

# The Pheasant Tail Fly

(Installment No. 2 on the essential flies)

By Eric Palmer

One of the fascinating things for me about fly fishing is that each of us can make the sport as complex or simple as we may choose. If you feel that you need a fly box full of *Jeroen Smit Rooster Sphincters* ([Dec. 2015 Leader](#), Upper Sac write-up) from size 6 to 34 to hook fish on your favorite water, and have access to the scrotum hair of a Tibetan Yak, knock yourself out. If, on the other hand, you have minimalist leanings, you will find there's a modest collection of standard, generic and easily identifiable flies that do an excellent job of matching almost every form of fish food we're concerned with. One such fly that's a must-have in every fly box is the Pheasant Tail (PT). General rule of thumb: If it's all brown, it's probably a PT.

This simple fly was conceived in 1958 for the Hampshire Avon in the U.K. by River Keeper **Frank Sawyer** (1906-1980), who, by that time had over fifty years of experience on the river. Meandering its way some sixty miles out to the coast at Christ Church, the Avon has one of the richest diversity of life forms in Britain, especially in mayflies. With over 600 species of mayfly in the U.S., almost all small and brown as nymphs, it's easy to see why this fly has become a favorite of American fly fishers.

Frank Sawyer designed his fly with its small head and tapering body contour to imitate a drifting and emerging baetis mayfly, "olive" to the Brits, or blue wing olive or simply "BWO" to us. Sawyer conceived this fly after an "Ah-ha!" moment when he observed that the much older *Pheasant Tail Red Spinner* dry fly would still take fish once it was submerged.

The beauty of the Pheasant Tail is both its simplicity and its versatility as a trout magnet on almost all California streams or lakes. Besides the **baetis mayfly**, aka **blue wing olive** (BWO), it's also a proxy for a wide range of bugs that trout crave including the **pale morning dun** (PMD), **march browns**, the **callibaetis** nymph in lakes, **stoneflies**, and even the good 'ol **stick caddis** or *brachicentrus* on the Upper Sacramento and elsewhere. So, don't despair after losing your last and much coveted *Bill's Stick Caddis*; after muttering the requisite swear word, just tie on a suitably sized and weighted PT, and press on without skipping a beat.

Now, about the fly's construction: An interesting thing about how Sawyer tied the original may resonate with the minimalists among us for its paucity of ingredients; there were only two! Very thin copper wire and cock pheasant tail fibers. That's it; not even thread. The wire binds it together and serves to fatten up the thorax while adding some weight along with a little brightness to an otherwise drab fly. Sawyer twisted the wire and pheasant tail fibers around one another, and wrapped them forward together, forming the thorax and abdomen.



Frank Sawyer's original Pheasant Tail

Frank Sawyer's book "*Nymphs and the Trout*", first published in 1958, describes his method of tying and fishing the fly. Here's [a rather dated video](#) showing Frank Sawyer himself tying his fly. And, another [modern video](#) in living color with sound showing how to tie the original.

As with most everything, over time the fly has evolved considerably as American tiers added their own creative spin and the *American Pheasant Tail* emerged. Thread replaced the copper wire

for all but the ribbing, and Al Troth (of Elk Hair Caddis fame) is credited with adding lead wraps for weight, a peacock herl thorax, and pheasant tail fibers for legs. Then came the bead head, a flash back (FB) for the wing case using either epoxy (PB for "poxy back") or Mylar or crystal braid, and there are many more augmentations involving crystal flash, hare's ear dubbing, fluorescent hotspots, and died pheasant tail feathers in olive and yellow. The near infinite variations of this fly in color and size have allowed it to be a stand in for everything from a midge pupa to the largest stonefly nymph.



**The Modern American Pheasant Tail**

But when you strip away the flash and glitter that adds what fly shops call "bin appeal" – and who knows if the fish really care? - it's still Sawyer's elegantly simple, and devastatingly effective nymph that has become a staple of most every fly box worldwide.

When studying the list of suggested flies for a given stream on a fly shop's website, you might see mention of a "BH PT" for bead head Pheasant Tail, or perhaps "FB PT" for flash back PT, invoking short the hand notation for the eye catching enhancements. Now you know the

secret codes of guides.

So how do you fish a Pheasant Tail? In a stream or river the fly can be fished just sub surface if desired, but it's best fished on the bottom in a dead drift, and then gently raised with the rod tip to imitate an emerging nymph using the method referred to as the [Leisnring Lift](#) (after James Leisnring). This method can trigger an "induced take" or grab, much like dangling a string in front of a semi-conscious napping cat will get his immediate attention as instinctive reflexes passed down from his ancient ancestors, and well beyond his conscious control, jolt kitty from his stupor. You can also "short-line" nymph the PT, and at the end of the drift you will also have, in effect, an automatic Leisnring Lift as the line goes taut and your fly(s) rise to the surface. A little gentle twitching at this time may also be in order.

In a lake the Pheasant Tail becomes an excellent proxy for the Callibaetis nymph as it rises to the surface from the weed bed. With a floating rig, Ralph Cutter in his *"Fish Food"* instructs us to tie the fly to the end of a 6x tippet one and a half times the water depth. Fish the fly just off the bottom with slow long retrieves that mimic the bug tentatively leaving the weed bed and then retreating for cover as fish approach. For more detail on this method and fishing the Pheasant Tail in stream and lake, see chapter 19 of Ralph Cutter's must-read *"Fish Food"* (also check the GBF library).

Another highly recommended book for the fly fisher – particularly the beginner - is *"The History of Fly-Fishing in Fifty Flies"* by Ian Whitelaw, Abrams Publications, pub. 2015. This book was the inspiration for the on-going articles on the history of flies, and, along with Ralph Cutter, the source of much of the material you have just read.

Thanks for your time, and see you on the water ...

Eric