



John Shaner's Spider & Soft Hackle Resources

Fly Tying Materials

Feathers for Hackles

Partridge: This is the European (Hungarian) Partridge, not our Ruffed Grouse. I recommend buying full skins.

Starling: Full Skins. (Most dealers carry these. Hareline and Wapsi are good brands)

Hen Necks in various colors: Dun, Ginger, Greenwell, Black, etc.

All the genetic growers produce good hen necks but don't overlook the inexpensive Indian necks, these are often a great buy.

More exotic feathers include:

Snipe Wings

Jackdaw Scalp (Inexpensive, easy to get.)

Plover (Expensive)

Waterhen (May be hard to get. Some Quail species can be excellent substitutes. The dealers listed below may have suggestions.)

European Grouse: Loose bagged feathers are fine here.

Woodcock: Loose bagged feathers are fine.

European Jay (Beige feathers are a substitute for Dotterel)

Furs and Feathers for Bodies

Hare's Mask. Buy the full masks.

Mole Skins in natural gray.

Muskrat, Rabbit

Peacock Eyed feathers

Pheasant (Ring Neck) Tails

Silk (Very Important!)

Pearsall's is the traditional brand. Recently, production of Pearsall's silk was discontinued, and it is becoming scarce.

Most popular colors: #3 Primrose, #5 Yellow, #6a Light Orange, #8 Purple, #19 Hot Orange.

Other good colors: #2 Straw, #9 Black, #10 Scarlet, #16 Olive

'54 Dean Street' is the best substitute for Pearsall's silk.

Pearsall's spools are smaller (narrower) than standard thread spools and may not fit standard fly-tying bobbins.

The special "722" wax I use on Pearsall's Silk is now available from Great Feathers and Badger Creek. (Address below)

Effective Spiders can also be tied with modern synthetic threads. Choose colors to match the Pearsall's silk.

Hooks:

I use the following, but there are many brands and models that will work fine. For Spider fly proportions, see the diagrams below.

Tiemco 3769 12 – 16 Tiemco 9300 14 – 18

Varivas 2400 V

Partridge L2A 14 -18 (Very Strong, Heavy Wire)

Partridge L3AS "Classic Spider" 12 -20 (A new hook that is excellent for lightly dressed flies)

Mustad R50 in 14 – 18

Tiemco 2499SPBL 12 – 16 ("Competition Style")

Favorite Spider Fly Patterns



PARTRIDGE & HARE'S EAR



SNIPE & PURPLE



STARLING & PURPLE



PLOVER & YELLOW

Partridge & Hare's Ear: Hook, Size 14 & 16 Body: Hare's Ear Fur, very sparse, ribbed with fine gold wire. Hackle: Brown Partridge Back feather. Thread: Pearsall's #19 Hot Orange.

Partridge & Orange: (Dark & Light) Size 14 & 16 Body: Pearsall's #19 Hot Orange (Dark) or #6A Orange (Light), fine gold wire rib. Hackle: Brown Partridge Back.

Snipe & Purple: Size 16 Body: Pearsall's #8 Purple. Hackle: Snipe Wing Covert Feather.

Starling & Purple: Size 16 -20 Body: Pearsall's #8 Purple. (A thorax of either Mole Fur or Peacock Herl can be added if desired. Hackle: Glossy Starling Body Feather.

Waterhen Bloa: Size 14 & 16 Body: Mole Fur sparsely dubbed on Pearsall's #4 Yellow. Hackle: Waterhen Underwing Coverts or as a substitute, California Quail.

Plover & Yellow: Size 14 & 16 Body: Pearsall's #4 Yellow. Hackle: Golden Plover Wing Covert or Body Feather. (A small gold bead, gold wire rib, and thorax of Mole Fur can be added.

Winter Brown: Size 14 Body: Sparse Hare's Ear on Pearsall's #6A. Hackle: Woodcock Underwing Covert. Head: Peacock Herl.

Hare's Ear & Plover: Size 14 & 16 Body: Pearsall's #6A lightly dubbed with Hare's Ear Fur, gold wire rib. Hackle: Golden Plover wing covert or body feather.

Iron Blue Dun: Size 16 & 18 Body: Lightly dubbed Muskrat or Mole Fur on Pearsall's # 11A. Show a couple turns of the scarlet thread at end of body for a tag. Hackle: Jackdaw Scalp Feather or Dark Blue Dun Hen.

Greenwell Spider: Size 14 – 18 Body: Pearsall's #4 Yellow waxed with dark wax, or Pearsall's #11 Golden Olive un-waxed, Gold Wire rib. Hackle: Greenwell Hen. (Ginger with Dark Center)

Grouse and Hare's Ear: Size 14 -16 Body: Pearsall's #18 Green dubbed with Hare's Ear Fur, Gold Wire Rib. Leave a tag of thread showing. Hackle: Grouse Body Feather.

Endrick Spider: Hook, Size 12 – 16 Tiemco 2488SPBL Silk, Pearsall's # 19 Hot Orange Silk. Tail, Partridge Fibers, Short. Body, Pheasant Tail Fibers – Peacock Herl Thorax – Copper Wire Rib. Hackle, Brown Partridge Back Feather.

Tackle Suggestions

Rods, Reels, and Lines:

Any fly rod in weights 2 – 6 will work for fishing spiders, however longer rods have an advantage in line control and fly manipulation. My preferred rod is a 10' 3 or 4 weight. Softer action, light tip rods will allow the use of lighter tippets. Use whatever reel you feel matches the rod, but I sometimes use a slightly heavier reel on longer (10') rods to balance them.

My preference in lines is for Weight Forward floaters. I find no advantage to Double Tapers, and they take up more space on the reel. Any good floating WF line to match the rod should work fine, but I prefer a Long Belly type. My current choice in lines is the Wulff Long Belly Floater.

Leaders

I use 9-to-12-foot tapered leaders with 3X to 6X tippet, depending on fly size and fishing conditions. When fishing size 14 and 16 Spiders, the most common sizes, I start with a 5X tippet and 4X dropper and adjust as needed. Knotless tapered leaders are fine; however, I prefer to tie my own leaders as I can control the taper more precisely. I almost always use a dropper if local regulations allow. Add the dropper at the section above the tippet. The dropper should be one "X" size larger than the tippet. For example, when using a 5X tippet, the dropper would be 4X. I like a dropper length of 3" - 6" and a tippet length of 18" – 24". Droppers can be attached by leaving a short length of leader material at the leader to tippet knot; tying a 1" – 2" loop in a 5" piece of tippet material and looping it over the leader; **but I now most often use a commercially available 1MM or 2MM tippet ring to attach droppers.**

In my Formula for a 10' leader to 5X, I use Maxima Chameleon from .017 to .009 (2X) and Copolymer Nylon tippet material from 3X – 6X. Modify as needed.

Diameter	Length
.017	40"
.015	20"
.013	8"
.012	8"
.011	8"
.009 (2x)	8"
.008 (3x)	12"
.007 (4x)	12"
.006 (5x)	18-24"

Recommended Reading

Contemporary

- Robert Smith "The North Country Fly: Yorkshire's Soft Hackle Tradition", 2015. Highly Recommended.
- Roger Fogg "Wet Fly Tying and Fishing"- 2009, Highly Recommended.
"The Art of the Wet Fly" Out of print but often available from sporting book sellers.
"A Handbook of North Country Trout Flies" Out of Print but often available from sporting book sellers.

Mike Harding "A Guide to North Country Flies" 2009 Highly Recommended. (Now out of Print.)
Sylvester Nemes "The Soft Hackled Fly"
"The Soft Hackled Fly Addict"
"Two Centuries of Soft Hackled Flies"
"Soft Hackled Fly Imitations"
Dave Hughes "Wet Flies" Second Edition, 2015

Historical

Edmonds & Lee "Brook and River Troutling" Available as a Reprint
T.E. Pritt "North Country Flies" Available as a Reprint
James Leisenring & Vernon "Pete" Hidy "The Art of Tying the Wet Fly & Fishing the Flymph"

For Robert Smith's book and other books about Spiders, contact David Foley Sporting Books: dryfly@snet.net 570-255-4940

Other Media

Oliver Edwards "Essential Skills" DVD Series "Wet Fly Fishing on Rivers" and "Czech Nymphing, Upstream Nymphing, and North Country Spiders" are very well done and full of excellent information. Highly Recommended!

www.flymphforum.com An excellent internet forum devoted to Spiders, Flymphs, and Soft Hackles.

www.williamsfavorite.com The website "William's Favorite" contains a wealth of information and detailed photographs of properly tied wingless wet flies.

Sources

The following shops carry a full range of materials and tools for tying Spiders, as well as proper tackle for fishing wet flies.

Mike Hogue / Badger Creek Fly Tying www.eflytyer.com
622 West Dryden Road, Freeville, NY 13068 607-347-4946
(Mike carries many interesting and hard to find fly tying materials)

Great Feathers www.greatfeathers.com
14824 York Rd. Sparks, MD. 21152 888-777-0838
(A "Great" Source of Spider materials and the special "722" wax)

Jim's Fly Co www.jimsflyco.com
155 Campfire Lane, West Yellowstone, MT 59758 406-646-7259
(Large selection of Hackles and other materials)

Furs and Fur Blending

Dubbing fur is a favorite subject of mine. Notice I said "fur" as I have an aversion to synthetics in trout flies. (Saltwater flies are an exception.) While I rely for the most part on relatively few furs, my palate of body materials is fairly broad. I am as interested in furs as I am in feathers, but I do have some favorites that I use most often. I seldom buy pre-blended furs as I much prefer to process my own dubbing, as you'll see below. Fur on the skin is inexpensive and I can get just what I want with very little cost or effort.

Hare's Mask - If I was restricted to one dubbing source it would be Hare's Mask. The diversity of color, texture, length, and application contained in one mask is almost endless. One can find delicate mottled grays, long, soft gingers and tans, spiky ear fur and soft under fur. I use Hare's Mask fur for everything from Spiders to Dry Flies. Dyed or bleached masks add even more color choices. The ear, poll, (forehead area) and cheek furs are the most useful and I process them separately. To do this I water blend

them; it's a very easy technique and produces a beautiful result. Water blending can be used on almost any fur, and you can mix very disparate textures and lengths. I gave up dry blending many years ago and have never looked back.

To process a Hare's Mask, (I usually do 3 or 4 at a time, enough for several hundred flies) take a sharp pair of scissors and remove as much of the brown, mottled fur from the ears as possible. Work from the tip of the ear towards the base and get the scissors as close as you can to the skin before cutting. Collect this fur in a pile or container. Now cut all the fur from the forehead and between the eyes (poll) and keep separate. You can cut the sandy colored fur from the cheeks as well, and lastly I cut away anything else that looks useful and keep it in a separate pile, I call this "Hare's Blend". Each of these piles will be blended separately so don't mix them up.

You'll need a clean jar of about a pint capacity with a tight-fitting lid, (a jam jar is perfect) a small wire mesh tea strainer, (you can find these at your local Dollar Store) and some Crème Rinse Hair Conditioner, any brand is OK. I often just use the tiny bottles of Conditioner from hotels. Most just say "Conditioner" on them. I haven't found that any brand gives better results than another. But don't use shampoo, it will make a sudsy mess! Fill the jar about half full of warm tap water, put in the Ear Fur and about a teaspoon of the conditioner. Screw on the lid and shake vigorously for about 30 seconds or so, then pour the contents into the tea strainer. Swirl a bit more water in the jar to get all the fur out and pour through the strainer. It will look like you have lost a good deal of the fur, but it will all be there. Keeping the fur in the strainer, rinse well under warm running tap water, then squeeze as dry as possible, remove the fur to a few layers of paper towel or newspaper, squeeze against the paper to blot up the moisture and let dry completely for several hours or overnight before storing in a Zip-lock bag or other sealed container. Repeat with the remaining furs you have kept separate; these will give you several distinct colored/textured dubbings from a single mask. If you haven't tried this before you're in for a treat; it will be the cleanest, easiest to dub fur you can imagine and becomes almost silky in texture.

This process works with almost any fur. Mole, rabbit, muskrat, beaver, fox, and mohair are wonderful when treated this way. You can also blend furs of different colors, textures, etc. together, or add chopped synthetics; whatever you like. For example, muskrat and fox makes a nice blend. Experiment!

Some Commonly Used Furs

Muskat - Silky bluish under fur, very easy to spin. Like English Water Rat but a bit finer and longer in fiber.

Beaver - Another silky under fur, denser than muskrat, Bleaches and dyes very well. Will spin the finest bodies of any easily available fur.

Fox - A very traditional dubbing fur, used often in Catskill School dry flies. Wide color range: tans, grays, sandy, reddish, browns, etc. Long fibered and somewhat "glassy", it spins easily. Next to Hare, Fox is my personal favorite fur for dubbed bodies, but I don't use it as much as I once did. The pink urine burned fur from a vixen holds almost legendary status with fly dressers and is the traditional body material for the Hendrickson dry fly.

Otter - Very fine under fur with spiky guard hairs.

Rabbit - Easy to dub, soft under fur and guard hairs, dyes and blends easily. Available in a multitude of natural and dyed colors, rabbit fur is the basis of most prepackaged commercial dubbing.

Mole – A very fine, short fibered fur with no guard hairs. Natural mole is an iron blue color and is a traditional substitute for English Water Rat. Also available bleached and dyed.

Angora Goat (Mohair) - A very spiky, glassy, course, long fiber dubbing similar to Baby Seal. Another favorite as it has a very bright, sparkly, look. A little harder to dub than other furs, it gives a wonderful translucent look to the fly. I use it a lot for dry spinners, a very important fly style for me. Usually available only as dyed fur, I blend several colors to get the shades I want.

Squirrel - Pine, Fox, and Gray Squirrels all have a nice under fur with soft, mottled guard hairs that give a very buggy effect when blended. Dubs easily. Pine Squirrel is very fine and close to Water Rat.

Crewel Wool - Great stuff when teased apart and dubbed. Inexpensive and available in lots of colors. Look in craft/sewing stores.

I think I might be missing one or two but that's a pretty good list of the most common dubbings. For my own tying I use Hare, Fox, Mole, and Mohair most frequently.

Natural furs are my first choice as they aren't solid colors like dyed furs. I feel that mottled, broken colors produce a much more killing fly than solid colors and my flies reflect this philosophy. Even mohair, which is available only in solid colors, gets blended and I may include 3 - 6 different shades in the blend.

My feelings on synthetics may not line up with many modern tiers but I firmly believe they offer no advantage over natural materials. Just hold almost any color synthetic up to the light and it will show the same milky, bluish-purple hue. I do on occasion use a bit of Z-Ion in spinner wings, but not very often. Also, natural materials are biodegradable so if I leave a fly in a fish or a tree it will decompose before too long; (hooks rust very quickly) but plastics stay around much longer. Natural materials are just that, "natural", and in my experience are more effective than synthetics when incorporated into trout flies. But perhaps, and most importantly, I just enjoy working with real Silk, Fur, and Feathers, to borrow a phrase from Mr. Skues.

Hackle Length

When I teach classes or demonstrate tying Wet Flies, the most asked questions are "what is the proper hackle length for Spiders and Soft Hackles", and "how does one find game bird hackle, such as partridge, suitable for the smaller hook sizes?" Let's look at these questions and perhaps I can offer some useful solutions.

The problems may lie more with our modern sense of fly proportion rather than with the scarcity of the "proper" size hackles. We Americans seem to be bound to a hackle- to -hook proportion dictated by the Catskill School of dry flies; specifically, the hackle length should be 1 1/2 - 2 times the gape of the hook. This would, of course, be short for a Spider hackle. Also, many American Soft Hackle flies are much more nymph-like in proportion than traditional English North Country Spiders. In tying manuals and magazine articles discussing Spiders and Soft Hackles I've seen proportions stated as having the hackle reaching the point, barb, or bend of the hook, length of body, etc., most of which are hard to follow in real world tying. Remember also that hook style, model, and size will vary, making set formulas for length nearly useless. (The Partridge Hook Size Charts below offer some guidelines for proportion, but just specifically for the Model L3AS Hook. Proportions for other hook models would be different.)

I guess what I'm saying is that we Americans tend to prefer a shorter hackle on our spiders, which suits our current sense of aesthetics. Again, American Soft Hackle Wet Flies are often more nymph-like in proportions. The British seem to be much less dogmatic but also their aim with Spider style flies is to suggest emerging, emerged, or spent insects and not necessarily those in the nymph, larval, or pupal stages. I have examined many flies from England and Scotland, both antique and contemporary, and they show a broad range of hackle length in relation to hook size, but most often the hackle is on the long side, at least to American eyes. Early flies (actual flies, not illustrations) I have seen are quite small, seldom larger than a modern 16 and often much smaller. The hackles on these flies may look out of proportion to modern eyes, but the old tyers were dressing their flies to a different set of proportions. Remember too that the hackle on most North Country spiders is meant to suggest WINGS, not LEGS, so by nature the hackle would be longer. Indeed, many of the old, published patterns read something like; "winged with the hackle from a partridge back", or some such description, it being understood that the feather would be wrapped as a hackle and not tied on as a bunch or paired as in conventional winged wet flies.

My own flies are now more reflective of what I've seen represented by "original" spiders, i.e. longer hackle in proportion to hook size. I am very happy with this change as I too struggled for years trying to find those elusive little partridge (and other gamebird) hackles. I also like the look of flies having a longer hackle length and I am beginning to believe the trout like them better too!

(For a good discussion on hackle length, especially as it pertains to spiders, see Paul Schullery's chapter on hackles in his book, "The Rise")

Hackle length can be manipulated during tying, but I feel strongly about using some of the suggested ways to shorten hackle shown in several contemporary books, and I have never had very good luck using these techniques. You may get the hackle length you want but at the expense of losing the mobility of the hackle fibers, which I feel is so important to effective Spider flies.



AN ORIGINAL PARTRIDGE AND ORANGE, CIRCA 1880, SHOWING A TRIMMED HACKLE

There is, however, one way to shorten hackle that I DO like, and which is also very easy, practical, and traditional: that is simply trimming the hackle to size. Oh, heresy of heresies! We were taught since childhood that a trimmed hackle is the mark of an unskilled or lazy tier or of poor materials. The early spider tiers were much more pragmatic when it came to this and trimmed feathers to length as needed. Such flies are illustrated in many of the 19th century books (see the illustrations in John Bickerdyke's "Angling for Game Fish", 1889, for good examples of trimmed hackle spiders) and I believe it was taken on faith that one would shorten hackle as needed by the deft and judicious use of scissors.

To trim hackles to uniform length, it is best to do this after the fly is finished. Stroke the fibers forward over the head of the fly in a bunch and simply cut the tips back a fraction of an inch. Don't cut too much at first as you can always cut them back a bit more if needed. After a little practice you will be able to judge the length of cut and produce a consistent hackle length with little effort.

As to fishing, trimmed hackle spiders work just fine and I've found little difference in their effectiveness compared to flies with non-trimmed hackles. They may look different to us but the fish like them just fine!

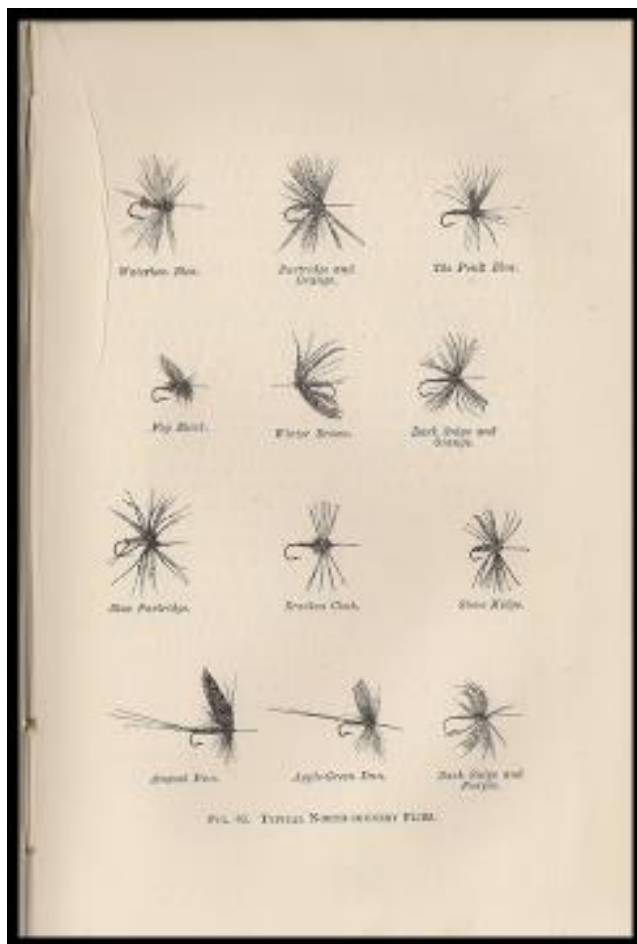


PLATE FROM BICKERDYKE'S "ANGLING FOR GAMEFISH" 1889, SHOWING HACKLE LENGTH AND TRIMMED HACKLES.

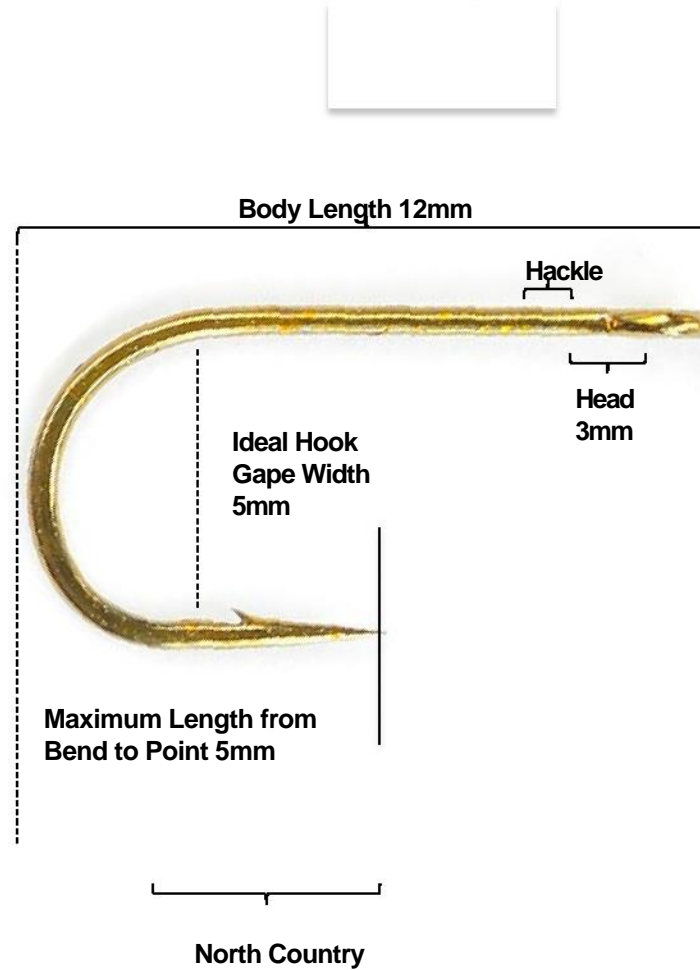
THIS BLACK AND WHITE PLATE CLEARLY SHOWS THAT NOT ONLY WERE HACKLE LENGTHS MUCH LONGER DURING THE 19TH CENTURY BUT ALSO THAT TRIMMING HACKLES TO LENGTH WAS A COMMON AND ACCEPTED PRACTICE.

(Dressing a commercial quantity of small partridge hackled flies is another matter though. The customer will obviously be expecting that the flies are tied to pattern and trimming or using a substitute could be problematic. Using hen is certainly an option but now you have a "Brown Hen & etc." rather than a "Partridge & whatever". Again, I doubt if the fish would care but the customer might. If that's the case, one would just have to look through a lot of partridge skins for those elusive 16's!)

I offer these resources as a consideration to my friends in the fly-fishing community. While not copyrighted, I ask that you respect my intellectual property. If you share this material, in print or in other media, please be kind enough to mention me as the source of the information. The Partridge Hook Proportion Chart is copyrighted, is the property of Partridge of Reddich, and has been used with their permission. [John Shaner](#)

Ideal Hook Proportions

Traditional North Country Spider #14



Partridge Classic Spider L3AS

Straight eye, wide gape, Captain Hamilton bend



PARTRIDGE
OF REDDITCH

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The Resulting Pattern Classic Spider

**PARTRIDGE
OF REDDITCH**

CLASSIC SPIDER - L3AS

Straight-eye lightweight
hook for North Country
Spiders and Soft
Hackle patterns

Sizes : #12 - #20
Bronze finish
Straight-Eye



PARTRIDGE & ORANGE

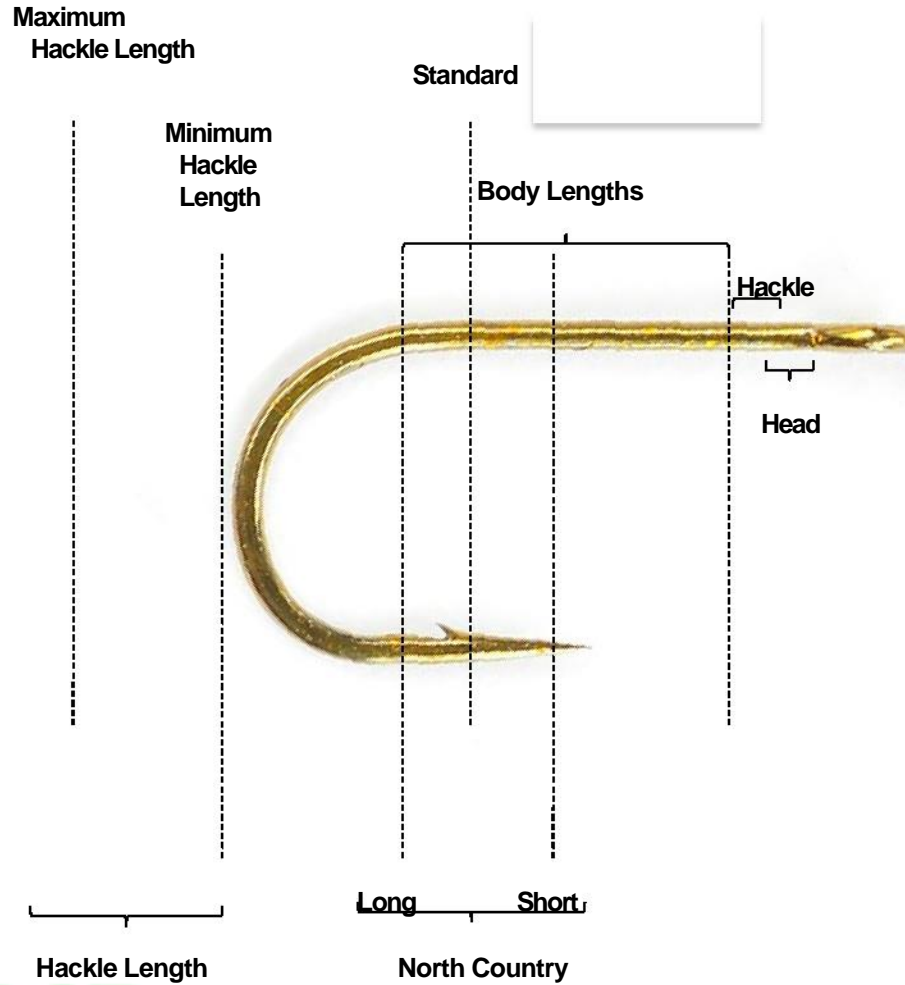
Available from:
Sportfish • Glasgow Angling • Lakeland • John Norris
Anglers Lodge • Albury • Lathkill
Lyttles of Dunchurch • Walker's of Trowell

**PARTRIDGE
OF REDDITCH**

Difference between soft hackle styles...



Proportions for Traditional North Country Spider



PARTRIDGE
OF REDDITCH

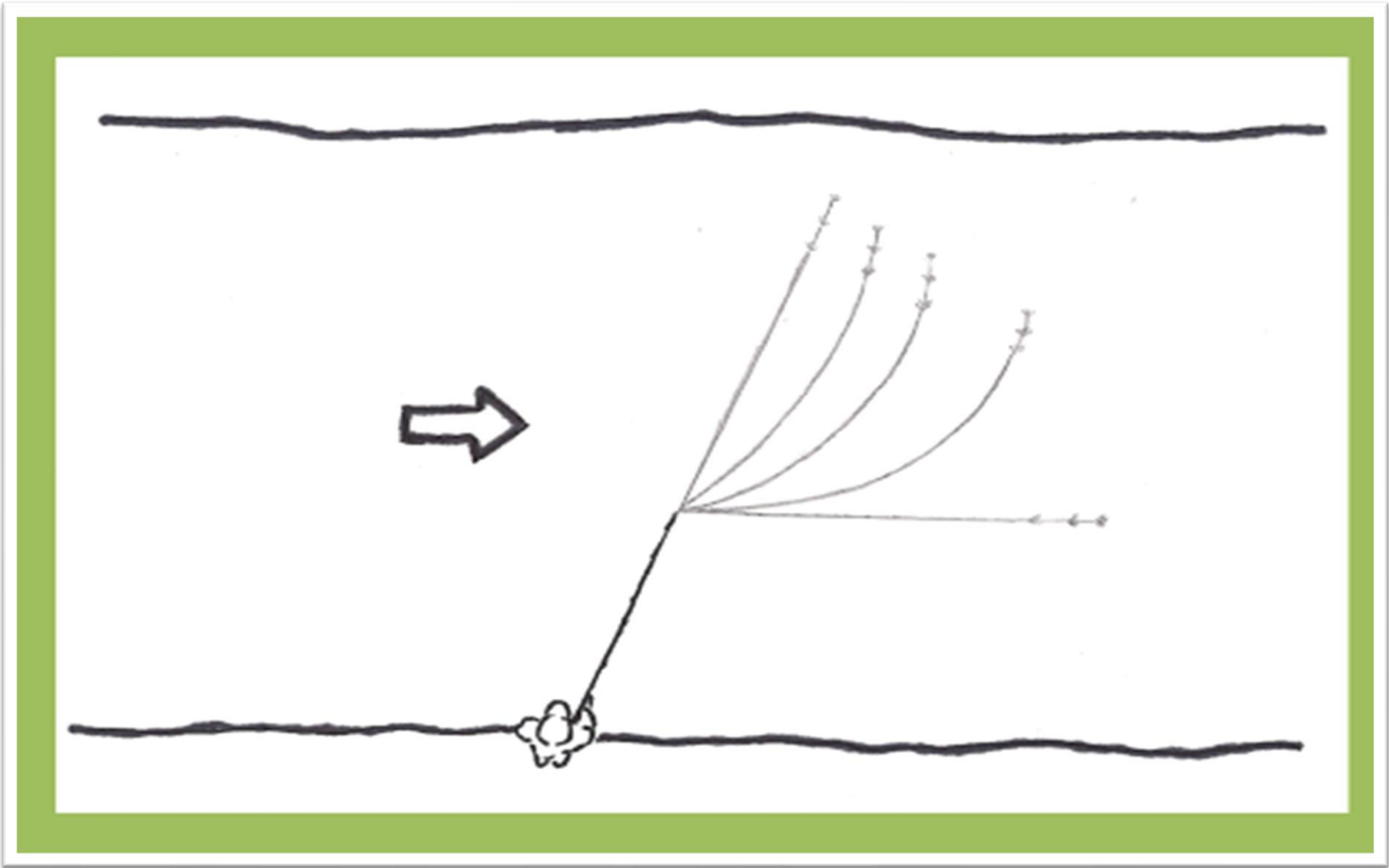
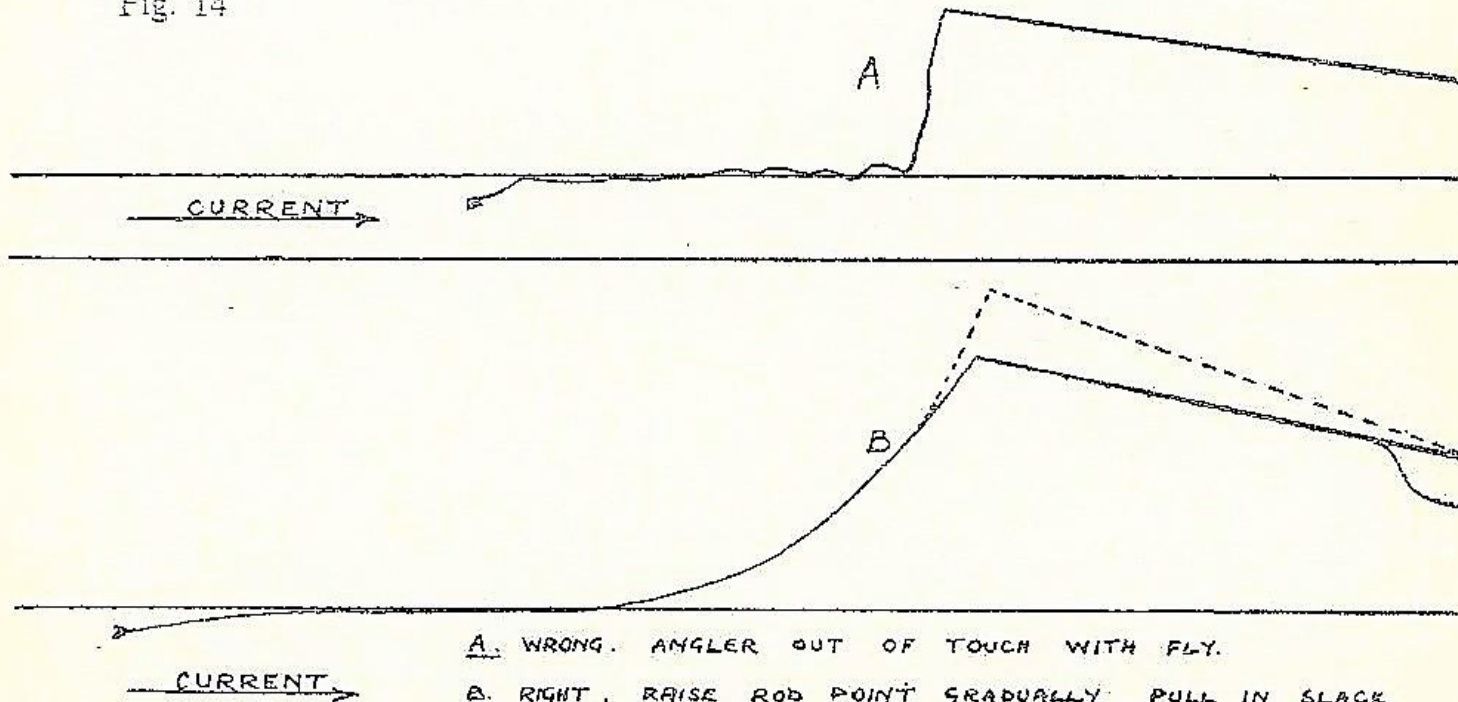


Fig. 14



A. WRONG. ANGLER OUT OF TOUCH WITH FLY.

B. RIGHT. RAISE ROD POINT GRADUALLY, PULL IN SLACK