

THE BIRTH OF A NEW FLY

BY MARK DEF^RANK



The Original Grim Reaper

During the outset of my early tying days, one of the first patterns I learned to tie was the soft hackle. The minimalism of the pattern and its effectiveness in the water astonished me in my novice status and certainly fossilized a place for it in my pattern repertoire.

Years later, on an early 2002 fall night, I nestled into my chair at the tying station with intentions of designing a new Steelhead fly. Wracking my

brain, I tried to think of something new, something exciting to mirror the anticipation of the first fall run of the season. Then there it was...a hook point plunged into a piece of driftwood...a soft hackle tied during my youth that has traveled from bench to bench throughout my adulthood. It wasn't something completely new, instead it turned out to be something tried and true, but with a new twist. "That's it," I thought, "a soft hackle, something with a little flash, with mottled characteristics and for steelhead, something that is definitely durable." A little bit of this ... a touch of that ... and a fly was born.

THE NEW FLY'S DEBUT

It was a day slated on my calendar to fish Elk Creek, Erie, PA. I arrived in the early morning to favorable weather and perfect water conditions, oblivious to the eventful day ahead. I began to fish with great expectations for the new soft hackle pattern. On the second cast I hooked and landed a fresh hen, average in size, and thought "not bad at all". As the day wore on I continued to catch more and more fish, netting double digits at the end of a great day of fishing. Somewhere in the back of my thoughts reflected on how well the new fly did.

Not only was I fishing over fresh, brilliant Chromers, but also over fish darkened by their length of time in the stream, that are on their guard because they have run the gauntlet, and have seen and fell prey to all sorts of patterns. That is what impressed me the most -- the ability of this simple pattern to hook the wariest of fish.

NAMING THE FLY

The new fly made a few more trips with me to Cattaraugus and Canadaway Creeks in New York, and Conneaut Creek, Ohio, before landing a permanent spot in my box. I fished the new fly exclusively on my Steelheading trips that year, landing trophy fish after trophy fish. Fellow anglers, seeing the awesome performance of the new fly, requested and were granted a precious few. Their results were the same. Trophy fish and double digit days abounded.

The results the fly produced gave it a well-deserved name – The Grim Reaper. I was honored when the Grim Reaper secured a spot in John Nagy's *Great Lakes Steelhead Guide*, along with four of my other patterns.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE REAPER



Grim Reaper Assortment

The Grim Reaper has more than lived up to its name, and has found its way into the fly box of many an angler. Because of its popularity and simplicity, I routinely teach novice tiers this pattern during classes and demos. The original is tied on a Daiichi curved nymph hook for the added aesthetic value the shape of this particular hook adds. Gold holographic tinsel is added for the subtle flash, and red UTC Ultra Wire is wrapped

around the tinsel for added color. The wire also provides extra durability to help protect the streamlined body of the fly from hungry prey.

The simplicity of the pattern lends itself to many variations. Since its birth, a variety of new color combinations has been turned out of the vise and fooled many a Steelhead. Its evolution began with the Rusty Reaper and continues.

FISHING THE REAPER

To understand the different techniques that can be used when fishing the Reaper it is also necessary to understand the geography of the Great Lakes Tributaries. The tributaries are made up of mostly shale, with gravel beds located in select areas in the streams. These gravel beds are created when the high, shale walls that tower over the streams in various areas crumble, fragment and wash downstream. The layout of the streams varies; narrow, deep, fast runs lead to large wide and slow pools that flow into quick, shallow runs that are dominated by gravel beds.

The Steelhead hold in certain areas of the streams – mostly along ledges in fast runs or spread out on the gravel flats. Where you are fishing will dictate which tactic you use. Little seams, deep runs and pocket water lined with shale ledges are Steelhead magnets and present the opportunity to fish the fly my favorite way – dead drifting. When the Steelhead migrate to the gravel flats to form the runs they are spread out in smaller pods and under prime conditions you can sight the fish. This is when I change tactics and swing the fly to them.

Some anglers find it unethical to fish over spawning fish. However, due to the elevated water temperature in the streams the natural mortality rate is high, with less than 5% of the juvenile Steelhead making it out to the lake to return in three years to spawn.

Find video and photo tutorials on tying the Grim Reaper at www.defranksflies.com.

Mark DeFrank is owner of DeFrank's Flies & Guide Service. He is a master fly tier with 35 years' experience, 20 of which are in commercial and competition tying. He holds several prestigious awards, and routinely instructs many satisfied novice, intermediate and advanced tiers. Most recently, Mark took 1st place at the 2010 Pennsylvania State Tying Championship in the Pro Division. Mark also placed First in Wet Emergers, Second in Nymph and Third in Most Creative Categories in the FTF Tying Competition. He took third place in the 2008 Fly Tyer Magazine International Fly Tying Competition. Mark has 5 hot patterns listed in John Nagy's Steelhead Guide - 4th edition.

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