

Innovative Fly Tier

Jack Salstrom/By Scott Willison



Every skilled fly tier eventually finds a niche, leaving his or her own indelible signature scrawled on the craft of fur and feathers. There are the realists, the tiers who incorrigibly count tails, legs, and wing pads, seeking to precisely replicate the organism before them. Some are impressionists, concocting creatures at the vise that exude bugginess and look enough like everything that might appeal to their piscatorial quarry. Then there are the artists, blending exotic materials into a flowing thing of beauty. Rarest are the craftspeople who straddle all three camps, developing flies that look like they could crawl out of the box yet move like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. Jack Salstrom is such a tier.

Salstrom, a retired electrician born and raised in Bellingham, Washington, began tying at the age of 15. For Salstrom, a skilled sketch artist, fly tying seemed a natural progression from drawing the natural world around him to reproducing it at the vise. He has a keen interest in entomology, and his tying process typically begins with collecting streamside samples and observing their every detail. After such careful examination, he photographs and begins sketching the insect. Following these preparatory steps, the insect is subject to interpretation on a steel hook shank in extraordinary detail, integrating Salstrom's limitless knowledge of natural and synthetic materials. One of his earliest originals, a darter dragonfly nymph pattern known as the Drag, was born of such an exercise. With its lifelike silhouette, twitching pheasant-tail legs, and foam underbody, the Drag hovers above weedbeds and scurries for cover much like the real deal when slowly retrieved on a sinking line.

Salstrom was stationed in Japan from 1963 to 1965 while on a tour with the U.S. Navy. During this time, he labored daily over the vise to perfect his tying skills; upon returning to civilian life, he tied commercially for several Washington fly shops. He drew sizable audiences while tying his patterns at annual fly-fishing expos in the long-since-imploded Kingdome in Seattle. He also designed skillfully constructed shadow boxes to display his patterns and drawings, and his boxes continue to command a high price from local buyers and at the various conservation auctions he supports. In 2013, he finished one of his more unusual creations following a challenge from a fellow fly-club member: he dressed the Don't Ask Don't Tell on a size 3/0 gold Alec Jackson hook using 36 strands of baleen from a specimen that had fallen from a friend's wall. The individual strands of baleen were laboriously set in place one by one to create a bold and sweeping Spey-style hackle crowned

with a perfectly postured feather wing, golden pheasant crest, and a suite of materials for the body including just about everything but unicorn fur.

Salstrom has been a member of Bellingham's Fourth Corner Fly Fishers club since the 1970s and evolved as a tier among the ranks of well-known club members Ralph Wahl and Dick Van Demark. The "Swede," as he is affectionately called by his friends, is both charismatic and boisterous. At an imposing 6 feet 4 inches, with the giggle of a middle-school boy, his presence fills the room.

While Salstrom remains a familiar figure in many area fly shops, he is equally at home at the craft bin and the local fabric store, finding a variety of synthetic yarns and tinsels to accentuate his proprietary dubbing blends or highlight his elegant steelhead flies. His garage serves as a tying den and houses bulk materials bought in quantities vast enough to last several lifetimes at the tying bench.

Often, in the absence of a proper template for his flies, Salstrom calls upon his mechanical background to modify hooks to his exacting specifications with a pair of pliers, capturing both the appropriate posture and desired swimming qualities for his creations. He'll straighten the eye on a TMC 2457, his stout hook of choice for big Canadian rainbows, to get his Chironomids to hang right in the water, or transform a 4X-long straight-eye streamer hook into a jig hook for his salmon patterns because he can't find quite what he's looking for from a commercial source. His flies are painstakingly constructed and reinforced with various glues and solvents for durability and shine. The body of his Golden Stone Nymph is reinforced with Softex brushed into the dubbing and shell back, tied over a heavy underbody of flattened lead wire. The resulting pattern withstands the rigors of tumbling amidst the rocks where the naturals live. More recently, the Softex and cyanoacrylate, or CA, glues Salstrom once turned to have

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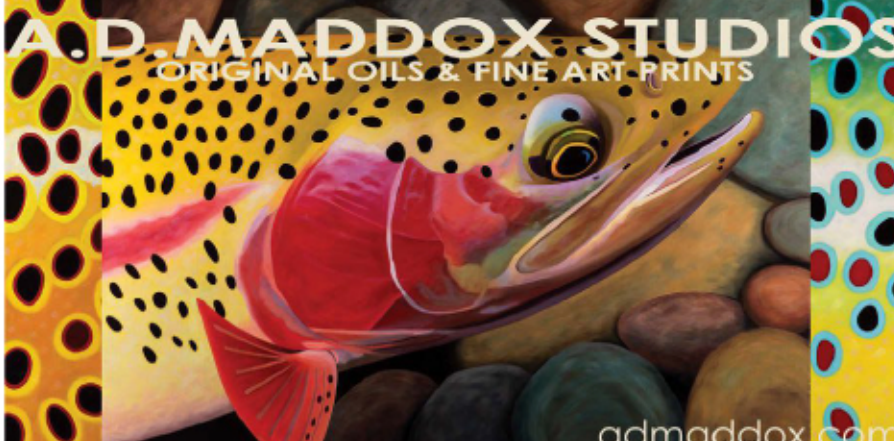
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been supplanted by Clear Cure Goo and other UV-cure resins for their ease of use and nontoxicity.

With the recent advent of wiggle nymph shanks, Salstrom has revitalized many of his long-standing patterns to incorporate natural movement into them. Using thin-gauge stainless wire, he connects the abdomen to the thorax to achieve a lifelike, wriggling pattern that moves like the natural. His Wiggle Damsel and Wiggle Chironomid have served him equally well on his annual pilgrimages to Tunkwa Lake, in British Columbia, and closer to home on Fazon Lake, a rural pond brimming with oversize bluegills. The Wiggle Hexagenia has proven deadly on Lake Whatcom smallmouth bass in early summer when giant yellow mayflies awkwardly emerge at dusk.


I have enjoyed great success through the years using Tom Murray's Rolled Muddler for sea-run cutthroat and coho salmon in local rivers and sloughs. When Salstrom first showed me his Wiggle Muddler, my initial response was, "That ought to be illegal." With its diver-style deer-hair head, the pattern retreats into the depths like a fleeing baitfish when strip-retrieved, its articulated tail wagging tantalizingly behind. Indeed, I've handed Salstrom a number of my own patterns that had undergone years of tinkering to arrive at what I'd thought a perfect state, only to have them handed back a few days later with a boyish grin and the exclamation, "There, I made it better for you."

While probably best known for his nymph patterns, Salstrom has also authored a number of striking steelhead patterns. The Sahl's Special, with its vivid chartreuse ribbing and guinea



Jack Salstrom—known as the "Swede" to his friends—puts the finishing touches on one of his creative flies.

collar against a black floss backdrop, was developed in the 1970s for the Nooksack River in British Columbia after he noted this color combination had particular appeal to the river's steelhead and stood out remarkably well in the glacial tinted waters. The Lady Jan, named for his wife, fishes well in low, clear water thanks to its subdued natural overtones. Jack's Ghost Shrimp is another tie that melds lifelike appearance and enticing movement, with its soft and pulsating pheasant hackle.

One of the true marks of innovation is the ability to pick an individual pattern from a crowded fly box and easily identify its parentage. Salstrom's flies flow from a free-thinking and visionary mind, unhindered by conformity. He is a willing teacher and pensive observer, and, after more than 50 years at the vise, continues to evolve as a tier. 

Scott Willison is the co-owner of The Confluence Fly Shop in Bellingham, Washington.

Editor's note: Salstrom's new DVD, *Jack's Nymphs*, available at The Confluence Fly Shop, www.theconfluenceflyshop.com, features many of his signature fly patterns and recipes, and provides dubbing mixes, drawings, and entomology notes.