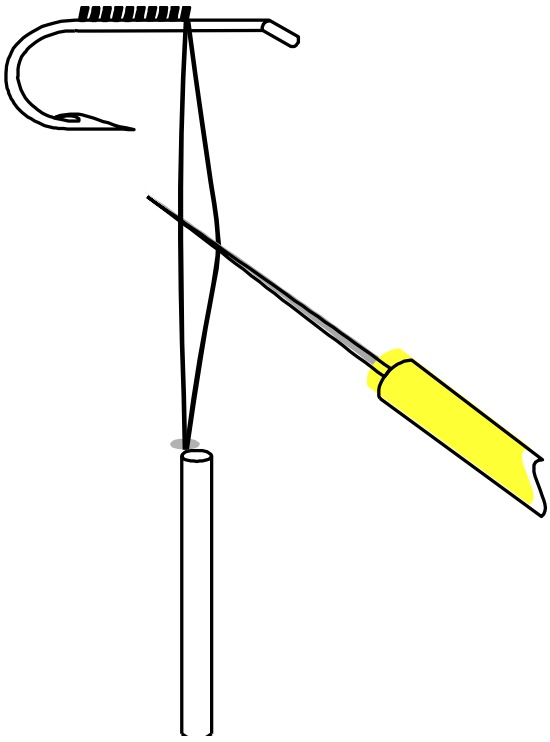
# Split-Thread Dubbing

by Wayne Luallen

Most fly tiers, at least those who consider themselves intermediate to advanced in skill, are familiar with a "dubbing loop." One of Gary Borger's most used methods of dubbing utilizes this technique. He discusses its application in his book, *Designing Trout Flies*, Tomorrow River Press, 1991, pp 21-22. Borger describes how this method is "not suitable for some dubbing techniques." The predominate concern he has is that "at the top of the loop the thread is separated by a distance equal to the thickness of the hook" which allows materials near the top of the loop to fall out. Borger then follows up with a method to close the loop with additional wraps of thread. To close the loop and then spin it often requires various tools that are marketed for the purpose. The technique does provide a very durable dubbing method, especially for medium to larger flies when applying coarse dubbing blends as well as Borger's "hair legs."

Another technique called "split-thread dubbing" is not only useful for medium to larger flies, but also is used on the very smallest flies. It is simply a dubbing loop formed by splitting untwisted tying thread with a bodkin, placing the dubbing between the two strands, and twisting. Most all tying threads work fine as long as they are a mono-cord type thread such as Danville's Fly Master, Gudebrod Fly Tying Thread, Uni Products' Uni-Thread, Belding Corticelli's Nymo Nylon, and Giorgio Benecchi's Products tying thread, as well as rayon and silk floss.

Who can be sure of the first person to apply the split-thread technique? I know of several for whom I have demonstrated it that indicate they have seen it before. Gary Kaplin sent me some written material from a class Steve Gobin taught in San Francisco in 1992. In it Gobin tells how he uses a bodkin to split the thread, then "wax lightly and rub your dubbing down to lightly dust the thread with fur. Close the loop and twist counter-clockwise." The technique is bound to have been around for some time, though I am surprised that I have not seen it before. Split-thread dubbing was first brought to my attention by Davy Wotton of Wales when I visited
with him in May, 1994.



Wotton wrote an article in the English magazine, Fly-Fishing & Fly-Tying, May/June 1994 titled "Split for the Difference." In the article he explains the use of his synthetic dubbing material, Partridge SLF (Synthetic Living Fiber, or as he put it "seals live forever!") Dubbing, in a split-thread application. His technique was developed for the purpose of better representation of "any...organism that bears elements of translucency." He writes, "For the last 18 months, I have been experimenting with various fly-dressing methods in order to achieve a much higher degree of translucency surrounding the metal hooks. Readers will have seen some of the techniques I have described that deploy the use of a dubbing loop. The following technique tackles this to a much more advanced stage."

Wotton's description of application then follows. 1) He creates a "mat of dubbing material." 2) He supports the thread with a finger tip slightly below the hook, allowing the bobbin to keep the thread taut, which he says will flatten it. (I prefer to have my thread manually untwisted at this point.) 3) He then splits the thread with a bodkin at the point his finger touches the thread or at the point the thread comes off the hook. 4) Next he slides the bodkin down the thread opening a loop into which the mat of dubbing is inserted. 5) The thread is then twisted "anti-clockwise" to entrap it. (For the right hand tier, an anti-clockwise twist will make each wrap slide back against the prior one. For the left hand tier, twist the thread clockwise to achieve the same effect.)

There are several advantages to the split-thread dubbing, but there are also some disadvantages when comparing to standard loop dubbing. First, the material is twisted into half the amount of thread, thus the

likelihood of over-twisting to a point that the thread will break is more likely with the split-thread technique. Also it is a bit awkward initially learning how to split the flat thread. Be sure to use a sharply pointed, fine bodkin. Do not use a bodkin with residual head cement on the needle since the cement will likely catch on and fray the thread.

Advantages to split-thread dubbing include ease of application, less bulk, no special tools required to close the loop other than the bobbin holder, and the fact that the loop separation at the hook shank (a problem with standard loop dubbing) is nonexistent. Simply insert the dubbing mat into the split in the thread, then allow the bobbin's weight to close the loop. This captures the dubbing. The mat can be manipulated up or down, dispersed or compressed, as well as be reduced or increased before spinning the bobbin holder.

Various dubbings can be used. Synthetics, particularly more coarse types, are begging for this technique. Natural dubbings are all easily applied: from seal to muskrat, underfur only, guard hairs only, or blends of both. Also synthetics blended with natural furs works well.

By shaping the mat of dubbing prior to inserting it into the split, a variety of results can be achieved depending on the nature of the dub to begin with; whether it is fine, coarse, loose, or tight.

A loose mat will provide a more translucent body. This is particularly true with materials such as SLF, seal, "African Goat" (which is mohair chopped up,) hare's mask, or a finer natural dubbing blended with a more coarse synthetic. This body type is most useful for salmon and steelhead flies, nymphs, and a personal favorite, X-Caddis bodies, when using the SLF Finesse Blend (a finer material than SLF Dubbing.) With the latter, the dubbing is wrapped around wet fly style, sweeping the fibers back as they are wound, which in turn allows a trailing shuck to develop out of the body material. I like to begin the dubbing with a gold colored SLF Finesse Blend, then continue on in the same loop with the body color of the natural. Next I comb back the dubbed body even more with a dubbing teaser, such as my favorite, Gordon Mankin's "Tickler," or possibly hook Velcro. For salmon flies that call for multiple colored sections of seal dubbed up the body, I begin with a neutral colored thread, and mark it off with felt tip markers the color of the various seal, mohair, or SLF Dubbing. (A little practice will determine how much length is required for each section.) Next the thread is split, and each color of dubbing is inserted into its appropriate location. The thread is spun, and the dubbing is wound on as described for the X-Caddis.

A bit more compact body, such as might be called for in a Dee fly, is accomplished by compressing the mat of dubbing a bit before inserting into the split. When winding on, no attempt is made to wet-fly sweep the fibers. Any dubbing material from coarse to medium-fine will allow for the desired result.

To achieve a very compact body, even to the point of showing segmentation, place the dubbing in the palm of your hand or on your pant leg and roll it into what Polly Rosborough called his "noodle." The tighter the twist, as well as the finer the dubbing blend, the more segmented the body will be. Once twisted, it is simply wound onto the hook. Take care to not twist so vigorously that the thread breaks. Usually it will break at a point intimate to the hook. Bearing this in mind, after twisting make a wrap or two, then twist the thread further and wrap a few more times. If necessary, twist even further.

To finish off untwist the thread. This allows for easy removal of unused dubbing as well as flatten the thread, thus reducing bulk, which is especially important for smaller flies.

If not enough dubbing was initially placed into the loop, untwist the thread, split it once again, and insert the additional dubbing.

The split-thread technique allows you to taper the bodies easily by putting lesser or greater amounts of dubbing into the loop prior to twisting the thread.

This technique has not replaced all other dubbing methods for me. I still prefer standard twisted dubbing on single strands of thread for many of my finer bodied dry flies. I also prefer the strength that loop dubbing provides in some applications. With some dubbings I prefer to allow the material to wrap out of my hand carried by the thread as it winds around the shank. But for the applications mentioned above, the split-thread technique is superb.

November 1994