

# Wet Flies

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## Flies for fishing, and flies for fun

By *Bob Petti*

It has been quite some time since I tied my first set of wet flies for GFF. At the time - I remember being happy that I was just able to get the quill slips somewhat upright on the hook and not totally squashed. The few flies with duck flank wings - forget it - especially bronze mallard. Total horror show. I basically copied the Bastian style of fly tying - with a few alteration here or there such as hackle fiber tails instead of quill slips. The quill slips were all "concave out" such that the wings flared away from the body, the hackles were just a gathered bunch of hen saddle pinched under the head, and the hooks were all larger than I would fish in practice - most being on size 8 3906's.



A couple hundred yards of wet fly nirvana.

I've changed my style since then. I prefer a wound hackle of suitable hen or soft cock - not too webby - not too stiff. My wings are now tied concave in - with the shiny parts facing out. Through practice (one winter I tied nothing but wet flies save for a handful of streamers), I've gotten better at flank wings, too. Now I tie most of the flies in fishing size - mostly 12's with a few 10's and 14's tossed in. When I get down to the tips of mallard quills, I'll even go for a few 16's in a simple quill bodied wet.

I'm still learning. While I have gotten better at bronze mallard wings, I still struggle with teal flank wings. I still leave the heads with a single coat of varnish - rather than carefully applied 3 coats for that glossy smooth finish. I like the looks of the fancy polished head flies - but I'm too lazy. I know it is cliché to say "they're just fishing flies" - as if that really matters - fishing flies shouldn't be tied well, too? - but there you go. One coat of lacquer and in the box.

I think the biggest improvement in my tying is learning when to dial it back and present a sparse fly. Sparse flies sink better, swim better, are more translucent, and move more in the water. They fish better, you know? You'd think it would be easy to tie a slim sparse fly - fewer materials should go on the hook easier, right? - but it's not. I mean - yeah it is easy to tie the fly - but it's not always easy to be restrained with the materials. Just a few whisks for the tail - just a couple turns of hackle - a thin dubbed body. You have to pay attention to those things or the fly can get away from you.

I fish these flies - but not slavishly like some who make outrageous claims of success using them. A hungry fish will inhale anything that catches its eye, after all, and the long and rich history of wet fly fishing does not need my support. I have caught a lot of trout and tied a lot of flies, so these days mostly I do what feels fun. I enjoy tying wet flies - and I will often look for excuses to fish them. One day I fished the heavy pocket water downstream of the Five Arches Bridge on the Esopus, flipping a Pearly Invicta in front of me. I was hoping for a fish - but never did connect. But - you know - that's fine. It was fun to watch the fly do it's thing. I have a box of beadhead nymphs at the ready for those times when all I want to do is hook a fish.

A lot of these flies are originated somewhere in the UK. A few years ago I got a bug to tie UK wet flies as authentically as possible, so I got some hackles from - you guessed it - the UK. Nobody in the US sells a claret like a true Irish claret, and nowhere in the states can you find a vivid golden olive, especially that "West of Ireland" shade that seems to glow. It is also hard to find a true "red game" - a rich reddish brown hackle found on cheap cock necks (originally from fighting chickens, or so the legend goes) that is not dry fly quality but still retains the sheen of a good hackle. So I got some appropriate dubbing (Frankie McPhillips), some good hackles, and set out to learn these flies.

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### Teal and Black

Tail: Golden Pheasant Tippet  
Rib: Oval Silver Tinsel  
Body: Black Seal's Fur  
Hackle: Black  
Wing: Teal Flank

**NOTES:** There are many color variations of this fly, a Teal and Green also being quite popular.



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### Calder

Tail: Barred Wood Duck

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Butt: Peacock  
Herl  
Rib: Oval Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Orange  
Floss  
Hackle: Orange  
Wing: Brown  
Turkey  
Topping:  
Peacock Sword

**NOTES:** This is from Bergman's book, a pretty fly with some interesting tying challenges. Sometimes peacock sword refuses to cooperate and sit along the top of the wing. Sometimes? Most times!



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## March Brown

Tail: Bronze  
Mallard  
Rib: Flat Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Hare's  
Ear Dubbing  
Hackle: Brown  
Partridge  
Wing: Ringneck  
Pheasant Hen  
Wing Quill Slips

**NOTES:**A simply fly that is about as buggy as they come. Everything is mottled, and there is just a hint of sparkle. An all time great fishing fly.



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## Leadwing

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## Coachman

Tag: Flat Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Peacock  
Herl  
Hackle: Dark  
Red Brown  
Hackle  
Wing: Dark  
Gray Quill Slips

**NOTES:** In the US, this wet fly is best when the Isonychia are hatching. Drift it and swing it along the shoreline when the nymphs are migrating and you're apt to pick up a few opportunistic trout. Just be careful with your positioning and wading, as trout along the shore can be a little spooky.



## Heckham Silver

Tail: Golden  
Pheasant  
Tippet  
Rib: Oval Silver  
Tinsel  
Body: Flat  
Silver Tinsel  
Hackle: Black  
Hackle  
Wing: White  
Tippet Mallard  
Quill

**NOTES:** Just a cool looking fly - sparse, dark, with some sparkle in the body and sheen in the wing.



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## Teal Blue and Silver

Tail: Golden Pheasant Tippet  
Rib: Oval Silver Tinsel  
Body: Flat Silver Tinsel  
Hackle: Bright Blue Hackle  
Wing: Teal Flank

**NOTES:** One of my all time favorites. More well known as a sea trout fly in the UK, it has served me well fishing small streams that have a good population of tiny minnow fry.



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## Golden Olive

Tail: Golden Pheasant Tippet  
Tag: Glo-Brite #6  
Rib: Oval Gold Tinsel  
Body: Golden Olive Dubbing  
Hackle: Golden Olive Hackle  
Wing: Bronze Mallard

**NOTES:** The pattern is a classic, but the hot floss tag is a nod to Frankie McPhillips. He sells flies on his website and many sport a tag of that



famous  
fluorescent  
floss.

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### Bouncer

Tag: Orange  
Floss  
Rib: Oval Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Black  
Floss  
Hackle: Orange  
Hackle  
Wing: Yellow  
Duck Quills

**NOTES:** I listed  
this as a variant  
because it is not  
100% true to  
the pattern as  
listed in  
Bergman, but  
the spirit is  
there.



### Grey Monkey

Tail: Teal Flank  
Rib: Oval Silver  
Tinsel  
Body: Rear 1/3  
Golden Olive  
Dubbing, Front  
2/3 Grey  
Squirrel  
Hackle: Grizzly  
Wing: Mallard  
Flank

**NOTES:** This  
one is from  
"Tying Flies in  
the Irish Style"  
by EJ Malone.  
Very few wet  
flies sport a  
grizzly hackle.  
This one is  
super buggy.



**WOI  
Golden  
Olive**

Tail: Golden  
Pheasant  
Tippet

Rib: Oval Gold  
Tinsel

Body: West or  
Ireland (WOI)  
Golden Olive  
Dubbing

Hackle: West of  
Ireland (WOI)  
Golden Olive  
Hackle

Wing: Bronze  
Mallard

**NOTES:** I am particularly fond of this color. Back when we used to take our annual trip to Connetquot on Long Island, I bet this would have been deadly.



## Jenny Wren

Tail: Golden Pheasant Crest and Bronze Mallard

Rib: Oval Silver Tinsel

Body: Dark Hare's Ear Dubbing

Hackle: Brown Partridge and Red Game

Wing: Bronze Mallard outside Goose Quill

**NOTES:** Saw this pattern is a very old "Fly Fishing and Fly Tying" magazine. It is tricky with all the doubled materials - double tail, double hackle, double wing. The head can get out of hand if you don't plan ahead and leave ample space. A nice dark buggy pattern - but a little fiddly to tie.



## Mallard and Claret

Tail: Golden  
Pheasant  
Tippet  
Rib: Oval Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Medium  
Claret Dubbing  
Hackle: Medium  
Claret  
Wing: Bronze  
Mallard

**NOTES:** The classic Irish pattern which can be tied in a number of different shades. As Chris Del Plato will tell you, US trout love claret, too.



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## Pearly Invicta

Tail: Golden  
Pheasant Crest  
Rib: Fine Oval  
Silver Tinsel or  
Silver Wire  
Body: Pearl  
Tinsel  
Body Hackle:  
Red Game  
Throat: Jay  
Wing: Hen  
Ringneck  
Pheasant Tail

**NOTES:** Saw  
this in Stan  
Headley's  
"Trout and  
Salmon Flies of  
Scotland" and  
couldn't resist  
trying a few. It is  
a buggy fly with  
the palmered  
hackle and  
mottled wing,  
but then there is  
that sparkly  
body and vivid  
Jay throat. A  
real pretty fly.



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## Light Cahill

Tail: Cream  
Hen  
Body: Cream  
Fur Dubbing  
(mink used  
here)  
Hackle: Cream  
Hen  
Wing:  
Woodduck  
Flank

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**NOTES:** A US  
fly that is good  
to have handy  
during summer  
emergences of  
the light colored  
mayflies. I

mean yeah -  
you could fish a  
dun or an  
emerger - but  
why when there  
is a beautiful  
wet fly made  
just for the  
occasion?



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### Dunkeld

Tail: Golden  
Pheasant Crest  
Rib: Oval Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Flat Gold  
Tinsel  
Hackle: Orange  
Wing: Bronze  
Mallard  
Cheeks: Jungle  
Cock

**NOTES:** A  
great  
combination of  
materials on  
this fly - as well  
as the similar  
Thunder and  
Lightning (black  
floss body).  
Tying in those  
tiny JC cheeks  
can try your  
patience, but it  
is so worth it.



## Alexandra

Tail: Red  
Hackle  
Rib: Oval Silver  
Tinsel  
Body: Flat  
Silver Tinsel  
Hackle: Black  
Wing: Peacock  
Sword  
Sides: Red  
Goose Quill  
Slips, Narrow

**NOTES:**  
Everyone has heard the story of the Alexandra. If you are going to carry wet flies - this should be one of them. It has it all - red, peacock, silver, black - a cornucopia of fish catching materials.



## Professor

Tail: Red  
Hackle  
Rib: Flat Gold  
Tinsel  
Body: Yellow  
Floss  
Hackle: Brown  
Wing: Gray  
Mallard Flank

**NOTES:** A simple wet fly that is probably in everyone's fly box. Of all the mallard flank winged wets - this is by far the most popular and well known.



## Silver March Brown

Tail: Bronze  
Mallard  
Rib: Oval Silver  
Tinsel  
Body: Flat  
Silver Tinsel  
Hackle: Brown  
Partridge  
Wing: Hen  
Ringneck  
Pheasant Wing  
Quill

**NOTES:** There is also a gold version. A good fly to use when you want something mottled and buggy but with a bit more flash.



## Dark Cahill

Tail: Brown  
Hackle  
Body: Dark  
Gray Dubbing  
(squirrel used  
here)  
Hackle: Brown  
Wing:  
Woodduck  
Flank

**NOTES:** The dark companion to the Light Cahill above for Hendrickon season. The original calls for a body of muskrat, but I really like to use natural gray squirrel here, as it makes a nice spikey body with plenty of mottling. Do as you see fit.



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## Greenwell's Glory

Tying Thread:  
Yellow  
Pearsall's  
Gossamer,  
heavily waxed  
with brown  
cobble's wax to  
attain an olive  
hue. Rib: Fine  
Oval Gold  
Tinsel or Gold  
Wire  
Body: Tying  
Thread (down  
and back)  
Hackle:  
Greenwell's  
Hen (brown w/  
black center  
and tips)  
Wing: Mallard  
Quills, thin



**NOTES:**

Perhaps the oldest fly on this page? The origins go WAY back. If you don't have the right Pearsall's thread and dark cobbler's wax, you can substitute an appropriate colored olive floss, but oh that waxed thread looks great. I have just a little blob of the dark wax that I save for this pattern alone.