

# THE HISTORY OF THE SALMON FLY

With elegant appearances and curious names such as the Emerald Gem and the Jock Scott, salmon flies intrigue non-fishers as much as fly fishers. Their fascinating evolution has been shaped by discoveries of bird species and finding new ways to marry feathers.

Fly fishers must have caught salmon since time began, but until the invention of the reel, landing one was another matter. Therefore, to begin with, there was little difference between salmon flies and trout flies, apart from their size. By the seventeenth century, however, the idea had taken hold that salmon were attracted to brighter flies than trout were, and a tradition started, hesitantly at first, of including rare and gaudy feathers and colorful materials in the wings and bodies of salmon flies. Salmon fishers in Britain started to use small quantities of fibers from the feathers of exotic birds like flamingo and parakeet to brighten up their flies, and the use of peacock tail became common, but there was no hint of what was to come. The majority of salmon flies were enormous by modern standards, with many being tied on hooks that were more than 2 in. (5 cm) long, and Scottish salmon flies often had multi-colored bodies and a second set of wings tied halfway down the shank. Despite the occasional flashes of color, the vast majority of these early flies used feathers from birds that could be found in the United Kingdom, such as mallard, red kite, and turkey.

Then the golden pheasant was discovered. It is very hard to overstate the influence that the discovery of this bird had, because it completely transformed the way salmon flies looked—an influence that stretches down to our time. There is virtually no feather on a golden pheasant that is not wholly spectacular, and watching a male display is an unforgettable experience (for you and I, anyway—the

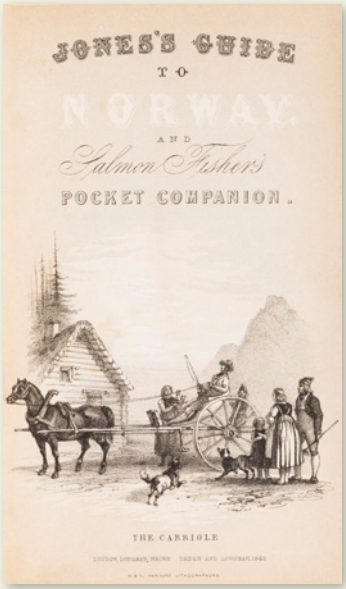


Nineteenth-century salmon flies. From top to bottom: The Durham Ranger tied by Alberto Calzolari. Emerald Gem tied by Long Nguyen. William Blacker's The Shannon, tied by Alberto Calzolari. The original dressing of the Jock Scott, tied by Alberto Calzolari.

females usually ignore them completely). The problem for salmon-fly dressers ("dressing" is an old term for pattern, or the instructions on how to make a fly) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was that golden pheasants were incredibly rare in Europe and the few that had been imported were held in well-protected private aviaries. One way or another, a few of their feathers found their way into the hands of salmon-fly dressers in Ireland, and the rest is history, as they say ...

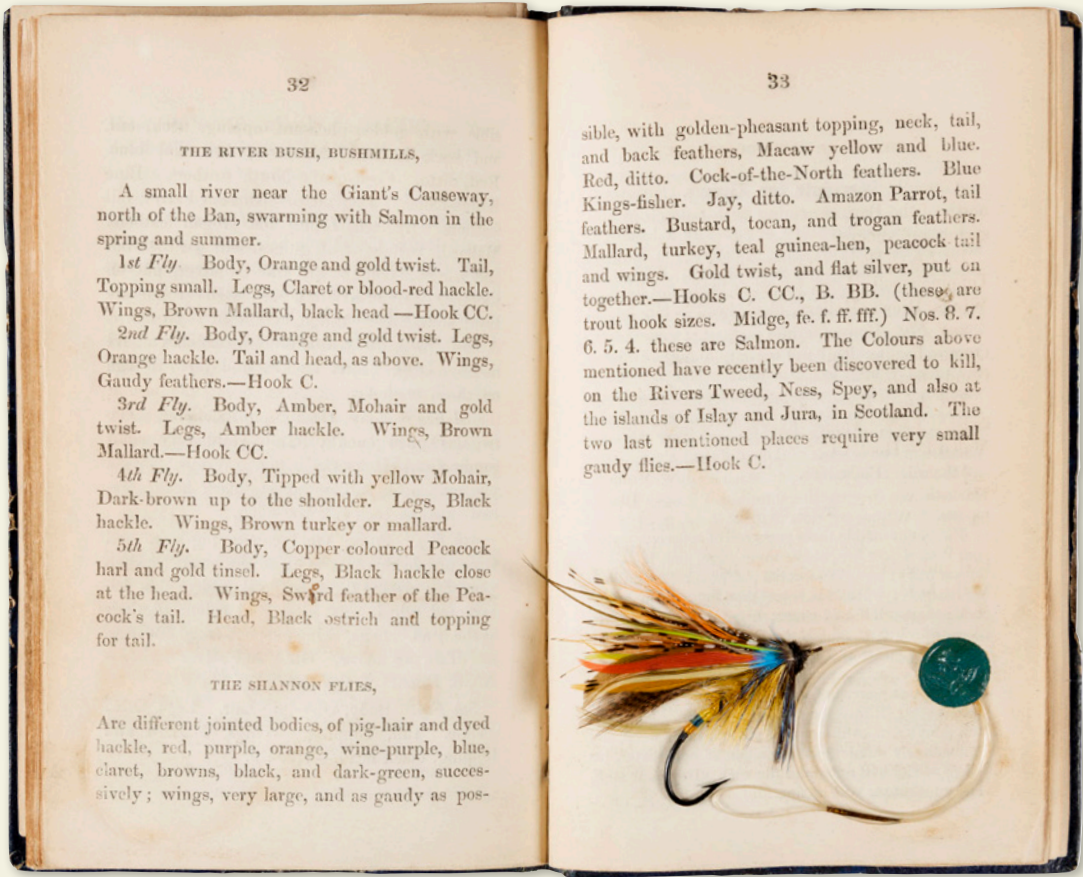
The first the world knew of the Irish reinvention of the salmon fly was in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when a few examples of the new breed of mixed wing flies began to find their way into the hands of British anglers. These flies were very different to the old style of salmon fly, which used strips of a single type of feather in the wings, and instead made use of many different types of feather to achieve striking color combinations. The use of golden pheasant crest feathers, which are a lush golden yellow—sometimes with blood red tips—became almost compulsory, and a whole world of possibilities opened up, as flytiers started to experiment with materials like bustard, cock-of-the-rock, toucan, blue chatterer, ibis, junglefowl, and wood duck, in addition to golden pheasant, macaw, and peacock. Suddenly, the old flies looked boring, and although they were just as effective at catching fish as the new Irish-style flies, they went out of fashion because they were not as good at catching the fishers.

The mixed wing style of salmon fly was popular until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when an unknown flytier discovered that it was possible to zip the fibers taken from different species of bird together to form a single unit. Doing so completely altered the look of salmon flies, because, instead of the wing fibers all being separate, as they had been in mixed wings, they were now "married" together into a single block. This style inevitably became known as the married wing. Many famous salmon flies, like the Jock Scott, started out as mixed wings but were altered to become married wings by English and Scottish flytiers, and salmon-fly patterns became incredibly complicated, time-consuming, and expensive to tie, with an entire pseudoscience growing up around why the flies were tied as they were. The salmon, of course, knew nothing of this, and kept on grabbing them out of pure aggression, because salmon, as we know, do not eat in freshwater—one of the ironies of salmon fly fishing.



Top: The title page of *Jones's Guide to Norway, and a Salmon Fisher's Pocket Companion*, published in 1848. The book by Frederic Tolfrey is a fly fishing classic, containing patterns and plate illustrations. Bottom: A very rare example of a salmon fly tied by William Blacker and tipped into his book, *Art of Angling*, published in 1842.

Married-wing salmon flies were popular for a very long time, but as the materials required to tie them became ever scarcer and more expensive, a search for a replacement began, a search that was fuelled by the knowledge that, attractive though married wings were, they were needlessly complex. By the 1960s, married-wing salmon flies were being replaced by a new style of fly called "hair wing," and these patterns used natural materials like dyed squirrel-tail fur, for example, to replace the exotic feathers that had been the rule up to then. Not only were hair wings dramatically cheaper, they were, it was discovered, just as effective as the married-wing flies they replaced, and within a short space of time the hair wing had completely taken over. The latest development is the use of man-made material to replace the animal hair, meaning many of today's salmon flies look nothing like those our fathers or mothers knew. But old habits die hard, and patterns like the Jock Scott, which is at least 150 years old, are still being fished today. ←



The antique plate illustrations taken from *Jones's Guide to Norway* and *Art of Angling* on this and the following pages (56–59) were kindly provided by Hermann Dietrich-Troeltsch.