# Atlantic Salmon Dressings in Steelhead Fly Fishing

*by Trey Combs*

NINETEENTH-CENTURY Atlantic salmon dressings came to steelheading embodying the most aristocratic of all angling heritages. Slips of feathers from a dozen different exotic birds were crafted into a single salmon fly that was an attractor of fish and a metaphor for peerage, propriety, and mystique. A Jock Scott or a Thunder and Lightning spoke to us, grounded us, gave our sport a necessary infusion of soul. We traded on this association, and our steelhead flies, always the product of plebeian enterprise, became more than graceless confections. Married strips of dyed goose, silk tags, ostrich butts, heads of peacock herl, and golden pheasant crests embellished steelhead ties, bastard creations that nevertheless required a thorough knowledge of fly tying. A British gilly would have considered them coarse as he noted parts missing from the classic originals, but the flies gladdened our untutored frontier anglers and filled them with confidence. A steelhead fly is nothing if it can't do that.

The earliest "fly shops" were hardware stores that sold fishing and hunting licenses. At a back counter beneath elk heads and stuffed salmon, one could purchase anything from deer rifles to snelled trout flies imported from Ireland and Scotland. In the larger sizes, these wet flies were among the first steelhead patterns, the Royal Coachman, Black Gnat, Professor, and Red Ibis, for example. Steelhead flies would come to have red tails and white wings and, as often as not, cheeks of jungle cock. When they came to be constructed of bucktail and chenille, these simple trout flies were easily converted. The elaborate Atlantic salmon patterns were not. For more than thirty years beginning in the 1930s, the proliferation of bright, showy steelhead bucktails became a distinctly American art form and symbolized the sport of steelhead fly fishing. In these many dressings, Atlantic salmon flies survived mostly as trace elements.

Two men in particular, Sam Wells and Joe Wharton, strongly influenced the early development of steelhead flies. Wells' shop at 315 F Street in Eureka, California, serviced fly fishermen bound for the Eel River, certainly the first American river where summer-run steelhead were routinely pursued with a fly. His own Wells Special, John Benn's Railbird, and Sumner Carson's Royal Coachman were locally popular steelhead dressings. Beginning in 1922, Wells had these and other steelhead patterns tied for him in Ireland. "Imported flies" meant British, and that mattered greatly to West Coast anglers taking their first tentative steps toward sorting out steelhead with a fly. According to Wells' letterhead, he could advance the angler's needs with "Hardy Reels, Scotch Tapered Lines and Leaders, English Waders, and Many High Class Necessities."

Joe Wharton's store changed from hardware to sporting goods, and by the 1930s his location at 104 South Sixth Street in Grants Pass, Oregon, was a landmark. He helped outfit Zane Grey for an expedition down the Rogue in 1926, and Grey had urged him to begin stocking English and Scottish fly tackle. The famous writer told about his Rogue adventures in *Tales of Freshwater Fishing* (Harper and Brothers, 1928) and Wharton became a celebrity. He took to calling himself the "Sage of the Rogue," and wrote extravagantly about its steelhead. Wharton's "#1 Special" became the Rogue River Special, and his Turkey and Red became an early favorite of Grey's.

Not all the steelhead flies being sold were imported. Commercial fly tying was always something of a cottage industry, often a sideline occupation that attracted women who could work from their homes. Overhead was minimal, the flies readily marketed through local sporting goods stores.

The Bunnell sisters, Ardath and Irene, grew up in Goldendale, Washington, and learned their craft from Wharton and Wells. They ran a mail-order business, Oregon Waters Fly Company, from Portland, Oregon, and called their product "Water Call 'Scotch tied' Flies." These flies reflected the fashion of the 1930s, as steelhead flies became hairwings, a bucktail wing vastly out of proportion to the body, three or four times the length of the hook. Anglers found the dressings extremely unstable, a characteristic which led to the use of double hooks, especially on the Rogue. Among the fifteen "steelhead" patterns the Bunnell sisters listed in their catalog were the Durham Ranger and Jock Scott as simplified featherwings, and a hairwing Silver Doctor—all Victorian salmon flies.

Glen Evans, Inc., a tackle and lure manufacturer in Caldwell, Idaho, was the largest commercial tyer in the West through the 1940s and 1950s. John Joy worked for Evans and had invented the sewing machine "vise," a trundle operation in which the hook spun around and could be dressed in seconds. Eventually, over one hundred women tied flies for Evans on these machines, including Joy's daughter, Audrey.

Audrey Joy left Idaho in 1945 to find work in Portland, Oregon. At the time, Polly Rosborough was quitting his job as a fly tyer in the sporting goods section of

Water Call Flies

GRADE NAMES AND DESCRIPTION

Today there are hundreds of Steelhead patterns in both wing and hair, tied on heavy turned-down eyed hooks (preferably spread) especially designed to sink rapidly and to withstand the terrific slashing of the fighting Steelhead and Salmon.

**Hunker**—Plain wing Steelhead fly. Picture No. 1, Professor. A very sturdy, heavily dressed fly especially tied to sink rapidly, tied on extra stout t.d.e. hollow point imported hooks, select materials, all standard Scotch and American patterns. Sizes: 10-2.

**Gypsy Lurn**—Fancy wing Steelhead fly with jungle cock shoulders. Picture No. 2, Royal Coachman. Highest quality genuine jungle cock mounted each side of wings. Fancy patterned flies made of rarest materials. Bodies of finest silk floss, chenille, tinsel, gold or yarn. Tied on extra stout t.d.e. hollow point hooks. Standard and special patterns. Sizes: 10-2.

**Grizzly**—Bucktail Steelhead fly. Picture No. 3, Durham Ranger. A very popular fly especially designed for Steelhead lidding. Northern bucktail securely tied on extra stout t.d.e. hollow point hooks, beautifully wrapped bodies of finest materials, full untrimmed select hackles. Standard and special patterns. Sizes: 10-2.

**Tantalizer**—Bucktail Steelhead fly with jungle cock shoulders. Picture No. 4, Golden Demon.
Choice jungle cock feathers mounted each side of bucktail streamer. Many patterns of vividly dyed bucktail, non-fading. Securely tied to wilhstand terrific lashing on extra stout t.d.e. hollow point hooks. Choice of long or short streamer in bucktail, polar or squirrel. Standard and special patterns. Sizes: 10-2.

**Bass Flies**—Picture No. 5, Jock Scott.
Standard patterns in hackle or bucktail streamers or flat, inverted or upright wings. Fully hackled. Well formed fly. Bodies finest quality silk, chenille, tinsel or yarn. Ringed or t.d.e. hooks.

Fancy patterns, feather or hair, or combination feather and hair streamers. Many patterns jungle cock trim. Sizes: 4-2/0

**Distinctly Bass, Salmon and Steelhead Patterns**

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|---|---|---|---|
| Beauty Dacor | Colonel Fisher | Josephine | Royal Coachman |
| Buck Dog | Dog Face | Jungle Cock | Bucktail |
| Black Demon | Durham Ranger | Lord Baltimore | Silver Grey |
| Bucktail | Golden Demon | Ocala | Silver Doctor |
| Canary | Gold Dust Queen | Osborne | Thunder and |
| Carrie | Grayson | Parachute Belle | Lightning |
| Colton Salmon Polar | Hardrock Bucktail | Perkins Special | Wm. Edgehill |
| Bear Series | Improved Grayson | Red Gordy | Wilkinson |
| Green Kiling Tip | Indian Rock | Rogue River Special | Umpqua Special |
| Blue Kiling Tip | Jock Scott | Rio Grande King | Yellow Hammer |
| Red Kiling Tip | | | Yreenpeak |
| Colton Demon | | | |

OREGON WATERS FLY CO., PORTLAND, OREGON Page 6

*Among the fifteen "steelhead" patterns listed in the 1930s advertising brochure from the Bunnell sisters' Oregon Waters Fly Company, Portland, for their "Water Call Flies," were featherwings Durham Ranger and Jock Scott, and a hairwing Silver Doctor—all Victorian salmon flies.*

Meier and Frank, a Portland department store, and the job became available to Joy. For more than twenty years, she tied at her sewing machine—an estimated 300,000 flies, and her little booth became a shrine. She is best remembered for refining the Rogue River Special and Juicy Bug to more compact, double hook dressings.

Perhaps the most influential of the sporting goods dealers was Shoff's Tackle in Kent, Washington. Though little known outside of Puget Sound, Clarence Shoff wholesaled flies and fly-tying materials to many other businesses, including Sam Wells, Joe Wharton, and C. Jim Pray. By the 1930s, Zane Grey was ordering flies directly from Shoff. In a handwritten letter dated April 7, 1935, Grey wrote:

> I rec'd the 6 dozen flies and they sure are swell. I confess that collecting flies is a passion with me. But some of them I use. Tie me a dozen Gold Demon Bucktails for the size hook enclosed. Also, one dozen each of Hair Coachman in 10-8-6-4 and the size I enclose. Put in a little more bucktail.

This last request is interesting. At the time, Washington steelhead fly-fishers were tying their flies on larger hooks and along sparser lines. Grey, still operating from a California/southern Oregon frame of reference, wanted flies with longer streamer-style wings and tied on regular-length hooks.

Zane Grey's next letter to Shoff, dated May 22, 1935, illustrates the West Coast angler's ambivalence about Atlantic salmon dressings that persisted in steelheading.

> One dozen each of numbers 6, 4, 2, 01, size hooks, Jock Scott pattern only with gold body (not gilt) with red streamer running out from the body.

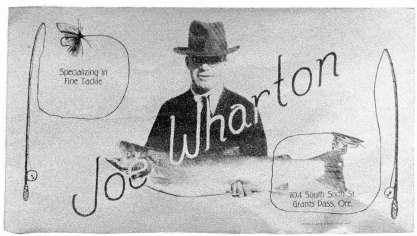
By the 1940s, steelheading had its own cherished fly patterns, home grown and winged with bucktail or polar bear. Jim Pray's Optics and Thor, the Umpqua Special and Skunk from the North Umpqua, Ken McLeod's Skykomish Sunrise and Purple Peril, Enos Bradner's Brad's Brat, and Clarence Shoff's Polar Shrimp were standards that would soon beget hundreds of similar patterns.

The steelhead bucktail was something of a one-dimensional approach. It was usually fished on a sinking line, commonly a shooting head system by the 1960s, the fly was typically weighted for summer fishing, and heavily weighted for winter rivers. Hook size ran to 6s, 4s, and 2s in regular length, with turned down eye. Its typical symmetry was a fairly long hackle tail, a wing that came to the end of the tail, and hackle that reached just to the point of the hook. Overdressed by today's standards, it did not penetrate strong currents well on a floating or slow sinking silk line, and was likely to plane across the surface on its side. Weighting the fly helped to sink it, but this made it even less stable, and not uncommonly, the fly passed through a hard swing upside down.

Anglers sought to fish these flies well sunk because of their general conviction that the fly needed to be carried to the steelhead, that it was less effective—or not effective at all—when working in the surface film. Gradually, our perceptions changed.

Twenty years ago, steelhead fly fishing began a tremendous growth which corresponded to a truly remarkable renaissance in steelhead fly tying. For inspiration, tyers returned to their spiritual roots, to the Atlantic salmon flies of both the past and the present. They dusted off *Greased Line Fishing* by Jock Scott (published in England in 1933), studied it carefully, and tied low-water flies that functioned as beautifully as they were formed.

Since the 1930s, hairwing Atlantic salmon flies, particularly those from New Brunswick's Miramichi, had been slowly




*Joe Wharton was a strong influence on the early development of steelhead flies. His store's location on Sixth Street in Grants Pass, Oregon, became a landmark and he became something of a celebrity himself in the salmon world of the 1920s and 1930s, outfitting Zane Grey, writing "extravagantly" about steelhead, and calling himself "Sage of the Rogue."*

replacing the classic full-dressed Atlantic salmon patterns. Harry Smith's Black Bear series, John Cosseboom's lovely full-collared patterns, and Roy Angus Thompson's now famous Rat series (RAT for his initials), were examples of highly original Atlantic salmon ties using bear, squirrel tail, and fox, but not bucktail. At the same time, complicated married-wing dressings were dressed down—"reduced"—and, when possible, simply tied with wings of hair. These and other dressings were given a "Portland hitch," two overhand knots secured behind the head so that the leader came from the throat of the fly, forcing the fly into the surface film where it caused a visible and erratic wake. By the 1960s, a spun deer hair dry fly, the Bomber, was fished under intentional drag on a downstream swing and "skated" in a manner impossible to achieve with Wulffs and Steelhead Bees. It, too, could be given a "hitch" and made nearly unsinkable.

These developments in Canada ignored Scottish Spey flies, an omission resolved by Syd Glasso of Forks, Washington, with Spey flies that are still among the most beautiful in steelheading. So, unlike many of the other patterns from England that passed through Atlantic Canada and then on to the West Coast, Spey fly design went directly from the British Isles to the North Pacific rain forests. Syd inspired an army of disciplined, studious followers, and I think the Northwest—including British Columbia—has a larger number of truly outstanding Spey fly dressers than any other area of the world.

We had gleaned so much from Atlantic salmon anglers that by the 1970s, our heads were filled with many new approaches to tying and fishing steelhead flies. New materials and traditional materials, dyed in exciting hot colors, were appearing, challenging the imagination still further. Using Atlantic salmon dressings for their graceful proportions and better swimming characteristics, anglers began the cross-pollination that has created a generation of steelhead flies at once new and classic.



## Steelhead as Pacific Salmon

IN 1989, the American Fisheries Society's Committee on Names of Fishes announced that the trout species naturally indigenous to western North America and the northern Pacific Ocean drainages, the rainbow, cutthroat, golden, Apache, Mexican golden, and Gila would no longer have the generic name of *Salmo.* Henceforth, these species would be classed as *Oncorhynchus,* the genera of Pacific salmon. The Atlantic salmon and brown trout remained *Salmo.* My steelhead, *Salmo gairdneri,* a name fixed in Northwest history, became the incomprehensible and largely unpronounceable *Oncorhynchus mykiss.*

They based their decision on a more complete discovery and interpretation of fossil records. The common ancestor of today's trout and salmon lived some twenty million years ago. A major branching split this family into a North Atlantic population which led directly to the Atlantic salmon and the brown trout, and a Pacific population. The Pacific group split again about ten million years ago, one group becoming western trout, the other Pacific salmon. Because taxonomists seek evolutionary relationships upon which to base their classifications, the decision to place western trout with Pacific salmon was logical. Other lines of comparative scientific investigation such as chromosome counts, DNA, and electrophoretic analysis of proteins support the findings of the paleoicthyologists. Outward habits and general appearance aside, the trout of western North America and eastern Russia have more physical characteristics in common with Pacific salmon than with Atlantic trout and salmon.

In 1792, Johann Walbaum described five species of North Pacific salmon, the Dolly Varden char, and the rainbow trout found in the Soviet Union's Kamchatka peninsula. He named the rainbow *Salmo mykiss,* the species a transliteration of the Russian. Investigators have now clearly established that *S. mykiss* and *S. gairdneri* are identical. When the generic name was changed to *Oncorhynchus,* the species name *mykiss* was retained, because it predated *gairdneri* and thus had priority.

The steelhead of western North America ascend cold water rivers from Cook Inlet off Anchorage, Alaska, to the Big Sur coast south of San Francisco. Their range once extended south to rivers in Baja California del Norte. Loss of Mexican and southern California steelhead was due to the partial-to-complete loss of their spawning rivers to a myriad of urban and rural uses. T.C.

(From *Steelhead Fly Fishing: The Great Rivers* by Trey Combs.)