



SEAN DAHLQUIST

Champions Classic
Northwest Steelhead Flies



While our craft has become consumed with the newest flies and synthetic materials, Glenn Zinkus says this young tier has a passion for the timeless patterns.

Steelhead are a noble game fish. Whether they are silvery fresh from the Pacific Ocean or the natural red, pink, and shades of green from spending time in their natal rivers, steelhead are beautiful. Muscular from long ocean voyages, they are a most desirable quarry.

Gallant fish deserve equally resplendent flies. Sean Dahlquist, of Sequim, Washington, ties extraordinarily beautiful classic steelhead and Atlantic salmon patterns. From a young age—and he still is young—Sean has been a student of all things fly tying, especially classic steelhead flies: the pattern recipes, their histories, the special materials and tying techniques, and the tiers who came before him. The history and tradition of steelhead flies are as rich as the verdant forests surrounding the waters steelhead swim. Sean is blessed with a natural artistic ability, dressing perfectly executed flies and creating artwork that hangs on the walls of serious steelheaders throughout the Northwest. Today he is one of the best at tying these flies.

Fly Tying Influences

Sean hails from a region that has great steelhead fly fishing history, which includes such great Northwest tiers as Syd Glasso, Walt Johnson, Wes Drain, and many others. In a conversation with Sean, I asked him about the influences behind his tying. Sean grew up with fly tying before he even understood what the process was all about; his father was a serious steelhead angler and fly tier. Although he might not have understood the process as a toddler, he was nevertheless fascinated by the colorful array of silks, tinsels, and brilliant feathers used to make these flies.

Sean's strongest influences include "Glasso, who influenced everybody," and Walt Johnson, who began tying steelhead Spey flies after his experiences of fishing with Glasso and seeing his flies. Sean went on to describe the traits of both men's patterns.

"I love the hackle-tip wings and the steelhead Spey style," he said.

Because of the explosion of patterns he created, Dave McNeese is another significant influence. Dave introduced more colors and materials into his patterns, and he and his flies are just as influential as those of Syd and Walt.

Sean is in regular communication with Dave McNeese and a cadre of other high-caliber fly tiers. They typically see each other several times every year at various fly tying shows. Dave recalls the first time he met Sean; it was at the Atlantic Salmon Fly International exposition in 2014 in Seattle, Washington. They were assigned tying stations next

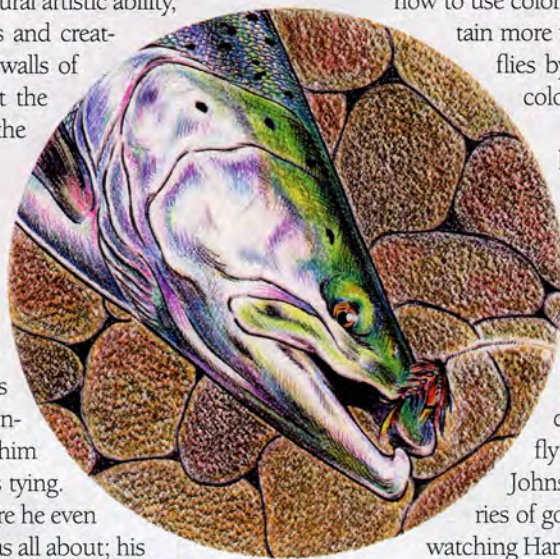
to each other. Dave, in his inimitable style, tells it like this.

"This snout-nosed kid sits down next to me and sets up," Dave reminisces. "I've never seen him before. I was cranking out some steelhead flies and then I look over at Sean. I say, 'Geez, you're the slowest fly tier I've ever seen.'"

Dave continued to lightheartedly rib his fellow tier throughout the session as Sean would tie part of a fly, unwind it, and retie it again until he was satisfied. When the fly was finished, it was just gorgeous, and Dave thought, "Maybe I should just slow down a bit."

For the last half dozen years, Sean, his best friend and fly tying compatriot, Nick Riggs, along with other tiers of the classics such as Oregon's Jon Harrang, have gotten together at McNeese's home to dye and trade materials, and to tie flies. Dave relishes the opportunity to teach tiers how to use color in their patterns, and how to obtain more intensity in the color of steelhead flies by means of dyeing and blending colors.

Sean has developed an even larger community of fly tying friends through the Northwest Atlantic Salmon Guild. Sean joined the guild approximately 10 years ago; at that time he was certainly among the youngest members. Sean was well received and had opportunities to discuss the craft with world-class fly tiers and steelheaders from Walt Johnson's era. Sean has vivid memories of going to his first guild meeting and watching Harry Lemire tie a Jock Scott in hand.



Sean on Fly Design

When designing flies, Sean says, "I am, in a sense, a traditionalist, and I have an affinity for tying hackle-tipping Spey flies, particularly the Walt Johnson hen-hackle Spey flies."

Bob Veverka, who once wrote that a fly should look as if it were swimming while still in the vise, has also influenced Sean's work. Sean says about Bob's comment: "This is right on." Glasso's and Johnson's flies had that look, and Sean concludes: "I try to think about that while I tie these flies." While Sean does not precisely copy what Syd Glasso and Walter Johnson did, he strives to achieve the right look and attain the proper flow on the curves of the feathers.

Sean has tied Syd Glasso Spey flies for more than a decade. Ever the talented perfectionist, he feels that despite the short list of required materials and the Spartan appearance of a Glasso pattern, it is more difficult to give a steelhead fly the right look compared with tying a full-dress Atlantic salmon pattern. There is a real art to the Spey fly.

DRAIN'S 20

ORIGINATED BY WES DRAIN

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Tip: Silver flat tinsel.

Tag: Fluorescent-yellow floss.

Tail: Golden pheasant tippet topped with yellow toucan or a substitute.

Body: Fluorescent-red floss.

Rib: Silver flat tinsel.

Hackle: Purple.

Underwing: Red cock-of-the-rock feather or a substitute.

Wing: Gray squirrel tail.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.



STEELHEAD KELLY

ORIGINATED BY WES DRAIN

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Fluorescent-yellow floss.

Tail: Red hackle fibers.

Body: Fluorescent-green fur dubbing (chenille on the original).

Rib: Flat silver tinsel.

Hackle: Black.

Wing: Coyote or raccoon tail.



SKYKOMISH SUNRISE

ORIGINATED BY GEORGE MCCLEOD

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Silver flat tinsel.

Tail: Yellow over red hackle fibers.

Body: Scarlet dubbing (chenille on the original).

Rib: Silver oval tinsel.

Hackle: Red and yellow, wrapped together.

Wing: White bucktail or polar bear hair.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.



Fishing Flies First and Foremost

As beautiful as they are, steelhead flies are meant to catch fish. Syd Glasso developed his patterns at a time when there were only a handful of other anglers on the rivers. As Sean says, "Syd tied these for himself and the fish. They are fishing flies first and foremost, but at the same time they are among the best flies ever tied."

Sean primarily uses natural materials. Take his Tippet Spey series of patterns. "I started tying the Tippet Speys while experimenting with using various nontypical feathers as Spey hackles. Using heron is illegal and blue-eared pheasant is sometimes scarce, so I began using alternatives such as ring-necked pheasant rump feathers like Walt Johnson, waterfowl flank as Wentworth and Glasso often did, and eventually golden pheasant tippets." Sean notes there are several very old classic salmon flies that use golden pheasant as a collar, and a few even feature it as body hackles.

Sean once saw a McNeese steelhead fly that had a dyed golden tippet as a Spey hackle that was much prettier and fishier than the old salmon patterns, so he decided give it a try. Placing a long, flowing collar hackle over the palmered tippets gave the pattern that Spey-style look and made for a real fishy-looking fly.

Sean uses many other materials. He makes generous use of metal tinsels; less frequently, Sean uses some synthetics, especially if a classic fly recipe calls for those ingredients.

Small thread heads are a hallmark of Sean's flies; they are very neat and flawlessly executed. Note, however, that Sean isn't striving to wrap tiny heads; for him it is all about the shape and cleanliness of the heads that melt perfectly into the hooks. Look at the actual flies Syd or Walt tied; they have this incredible taper that leaves ample room to tie the flies to a tippet.

Sean the Artist

Creating works of art is in Sean's blood. He attributes his feel for art to his father, a talented landscape

photographer. As Sean says, "Some of his landscape works are amazing. It is criminal that he is unknown for what he can do with photography."

Sean was always known as a kid who could draw. He was a standout in his high school art classes and eventually won national scholastic art awards. This aptitude culminated in a trip to Carnegie Hall to receive yet another art award. Life was pretty cool; Sean built a portfolio of his work, and upon graduating high school he found himself with an art school scholarship. Unfortunately, the school abruptly closed soon into Sean's freshman year, and he moved away from art as a potential career.

Today, Sean produces stunning drawings related to fly fishing such as still lifes of landed steelhead and salmon, often with classic flies. He draws these for friends and others who eagerly seek his artwork.

Sean is also a frequent contributor to magazines, often writing on aspects of classic steelhead fly history such as the tiers, regional patterns, and materials. Sean and Nick talk of writing a book about tying steelhead flies. They have all that it will take—ability, talent, and energy.

Sean concluded one of our conversations by saying, "I love tying the classics. I love exploring this style of fly." Sean says he goes back to the flies tied several years ago and wonders what he was thinking at the time, and he hopes his tying will continue to improve. This is

hard to imagine: look at a Sean Dahlquist fly from the past or today, and it's next to impossible to find flaws. But Sean knows his tying abilities have not plateaued; he continues to get better, and he might move on to tying modern steelhead flies. Intruders and tube flies are obviously effective for catching fish, and some are beautifully tied. For now, however, there are still challenges and much to learn in tying the classics.

Glenn Zinkus loves fishing for almost everything, but his real passion is steelhead. And why not? He lives in Oregon.



DEEP PURPLE SPEY

ORIGINATED BY WALT JOHNSON

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Body: Deep purple mohair or dubbing wound tight.

Rib: Flat silver tinsel.

Hackle: Dark-brown ring-necked pheasant rump feather.

Collar: Deep-purple soft hackle.

Wing: Red golden pheasant body feathers.



SOL DUC SPEY

ORIGINATED BY SYD GLASSO

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Body: The rear half is fluorescent-orange floss, and the front half is hot-orange seal dubbing substitute.

Rib: Flat silver tinsel.

Hackle: Yellow schlappen.

Throat: Black heron substitute.

Wing: Four hot-orange hackle tips.



SOL DUC

ORIGINATED BY SYD GLASSO

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Tip: Flat silver tinsel.

Tail: Golden pheasant crest.

Body: The rear half is fluorescent-orange floss, and the front half is hot-orange seal dubbing substitute.

Rib: Flat silver tinsel.

Hackle: Yellow.

Wing: Four matching hot-orange hackle tips and golden pheasant crest.

Throat: Teal flank.





PURPLE PRINCE

ORIGINATED BY DAVE MCNEESE

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Orange 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Fine flat silver tinsel.

Tail: Golden pheasant crest and Indian crow substitute.

Body: The rear half is fluorescent-red floss, and the front half is fluorescent-hot-orange seal dubbing substitute.

Rib: Fine oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Hot-purple pintail flank.

Wing: Hot-orange hackle tips and purple golden pheasant flank.

Topping: Two golden pheasant crests.

Throat: Long pintail flank.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.



SOL DUC PURPLE

ORIGINATED BY SEAN DAHLQUIST

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Small flat silver tinsel.

Tail: Amherst pheasant crest.

Body: The rear half is fluorescent red-orange floss, and the front half is deep-purple dubbing.

Rib: Medium silver oval tinsel.

Hackle: Black rooster neck hackle from the second wrap of the rib.

Collar: Purple rooster neck hackle.

Wing: Deep purple grizzly hackles.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.



ORANGE HERON

ORIGINATED BY SYD GLASSO

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Body: The rear two-thirds is orange floss, and the front one-third is orange seal dubbing substitute.

Rib: Medium or wide silver tinsel overlaid with narrow oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Gray heron substitute.

Throat: Teal flank.

Wing: Four hot-orange hackle tips.

BRAD'S BRAT

ORIGINATED BY ENOS BRADNER

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Orange 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Flat gold tinsel.

Tail: Orange hackle fibers.

Body: The rear half is orange wool yarn, and the front half is red wool yarn.

Rib: Oval gold tinsel.

Hackle: Brown mallard flank.

Wing: Orange over polar bear or white bucktail.

Cheeks (optional): Jungle cock.



GREEN BUTT SKUNK

ORIGINATED BY DAN CALLAGHAN

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Tip: Flat silver tinsel.

Tail: Red hackle fibers.

Butt: Fluorescent-green floss.

Body: Black floss.

Rib: Flat or oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Black.

Wing: Polar bear or white calftail.



KINGFISHER SPEY

ORIGINATED BY WALT JOHNSON

Tail: Blue Amherst pheasant tippets.

Thread: White 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Flat silver tinsel.

Tail: Blue golden pheasant tippet.

Body: Light-blue floss.

Rib: Flat silver tinsel.

Hackle: Gray Spey hackle.

Wing: Light-blue hackles.

Throat: Light-blue hen hackle and strands of silver pheasant fibers.

Cheeks: Brown hen hackle.

Topping: Blue Amherst pheasant crest.





BLUE CHARM

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Fine silver wire or oval tinsel.

Tail: Golden pheasant crest.

Butt: Golden-yellow floss.

Body: Black floss.

Rib: Fine oval silver tinsel.

Throat: Blue hackle fibers.

Wing: Bronze mallard veiled on the upper half with narrow strips of barred teal flank.

Topping: Golden pheasant crest.



WHITE AKROYD

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Black 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Oval silver tinsel.

Tail: Golden pheasant crest and tippet fibers.

Body: The rear half is yellow seal dubbing substitute, and the front half is black floss.

Rib: Oval silver tinsel and a yellow hackle wrapped over the rear half of the body. Wrap a black heron or dyed blue-eared pheasant over the front half of the body.

Throat: Teal.

Wing: Strips of white turkey wing.

Cheeks: Jungle cock angling down.



TIPPET SPEY #1

ORIGINATED BY SEAN DAHLQUIST

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Body: The rear one-third is oval silver tinsel, the middle one-third is fluorescent-pink floss, and the front one-third is purple dubbing.

Rib: Medium oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Gray golden pheasant tippet beginning at the third wrap of the tinsel rib.

Collar: Blue-eared pheasant dyed blue and a blue guinea fowl feather.

Wing: Purple grizzly hackles.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.

TIPPET SPEY #2

ORIGINATED BY SEAN DAHLQUIST

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Small flat silver tinsel.

Body: The rear one-third is orange floss, the middle one-third is small silver oval tinsel, and the front one-third is fluorescent-pink dubbing.

Rib: Medium oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Orange golden pheasant tippet beginning at the third wrap of the tinsel rib.

Collar: Blue-eared pheasant hackle followed by guinea fowl.

Wing: Lavender grizzly hackles over a pair of hot-pink badger hackles.



TIPPET SPEY #3

ORIGINATED BY SEAN DAHLQUIST

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Wine 8/0 (70 denier).

Tag: Small flat silver tinsel.

Body: The rear one-third is orange floss, and the remainder is reddish-orange dubbing.

Rib: Medium oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Red golden pheasant tippet beginning at the third wrap of the tinsel rib.

Collar: Blue-eared pheasant hackle followed by a teal flank feather.

Wing: Purple-red grizzly hackles.

Cheeks: Jungle cock.



TIPPET SPEY #5

ORIGINATED BY SEAN DAHLQUIST

Hook: Your favorite steelhead hook.

Thread: Orange 8/0 (70 denier).

Body: The rear one-third is small oval silver tinsel, and the remainder is hot-orange dubbing.

Rib: Medium oval silver tinsel.

Hackle: Orange golden pheasant tippet beginning at the third wrap of the tinsel rib.

Collar: Hot-orange blue-eared pheasant hackle followed by teal.

Wing: Purple grizzly hackles.

