

Fly of the Month Skull & Bones



RandRFlyFishing.com



Ian & Charity Rutter

865.448.0467

www.RandRFlyFishing.com

SKULL & BONES



Skull & Bones is a fly I've been fishing in some way, shape, or form for many years now. I'd love to say I developed this pattern on my own, but that would be far from the truth even though I've put my own tweaks on this highly effective tailwater trout fly.

I started fishing the Clinch River in the early 1990's and was initially baffled by how different this large river fished from trout streams in the Smokies where I learned to fly fish for trout. The first time I ever went to fish the Clinch was in August and I strung up my fly rod just as the generators were winding down and the water was falling. It was late afternoon and I'm sure the temperature was at least in the high 80's if not in excess of 90 degrees. What I would come to know as a typical tailwater mist hung in the humid air over the river as I walked down the bank to the river wearing my usual summer fishing attire, shorts and wading boots.

Anyone who has fished our tailwaters in East Tennessee is smiling already. Water temperatures on the Clinch are considered warm if they surge past 55 degrees and they are often in the low 40's for most of the year. That includes the hot summer months.



Small flies don't mean small fish on tailwater rivers. Notice the small Skull & Bones in the jaw of this nice brown trout.

My knees, ankles, and calves ached so badly from the cold water that I had to retreat. I initially thought that the air was so warm that it took me longer than usual to acclimate, but the water was far too cold to wade in shorts. After that I was sure to bring my neoprene waders. This was several years before the first expensive and leaky attempts at Gore-Tex waders came to the market.

That first experience on a tailwater set the tone. These large rivers below dams were nothing like the tumbling streams I knew in the Smokies. Not long after I learned to always bring waders I learned to always have some midges in my fly box. Back then it was rare for me to fish anything smaller than a #14 dry fly, but I quickly found that #18-20 midge patterns were a fact of life on the Clinch.

Another thing that initially baffled me was that fish would “rise” on the Clinch, but rarely take a dry fly. I was later told by a far more experienced angler that the fish were eating midge pupa just under the surface. The midges had not hatched yet, but were being intercepted by trout as they ascended to the surface. Even as the fish ate under the surface

they were near enough so the water that entered their mouth and expelled through their gills made a rise ring when they inhaled a midge. I could catch a few fish on Griffith's Gnats, a small dry fly, but often missed strikes when I couldn't see the fly if it sank. It was the peak of frustration. If I could see the fly fish would usually ignore it. If it sank and I couldn't see it I got more takes but missed them.

I can still clearly remember the silhouette of a lone fly fisher just downstream of me who seemed to constantly have a bend in his rod. It was frustrating to struggle to miss a few fish an hour while he was constantly hooked up. Even worse, I could tell he was intentionally allowing fish to shake off. He was hooking so many fish he found it inconvenient to have to land them all!

I eased a bit closer just to watch then give a smile and wave when he happened to look my way. "Are you fishing a scud?" He was obviously using something different than I was and that was a tailwater pattern I knew I didn't have with me.

He casually spit some tobacco juice out the side of his mouth away from me as he made a feeble roll cast to help another hooked fish free itself. "No..... A little beadhead." The fish came loose and he looked over at me. "A little beadhead is what it is."

The lone fly fisher turned out to be Ron Whaley. Ron was a bit of a local legend around East Tennessee and over the years I'm sure I ran into him on virtually every stretch of trout water in the region. Like me he fished it all from the Smokies to the South Holston and everything in between.

He insisted on giving me one of his flies even after I tried to refuse. It was tied on a small scud hook with a black bead. The body had a faint segmented appearance and there was a stumpy little wing poking out from a collar of peacock herl. As it turned out the body was stripped peacock herl, a relatively tough material to find. You don't find it many places now and I never saw it in fly shops back then. To tie the fly you had to find an extra thick piece of herl from the "eye" of the peacock tail.



Then with a pencil eraser you would rub all the herl off to leave the naked quill that was slightly lighter in the center.

The little fly was easy tie after I had a supply of stripped herl and I fished it religiously. One day I was knocking them dead in a riffle just upstream of the Highway 61 bridge. One of the regulars whom I referred to as a member of “The Creel Mafia” came along. The Creel was a fly shop in Knoxville at the time. Like most fly shops it had a colorful array of groupies who hung out by the front counter trading half truths and secret flies. We exchanged pleasantries and observations on the fishing when he gently pulled my rod up close to his face.

“Well, well.... Where did you get one of those things?” he asked. He was astonished when I said I tied it. I was a little uneasy when he asked where I found the pattern, almost in an accusing tone. It put me off a bit and I said it must have been in a book somewhere or something. “Whatever you do, don’t show it to anybody! We can’t let that one get out!”

I later heard the little beadhead fly jokingly referred to as “Skull & Bones” after the secret society at Yale University. I didn’t know there was such a thing and assumed the name meant they intended to cut out your tongue if you divulged the secret fly pattern!

Over the years I’ve found this fly is far from unique in fly fishing but it may have been one of the first patterns of its kind introduced around these parts. A few tailwater anglers who were in on the secret had a monopoly

on it while the rest were using more common but less effective nymph and wet fly patterns. Since those early days nearly 20 years ago I've used this simple fly on all of our tailwaters in East Tennessee as well as many Western rivers including the Madison, Yellowstone, and Henry's Fork. Over the years I've made some changes to the fly to make it quicker and easier to tie as well as more durable on the water.



Fishing Skull & Bones

Skull & Bones has caught fish in the Smokies, but we almost never use it on those streams. Most trout in the Smokies will take a larger fly and rarely get selective to such small flies. This fly works quite well in a number of situations on rivers where midges are a staple trout food. Our tailwaters certainly fall into that category where midges are a primary food source for even large trout.

Midges hatch all year long on our tailwaters, but some of the most prolific hatches happen on sunny days in winter and early spring. Because they are so small, fish seldom exert much energy to eat them. Rises are typically casual and trout will usually take up a comfortable position where they can comfortably feed on the small flies.

Skull & Bones can be fished alone or in tandem with another pattern. Water conditions dictate the way we fish it. If we are wading and there is absolutely no surface activity anywhere, we'll fish it relatively deep. This usually means about 30" deep, but there isn't much deep water when there is no water coming from the dams. Fish look for refuge in the few deep spots in the river when flows are low. Sometimes we'll pair this fly with a Zelon Nymph or sow bug pattern for water more than four feet deep. The extra weight gets the fly down where the fish are if they aren't up on the surface.

Our absolute favorite way to fish this fly is to target rising fish with it. Most of these fish are not eating flies on the surface, but just underneath so the Skull& Bones is ideal. The water in our tailwater rivers is exceptionally clear and we'll often target feeding fish we can see. For that reason I prefer not to use a strike indicator but fish the fly under a something like a Parachute Adams that is much more discreet. Even a Thunderhead or Royal Wulff will work just fine and I'm still surprised at how often "selective" midging trout will take one of these traditional fly patterns that have no resemblance to any insect in these rivers.

During the summer when the fish are used to seeing Sulphurs I may use one of those patterns for the top fly. I've found trout feeding on midges in the morning and switch over to Sulphurs after they start to hatch in the afternoon. This particular tandem rig will also help you get a sense of how interested the trout are in Sulphurs. If I get a few fish just look at the Sulphur dry fly and ignore the midge underneath you know the fish are starting to change their feeding preference.



SMOKY MOUNTAIN FLIES NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE



A feisty rainbow goes airborne after getting fooled by a Skull & Bones

Tying the Skull & Bones

Over the years I've made some important changes to this fly that I feel have made it easier to tie and far more durable without sacrificing its effectiveness. The original pattern used CDC for the wing which I have substituted with Zelon or poly yarn. CDC is relatively expensive and doesn't seem to offer any advantage as it's clipped so short on this fly. I'll often have a tough time finding CDC that's just the way I like it for dry flies so it seems like a waste to use a material that's harder to find and much more expensive.

Second and most important I've substituted the stripped peacock herl with black wire. Stripped peacock herl takes extra effort to make and is exceptionally delicate to work with. At least 10-20% of the time it will break while you're tying with it. As someone who sits down to tie flies by the dozen, I never like to see a fly come apart in the middle of the tying process. Even worse, I hate to see a fly come unraveled after it's been eaten by a single fish. Wire is far more durable, easy to work with, and relatively easy to find. Even better, it offers the opportunity to experiment with different colors. I suggest olive, brown, green and red as other colors you might want to try.

HOW TO TIE THE SKULL & BONES

Hook: Any scud hook #18 - 20, A dry fly hook will work in a pinch

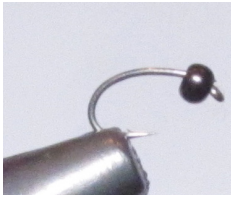
Bead: 2.0 mm black bead

Thread: 8/0 Black

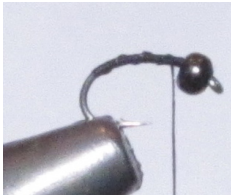
Wire: Ultra Wire, Size "Brassie", Black or other colors to suit

Wing: White Zelon or poly yarn

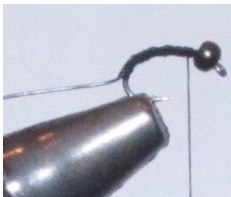
Collar: 2 strands of peacock herl



Step 1 Put the bead on the hook. You may need to use a pair of hemostats to hold the bead when threading the hook when both are so small. Your bead should have a small hole on one end and a slightly large hole on the other side. Be sure to thread the point of the hook through the small hole, otherwise the eye of the hook will slip inside the bead.



Step 2 Start your thread just behind the bead and wrap a layer of thread most of the way back to the bend of the hook, then bring the thread back up to the bead. This will help the wire tie in more securely.



Step 3 Tie in the wire just behind the bead and wrap thread over it all the way down to the bend of the hook. Hold the wire as you wrap the thread to ensure it stays on top of the hook as you work your way back.



Step 4 Bring the thread almost all the way back to the bead. Wrap the wire up to the thread with tight wraps. Even though this is a basic maneuver, it can be tough when working with such a small hook and fine wire. Take your time and don't hesitate to unwrap a bit to go back and cover any large gaps. Be sure to leave about one bead's distance between the point where you stop the wire wraps and the bead.



Step 5 Tie in some Zelon. It doesn't take much on a fly this small so an entire hank is way too much. Use only a fraction of what is in a strand. No need to clip the wing to size just yet, but go ahead and clip any excess on the end tied down on the hook.



Step 6 Take two strands of peacock herl and clip off the weak tips. Tie the herl in from the tip end. Now as you work with the herl it will cause the fibers to flare out.



Step 7 Wrap the strands of peacock herl around the thread about three or four times. This will reinforce the herl and make it far more durable. If you are right handed wrap it counterclockwise. Wrap clockwise if you are tying left handed.



Step 8 Wrap your herl and thread around the hook twice. This should be enough to fill the gap between the wing and the bead. Unwrap any herl still twisted around your thread. It may just do it on its own. Then clip the excess herl and make a couple more wraps with the thread.



Step 9 Finish the fly with a series of half hitches or a whip finish. There is no reason to add any head cement since the thread will be buried under the bead and herl and glue will likely run all through your peacock and matt it down.

R&R

FLY FISHING



Ian & Charity Rutter
Townsend, Tennessee

FLIES • LEADERS • TIPPET



BOOKS • MAPS • VIDEOS • TRAVEL



GUIDE SERVICE • FLOAT & WADE TRIPS



WILD TROUT • SMALLMOUTH BASS



www.RandRFlyFishing.com

865-448-0467

It's All About The Experience!