

Toppings and Tails by David White



During a recent day of salmon fly tying with Charlie Chute at the 2003 Cleveland Salmon and Steelhead Summit, Charlie provided the class with preformed toppings and tails. They were of obvious high quality, but more importantly the crests exhibited an enhanced "golden cascade" that is so desirable in display flies.

So many flies that you see look as though they have been recently fished, in that the crest barbules are matted along the rachis of the topping and tail much like Christmas trees that have been trussed for transport. This is fine if you intend to fish the fly, or if you are trying to duplicate the look of a historic pattern that would have been fished. It is also the result of misshaping toppings and tails over a cylinder as recommended by a number of authors. The result does not show the material to best effect. The barbules need to be splayed downward along the wing, the other method places all of the barbs in a bundle along the top.

Charlie's method is simple, and will add immensely to the appearance of a full dress presentation fly. Here is how:

1. Soak the tails and toppings over night, or longer, in water. A drop of Woolite may be added for an extra bit of sparkle. A small jar such as those used for spices works well.
2. Lay a soaked crest out on a small smooth surface such as the glass from a picture frame. Make sure

that enough water is laid on the glass that the entire topping "swims" in a bead of water. I use a small straw to suction the water out of the jar and spread it on the glass along the length of the crest feather. This forms a curved "bead" of water in which each feather is encased. Surface tension will hold the feather and the barbules to the glass until the water evaporates.

3. Next shape the overall curve of the crest to a form a semicircle smaller than the curve of the tail or topping you wish to form. More curvature is desirable here, as you can always flatten the curve, but you can never add more later without repeating all the steps above. If you really want to get organized here, draw the curves with a "sharpie" on the opposite side of the glass; you can then shape the toppings to fit various sizes of flies.

4. With a bodkin or similar pointed tool, start at the base of the crest and carefully work the individual barbules downward away from the rachis. Use a curving motion to develop a natural-looking splay of barbules along the entire length of the crest. This results in the "golden cascade."

5. Now let the crests dry. If you used a great deal of water, you can pick up some of it by carefully blotting the "beads" of water with a paper towel. Let the water evaporate naturally; when the crests are dry they will hold the curve you set on the glass. The barbules will fall nicely down along the length of the crest. This takes some effort, but the result is worth it.

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