

Soft Hackle Sow Bug Supper  
by  
Wallace Westfeldt February 12, 2009



I do not know of a sub-surface fly that produces more consistently on the Big Thompson than the Soft-Hackle Sow Bug. I fish it all year around. I usually fish #18 and will do so with a #24 midge on the same rig in the middle of winter when the water temperature is below 38 degrees. I will fish it at the top of the canyon below the dam and in the middle of the canyon. I will fish when sow-bugs are present and when they are not. And, I will almost always get hook-ups with it. The question is why? In order to answer the question, let's first explore the natural and then the pattern.

A sow-bug is the same thing as a pill-bug, roly poly, or scud. It is crustacean with a definable hard or soft segmented back shell.



It is easy to locate the natural by inspecting rocks along the bank. From time to time there are lots of them in the Big T. The ones I have seen have ranged in color from the picture above, to olive, to a lighter grey. When sow bugs are present, most anglers will look to their collection of scud patterns, as well they should. The first thing one might say when comparing the pictures of the natural and fly patten above is, "They don't look anything a like!" I would agree.

The Soft-Hackle Sow-Bug at the top of the page was tied by Charlie Craven and invented by some folks in Montana for the Big Horn River. The recipe for this pattern consists of fluorescent orange or red thread, Harline Cinnamon Caddis dubbing, and dun to tan colored neck hackle ... the softer the better.

I am convinced that one of the keys to the success of this pattern is how much it changes after it's soaking wet (5 to 10 drifts). The dubbing gets mushy and translucent allowing the fluorescent thread to glow through. The hackle has a tendency to drift in a bubble along the body (like a streamer) intensifying the "halo" effect. It still doesn't look like a sow bug to me and I never rig it as fly that is dredging the bottom. Rather it seems to be more effective in a free and wide ranging drift. Ring any bells yet? The bell that rings for me is an egg ... more specifically a filmy egg. In fact, I think it is a better egg pattern than several I have tied that are called egg patterns. It brings to

mind the subtly amusing comment from Pat Dorsey, “Yes, we have clients that won’t fish egg patterns. So, we give’em orange scuds and everybody’s happy.”

I have also noticed that when the hackle folds back sharply, it is highly reminiscent of many of the deep sparkle pupas in both shape and iridescence, if not color. And, with a little active drifting the longer hackle versions resemble a mini-streamer (fry?).

It useful to remember at this point, that this is an angler’s query and not likely debated among trout. In fact, it seems to me that many of the most successful fly patterns were first successful and then we try to figure out why. I am not one that suggests that fish swim around thinking “Wouldn’t it be nice to have full plate of diptera today?” Fish would rather eat and if doesn’t look wrong they will probably eat it. It turns that the Soft-Hackle Sow Bug looks a lot like food.

The pictures below were taken February 15, 2009, Top of Big Thompson (various spots below Olympia Dam).

- Water temperature 36 degrees
- Water flow 23 CFS, very clear
- Rig: indicators, #6 shot, #20 Black BH Zebra, #18 Soft Hackle Sowbug, #24 UV Midge (black); all on 7X
- Results: 15 fish, 90 minutes, two on UV Midge, two on Zebra, rest on Sowbug, Largest (15”) on Zebra



Sowbug at work



Sowbug again



15 inches on #20 BH Zebra, Black