

Softshell Crayfish Fly

As tied by Pete Yarrington at the January 2020 PPTU Fly Tying Meeting

This fly is essentially the pattern of the same name in Will Ryan's *Smallmouth Strategies for the Fly Rod*, Lyons and Burford 1996. As Mr. Ryan explains, he designed his fly to imitate a live softshell crayfish that he would pick out of a bait bucket if he really needed to catch a bass. Such a crayfish would be small, about one to 1.5 inches long, with a pale soft shell and small slender claws. He bases this on fishing successes and published studies of smallmouth foraging and prey selection. In a nutshell, bass will swim past a number of other crayfish in order to eat ones that are smaller, lighter in color (have recently molted), and have smaller, less defensive claws.

This fly works best for me on smallmouth when fished dead-drift in moving water, nymph-style, on a long 3x tippet with a large strike indicator. Think two- to six-foot-deep smallmouth riffle. It has proven to be especially effective in sunny, clear-water conditions, when fish are a little "shell-shocked" and are ignoring all the things we normally throw at them.

Materials

- Hook: Mustad 9671/R73 or similar, #4, 6 or 8
- Thread: Tan Danville Monocord or similar
- Weight: Lead or lead-free wire, approx. same diameter as hook shank, tied in keel-style
- Underbody: Light tan yarn or fine chenille, used to reduce amount of dubbing needed to form body.
- Body: Off-white/light tan heavy dubbing. Mine is about 90% light red fox tail fur with guard hairs removed, 10% red squirrel flank, with a very small amount of Pearl Ice Dub. Because these flies use a lot of dubbing, I mix a big batch of dubbing all at once by adding the fur to a large Mason jar half-full of water and swirling it for several minutes. When the mixture appears fairly homogenous, I pour it out through a sieve, blot it in several layers of paper towels, tease it out flat, and leave it to dry under a work light or in front of a heating duct.
- Antennae: Tan or light reddish brown feather fibers, such as Ringneck pheasant flank, or tan bucktail. No more than 6 or 8 fibers, tied in so lengths not all equal, with longest ones similar to length of shank.
- Claws: Small tufts of reddish brown fox or rabbit fur, or small clumps of reddish brown partridge or grouse (from larger feathers that would otherwise be waste).
- Legs: Large partridge, grouse, or other game bird breast/flank feather, one to 1.5 winds.
- Carapace: Butt ends of brown hair from the bottom of a large bucktail. I like either natural-colored bucktails or ones dyed "Tan." If possible, look over several bucktails and choose one with the most heavy, large-diameter (hollow) hair left at the bottom of the tail. This will help the thread sink into the hair when you rib it to form the fly's thorax and rib the tail.

When tying this fly, keep in mind that it's the overall shape and proportions that matter, not taming every fiber...

Step 1

Place the hook in the vise “right side up,” bend a slight hump into the shank, and tie three short pieces of lead wire along top of hook to act as “keel” and help the fly sink upside down. Put a couple drops of cement on the lead wire. Then tie in antennae.

**Step 2**

Flip the fly in vise so it is hook-side up. It will remain in this position for the remainder of fly construction. Tie in a piece of tan yarn, fine chenille, or other material and build up a tapered underbody.



Then cut a bunch of hair from the butt end of a natural or dyed-tan bucktail. For a size 4 or 6 hook, the bunch should be approximately the diameter of a pencil. Tie the bunch in on top of the fly in about the middle of the shank, with the butts extending over the hook bend. Do this by holding the hair above the hook, and using several loose wraps before tightening them up and continuing to wrap tightly. Be sure to bind down the hair all the way back to the point where the antennae emerge at the hook bend. Cut off any tips of the hair that extend over the hook eye.

Step 3

Dub the first third of the body, starting at the hook bend. Then tie in two very small bunches of fur or feather to represent the short claws. These should not extend much beyond the bend of the hook. Add a little more dubbing behind the claws as shown.

**Step 4**

Choose a large partridge flank feather or other webby game bird feather, with fiber lengths at least 1.5 times the gape of the hook. The feather does not need to have the fine barring you want for wet flies and nymphs. Strip off only the fluffiest stuff at the base of the feather, and then tie it in behind the claws and dubbing with the feather curve towards the eye of the hook as shown.



Step 5

Wind the feather one to 1.5 times around the hook, then tie it off and trim the extra. Now make a two- to three-inch loop in the tying thread and spin it into a single strand, and take several turns of the thread from the bobbin back over the base of the loop, and pull the loop out of the way. This doubled strand will be used to rib the fly in a moment.

**Step 6**

Dub the remainder of the body quite full, and let the thread hang about one eye length behind the eye. Now pull the bucktail over the top of the fly and bind it down at this same point. Wiggle the bucktail

bunch back and forth so that its centered on top of the fly and partially extends down the sides. Stroke the bucktail back several times in the process of doing this to help ensure all the hairs are pulled snugly back. Take several more winds to lock in the hair. Pull the feather fibers to each side if necessary to keep from binding them down when pulling the hair over, but don't sweat it if a few get caught up.



Step 7

Take the doubled piece of tying thread and make a full wind around the fly right behind the legs, creating the separation between the thorax and abdomen. Then take two or three more open wraps back to where the tying thread is hanging, creating the segmentations in the abdomen. Tie off the doubled thread at the end of the abdomen very securely, take a few more wraps and then whip finish. Cut off the remaining thread and the rest of the doubled thread loop. Trim off the remaining loose bucktail about even with the end of the hook eye.

Step 8

Take the fly out of the vise and use a dubbing brush to fuzz up the dubbing on the bottom and sides of the fly. Now trim most of the fuzzy dubbing and hackle fiber legs from the bottom of the fly, but not the sides. This, in addition to the bent shank and the position of the lead keel, help the fly sink hook-up.



Apply several drops of cement to the top and bottom of the tie-off area, and you're done. When I am done tying, I bend the gape of the hook slightly to one side to increase the gape a little. I haven't done that yet in this photo.