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## BEADHEAD ZELON NYMPH



The beadhead Zelon Nymph is a fly that Charity and I have in our fly boxes at all times. We fish this nymph in the Smokies, on East Tennessee tailwaters like the Clinch and Holston, and western rivers like the Madison and Yellowstone. The fly is based on the highly successful Pheasant Tail Nymph blueprint, but has several factors that I believe make it better.

I didn't set out to create a new fly, but was simply trying to make the best of a tough situation a couple of years ago. During the busy spring guiding season I ran completely out of pheasant tail feathers and couldn't round any up on short notice. Each morning I was on the way to the river for guide trips before any fly shops were open and they were closed before I returned in the evening. I needed the feathers for Beadhead Pheasant Tails which are not only good in the Smokies, but made up the bulk of nymphs we fished on float trips on the Holston and Clinch Rivers.

I decided to use Zelon to replace pheasant feathers and was immediately pleased with the result. The material was the perfect size for tying #14 - #16 nymphs, was easier to work with than pheasant, and had a more attractive appearance when the fly was complete. The nymphs were an immediate hit with the trout as well.



I continued to call the new flies Pheasant Tail Nymphs for a while, but one day a customer called me on it. “Doesn’t look like a Pheasant Tail to me,” he said and began to suspect I was keeping the true identity of the fly a secret since it was outfishing a true Pheasant Tail nymph his buddy was using.

That wasn’t my intention, but the Zelon does give the fly a different look. The material has a translucency that catches light and gives the fly a more lifelike quality. Perhaps trout like it so well because it more accurately imitates a nymph with a loose skin just before it hatches. The Zelon may catch the light the same way bubbles in a nymph’s shuck do.

From the perspective of a fly tyer I really love this fly. The Zelon is easier to work with than pheasant fibers. It is far stronger and will not break the way feathers will. It also shapes better and is easier to create a tapered body. Casual fly tyers who don’t spend as much time at the vise as I do will appreciate the fact that they don’t have to be as accurate when measuring the tail of the fly. It will look great when clipped to the appropriate length. The legs are also pretty easy to create.

Like most nymphs I tie I’m always generous with the weight. It might sound funny, but since I prefer dry fly fishing I really want a nymph to sink well. I’m probably fishing a nymph because the trout won’t rise so the fly had better sink to where they will eat something. I sure don’t want to fish a nymph if it won’t produce!

The last element of this fly that I really like is that it's incredibly adaptable. Change the color of the Zelon from Mayfly Brown to a lighter color and you can immediately imitate a wide range of insects. My next favorite color is Caddis Tan. This nymph imitates a wide variety of light colored mayfly and stonefly nymphs. I even believe it is a suitable stand-in for some caddis pupa. I substitute light colored dubbing for peacock herl when making a thorax to keep this imitation consistent with the coloration of light nymphs. Black wire gives a clearer segmentation on the abdomen than copper wire.

I even tie another variation of this nymph for selective trout on highly pressured tailwaters like the Clinch and South Holston. I'm sure that the flash of the gold bead and copper wire attracts trout in the swift, tumbling streams of the Smokies, but the most discriminant tailwater trout in slow, clear currents probably see these same qualities and think "Cheap imitation!" I tie the tailwater variation only with #16 - #20 hooks and substitute a black bead and black wire. A light colored thorax adds even more realism to imitate the Sulphur and Blue Wing Olive nymphs that are so common in many rivers.



Light Zelon Nymph



Light Mayfly Nymph



Tailwater Zelon Nymph

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## FISHING THE BEADHEAD ZELON NYMPH

We usually fish this fly on 5X tippet, but will often use 4X on a #14 in the Smokies. Use 6X if fishing the tailwater version over picky fish. While the Zelon Nymph works great when used with traditional tight line nymphing techniques, we fish it under a strike indicator when we're out on guided trips. Fish the fly between two and three feet under the indicator, but don't be shy about fishing it deeper.



Our favorite way to fish this fly is as a part of a double nymph rig. I particularly like to fish a light Zelon Nymph with the original dark one and separate them by about 12" of tippet. Not only am I fishing different colors, I'm also fishing at different depths. This is an excellent rig for the spring and summer months, but we'll often pair the fly with a larger nymph in the cold times from late November through early March.

Our favorite big nymphs are #8 Rubber Leg Tellicos and #10 Princes. Fish the smaller Zelon Nymph on top when water temperatures are in the high 40's or warmer. Trout and nymphs should both be active and the fish will be watching for mayfly nymphs or caddis pupa to ascend to the surface. When water temperatures are in the low 40's or even colder you should consider tying the smaller Zelon nymph under the bigger stonefly pattern. This will put both flies down on the bottom of the stream and give you the advantage of presenting two different flies in front of sluggish fish.

A #16 is a good size to use if you're dropping the nymph under a dry fly. A #12 Parachute Adams or Haystack combined with a Beadhead Zelon Nymph is excellent for fishing in the spring. Switch your dry fly to a #12 or #14 Stimulator from May through the summer months.

## TYING THE BEADHEAD ZELON NYMPH

Hook: Scud/Shrimp Hook

Weight: 4 - 6 turns of .015 No Lead wire

Thread: 6/0 same color as the body

Body: Zelon but antron yarn will work if you have difficulty acquiring it

Rib: Copper wire, size Brassie or Small

Thorax: Peacock but variations on the pattern can use different dubbings



Begin by wrapping wire behind the hook. I'll put 6 wraps on a #14 intended for swift flowing streams and 4 or 5 wraps on a #16. You may prefer less weight for slow, shallow runs on the South Holston. I'll keep a few with no weight other than the bead just for tailwaters when trout are eating nymphs near the surface during a hatch.



Wrap your thread just behind the wire, put a few wraps over the wire to lock it down, and wrap toward the bend of the hook.



Tie the Zelon in at the point where a horizontal line would intersect the bead. It's easier if you use 6" or less of Zelon. That is enough yarn for several nymphs.

Tie in the copper wire then wrap thread up to the No Lead wire.



Wrap the Zelon up to the thread. Try to make the wraps such that the yarn builds on itself as you move up the hook to build a body.



Reverse wrap the copper wire. This isn't entirely necessary, but I feel like it adds durability to the fly. There should be about 4 wraps of copper wire over the Zelon. Make a couple of wraps with the copper wire on the hook shank between the Zelon and bead, then make a few wraps of thread over that.



Use two or three strands of peacock herl for the abdomen. Clip the tips off and tie the herl in by the tips. This causes the herl to be rubbed the wrong way and flare out nicely. Completely cover the wire and tie down with only two wraps. Clip excess.



Bring the Zelon down and tie down with only two wraps. It's important not to build much bulk behind the bead so you'll have space to create the legs.



Divide the Zelon into two halves and give each side a twist to help the fibers stay together. This image is taken from slightly above to illustrate.



Fold each side back along the sides of the fly and hold in place with your thumb and forefinger while your other hand wraps thread over the Zelon to hold it in place.



At this point you can tie the fly off with a few half hitches or a whip finish. Clip the Zelon so the legs and tail are the appropriate length. This photo shows the fly after whip finish. Legs should be clipped shorter now. A drop of head cement on the thread does wonders for the durability of this fly.

# R&R

## FLY FISHING



Ian & Charity Rutter

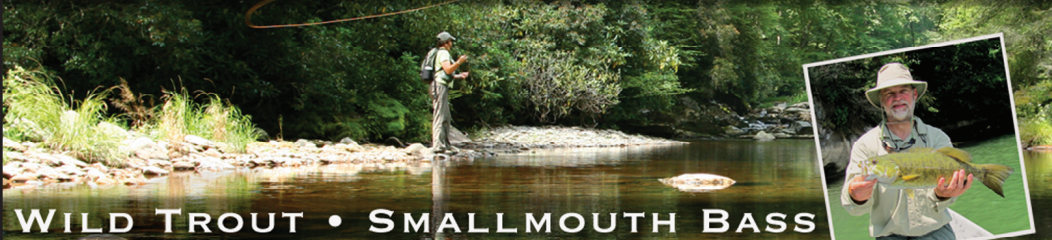
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