



# Swinging Through The Great Lakes

by Nick Pionessa

**On the drive up I was tired as hell and really not all that enthused. It was late winter or early spring depending on your outlook, and my outlook was far more to the winter side. This was New York in March, and sometimes it seems like months before winter will let go.**

The river we were headed to is well known and stays open for the most part right through the winter. It also seems to draw bright fish throughout the cold months and by this time of year some of the springers are already coming in. That was the word that had us driving three hours in the morning dark with a thermometer in the truck barely reading 24 degrees. My somewhat new friend, John, had offered to drive and host the trip since it was a river he had a lot more experience on than I did. I was grate-

ful at the thought of having someone who knows the large river better than me to direct the operation. As we got closer to the destination, my enthusiasm started to build the way it usually does when the waiting is almost over and the doing is about to begin. By the time we left the Dunkin' Donuts with our mitts full of caffeinated and sugary goodness, we were in much better spirits and ready to swing some flies.

We pulled into the empty parking lot to acquire our passes for

this stretch of river. We were after bright fish, and the lower part of the river simply offered more chances of new fish than upriver considering the low winter flows and cold temperatures. The nice fellow at the hut informed us that there were indeed a few chromers being taken, but he also said, "They are only taking egg patterns and stonefly nymphs." We nodded our heads, got our passes and started to suit up. The daylight was fast approaching. As we were getting our rods together and taped, the guy from the hut came over to shoot the breeze. He asked us about the double-handed rods and again mentioned that swinging flies was going to be pretty fruitless. He suggested we take his earlier advice and dead drift. We said we would keep it in mind.

## The Turducken

Tube: HMH ½" small copper

Thread: Red 8/0

Rear hackle: A whole schlappen feather folded and wrapped

Flash: Silver Holographic Flashabou or whatever you like

Front hackle: Marabou blood quill folded

Collar: Mallard flank folded

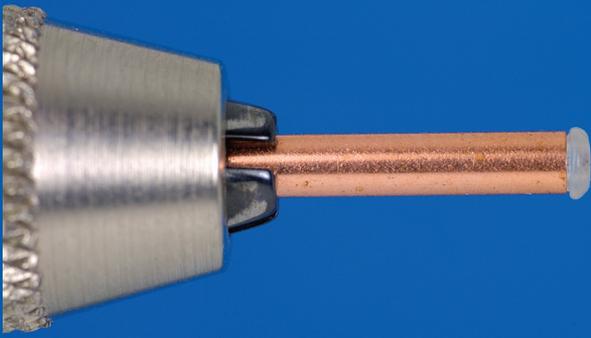
Hook: Daiichi 2451 size 6

- 1 Start off with a ½ inch HMH copper tube with about 1/8 of an inch clamped in the chuck.
- 2 Start the thread at about the halfway point on the tube and wind back to just in front of the chuck jaws.

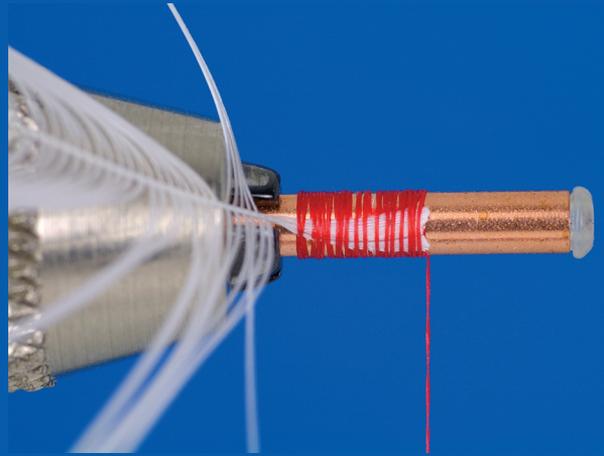
Tie in a schlappen feather by the tip. Note: the thread is not just on the bare tube, there are some fibers under there also if you look closely. This strengthens the tie in point. Now coat the thread wraps with head cement before wrapping the hackle.

- 3 Fold and wrap the entire hackle forward through the head cement to increase durability. Wrap all the way to the end of the thread base. Tie off and clip the stem.
- 4 Tie in a few strands of Flashabou and then tie in a marabou blood quill by the tip. Advance the thread half way to the end of the tube.
- 5 Fold and wrap the marabou feather to the end of the thread base. Tie off and clip the stem.
- 6 Tie in a mallard flank feather by the tip. Advance the thread half the remaining distance.
- 7 Wrap about three turns of mallard flank for the collar. Tie off the stem.
- 8 Trim the stem, flatten the thread and wrap a neat head. Coat the head with cement.

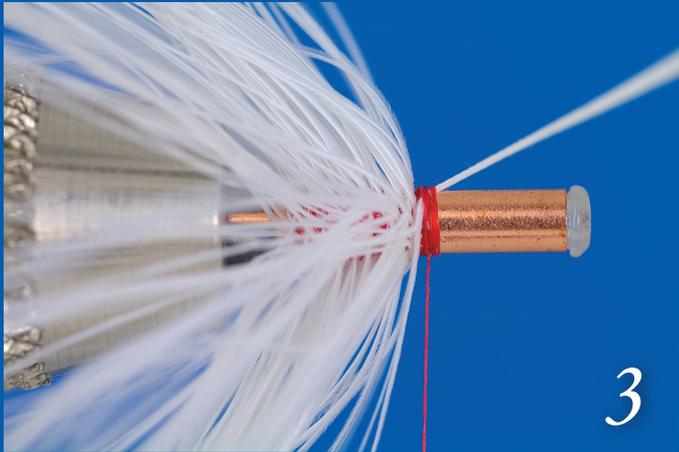




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Trudging through two feet of snow down to the river was pretty tiring, and we were getting a little sweaty. When we finally got to the water, there were slabs and floes of ice well over our heads. The “refrigerator effect” was stunning; when you walked the bank next to an 8-foot block of solid ice you could almost feel your core temperature lower. The river itself looked black as old oil in the early light, and it seemed to get colder by the minute, at least I did. Again, I had some doubts as to what in the hell we were doing here. There was no one else around. It is nice to have the place to yourself, but when the conditions are marginal it’s almost comforting to see other folks with the same ideas, confirming hope, even if all of us were wrong! This day it seemed we were the only crazies.

We strung up on the bank of a famous pool well known for producing, especially with traditional techniques. Since he was the gracious host I suggested Jonathan go first. After the first pass, neither of us had so much as a tug; we sank a little lower in our hoods. I was using a white marabou spey, my favorite winter fly. John was using a similar white marabou pattern but with a rabbit strip wing. The flies were designed to have a baitfish-like appearance and had a lot of movement. I believe these are key elements especially in winter flies. About halfway down the pool with the sun high enough to begin shinning on the river, I was finally able to read the water better. I could just make out what appeared to be the “bucket” of the pool. I dropped a cast right on the biggest rock that defined the drop-off and made a quick mend to sink the fly. The fly disappeared into the tea. Just as it began to turn the corner and started to swing to my side of the river, the fly stopped. I came tight and felt that distinct feeling of life. Even before the first headshake, I knew the day was a success. How much of a success I was yet to learn, and there was a long way to go with this one. The fish wallowed like most

cold steelhead do for a few seconds then bored for the deepest part of the pool. Not wanting to let him rest, I pressured him from the side in an effort to turn his head against the current. As soon as he felt the current on his side he seemed to gain some serious strength and tore off the entire spey line down river. As is the case with many fish hooked in cold water, as he fought he began to increase his heart rate, get more blood flowing, and grow stronger and faster as the fight wore on. Moving down the pool, I got along side him again and gained my first look at him. He was very bright and very wide!

After a minute or two, he was ready. I worked him into the shallows, and John came down to help. The water was still a couple of feet deep at the bank, and with a wall of ice 2 feet from the gravel, there was no where to go. I managed to tail him myself. This fish was fine specimen; I admired the 30 or more inches of chrome Lake Ontario steelhead in my hands. Desperately wanting to get a photo, I had Jonathan take hold of him while I dug the camera out of my pack. Just as I raised the camera, he shook free of Jonathan and bolted for the depths. A bit of a bummer no doubt, but a fairly landed large steelhead on a two handed rod with a traditionally fished fly in 33-degree water was all I could have hoped for and more. I was at least happy for his safe return. I looked at John and said, “All they will take are egg flies and stonefly nymphs.” We chuckled about it as we walked back to the head of the pool to try and find another one for my partner.

By the end of the short day, we had each landed an above average steelhead, a couple of smaller ones and a brown trout or two. When we got back to the lot, we told the guy from the morning of our success. We got the old skeptical look I know so well. I’m not sure he believed us even after reviewing the photos on my digital camera.

This is just one example of a time I have had good success with traditional flies fished on the swing

when these things were not “supposed” to work. The sheer number of steelhead I have caught swinging flies, when I had to repeatedly pick ice from my guides, tells me that the old maxim that fish in water less than 40 degrees will not readily take moving flies is complete BS. They just won’t take them if you never fish them! When the stream temperature drops quickly it absolutely slows the fish down, no question. After the temperatures have settled to their lows, the fish acclimate to them and will be more willing to move for a fly. Will this method catch more fish than dead drifting? Hell no!

I personally feel that you either evolve or get damn bored. This probably isn’t the technique for folks still in the “catch them all” stage of their fly fishing development. When a day on the stream fishing the way you like becomes more important than numbers, you’re likely ready to move toward swinging flies. Hooking steelhead on a tight line swing is by far the most exciting way to hook them, and I have never had a customer tell me, “That was OK but let’s put the bobber back on,” never.

## The Materials

There are many hackle choices for tiers who want to tie and fish some traditional looking patterns. Most of the good ones are both costly and hard to find, or walking around poking trout at your favorite stream, legally out of reach. I have always suspected this was one of the reasons these patterns end up ignored by so many anglers. Working in the shop for years, I was always being asked about spey hackle and most people seemed as disappointed with the commercial choices as I was. Most were also unwilling to pay for the good legal substitutes. Schlappen and marabou

have long been used as viable substitutes, but they were too bulky for a truly sparse look so effective in spey flies.

Burning feathers with household bleach has long been used to remove the webbing from feathers for spey hackle. It is simple and anyone can do it well with a little practice. I find using a clear, shallow, flat-bottomed plastic tub works best for most feathers. The feather, in this case schlappen, is wetted first with warm water and then placed in the bleach. I use the bleach at full strength since it works the fastest, but beginners may want to dilute it. Please do this in the laundry room or basement with a window open and don't accidentally tie dye your wife's favorite blouse!

## Burning

At first the feather will look like this, where all the fibers are stuck together and opaque. Begin to swish the feather back and forth in the solution. You can clamp a hemostat on the stem to avoid touching the bleach.



After about a minute, it will sometimes fizz a bit and the hackle fibers will begin to break up. Keep swishing it around while watching the fibers. As soon as they break loose from each other fully, make two more swishes and remove the feather and rinse it quickly.



Some care must be taken since the fibers will stick

together if allowed to dry in a clump. Pinching the feather between the folds of a towel will get off most of the water, and then wave it around a bit by the stem to dry it. When I am doing a bunch, I will clip them to a wire and set them in front of a fan. The entire process can be time consuming, but well worth the effort.

## The Flies

As most tiers know, spey type flies originated in Scotland in the mid 1800's. Some are still in use today in their original forms. Two I have used with good success are the Lady Caroline and the Akroyd. Though they vary in tying technique and wing style, the pair seems to compliment each other well. The Lady Caroline is a drab, sparse fly very effective in clear waters, while the Akroyd is a black and yellow, heavily dressed pattern that works well on more stained, higher waters. Both flies are also relatively easy to tie and can be done cheaply with modern materials that don't vary too much from the originals. This article will deal with modern flies for the Great Lakes steelhead, so I won't go into these classics. The past is never far behind and these origins bear mentioning.

We will start off with the simplest of the modern spey type flies, the marabou Spiders or Popsicles. Jack Cook from Washington popularized the Popsicle. It was constructed of marabou tied in and also wrapped as a collar. Incorporating some flash and a high degree of contrast along with all that wiggling marabou made for a killer pattern. The color combinations are endless, the materials are cheap, and just about anyone has the skills needed to tie these flies. Therefore they are a great place to start. I will take it to the next generation by tying them on tubes and altering the pattern to make it a bit more translucent and wiggle even more.

The Turducken gets its name from the fact that it is simply: a turkey feather (marabou), a duck feather (mallard flank), a chicken feather (schlappen), and a few strands of Flashabou. The schlappen feather supports the center of the marabou while providing a contrasting color. The schlappen fibers are shorter than the marabou fibers, so the tips of the marabou feather wiggle wildly beyond the length of the body. The mallard flank collar adds a barred or speckled look, which breaks up the color a bit and also gives it a scaly and baitfish-like appearance. My favorite color is the all white version. I also use a black and purple one and a purple and orange variation, but just about any color combo you like is fine. White has a long-standing tradition of being very effective in the Great Lakes. The white Turducken is a direct descendant of Rick Kustich's Devils Advocate, one of the first speys I fished and still a great producer.

Nowadays, I fish almost all tube flies for steelhead. The weight and the ability to get the hook back further on the fly are both good reasons to give them a try if you haven't already. Any of these flies could just as easily be tied on hooks and most were originally created that way.

All of these patterns can be done in any color combo

## Green Butted Ostrich

Tube: HMH copper 1 inch small copper tube

Thread: White to start red for the head

Butt: Chartreuse ostrich

Body: Black ostrich

Body hackle: Burned black marabou

Collar hackle: Barred waterfowl in this case scaup

Wing: 6 White ostrich fibers

Eyes: Jungle Cock (optional)

Hook: Daiichi 2451 size 6

- 1 Start with the desired tube in the vise with just an eighth of an inch clamped in the chuck for where the junction tubing will be attached.
- 2 Start the white thread just in front of the chuck, and tie in four strands of ostrich by the butts and a piece of .006 monofilament a bit longer than the herls. Clamp the mono and herl in hackle pliers and twist them up, then brush the rope with a toothbrush.
- 3 Wrap the ostrich rope forward about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the tube length and tie off. Now use a half hitch to tie off the white thread. Brush the finished section again to loosen any trapped fibers.
- 4 Start the red thread and tie in 6 strands of black ostrich by the butts and another piece of mono on top of the tube. You will need to leave roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the tube bare to accommodate the collar and the wing.
- 5 Now tie in the burned marabou feather by the tip on the bottom side of the tube with the outside of the feather facing away from the tube.
- 6 Twist up the black ostrich with the mono, brush it out, wrap it up the tube to the bare area at the head, tie it off under the tube and clip the remains. Brush it out again.
- 7 Fold the marabou hackle and wrap it up the body, keeping the outside of the feather toward the head the whole way. Usually three turns up the body and one in front. Tie it off under the tube and clip the stem closely. Advance the thread to half way of what tube is left.

8 Tie in the duck flank by the tip on the top of the tube with the outside of the feather up. Now fold the hackle fibers. If you lift the feather straight up from the tie in point, the left side fibers will wrap like they are and the right side will be folded under the stem also now facing back.

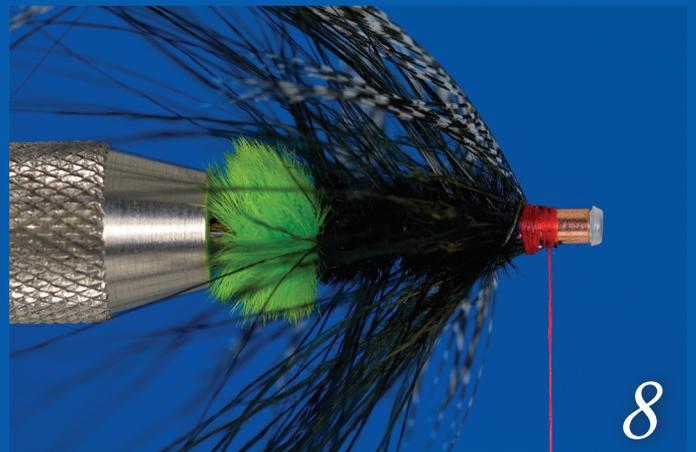
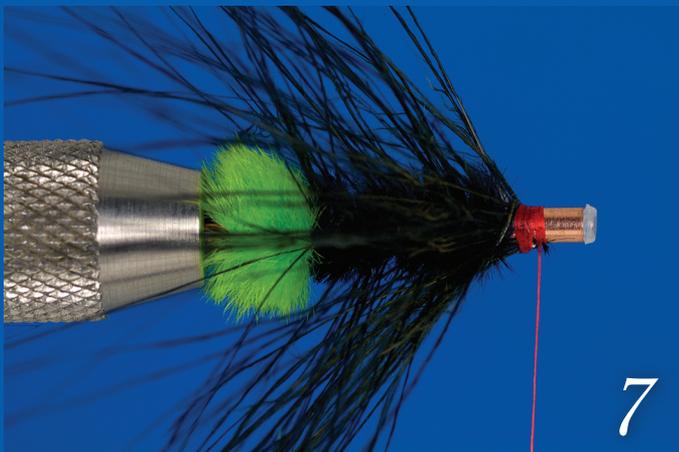
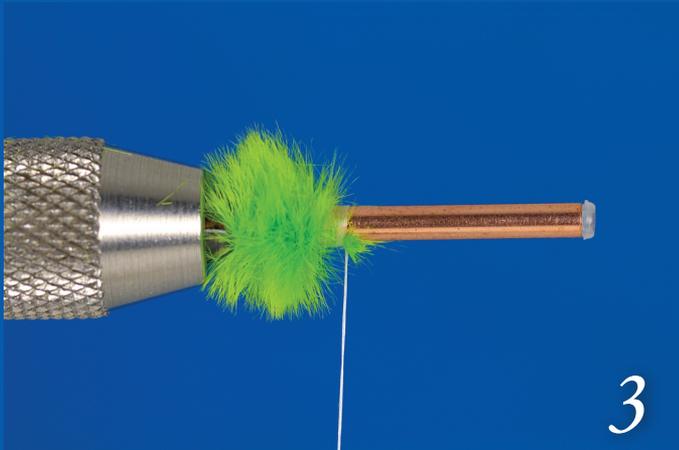
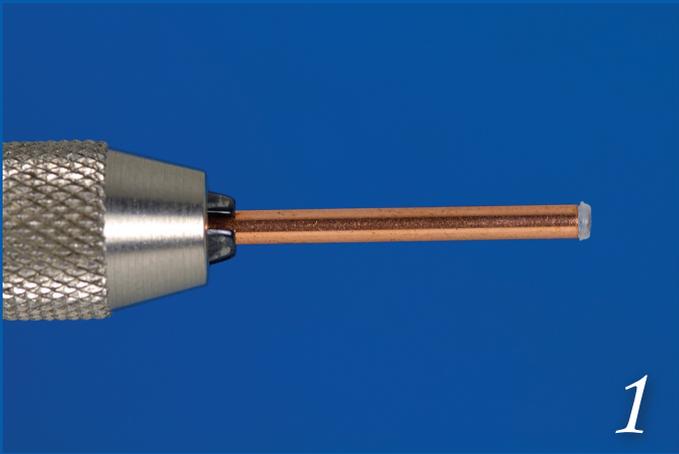
9 The feather is then wrapped on the inside of the stem. When you wind away from yourself you should be looking at the outside of the feather with the fibers folded as described. Tie it off under the tube. If you look closely, you can see that there is no thread on the stem and the fibers are all facing back correctly. Never wind the thread back over the stem. The thread torque will cause the fibers to twist and stick out at funny angles. Neatly clip off the stem.

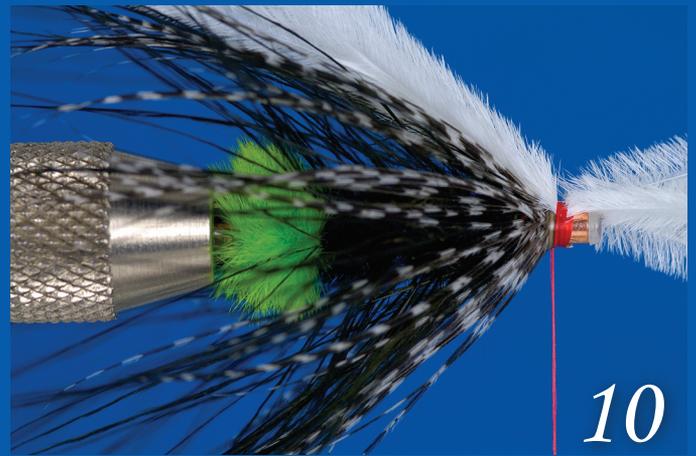
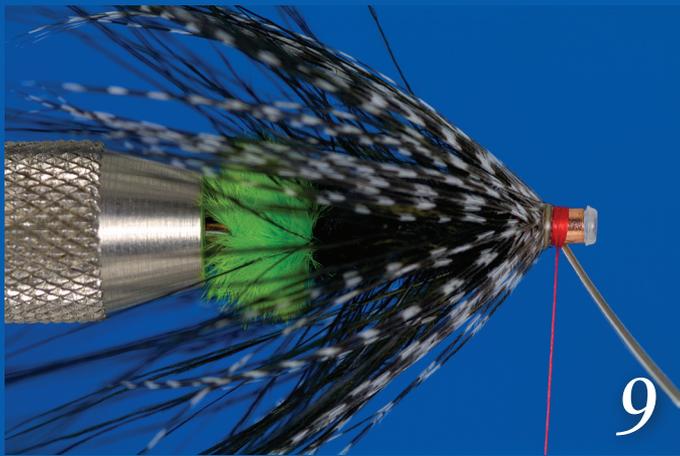
10 Tie in six strands of white ostrich with good tips. The tips are to the left over the fly and the butts are to the right. Get your scissor tips flat and tight and clip the ostrich off as close as possible.

11 If you would like to double the cost of the fly (but probably not its productivity) you can tie in a small Jungle Cock nail. Tie level with the tube and just above center on either side and trim the stems off. They look cool and chicks dig them, but I'm not sure they make the fly work any better.

12 Take care with tubes to leave a small bit of copper so the thread does not slip off the end and onto the insert. Counter spin the thread bobbin to flatten the thread and finish off a neat head, then cement.







you like. I have had good luck with purple, black, white, orange, brown and olive. Anglers should feel free to roam and explore with different colors and sizes. From small, sparse, one-hackle Spiders to multi hackled flies with bunny wings. There is no real reason any self-respecting steelhead should eat one of these anyway, but they will.

The marabou Popsicle flies are probably the most popular and are extremely effective, but we are going up a rung with these next flies. The types of spey flies I love to tie and fish have a very traditional look popularized by Syd Glasso. Some of these flies can be tied exactly like the originals, the Orange Heron for example. Some have been altered to fit the needs of the modern Great Lakes steelheader. Brighter colors and easily obtainable materials, involving more motion than their original counterparts, have altered the patterns while keeping the traditional look.

Finding suitable spey hackle for these fly types is where problems can arise. The modern substitute for the spey hackle is burned goose shoulder. I am just not a big fan of these feathers for palmering along a body as the stems are short and heavy. In my quest for a better substitute at a reasonable cost I have settled on "burned" schlappen and for bigger flies marabou. Finding schlappen feathers with the longest fibers is the hardest part. Due to their long, thin, flexible stems, they make great body hackle where the feather is used to follow a rib the length of the body and still have some stem left for a turn or two.

The downside (there always seems to be a downside) is that due to the limits of the fiber length only flies up to about a size 3 are possible. This is where the marabou takes over since it allows for much larger flies. Marabou is the hardest material to burn as the fibers are the flimsiest, but with a little practice it can become a quick and easy technique. The original color is largely unaltered by the burning process so regularly available marabou and schlappen can be used. The collar can be guinea hen or whatever you like. I prefer duck flank feathers for these flies since the stems are nice and fine, and the duck feathers are widely available, even in dyed colors. If you happen to have some duck hunters for friends, all the better, they dye very easily.

A cool variation I like, especially for the burned marabou hackle, involves using twisted ostrich fibers for the body. These flies have a much thicker body with vibrant colors and a very furry and appealing look when wet. Ostrich is also readily available in a multitude of colors. Master tier Alec Jackson popularized this technique. It is easy to do and the results are more durable than you might think. You tie in about six strands of ostrich by the butts along with a piece of oval tinsel, wire or my personal preference, clear monofilament. The fibers and the reinforcement are twisted up together, brushed with a toothbrush and wrapped up the shank. I like these bodies a lot and use them for bigger flies in higher water where a large profile is desired.



Another method would be to dub the body utilizing Synthetic Living Fiber or angora dubbing. The wings can be ostrich herl, arctic fox tail, goose shoulder slips, rabbit strips or whatever you like. Contrast and motion are the preferred elements.

The final type of fly that I will cover here uses the most obscure technique and allows us to make some very large patterns with proportional hackle. Since traditional great blue heron is illegal to possess in America, finding an appropriate hackle with long fibers and a thin, long stem is next to impossible. The alternative involves using various types of pheasant tail. Burned with bleach and pulled from the stem bunches of fibers can be evenly distributed around the hook or tube. Hackle fibers three inches or more can come from Lady Amherst or Reeves pheasant or even blue eared pheasant tails. Another, somewhat harder to obtain material is rhea, which can be used with this method as well. Another alternative is burned or natural ostrich. Smaller flies requiring two-inch hackle can be made from ringneck or golden pheasant tails. Ringneck are the pheasant tails you may have used for nymphs and wing cases. They are widely available, cheap and come in a good range of dyed colors. Since the bleaching process does not significantly alter the color of the pheasant tails, there is no need to dye them after burning.

Instead of dubbing a body and then wrapping the hackle, this technique requires you to work a step at a time. Starting at the back of the tube, dub a small section of the tube with a material that contrasts well with the color of the hackle fibers you will use. Select about a dozen fibers of pheasant tail; tie them in loosely by the butts and then distribute them evenly around the tube with your thumbnail. When you are happy with the distribution of the fibers secure them with the thread. You repeat this process, usually about four sections, until you reach the front of the tube, leaving enough room for a collar hackle and a wing. This technique obviously eliminates the need for a

thin stem but gives the appearance of a palmered hackle.

## Lessons Learned

Suzanne and I had gone down to look at some water I was not familiar with, but since the creek was pretty busy where we had been, it made sense to take a walk. We were looking at a big froggy section of water and trying to figure out where to start, when a fish rolled just downstream. Not being one to ignore such obvious jujitsu, Suzanne said we should start right there. I agreed.

Being the consummate gentlemen and hungry for lunch, I let her try the spot first. On the second cast, she was fast to a great fish. Surprised at the luck, I helped her land the fish, snapped a couple of photos, and tried to figure out why this spot was productive. Having no clear ideas and since I was working on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at the time, Suzanne got right back in. On the very next cast she hooked up on a smoking hot, big fish. It tore up the pool, ripping in one direction while the line was pointing the opposite. Making those out of control runs till the fish ran out of water and then turned to do the same thing in another direction with its bright scales flashing in the sun. Every time he came in close, he would bolt for the far side again. The line made that tearing, "open the water" sound beloved by steelheaders. She finally slid the fish in to tail him, and I marveled at all ten pounds of him with a good scrape on his jaw as a souvenir of his travels up to tourist country. This was Suzanne's best fish ever.

I fished down through the area the first fish came from and blanked. I was on the fourth straight day of walking miles on cobbles, so my ambition had pretty much evaporated, as long as someone was catching fish it didn't have to be me. Suzy got up from a break and in less than a minute she had another one on, right behind me. Damn! This wasn't a new experience to me, it just happened quicker than normal. We

## Clear Water Spey

Tube: HMH ½ inch small copper tube.

Thread: 8/0 olive dun

Body: Synthetic Living Fiber summer duck dubbing

Body hackle: Burned golden pheasant tail

Collar hackle: Wood duck flank

Wing: Six strands of natural grey Ostrich

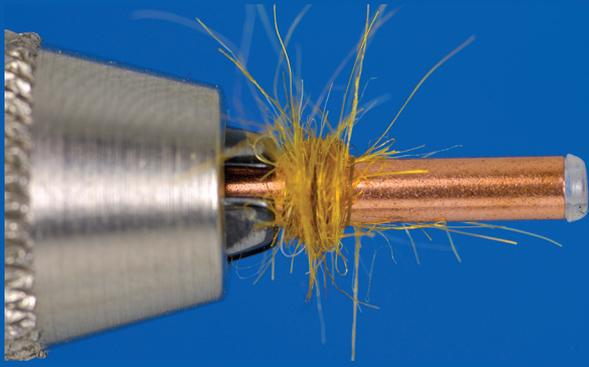
Hook: Daiichi 2450 size 6

- 1 Start the thread and cover about ¼ of the exposed tube. Dub a small section the distance of the wrapped thread. Brush it lightly.
- 2 Tie in about a dozen burned golden pheasant tail fibers clipped from the stem. Evenly distribute them around tube. Make three turns of thread over the fiber butts and use your thumbnail and push the fibers around the tube until you are happy with the distribution. Wrap the fibers down securely and then trim off the

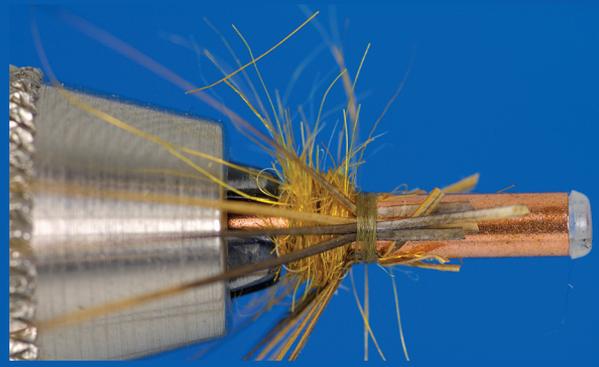
remaining butts.

- 3 Dub another section ¼ of the tube and brush it lightly.
- 4 Tie in another dozen fibers. These should be shorter than the first bunch and distribute them evenly as you did in the pervious step, then trim off the butts.
- 5 Dub another section and brush it out.
- 6 Tie in another dozen fibers as long as the first bunch and distribute them around the tube. Secure them with more thread wraps and trim off the remaining butts.
- 7 Dub the last section of Synthetic Living Fiber and brush it out again.
- 8 Tie in a wood duck flank feather by the tip. Fold the hackle and warp about three turns. Tie off the stem and trim it close.
- 9 Tie in about 6 ostrich fibers for the wing with clean, somewhat even tips.
- 10 Trim off the ostrich fiber butts and wrap a neat small head. Coat it with head cement.

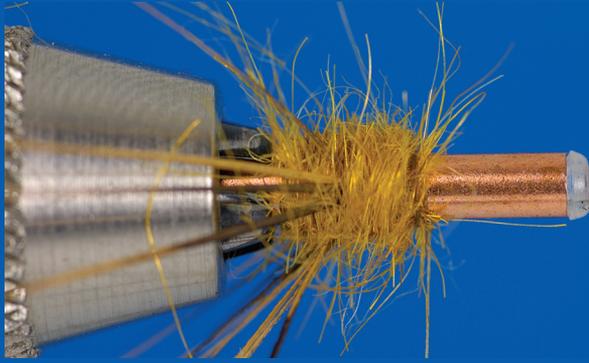




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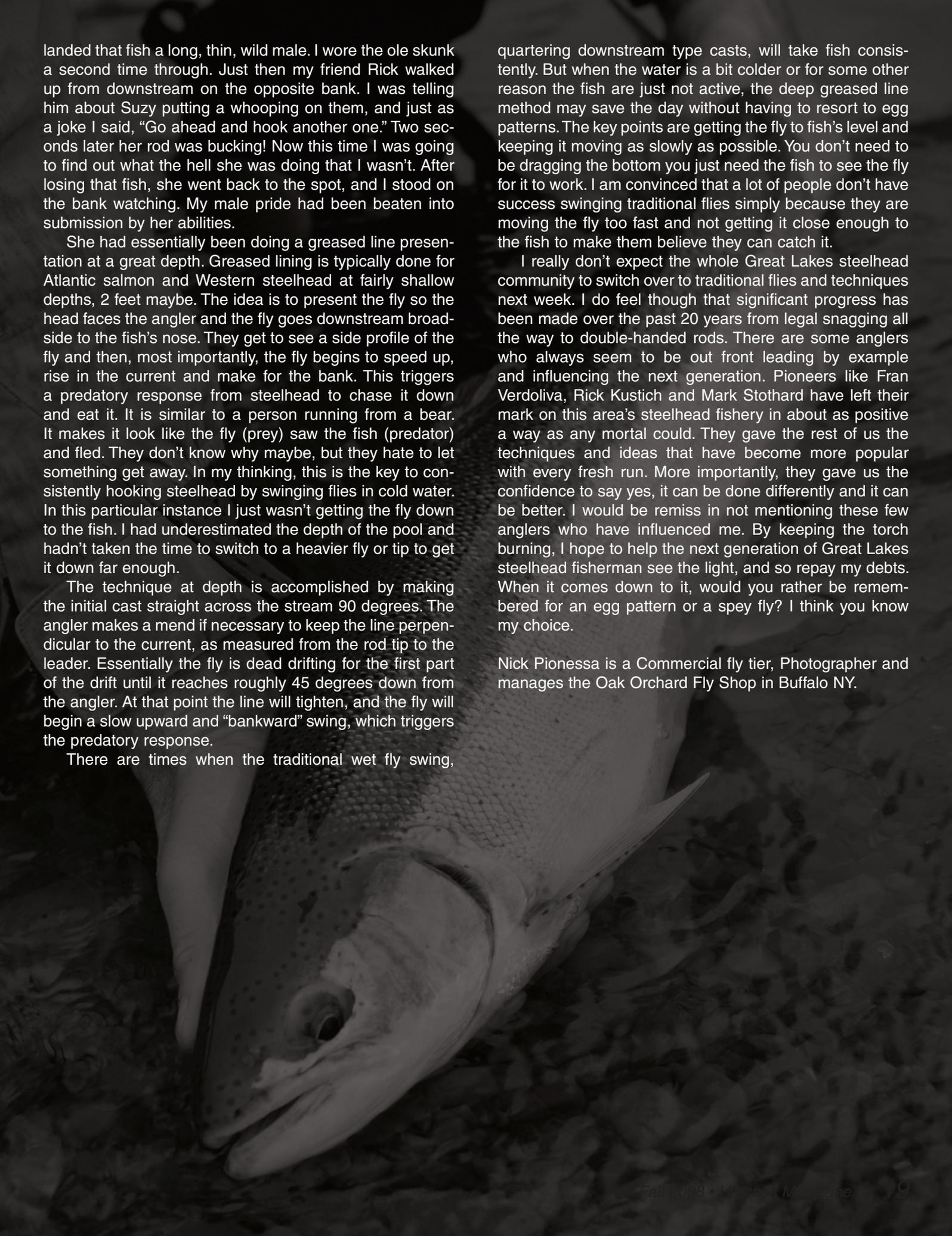
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landed that fish a long, thin, wild male. I wore the ole skunk a second time through. Just then my friend Rick walked up from downstream on the opposite bank. I was telling him about Suzy putting a whooping on them, and just as a joke I said, "Go ahead and hook another one." Two seconds later her rod was bucking! Now this time I was going to find out what the hell she was doing that I wasn't. After losing that fish, she went back to the spot, and I stood on the bank watching. My male pride had been beaten into submission by her abilities.

She had essentially been doing a greased line presentation at a great depth. Greased lining is typically done for Atlantic salmon and Western steelhead at fairly shallow depths, 2 feet maybe. The idea is to present the fly so the head faces the angler and the fly goes downstream broadside to the fish's nose. They get to see a side profile of the fly and then, most importantly, the fly begins to speed up, rise in the current and make for the bank. This triggers a predatory response from steelhead to chase it down and eat it. It is similar to a person running from a bear. It makes it look like the fly (prey) saw the fish (predator) and fled. They don't know why maybe, but they hate to let something get away. In my thinking, this is the key to consistently hooking steelhead by swinging flies in cold water. In this particular instance I just wasn't getting the fly down to the fish. I had underestimated the depth of the pool and hadn't taken the time to switch to a heavier fly or tip to get it down far enough.

The technique at depth is accomplished by making the initial cast straight across the stream 90 degrees. The angler makes a mend if necessary to keep the line perpendicular to the current, as measured from the rod tip to the leader. Essentially the fly is dead drifting for the first part of the drift until it reaches roughly 45 degrees down from the angler. At that point the line will tighten, and the fly will begin a slow upward and "bankward" swing, which triggers the predatory response.

There are times when the traditional wet fly swing,

quartering downstream type casts, will take fish consistently. But when the water is a bit colder or for some other reason the fish are just not active, the deep greased line method may save the day without having to resort to egg patterns. The key points are getting the fly to fish's level and keeping it moving as slowly as possible. You don't need to be dragging the bottom you just need the fish to see the fly for it to work. I am convinced that a lot of people don't have success swinging traditional flies simply because they are moving the fly too fast and not getting it close enough to the fish to make them believe they can catch it.

I really don't expect the whole Great Lakes steelhead community to switch over to traditional flies and techniques next week. I do feel though that significant progress has been made over the past 20 years from legal snagging all the way to double-handed rods. There are some anglers who always seem to be out front leading by example and influencing the next generation. Pioneers like Fran Verdoliva, Rick Kustich and Mark Stothard have left their mark on this area's steelhead fishery in about as positive a way as any mortal could. They gave the rest of us the techniques and ideas that have become more popular with every fresh run. More importantly, they gave us the confidence to say yes, it can be done differently and it can be better. I would be remiss in not mentioning these few anglers who have influenced me. By keeping the torch burning, I hope to help the next generation of Great Lakes steelhead fisherman see the light, and so repay my debts. When it comes down to it, would you rather be remembered for an egg pattern or a spey fly? I think you know my choice.

Nick Pionessa is a Commercial fly tier, Photographer and manages the Oak Orchard Fly Shop in Buffalo NY.