

Flyfishing & TYING JOURNAL

SUMMER 2009

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A detailed view of a Ditto-Head Nymph fly, showing its red and white body, white legs, and white tail.

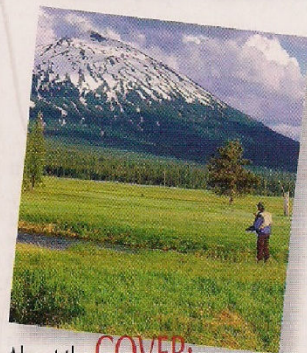
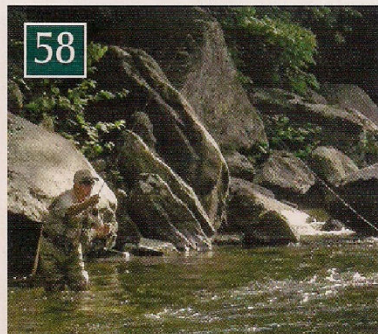
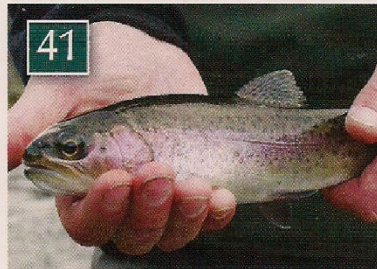
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Tying the Modern Classics

Part Three: The Muddler Minnow



by Kevin W. Erickson

Ask most anglers: “If you could use only one fly to catch fish anywhere, anytime and under any conditions, which fly would you choose?”

Many will come up with the same answer: Muddler Minnow. Whether used in warm or cold, fresh or salt water; no matter if you are out to catch trout, salmon, steelhead, bass, panfish, bonefish and myriad other species—the Muddler will catch them all.

Originated in 1937 by Don Gapen, the Muddler Minnow was intended to imitate the ubiquitous sculpin, and was popularized by Montana fisherman and fly tier Dan Bailey. Designed to suggest the large, blocky head and tapered body and tail of the sculpin, the Muddler has accounted for many fish in most waters around the globe.

A Muddler incorporates matched turkey quill strips for the wing and deer hair for the head of the fly. Matched turkey quill strips provide a nice tall silhouette for the tapered body and tail of a sculpin, yet are thin in profile and easy to cast. Deer hair is a material with unique properties allowing it to be “spun”—rolled around the hook, and “flared”—the fibers bending sharply and creating a large volume of material in a relatively small space. Another unique property of deer hair is that each fiber is hollow, thus providing buoyancy. This can be a problem when you want

to sink a fly made with deer hair, necessitating weight in the fly or a fast-sinking line to counteract the hairs lifting effect. But the hollow makeup of deer hair can be an advantage too. Dry flies suggesting grasshoppers or stoneflies including the Letort Hopper and Steelhead Caddis are cousins to the Muddler. Deer is also used in flies for bass as “bugs”—big dry flies suggesting frogs, mice, and whatever else fish can imagine in the sometimes wild color combinations. And variations of the original abound, including the Matuka Muddler, Spuddler, Marabou Muddler and others.

The Muddler will always be a favorite pattern with its universal appeal to almost all game fish. We’ll focus on the techniques of tying the Muddler and tricks for tying the turkey quill wing and spinning and flaring the deer-hair head. From there, you’re encouraged to see what you can come up with for your own variation of what is soon to surely become your new favorite fly!

Muddler Minnow

Hook: 2X to 4X long Sizes 12 to 1/0.

Thread: Red.

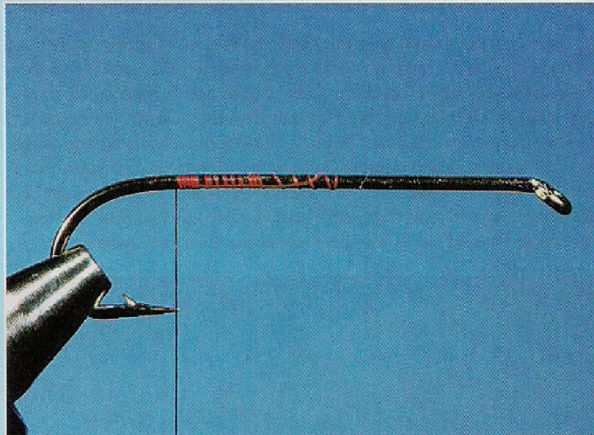
Tail: Matched slips of turkey wing or tail quill.

Body: Gold tinsel, flat or braided.

Underwing: Fox squirrel tail.

Main Wing: Matched slips of turkey quill, to match tail.

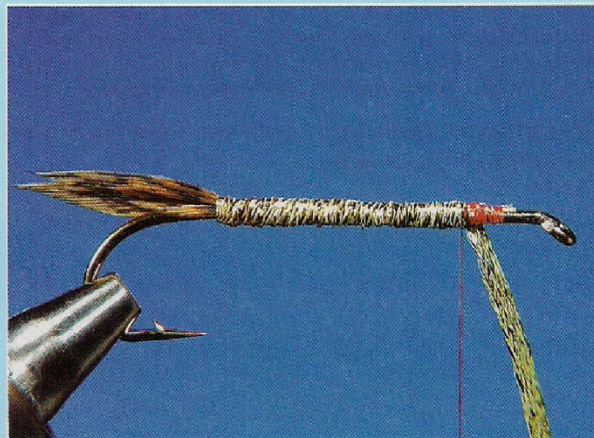
Collar/Head: Deer hair, spun and flared, trimmed to desired shape.



1 For a deeper-sinking version, a conehead or metal bead can be added first or wire for weighting wrapped around the shank. In modern times, the fly is often tied without any added weight and the depth controlled through the fishing approach or line style. Mount hook in your vise securely, with the shank level. After attaching thread, wrap back to a position above the point.



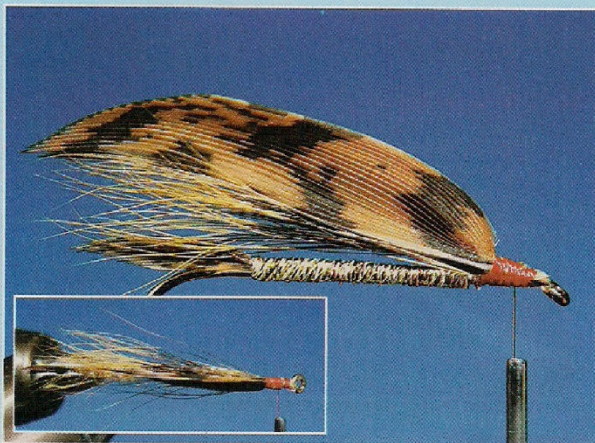
2 Match a pair of slips (strips) of selected turkey quill material about half the hook gape in width. Place back-to-back. Hold tapered tips of the strips tightly in your left hand (for right-handed tiers) above hook shank, but rotated slightly toward you. Allow strips to roll into the final position on top of hook instead of trying to keep them from rolling beyond vertical. Wrap thread around strips and hook and back up on top again. Most importantly, bring the middle finger of your left hand up behind the base end of quills in front of thread. Keep butts from rolling with this finger, butts should only be allowed to compress vertically. Pull up on thread while holding strips tightly to secure them to hook. After a few more tight wraps, continue forward securing excess along length of shank. Be careful to not let quill spin around the shank while securing it. Don't crowd the front; leave at least 1/4 of shank bare for the head of the fly.



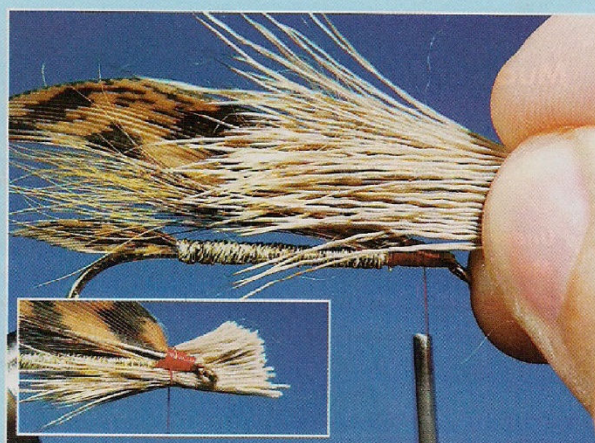
3 Attach braided body material at front of the body space. Secure it as you wrap thread back to the tail (above the point) and then wrap thread back to the front of the body space. Wrap braid forward in one continuous smooth layer. Tie off and trim excess.



4 Select small clump (two dozen fibers or so) of fox squirrel tail for underwing. Clean out shorter fibers by holding tips of the fibers in your left hand and removing shorter fibers from the base with your right hand. Clean hair well, as extra fibers make securing hair all the more difficult. Tie in tightly on top of shank with tips extending back just past tip of the tail. Trim off excess and wrap over butt ends.



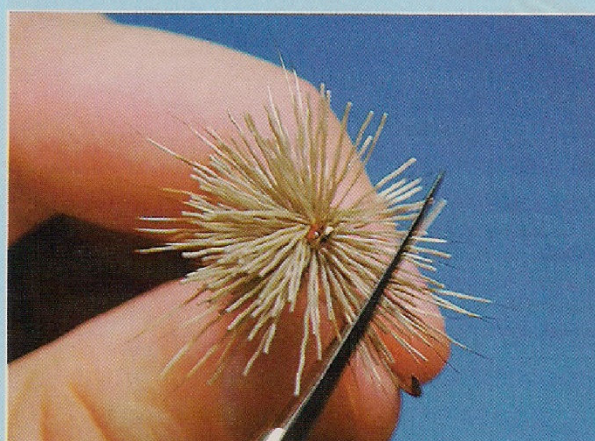
5 Select either a symmetrical turkey quill with even-length fibers on both sides of each quill; one has long fibers on left side, the other has long fibers on right side. Open scissors to where the points are the same width as hook gape. Slide them into the quill to separate out a strip the same width as hook gape. Cut strip as close to the base of the quill as possible. Match strips and place back-to-back, same as the tail. Follow the same steps to secure wing as used to tie in the tail. When viewed from above, you should have a narrow knife-edge view of the strips. Trim excess and secure butt ends.



6 Select deer hair from a good-quality tanned skin. It's imperative to get good-quality hair that is soft and hollow and therefore will spin and flare correctly. Avoid hair on a hard, stiff-dried skin. If skin is dried and hard enough to drive nails, it will be thin, brittle and have lost its hollowness. Cut out a clump about the size of a pencil in diameter. Clean out short fibers and underfur thoroughly. Place hair against fly and measure tips back to middle of wing. Transfer hair to your left hand. Trim butts about 1/4" beyond tie-in point. Place hair on the back side of the wing and make three loose wraps around hair and hook. Placing hair behind the wing allows it to spin freely before encountering the wing.



7 Roll hair and spin it around hook completely, then tighten thread and flare the hair. Often the hair will clump and not distribute evenly, leaving a large amount on one side and not much on the other. If this happens, slowly unwrap first one wrap, then another. As you undo the second wrap, you will reach a point where the hair springs loose from the hook. Don't unwrap any further! When this happens, the hair is now loose and can be spun further to even out the distribution. As long as you are slow and careful this process can be repeated until hair is nicely spread around hook. Make a few more tight wraps, pull thread forward through hair, add a few more wraps and finish the head.



8 Trim head to desired shape. A standard "bullet" shaped head will be bulky and buoyant. A shallow, wide "wedge" shape is effective to make the fly dive and dart with an enticing swimming motion. Experiment to see what you like best for your fishing. One option is to leave the head larger and carry a pair of scissors when fishing. This way a quick trim can modify the head and therefore the way the fly fishes to suit your needs at the time.

Give the Muddler Minnow a try—in any color or style it is an effective fly for anything that swims!

*Kevin Erickson worked in the flyfishing business as a full-time professional, including instructing fly fishing and fly tying classes, for over 25 years. He has traveled extensively and acted as host of angling groups to both fresh and saltwater destinations around the globe. Also a published author, his work includes contributions in Randy Stetzer's book *Flies: The Best 1000* and Randall Kaufmann's epic *Bonefishing*. He currently has a "real" job in the software industry in Beaverton, Oregon. If you have questions, feel welcome to email Kevin anytime at*

Visit Kevin's website at www.professorfeather.com

