

# Copper John



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## COPPER JOHN



The Copper John is one of the most effective and innovative trout flies to come around over the last 20 years. Every year you'll see several new fly patterns in shops across the country but very few seem to stick around long enough to join the venerable ranks of universal flies like the Parachute Adams and Pheasant Tail Nymph that fool trout in the Smokies, Rockies, Patagonia, and New Zealand. The Copper John has easily reached the point where it's found in fly boxes all over the world and is likely to keep that spot.

John Barr, originator of the Copper John, lives along the Front Range of Colorado's Rocky Mountains but started fly fishing in the Sierras of California. That's more than a point of passing interest as rivers and streams in the Sierras are quite similar to those found here in the Smokies. Both have exceptionally clear and turbulent water with a wide variety of aquatic insects. While Barr's current home waters are somewhat different, it's easy to see the influence freestone streams have had on his fly designs.



*The Copper John sinks quickly and is easily visible to trout  
in rough water or hiding under structure*

The Copper John is a classic attractor nymph pattern that has an accurate profile but incorporates a flashy appearance to catch a trout's eye in swift water. This fly is really the latest development in a trend that started decades ago. Most nymphs were tied on heavy wire hooks to help them sink, but often no extra weight was applied and very few anglers use split shot. In the late 1980's and early 1990's beadhead nymphs revolutionized fly fishing. The extra weight with a little gold flash proved to be a potent combination. In fact it's very hard to find any number of traditional nymph patterns tied today without a bead. The Copper John uses a heavy wire hook and a bead, but takes the idea of weight in fly design even further by incorporating wire and epoxy into the body of the fly. The result is a fly that packs the most weight possible into a small package. Even better, the pattern is easily customizable by simply by changing the color of the wire for many variations.

The fly's wire abdomen adds weight and a segmented body. The epoxy on the back of the thorax gives the signature hump found



*Broken water along numerous rock ledges make the Copper John an ideal fly on the Hiwassee River*

on emerging mayfly nymphs as their wings prepare to break through the shuck. The epoxy also adds weight and gives the fly an irresistible curb appeal. There's no way to be sure if trout are as taken with the Copper John as fly fishers are, but results on the water indicate they are.

Another thing about the Copper John that has also impressed me is how many fly tyers will fish it, but simply will not tie it. This pattern has a few wrinkles that deter many fly tyers so I'm always able to tell just how serious a tyer someone is based on whether or not they tie the Copper John. In fact, I used to avoid tying them myself and told Charity buy them since she liked them so much. I just didn't want to mess with them!

One early autumn day several years ago Charity and I traveled to fish the tailwater section of the Nantahala River in North Carolina. This piece of water is best known for whitewater rafting but has a robust population of wild trout. We always steer toward this



*Hooked up using a Copper John under a strike indicator  
on a winter day on Abrams Creek*

section of river instead of the more popular delayed harvest section upstream of the powerhouse. Most anglers fish the river with zero generation but we've always been comfortable fishing it when the river is running. Fish will always take nymphs with gusto under these conditions and the character of the water always reminds of certain sections of the Madison River in Montana.

I was probably fishing a pair of Prince Nymphs as I often do here, but Charity was staying true to the Copper John as she had experienced several months of good fortune with the pattern. We were fishing around the Ferebee Monument when Charity hooked up a heavy fish from a narrow slot of calm water in some rapids. She stumbled downstream clumsily through the rushing water as a large rainbow tore line from her reel. The fish finally broke her tippet on the last of three cartwheeling leaps. We'll never know just how large the fish was, but our most conservative estimates put it well over 18". That day cemented the Copper John's place in our fly box!



*The Copper John works well on several southern tailwaters like the Hiwassee, Watauga, Tuckasegee, and Nantahala Rivers*

### **Fishing the Copper John**

The Copper John is a superb nymph pattern to fish year round in a number of locations. While we often fish it in the winter, we fish it even more in the summer months in the Smokies. It's not unusual for trout to take refuge in the deepest part of a pool directly under the white water plunge. As pools shrink this is a valuable lie since it provides depth and cover from predators while also providing constant opportunities for food. Undercut banks and boulders may not have enough water for trout to position themselves there during the dry months. This type of lie is perfect for a Copper John.

The Copper John's success on southern tailwaters is spotty. Rivers with varied insect populations such as the Watauga and Hiwassee are good places to fish it. The swift tumbling nature of these rivers combined with a wide assortment of insects makes this a valuable attractor fly. On the other hand, rivers like the Clinch where



*The Copper John is a valuable summer fly  
fished as a dropper under bushy dry flies such as Stimulators*

midges make up the bulk of insect life are not the best places for the Copper John. We may use tie it on in lieu of pinching on a split shot for added weight, but picky trout in slower rivers rarely favor it over a Zebra Midge or small Pheasant Tail Nymph.

The Copper John may be fished alone under a strike indicator or fished in tandem with another fly. One of my favorite summer pairings in the Smokies is a #14 - #16 Royal Stimulator on top with a #16 - #18 Copper John about 18" underneath. This fly also pairs well with Zelon Nymphs, Prince Nymphs, Tellico Nymphs, and other Smoky Mountain favorites. It fishes particularly well with a Prince Nymph on North Carolina delayed harvest streams like the Tuckaseegee. In the Rocky Mountain west it is commonly fished under grasshopper patterns as part of a combo popularly referred to as the Hopper Copper Dropper.





*Epoxy that cures with ultraviolet light make the Copper John much easier to tie than traditional 30 minute epoxy*

### **Tying the Copper John**

There was a time when I didn't fish Copper Johns much because they were a huge pain to tie. Sometimes I tied a few without the epoxy, but they just didn't look the same plus I knew they didn't sink as fast without it. Epoxy is a real pain to use. Upon mixing two part epoxy you have set amount of time before it begins to set. Furthermore it can be runny before it starts to set. For these reasons it's necessary to put epoxy on as many flies as you can at once. It's even better if you have a rotating platform similar to a rotisserie for roasting chicken. The constant slow rotation keeps the syrupy epoxy from running off of the fly. After I saw a new product by the name of Clear Cure Goo it changed my attitude. No mixing is required and it comes in a tube with a applicator similar to a syringe. The best type of Clear Cure Goo for flies like the Copper John is in a bottle with a brush applicator. Unlike other epoxies it doesn't set unless it's exposed to ultraviolet light so you're not in a desperate game of beat the clock. Even better, it cures in about 5 seconds with UV light. This means that you simply apply



*The Copper John is fished in every color of the rainbow. Chartreuse is a popular color around the Smoky Mountains.*

the epoxy where it's needed, then shine a UV light on it to cure. It's not much harder than simply apply head cement. Now I tie Copper Johns and other fly patterns with epoxy frequently.

### **Tying Materials**

**Hook:** Tiemco 5262 #12 -18 or other 2X Long and Heavy hook

**Thread:** 6/0 Black

**Underbody:** .015 No Lead Wire

**Tail:** Brown Goose Biots or other color to suit

**Abdomen:** Wapsi Ultra Wire, size Brassie, color your choice

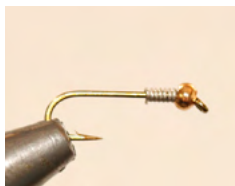
**Flashback:** A few strands of pearl Flashabou or Krystal Flash

**Shellback:** Scudback or Wapsi Thinskin color black

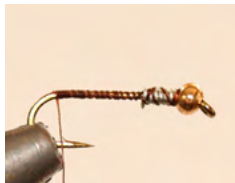
**Thorax:** 3-4 strands of peacock herl

**Legs:** Hungarian Partridge, Grouse, or Guinea Hen feather fibers

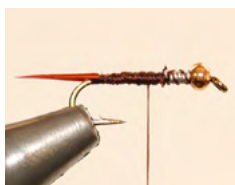
**Humpback:** Epoxy, Clear Cure Goo is the easiest to use by far.



**Step 1** - Put the appropriate size bead on the hook and put anywhere from 6 - 10 wraps of lead free wire on the shank. Shove the wire up inside the bead.



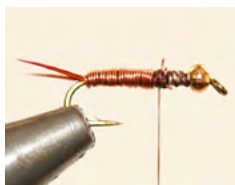
**Step 2** - Start your thread just behind the wire wraps. Wrap over the wire to the bead, then wrap back to the bend of the hook. This will lock the wire in place and keep it from moving.



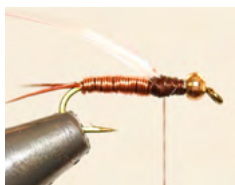
**Step 3** - Now tie in your goose biots for a tail. This is exactly the same as tying a Prince Nymph. The biots have a natural curve. Tie them so they curve out and away from each other. Now wrap your thread forward to build a bit of an underbody. Don't build up much near the tail, but more toward the middle of the hook shank.



**Step 4** - Tie in the copper wire in the middle of the hook shank and wrap over it back toward the tail. This ensures you will have a smooth body without any lumps.

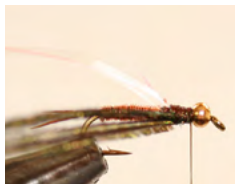


**Step 5** - Wrap the thread forward again and stop about 1 1/2 bead widths behind the bead. Use this as one last opportunity to build a tapered underbody with the thread.

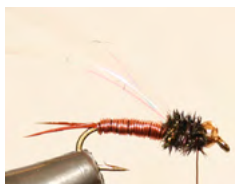


Now wrap the copper wire forward to create the abdomen. Keep the wraps tight. You should have a smooth and tapered body.

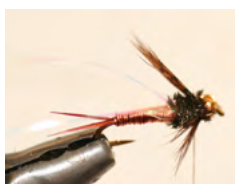
**Step 6** - Now tie in a strip of scud back and a few strands of pearl Flashabou or Krystal Flash. Thin Skin is the "official" material but requires a little more effort since you must cut it to size.



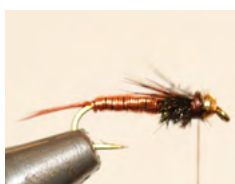
**Step 7 -** Tie in 3 or 4 strands of peacock herl. Clip the weak tips off and tie them in by that end. As you work with the herl it will make the fibers flare nicely. Be sure the thread ends up against the bead.



**Step 8 -** Wrap the peacock herl so you build a nice thorax. Tie it off and clip the excess. Be sure you still have space left for the remaining steps!



**Step 9 -** Take a small clump of partridge or other fibers and tie them on the side of the hook next to the bead. Repeat on the other side of the hook.



**Step 10 -** Fold the scud back and flash over the peacock herl and tie it down. Clip any excess soft hackle, scud back, and flash. Make a few extra wraps to cover any small excess that can't be clipped.



**Step 11 -** Now finish your tying with a series of half hitches or a whip finish. Now is the definitive step of the Copper John, application of epoxy. If you're using traditional 5 or 30 minute epoxy you'll want to apply it to all of your flies at once and have a place for them to dry.



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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](http://www.RandRFlyFishing.com)

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