

Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

Pheasant Tail Nymph

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Comments by Jim Abbs

Early fly fishing in America was influenced very significantly by English traditions, particularly before 1920. Today, America has its own flies, techniques and equipment, much of it developed on this side of the big pond. However, some English traditions still have a tremendous influence. One of these is the work of George Edward MacKenzie Skues, a solitary bachelor lawyer and master of the famous River Itchen, in the Hampshire of Southern England. Between 1900 and 1939, Skues wrote dozens of articles for British fishing magazines as well as several influential books, almost exclusively on fishing for trout with nymphs. American fly anglers still read Skues for insights and inspiration.

Skues successor as a leader in nymph fishing also was an Englishman, Avon River Keeper Frank Sawyer, who himself wrote widely and developed several very effective nymph patterns. If Skues is the grandfather of modern nymph fishing, Frank Sawyer is the father. Sawyer's most famous and widely heralded fly is the Pheasant Tail (P.T.) nymph.

Today the simple, yet elegant P.T. nymph is a must for any angler wishing to imitate mayfly nymphs and it works from the chalkstreams of Pennsylvania to the freestone rivers and tailwaters of the American west. One of the most striking aspects of this fly is that it is tied exclusively of ring-neck pheasant tail and copper wire. If it is tied correctly, and with smaller hook sizes, only one bunch of pheasant tail fibers is used in the whole fly! Importantly, the Pheasant Tail Nymph is easy to tie in a wide range of sizes, from 10-18, illustrating the range of mayflies it imitates.

There are several variations on this pattern, by both American and English fly anglers. Many American fly tiers add legs to the fly, including Al Troth, Ed Zern, and Eric Leiser--- these were not part of Sawyer's original pattern. Another variation is that of hook length. Sawyer tied this on a standard length hook, while some American tiers recommend a hook that is 1X long. In England Arthur Cove modified the Pheasant Tail Nymph for fishing that country's reservoirs by adding a gold body rib and a rabbit fur thorax. This latter fly is called Cove's Pheasant Tail.

Sawyer tied this fly using copper wire rather than thread. The pattern described below uses thread and copper wire, as described by English fly tier and author Mike Dawes in his book, The

Flytier's Manual. Finally, Sawyer used copper wire to form the bulk of the thorax, with a pheasant tail overlay to form a wing case. While this wire ball thorax is not a standard in America's PT nymphs, it is true to Sawyer's original and included in the pattern described here.

To document the effectiveness of this pattern, let me pass along a story from Gary Borger, (reported in his book Nymphs). Gary noted that in 1973 he received Frank Sawyer's book for his birthday and from it tied some P.T. nymphs for use on a Montana spring creek. In his first experience with this fly, he caught 27 fish in 100 feet of stream in 2 hours, all between 1 and 3.5 pounds.

While I make no promises, this anecdote illustrates why you need to add this fly to your nymph selection, if you have not already done so. In American waters, this nymph imitates a number of mayfly nymphs using pheasant tail fibers in their natural color and many small nymphs if one uses pheasant tail that is dyed olive yellow or olive.

MATERIALS

HOOK: Mustad 3906 (or 3906B-1X long), sizes 10-18

THREAD: Brown

TAIL: 3-8 fibers from the tail of a cock ring-neck pheasant (Sawyer recommends 4)

BODY: Fibers from center tail of cock ring-necked pheasant twisted with copper wire

THORAX: A wound-on ball of copper wire

WING CASE: Fibers from pheasant tail

HEAD: Fine copper wire

TYING INSTRUCTIONS

Using fine copper wire (.005 says Al Troth- about 34-36 gauge), form a ball about occupying 1/5 of the hook shank, about 1/5 of the hook shank back from the eye.

Wrap tying thread at the bend of the hook and tie in tips of tail feather fibers to form the tail of the fly. Fiber tips should extend one hook gap width past the bend. Do not trim butt ends of tail feather fibers.

Tie in a length of the same fine copper wire at the bend and remove thread.

Twist the copper wire and pheasant tail fibers together and wrap up toward the eye of the hook up to the start of the wire ball.

Tie in an additional bunch of pheasant tail fibers for a wing case. Alternatively, if the fibers used for the tail and body are sufficient these can be used for the wing case.

Wrap the fine wire forward to the point in front of the copper ball.

Bring the pheasant tail fibers forward over the copper wire ball to form a wing case and tie off with the copper wire.

Finish the fly with thread for the head, or as Sawyer recommends, tie off with copper wire.

Please Credit FFF Website or FFF Clubwire with any use of the pattern.

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