

# Ragtag and Rumples: The Mystery of the Ratty Fly

*by Paul Schullery*

Sara Wilcox



*These flies belonging to the museum's Deputy Director Yoshi Akiyama have definitely seen better days.*

ONE DAY NOT LONG AGO I was fishing a small undistinguished local trout stream, and as I released one of its small undistinguished local trout, I noticed that the hackle on my Adams had unwound and was trailing loose. But when I reached for my fly box to replace the ruined fly, I found myself wondering: Did the fish I was releasing tear that hackle loose, or was the loose hackle the reason the fish took the fly? The trout wouldn't tell me, of course, and rather than launch what I knew would be a pathetically quixotic attempt at empirical study by continuing to fish with the damaged fly, I put on a new one.

But the experience got me thinking about one of angling folklore's most intriguing and persistent minor narratives. Spend a little time out on the shadowy margins of fly-fishing propriety, and you're sure to encounter the tale of the ratty fly. Fishing writers, and plenty of actual fishermen, have been telling this story for many years. They remember a day when they were using a fly the fish loved so much that it was gradually chewed to pieces. In the most extreme cases, the fisherman just kept fishing the

same bedraggled fly until there was nothing left of the thing but some fuzzy thread on the hook shank or perhaps some mangled wing fibers. And still the fish took it.

## A COMFORTING ICONOCLASM

These stories seem a little unreal the first time you hear them, especially if it hasn't happened to you yet, but plenty of trustworthy people have told them. Ed Van Put, one of the Catskills' leading angling authors and a fish and wildlife technician with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, recently related such an experience on the Beaverkill.

I had caught a number of trout on an Adams and decided to see how many I could catch without changing the fly. In time, the tail, body and hackle came off . . . but I continued to catch fish. With only the wings remaining, I caught my 37th trout, the beautiful wild brown and largest of the day. I let it go and called it a day.<sup>1</sup>

There is a common implication in these stories—that the rough, half-wrecked fly actually caught fish better than the new, tidy one. This appeals to our sense of iconoclasm, of course, especially if we're a little tired of the (let's face it) bullying pronouncements of the angling masters who insist on the highest fly-tying standards. I don't know about you, but many's the day I don't really feel like making sure my hackle is just the right shade of pale watery dun (whatever that is) or my gold ribbing achieves symmetrical microperfection. At times like those, it's nice to think that trout will go for something a little less formal and bookishly precise.

Still, the question remains why such accidental and short-lived fly "patterns" sometimes work so well. Flies don't fall apart gracefully. They get lumpy or start dragging loose pieces. The head unravels, or ribbing pulls free and springs out to the side. The body and wings rotate embarrassingly around the hook shank or just scrunch down toward the bend of the hook. None of these developments would seem to help the fly catch more fish, but for some combination of rea-



sons and conditions, some terribly contorted flies do keep working. And though it is easy enough to imagine some flies continuing to catch fish with fairly severe structural failures—a streamer that is being worked quickly through the water can still look pretty good even if its collar has unwound and has just become a part of its wing—most of the ratty fly lore has to do with smaller and more carefully tied wet flies and dry flies.

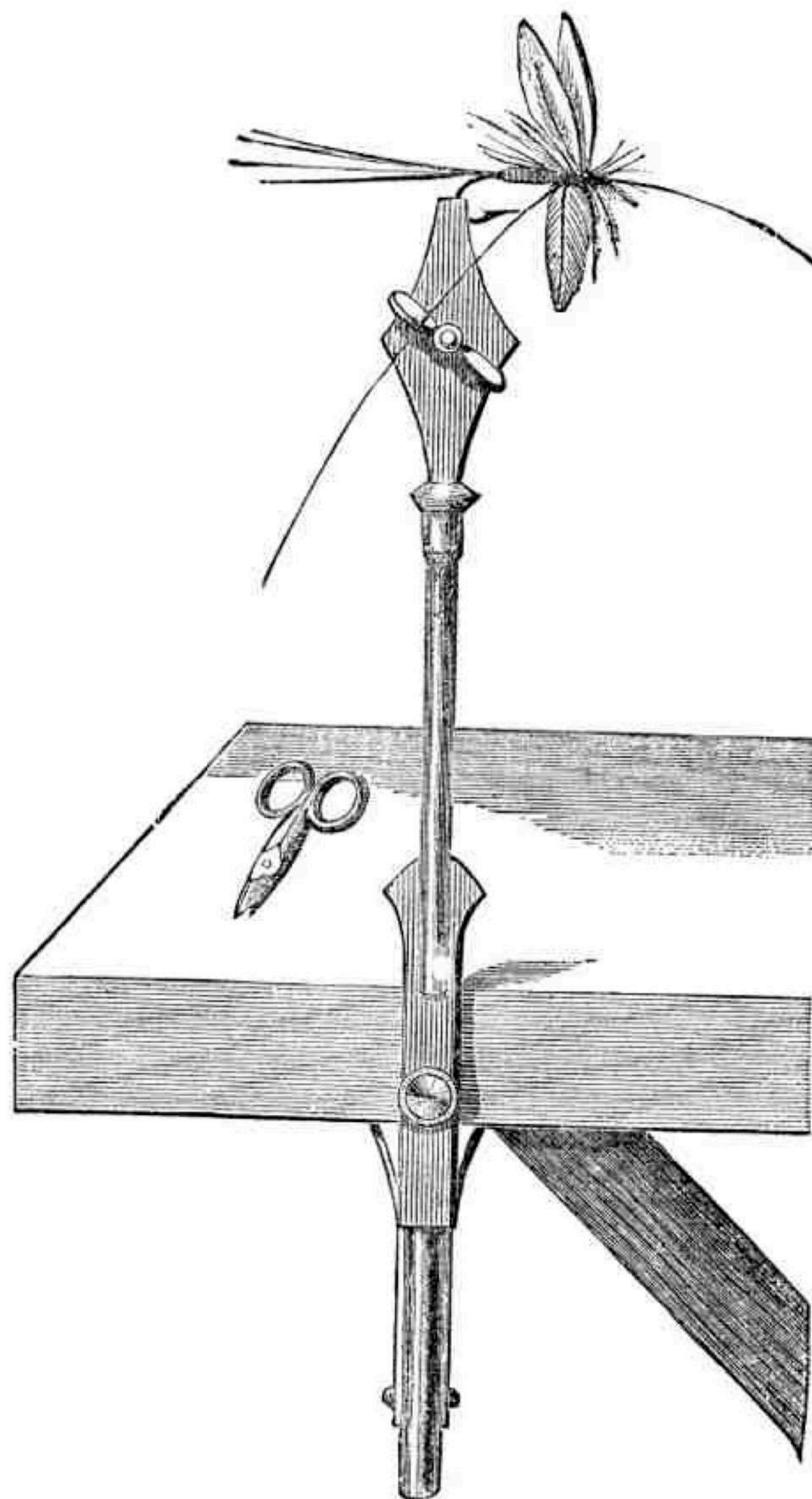
There are plenty of casual explanations out there. It could just be an off day for the trout, who are in such a generous mood that they'd take cigarette butts or dandelion seeds. Or maybe we should see the success of the ratty fly as a modest corrective to keep us humble and realistic when we get a little too puffed up about our imitation theories. Besides, many of the very best fly patterns—the Hare's Ear comes to mind right off—have always featured a somewhat unkempt overall demeanor. The old Casual Dress and Muskrat patterns typify the same approach: keep it loose, keep it buggy, hope for the best.

## THE LONG VIEW

Our neglect of rattiness in our fly patterns is probably more important than we've realized. I think that to an unappreciated extent, the highly refined, tightly prescribed fly patterns we depend on today are mostly a product of the past century and a half. What's more, I am sure that they don't necessarily represent progress. What they represent instead is the need for the widespread commercial standardization of fly patterns that became necessary in the nineteenth century, when professional fly tying began to move out of the cottage and into the mainstream of marketing. What they also represent is the need for a vastly enlarged angling community, blessed or cursed with miraculous communications technology, to know that they are "getting it right" when they sit down to tie a fly that has been recommended by someone far away.

Our long-ago forefathers didn't feel these same needs. If they had, the instructions they gave in their fly-pattern lists would have been a great deal more fulsome and exact than they were. The typical fly dressing given in books before the early 1800s consisted only of the materials in the fly.<sup>2</sup> If you were lucky, the author would offer a word of advice about the size of the fly, or about making the body slender or otherwise. But he'd give you nothing about proportion or style, and certainly nothing as detailed as provided by modern books, with their helpful combination of words and sharp color photographs.

By contrast, with the precisely tied and undoubtedly beautiful modern flies, the one thing that characterizes almost every one of the flies I've seen that date from before about 1830 is a consistent looseness of form—they have surprisingly coarse dubbing (which often provided the fly's "legs" in its errant longer strands), raggedly mixed winging materials, and an overall scruffiness that suggests to me that when it came to fly tying, anglers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may have operated from a significantly different aesthetic stance than the one we adhere to today.<sup>3</sup> And I'm convinced that those rougher traits of the earlier flies were not the result of the craft of fly tying being in a more primitive stage of development. They were a recognition of what worked best on the trout.



From J. Harrington Keene, *Fly-Fishing and Fly-Making* (New York: O. Judd Co., 1887), 65.

## RATTINESS AS A GOOD THING

Some anglers accepted the mystery of the ratty fly rather fatalistically. In a charming if neglected little book called *Dry-Fly Fishing in Border Waters* (1912), F. Fernie simply offered, without elaboration or conjecture, the bemused observation that in order for the Black Gnat pattern to work best, "the whole fly should have a rather battered appearance."<sup>4</sup>

Fernie was talking about relatively mild rattiness, of course. A certain indistinctness of outline in a fly pattern—as exemplified by, say, Polly Rosborough's fuzzy nymphs or John Atherton's "impressionistic" dubbed dry-fly bodies—is nothing new in fly tying.<sup>5</sup> But in the present inquiry into the mystery of the ratty fly, we're not talking about mere





*The Dabbling, tied by Alice Conba of Tipperary, Ireland.  
Image courtesy of Hans Weilenmann.*

blurry visual edges. We're talking about the apparently random and catastrophic disassembly of the fly itself, with chunks poking out in unplanned directions and other chunks simply falling off.

Other anglers have applied more thought to the matter, and the most comforting rationalizations we've come up with to explain the success of such flies seem to involve emergers. The growing appreciation of emergers among anglers in recent decades—based on the realization that a variety of aquatic insects spend critical moments of their emergence looking neither like traditional nymphs nor like traditional dry flies—has generated a wealth of wonderful if unorthodox new fly patterns. In defiance of traditional fly-tying conventions, these new creations sprout little tufts of feather or dubbing here and there, or drag an unorthodox appendage—feather, fur, yarn, whatever—behind the body, to suggest a trailing nymphal shuck.

Today, even a quick turn through Doug Swisher and Carl Richards's *Emergers* (1991) or Ted Fauceglia's *Mayflies* (2005) should convince you that flies do indeed pass through a brief but significantly un-"classic" stage in their appearance as they shed their nymphal skins.<sup>6</sup> If you've looked at enough insects at this stage in their lives, and mentally multiplied them by some sizeable portion of the hatch that may get hung up in the shuck or otherwise fail to successfully emerge (as in Swisher and Richards's "stillborn" flies), it is a lot easier to understand why even an experienced trout might be attracted to some fairly unpho-

togenic artificial flies. As Gary Borger wrote in *Nymphing* (1979), emergers "are a ragtag, rumped, and disheveled group. The very best imitations are themselves a disreputable-looking lot."<sup>7</sup> Or, as that most penetrating of angling observers, G. E. M. Skues, described an emerging mayfly:

One is apt to forget that at the moment of eclosion (which we erroneously designate "hatching") when it emerges from the envelope which clad its nymphal form, it passes through a stage of untidy struggle not distantly resembling that which a golfer or a footballer displays in extricating himself from a tight-fitting pullover or sweater or jersey.<sup>8</sup>

Few things help us see the limitations of our theories and philosophies of fly tying than a good look at how anglers in another country handle the same challenges and questions. We're concerned here specifically with the mystery of the ratty fly, but that's only one of the reasons I recommend Peter O'Reilly's *Trout & Salmon Flies of Ireland* (1996), a wonderful testament to both parallel and divergent evolution in fly style from nation to nation.<sup>9</sup> As far as flies that violate our carefully nurtured sense of proportion and balance, the various Bumbles, Buzzers, and Daddys that have long been popular on Irish streams and lochs suggest the extent to which trout approve of hackling and winging styles that might seem absurd to the conservative eye of a tradition-oriented American tier.

But for me at least, one Irish fly best represents international contrasts of fly

style and especially the aesthetic stretch we have to make to understand ratty flies: the Dabbling. Developed in the early 1980s by competition angler Donald McClearn (the original's body was made from old carpet fibers), the Dabbling features a bunch of long pheasant-tail fibers for the tail and full, somewhat oversized, palmer hackling. The wing, which reaches to the end of the long tail, is a "shroud" of bronze mallard fibers lashed on in uneven clumps on the top and both sides of the fly. Dabblers have been enormously successful in Irish competitive fishing, winning many championships for their users.<sup>10</sup>

When my well-traveled angling friend Ken Cameron sent me a Dabbling a few years ago, I immediately liked it and couldn't wait to try it out—perhaps because its rough outline did, indeed, look vastly more buggy than many tidier flies, but probably also because I found great reassurance in recognizing it as the sort of fly I might end up with when I was actually trying to tie something a good deal prettier.

After a while, as I adjusted to the aesthetic shocks of the fly's proportions, I decided that the Dabbling *was* pretty. Perhaps that is the greater lesson of the ratty fly—if a fly catches trout, we quickly adjust to its visual weirdness or disproportion. Before long, we think it's downright good-looking.

E. J. Malone, the great Irish fly encyclopedist who has provided me with current information on the Dabbling, praised McClearn and his Dabbling in *Irish Trout and Salmon Flies* (1998).

Donald has not produced a new fly—what he has done is more fundamental in that his new style consists of dressing old established patterns with a bunch of tail fibers to represent a discarding shuck and a broken wing of straggly fibres which makes a perfect imitation of a hatching sedge.<sup>11</sup>

Here we see the Irish, like the Americans, recognizing the importance of emergers and the need to imitate them quite differently—and more rattily—than we might imitate nymphs or dries. Originally tied in large sizes (sixes, eights, and tens) for loch fishing, the Dabbling has been adapted to more delicate situations. Malone wrote me that Dabblers are now "more likely to be found tied on 10s and 12s, with an occasional 14!"<sup>12</sup>

## EMBRACING THE RAT

The ratty fly is good for us. It makes us think, and it keeps us off our high horse of overconfidence and overrefined taste. About thirty years ago, a friend of



mine from Utah showed me a local dry-fly pattern known as the Hank-O-Hair. It consisted entirely of a few deer hairs laid unevenly along a hook shank and lashed tight to the shank in the middle so that the hairs splayed out in all directions. At the time, I was fully under the influence of the sport's more cosmopolitan thinkers and found the thing kind of offensive. I didn't think such a nonfly deserved a name, even such a silly name as it had. I didn't doubt that it would catch fish, especially where I lived in the Rockies; little-fished mountain trout could be caught on less impressive "flies" than that. It just didn't fit my idea of how to play the game.

But many years later, as I became familiar with the finer points of surface films, read the more recent fishing books on the feeding behavior of trout, and started working on my own book about how trout rise, that simple pattern made more and more sense as an actual imitative fly. Specifically, the Hank-O-Hair's widely radiating strands of deer hair would have done more than support the fly on the water. From the trout's point of view, looking up at the mirrored underside of the stream, those hairs probably gave a pretty good imitation of insect feet pressing into the surface film—the starburst pattern of light disturbance in the mirrored underside of the water's surface described so well by Clarke and Goddard in *The Trout and the Fly* (1980).<sup>13</sup> So simple a pattern, yet it still performed the function it most needed to.

The wise Canadian angling writer Roderick Haig-Brown deserves the last word on the mysteries of rattiness. Haig-Brown said that the experience of catching fish on such "tattered and torn" flies was universal among anglers, but he took the experience another step.

I used to think that the explanation was probably in the immediate conditions, in the day and the way the fish were taking. But I have kept these battered flies sometimes and find that they still do well on another day, in another place, under quite different conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Maybe the lesson of the ratty fly isn't well enough learned until we get in the habit of setting the fly aside at the end of its great day and using it again and again.



## ENDNOTES

1. Ed Van Put, "Ed Van Put, Technician," *Fish & Fly* (Spring 2003), 76.

2. Easily the best review I've seen of the early literature of fly tying appears in Darrel

Martin's wonderful book *The Fly-Fisher's Craft* (Guilford, Conn.: The Lyons Press, 2006), especially the generously long chapter, "Antique Tying," 5–68. This documentary history traces the known development of the early techniques.

3. For some excellent photographs—with equally helpful commentary—of flies from the late 1700s and early 1800s, see the feature in the *American Fly Fisher* (Fall 2000, vol. 26, no. 4), 4–16. This includes Sara Wilcox, "Gallery," 14–15, and Ken Cameron, "First Impressions of the Harris Flies," 16. For a variety of pre-1800 illustrations of flies, many of which are variants on the same original illustration, see Ken Cameron and Andrew Herd, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," *The American Fly Fisher* (Summer 2001, vol. 27, no. 3), 12–19. This article, which traces the complex lineage of certain important eighteenth-century illustrations, is a model of the kind of historical detective work that makes the study of fly-fishing history so engaging.

4. F. Fernie, *Dry-Fly Fishing in Border Waters* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912), 58.

5. Polly Rosborough, *Tying and Fishing the Fuzzy Nymphs* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1965 and later editions), and John Atherton, *The Fly and the Fish* (New York: Macmillan, 1951). I do not understand why a book as excellent and significant as Atherton's has been out of print for so long.

6. Doug Swisher and Carl Richards, *Emergers* (New York: The Lyons Press, 1991), and Ted Fauceglia, *Mayflies* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2005).

7. Gary Borger, *Nymphing* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1979), 72.

8. G. E. M. Skues, *Side-Lines, Side-Lights and Reflections* (London: Seeley, Service & Company, 1932), 419–20. The material quoted first appeared in *Salmon and Trout Magazine* (October 1925).

9. Peter O'Reilly, *Trout & Salmon Flies of Ireland* (Shropshire, U.K.: Merlin Unwin Books, 1995).

10. Vernon Edgar, "Having a Dabble," *Trout Fisherman* (June 1990), 18–19, and E. J. Malone, *Irish Trout and Salmon Flies* (Machynlleth, Wales, U.K.: Coch-Y-Bonddu Books, 1998), 103.

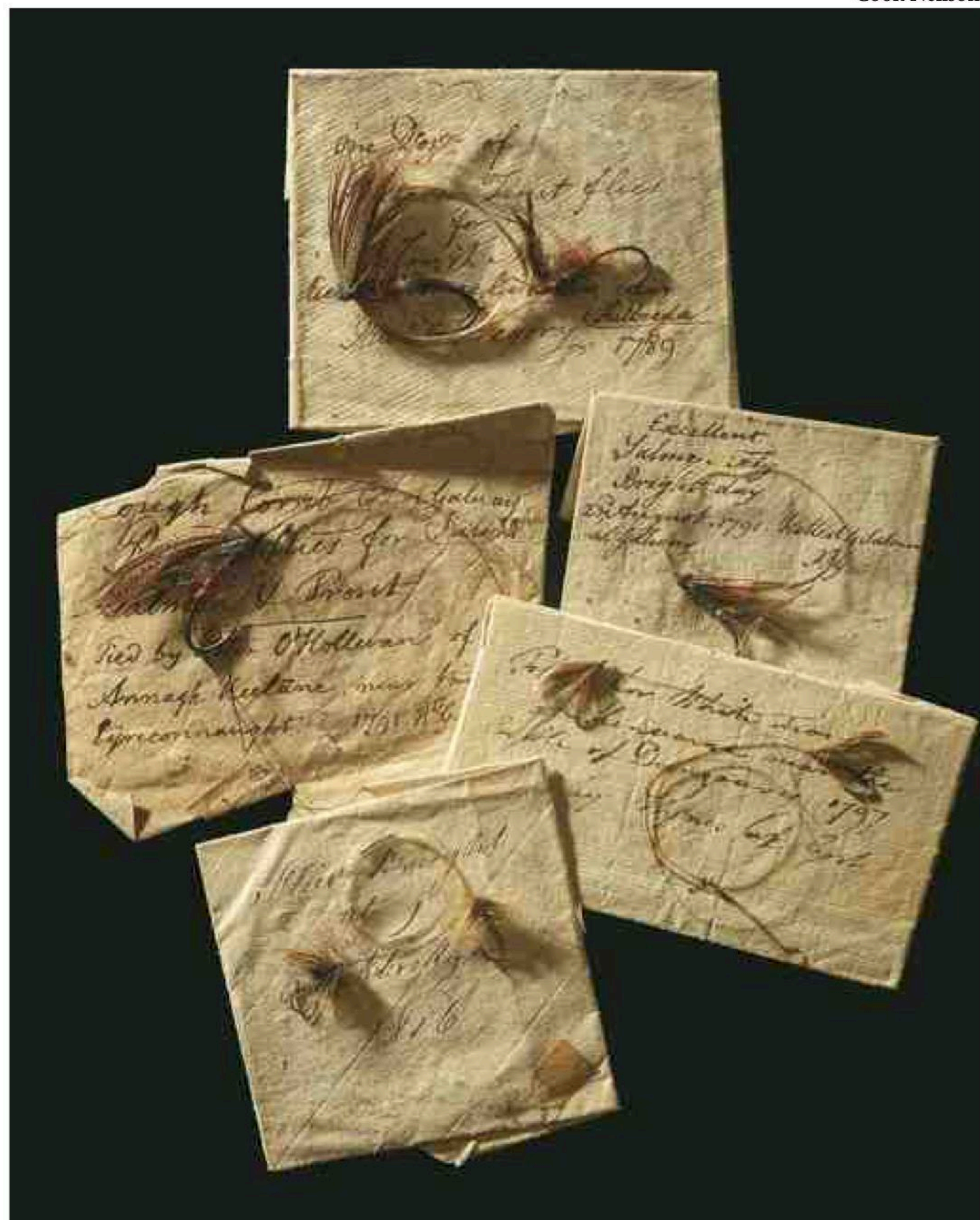
11. E. J. Malone, *Irish Trout and Salmon Flies*, 103.

12. E. J. Malone to the author, 24 March 2003.

13. Brian Clarke and John Goddard, *The Trout and the Fly* (New York: Nick Lyons Books, 1980), 72. This is not an easy work to cite. On the cover, the authors are listed as Clarke and Goddard, and on the title page the authors are listed as Goddard and Clarke. I assume it was their little joke at the time, and I have tried to stick with Clarke and Goddard.

14. Roderick Haig-Brown, *Fisherman's Spring* (New York: Morrow, 1951), 130.

Cook Neilson



A sampling of the J. R. Harris flies featured in the Fall 2000 issue of the *American Fly Fisher* (vol. 26, no. 4). Starting at the top and moving clockwise, they are dated 1789, 1791, 1797, and 1791.