



Green Highlander

A fly for *fishing*

Text & Photos: Miki Äikäs

“The sun was shining and the sky was clear. The air was really warm, but the mountains were still covered with lots of snow. Fishing had been quite slow and no fly didn't seem to interest the salmon. Despite the warm weather the water temperature was under 7 Celsius, due to the the snow melt. I was fishing with the extra card some beats lower from our own pools. I heard how my stomach was growling for food and decided to drive back to the house. I crossed the bridge and saw the pool downstream. It looked really good. I stopped the car and picked the rod from the rack. I looked at my fly on the leader and decided to change it. I opened my box and looked for the right one. Nothing seemed to feel right until my eyes spotted one kind of “A Poor Man ‘s” version of Green Highlander tied on tube. The body was almost like on the original, but the wing was made from Polar bear in green and yellow, and the top wing was black Monkey with a few strands of Peacock Herl. I looked at the fly against the green river bank, and that greenish fly seemed to be the Right one.

I tied it on the leader, left the fly box in the car, and walked to the pool.

The closer I got to the pool, the better it looked.

I started to cast from the fast water and worked my way down the pool. Nothing happened.

I sat down for five minutes and then decided to try one more time before heading back to the house.

I started again quite high and didn't made very many casts before I felt a strong pull on my rod. The salmon jumped high and took line out from the reel. I walked after it, and five minutes later I landed the 10 kg sea-liced female. Great!

I released the fish and had a drink from the river. Yes, you can drink from the rivers like that.

Even if I felt very hungry, I decided to finish the pool. I had made maybe ten casts, when my Highlander was taken again. Now the line ran out from the reel very hard and I was forced to run after the fish, which decided to rush to the next pool. After some jumps and runs I managed to land the same sized male, covered with sea lice. What a morning.

I drove back to the house and the other guys were already eating lunch. I told the story and my buddy asked me what fly I had used. When I told him that I used one

of the many versions of GHR, he was very amused. I asked him the reason for that and he told me that he hadn't ever caught anything with the Highlander and hadn't any confidence for that fly, even if he had tried it many times”

I have never been very interested in the history of the flies, and when I was asked to write an article about fishing with classic salmon flies and especially with Green Highlander, I was at first very surprised. Everybody who fishes Atlantic Salmon with a fly rod knows Green Highlander, and there are hundreds of articles and stories already written about it.

Actually, Green Highlander was the first fly I used for Atlantic Salmon and the first classic fly I tied a long time ago.

As my flies aren't all that fancy, I asked some of my Finnish friends who I know to use Highlanders when they fish, and who are excellent tiers, if they can show us their view of GHR, a classic version and other, modern versions of it. The important thing in this was that the flies should be tied for fishing.

A new standard

I have used GHR since I started salmon fishing. When I want to use GHR, mostly I pick the classic version, but I also use modern versions, tied on a hook or on a tube.

My opinion of the modern versions is that most of them are like GHR looking at the body, but on the wings I have seen as many different versions as there are tiers. On my tubes, I'm not sure that we can call them Green Highlander, if we speak about the wing. In some versions the wings colours come from the original version, but mostly I just use some green, orange and yellow Polar Bear on the underwing and black Monkey on the top. The body sections are more or less the same as in the original recipe. Maybe we can say that the new standard is to name the fly by its body.

Even if my knowledge of the classics sucks, I found out something about Green Highlander's history. The first mentions of that fly seem to be found from Francis Francis's book in 1885, but back then it was named just The Highlander. In Kelson's book from 1895, Kelson attributes GHR to Mr. Grant.

One of the most used recipes is found in Pryce-Tannatt's book “How To Dress Salmon Flies” from 1914. Guys who are more interested about the history of classic patterns knows this all, and please forgive me if I have wrong facts here. But no-one can say anymore who is the original father of some pattern from more than a hundred years back. Back then, I believe, modifying flies was as common as today and some tiers and fishermen just happen to have some patterns to their name.

I have also understood that GHR never became very popular in Scottish rivers. In bright waters green and yellow works fine, so it is understandable that GHR is very good in Norway's and Canada's clear rivers.

Maybe because Scottish rivers have some colour, it didn't get that popular in there. But when we take a look at old flies of the mighty river Tana, on the border of Norway and Finland, there are lots of patterns that are based on GHR. The Tana is a huge river with a brownish shade in its water, and green-yellow patterns with olive and a bit of orange are very popular in there.

A special greenish fly

What makes this greenish fly that special to me? I'm not sure if I have any specific reason, but maybe I just have succeeded with it so many times. As I have told many times before, I really like to use classic flies beside the hair winged flies and tubes. In some kinds of pools and currents the classics works wonderfully, but their construction must be the right kind. The wing shouldn't be tied completely flat. It should be roofed over the hook to have the right kind of resistance against the water. It is hard to explain, but when you see a “right” tied classic fly in the stream, you know what I mean.

Green Highlander is known for being a good pattern in bright days and in greenish pools. Sometimes I use an orange hackle on it, especially when the water has some colour in it. Last summer I used a Monkey winged tube version with orange throat, and it worked great.

A few years back, I managed to land four good sized salmon in a few hours with a size 1 classic Highlander in very low water conditions. In that fly there was Crest on the tail and the topping



Green Highlanders for fishing. ▲

was dyed green.

I use Highlander almost in any conditions. I don't see any reason why some pattern could not work in any situation. I believe that the salmon can take any pattern, and we anglers make a decision of the fly just for some specific reason; maybe because we have succeeded with a specific fly before, or maybe because some well-known angler has spread it in the Internet, or maybe simply because the fly just looks good in that moment.

As we all know, salmon don't choose the fly. We do.

If I had to name some specific

conditions, or situations, when I like to use a classic Highlander, it would be later in the afternoon when the Sun is shining a bit lower and rather behind or to the side of the fish than in front of the fish. Of course, if there is lots of green on the bank of the pool and when the river looks green and the water is clear, that's perfect for GHR. But maybe the most important factor for the classic fly is the current. It just won't work so well in slow pools. A thick, steady current, where the bottom and rocks create turbulence is a perfect pool for a classic fly. As the wing itself does not make any specific moves, the

whole package, including the hook, must move. Pools with strong current and turbulence in it make the fly move from side to side and up and down very aggressively. When the wing is roofed over the hook it kind of supports the fly, using the buoyancy of water to move it up and down.

Sometimes I use a pimped version of GHR. It is based strongly on the classic version but has some more color and some flash in it. A fat, roofed wing, but still airy, is what I'm looking for. When the river has some colour I pick a gold ribbed version, and for the clear river a silver ribbed fly.



Sunny days and greenish pools; perfect for GHR. ▲

Sometimes I like to use versions with green or orange Crest on the tail and topping.

Sensitive dance

When the river is low and the fish are scary, lightly coloured versions with a light and thin wing are good. In these kinds of conditions, the salmon many times follows the fly and maybe just nibbles at it. It is important that the wing is not too long and that the hook is really sharp.

I have also noticed that in very tough conditions salmon can get scared even by Jungle Cocks on the sides. Jungles make the Salmon Fly, that's true, but in some flies it is better not to use them. These flies are for the extreme conditions, when the fly has to be "invisible."

An old friend gave me some GHR's which were tied very lightly. They have worked fine in low water conditions with a floating line. A light, sensitive fly

dances beautifully in the current near the surface.

Many modern patterns with green, yellow and brown are based on GHR, like Mikael Frödin's Greenlander. In my opinion, it is okay to say that the fly you use is a Highlander if there are some identifiable details from the original pattern. As I said before, modern flies, which are named after some old well-known pattern, have totally different kinds of wings, but mostly they can be recognized by the construction of the body. The Green Highlander is no exception.

When we speak about the body of the Highlander, most of us tie the body with two different sections. The back part is yellow silk and the front is "Highlander Green." Actually, I'm not sure what is the right shade of green, but I like it a bit darker than many of us. I still have an old Seal's fur dyed Green Highlander from thirty years back. It is surprisingly dark green,

compared to today's Green Highlander dubbings. Green and yellow hackle are common almost in every version, but sometimes one turn orange front of yellow and green can do the trick. I like quite light body hackle and the front hackles should be tied lightly also, using soft materials.

Many times I use Golden Pheasant breast feathers as hackles, in natural color or dyed green, olive or orange. I think Golden Pheasant breast feathers are very underrated as hackle materials. In its natural colour it fits nicely into GHR and many other flies.

Tiny but important

Fishing with a classic Highlander does not make any exceptions compared to other flies. However, for some reason, I like to use it with lighter lines, because many times traditional flies are tied on single hooks, and those hooks are quite heavy, if we are talking about 2/0 size etc.

In tube versions I prefer sink tip line or full sinking line.



A poor man's version. ▲

On smaller versions, and when fishing in low water, I have noticed that the active salmon lie many times in very small spots. I try to cast my fly over the fish, a bit upstream, and bring the fly sideways to the salmon quite fast, and stop it into the salmon's field of vision for a few seconds. Many times this works very well.

Another, tiny, but still a very important thing, in my opinion, is the knot. I always use a fixed and solid knot; Turtle or something similar. Hooks with up bent eyes simply swim better with the fixed knot.

In tube versions I prefer sink tip line or full sinking line. Because I don't like weighted tube flies, I choose my line to match the pool and current. I don't want to turn the rocks, so I just try to control the speed of the tube with a sinking line. In tube flies I mostly use doubles in sizes 4-8 and trebles in sizes 6-8.

I know many good fishermen who use very small trebles, even in big tubes.

Many of them prefer size 10, and they all say that the small treble stays really well in the mouth of the salmon and does not harm the fish as much as a bigger hook.

Especially with feather winged flies, I like single hooks. Nothing looks prouder than a well tied, classic Green Highlander on a 2/0 size strong nicely shaped hook. On fishing versions, I like Gamagatsu and Mustad. They are sharp and reliable, but like many modern hooks, they are hard to get sharp again if they hit the bottom. Hooks are nowadays chemically sharpened and many of them are so hard that at least I have lots of problems to have them fixed after damage, even if I have a quality file and have learned to fix the damaged hooks.

If I tie it to doubles, I like to use size 4.

Because I'm mostly fishing with two handed rods and on rivers where is a chance to hook a fish of a lifetime, I prefer durable and thick leaders.

The best option, if we speak about reliability, in my opinion, is a level leader like 0,40 or 0,45 or thicker, depending of the size of the fish and the pool. Maybe it is not the best option for the casting and getting the leader straight, but I have lost some big fish with leaders where there are knots between different sections. In normal conditions, or better said easy pools and summer water, I like to use a rod length leader made of 0,45 and 0,40 mono. I like Trabucco, but because it is a quite hard-coated line, it is very important to have a good knot between the sections. A hard-coated line kind of cuts itself very easily, if the knot is badly done.

I don't use factory made tapered leaders.

In Green Highlanders, as in many other salmon flies, there are as many variations as there are tiers. Tube fly, hair winged or feather winged fly, they all look great to me. This fly has saved my day many times and nothing beats the feeling, when you can take a classic salmon fly out of the Atlantic Salmon's mouth.



Pasi Kettunen (57) is a fly purist who has won many fly tying competitions over the years. Pasi is a very well-known tier, especially in salmon flies. Pasi spends his time fishing in Scotland in April, and when the season starts he fishes on the Gaula. Later in the summer you can find him from above the Arctic Circle.

He started his salmon fishing in the river Tana many decades ago. The Tana is still today one of his favourite rivers.

He is a true gentleman and an excellent salmon fisher.

Pasi tied Grant's version from the Kelson's book and his "fishing" version is a pattern from River Tana, originally by Mr. Juhani Vapekko

Pasi's fishing version

- Hook: 4 LW double
- Tag: Gold, fluorescent red floss
- Tail: Crest
- Butt: Black Ostrich
- Ribbing: Silver
- Body: Yellow floss, bright green wool
- Body hackle: Fluorecent green, half it. Only on green part of body
- Wing: 2 long strands of Pearl flashabou, yellow and green Squirrel, brown Mallard
- Sides: Jungle Cock
- Horns: Macaw



Jukkis Järvinen (58) is one of the greatest all-around guys I know and a great fly tier. I have learned so much from him on tying over the years, and I think he is one of those guys who understand how to mix old tradition and modern ways of fly tying. He had made a long career as a musician, so maybe his profession is one the reason for his creativity.

Jukkis likes to fish in Northern Norway, and most of his time he spends near the border of Finland and Russia chasing big browns in the Kuusinki River.

Jukkis tied his classic version with a bit lower profile wing, because he thinks that the fishing flies work better with that kind of wing. The other fly is a small double with hair wing

Jukkis' small double

- Tag: Round silver and yellow Glo-Brite
- Tail: Crest, Mandarin Duck
- Butt: Black Ostrich
- Ribbing: Silver
- Body: Yellow silk and green Seal's Fur
- Hackles: Green on the dubbing, yellow throat
- Wing: Tippet under, orange and yellow Bucktail, Green Polar Bear
- Sides: Jungle Cock
- Head: Dark green



Jarkko Reinola (29), youngest of the quarter, but a very talented fly tier. He lives in eastern Finland and ties flies for fishermen from all over the world. Beside his classic flies, which are always Top Class, his tube flies are very fishable. He likes to fish salmon in Northern Norway and his home river Kymi.

Jarkko tied a single hook Pryce-Tannats version, a small double hook Grant from the Kelson book and two tubes for the fishing.

Jarkko's Short Body tube

- Tube: Brass & FITS chartreuse S
- Body: Golden yellow silk and green Seal's fur mixed with green flash
- Hackles: A green olive hen saddle and yellow spey hackle
- Wing: A green olive Polar Bear, green and yellow flash, medium brown Templedog hair, fiery brown Templedog hair
- Sides: Jungle Cock

Jarkko's Monkey winged GHR

- Tube: FITS clear M
- Tag: Round silver and golden yellow silk
- Tail: Golden yellow fluoro fibre
- Body: Golden yellow silk and green Seal's fur mixed with green flash
- Body hackle: A green Cock neck
- Rib: Oval silver
- Throat: A yellow Cock saddle
- Wing: Yellow, orange and green olive Polar Bear, brown and black Monkey fur, Peacock Herls
- Sides: Jungle Cock



Toni Siltanen (43) is one of the most innovative salmon fly tiers I know. Beside his tying skills he is a very talented salmon fisher. Toni has won many competitions over the years and he is always searching for the Perfect salmon fly for fishing. If you ask Toni to make a fly for you, you can never know which kind of innovations it holds, even on classics.

Toni tied a modified classic close to Tannant and his very fishable tube version.

Toni's tube

- Tag: Opal Mirage tinsel, SLF Prism Light Olive dubbing
- Back hackle: Golden Pheasant breast feather in yellow
- Tail: Orange dyed Golden Pheasant breast feather fibres
- Butt: Black Ostrich
- Ribbing: Silver
- Body: Yellow Floss, green Seal
- Throat: Green Spey Pheasant, yellow Cock
- Wing: Polar Bear in rusty orange, bright green and olive. Amherst in orange and green. Brown Bear and on the top dark brown Amherst.
- Sides: Jungle Cock ●



Greenish banks reflect their hues on the water. ▲

Original Recepies

Pryce-Tannant

- Tag: Silver tinsel
- Tail: A topping and barred Summer Duck in strands
- Butt: Black Herl
- Body: First quarter golden yellow floss, remainder bright green floss
- Ribs: Oval silver tinsel
- Hackle: A grass-green hackle
- Throat: A lemon hackle
- Wings: Mixed- Tippet in strands; married strands of yellow, orange and green Swan, Florican, Peacock wing and Golden Pheasant tail; married narrow strips of Teal and barred Summer Duck; narrow strips of brown Mallard over
- Sides: Jungle Cock
- Cheeks: Indian Crow, a topping over all
- Horns: Blue Macaw ●

GHR Kelson

- Tag: Silver twist and Canary silk
- Tail: A topping and Teal
- Butt: Black Herl
- Body: Two turns of yellow silk and green Seal's fur
- Ribs: Silver tinsel
- Hackle: Green from yellow silk
- Throat: A yellow hackle
- Wing: Two tippets back to back, veiled with light and dark Bustard, Golden Pheasant tail, darl mottled Turkey, Swan dyed green, Mallard and a topping.
- Horns: Blue Macaw