

IN THE 1930's when I first developed the Wulff flies, it was a time for experimenting. Ed Hewitt had come up with the Spider, which was immediately popular with the small group of trout fishermen who had gone to small hooks in their flies. Hewitt had also given us the Bivisible, which floated readily and high on the water while the other flies of the day did not. Bivisibles caught fish more consistently than any other pattern, it seemed.

I looked at the dry flies available at the time and found that they were always slim-bodied and sparsely hackled. They were made only of feathers, and they were hard to keep afloat. If a fish were caught on one of them, the fly had to be retired to dry a while before it would float again.

I wanted a buggier-looking, heavier-bodied fly, and I needed more flotation in order to keep it up. I had in mind the big gray drakes that came out on New York's Ausable, which were heavier in the body than any of the dry-fly imitations of the day. Looking for a material that would float such a body, I came up with bucktail. The tail of the fly was most important since it would support the bend of the hook, where most of the weight is concentrated. Bucktail would make a much better tailing material than the conventional feather fibers because of its floating qualities and its strength. The flotation of the old flies was mostly at the front, and the usual wisps of feather fibers wouldn't make a strong, floating tail. For example, the few golden pheasant tippet-feather fibers of a Royal Coachman tail certainly didn't have enough strength to hold the hook bend up for very long.

Out of this thinking came the Gray Wulff, White Wulff and Royal Wulff. My use of bucktail was the first use of animal hair on dry flies. The Royal Wulff made the old, difficult-to-float, but beautiful, Royal Coachman pattern into a hell of a fly. The White Wulff was tied to imitate the coffin mayfly. I tied it both conventionally and with spent wings and no hackle to match the flies of the spinner fall—when the mayflies, spent with mating, fall to the water with wings outspread. Had I been brighter I would have patented the use of animal hair on dry flies and made some money, but I feel lucky that through these flies my name achieved a permanent place in fly-fishing.

The Gray Wulff has brown bucktail wings and tail, blue-gray hackles and a gray angora yarn (spun rabbit's fur) body. The White Wulff has white bucktail wings and tail, badger hackles and cream-colored

LEE WULFF has been an important figure in American fly-fishing for half a century. He lives with his wife, Joan, in the Catskills near Lew Beach, New York.

*The creator of a classic fly series explains how it happened*

# The Wulff Flies

LEE WULFF

angora for the body. The Royal Wulff has white bucktail wings, a brown bucktail tail, dark brown hackles and a body of red silk floss between two segments of wound peacock herl.

Dan Bailey, a close friend and one of my early fishing companions, insisted that I call the Gray Wulff by its present name instead of the Ausable Gray as I had thought to call it. It was Dan, who was beginning to tie and sell flies at that time, who sat down with me while we worked out the other patterns of the series to cover the field of trout-stream insects in general. The Grizzly Wulff, the Black Wulff, the Brown Wulff and the Blonde Wulff came out of those sessions.

Those first days and weeks of trying out the Wulff flies were a dream. I put on a Gray Wulff while fishing the Salmon River near Malone, New York, with Dan Bailey, and I caught fifty-one trout with the same fly without once having to take it from the leader, which was a fantastic feat at the time. I used Mucilin line grease as a fly floatant instead of the universally used mixture of paraffin dissolved in benzene or gasoline, into which the fly was dipped. I found I could catch five or six trout between greasings, and I was glad I had secured the fly so well with lacquer when I tied it. Anything that makes fishing simpler and lets me spend more time with my fly on the water and less time in fussing with things to get ready or while on the stream makes me happier.

I used many kinds of hairs for the tails and wings of these flies. I even bought some "Chinese" bucktails that were small and the color of red fox fur and used the material for the Wulff flies. It worked very well. I tried other hairs (I failed to try

calftail back in the early days of testing) and decided that bucktail gave the best flotation and durability to the flies. Calftail, while it does not have quite the elegance of bucktail, has great floating properties, and it is a lot easier to match into proper wing lengths and work into proper spreads, or positioning of the wings.

My original instincts had been right. I had felt that a heavy-bodied, large fly—I used flies tied on #10 hooks mostly—would be more attractive to the trout than the slim-bodied, small patterns of the day. The trout would be able to see it from a greater depth, and it would seem to them like a bigger mouthful and something that was worth coming up for. It might even look at a quick glance like some strange terrestrial: a bee, a wasp or a fluttering moth. Part of my deep feeling was that if it looked like a bug—if it had a familiar look to the trout—whether identical to the mayfly or not, it would draw rises.

Soon after the Wulff flies began to gain popularity, Dan Bailey started to go to Montana in the summers to fish. Because he taught science at Brooklyn Polytechnical Institute for a living, Dan had his summers free to fish. Preston Jennings, a great student of stream insects, was writing a book about insects and trout flies. Dan showed him the Wulff flies when they fished together in Montana, saying he was tying a lot of them to sell and was catching a lot of fish on them. Preston looked at them and said they imitated no insects, and he couldn't believe that they were actually good trout flies. Although the Montana fishing convinced Preston that they would take fish, he didn't put them in his well-known *A Book of Trout Flies*, published in 1935. He told me he couldn't figure out why trout

liked them so well. It was, he said, one of the unreasonable things about trout fishing.

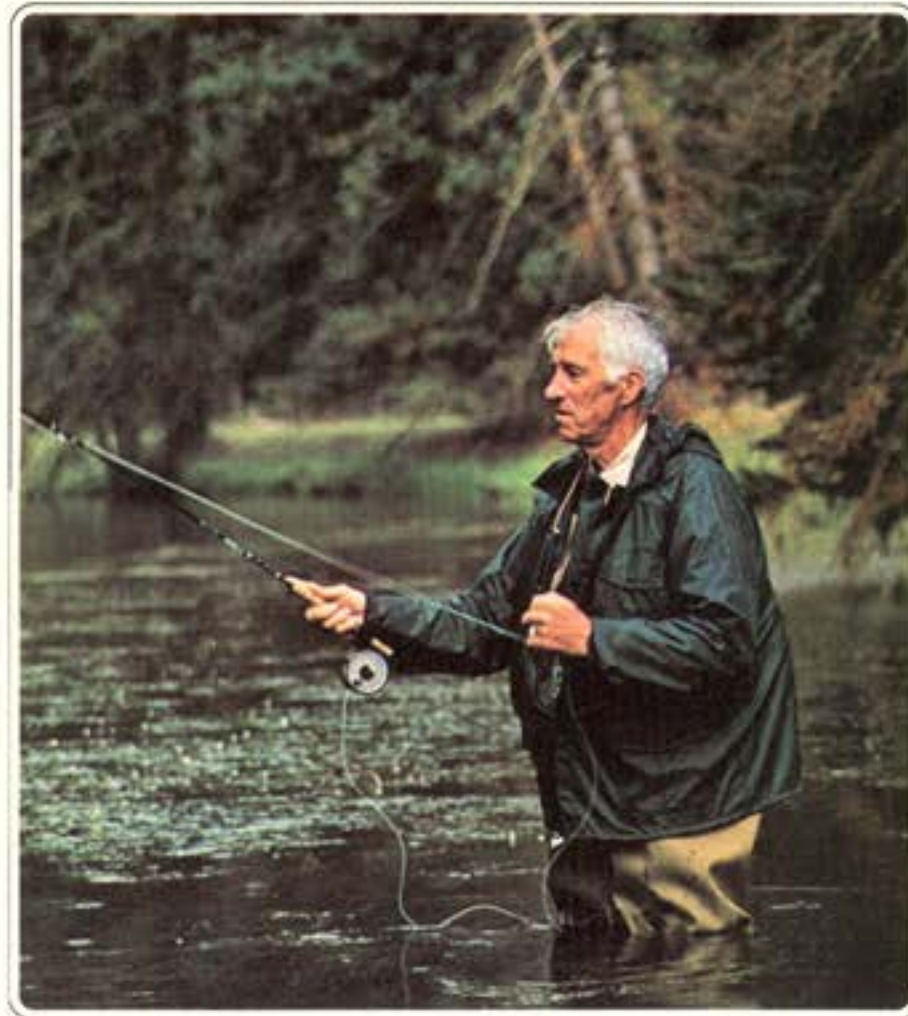
TO TIE THE WULFF, begin the thread near the hook eye, wind down the shank to the bend, and return back up the shank to the start. At this point, lacquer may be applied to give a good bond between the thread and hook shank, which will prevent the twisting of thread and materials as the fly is tied. Select bucktail to be used for the tail, and match the fine ends of the hair so they are as even as possible. This can be done by pulling out the longer hairs and resetting them so they are even with the tips of the others, or by placing the hairs in a narrow container, such as a cartridge shell, and tapping the container gently on the tabletop. Hair-evening tools for fly-tying are also available for this purpose.

Place the tail along the hook shank with the tips extending beyond the bend of the hook. Wrap the thread down to the bend of the hook, and clip off the excess hair near the eye of the hook. Apply a drop of lacquer to the thread wraps along the hook shank; the lacquer will penetrate to the hook and also remain on the thread to help set the angora-wool body tightly when it is applied in the next step. Good setting of the body makes for long life in a fly.

Tie in a length of angora wool at the head and wrap the thread to the bend and back to the head. Wrap the angora wool forward, forming the proper shape of body, and tie it off at the head. As you are winding the angora, also rotate the material to avoid twisting it, forming a smooth body.

Select the bucktail to be used for the wings and even the tips in the same manner that you evened the tips of the bucktail used for the tail. (If calftail is used for the wings, the evening process is not necessary.) Lay the bucktail over the shank, with the tips facing forward over the hook eye. Tie the hair in, then bring the thread in front of the wings and make them stand up vertically by building up a wall of thread in front of the bucktail. By splitting the hair into two wings and winding between and around at the base, the wings are set into the right position. A drop or two of lacquer should be applied between the wings at their base. The lacquer will penetrate the hair and thread and set the wings securely to the hook. The lacquer should still be soft as the hackles are wound, which will set the hackle fibers securely in place. Saddle hackles, which I prefer, are usually strong of fiber but without great strength where the fibers join the hackle stem. Setting their bases in lacquer makes a durable fly.

Two long saddle hackles are used for the standard Wulff. After you tie them in, bring the first one back between the wings and wind it around the shank close behind the wings until it is just long enough to pass



Lee Wulff

Photo by Dan Abrams.

between the two upright wings again. Bring it between the wings and hold it at the hook eye between your forefinger and thumb. Wind the second hackle around the shank in front of the wings to the hackle's tip. Wrap the tying thread over the two hackle tips, trim excess, whip-finish and lacquer the head.

OF COURSE THERE ARE many versions of the Wulff flies. I've seen them with the wings slanted forward, and I've seen them with the wings slanted backward. I've even read a short article in a minor publication, by a man I've never met or corresponded with, entitled, "The Right Way to Tie the Wulff Flies." But all this is good, because the Wulff fly is a category of flies, not an inflexible pattern.

I tie the Wulff flies in a variety of patterns. On #12, #14, or #16 hooks, with slimmer-than-usual bodies and wings, and with less winds of hackle, I use them to imitate the Hendricksons when those flies are on the

water. On a very long-shanked hook, with a slim body and long tail, the Wulff fly looks like a small dragonfly. On very large and heavy hooks, when the hackles aren't big enough or strong enough to give proper flotation, I tie a clipped-deerhair body to float the big fly.

One of my variations is the Scraggly. It floats even higher than the standard Wulff, and it has a bulkier body. It is, perhaps, a better imitation of a nondescript, flying terrestrial than the standard Wulff.

The Scraggly is tied by using chenille or another bulky body material and winding a hackle palmer style down the body. The body and hackle add bulk and flotation at the same time. The Grizzly Scraggly is a Gray Wulff with a grizzly hackle wound over a chenille body; the Bumble Bee Scraggly is a Gray Wulff that has a chenille body of alternating yellow and black with a badger hackle wound over it to replace the gray body of the Gray Wulff; the White Moth Scraggly is a White Wulff that has a

*Continued on page 82*



## Wulff Flies . . .

Continued from page 79

cream chenille body with a badger hackle palmer tied over it. These Scragglies float high and attract attention from hungry fish deep in the water because of the size of their bodies.

I use Wulff flies for bass as well as for trout and salmon. In #4 or larger they have considerable bulk and will attract bass, yet they are lighter to cast than the average-size bass bugs. Heavily hackled with a clipped-deerhair body, they can be jumped across the surface a bit from time to time to make them even more attractive to the bass.

better flotation and are more visible to the angler. And the illusion the split-wing Wulffs create seems completely adequate.

When fishing fast water I like Wulff flies with quite bushy wings and sometimes as many as three hackles. They should be tied in this manner so they ride high and don't drown in the rough water. In very still water, I use either the bushy flies as terrestrial imitations or the more sparsely tied patterns as imitations of stream insects. I tie almost all of my flies in a wide variety of density of materials as well as in a wide variety of colors. My use of hackle may vary from the normally bushy to none at all, such as in a spinner pattern when the

The Wulff flies will also serve as bulky, substitute Skaters when tied with the usual or a greater amount of hackle support and wing thickness. In 1933, a salmon fisherman on the Liscombe River in Nova Scotia, to whom I'd given a Wulff to try, reported good luck with it. I came to watch him fish because he was doing better than we were on the Ecum Secum River. I found him fishing the gift fly as a wet fly, dragging it across the surface of the pool below a falls. I hadn't explained to him when I gave him the fly how dry flies were fished, and apparently he had never fished with dry flies before. By fishing it just as he would a wet fly, he made it into a substitute Skater.

I tried the fly with a free float, and I failed to get a rise. It may have been because he'd caught all the takers with his dragging fly, or because the salmon actually liked the dragged fly better than the free-floating fly. I don't know, because he had no rises while we both fished the pool. This is typical of the situations that leave you to wonder about the reasons salmon take a fly.

I HAVE A LETTER somewhere in my files from Ken Lockwood, a fine fisherman and outdoor writer from New Jersey. He wrote me soon after Ray Bergman's *Trout* came out in 1938 and brought the Wulff flies to the notice of fishermen. Ken explained that he'd come up with a version of the Gray Wulff that had a clipped-deerhair body instead of the angora-wool body. It was being called the Irresistible. Did I mind? I wrote back to wish him well and say that I didn't mind.

Trout fishermen don't seem ready for categories of flies; instead they seem to stick by particular patterns. The Wulff flies, like Don Gape's original Muddler Minnow, should be only the beginning—opening up new categories, systems, or fields of flies for the trout fisherman. The clipped-deerhair fly head was the new and especially effective idea introduced by the Muddler; it should be tied not only with a tinsel body and turkey-feather wings, but in every conceivable combination of materials that make up flies. Similarly, the Gray Wulff was only the first fly in a new category for the fisherman.

The many techniques used to fish the Wulff flies and the many different insects the Wulff flies may imitate reflect that the flies are a category of patterns. The Wulff flies almost seem made to be tied in various patterns. I like to think of flies such as the Wulff as categories, in the same manner as trout and salmon form a category with the first name of *Salmo*.

© 1980 by Lee Wulff. Excerpt from *Lee Wulff on Flies*. Used by permission of Stackpole Books, Box 1831, Harrisburg, Pa. 17105.



Photo by Pierre Affre.

Of course, as I was originally dealing with a mayfly imitation, I tried out a single wing as well as the split wings. I made up a few dozen flies with a wing that consisted of a single tuft of bucktail, either vertical or slanting back at an angle like a mayfly's wings. It seemed that I had just as many rises to the single-wing versions as I did to the split-wing versions. I was especially successful with the single-wing Royal Wulff. But since I was poor at the time, as was almost everyone else during those Depression days, I tied and promoted the Wulff flies the way my customers wanted them—with split wings. But, while I feel that single-wing flies are better imitations than are split wings, divided wings do give

wings are spread out horizontally to imitate the mayfly's spent wings.

When tying spent-wing Wulffs with no hackle, I use the fine hairs from the tip end of the bucktail, and I flare these hairs out at the wings and at the tail to give maximum flotation with minimum visibility. These tip-end bucktail hairs are more wiry, and they have very fine diameters. They are stronger than the rest of the hairs on the bucktail. In this instance the bucktail is far superior to calftail. The color may be varied by dyeing, and the bodies may be tied thick or thin, depending upon the spinner being imitated. Most spinners have more slender bodies than the standard Wulff flies.

# Scientific Anglers

## THE RIGHT FLY LINE FOR YOU.





# FLY FISHERMAN<sup>®</sup>

SPRING SPECIAL • 1980

Double Issue • March \$1.95

Great Waters: Wyoming • Drag-Free Dry-Fly Leaders  
Wulff Flies • Winter Midging • Schwiebert on Boron

