

RED TAG

Why is it, with all our inventiveness, all the ready availability of fly-tying materials, and the world-wide circulation of specialist magazines which spread new ideas very quickly from one part of the world to another, we still like to use an old reliable fly like the Red Tag, which was invented more than 140 years ago?

I love to sit at the vice when I have a spare moment and design new patterns. It's easy to get carried away. Complete monstrosities result. These disasters usually appear during the winter months when there's a long wait before the season starts again. Then, towards September, my sort of lunacy reaches its climax. Maybe it's those westerly winds or the fact that it's almost time to go fishing again. But there I sit and turn out flies that defy description or explanation. Some of these things would cause anxiety, fear and loss of sleep to a Murray cod. All these flies end up in a separate box that I hide somewhere.

During the summer months things get more practical. Then I design flies to catch fish. These I put proudly in my fly box and dream of battles to come. So off I march to the stream and examine the water and try to imagine what's going on down below there, and I get excited and completely forget my new inventions and without hesitation tie on a Red Tag!

Well, then, what is this little Red Tag, and who invented it? According to Courtney Williams, it originated in Worcester, UK, about 1850. A Mr Flynn is bestowed with the inventor's title. It was originally used as a fly to catch grayling and was then known as the Worcester Gem. Around 1878 the fly was passed on, possibly by its inventor, to a Mr Walbran, who introduced it to the grayling of the Yorkshire rivers. From there it spread to use in trout fishing as well. It was then given the name of Red Tag, possibly by Walbran. The original dressing was tied on a no. 14 hook, the tag a bright red wool or scarlet ibis. It was believed the original tag was made from strands taken from a green woodpecker's crest. Sometimes a turn of gold or silver tinsel was added under the red tag.

What of the fly here in Australia? In David Scholes's book *Fly Fishing in Australia*, it is mentioned more than any other fly. In a later book, *Trout Days*, he is still as enthusiastic about it. David has tossed the Red Tag over most water in Tasmania and the mainland and quite a few rivers overseas: the hallowed test in England, trout streams in Scotland, and also in Maine and Vermont in the United States. I'll quote from *Trout Days*, chapter 13, 'The Friendly Trout':

Broadly speaking, taking the whole fly-fishing scene around the world, if you were limited to just three flies, regardless of where you fish or when, if you have as a dry fly a Red Tag, as a wet fly a Robin and as a nymph Wigram's Brown Nymph, I'll lay a shade of odds you'll hold your own on most occasions.



Red Tag

So far as the nymph and Robin are concerned I can't speak from the same experience, but I've tossed a Red Tag over quite a few waters. A fancy fly of British origin, the Red Tag represents nothing on earth. Some will tell you it's supposed to be a beetle. Well, of all the umpteen beetles I've come across, none of them has looked anything like a Red Tag. Maybe the trout take it in mistake for a beetle, I cannot say and neither can you, but if so they're easily fooled; I think they take it as something unknown that looks worth a try.

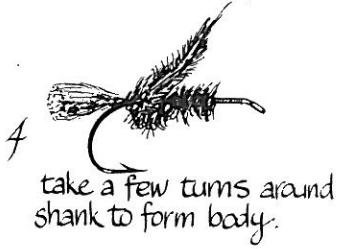
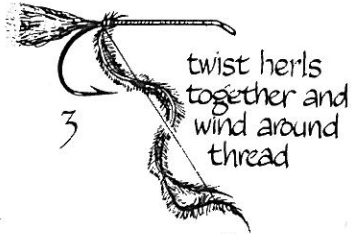
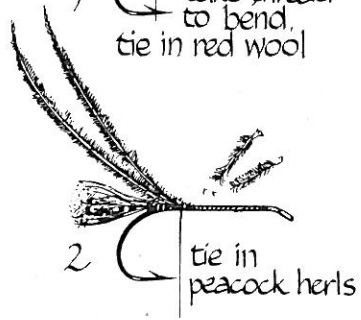
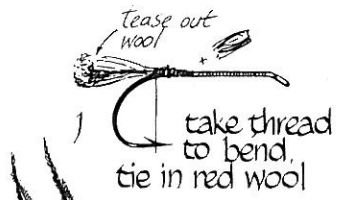
Well, that sums it up rather well, so I'll leave it at that except to say that it's also effective as a wet fly. Just make the body a bit plumper and use a couple of turns of hen instead of cock hackles.

Hook: 14-16

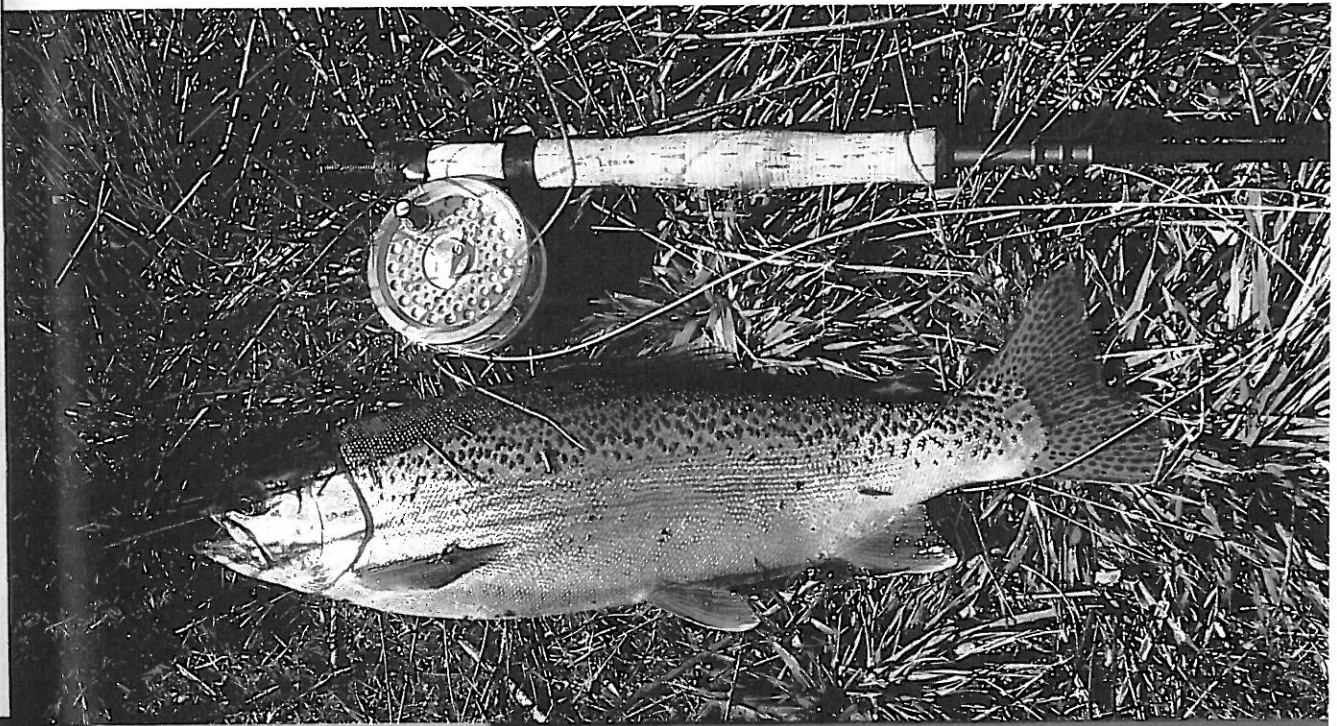
Body: Bright green peacock herl taken from the moon feather (F.M. Halford's pattern describes it as copper-coloured peacock herl)

Tag: Bright scarlet wool

Hackle: Red cock



Autumn Rainbow, Eastern Monaro, NSW. (Photo: Peter Gibson)

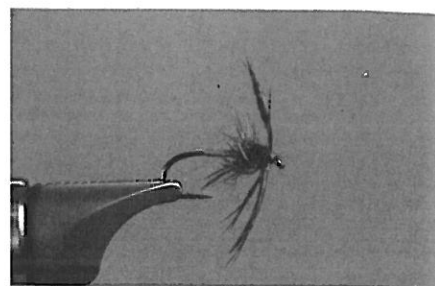


SOFT-HACKLED WET FLIES

Simple soft-hackled wets were first tied more than a century ago for hill-stream trout in the border region of Scotland and England. They were tied using sewing basket silks and the feathers from an occasional poached partridge or other land bird. That's all the tiers had available, and they made it work. Sylvester Nemes, in his brilliant book *The Soft-Hackled Fly* (Stackpole Books, 1975), brought these flies to the attention of American anglers. His flies, and the basic methods he uses to fish them, take trout well to this day.

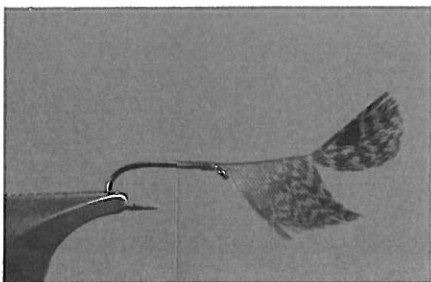
Soft-hackled wet flies resemble many winged insect types—mayflies, caddis, and stoneflies—that have drowned and become disheveled. The naturals are tossed at the whim of the current. The soft fibers of these wet flies open and close, kick, and all but scream that they're alive and good to eat to a trout.

The listed Grouse & Orange, along with the Partridge & Yellow and Partridge & Green, all tied in sizes 12 and 14, cover many fishing situations. Two ways to tie them are demonstrated here.



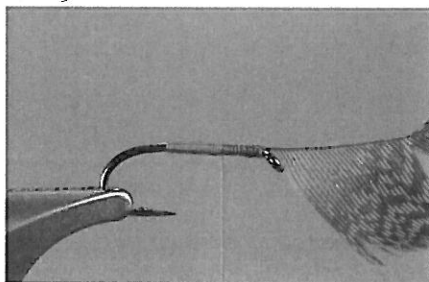
Grouse & Orange

Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 10, 12, 14, 16
Thread	Orange Pearsall's Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Grouse wing shoulder feather
Body	Working silk or orange floss
Thorax	Hare's mask fur

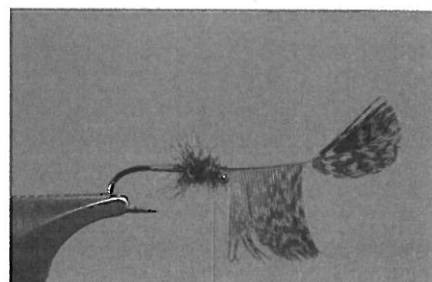


METHOD 1

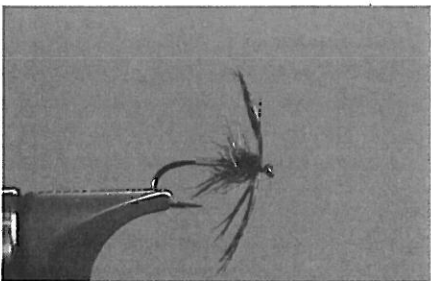
Step 1. Wax the first inch of tying silk with beeswax. Start the thread just behind the hook eye, and clip the excess tag. From the shoulder of a grouse wing, select a partridge feather with fibers about two hook gaps long. Prepare the feather by stripping fuzzy fibers from the base, then flaring all but the short tip fibers to 90-degree angles to the stem. Hold the feather by the stem, with the concave side toward you, and peel away the top fibers. Tie in the feather at the hook eye, with the tip out over the eye, and clip the stem.



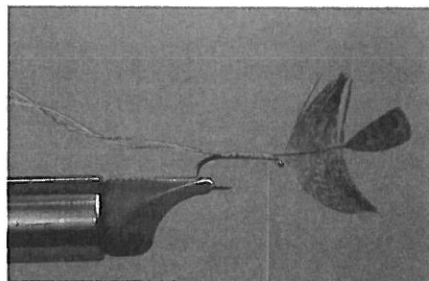
Step 2. Wind tightly adjacent turns of silk to a point on the shank just past the hook point. Take a second layer of silk in tightly abutted wraps forward over the first to a point one-third the shank length behind the eye. This short body becomes an undercolor to the hackle as the hackle fibers open and close around the body. If you were to use just a single layer of silk thread, or two layers of 6/0 thread, the dark color of the hook would come through and kill the color of the body as soon as the fly got wet.



Step 3. Wax 1 to 2 inches of thread with sticky dubbing wax. Twist a short bit of hare's mask fur dubbing, with some guard hairs mixed in, onto the waxed thread. It should be loose and fibrous. Take four to six turns of dubbing just behind the hackle tie-in point, covering one-fourth to one-third of the shank. This serves to make the fly look buggy, but its main purpose is to prop the hackle and make it more active as it opens and closes in the water.

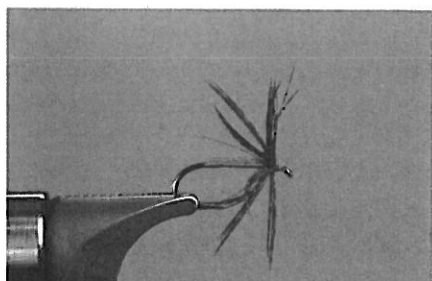


Step 4. End Step 3 with your silk thread behind the hackle. Grasp the hackle tip in your hackle pliers. Take one turn of hackle at the hook eye, then a second turn behind it, ending tight against the fur thorax. Hold the hackle tip up, and catch it with two turns of thread over the stem. Cut or break off the excess tip. Work two to four turns of thread forward through the hackle to the hook eye. Wax an inch of thread, make a four-turn whip finish, and clip the thread. Don't cement the head when tying Gossamer silk, as it kills the color.



METHOD 2

Step 1. Use this method, which uses floss and has no thorax, if you cannot find Pearsall's Gossamer silk or prefer the traditional tie without a fur thorax. Start orange 6/0 thread just behind the eye. Strip fuzzy fibers from the stem of a feather, and flare the remaining fibers at 90-degree angles. Tie in the feather with the concave side toward you. Separate four-strand orange floss into two-strand sections. Tie in the floss, and take thread wraps over it to a point just past the hook point.



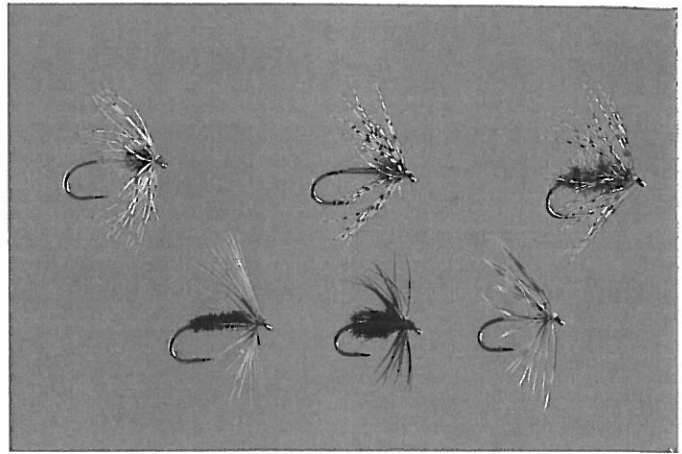
Step 2. Wind floss forward in a single layer to the hackle tie-in point. Tie it off there and clip the excess. The body should be slender and without taper. Take two turns of hackle, one behind the hook eye and the second behind the first. Capture the hackle tip with two thread turns, break or cut the excess tip, and work a few thread turns through the hackle to the hook eye. Whip-finish the fly and clip the thread. Cement the head when using 6/0 thread.

Useful Variations

The Grouse & Orange, Partridge & Yellow, and Partridge & Green cover the colors of many mayfly duns, caddisfly pupae, and stonefly adults. They are the basic soft-hackles that you should tie and carry, if you carry no others. They are useful whenever you're exploring new water, especially if it's shallow and riffled and you want to cover it quickly to see where trout might be found.

The March Brown Spider is specific for march brown mayfly hatches and an infinity of caddis species with brown wings and tan bodies. It's effective just after a hatch of the mayfly duns, when trout turn from floating duns to taking drowned cripples. It often works better than a dry fly when brownish caddis adults are on the wing.

The Red Hackle works well when olive-bodied caddis are in the air and on the water. The Starling & Herl is usually better than a matching dry fly when small, dark American grannom caddisflies (Brachycentridae) are hatching. The Snipe



& Yellow works when any of a myriad of tiny, light-colored caddis are out and about.

1	2	3
4	5	6

1	<i>Partridge & Yellow</i>
	SYLVESTER NEMES
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 10, 12, 14, 16
Thread	Yellow Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Gray partridge
Body	Working silk or yellow floss
Thorax	Hare's mask fur

2	<i>Partridge & Green</i>
	SYLVESTER NEMES
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 10, 12, 14, 16
Thread	Green Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Brown partridge
Body	Working silk or green floss
Thorax	Hare's mask fur

3	<i>March Brown Spider</i>
	SYLVESTER NEMES
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 10, 12, 14, 16
Thread	Orange Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Brown partridge
Rib	Oval gold tinsel
Body	Hare's mask fur

4	<i>Red Hackle</i>
	JAMES LEISENRING
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 12, 14, 16, 18
Thread	Red Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Brown or furnace hen
Body	Bronze peacock herl

5	<i>Starling & Herl</i>
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 14, 16, 18, 20
Thread	Black 6/0 or 8/0
Hackle	Starling back feather
Body	Peacock herl

6	<i>Snipe & Yellow</i>
Hook	Standard wet fly, sizes 14, 16, 18, 20
Thread	Yellow Gossamer silk or 6/0
Hackle	Snipe wing shoulder feather
Body	Working silk or yellow floss

Fishing Notes

Originally, two or three soft-hackled wets were used on the same leader. They were fished upstream in riffles, runs, and pools of small, fast waters. I still use them this way on my tiny home streams and have had success fishing them this way all over the world. Whenever the sun is bright and small-stream trout splash at your dry flies but refuse to take them, switch to a soft-hackle, or a pair of them. Creep close, shorten the cast, and fish them upstream just like dries. Watch the line tip or leader for any twitch or dart, the water for a wink of light. If you see anything suspicious, raise the rod to set the hook.

It's more common to fish soft-hackles on larger streams and rivers, with casts quartering across broad riffles and runs. Let the fly, or pair of flies, swing down and around. Slow the swing with mends if the fly or pair of flies moves faster than a natural insect might swim in the same water. Take a step or two between casts, and repeat the cast to let the flies explore all the water as you work downstream.

You won't have any trouble noticing takes. Respond gently when you feel a tap or a tug so that you don't set the hook too hard and break your tippet.

Sylvester Nemes, author of The Soft-Hackled Fly, playing a trout in a classic soft-hackle riffle on the Yellowstone River.

