

CRIPPLER CLASSICS

Rob Denson reworks a series of famous wet-flies and comes up with a selection that have earned their spurs on stillwaters from Blagdon to Lomond

GRAFHAM WATER – September 2010, and the news of the “killer shrimp” invasion has just broken. A good fish boils 20 yards in front of the boat as my second false cast comes back towards me, and a couple of seconds later the next stroke lays the leader neatly across the remaining shimmer. Two quick pulls...then a medium figure-of-eight...then something tells me I’m into something good. An anxious but exhilarating five minutes later and one of Graham’s finest slides over the net.

At 4 lb it’s not the biggest rainbow I’ve ever lifted from a stillwater. It is, though, every inch and every ounce the fittest, finest, shiniest example of the marke I’ve ever been lucky enough to fool and subdue; all the more satisfying for the fish’s choice of fly. Chosen as a vague shrimp imitation, the Silver Invicta “Crippler” had been its downfall – a variant of the famous and ubiquitous wet-fly, and one of a series of reworkings of classic wet-flies.

Rewind nearly four years to summer, 2007. The evolution of the aforementioned Silver Invicta Crippler, and the series in general, goes back to a tinkering session at the vice with, of all things, the Soldier Palmer.

Most of my fishing these days is for stillwater trout, with a particular penchant for wild browns, although anywhere that affords a long drift over a sizeable expanse of water, with the chance of good grown-on fish snapping at the fly, will do me just fine.

I like nothing better than fishing the wet-fly, and tying them when I can’t fish. I rarely if ever set out to create the next seismic shift in fly design; I’m more than happy tinkering with the classics, modernising them with new materials maybe; or, conversely, giving more recent, modern flashy patterns a “retro” feel...just to be awkward!

I think there’s often scope within the basic template of most patterns, new and old, to adapt and improve them. An addition here, a substitution or a subtraction there, can give most flies a new lease of life, or adapt them for conditions outside their normal comfort zone.

In 2006 I’d had success with a Soldier Palmer variant by adding a red golden-pheasant (GP) body feather up front as a “shoulder” hackle. The GP body feather has a lovely gentle, springy quality, giving a soft “kick” – closing when pulled through the water, and opening wide when slowed down or left static. The long legginess of the GP was a big attraction, too, adding a further dimension at the hang, or dibble stage, giving a strong sense of legs, movement and general dishevelment irresistible to trout. Unknown to me at the time, the tinkering with the Soldier was to be the starting point for a whole series of variants based on some of the classic wet-flies. ►



This lovely Malham Tarn brownie fell to a Kate McLaren Crippler.

PHOTOGRAPH: STUART LEVELL/N

The Soldier Palmer has always been right up there in the upper echelons of my favourite classics, and I was particularly pleased with this variation. I felt it gave the Soldier more strings to its bow. Indeed one particularly mucky, windy day on Stocks Reservoir I raised around 30-35 fish, each and every one of them coming to the new Soldier. Raising fish is one thing, though: converting those offers is another. Somehow, I managed to convert just over half my offers that day, despite the usual tactic of going up and down the sizes. That's how it goes sometimes, and you can drive yourself mad searching for the reasons why so many offers fail to stick. When you've tried smaller flies, bigger flies; when you've had a word with yourself about concentration, and when you've changed to that new, super-sensitive, non-stretch, never-miss-a-fish-again fly-line (but you still do), then the only way to retain any semblance of

sanity is to remind oneself that on certain days the fish miss the flies on purpose! We fly-fishers invariably have to try to find "the" reason, even when one doesn't necessarily exist. Never let your own shortcomings and a pea-brained creature get in the way of some brain-frying over-analysis and a good dollop of rocket science!

In this particular case I chose to blame the fly! The missed opportunities that day were the only excuse I needed to tinker some more with the Soldier, which had hitherto been tied pretty much as standard – red floss tail, and red game cock hackle for the body. The standard cock hackle version was fine for top-dropper work – fishing classic loch-style – but it didn't lend itself too well to being pulled or stroked subsurface with an intermediate or full-blown sinker. Certainly, Bumbles, Palmers, Dabblers and the like tied with cock hackle will get down sooner or later, but the

problem with cock body hackles for sunk-line work is two-fold: first, the stiff cock hackle tends to act as a kind of parachute, increasing the drag and resistance of the fly and slowing down its descent. This is, of course, why we use cock hackles for top-dropper wet-flies – to keep them there, doing what they do best: moving water and looking vulnerable in the top couple of inches. Secondly, the movement of stiff cock hackles subsurface is minimal, and I suspect can appear rather ungainly, not to mention unnatural.

The next adjustment, then, was to replace the cock hackle traditionally used for the palmer or body hackle with hen. Hen hackle does not come with the limitations of cock. It's a different beast altogether, but eminently more versatile – just add water and it makes its own life! On, in, or under the surface, the limp fibres sway and pulse with every ripple, wave, or swell, and with

“Fished on the hang, it bulges and pulses like a

soft brush pulling out of thin glue”

SILVER INVICTA ▼

Hook Size 8-12 Kamasan B175
Thread UTC 70 denier Tag Flat silver
Rib Oval silver Body Flat silver Body
hackle Grizzle hen dyed ginger
Shoulder hackle Yellow golden-
pheasant body feather Front hackles
Grizzle hen dyed “Silver Doctor blue”
over grizzle hen dyed ginger

The original was always a middle-dropper fly for me, don't ask me why, though I doubt I'm alone in that respect. I like the idea of a bit of flash on the middle dropper to pull fish in from afar, even if only to help get the top or tail flies noticed. The Crippler version, though, now offers real scope for the tail position.

every twitch imparted by the angler. It does great things in the surface film, too, coming into its own in calmer conditions when the gentle motion of wind and wave impart irresistible wiggles and wriggles upon the hen fibres. A subsurface “hang” with a hen-based fly is a difficult thing for any trout to resist, especially when the fly is lifted into the film, half in and half out, bulging and pulsing like a soft brush pulling out of thin glue...much like an emerging or crippled natural. The look and behaviour of what would become the Crippler series, at the hang or “glue” stage, was very much down to the use of hen hackle contrasting, but blending nicely, with the slightly stiffer, springy GP body feather.

I sometimes worry about the possible hook-masking effect of particularly stiff and bushy flies tied with cock. Do they sometimes adversely affect our conversion rate of offers into hooked fish? Another possible answer to the “coming short” conundrum? No such worries with hen. Even seriously bulked-up tyings with hen hackles remain limp enough not to mask the hook, and offer

DOOBRY ▶

Hook Size 8-12 Fulling Mill/Haybusa 31531
black nickel Thread Black UTC 70 denier
Tag Flat gold Rib Oval gold Body Flat gold
Body hackle One black hen and one grizzle
hen dyed orange Shoulder hackle
Golden-pheasant body feather dyed black Front
hackles As body hackles (black over orange)
A little twist on Stan Headley's deadly pattern. It is best suited to peaty, coloured water and at ease in any position on the leader.

KATE MCLAREN

Hook Size 8-12 Fulling Mill/Haybusa 31531 black
nickel Thread Black UTC 70 denier
Tag Flat Silver Rib Oval silver Body Seal's fur
mix – 50 per cent black, 50 per cent darkest brown
Body hackle Furnace hen Shoulder hackle
Yellow golden-pheasant body feather
Front hackle Furnace hen

The original Kate McLaren holds sway among candidates for king of the top-dropper position. The Kate Crippler has been a real eye-opener, though, proving surprisingly versatile in terms of both line and position on the cast.

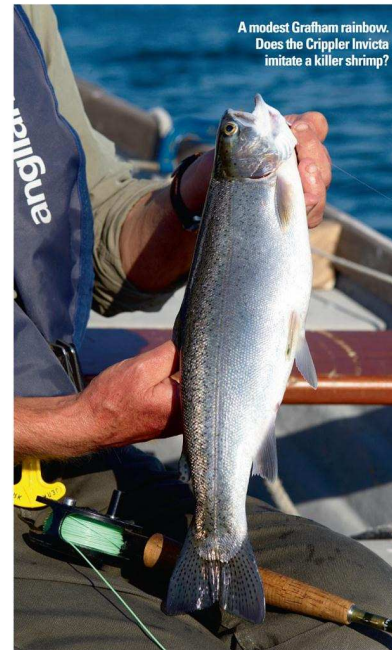
◀ HARE'S EAR

Hook Size 8-14 Kamasan B175 Thread Brown-olive
UTC 70 denier Tag Flat gold Rib Oval gold Body Hare's
ear Body hackle Grizzle hen dyed ginger Shoulder
hackles Yellow golden-pheasant body feather Front
hackles Brown variant hen over grizzle hen dyed ginger
The days of the season when a Hare's Ear something-or-other won't work are few and far between. The Crippler version is no exception. Useful in most types of light, on the top or tail for me, or maybe a size 12 or 14 on the middle – any line you fancy.

▲ SOLDIER PALMER

Hook Size 8-12 Kamasan B175 Thread Red UTC 70
denier Tag Glo-Brite No 4 Rib Oval gold Body Red or
scarlet seal's fur Body hackle Grizzle hen dyed ginger
Shoulder hackle Red golden-pheasant body feather
Front hackle As body hackle

As with all the Crippler dressings, the tail from the original pattern has been omitted, and in this case replaced with a tag or butt. A great puller of fish in most conditions, and in most types of light, the Soldier is a favourite with me in good to poor light, and in the evening – especially if there's some red in the sky. My preference for position and line is always the top dropper, and almost always on a floater or a neutral/intermediate line.



little if any resistance to wary mouths – another plus for the switch to hen.
Something else that was niggling me was the tail. The usual tail for my standard Soldier is Glo-brite (No 4), a great fish-puller, but maybe, sometimes, a great fish-pusher, too? I can't help feeling that in-your-face Glo-Brites must sometimes be a double-edged sword, bringing a fish up to the fly in the first instance, only to put him down at the last second. Worth a try, I thought, to have a few of the new Soldier variants without a tail in reserve. I liked the look a lot and felt that the lack of a tail, far from unbalancing the look of the fly, actually made more sense, giving the fly a pronounced “arrow point” feel and strong sense of a forward and lively dynamic. The Soldier Crippler was born. Not exactly the next sliced-loaf in wet-fly design and technology, but nonetheless a seriously useful template, I felt, and worthy of further investigation. None of the classic wet-flies was safe or off-limits! What struck me most when developing the series was how these flies, at first glance and to all

intents and purposes, cry out to be used on the top dropper yet performed so well up and down the leader, too, some of them working best when “played out of position”.
Back to Grahnam, and that September day. Grahnam isn't always thought of as a Mecca for wet-fly: nymphs, buzzers and competition fare generally hold sway, with dry-or-wet-flies coming into their own on occasion – if you fish them. The usual competition fare wasn't setting the place on fire that day – not for me at any rate, unless you call a 10 lb bream on a Claret Dabblers-Booby success. Sadly there were no prizes for monster bream that weekend!
There had been a hell of a chop in the eastern half where we had been concentrating our efforts all day, so by mid-afternoon a bit of respite was sought over towards Hill Farm and the tower area. The easy wave in the relative shelter by the tower simply begged for lazier tactics and a change of line. On with the neutral line, then, and on with the Silver Invicta Crippler – deployed on the middle dropper to work the top ▶

PHOTOGRAPH: COLIN BRACH



The Crippler claims another victim – who knows or cares what the reasoning may be?

foot or so of water. The standard Silver Invicta is a cracking fly at any time of year – the consummate vague, suggestive pattern, gracefully and effortlessly imitating practically all that swims – corixa, fry, sedge pupa... and shrimp (killer shrimp?). All were present and correct at Grafham last autumn. I know not nor care not what that rainbow took the Crippler for;

whatever it was, he liked it. The Crippler “classics” have performed well over the past couple of seasons on waters as diverse and as far afield as Blagdon, Grafham, Brenig, Stocks, Malham Tarn, Gladhouse, Lomond and Leven. Both freshly stocked and grown-on browns and rainbows from the mixed fisheries have succumbed to the charms of the Crippler. Good numbers of

wild trout also regretted their expressing too much of an interest. Memorable fish were fooled with several Crippler classics on Malham Tarn and, further north, a nice Lomond sea-trout on the Claret Bumble for my pal Jimmy Millar. Jim did the honours and caught fish on a Crippler on Leven, too, the successful pattern here being the Kate version.

I must confess to becoming a little obsessed now with this style of fly. Golden-pheasant body feathers and bundles of hen necks are never far from my thoughts! I’m sure there are one or two more classic wet-flies that would sit comfortably within the Crippler profile, and this past year or so has seen another set of Cripplers hanging from my leader – this time a few random colour schemes and variations of my own design. It’s still in progress, so we’ll see how they get on.

I can, however, wholeheartedly recommend to you the Crippler classics.

CLARET BUMBLE ▶

Hook Size 8-12 Fulling Mill/Hayabusa 31531 black nickel **Thread** Wine UTC 70 denier **Tag** Flat gold **Rib** Oval gold **Body** Seal’s fur mix – 33 per cent black, 33 per cent claret, 33 per cent darkest brown **Body hackle** Grizzle hen dyed claret **Shoulder hackle** Yellow golden-pheasant body feather **Front hackles** Grizzle hen dyed “Silver Doctor blue” over grizzle hen dyed claret **Thread** Wine UTC 70 denier

While I wouldn’t dare tell you this is a serious improvement, it’s another option and has worked well for me in various positions. One for the floating/intermediate line.

▶ BIBIO

Hook Size 8-12 Fulling Mill/Hayabusa 31531 black nickel **Thread** Black UTC 70 denier **Tag** Flat silver **Rib** Oval silver **Body** Seal’s fur mix – 50 per cent black, 50 per cent darkest brown plus band of red seal’s fur in the centre **Body hackle** Black hen **Shoulder hackle** Red golden-pheasant body feather **Front hackle** Black hen

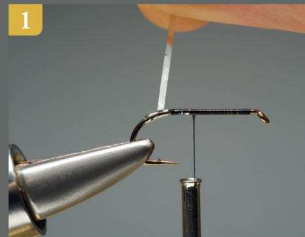
This is another good fly for switching positions, although I rarely put predominantly black flies on the middle dropper; always top or tail for me. Lethal on the likes of Stocks, Brenig and Scottish lochs throughout the season, it does a fine turn as a heather fly pattern, too, the red GP feather suggesting the legs of the natural quite nicely.

◀ CLAN CHIEF

Hook Size 8-12 Fulling Mill/Hayabusa 31531 black nickel **Thread** Black UTC 70 denier **Tag** Flat silver **Rib** Oval silver **Body** Black seal’s fur **Body hackle** One yellow golden-pheasant body feather and one red **Front hackles** Black hen

My wariness of full-fat, Glo-brite tails prompted a substitution of the original tail colours and materials to the GP shoulder hackle – two this time, to match the red and yellow of the original. A good fly to ring the changes on very dark, or very bright days, when you’re not too sure!

How to tie the Clan Chief Crippler



Fix the hook in the vice and run the tying thread down the bend. Catch in a length of fine, flat silver tinsel and apply touching turns to form the tag.



Secure the end of the tinsel, then trim off the excess. Catch in a length of oval silver tinsel, and then dub on a pinch of black seal’s fur to form the body.



Wind the dubbed fur along the shank in close turns, stopping a short distance from the eye. Catch in a dyed-red hen grizzle hackle in front of the body.



Take hold of the grizzle hackle by its tip, using a pair of hackle pliers. Wind the hackle along the body, in open evenly spaced turns.



When the hackle has reached as far as the tinsel tag, wind the oval silver tinsel up through it to lock it in place. Ensure that no hackle-fibres are trapped.



Secure the end of the tinsel then trim off the waste, plus the hackle-tip. Select a red golden-pheasant body feather and catch it in by its tip.



Take hold of the golden-pheasant feather by its stem and apply two full turns. Stroke the fibres back so that they sweep over the body.



Select another golden-pheasant body feather, this time a yellow one. Ensure that its fibre-length is the same as the previous, then catch it in by its tip.



Holding the feather by its stem, apply two turns. Stroking the fibres back after each turn will ensure that most of the fibres sweep back over the hook.



Secure the hackle stem then trim off the waste end. Next, select and prepare a long-fibred black hen hackle. Catch this one in by its base.



Holding the black hen hackle by its tip using a pair of hackle pliers apply two turns. Again, stroking the fibres will help achieve a swept-back look.



Secure the hackle-tip with thread then remove the excess, plus the stem. Build a small head using the tying thread, then cast off with a whip-finish.