Parachute Wings

by Wayne Luallen

There are many methods of hackling a dry fly including standard hackle, palmered hackle, water walker, and more. For my own fishing, I prefer the parachute. As with the other methods, parachutes have variations within the type, such as mono loop parachute, parachutes beneath or along side the body, melted poly wing post parachute, and so forth. I tend to limit my flies to the more standard parachute where the hackle is wrapped around the base of a single, vertical wing that has been posted with thread. The wing material used may be synthetic or natural. With this wing I can imitate most any size and type of fly I choose whether it be the wings of an adult damsel or the legs of an emerging midge. Dry flies representing mayflies will be the specific type of parachute considered here, though the steps discussed can be applied to other flies.

There are two types of parachute wing materials: synthetic and natural. Synthetic wing materials come in a wide array of character, from "soft" materials that produce quite a bit of flair when posted (i.e., egg yarn, foam) to materials that are rigid, changing little when posted (i.e., organza, Z-lon.) Rigid synthetics may not be suitable for parachutes since they do not compress adequately to produce an area that captures the hackle and protects it from sliding off the wing. Natural materials are found in a variety of feather or hair types. Feathers may include both aquatic and terrestrial birds. Hair may be of a hard nature, such as calf, or soft, such as caribou. Selection of a specific piece should be made according to where on the material the post for the hackle will be placed. If, for instance, a piece of deer hair is used for wings on both #12 and #16 hooks, either the wing on the larger hook will flair too much under the pressure of the thread on the post, or the smaller will not flair enough to protect the hackle from sliding up and off the wing. This is due to the variance of texture in natural materials. In the case of deer hair,

the texture nearer the tip of a hair will be harder, and therefore less likely to compress as compared with the same hair simply 1/8th inch further down.

Before tying on a wing material, the method of securing it to the hook should be considered. Egg yarn, for instance, ties down with less bulk if the yarn is looped over the thread and slid up to the shank. Follow this with one or two more warps placed directly over the first wrap. A few additional wraps are placed intimately in front of and behind the wing before it is posted. A different approach is used on natural materials. Deer hair usually begins with the tips over the eye and the butts tied down toward the bend. After initially securing the butts, let the thread compress the hair for a few seconds. Then remove most of the wraps, trim the butts at an angle, and reapply untwisted thread. The hair butts add little toward flotation of the fly. By compressing the hair, trimming at a taper, then covering with smooth thread wraps, bulk to the body is reduced which in turn allows a body more closely matching the slenderness of most insects. Essentially the same applies to feather strips such as turkey flats. A strip of barbs approximately twice the hook gape is trimmed from the feather, folded in half, and with tips over the eye, is tied in parallel with the plane of the hook. The butts are secured and slightly compressed as described for the deer hair wing before trimming and tying down. (Feather butts will compress further if they are moistened first.)

Floatability of a durable wing material is of less concern than is water absorbency. The parachute wing does not support the fly on the meniscus, but water in the wing can disrupt the silhouette as well as add unnecessary weight which can sink the fly. Experiment with materials to see which absorb the least water, readily shed water during false casting, and provide the best silhouette. Some surprises may be discovered.

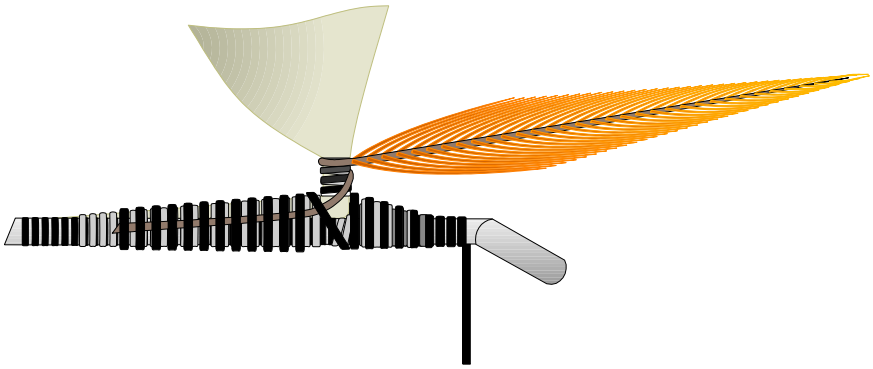
A mayfly’s wing height is an important feature fish key on. The actual insect has a wing usually equal to or even longer than the length of the entire hook

when using the hook shank to determine body length. Most parachutes are tied with the wing far to short, usually equal to the length of the hook shank. The only true test is to actually have the insect for inspection at the tying bench.

When tying the more typical parachute wing, first lay down a thread base beginning near the hook bend, moving forward to the point that the wing will be raised upright. (The thread base under the wing butts adds surface friction reducing slippage. The bare shank between the wing and the hook eye will be used later when forcing the wing upright.) With the tip of the wing projecting over the hook eye, place initial thread wraps at the point it is to be raised upright. Then, as described previously, wind the thread toward the bend compressing the butts, wait a few seconds, unwind the compression wraps, taper the wing butts, rewrap with flat thread, and, if appropriate, tie in the tail. With the thread positioned half way between the tail and the wing, pinch the wing between thumb and index fingers of the free hand (to control the wing position,) and reach untwisted thread around the front of the wing pulling firmly toward the hook bend driving the thread under the wing root. This applies equal force under and to both sides of the wing root more effectively than would occur if the process began with the thread at the root. Continue to control the wing with the free hand as additional thread wraps are added in front of the first. As each wrap is applied, slide it on the bare shank toward the root compressing the wraps into one another, while working toward the hook eye. Note that a taper has begun to form, thicker near the wing root, tapering thinner toward the hook eye. Take advantage of this taper and build additional tapered layers upon it with untwisted thread. Ultimately this tapered platform will force the wing to a vertical position.

We have all seen parachute flies that have the hackle barbs laying helter-skelter. Generally one or both of two problems create this condition: the hackle has crossed over itself, or the wing post was unevenly laid. If the hackle is wound up the post, and then back down, for every wrap down there is a crossover wrap. The direction of the hackle initially is a spiral going up. Once the wraps descend the post, the spiral changes direction and crossover occurs that forces barbs to go out of natural position. Disturbance of barb placement also occurs when a hackle is wound up the post with the feather tip drawn down through these wraps to the hook shank to be tied off. A better approach is to wind a bare hackle shaft to the top of the post and when the barbs begin to extend out from the post, wind back down.

If the foundation wraps on the post are uneven due to twisted thread and/or unplanned, poorly placed wraps, the hackle shaft will not lay evenly and the barbs will be misaligned. To understand why this occurs requires a close look at a hackle shaft in cross section. The shaft is somewhat rectangular in shape with the barbs coming off the long sides of the rectangle. Therefore it is only natural that the hackle will lay on the long side of the rectangle when wrapped, which in turn forces the barbs to protrude vertically off that plane. This can be demonstrated with an “eyed” peacock upper tail covert. While



holding the feather by the eyed end in one hand and the quill end in the other, attempt to wind it onto a broom stick. Note the direction it naturally takes: it is on edge with the barbs protruding perpendicular to the broom stick, simply refusing any other direction. If the foundation the hackle is mounted on is uneven, the hackle has no choice but to follow that uneven plane. This can be demonstrated with a shoe string that has been twisted and wound haphazardly onto the broom stick. Attempt again to wind the peacock feather, but this time over the uneven “thread” warps. In whatever plane the

“thread” lays, the feather shaft will follow with the barbs extending perpendicular to that plane. Twisted thread haphazardly laid creates a wing post of such unevenness that it is impossible for the hackle to assume a level plane. A smooth cylinder of thread on the post will allow even alignment of the hackle wraps. This is easily accomplished by wrapping untwisted thread up the wing in even, adjacent wraps, then evenly back down again.

The number of wraps required to form the wing post cylinder is determined by the bulk of the body material to be added later, the width of the thread used, and how many wraps of hackle are desired. For example, if the fly size is #14, the thread is Danville’s 6/0 Fly-Master, the body is thinly dubbed fur, and four or five wraps of #14 hackle are required, then generally a post of three wraps up and three down may be appropriate. If the fly size is #22, the thread is 12/0 Benecchi, the body is thinly dubbed fur, and three or four wraps of #22 hackle are required, then the post may require only a couple of wraps up and down.

With few advantages beyond personal taste, the hackle can be tied tip to the front, tip to the back, concave side up or down, wound clockwise or anticlockwise, and can be wound and tied off before the body is wrapped or after. There are, though, a few things that must be followed without variation to achieve a flat, durable hackle. The hackle must be tied onto the side of the hook shank ending adjacent the post, perpendicular to the wing, and slightly tilted upward. Also the shaft should be stripped of barbs to allow 3/4 to 1 revolution before any of the barbed portion of the shaft touches the post. This allows the shaft to reach the top of the post before the barbed portion begins its descent down. Otherwise some barbs will extend out at objectionable angles before the top of the post is reached, and will be crossed over and further displaced as the hackle is wound down the post.

As it is wound down the post, use the hackle to reach under the previous wrap's barbs and lift them up. This will compress the narrow edge of the shaft against the previous wrap without overlapping it. It also forces tight hackle wraps against the flare of the wing at the top of the post helping to prevent the hackle from sliding off the wing when fished. The amount of hackle a post can support becomes obvious when the feather barbs begin to skew out of position. If more hackle is required, lengthen the post.

With the following description it is assumed that the body was wrapped prior to winding the hackle, which is easier than winding the hackle first and then applying the body.

Once the appropriate number of wraps of hackle are in place, lift up the barbs in front of the wing and wind over the hackle tip from the hook eye toward the wing root with two or three wraps of thread. These warps should be placed over two previously placed adjacent thread wraps which provide friction against the hackle from below. For straight-eye or down-eye hooks, secure the hackle tip on top of the hook shank. For up-eye hooks, secure the hackle tip under the shank. This approach allows more room to trim the hackle. Whip finish with untwisted wraps winding toward the hook eye. Pull the knot tight with pressure applied toward the hook bend. This will tighten the whip finish as well as the initial wraps over the hackle tip. Finally realign the barbs that were forced out of position when tying off the hackle. The result is a fly with consistent hackle that floats properly and is very durable.

(Updated: 3

-97)