

{ MATERIAL OF THE MONTH }

# HEN PARTY

Rob Denson brings fly patterns to life with this soft, mobile hackle



**C**AST YOUR MIND BACK A FEW MONTHS and you may recall an earlier piece in this series on the subject of cock hackle. There's a difference? Yes, there are several, and they're important differences, too. If you remember, the main characteristics of cock hackle are the spiky, stiff, shiny barbs; attributes that we exploit mainly for dry-flies and keeping bushy wet-flies high in the water. Hen hackle, on the other hand, has soft, limp feathers with a more matt finish. It's primarily the softness and inherent mobility that makes hen of special interest to the fly-tyer. Why? Soft hackles move freely in the water; movement suggests life, life means food. So convincing is the illusion that it only takes a turn or two of hen hackle at the front of a nymph or wet-fly to drive fish potty. As with cock hackle, both capes and saddles are used and taken from regular domestic birds and genetic versions thereof. Tyers in the know will do bad things to get their hands on feathers like the beautifully light, super-soft and wispy natural coch-y-bonddu hen feather above.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB DENSON



## CLARET BUMBLE

Cock and hen can work well together. This Claret Bumble variant is best fished high in the water, hence the use of cock for the body hackle. The usual blue jay is substituted for two turns of dyed blue genetic hen, not just for the colour match with jay, but for that all-important softness and movement.



## BLACK MAGIC SPIDER

Less is more! This Black Magic Spider positively bristles with life even before it gets a swim. Two turns of dyed black Indian hen is all it takes to bring the fly to life, fooling even the wiliest trout with the bare minimum of materials and effort.



## OLIVE

Hen saddle feathers have a slightly rounder, shorter shape than cape-neck feathers and are also heavier in the barb. They're not much use for palmering, but they're beautifully marked and look great as a head-shoulder hackle on traditional-style wet-flies. This olive pattern sports a hen saddle feather dyed golden-olive up front and a longer, genetic grizzle dyed-yellow cape feather for the palmer.



## ROOTBEER CRUNCHER

Cock hackle has no business at the front end of a nymph; it's far too stiff and lifeless. The front end of your Crunchers, Spiders and similar nymphs should be given the gift of life through soft, supple hen. This Rootbeer Cruncher uses a dyed genetic grizzle cape feather, palmered through the thorax and finished with two turns at the head.



## BIBIO

The standard Bibio calls for black cock hackle for the palmered body, but when I swapped the cock for furnace hen, my catch rate with the new, more versatile version doubled. Two turns of black hen at the head finish the variant off perfectly. Try this trick on a few of your favourite wet-flies — I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. ■



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## PREPPING



Genetic grizzle hen feathers, natural (far left) and dyed. Perfect for palmering traditional wet-flies (strip the fluffy stuff and tie in with the stalk at the bottom end) or for head and shoulder hackles (tie in with the tip end). The stripes cause a subtle optical illusion suggesting movement.



Left to right: Natural Indian saddle, genetic saddle dyed yellow, genetic furnace neck, and genetic neck dyed fiery-brown. Just a few of the hundreds of hen options available to the tyer. Use saddles mainly for head and shoulder hackles, and neck feathers for palmering and/or the neck and head.



A natural saddle hackle prepped for tying in with the tip. Strip the fluffy waste and the lower barbs, leaving just enough for two or three turns.