

Origin of the Copper John Fly

(Installment No. 4 of the essential flies)

by Eric Palmer

"Calling Fly-Fishing a hobby is like calling brain surgery a job."

~ Paul Schullery

It was a day in 1993 that long-time fly angler and master fly tyer John Barr of Boulder Colorado concluded that he needed a new fly. His favorite rig for moving water was a three fly version of the configuration that we today call "hopper-dropper" or "dry-dropper", and, which unbeknownst to Barr at the time, would soon spawn the catchy phrase popularized by guides: "hopper-copper-dropper".

Barr visualized a small attractor with the fastest sink rate physics would permit to hang 2-4 feet below a bushy floating stimulator like an Elk Hair Caddis, or foam hopper "indicator". This new fly would in turn have a more realistic hatch-matching nymph dropper tied below it as the morsel the fish would presumably prefer among the other options of the three-fly configuration; caution advised. But, good news, as we've learned this concept can also work well with just two flies for the more risk averse among us.



A Copper John in natural copper with a well tapered body.

In fact, each fly in its own right presents an opportunity to hook a fish. And, as it would later develop, Barr's new creation fished all by itself would often prove to be very effective.

Barr likely had no idea at the time that what would evolve from his early efforts almost 30 years ago would become a fly so ubiquitous and popular that it's likely found in nearly every fly box in North America, if not many world-wide.

He wanted a small yet very heavy fly to sink fast in order to keep the fly below it hugging the streambed. It should be flashy enough to catch the eye of an otherwise disinterested trout as inducement to cruise over for a closer look at the full rig, and to hopefully pick off the bottom more realistic fly.

The fly's disparate features should allow it to serve as a proxy for a myriad of aquatic life including a stonefly, mayfly, caddis, and even a midge (chironomid). A jack of all trades, yet master of none. In other words, it's not a particularly precise match for any known aquatic insect in North American

waters. But then, who among us has ever witnessed a two or three year old human toddler refuse a smooshed, misshapen factory second cookie or cupcake? "Close enough" can and often does win the day.

It would not be until three years later in 1996 before John Barr was fully satisfied that his new fly was finished after various tweaks, twists and turns. After trying various hooks, he settled on a Tiemco 5262 2XL, 2X heavy hook with a tungsten bead. For yet additional weight, and to secure the bead, he added several wraps of lead wire tucked tightly behind the bead. Modern YouTube tyers may add a couple drops of super glue to the wire for good measure.

The original abdomen was natural-color copper wire as today's colored non-tarnishing copper wire would not appear until later, and the original body had no taper. Barr then, to help facilitate faster sinking, added a gracefully tapered thread underbody for the sleek smooth profile seen in the photo above. A fly I will claim, without proof, to have been tied by John Barr himself because of where I found the photo.

He then dropped the original and fragile Hungarian Partridge tail and legs in favor of today's brown goose biot tail and brown hen hackle legs. That forked tail, by the way, provides the impressionistic stonefly que that can trigger a strike. The original single peacock herl thorax remains, but the turkey quill wing case was replaced by Wapsi Thin Skin as it became available, and it also proved to accept the epoxy better than the turkey. The final touch appeared after his artist friend Dave Hall suggested a narrow strip of Pearl Flashabou across the top of the Thin Skin and under the epoxy, and now the fly was complete, at least in its original natural copper.

On the addition of epoxy, Barr had this to say:



John Barr

“I first saw epoxy used to coat wing cases years ago on a Hal Jansen’s Callibaetis nymph pattern. The epoxy may give off a little glow that many emerging nymphs and pupae exhibit. I do not know if the epoxy makes the fly more effective, but it sure gives the fly curb appeal.”

In the spring of 2001 Wapsi came out with their Ultra Wire in the wide array of colors and sizes we see in fly shops today. Barr was quick to embrace this new non-tarnishing copper wire, which opened up near endless opportunities for the fly. In fact, today, if you see Copper Johns in your fishing partner’s fly box, they will most likely be the red Ultra Wire version, which speaks loudly to the effectiveness of that particular color as a good place to start with your collection.



Wapsi Ultra Wire

But, the other colors are not to be ignored. Chartreuse will evoke a caddis larva (green rock worm), stoneflies in black or brown with larger hooks. Black in size 18 or 22 can be a Baetis or Trico imitation. In still-water as a chironomid imitation under an indicator you can fish size 14-18 in red, green or zebra (black/silver wire). For the fly’s creator, plain copper, Red, black and chartreuse are his favorite colors.

You can even use Copper John’s for Crappie, Bluegills and Large Mouth Bass. The Copper John is a hard fly to beat as a versatile “work horse”, albeit a small one, including as a “Hail Mary” when you are having a really bad day on any water. Simply tie on a size 16 or 14 red CJ about 15-18 inches below whatever fly you’ve been fishing and see what happens. One fall I hooked a nice half-pounder in a riffle on the American with that trick. The next morning at the same spot, I coached my brother-in-law to “stand here-cast there” with the same configuration and producing the same result. He looked at me like I was a genius. This just might allow you to return home one evening with head held high as you are about to be interrogated with a skeptical “Well...how’d it go mister flyman?”

Barr’s preferred leader rigging with a Copper John is a 7.5 foot 3X tapered mono leader with a heavy butt section to the hopper (top) fly. Next is 2-4 feet of 4X fluorocarbon to the Copper John, with 12 inches of 5X fluorocarbon to the final nymph dropper. Under a strike indicator, he may use the Copper John as the first fly and have two nymphs dropped below it.

So...if you are a new fly tyer you might be wondering, ok, great, how do I tie this fly? There are many YouTube videos available but [this one](#) from Tim Flagler of *Tightline Productions* is easily my favorite. Take a look.

And, as for the fly’s name? Well...what else could it be?

About John Barr

John Barr began his fly-tying journey in his next door neighbor's San Jose garage when he was only five or six years old, and much of his early fly-fishing years were spent fishing for crappies and bluegills in the local San Jose gravel pits. As years passed he branched out developing his skills stalking trout in the Merced River, Yosemite National Park and streams and lakes throughout the Sierras.

Today most of the flies he ties and fishes are patterns representing aquatic insects (nymphs) since they provide most of a trout's diet. Beyond his Copper John, Barr's additional designs include well-known patterns such as the Barr Emerger, Vis-A-Dun, Graphic Caddis and the Meat Whistle. John is a fly designer for Umpqua Feather Merchants and on the advisory staff for Sage, Simms, Rio and Outcast, and is a member of the Ross pro staff.