

# MAKE YOUR SPIDERS A MOUTHFUL

*Matt Eastham defies convention as he re-ties some much-loved North Country flies*



▼  
Matt Eastham has spent the past 20 years fishing the rivers and wild stillwaters of northern Britain. He is author of the popular North Country Angler blog.

I HAVE ALWAYS been drawn toward running water. Even as a young lad cutting my angling teeth on the coarse fisheries of my native Lancashire, I felt the pull of local rivers. So perhaps it's no surprise that having converted to fly-fishing in the mid-90s, it wasn't long before I left the stillwater scene and headed into the uplands in search of the wild trout and grayling of our beautiful

northern rainfed streams. As much as the fishing itself, I was mesmerised by the attention to detail demanded by the hatch patterns of aquatic insects, and by the vast library of beautifully named fly patterns that anglers of our past had designed to imitate them: Wickham's Fancy, Bivisible, Haul a Gwynt - who could fail to fall in love with the notion of such creations?

Of course, being a northern lad it wasn't long before I discovered

Spider patterns and the strong tradition around these parts of fishing the wet-fly. And this is what I quickly learned: North Country Spiders, properly tied, are creations of no more than two turns of hackle and a body of silk thread wraps that should not extend beyond a point in line with the point of the hook. Sparse seemed to be the dictum whenever and wherever I read about these legendary patterns. It still is.

There is much logic in this. An examination of the invertebrates that our Spiders seek to imitate shows them to be tiny delicate creatures, often much tinier and more delicate than our clumsy hooks and materials can come close to matching. Little wonder, then, that we have arrived at a place where less is considered more in our approach to tying river flies. After absorbing the received wisdom on the subject, I was convinced and set about filling my boxes with skinny Spiders, all tied as per the prescribed recipes and using the exact shade of silk, species and sex of game bird and so on.

As if to reinforce the message, I caught plenty of trout and particularly when casting upstream to feeding fish when the light dressing of the Spider felt spot on. However, I always ended up feeling a little dismayed at the state of them once the day was done and a few trout had been returned, for the fishes' teeth had inevitably rendered my once sprightly little wet-flies a shadow of their former selves, sometimes with only a handful

of hackle barbs remaining and a decidedly denuded appearance. I wondered then if I should try to dress them a little heavier, but always defaulted to the norm in the end, reasoning that decades of expertise couldn't be wrong; that beefier Spiders would certainly not fish as effectively.

## FASHION VICTIMS

These days I am fascinated by what I have come to think of as fly-fishing fashion. What we read in books and magazines and more recently on social media, and what the experts tells us is correct, we so often blindly follow without question. Although the advice is generally sound, look carefully and you will find interesting examples of how a misconception can become ingrained in the fly-fishing psyche as The Truth. I have fallen foul of this on numerous occasions, taking what I had read as gospel only to find some time later that when I looked - I mean really looked - at what was going on, I'd been missing some vital detail all along.

So, what of North Country Spiders? It was a couple of seasons ago that I started to wonder about the logic in dressing these iconic patterns so lightly. The seed was sown one July day in 2014 as I climbed down off the fellside having spent an entertaining morning above Ullswater catching small wild trout in the dark waters of a high mountain tarn. On that occasion my usual line of attack had failed and in seemingly ideal circumstances, a pair of small dark wet-flies had been all but ignored. I started to trawl through my boxes looking for inspiration and only when I offered the fish some of my largest, bushiest patterns did I start to connect. Everything about the conditions had suggested small and slow would be the way forward, but no. Once again I was reminded about the opportunistic nature of wild brown trout, and as I trudged down to the car I couldn't help but wonder whether a parallel could be drawn to running water and what the results would be if I swung a team of fairly big wet-flies downstream. ▶

LEFT TO RIGHT  
Endrick Spider; heavily dressed Waterhen Bloa; Matt's No-Name Spider; and Oliver Edwards' traditional Hare's Lug and Plover.

*"Wickham's Fancy, Bivisible, Haul a Gwynt - who could fail to fall in love with the notion of such creations?"*



MATT EASTHAM



## Endrick Spider

(tied by John Harwood)

**Hook** Wet fly (size 8 for sea-trout, size 10-12 for brown trout)

**Thread** Orange, waxed

**Underbody** 1½ layers of copper wire  
**Tail** 6-8 pheasant tail fibres

**Body** Pheasant tail fibres

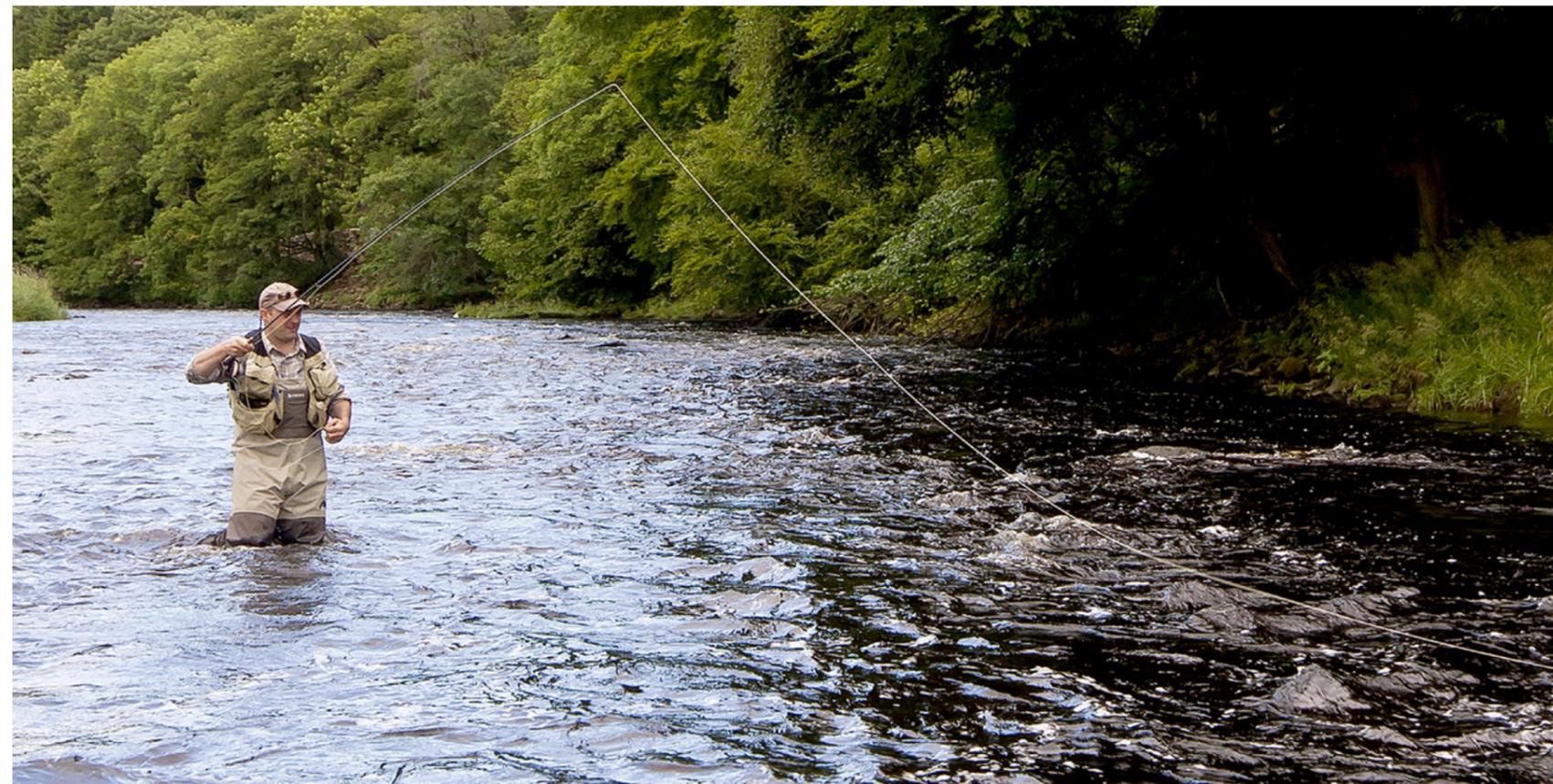
**Rib** Copper wire (continued from underbody)  
**Hackle** Brown partridge  
**Head** Orange thread

Fast forward a few months and several things happened in quick succession to persuade me that we have maybe missed a trick when adhering to the “less is more” principle of tying Spiders. First, a phone call: a lengthy chat one evening with that most respected of northern river fishers, Oliver Edwards, revealed that he favoured a heavier hand in his Spider dressing. Oliver’s reasoning was simple – more turns of hackle provide more “kick”, make for a noticeable profile in popply water and provide the fly with far greater

longevity after a few fish have been caught; and besides, what about the originals tied by the countrymen of Yorkshire and Lancashire in the 19th century? Without many tools or even a vice, and tying on heavy irons whipped directly to horsehair or gut, could we really expect the true original versions to be anything like what today we consider to be a “properly” tied Spider?

### PAST MASTERS

As if to confirm Oliver’s musings, just a few weeks later fellow T&S contributor Robert Smith’s excellent *The North Country Fly* was published – arguably the most comprehensive review of North Country Spider patterns available and one I wholeheartedly recommend to any wet-fly enthusiast. An interesting characteristic of this book is that although the author’s own renditions of the famous flies are tied very much in the modern style, also included are fascinating photographs of original tyings from the likes of Walbran and Brumfitt, and the latter are very much as Edwards had suggested – somewhat untidy work featuring many turns of hackle, often exhibiting some “travel” up the shank as if the fly has been semi-palmered. It is fair to say that fly design undergoes a constant evolution, but even so I find it interesting that what we sometimes see proclaimed as the correct dressing of a North Country Spider is in fact quite wide of the mark stylistically.



**ABOVE** When fishing faster water the bulk of a bushier and heavier fly is an advantage.

The final piece of the jigsaw fell into place for me shortly after. I had been asking a friend about the correct tying of an altogether more contemporary pattern – the famous Endrick Spider, and discovered that he was actually acquainted with its originator John Harwood, and would post me a few tied by the man himself. When the flies arrived a day or two later, I was surprised to see how large they were, and how

heavily hackled – not at all like the more dainty Endricks I had seen photos of elsewhere. Reading John’s accompanying notes it was interesting to learn that the fly evolved as a solution to the problem of fishing heavy water for trout and sea-trout. It needed to be large enough to be seen and slightly weighted to afford some control when fished downstream, where other patterns had a tendency to skate.

particular little river, he certainly had a point.

Closer to home the bushier Spiders have worked a treat. Don’t get me wrong: I still reach for the delicate dressings when an upstream, just sub-surface approach is called for, but for traditional across and downstream work, the increased presence and longevity of the

*“Closer to home the bushier Spiders have worked a treat”*

alternatives has proved very useful, and I’m convinced some of my better days wouldn’t have been quite so productive had I persevered with the lighter versions. I have started to think of my wet-fly fishing a little in terms of the stillwater paradigm of movement and colour provoking a feeding/aggression response, as much as the imitative principles upon which our North Country forebears based their designs. That might be a discussion for

another time, but if I have learned one thing from the whole experiment it is that there isn’t necessarily a right or wrong way to tie a fly, regardless of what the conventional wisdom dictates. Despite our modern obsession with lean-and-mean river-fly tying, trout are still the aggressive, opportunistic predators they always have been and rarely refuse a well-presented mouthful, something of which our fly-fishing ancestors appear to have been well aware. I would certainly encourage you to give this style of Spider a cast – if nothing else your patterns will last for a few more fish.



This grayling took a heavily dressed Waterhen Bloa on the River Ribble.

## Snipe & Purple

**Hook** Size 12 old Mustad sneck  
**Silk** Pearsall’s purple  
**Hackle** Several turns of a large snipe over covert



ROB DENSON

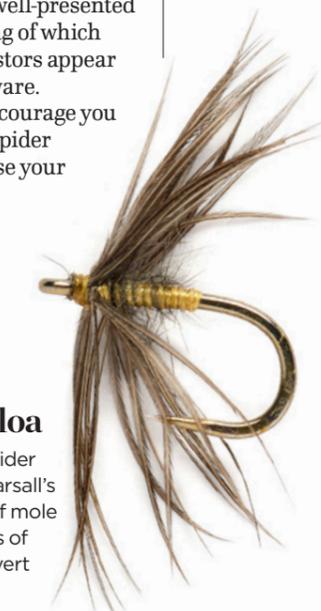
## Hare’s Lug & Plover

(tied by Oliver Edwards)

**Hook** Size 12-14 Sneek  
**Silk** Yellow  
**Rib** Fine flat gold  
**Body** Finely dubbed hare’s ear fur  
**Hackle** Several turns of golden plover covert, with some “travel” up the shank



PETER GATHERCOLE



## Waterhen Bloa

**Hook** Size 14-16 spider hook  
**Silk** Yellow Pearsall’s  
**Dubbing** Fine mist of mole  
**Hackle** Four turns of waterhen over covert

MATT EASTHAM

FLY PICTURES: PETER GATHERCOLE

# TYING THE NO-NAME SPIDER

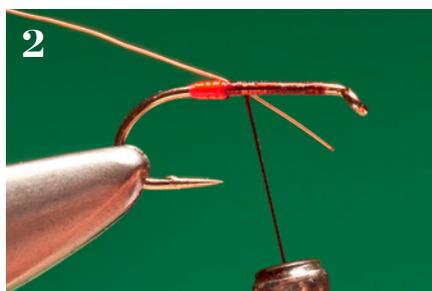
This is a pattern I created as a wet-fly variant of a productive nymph pattern I've been using for years. It has since proved its worth many times as part of a team of three Spiders and works particularly well in high summer when the fish sometimes need additional stimulus to move, and when there is a touch more colour in the water than one would prefer.



**Hook** Size 14 Kamasan B170  
**Thread** 14/0 sheer, dark brown  
**Butt** Globrite floss no. 4  
**Rib** Fine copper wire  
**Body** Wraps of melanistic pheasant tail  
**Hackle** Several turns of grouse covert



**1** With the Glo-Brite floss in a bobbin holder, attach it to the hook and then take it three turns down the shank and three turns back up to form the tag. Cast off the floss.



**2** Apply clear varnish to the tag, allowing it time to dry. Run on the thread and catch in the copper wire at the tag, ensuring the end of the wire is 3 mm short of the eye.



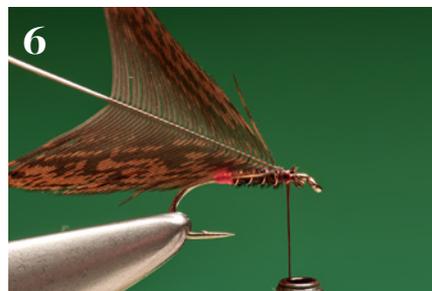
**3** Secure the waste end with thread, then wind the thread back to the tag and catch in three or four melanistic pheasant tail fibres.



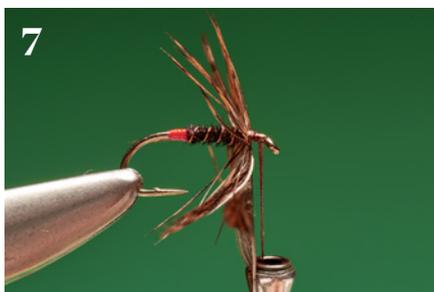
**4** Take the tying thread back up toward the eye to form a smooth base for the body. Wind the pheasant tail fibres along the shank in the opposite spiral to normal.



**5** Secure the ends of the pheasant tail with tying thread, then take hold of the copper wire. Wind the wire in the normal spiral so that it crosses the turns of pheasant tail.



**6** Remove the waste ends of both the pheasant tail and the copper wire, then select and prepare a well-marked grouse wing covert feather. Catch it in by its tip.



**7** With the thread positioned at the eye, begin to wind the feather. As each turn is applied, stroke the fibres back so that they all sweep in the same direction.



**8** Continue winding the hackle, adding three or four turns to fill the space between the body and the eye. The aim is to produce a full effect in contrast to a normal Spider.



**9** With the hackle at the eye, secure the stem with thread turns. Trim the waste stem, then cast off the thread with a whip finish. Add a drop of clear varnish to the head.



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