

The Woolly Bugger

By Eric Palmer

It seems fitting that this series of articles would begin with the Woolly Bugger, not just because chronologically it's probably the oldest documented fly known to fly fishing as we know it today, but because in ancient times it was known as the "Palmer-Worm".

In 1653 Thomas Barker wrote:

"Let us begin to Angle in March with the Flie: If the weather prove Windie, or Cloudie, there are severall kindes of Palmers that are good for that time."

Thomas Barker was a contemporary of Izaak Walton, who also spoke of the fly in his *"The Compleat Angler"*, co-authored with Joseph Cotton and first published that same year.



The Palmer Worm, ca. 1651

The creator's name and the exact date in the 15th century are lost in the fog of time. The originalⁱ was tied on a handmade hook fashioned on a bent and tempered needle with a hand cut barb, since this was the era of DIY fishing tackle; no fly shops, nor sporting goods stores in the middle ages. It was dressed with red silk thread, a body of deep red mohair and a hackle of brown-red cock. The optional ribbing was gold wire or tinsel finished off with a head of black silk.

And, as you will soon read, this fly can be one of the most productive and versatile in our arsenal because it's a very convincing proxy for so much of what fish eat. In fact, some might argue that suitably tied, weighted and fished, one could have a very successful year on lake or stream using nothing

but a Woolly Bugger.

But where did that odd name "Palmer-Worm" come from in the first place you might ask? During the great crusades of the Middle Ages, 1095 to 1291, when religious pilgrims returned from the Holy Land, many did so carrying palm fronds, or with palm fragments pinned to their clothing as a token of their journey. Over time, they became known as "Palmers", and as the centuries wore on, the many pilgrims seen meandering across Europe and Britain from one holy site or shrine to another were similarly called "Palmers".



Pyrrharctia Isabella "Tiger Moth"

There's another creature that meanders about in the same fashion, *Pyrrharctia Isabella*, the larva for the Isabella tiger moth (and there are many, many variants). They roam the land in large groups devouring all in their path, and they also happen to be excellent fish food, should they fall into the water from an overhanging branch or bank, or blown in on the wind. By the 1500s, this little fellow became known as

the *Palmer-Worm* due to his meandering habit, much like the religious pilgrims.

And, it should be clear by now why the fly tying technique of using hackle feathers to imitate the insect's defensive spikes became known as "palmering". So there you have it in a nutshell.

Thomas Barker, apparently partial to black, continued to write:

"First, a black Palmer ribbed with silver: the second, a black Palmer with an Orange-tauny body: thirdly, a black Palmer with the body made all black: fourthly, a red Palmer ribbed with gold, and a red hackle mixed with Orange cruel; these Flies serve all the yearlong morning and evening, windie and cloudie."

And, as further evidence that modern anglers in the 20th and 21st Centuries did not invent the concept of tying this fly in a wide variety of sizes and colors, in 1848, Edward Fitzgibbon in his *Hand book of Angling* quoted a prominent London angler as follows:

"As they are meant to represent the larvae of caterpillars of flies, as well as some of the insects themselves, it is very evident that their size and colours may be varied to infinity."

When the fly migrated to the U.S. in the early 20th century, it underwent a metamorphous. The hackle became shorter, with a wool or chenille body, and it sprouted a short, stubby red wool tail to match the Woolly Worm caterpillar of the southern states, and thus the fly of that name that we see today. In 1967, Russell Blessing of central Pennsylvania tied the first Woolly Buzzer that we see today with its long flowing marabou tail to imitate the hellgrammite or Dobson Fly larva. His 7 year old daughter came up with the cute name, and it stuck.



The modern Woolly Buzzer

Now, here's the fascinating thing about the Woolly Buzzer: Depending upon how it's tied, weighted, sized, and fished, this humble and easy beginning fly tier's first fly, can imitate a huge number of terrestrial and aquatic creatures that both trout *and* even large and small mouth bass feed on.

Ralph Cutter, in his book *Fish Food*, states that the Woolly Buzzer is an excellent candidate for the sculpin and crawdad, along with a leach and many bait fish. It also makes an excellent tadpole, and even a stonefly. It's a steelhead fly, it works for salmon, and shad, and the huge cutthroats in Pyramid Lake love them. A properly tied buzzer can imitate a

damsel or dragonfly nymph on Lake Davis and Rancho Seco, and it's deadly on the huge largemouth bass at Cameron Park. It's hard to find a more versatile must-have fly for our fly boxes.

How do you fish a woolly buzzer? Any way you want, depending on what you're trying to imitate. You can short-line nymph them, swing them, or drift them with or without an indicator. Strip them like a streamer or just let them just tumble downstream with the current. Strip them fast or painfully slow. Fish them heavily weighted, or unweighted. There is no wrong way to fish a Woolly Buzzer, and the details on how to do so are just a Google away.

It's hard to go wrong with taking a John Gierach quote to heart, so try this one on for size:

"If you're stumped and wonder aloud what do to do next, at least half of the fly fishers in North America will say, 'I don't know, I'll try a buzzer' "

ⁱ Original Palmer Worm illustration along with the fly's origin story from *The History of Fly-Fishing in Fifty Flies*, by Ian Whitelaw, sketch reproduced with author's permission.