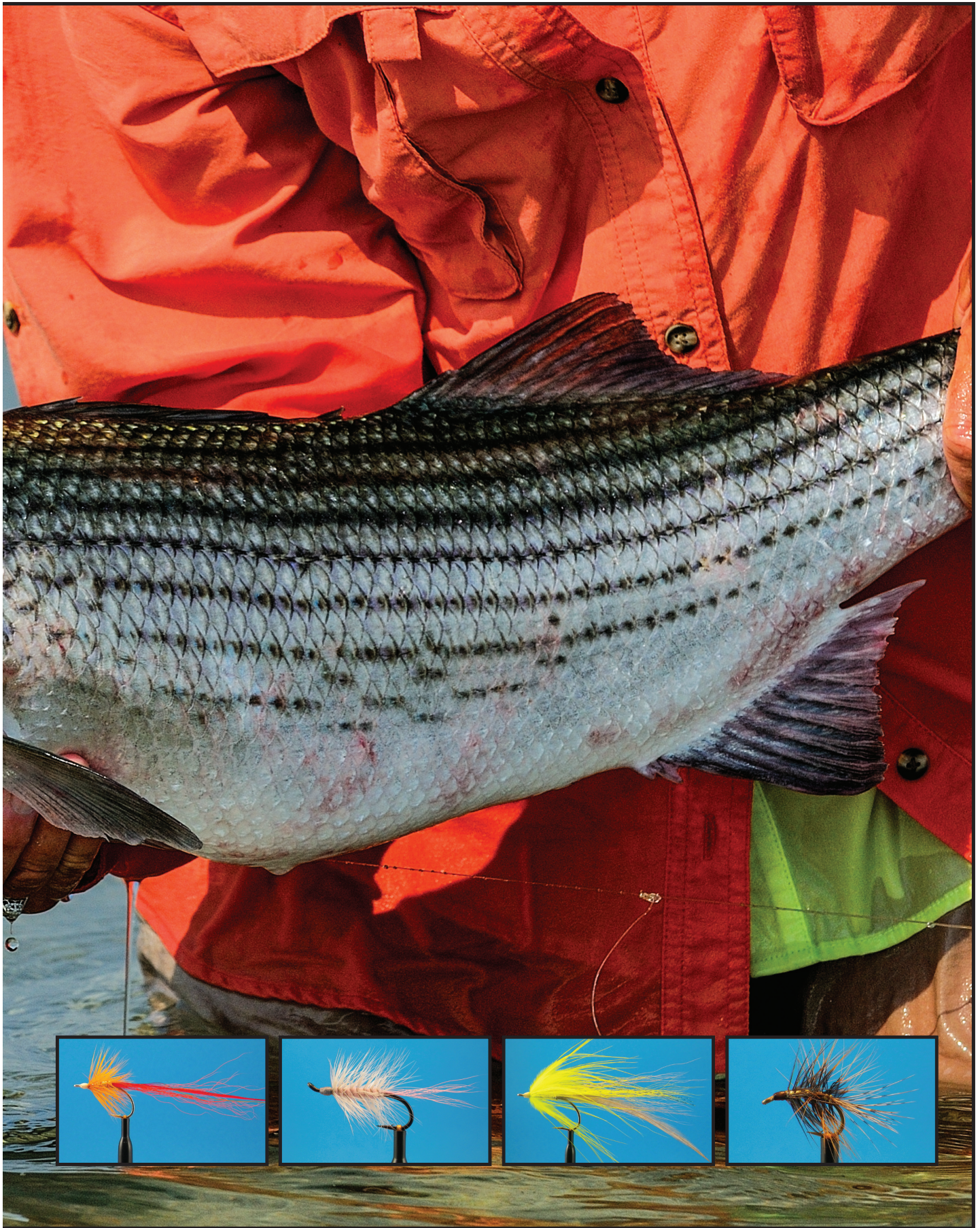


Soft hackles for **STRIPED BASS**

Catch the fish other
anglers can't with these
impressionistic patterns.

By Steve Culton





I remember being so disappointed by the flies in the saltwater bins.

I'd just started fly fishing for striped bass. Coming from a trout background, I'd cut my teeth on traditional flies like Hare's-Ear Nymphs and Usuals—patterns that at best gave an approximation of what a bug *might* look like.

But the striper flies before me left little to the imagination. With their ultrarealistic 3-D eyes and opaque bodies, they looked like stuffed-animal baitfish. Many felt heavy and would likely be a challenge to cast. All of them seemed as if they were trying way too hard to impress the fish—just as you might stumble over words while trying to meet a beautiful woman, when all you really need to do is say hello.

Then I discovered the traditional New England school of striper flies. These were patterns that made the case for less is more. Bucktails so sparse you could read a newspaper through them, flatwings that swam like baitfish (even when at rest), and soft hackles. Oh, those magical creations that breathed and pulsed and undulated like no jointed bits of plastic ever could.

Those were the flies I was looking for. Once I started tying and fishing them, I made a wondrous discovery: Stripers loved them just as much as I did.

The Soft Hackle Energy

Like their sweetwater cousins, saltwater soft hackles tend toward impressionism. Their goal is not to carbon-copy the bait, but simply

to represent it in size, color profile, and movement. In a fly box, a soft hackle may look very little like something that's alive and good to eat. But once a soft hackle is introduced to water, a remarkable transformation occurs. "It's a completely different way of looking at fly design," says Ken Abrames, the father of the modern saltwater flatwing. "Water becomes an essential part of the material list."

It was Ken who first turned me on to soft-hackled flies (I feature three of his best patterns in this article). I asked him about his typically sparse designs. "When a fish comes up to your fly, and turns away, it means that he was going to eat it until he saw something that he didn't like. So instead of adding things to my flies that he might like, I started taking things out," Abrames said.

You may also notice that eyes are conspicuously absent from these patterns. You could endlessly debate whether or not eyes are a feeding trigger. But the true test of a fly is whether the fish eat it, and soft-hackled flies are indeed striper-approved. For those familiar with the modern striper fly, this sparse, no-eyes-necessary philosophy in baitfish pattern construction can be a difficult concept to embrace. But as more and more anglers discover its seductive powers, the soft hackle is becoming a saltwater fly box staple.

Presenting Soft Hackles

Most anglers fish for striped bass by casting, and then stripping the fly in. This is a highly effective method for catching aggressive fish. But the more you fish for stripers, the more situations you'll encounter where they will ignore a stripped fly. The bass may be feeding on station, like trout, waiting for the baitfish to come to them. They may not be feeding on baitfish at all, but rather on tiny shrimps, crab larvae, or isopods. Or, they may not be in attack mode. These are the stripers that not everyone can catch. But they can be caught. Sometimes the answer is as simple as a subtle fly and an eloquent presentation.

Meyer Breslau stated, "Beer that is not drunk has missed its vocation." The same may be said of soft hackles that are not dead-drifted, swung, or dangled. Soft hackles are presentation flies. Yes, you can cast and strip them. But if you limit yourself to that presentation, you're missing out on a whole lot of fly fishing magic. Soft hackles



September Night

HOOK: Eagle Claw 253, sizes 1/0 to 3/0.

THREAD: White 6/0.

TAIL: 30 gray bucktail hairs under two white saddle hackles tied flat under two strips of silver flash.

BODY: Silver braid.

THROAT: Sparse, long white bucktail tied as a three-quarter collar, both sides and bottom.

COLLAR: White marabou, folded or doubled three or four turns.

WING: 30 long white bucktail hairs under 15 strands of purple bucktail under two strands of blue flash under one natural black saddle hackle.



Big Eelie

HOOK: Eagle Claw 253, sizes 1/0 to 3/0.

THREAD: White 6/0.

TAIL: 30 white bucktail hairs under white saddle under 4 strands of pearl flash under yellow saddle under blue saddle under olive saddle (use pencil-thin saddle feathers).

BODY: Pearl braid.

COLLAR: Two to three turns of white marabou, tied in at the tip.



Orange Ruthless

HOOK: Gamakatsu SC15, size 2.

THREAD: White 6/0.

TAIL: 30 orange bucktail hairs under two strands of emerald green flash under a red saddle tied flat.

BODY: Gold braid.

HACKLE: Soft, webby, fire orange saddle, palmered.

look alive even on a dead drift. They shine with a floating line, which allows you to mend and let the current work for you, as with presentations like the greased line swing. Fishing soft hackles with traditional methods is a beautiful, meditative way to fool difficult bass. It's almost like you're trout fishing for stripers.

September Night

It may be easy to confuse smaller baits like silversides and anchovies, but there's no mistaking the rounded cigar shape of mullet. You find them in worried pods along the Rhode Island coast in late summer and fall. The September Night is the brainchild of Ken Abrames. Here he describes the genesis of the fly.

"I looked at a mullet, then I went home and tied the fly. I went fishing that night in Newport [Rhode Island]—it was September—and caught over forty bass on it. I just let it swing to where the fish were holding, and they loved it. It may look fully dressed, but it's still a sparse fly. While it's got everything it needs, it doesn't have too much of anything. Tie it in full silhouette, about as thick around as a man's index finger."

I tie the September Night from 3½ to 9 inches long. Sometimes I tie it with a ginger or yellow marabou collar. This is a reliable year-round pattern that also works for trout and steelhead.

Big Eelie

I've caught more double-digit-pound stripers on the Big Eelie than on any other soft hackle. Another Abrames pattern, it's a high-confidence fly that I use whenever sand eels reach the three-inch mark. What makes the Big Eelie so effective is its profile. Sand eels are a slender bait, and the saddle hackles that form the tail are



BARRY & CATHY BECK

Just add water. Striper grandmaster Ken Abrames knows that's all you need to make soft-hackled flies (above) come to life. But remember, soft hackles are presentation flies (below). Match the bait in size, color, and profile, then present the fly like the naturals, and you'll catch more stripers.

pencil thin. In the water, the marabou collapses around the body like a veil, creating movement and an effect of dimensionality. I tie this fly in many different color schemes, from bright white/yellow/chartreuse to foreboding black/blue/purple, and all points in between. Stripers have said yes to all of them.

One June night on Block Island, stripers were ambushing sand eels where a sandy flat dropped off into deeper water. Their noisy feeding was clearly audible against the backdrop of rolling breakers. After three hours of virtually nonstop action, including some 15-pound fish, my thumb was raw and I was ready to call



DAVE SKOK

it a night. As I left, another fly angler who had been fishing 20 yards away—and not doing nearly so much catching—chased me down the beach. He had been fishing a dumbbell-eyed sand eel and wanted to know what fly I was using. With a smile, I reached into my box and handed him a Big Eelie.

Orange Ruthless

Each May, three mobs descend upon the salt ponds of South County, Rhode Island: clam worms, stripers, and fly anglers. The worms are there to mate, and the stripers, to eat. So both will be enjoying themselves as much as such creatures can. Anglers will often be a different story: angst, bewilderment, and even fury over too much bait and too few stripers that are willing to take their fly. Success boils down to presentation, perseverance, and luck. The right fly helps, too.

While Ken's Orange Ruthless is a single-feather flatwing, I believe its real magic stems from the soft, flowing hackle palmered along its body. In the water, each fiber comes alive, even when the fly is at rest. A good fly will catch when the bait it's supposed to imitate is present. A great fly will catch when there is no such bait close to where you're fishing. Ken puts it this way: "Stripers see clam worms all year long, and they like them." So do I, especially as a searching pattern on a three-fly team. And in the "go figure" department, I have done very well with this fly when small grass shrimps are swarming. While I sometimes go bigger or smaller, I like to tie the Orange Ruthless about two inches long.

Grass Shrimp Solution

Many fly tiers take great pains to create ultrarealistic shrimp patterns. Eyes, legs, body shells, tails, all rendered in minute detail. Don't get me wrong. I admire skilled craftsmanship as much as anyone. But it's unnecessary for catching fish. The Grass Shrimp Solution proves this, even if it wouldn't get a second look in a fly shop bin.

What a simple pattern—a few strands of bucktail, some dubbed rabbit fur or body braid, and a palmered soft hackle. It presents a tempting, translucent profile when viewed from below. The hen hackle moves like so many legs, declaring that this is no sham, but rather a living creature. I like this fly on



STEVE CULTON

BLOOD QUILL MARABOU

The King of Striper Soft Hackle

While striper flies use a diverse range of soft-hackling materials (hen, game birds, waterfowl), the clear favorite among tiers is marabou. The slightest movement or current gives a fly tied with marabou the breath of life. Marabou is inexpensive, widely available, and comes in colors from muted naturals to bold fluorescents. Because you'll be winding the marabou, you'll want to make sure the feather has a flexible stem. Stay away from marabou designated as Woolly Bugger or Extra Select, which have stiffer stems. Rather, look for blood quill marabou. It has long, flowing feather barbs, and because it is a relatively young feather, its soft stem makes it easy to handle.

Atlantic salmon hooks. The longer shank is an ideal match for the naturals, and even in smaller sizes like 8 or 10, you can be confident that the hook will be strong enough to handle a larger bass. I mostly stick to muted natural colors, but I've had success with this pattern in black, orange, and olive.

Soft-Hackled Flatwing

A former boss advised me, "Always steal from good sources." I



Grass Shrimp Solution

HOOK: Atlantic salmon, sizes 6 to 10.
THREAD: 6/0, color to match hackle color.
TAIL/ANTENNAE: Sparse bucktail taken from the tip of a tail.
BODY: Rabbit dubbing or Mylar braid (color of choice).
HACKLE: Soft, webby hen, palmered.



Soft-Hackled Flatwing

HOOK: Eagle Claw 253, sizes 1/0 to 3/0.
THREAD: 6/0 (color of choice).
TAIL: 30 bucktail hairs under matching color flatwing saddle, under two to four strands of Flashabou.
BODY: Mylar braid (color of choice).
WING: 30 to 45 bucktail hairs, under 10 to 20 bucktail hairs of contrasting color, under two to four strands of Krystal Flash or Flashabou.
COLLAR: Three to four turns of blood quill marabou tied in at the tip, and one turn of mallard flank (optional).



The Tick

HOOK: 2X-strong scud, sizes 10 to 16.
THREAD: Brown 6/0.
TAIL/ANTENNAE: Brown partridge fibers.
BODY: Gold Mylar braid.
HACKLE: Soft, webby brown hen, palmered.



followed her instructions to the letter with this fly. Part flatwing, part soft hackle, and a little bit of the traditional New England bucktail (like Ray's Fly) make this a union of fish-catching juju. I'm not trying to imitate any specific bait with this fly; its energy is pure attractor. The template lends itself to any number of color combinations, and I take great delight in tying and fishing it in some oddball palettes (such as fluorescent yellow, gray, and silver). Sometimes I will add a collar of teal or mallard over the marabou.


This is one of my favorite flies to fish during the spring run. Admittedly, the stripers aren't that picky about what they'll hit, but when I fish the Soft-Hackled Flatwing, I know I've tied on a fly that looks alive on the dead drift, the swing, the dangle, or

Anywhere there is current—tidal rivers and creeks, breachways, salt pond outflows, and pinch points around structure—is a good place to find fish (above), and if you find enough of them, expect “bass thumb,” the celebrated rough skin of a successful striper fisherman.

the strip. I've tied it bigger, but I think this fly's wheelhouse is 3½ inches long. Try it for smallies, too.

The Tick

Isopods are small, buglike crustaceans. There are thousands of marine species. In August, the rock bars of New England are filled with isopods—and the stripers that come to feed on this enormous biomass. It's tempting to be seduced by the mantra of, “big flies, big fish.” But any trout angler will tell you that size 22 to 28 Tricos produce some of the largest fish of the season. Like trout with tiny mayflies, stripers need to gorge on isopods, and filling themselves can take an entire tide.

Tie the Tick on a 2X-strong scud hook. I won't tell you that fishing for stripers with flies this small is easy. It can be downright maddening to stand on a jetty and see a school of 15-pound fish swirling at the surface, blithely ignoring your offerings. But when you hook your first striper on a fly whose size seems preposterous, you'll understand the beauty of contrarian fishing. To increase your chances of a hookup, try a team of three flies. And be prepared to ditch your 30-pound-test leader in favor of something in the single digits. The Tick also works as an imitation for baby crabs. Adjust the colors to match the bait. 

Steve Culton is an outdoor writer, guide, speaker, and fly tier. You can see more of his work at www.currentseams.com.

