

The RED FOX SQUIRREL-HAIR NYMPH

by Dave Whitlock



"What half-dozen or dozen trout fly patterns would you pick or recommend if they were the only flies you could use?" This is the question I am asked most frequently by fishing writers, shop owners, audiences and fly-fishing students. Picking a dozen or so flies would not be a *problem, but what would I use if limited to a single pattern? That question is much more thought provoking and difficult to answer.*

If restricted to one fly pattern, I would have to say that my *Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph* is the most consistently effective fly, both in numbers caught and size, that I use. Even more significant, this nymph seems to be a fly that, like the classic Gold-Ribbed Hare's Ear, Adams dry fly and Woolly Bugger streamer, performs well for almost all fly fishers in almost all waters.

THE DESIGN

This nymph was a key ingredient in both my nymph-fishing enthusiasm and my confidence in the suggestive theory of fly tying. As so often happens, I discovered the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph (RFSHN) by accident.

When I first began tying soft, fur-bodied nymphs (back in the 60's) I was most influenced by the flies tied and fished by Thom Green, Ted Trueblood and Polly Rosborough. But I lacked the furs that they often recommended, such as otter, mink, seal, hare's ear and beaver. I substituted

the gray and red fox squirrels, muskrat and rabbit that I could obtain locally, often from road kill, for my nymphs but seriously lacked the confidence that these would have the same magically effective qualities of the three master's nymphs.

The RFSH Nymph worked well for me from the very start and so my confidence increased. As the years have passed, I have been fortunate enough to gain a fine inventory of furs, synthetic dubbing and other useful fly materials, but I have yet to tie a nymph pattern with any other fur that is more effective for me for my all-purpose fly fishing.

AN IMPRESSIONISTIC IMITATION

The Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph, in its pattern and form, is an impressionistic fly. This means that it looks alive, vulnerable and edible to fish without looking exactly like a specific creature. A trout, actively feeding or not, seldom ignores such a morsel swimming or drifting toward it.

By maintaining the unique material pattern while varying its size and profile, you can make the nymph closely mimic numerous trout foods: certain species of mayflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, midges, damselflies, scuds, sowbugs and crayfish. The nymph is a tempting tidbit regardless of what a particular fish is preparing to dine on. If presented and fished like a specific live food, say an emerging caddis pupa or a swimming scud, the fly becomes more actively imitative rather than passively suggestive.



Red Fox Squirrel Nymph Variations:

1. Bead-head, rubber-legged
2. Caddis pupa
3. October caddis pupa
4. Standard RFSHN
5. Bead-head
6. Crustacean

The material used to tie the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph is most responsible for the fly's effectiveness. It is tied with rich orange-tan red fox squirrel belly fur and the spicy spectrum of tan, cream, gray, black and white from the red fox squirrel back. I blend each fur with a matching, glossy 'SLF' synthetic fiber and thinly rib the fly with gold oval tinsel or pearlescent gold Flashabou. This combination gives this pattern the light, natural coloring so common in natural aquatic insects and crustaceans, especially during the vulnerable soft-shell stage which trout seem to prefer.

The soft texture of the fur further enhances the attractiveness to fish. Water, air bubbles and light on the tinsel fur body create halos of visual liveliness and movement and the dubbed body has a Velcro-like holding effect on a biting fish's teeth. I've found that in many cases, the scruffiness and absorption of natural odors from extended use even **increases** the nymph's effectiveness.

TYING TIPS

For the standard RFSH Nymph, use a 2XL hook. Weight the shank with lead or copper wire. Use wire diameter equal to the hook wire diameter and wrap over the middle half of the shank ...a necessity).

The tail is a small tuft of three or four red fox squirrel back guard hairs and under-fur. The tail's length is equal to 1/2 the shank's length and actually represents both the body extension past the bend of the hook and the tail appendages. Leave only the tan base exposed (tie down the gray base hair found next to the skin). This will give the same color extension to the abdomen and tail base.

The abdomen can be 1/2 or 2/3 the hook shank length, tapering to a thicker diameter forward over the lead wraps. On very small hooks, sizes #14 - #18, I clip off the long free ends of the guard hairs on the abdomen to help the nymph sink. For hook sizes #16 and smaller, I use the finest, shortest squirrel hair.

For the rib on the smaller sizes (#16-#20) I use gold wire. For #14-#10 hooks I use the smallest size oval tinsel (size 18) and from #8 to #2, I use size 16 or 14 oval tinsel. The rib does not necessarily suggest body segmentation when wrapped over the dubbing. It gives a definite illusion of transparency and lifelike movement to the nymph under the water.

The thorax should be enlarged compared to the abdomen and should be loosely wound so that guard-hair tips will radiate off this section to simulate legs, wing cases, antennae and gills. When I wish to simulate the larger, leggy stoneflies, damsel nymphs and caddis pupae, I make one turn of soft, webby, Metz dark-ginger hen back or brown partridge feathers immediately in front of the thorax and trim off all but six or eight of the fibers.

To suggest more closely other natural nymphal shapes use hooks with longer or shorter shanks. Smaller long-shank hooks also have the advantage of hooking with less strike pressure and they seldom hang up when bounced over the bottom. If the nymph must be fished where hang-ups occur, add a nylon loop snag-guard to the nymph.

Exact imitation of the color of this nymph is not necessary and at times I even mix additional bits of olive, florescent orange, florescent green or red and black into the dubbing for a wider color choice to cope with water color, clarity, natural colors and other variations.

DUBBING BLENDS

For dubbing, shave the fur directly off the hide with electric hair clippers used for human or animal grooming. With razor blade, cut some of the back hide into convenient 1/2-inch wide strips for tailing material. The bridle-barred back hair of the gray or red fox squirrel also makes a marvelous addition for blending with natural hair or synthetic fibers of one plain color. Blending gives the dubbing more character and a better natural lifelike look. Squirrel fur also takes most dyes quickly, so tinting it olive, yellow, gold and brown makes it even more versatile.

Young squirrels have finer, softer fur for dubbing smaller nymphs. Hair from summer-hunted squirrels is too thin, short and wiry for ideal dubbing. Late fall and winter hides have the longest hair and are densely furred with the best dubbing. If you find squirrel hair that seems too short or grainy for easy dubbing, simply blend it with a small amount of similar-colored, longer rabbit or muskrat fur or soft, synthetic fibers. This makes the squirrel hair dub easier on thread and hooks.

The easiest way to get the exact dubbing color and material blend is to get the **Dave Whitlock/SLF** packaged dubbing, #1 and #2, manufactured by Wapsi.



To catch more fish with the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph, sharpen the hook's point and bend down the barb. This assures more consistent hooking, much simpler unhooking, and it reduces trout-handling damage for faster fish recovery and releases.

As we perfect our capability to catch more trout on flies, we must also resolve to use better ways to recycle them! We will all catch and enjoy more trout, salmon, grayling, steelhead, char and whitefish if we practice thoughtful and careful catch and release.

DAVE WHITLOCK'S RED FOX SQUIRREL-HAIR NYMPH Recipe

HOOK: Tiemco 5262 (standard & bead head); Tiemco 2313, 2302 (caddis emerger);
Tiemco 2457 (scud): Sizes 2-20

THREAD: Black or orange 70 Wapsi Ultra Thread

CEMENT: Dave's Flexament & Zap-A-Gap

HOOK WEIGHTING: lead wire, diameter of hook wire, 8 to 12 wraps

ABDOMEN: Belly fur from red fox squirrel skin mixed 50/50 with sienna or fox tan Antron dubbing OR **Dave Whitlock SLF Dubbing - #1** (blended to my specs).
Abdomen should be 1/2 to 2/3 of the overall body length

THORAX: Back fur from red fox squirrel skin mixed 50/50 with charcoal Antron dubbing
OR **Dave Whitlock SLF Dubbing - #2**

RIB: Oval gold tinsel or orange-pearlescent Flashabou

TAIL: Small tuft of back fur from red fox squirrel skin

LEGS: (On sizes 10 and larger) Metz dark ginger back-hackle or back-hackle of
Partridge, one turn

NOTE: Squirrel **tail** hair is completely unsatisfactory for this nymph's body or tail. Hair from the animal's body, not the tail must be used.

If red fox squirrel is not available, lightly dye grey fox squirrel with a tangerine or orange dye. You may substitute hare's mask for back fur and bleached muskrat, beaver or Australian opossum for belly fur. (When bleached, a medium grey fur first changes to a color similar to the red fox squirrel's belly.)

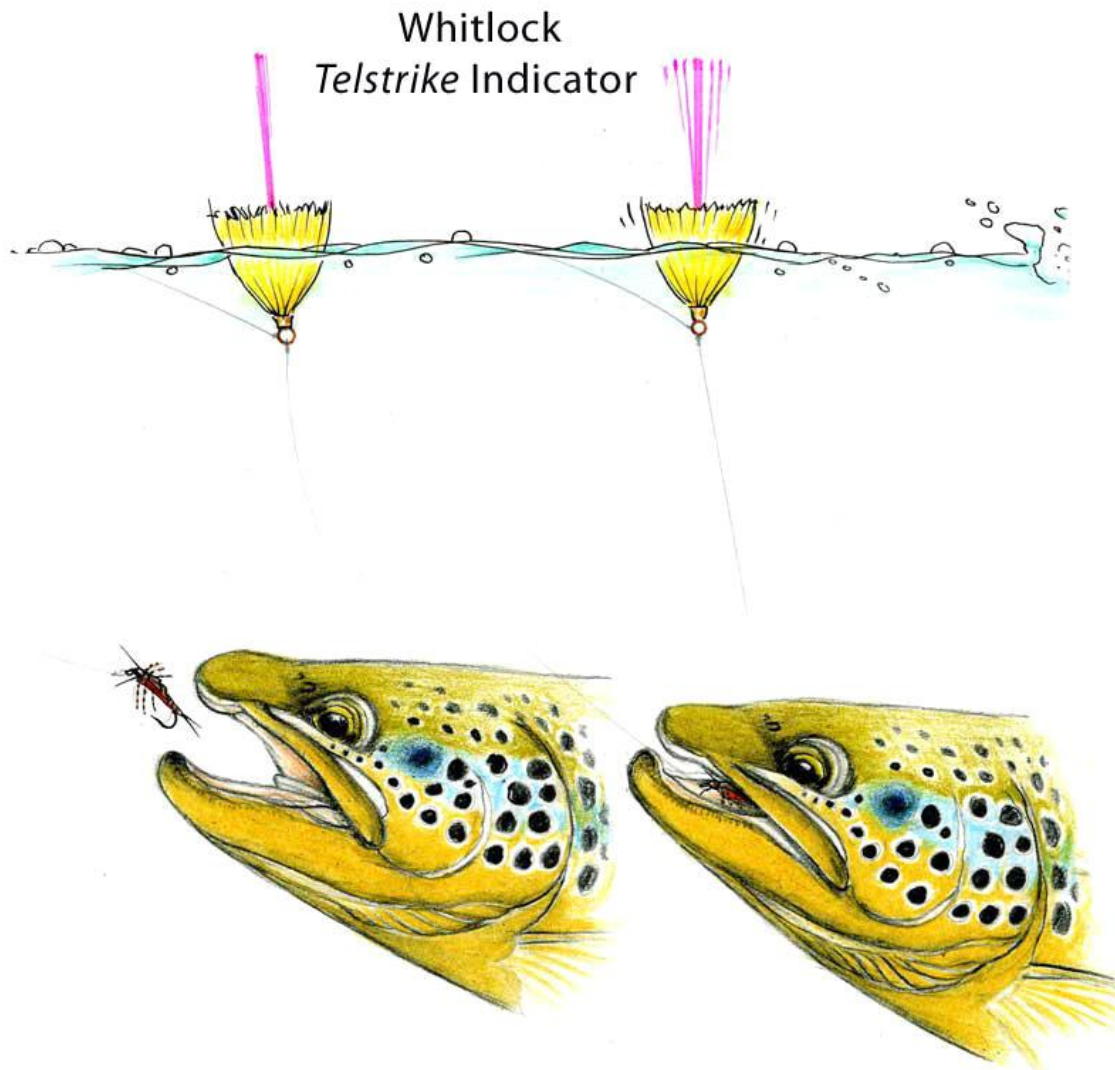
For fly fishers who do not tie nymphs, my Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph is manufactured in a wide range of densities, body shapes and sizes by Rainy's Flies in the United States and exported to many European countries. Rainy's is the only manufacturer I endorse as versions that are tied correctly.

FISHING THE RED FOX SQUIRREL-HAIR NYMPH

When fishing the RFSH Nymph, I vary my presentation to best suit the water type, depth and natural nymph action the fish would be most likely to key on.

STREAMS: The most consistent way to catch trout on the RFSHN in streams is to dead drift it, just off the bottom. I use a long knotless tapered leader with fluorocarbon tippet and a floating line for these presentations. On the leader, I always attach my "Telstrike" Indicator or other indicator. These indicators let me detect the trout's capture of the unseen nymph. When there is obvious trout-feeding activity on emerging insects, I'll fish the RFSHN using natural rising motions. (Telstrike Indicators are available at fly shops and websites and are made by Rainy's Flies.)

STILLWATERS: When I fish lakes or ponds with the Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph, I recommend using a clear, SA Still-Water Line and no indicator. I allow the nymph to sink to just above the bottom vegetation before I attempt to retrieve it with a series of erratic, swimming motions to simulate the nymph (or shrimp) action that trout prefer. Here, however, I keep my rod tip low to the water to better see or feel the trout's take.



I trust that my Red Fox Squirrel-Hair Nymph will be a nice addition to the potential of your nymph assortment. These flies are incredibly effective on trout, sunfish, bass, crappie, perch, carp ... and more. Try tying them in several sizes and then use them with confidence whenever you are not sure of what fly will work best for that particular day. It's my hope that you'll soon discover their magic too!

Good fly fishing!

Dave Whitlock

