

Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

February, 2000- THE SOFA PILLOW: A midwinter fantasy



Sofa Pillows for Salmon Flies

By Jim Abbs

Because we are in the dead of winter, much of our fly fishing must be imaginary. Not surprisingly, the most pleasant fly fishing I can imagine right now is being on a favorite Rocky Mountain river in early July ...just in time for the famous western salmon fly hatch. As it turns out, of course, the legendary salmon fly is really a giant stonefly. The salmon fly hatch, if fishing guides, fly shops and cowboy town chambers of commerce are to be believed, has fish almost jumping into your net. Actually, for a select time window, the fishing is spectacular. However, unless you live in the Rocky Mountains, the problem is trying to schedule your vacation for the particular week to 10 days when the big flies will be doing their out-of-water mating and flying thing. Because water conditions (temperature, level of spring run-off) determine the exact timing, the window of opportunity varies considerably from year to year. Moreover, there are claimed to be penalties to the fly angler who is early or late. If you go too early, most rivers are high and unfishable and if you go too late (after the alleged gluttony of this big-fly hatch), it is said the fish are sated (full), causing them to be disinterested feeders.

The real insect behind this legend is the ***Pteronarcys californica***, a stonefly which requires a big fly to imitate it, often using a size 4 or even a size 2 hook! These big critters spend 3 years maturing in the stream, principally as nymphs. Because of their size and abundance, many western fly patterns, like the Bitch Creek Nymph, Montana Nymph and The Brooks Stone are all aimed at imitating this stonefly nymph during that prolonged aquatic period. However near the end of their lives, when the water temperature and condition are right they crawl up on the stream banks and mate. After mating the females take to the air and deposit their fertilized eggs back into the stream. It is during this last stage that fish are said to be particularly indiscreet. Moreover, due to the size of the stoneflies, big fish are claimed to be more commonly seen... it actually is true.

The flies used to match this hatch are almost as legendary as the insects themselves. The famous Bunyan Bug that reached the silver screen in Robert Redford's **A River Runs Through It** was an imitation of the so-called salmon fly. Another famous imitation of the giant western stonefly is the Sofa Pillow, apparently yet another product of West Yellowstone, Montana tyers. It is highly visible, floats well through the swiftest currents, matches the size of the naturals and is easy to tie. For this wintry February, so far away from July, the fly of the month is that Sofa Pillow, both in its original form and its improved version.

MATERIALS (materials for improved Sofa Pillow in parentheses)

Hook: 3X long (Mustad 7980), sizes 4-10

Thread: Black monocord

Tail: Dyed red duck quill (Medium or light elk hair fibers)

Body: Laquered Red or orange floss (orange or red synthetic)

Wing: Fox squirrel tail (medium or light elk hair fibers)

Hackle: Four very good quality reddish brown saddle hackles

Ribbing: (only found on the Improved Sofa Pillow): Brown saddle hackle tied palmer style.

TYING STEPS

1. Tie on the red duck quill (or elk hair) for the tail at the bend of the hook with the curve of quill pointing up.
2. Tie in red or orange floss, wrap forward 2/3s of the hook shank forward from the bend and tie off.
3. (Note: For the improved Sofa Pillow you would also tie in the brown saddle hackle for the palmered ribbing as well as the synthetic orange yarn instead of the red duck quill. The yarn would be wrapped forward and tied off and the saddle hackle ribbing wrapped forward on top of it).
4. Tie in a small bunch (diameter of a wood pencil) of long red squirrel tail fibers with the tips not exceeding the end of the tail. Tie the squirrel tail down securely, trim the butts and secure with a little laquer.
5. Tie in the four reddish brown saddle hackles. Wrap your thread forward and laquer the thread covering the 1/3 of hook shank behind the hook eye.
6. Wrap two of the saddle hackles forward to just behind the eye (leaving room for a head) and tie off. Wrap the second set of two hackles, attempting to fill in open spots and create a uniform section of hackle over that 1/3 of the hook shank.
7. Tie up a bunch of these great old flies in several sizes and as you tie think about big rainbow trout, crystal clear cold water, bright high altitude sun, and majestic mountains.

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You can direct any questions or comments to FOM at flyofthemonth@fedflyfishers.org