



Lords of the Flies

Tying traditional Atlantic salmon flies in Atlantic Canada

By Don MacLean

DAMIEN WELSH



The Akroyd Fly, developed on the Dee River in Scotland.

With skill gained from years of practice, Nova Scotia fly tier Bill Carpan carefully matches feather segments for shape and colour. Later, these married feathers will form the wing of one of Bill's full-dress feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies, a Green Highlander. From steel, feathers, thread and tinsel Bill will craft a fly which, although originally designed to tempt a salmon, today is more likely to catch the attention of a collector. Atlantic salmon flies are often considered to be the epitome of the fly tier's art. Their beauty, combined with the skill and rare materials required to tie them contribute to

their allure and mystique. Today interest is growing throughout Atlantic Canada, and the world, as fly tiers, many who have never fished for salmon, are tying traditional feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies.

The Birth of Atlantic Salmon Flies

Traditional full-dress feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies have a long and interesting history. They were developed during a period in the second half of the 19th century, which saw the Atlantic salmon fly become the most complex and challenging aspect of the fly tier's craft.



This Akroyd Fly is tied in the dee strip wing style, one of the oldest styles still fished today.

The development of what became known as the gaudy salmon fly is attributed to Irish fly tiers who were pioneers in the development of bright and complicated salmon patterns. These Irish tiers took advantage of silk, silver and gold tinsel and rare feathers imported for the millinery trade. By the end of the 19th century, there were thousands of salmon fly patterns. Like many aspects of life in Victorian England, flies were required to be complex, overdressed and tended towards excess. Atlantic salmon were considered to be the King of Fish and only the most elaborate fly was deemed suitable to fish for them. The natural history of salmon was not completely understood at this time so many naturalists believed that salmon continued to feed when they reentered freshwater. As a result, many early patterns were created to imitate items, which anglers believed salmon would feed on while in the rivers such as dragonflies, wasps and butterflies.

The butterfly reference is an interesting one as many students of fly tying history suggest that most salmon flies were intended to imitate butterflies; and they point to the fact that the flies had tails, egg sacs (butts), bodies with legs (hackles) heads, feelers (horns) and colourful wings. While there is little evidence in salmon fishing literature that salmon are attracted to butterflies one account from Atlantic Canada reveals that they may have been on to something. Writing in *Salmon and Trout* (1904) Dean Sage related an experience he had while fishing the Restigouche River in New Brunswick:

"Once when fishing the Chain of Rocks pool I saw a salmon with great eagerness take one of the large black and yellow butterflies so common in July, which I dropped in the current and which floated down over him. I then caught another of the same insect, put it on a hook, and cast over the fish ineffectually. Going down the river directly after, I met a friend on his way to Chain of Rocks to whom I told the story and the location of the fish. He got him the same evening with one of the live butterflies."

Many present-day anglers continue to fish traditional feather-wing flies because of their effectiveness or their love of salmon fishing history. However, many fly patterns are incredibly complex and require rare, and expensive materials. One of the old favourites, which continues to be a popular fly on Atlantic Canadian rivers, is the Jock Scott; if tied according to the original dressing the pattern requires 50 components.

Among fly tiers opinions vary whether feather-wing salmon flies should be considered classics or traditional flies. New Brunswick fly tier Bryant Freeman is a well-known expert on tying feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies who is firmly in the traditional camp.

"They are the traditional flies for salmon fishing," Bryant told me. "While I admire their history, and beauty, I don't consider them to be classics." Whatever you call them there is no question feather-wing salmon flies are beautiful, and a challenge to tie.

Fly Tying in Atlantic Canada

When the first Europeans arrived in Atlantic Canada they found rivers full of trout and Atlantic salmon. This bounty helped fuel future exploration and settlement. The first European settlers were not anglers. Sport fishing was not a popular activity because few people had the free time required to participate in the activity, especially when fish could be easily caught with net or spear. Angling in Atlantic Canada would have its development as a diversion for those who had the wealth, or social position, which allowed them the time and money to fish. Most of the early literature refers mostly to flies, and fly fishing, for Atlantic salmon. This can be attributed to the backgrounds of the first anglers. Many of the early anglers to fly fish Atlantic Canadian waters were British military officers who were stationed in garrisons in Newfoundland, New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. They gained their angling experiences on the rivers of Scotland and they carried their knowledge, and love of the sport, with them to Britain's colonies in the Americas.

Today there is a renewed level of interest in tying; collecting and fishing full-dress feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies. In Atlantic Canada many attribute this renaissance to the fly tying of Ron Alcott, a fly tier from New England who conducted fly tying classes throughout Eastern Canada in the 1980s. His book, *Building Classic Salmon Flies*, is a standard reference on the topic.

When I asked Bill Carpan what attracted him to tying feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies he thought for a moment, "Basically I like the flies, and everything associated with tying them," he replied. "It takes skill, patience and good materials to tie one of these flies and I really enjoy the process. When you take the time to do it properly the results are very satisfying."

Today there is a growing number of fly tiers who are continuing the tradition



The Red Rover.

of tying traditional feather wing Atlantic salmon flies. Much of the interest is fueled by the Internet, which allows fly tiers throughout the world to share, and exchange, information on tying these flies. All the traditional fly tiers I spoke to refer to the history, beauty and challenges associated with tying feather-wing flies as part of their appeal. These flies don't come without a lot of effort. While some can be tied in several hours, some of the more intricate patterns, such as the Jock Scott, may take up to two days. This effort, as well as the materials require, comes with a price. A feather-wing fishing fly may sell for \$10 while a competition grade full-

dress tied with original material, by a well know tier, can cost \$1,000.

Damian Welsh, another Nova Scotia fly tier is one of a growing number of young fly tiers who have fallen in love with tying these flies. "I consider it to be the natural evolution of my fly tying," Damian told me. "I began tying streamers and dry flies for trout fishing but the more I got into it I was drawn to the traditional flies and the tying techniques involved with this type of fly. I consider feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies the ultimate challenge for a fly tier."

I asked Damian how difficult it is to tie these flies. "This is probably the best time for



The Silver Doctor.

FEATHER-WING SALMON FLY TIERS

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someone to begin tying these flies," he told me. "The books and DVDs are excellent, especially those by Mike Radencich, and the Internet is great. There is a real fraternity of fly tiers out there who are very willing to share information and materials."

All the fly tiers I spoke to commented on the difficulty of obtaining the materials required to tie traditional salmon flies. If tiers want to tie true to the original pattern it can often be difficult and expensive. Originally created, and tied at a time when the sun never set on the British Empire fly tiers could use feathers from birds around the world. Asia, Africa and South America were all areas where birds were targeted for their feathers. Today many of these species are rare, or endangered, and the trade in them is closely regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES operates under an import and export system which controls not only live specimens but also any part of that species.

However, fly tiers who wish to remain true to original patterns have several options available to them. Materials are available for those willing to search for them, and pay the prices charged by dealers who specialize in finding rare feathers. The materials may come from

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dead birds sold by zoos, museums and estate sales. Some also raise birds and either harvest them or collect feathers from living birds when they molt. The selection, and price, of feathers can be mind boggling. Bustard feathers are a common ingredient in many feather-wing salmon flies. There are six species of Bustard whose feathers may be required, the Kori, Arabian, Lirtle, Denham, White and Florican. I recently found Florican Bustard feathers for sale at prices ranging from \$50 to \$800. Because they are rare and expensive, some tiers may substitute materials for the original, especially for fishing flies. Dyed goose may be used instead of swan for instance while turkey and pheasant may also serve as a reasonable substitute for other feathers.

For some people finding, and collecting, the materials required for tying feather-wing salmon flies, from fur and feathers and hand made hooks to silver and gold tinsel is an activity onto itself. I asked several fly tiers if any of their traditional salmon flies were being fished. They all knew of a few anglers who continued to fish these flies for salmon but collectors snap up most.

Tying a Feather-Wing Salmon Fly

While I have enjoyed tying my own trout and salmon flies for many years I never attempted to tie one of the traditional full-dress feather-wing patterns. This changed last winter when I had the opportunity to take a class from Nova Scotia tiers Bill

Carpan and Damian Welsh. Along with five other tiers we met in Bill's fly shop on a Saturday morning. The fly they selected for us to tie was the Red Rover — not a fly pattern I was familiar with but one that was developed by George Kelson in the 1800s. Kelson wrote a book, *The Salmon Fly*, which is considered to be the bible on full-dress salmon flies by some anglers. Most anglers I know, who also tie flies, are fairly skilled at tying flies that will catch fish. They know how to tie on a body, wing and some hackle. Usually all you need to fool a trout or salmon. However, if you are interested in tying traditional feather-wing Atlantic salmon flies you have to add a few extra elements. The parts include a tag, tail, butt, body, rib, veil, body hackle, front hackle, underwing, wings, sides, cheeks, topping, horns and finally the head.

Tying the fly started off fairly simply with Damian showing us how to lay down a nice even layer of white thread to serve as a base. Then we added a butt of silver tinsel, a golden pheasant crest and a butt of ostrich herl. A wool body followed this, silver tinsel rib and a palmered hackle. All fairly straightforward stuff. However, when tying these flies, proportion is everything. Since you are tying on a lot of material you have to avoid a lot of bulk so everything has to be the proper size, and in the right place. Next we added a throat hackle, an underwing of golden pheasant and the hard part began.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of these flies for tiers to master are the married wings. Married wings, as their name suggests, consists of joining several pieces of feathers together to make a wing which has different colours or patterns. To create married wings for the fly we had to join fibers from a turkey, peacock, golden pheasant and goose wing feather. Fortunately for us Damian had selected our fibers and even married them together for one wing. We had to do the other one ourselves. Five hours later I left with a Red Rover, and a new appreciation for tying these flies. Not a classic — by any stretch of the imagination — but a fly which will have a place of honour at my fly tying bench as a reminder of the history of our sport. ❄

A LONG HISTORY OF FLY FISHING

One of the earliest references to sport fishing in Atlantic Canada is attributed to English naturalist Joseph Banks. In 1766 Banks, then a young naturalist was on the *Niger*, a British ship sent to Newfoundland to protect British fishing interests. Banks was on the voyage to investigate the natural history in Newfoundland and Labrador. In August of 1766, he wrote:

"So much for salt water fish the Fresh are in great Plenty tho but of 2 sorts Trout and Eels the first of which offered good Diversion to an angler biting Very well at the artificial Particularly if it has gold about it with this Pecularity in the rivers that they are to be caught in abundance no where but in the tide and at no time but from about two hours before high water till Ebb in Pools indeed they always bite but best in sunshining weather I have seen no large ones none I believe above half a Pound in weight but am told that in some Parts of Nfland they are Very Large."

Noted angling historian Paul Schullery, writing in *American Fly Fishing, A History* (1987) suggests Banks' account is the first written reference to fly fishing in North America.