

## **The Skinny on Hackle**

Dry fly hackle comes from two sources, a rooster neck (cape) or saddle, which as the name implies is from the back area between neck and tail.

### **Capes**

The advantages of neck hackle are that they offer:

excellent hackle, if one uses the genetically bred bird (Metz, Whiting, Hebert are all good breeders) and one feather is normally enough to hackle a fly

Wide variety of hackle from 4 down to 22 or smaller

“ tailing” feathers, sometimes known as “ spades” , although spades are not found on all capes

The disadvantages are:

Cost

Waste, especially if you tie in the 14 to 16 range

Each breeder will grade the cape, according to their own standard, rather than an objective standard. Metz has grade 1, 2, and 3. Others categorise in the terms of gold, silver, and bronze. A Whiting Silver will retail for a about \$130.00 AUD.

Top of the line hackle is not necessary. A grade 2 is excellent for most tying. A higher grade will have slightly less web and fewer broken feathers and more hackle in very small sizes, but most people do not tie in 20 or smaller, so that is not a useful feature except for fairly experienced tiers.

### **Saddles**

Not any saddle hackle will be suitable for tying dry flies. Saddle hackle comes in a variety of types, some suitable for palmering freshwater flies such as woolly buggers, or as wings for matukas (even then, hen hackle is often as good) but more often are suitable only for saltwater flies. Thus, you should avoid saddles that are described as capon, deceiver patches, schlappen (strung rather than on the skin), or saltwater saddle.

The saddles we are talking about have very long thin feathers from birds genetically bred for this purpose.

The advantages of saddle hackle is cost, bulk (ie a lot of hackle), and ease of use.

The disadvantages are that they usually come in a limited range of 12 to 16 (Whiting advertise them in sizes down to 20) and spades for tailing will be lacking.

Saddles can be purchased on the skin (a saddle patch). Whiting also offer “ 100” packs. These consist of 15 or so very long feathers of a predetermined size, eg 14. Theoretically the pack is capable of hackling 100 dry flies. These are good value because you can buy a packet for the sizes you tie predominantly, but you will still have to find feathers for tailing.

The barbs on saddle hackle, in my view, are coarser than neck hackle, with a compromise the aesthetics of the fly, but the fish won’ t be concerned. Indeed some suggest the rather stiff barbs on the saddle are better for hackling. However, there are also meant to be more barbs per centimetre of stem on a saddle hackle as compared to one from a cape (maybe this accounts for the coarser appearance).

### Cost

The main motivation for purchasing saddle patches is the cost saving.

The following table sets out the numbers of feathers of each size on a Grade 2 Metz neck cape:

Size	Grizzly	Brown	Blue Dun	Average
10	46	43	43	44
12	74	63	44	60
14	123	88	92	100
16	83	94	66	81
18	66	57	70	64
<b>Total</b>	392	257	315	349

I do not know why grizzly necks have more feathers, and since the above table was compiled, some 20 years ago, it may be that the numbers of feathers produced by one variety of rooster compared to another has evened out. Despite the age of the information in the above table, the calculation of the total number of feathers on a cape is probably the same today: Leeson and Schollmeyer’ s “ The Fly Tier’ s Benchside Reference” (p8) suggests a genetically bred cape will yield 600-800 useable feathers, which is roughly equivalent to the above table when you bring to account all feathers in the sizes 2-8 and 20-28 (excluded from reproduction in the above table).

Taking the figures in the “ Average” column as a guide, you will get about 350 feathers from the neck, with the advantages of range on each side and spades.

Within the 12-16 range you will get about 240 feathers.

A Whiting saddle (\$125.00) will set you back almost the same money as a cape (\$130.00). However, you might have to buy two saddles to get the full range of 12-16. You will have a lot of hackle, but the outlay is considerable. I do not recommend this unless you are either very serious or a production tyer.

If you buy 3 “ 100” packs in 12, 14, and 16 it will set you back \$84.00.

When you boil it down, the choice is:

3 x “ 100” packs (300 flies) for \$84.00 (\$0.28 per fly); or

spend \$46.00 more for a neck that will yield 240 feathers in the same range (at \$0.54 per fly) with range either side and spades for tailing

Generally I would go for necks, supplemented by 100 packs as you go.

### **Colour**

When choosing which colour hackle to purchase, my suggested priority is:

Brown. It is the most prevalent colour in tying by a long way and it can supplant coachman (very dark) brown and medium ginger;

Grizzly

Black

Black is essential, however, you will find it is used sporadically. Also, you will need range to cover ants, beetles, spinners and larger flies like the fuzzy wuzzy. I would not recommend a “ 100” pack. A ½ neck would be sufficient to start with.

After that buy ginger and dun as the budget allows.