Tying dry flies is one of my favorite things to do. I love creating tightly tapered dubbed bodies, up-righting the wings, and wrapping the hackle. All this gratification, however, did not come until after I learned the proper and most efficient ways of making dry-fly wings.

The wings on traditional dry flies have many different uses. Most obvious, they represent the wings of an adult mayfly, but they also have other functions. For example, calftail wings offer greater visibility, durability, and flotation. Compar-a-dun wings help create the proper form on the water by ensuring that the fly doesn’t land upside down.

How you tie the wings directly relates to the neatness and fishability of your fly. For instance, how you deal with the butt ends of the wings influences the taper of the completed body. And if the wings are crooked, too stiff, or too tall, the fly might spin on the end of your leader and cause a tangled mess.

For decades, fly tiers have been devising ways to imitate the wings of a mayfly. The author shows us five methods for tying these wings.
General Guidelines

Here are the guidelines I follow when making all my dry flies. Hopefully you can incorporate these into your own fly-tying repertoire.

Determining how tall to make the wings is first. I use the hook as a convenient measuring device. The wings on most of my flies equal the distance from the hook eye to the middle of the bend. I also like my wings to be about a third higher than the wrapped hackle collar.

I tie the wings on at the one-sixth point of the hook shank; in other words, in the middle of the front third of the shank. (Be sure to subtract a small space from that measurement to leave room for the head of the fly.) Traditional dry-fly proportions require allocating two-thirds of the shank for the abdomen; one-third of the shank is used for the thorax, which is usually just the wings and hackling. However, if you are tying a fly for fishing rough water and want to add additional hackle, you can stretch this rule and allocate more space for the thorax.

Use a pinch wrap when tying on the wings. You’ll find out how important this method is when tying duck-quill wings. After tying on the wings, I do not cut the butts at an angle. Even if you cut the tail butts off at an angle, the wing butts will never match up exactly with the tail butts. Later, when making the body of the fly, this uneven junction will become magnified. I just clip the wing butts straight off where the abdomen will meet the thorax. This creates a flatter platform for the hackle, and you can wrap a much smoother and evenly tapered abdomen using only thread.

Finally, I wrap a little dubbing on the thorax before wrapping the hackle collar. My good friend Robert Schreiner showed me this trick. The thorax style of fly popularized by Mike Lawson usually requires dubbing under the hackle, but Bob adds this on all his dry flies. The most obvious reason is because the thorax on a mayfly is always thicker than the abdomen, and the silhouette of one of Robert’s imitations looks much fuller and more realistic. The dubbing also creates an even platform for the hackle and helps maintain an even transition from the body to in front of the wings.

Tying Hen Hackle Wings

1. Choose two matching hen hackles. Strip the fibers off the base of each stem until the wings equal the length of the hook shank.
2. Place the feathers together so the wings are equal in length.
3. Tie the wings on top of the hook using loose pinch wraps.
4. Secure the wings with firm wraps of thread. Clip the butt ends and pull the wings upright. Wrap thread in front and behind the wings to keep them cocked up.
5. The wings should splay out. If you prefer them flared more, make several X wraps between the feathers.
6. The wings are complete, and you can now finish the fly.

March Brown

HOOK: Mustad R30 or an equivalent dry-fly hook, size 14 or 12.
THREAD: Dun or tan 8/0 (70 denier).
WING: Natural brown hen hackle tips.
TAIL: Medium dun hackle fibers.
BODY: Brown striped hackle stem.
THORAX: Black Superfine dubbing.
HACKLE: Grizzly variant.

What a lovely mayfly dun! Use the author’s suggestions for tying wings that imitate the wings of real mayflies.

Hen Hackle and Duck Quill Wings

Flies featuring hen hackle tip wings, such as the Adams, are universally popular. They are...
easy to tie, and there are numerous shades of natural and dyed hen hackle to create pattern variations. Hen hackle is much better than stiff dry-fly hackle for making wings. The web on hen hackle helps maintain the shape of the wings, and they are more visible than wings made from dryly hackle.

Duck quill wings are popular on Catskill dry flies. Crafting these delicate wings is almost a lost art because many tiers have moved on to more modern styles of patterns. Even though they might not be commonly used, I think duck quill wings are the most beautiful style of wings.

When selecting duck feathers for wings, be sure to select matched pairs of quills that are clean and have minimal wear along the edges. Cut slips from the middle of both the right- and left-side feathers. The width of the wings should equal approximately three-fourths of the hook gap; if the slips are too wide or they do not match, remove some fibers using a bodkin or sewing needle. Place the slips together so they splay away from each other.

When tying on the wings, do not wrap over the shiny sections where the quills begin to widen. Tying over these sections will cause the slips to separate and twist. After the wings are in the upright position, grasp the tips and force a bodkin between the slips to splay the wings farther apart. For fishing flies, you can make a couple of figure-eight wraps to lock the wings into this splayed position, but beware that this might cause the wings to twist and fold somewhat.

Hair Wings and More
Hair wings do not exactly imitate mayfly wings, but they do make a fly more visible on the water. Hair wings are popular on attractor patterns for less-educated fish when the shape of the wings is not so important. Dyed pink and yellow calftail hair make a fly even more visible for rough-water streams. Remember to always stack a clump of calftail before tying the wing; you may have to stack it a couple of times to even the tips.

Wood-duck flank feathers are also popular for tying wings. If you want to tie lots of wood-duck wings, try making friends with some hunters because high-quality lemon...
Wood duck feathers are not cheap. It is also possible to use dyed mallard flank if you need large quantities of feathers.

Flank wings are tied exactly like hair wings, except there is no stacking and they are somewhat easier to make because there is less bulk. Although I have seen many different ways of bunched the fibers together before tying the wings, I find that as long as the end of the feather is fairly even, I do not have to strip the individual fibers off the stem or cut out the center fibers. Just pull away the shorter fibers and fuzz from the bottom of the feather, and stroke the remaining fibers up with the stem. Measure the height of the wing using the hook as a guide, and tie it on using a tight pinch wrap. Next, pull the wings up into position and divide. Finally, make a few wraps around the base of each wing post.

The Compara-dun is not a traditional Catskill dry fly, but it has been around for a while. The Compara-dun creates a very accurate silhouette of a mayfly dun sitting still on the water’s surface. Unlike the wings on all the previous flies, the Compara-dun relies on its deer-hair wing to stay afloat. Be sure to use spinning-type deer hair that will have some flare. This type of hair is hollow and will improve flotation. You can tie a Compara-dun wing a little shorter than the previous styles of wings.

Traditional dry flies are fun to tie. Sometimes I make them purely for relaxation; after all, the reason we tie flies is not just to catch fish or save money. If that were the case, we’d all just buy our flies. I hope these tips help you become a little more proficient at tying dry flies. Have fun!

Caleb Boyle is one of those authors every editor dreams of discovering: young, energetic, and talented. Although he is only 19 years old, Caleb is already making an impact in fly fishing and tying. He is working on more articles for this magazine. One of those pieces will describe everything we need to know about how to tie diminutive dry flies. When we discussed this subject with him, he agreed to use a complete Fan-wing Coachman as his model for the tying photographs. “Can you tie it on a size twenty hook?” we asked. “I think that’s a little too big, don’t you?” he replied. Stay tuned for that great article!