TO PALMER A HACKLE

Choices in palmering techniques can change the appearance and performance of your fly

The term "palmer" refers to a method for wrapping a feather through or over all or a section of a fly body. The name comes from the Palmerworm or Caterpillar of old England. In palmering the hackle is wrapped in an open spiral, somewhat evenly spaced, generally for the length of the hook. Flies tied by this method are usually wingless. In this discussion, palmering doesn't include the tight wraps of hackle used to create a dry fly hackle, such as a Catskill pattern. Palmering is typically employed on wet fly patterns such a Wooly Worm or Wooly Bugger. Some dry flies use a palmered hackle on the body, such as a Stimulator or Elk Hair Caddis.

In the process of palmering, a hackle feather is typically attached at the bend of the hook with tying thread and wound spiraling over the body toward the hook eye. However, it is also common to attach the hackle at the head and wind toward the bend. Each of these methods can have the same general result. The most dramatic changes in a fly's appearance and performance are achieved by using different methods of tying in the hackle either by the tip or butt and by tying with either the shiny side (top or convex side) or the dull side (bottom or concave side) facing in an up or down position.

Some basic considerations in palmering a fly:

1. Choose the desired color. Color may match or coordinate with the fly body color or contrast with it.

1. Choose the desired height of the hackle above the body. Some flies will have a slim, low profile while others will have a larger, taller contour. Choice of hackle is important to achieve the desired results. A long, soft rooster saddle feather is often chosen for a Wooly Bugger or Wooly Worm. These hackles have longer and more sparse fibers and are well suited for wet flies such as woolies and various steamer type patterns. The section of feather to be used should have fibers of adequately uniform length so the fibers will still be long enough at the end of the spiral to avoid an excessive taper of the profile. Feather sections prepared for tying should be at least three times as long as the hook shank. Hackle from long, gently tapered feathers with fine fibers, low webbing and supple quill are good. Actual height may vary from one-half hook-gap-width to two times the gap width. Dry fly bodies, such as a Stimulator, may require a stiffer hackle as is found on neck capes used for a dry-fly type hackle.

3. Decide if you want the hackle fiber tips to slant back toward the bend or angle toward the head. Hackle feathers have a natural "(" curved shape in cross-section. The apex of the "(" is referred to variously as the shiny side, good side, or convex side. Tying the shiny side down and wrapping it facing forward causes the wound hackle fibers to stand more upright, tips projecting outward perpendicular to the shank and slightly forward. This is sometimes referred to as "reverse palmer" and is often the preferred appearance. Hackle tips which angle forward create a larger profile, displace more water, and create more vibrations. The larger profile, when retrieved through the water disturbs the water causing fluid vibrations that may help fish locate the fly.

   The bottom of the feather is referred to as the dull or concave side. Tying with the dull side down and wrapped facing to the rear causes the hackle fibers to lie more angled downward and rearward. Hackle tips which angle backward tend to flex back and downward when pulled through the water giving the fly a smaller profile which passes through the water with less disturbance. The effect is a low, soft profile sometimes desired in flies such as a leech.

   It is important to maintain the correct hackle position throughout the warp to achieve the desired appearance. Short feathers may require use of hackle pliers to control the warp, while longer feathers are often wrapped by hand, passing the stem from hand to hand as the feather moves around the hook. Some tiers splay the hackle fibers out perpendicular to the hackle stem by gently pulling the fibers toward the butt of the feather, reducing the number of fibers trapped under the wrapped quill. Palmered hackle should not be too close together, only four to seven turns are needed on a medium sized bugger.

4. Decide if you want to tie in by the tip or butt. Tying a feather in by the tip at the bend will result in a

hackle taper becoming progressively larger from the bend forward toward the head. This is often the preferred appearance. The amount of taper depends on the feather chosen--a short feather with a fast taper or a long feather with a slow taper. Extra long feathers may have one or more sections with very little or no noticeable taper. Conversely, tying in by the butt at the bend can result in the taper becoming progressively smaller from the bend forward. Tying in by the tip or butt at the head position will have respective opposite results.

4. Determine if you want to tie in at the bend or the head. Many fly patterns call for ribbing material to be tied in at the bend prior to tying in the hackle or body material. Ribbing provides reinforcement and segmentation. Materials used are varied and include fine wire, tinsel, thread, floss, mono, and quill.

   When tying in a prepared hackle at the bend, fly tiers often make one wrap of the body material behind the hackle before proceeding to wrap the body material forward. After the body is in place, the hackle is spiraled one complete turn, then forward in evenly spaced spirals leaving gaps between wraps. A couple of extra turns are made at the head and then tied down. The ribbing material is counter or reverse wrapped forward by "weaving" through the hackle fibers (to minimize tying down fibers) and over the hackle stem and body. Ribbing improves the fly's durability.

   When tying in a prepared hackle at the head, the feather is often wrapped two or three times in the head position, then spiraled backward in evenly spaced spirals leaving gaps between wraps. The hackle is locked into position at the bend with two to three reverse-direction turns of the ribbing material, then continued forward in a reverse wrap over the hackle and body.

6. Some additional options:
   Wet Hackle: Prepared hackle with soft fibers and considerable amount of webbing (often from a hen) is tied with concave side toward the tail. Stroke both sides of feather fibers to the rear of the fly with each wrap. This doubles the fibers on one side and maintains all the fibers on the rearward side. Soft hackle and webbing assist in water absorption and natural lifelike movement. Doubling the fibers and stroking back with each turn is occasionally used on some bugger patterns using rooster saddle hackle.

   Trimmed Hackle: Hackle is first palmered, then the fibers trimmed or cut off to a shorter length. A large hackle can be trimmed to fit a smaller fly. Trimming alters the esthetic appearance of the fly, but isn't considered to affect its fishing qualities. Some dry Caddis and hopper patterns use top-trimmed hackle.

   Thicker Hackle: If thicker hackle is desired, use two hackles as one, wrapped singularly or together.

   Thinner Hackle: On some wet fly or small-sized pattern "mini buggers" #12-16, one side of the hackle can be stripped off prior to wrapping.

   Dubbed Hackle: Form a dubbing loop, insert feather, twist feather and thread together prior to palmering. This makes a much stronger palmer which resists breaking and coming apart.

   Flash: Can be added to the feather, commonly with the aid of a special holding clip or blending tools, and twisted along with other materials, often in a dubbing loop, then wrapped with the feather. This adds glimmer and lifelike translucent qualities to the fly.

   Legs: Hackle is palmered two to three wraps over the fly thorax then fibers trimmed off on top (or top and bottom) leaving legs on the sides. Another option is to use wing case material to press hackle fibers down and outward to the sides.

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