tip with thread <>That locks it in place. Trim the excess and any errant barbules.

Finishing the Fly

The head of the fly is the signature on your piece or art. Assuming that you have followed the Prime Directive and have stayed well back from the hook eye, form a smooth head that tapers from small in front to large at the rear. Make the last winds at the large end, where the whip finish is made. Use a high-quality whip finisher unless you are adept at tying the whip-finish knot with your hands. Add a drop of Flexament to seal the head, and pat yourself on the back.

The value of high-quality flies was hammered home to me while guiding on the lower McCloud some years ago. As evening arrived, the pool before us came alive with rising fish. After observing for a few moments, I suggested a size 16 Parachute Adams. My client plucked one from his box, proudly announcing that he'd tied it. I stammered and lamely said, "Well, uh, I have some too. Why don't we try one?" He declined and knotted his creature to a 6X tippet. The hackle was too large, too sparse, and disheveled. The tail was two or three sizes too large, and the body was, to put it mildly, robust. His first cast was perfect. I watched sadly, as the fly bobbed unmolested past several nice risers. After numerous fishless casts, I suggested a fly change, and tied on a well-proportioned size 16 Parachute Adams. Later, when we could no longer see the fly and began walking out, he asked me what had made the difference. Diplomacy being part of guiding, I said something like "I think your fly looked too big to the fish."

The foregoing tricks, tips, and techniques will help tyers produce consistently good flies of proper form and proportion. When it really counts, as in the case of the fly that looked too big to the fish, it pays to have a box full of quality bugs to show them.