

Federation of Fly Fishers Fly of the Month

September, 1999: Break a few eggs to catch a steelhead



Over easy in hot pink: Egg flies

By Jim Abbs

It is autumn, when many fly anglers start thinking about steelhead in both Pacific and Great Lakes tributaries. The September Fly of the Month, the egg fly, is in response to that seasonal focus. However, egg flies are not limited to steelhead fishing, but have value almost anywhere there are trout.

For many young anglers - and especially those in the western U.S., the first-ever inland trout is caught on a real salmon egg. It was once possible to pick up a little jar of brightly colored salmon eggs and a box of tiny gold egg hooks (for about \$1.35), almost anywhere including the town gas station or local grocery store. This bait is so immensely popular and universally available because it works so well. Even far from the coast, salmon eggs will consistently catch fish in streams and lakes. Salmon roe is effective because fish eggs seemingly are an important natural food source. While spawning salmon and trout generate hundreds of eggs, a certain significant number do not stay put in the spawning beds, but break free, drifting with the current, served up for any hungry fish downstream.

The fact that fish eggs have such great appeal to almost all species of trout (and other river dwellers, like crayfish or aquatic insect nymphs) is not difficult to understand. Just like the fried over-easies that many of us relish (if our cholesterol levels permit), fish eggs also are an extraordinary source of food energy. One salmon egg is probably equivalent in calories to literally hundreds of mayflies. If a single fish egg or cluster of fish eggs comes drifting by, what self-respecting, enterprising fish is going to ignore such an easy, nutritious meal? Because fish eggs are so ubiquitously available and effective, one might even speculate that they elicit a primal feeding action in salmonids. This would also explain their effectiveness in eliciting strikes from steelhead and even salmon that allegedly do not feed once in the river.

Not surprisingly, there are a number of very successful fly patterns that imitate the humble fish egg. Indeed, for some, the very first fishing with a "fly" is with a few inches of bright orange yarn tied around a hook. These yarn flies, especially popular with steelheaders, have evolved into more complex patterns, including some flies that imitate multiple eggs, some even with hackle to represent the silky skein that holds them together. Interestingly, egg patterns, and the preserved eggs that come in the little jar, work best in bright colors. Florescent pinks, reds and oranges are most popular, not different from many of the most famous steelhead flies, including the Skykomish Sunrise, Klickitat, Polar Scrimp, Thor, Hot Shot,

Admiral and Pink Lady.

The best way to fish egg patterns, not surprisingly, is dead drift, near the bottom. In this way they imitate the naturals. In big waters this requires some weight, but in quieter runs, an unweighted egg pattern provides special fun because you can watch the fly all the way into the fish's mouth. When that fish is a 5-8 pound rainbow trout, the excitement is just beginning.

MATERIALS

Hook: Mustad 9174 (sizes 4-8), Mustad 9523 (sizes sizes 10-14) or TMC 2457 (6-14) for single egg flies or Mustad 7970 for double egg flies. The 9174 and 7970 are extra strong and hence offer a better sinking fly.

Thread: Same color as egg material or white

Body: Florescent yarn or chenille for the egg shapes in orange, red, chartreuse, pink. Glo-bug yarn (a brand name), or so-called egg yarn are particular favorites. Both of these soft yarns are similar to gift wrap yarn.

Hackle: White saddle hackle or white marabou

Tail: (optional on double egg fly): white marabou or saddle hackle fibers

Wing: (optional on a double egg fly) White soft hackle or white calf tail

Waist: (optional on a double egg fly) Tinsel or tying thread

TYING STEPS

SINGLE EGG FLY

1. Wrap a segment of Glo-bug or Egg yarn on the hook shank and tie down tightly. Pull up yarn and wrap tightly around the base. If hackle is desired tie in a sparse webby white hackle behind the hook eye.
2. Pull the yarn upward with a fair amount of force (don't break the hook or pull it out of the vise) and cut it at the approximately length of the diameter of the intended egg. If done properly, a "mushroom of yarn" will be generated, surrounding the hook.
3. Wrap the hackle (if included) in front of the egg and behind the hook eye.
4. Form a small head, whip finish and tie off.
5. Repeat this procedure for flame yellow, orange, chartreuse, hot pink and red. When one color doesn't work, others often will.

DOUBLE EGG FLY

1. Tie in a marabou or saddle hackle "tail" if that is desired
2. Tie in a segment of florescent chenille at in front of the tail
3. Wrap the thread forward to a position half way down the hook shank.
4. Tie in a piece of gold or silver tinsel for the waist, if a different colored waist is desired.
5. Wrap the florescent chenille forward forming the first round ball or egg. Tie off and wrap the chenille forward to the point where the second egg is to be formed.
6. Cover the shank of the hook in the segment between the two eggs with thread or tinsel, tie off. Wrap the thread to a point behind the hook eye just past the point of the second egg.
7. If a hackle or wing is desired tie in saddle hackle or calf tail.
8. Form second egg by layering the chenille and tie off.
9. Wrap the hackle soft hackle style or if there is to be a wing, fold back the calf tail in a slightly erect form to create a wing.
10. Form a head, whip finish and cement.

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