

Fly of the Month Speck Wet Fly



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SPECK WET FLY



The Speck wet fly is perhaps the best fly that few fly fishermen have ever heard of and even fewer have fished. It has an unlikely appearance and fishes much different than most would expect just from looking at it.

Like the Tellico Nymph, this fly also originated in the Tellico River watershed of East Tennessee. I'm fortunate to know the story of the Speck's origins and an angler who has probably fished the Speck more than anyone else alive. Walter Babb remembers a time when the Speck was almost the only fly he, his father, and most of their consorts would use when fishing the numerous streams in the Tellico Basin. They fished wet flies almost to the exclusion of everything else.

Many, many years ago Joe Bishop, a close fishing friend of the Babb family, had come across a new fly pattern, the Adams Irresistible tied by the legendary Fred Hall of Bryson City, North Carolina. While Hall didn't create the pattern, he was a tyer that many fly fishers relied on to supply quality trout flies. The new dry



Walter Babb fishes a pair of wet flies in a tributary of the Tellico River in Tennessee

fly fished well and all of the anglers in the group took a shine to it. When they sat down to tie some for themselves they just left the wings off and used hen hackle. They were wet fly fishermen after all.

Walter Babb is often regarded the modern day dean of Southern Appalachian fly tiers and trout fishermen. I once asked Walter why he and his contemporaries fished wet flies over dry flies. Wild trout in the southern mountains always seemed to respond to dries, so why would they prefer wet flies? Walter explained that there were several reasons. The first was practical: quality dry fly hackle was never easy to find in those days so it was always easier to come by materials for wet flies and nymphs.

The second reason also had a ring of practicality to it. When you're catching a bunch of fish it's very hard to keep a dry fly floating. You might as well fish a wet fly if the fly won't float anyway. I know plenty of people who have heard that and couldn't resist rolling

their eyes and shaking their head, but a skilled angler can rack up some serious numbers in wild trout streams around the Smoky Mountain region. It's not unusual for anglers like Walter to hook eight or nine fish from a single pocket on some days. Even with desiccant an angler will burn up plenty of time constantly reviving drowned dry flies.

Walter kept detailed records of his days on the water and I've thumbed through his journals on a few occasions. Once he and one of his fishing buddies, Rick Blackburn, made it a point to see how many trout they could catch in a day. When I asked how many they caught Walter shook his head and responded, "A sinful number." Pressed a little more he admitted it was in excess of 400 between the two, but he was also quick to point out that none cracked the 9" mark. That was in the wild and remote headwaters of the South Fork of Citico Creek locally known as Jeffrey's Hell.

The Speck is unusual since it has a spun hair body but is a wet fly. Every other spun hair body fly I know of is a dry fly. In spite of your first impression, this fly will sink after it's saturated with water and the fish absolutely love it. I can't help but notice it bears a strong resemblance to a Pat's Nymph, another ugly yet highly effective pattern here in the Smokies. Unlike the weighted Pat's Nymph the Speck has neutral buoyancy. While it doesn't give the immediate impression of any insect, it must do so with the fish. My best guess is they take it for a cased caddis or a caddis pupa. Both are quite common in Smoky Mountain trout streams.



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A Speck Caught on a Speck Wet Fly

Fishing the Speck

While it is common to fish all nymphs and wet flies with a strike indicator, this is one pattern I always fish with the traditional tight line method. It's a good pattern throughout the year, but really excels in small streams. Walter Babb would always fish a pair of flies, often a pair of Specks. Other patterns Babb will fish with a Speck are the George Nymph and the Tellico Nymph.

The Speck is really an excellent dropper to use under a dry fly later in the summer. It isn't heavy so it won't sink a dry fly. The best dries to use with the Speck are the Thunderhead, Parachute Adams, and Stimulator.

Be sure to prepare your Speck before fishing it. Put it in the water while squeezing it to saturate it with water. An even better method is to use saliva. Either spit on it or put it in your mouth, just don't hook yourself!

HOW TO TIE THE SPECK WET FLY

Hook: Std Dry Fly Hook #14 - #16

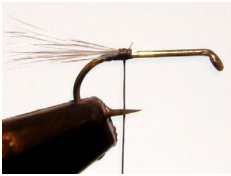
Thread: 6/0 Black

Tail: Brown & Grizzly Hackle Fibers

Body: Caribou Hair

Collar: Brown & Grizzly Hen Neck Hackle

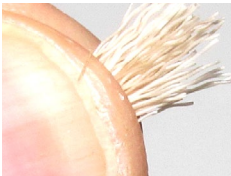
I believe that the primary reason most fly fishers don't fish the Speck is because it is difficult to tie. That's generally the case with any fly that has spun and clipped hair. Caribou is the absolute best material because it is the finest hair you can find that will spin. Deer or elk hair may be used, but you can't fit as many fibers on the hook so the body doesn't come as tight.



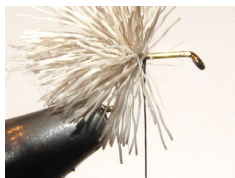
Step 1. Start the thread on your hook near the bend of the hook. Do not cover the shank of the hook with thread because that will impair the way the hair spins around the hook. Tie in a blend of grizzly and brown hackle fibers the same as you would for a dry fly.



Step 2. Clip a small clump of caribou hair from the hide with your scissors. Sort out any under fur and stray fibers. Clip the tips off of the clump. It should be about 1/2" long or shorter.



Step 3. While holding the clump of hair make two loose wraps of thread around it. Make a tight third wrap as you release the hair. The hair should flare and twist around the hook. Make a fourth wrap as the hair flares. Your hair will snag up in the hook if your hair was too long.



Step 4. Pull the forward fibers back and wrap the thread forward just ahead of the clump. Push the hair back with your scissor hand while using your other hand to pinch the back of the hook shank. The idea is to compress the hair tightly between your fingers.



Step 5. Now you'll repeat that whole process of tying on a clump of hair. After you've spun each clump you'll want to push it back to compress the hair as much as possible. This makes for a tight body. You shouldn't require more than three clumps of hair to make the body, but two may do it, especially for a #16. Don't crowd the eye of the hook. You'll still need to tie in hackle later. Now at this point make a couple of half hitches or a whip finish and clip your thread.



Step 6. Clipping the hair requires you to take the hook out of the vise and hold it in your hand. The first step is to clip the bottom. Take the scissor straight under the eye of the hook and clip the hair.



Step 7. Now this is the tricky part. Hold the fly by the eye of the hook and carefully clip hair around the tail. Be very careful not to clip the tail off. It's easy to do, but I've caught fish on Specks with missing tails and you can too if worst comes to worst.



Step 8. Now clip the hair from the top and sides. It's easiest if you hold the fly by the bend of the hook. You can put in the vise but I prefer to just hold it.



Step 9. The last bit of sculpting requires that you clip the forward section of the fly. There may be a few stray long hairs. You might just pluck them with your fingers if they're close to the tail.



Step 10. Now start your thread again close to the body and tie in one brown and one grizzly hen hackle.

Two turns with each hackle should be adequate. Tie them off and clip the excess.



Step 11. Now pull the hackle fibers back and make three or four thread wraps over it so the hackle will remain pushed back. Finish the fly with a series of half hitches or a whip finish.



One last thing - If you're tying more than one Speck at a time I highly recommend taking an assembly line approach. Stop each fly after spinning the hair, then start the next one. Later, trim all of the flies one after another. Then finally put the hackles on them all. Doing things this way is more efficient and you get much better at the spinning and trimming when you do it all at once.



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Ian & Charity live in Townsend, Tennessee where their guide service, R&R Fly Fishing is based. Together they log hundreds of days on the water each year guiding anglers inside Great Smoky Mountains National Park and on tailwater rivers in East Tennessee. They are avid anglers who travel extensively outside of the Southern Appalachians to fly fish. They regularly host groups of fly fishers in Yellowstone Country on the legendary Henry's Fork River in Idaho and Montana's Madison River, as well as the Turneffe Atoll in Belize.

Ian & Charity keep a busy schedule speaking at fly fishing expos and groups around the country. They have appeared in New Jersey, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. Anyone can keep up with their fishing report and weblog on their website; www.RandRFlyFishing.com

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