



## “Spey” Hackle – Which One is Right for My Fly?

Over the years, we have been asked a lot of questions about what hackle to use on certain fly patterns. With so many choices of feathers we wanted to clear up a few things about which feathers are suited best to “spey” flies and achieving desired looks on hooks and tubes.



We should note here, this article will refer to `Spey` style patterns. Traditional Spey flies do adhere to several characteristics that make them Speys. Many traditional Spey tiers are very protective about what a true Spey fly is, and they should be! There is a rich tying history behind true Spey flies. When we say `Spey` style, we are referring to only the attribute of a longer, flowing hackle that usually extends beyond the bend of the hook.

The picture below is a shot of many of the feathers we offer tied on a 1.5 Alec Jackson Spey Hook. Often a picture is worth a thousand words! These of course are not completed flies, but just a picture of that feather tied over a small amount of seal dubbing. When taking this picture, we wanted to showcase only the plume as it looks when building a pattern. As you can see, there is a very different look achieved by using these different hackles. It is pretty easy to see that if you want length, our large heron is the way to go. This is the feather that tiers that are creating shadow box quality ties on large irons. That being said, longer is not always better, especially when you are creating patterns that will see the water and hopefully some fish!



# Heron

The ORIGINAL spey feather (other than the extinct Spey Cock) and by far the most popular feather we offer. This heron is dyed over the natural chocolate colour. The dye jobs are strong, though they are covering a darker colour in most cases. This gives the feathers a natural looking transition where the bright dye colour is very evident at the base of the plume and the colour gets darker as you move up the feather. Our heron comes in two sizes. The large plumes have an overall feather length of 5-7 inches and a barb length of (on average) 3 inches. The medium size has an overall feather length of between 3-5 inches with a barb length (on average) of 2 inches.



<b><i>Large Heron * 5-7 inch length</i></b>		
<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Best feather for traditional looking spey flies</li> <li>- Incredible movement in the current</li> <li>- very thin stem that makes very small heads</li> <li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side</li> <li>- the fibers are strong in that they have not been chemically treated or 'burnt'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More expensive than other hackles</li> <li>- sometimes too long for smaller hooks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks sized # 1.5 and larger</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li> </ul>





<b><i>Medium Heron * 3-5 inch</i></b>		
<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Best feather for traditional looking spey flies</li> <li>- Incredible movement in the current</li> <li>- very thin stem that makes very small heads</li> <li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side</li> <li>- the fibers are strong in that they have not been chemically treated or 'burnt'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More expensive than other hackles</li> <li>- sometimes too short for larger hooks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks sized #3 and smaller</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li> </ul>



# Grey Heron

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Grey Heron is another fantastic feather and is perfect for spey flies, spey style tube flies, as well as Intruder style flies. Although the overall length of Grey Heron is longer than our regular heron, the barb length does not vary dramatically. This (especially with the XL Grey Heron) gives you much more length of feather to wrap on your hook, shank, or tube. Often, we have tied large flies and still had too much feather to wrap on. With the XL size, often you can get more than 10 wraps on a small diameter tube or very large gauge hook. The XLarge plumes have an overall feather length of 8-10 inches and a barb length of (on average) 3.5 inches. The Large size has an overall feather length of between 5-8 inches with a barb length (on average) of 3 inches.



## ***Extra Large Grey Heron \* 8 -10 inch***

<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- best feather for tube flies and very large hooks</li> <li>- longest `wrappable` feather (5 or 6 inches)</li> <li>- good movement in the current</li> <li>- a plume can sometimes be used for more than one fly</li> <li>- most durable barbs when they get into fish teeth – they have not been chemically burned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More expensive than other hackles</li> <li>- sometimes too long for smaller hooks</li> <li>- thicker stem than other plumes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 and larger</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li> <li>- great or Intruder style flies too</li> </ul>



## ***Large Grey Heron \* 5-8 inch***

<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Best feather for tube flies and very large hooks</li> <li>- longest `wrappable` feather (3 or 4 inches)</li> <li>- good movement in the current</li> <li>- a plume can sometimes be used for more than one fly</li> <li>- most durable barbs when they get into fish teeth – they have not been chemically burned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More expensive than other hackles</li> <li>- thicker stem than other plumes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks between #1.5 – #3/0</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li> </ul>



# The 'Other' Feathers!

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Heron is by far our most popular plume, especially for 'spey' style patterns. That being said, there are still several plumes that can give a look of the long flowing feather. The biggest advantage of all of the 'other' feathers, is price. Most of these feathers come in packs with dozens of plumes. They are much more economical. Many of these feathers can also be used in many different ways (as wings, collars, etc.).



# Pheasant Rump

These beautiful feathers can be used as 'poor man's spey' hackles on a variety of flies. These come complete in strung packages of between 30-40 feathers. Most are suitable for hackles and shell backs on patterns such as General Practitioners.

<i><b>Pheasant Rump</b></i>		
<i><b>Pros</b></i>	<i><b>Cons</b></i>	<i><b>Suggestions</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- very inexpensive</li><li>- a great feather for creating a 'buggy' look</li><li>- good movement in the current</li><li>- reasonably thin stem that makes small heads</li><li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side</li><li>- look great as 'shellback' wings on flies to, like a General Practitioner</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- barbs can be a bit delicate</li><li>- plumes have a shorter length of useable feather</li><li>- shorter barbs compared to heron and burnt goose</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 and smaller</li><li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li><li>- work best when tied in as body hackle and then again at collar (2 feathers for 1 fly)</li></ul>







## *XL Hackle*

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We have spent a good deal of time finding extra-large hackle suitable for wrapping larger diameter tubes. Anyone who has tied a great deal of tube flies knows that when you need a feather to palmer over an entire tube, you need one with length. The diameter of the tube eats up regular sized hackles pretty quick. These hackles come in packages of 50-70 feathers and are hand selected for their length.

## ***Extra Large Hackle***

<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- very inexpensive</li> <li>- a long length of 'wrappable' feather</li> <li>- great feather for creating a 'bushy' look</li> <li>- reasonably thin stem that makes small heads</li> <li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side though it can be to control how sparse you would like it</li> <li>- great when used to prop up a collar feather</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- barbs have little movement in the current</li> <li>- stems are thin but can sometimes be brittle</li> <li>- shorter barbs compared to heron and burnt goose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 and smaller</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip</li> <li>- work best when tied in as body hackle</li> </ul>





# Mallard Flank

They are not the standard mallard that are dyed over an almost white feather and have been picked through. These mallard flank plumes come straight from the large birds to our processing facilities which means that these packs have many of the large feathers suitable for large spey flies. Packaged in bags of 60-100 mixed sizes, including several XXL plumes. Mallard flank feathers not only serve well as a 'spey' feather, they are probably our favourite feather for making sharp looking collars on flies.

<b>Mallard Flank</b>		
<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Suggestions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- very inexpensive</li><li>- come in large packs of multi sized feathers from XXL to small</li><li>- good movement in the current</li><li>- reasonably thin stem on the useable feather length</li><li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side</li><li>- great as body hackle and even better as a collar</li><li>- fantastic variegated look</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- barbs can be a bit 'clumpy' (stick together too much)</li><li>- plumes have a shorter length of useable feather</li><li>- shorter barbs compared to heron and burnt goose</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 and smaller</li><li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li><li>- work best when tied in as body hackle and then again at collar (2 feathers for 1 fly)</li></ul>





## *Burnt Goose*

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These extra-large, select goose feathers, are a good substitute for true spey feathers (like heron). They have been lightly "burnt" with a chemical solution to remove the webby fiber that make the barbs stick together. Their best quality is that you can easily control how bushy you would like your fly by easily stripping one side of the plume before tying it on. Once you have a bit of practice, these feathers can also be split with a blade to make one feathers into two.



<b><i>Burnt Goose</i></b>		
<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More inexpensive than heron</li> <li>- great feather for somewhat traditional looking spey flies</li> <li>- good movement in the current</li> <li>- almost the entire plume can be used and does not need to be stripped on one side though it can be for a sparser look</li> <li>- can be split with a razor to make 1 feather into 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sometimes too long for smaller hooks</li> <li>- thicker stem than other feathers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 – #3/0</li> <li>- best tied in by the tip and stripped on one side</li> </ul>



# Burnt Grey Goose Spey

We've been developing a process that creates the look of a traditional spey feather but doesn't completely dry out and "burn" the stem of the feather that has to be wound against a shank or tube. Our Large Grey Goose that has been chemically treated and then re-moisturized is just that. Finally, a spey feather that has the burnt look to the hackle barbs but not the dried-out stem. No need to soak these little beauties before you wind them on! We particularly like using Grey Goose because the plumes are not one solid colour. They are dyed over a mottled natural plume.

<b><i>Burnt Grey Goose</i></b>		
<b><i>Pros</i></b>	<b><i>Cons</i></b>	<b><i>Suggestions</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- More inexpensive than heron</li><li>- great feather for somewhat traditional looking spey flies</li><li>- good movement in the current</li><li>- almost the entire plume can used and does not need to be stripped on one side though it can be for a sparser look</li><li>- can be split with a razor to make 1 feather into 2</li><li>- natural mottled look, not just a solid dyed colour</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- sometimes too long for smaller hooks</li><li>- thicker stem than other feathers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 – # 3/0</li><li>- best tied in by the tip and stripped on one side</li></ul>







## *Schlappen Spey*

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We always used to get excited when we opened a package of schlappen and found the one or two feathers that seemed to not matt together like all of the other 'regular' schlappen.....they were perfect as spey hackle. Our new process takes our extra large schlappen and removes all of the webby microfibers that make the barbs stick together. We also rehydrate the feathers so that the stem is left supple and not at all brittle like so many other commercial spey substitutes. This gives the same look as burnt goose shoulders, except the stems are much thinner and not at all brittle. No need to soak these plumes in warm water before you spin them on!

## ***Schlappen Spey***

<i><b>Pros</b></i>	<i><b>Cons</b></i>	<i><b>Suggestions</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- inexpensive</li><li>- good movement in the current</li><li>- very thin stem that makes very small heads</li><li>- the entire plume is used and does not need to be stripped on one side</li><li>- much less 'clumpy' (barbs sticking together) than regular schlappen</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- More expensive than other hackles</li><li>- sometimes too long for smaller hooks</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- perfect for hooks sized #1.5 and larger</li><li>- best tied in by the tip and not stripped on one side</li></ul>





As with all things in fly tying, beauty is in the eye of the beholder! When was the last time you picked up a pack of feathers and the tying gears in your head started turning? How often have you been excited about a type of feather that your tying pals have written off as something that gets tucked away in a bin? One thing that we have especially noticed in recent years is that tying is a creative art form! Interpretations and variations of fly patterns is what makes fly tying the fantastic hobby that it is. We are really embracing `freestyle` tying these days, breaking away from simply tying up dozens of the same old flies. Which feathers are you going to incorporate on your newest flies!



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