

Hair and Fur

Hair and Fur is really the same thing. The coat of fur bearing animals is typically composed of guard hairs toward the outside which are long and stiff and under fur toward the skin which is soft, wrinkly, and interlocked. If an animal skin has more under fur than guard hair, like a rabbit or muskrat, then it is often referred to as fur, if a skin has more guard hair than under fur, like an elk or deer, it is often referred to as hair. Under fur is typically used for dubbing dry flies, under fur mixed with guard hair is mixed and used for “spiky” dubbing for wet flies and nymphs. Deer and Elk hair are the main hairs used for dry fly tails and wings, but in some cases for bodies as well.

One way to divide hair is solid and hollow. Whether it is solid or hollow depends on the animal or where on the animal the hair comes from. For example, the body of a deer has hollow hair, the tail is solid hair. The body hair of a calf is solid. Tails of all animals, like squirrel, woodchuck, calf, are typically solid.

Solid hair typically is used for wings and tails. It stays compact and does not flare and is relatively hard to stabilize on the hook because it is slippery.

Hollow hair is typically body hair and is used for wings or for spinning where you want it to flare. It is used for tails as well, but there you want to control the flare by thread technique. If you look at the typical hollow hair, i.e. deer, elk, caribou, antelope, it looks like a carrot, thick tapering to thin, with the thick part being hollow and the thinner part getting less hollow until it is actually solid at the tip. It is actually honeycomb hollow if you look at it under a microscope.

The exact dispersal of hollow to solid on an individual hair depends on the type of animal, with, for instance, antelope being almost all hollow and some longer deer hair being almost all solid. The most important hollow hairs for fly tying are deer and elk and the hollow/solid ratio there depends on the age of the animal, the time of harvest, and the place on the body it was taken from. For instance, yearling elk is shorter and finer than mature elk. Back hair is shorter than belly hair on a deer. Early harvest, say September, produces finer and shorter deer hair than later harvest where the animal has grown its winter coat.

Unless you handle a lot of deer or elk hides, and can actually distinguish mule deer from white tail from yearling elk, and belly from back from side, selecting just the right deer or elk hair for, say, caddis wings, can get totally complicated. Then too, the size of the hook determines where on the hair shaft you tie it in so hair that is good for size 10 will not necessarily be good for size 16. TMI.

There are two practical solutions. First, when buying hair, buy straight, even tipped, and short hair as long as it is still hollow. Stay away from broken tips. This buying outline will limit sizing problems and will cover most winging needs, especially if you have learned enough thread handling skills to help it bunch or spread according to how you wrap it.

Generally long hair, 2-3 inches, is only good for spinning and is too frustrating to work with for wings, because it is all tip and will not spread nicely. Everybody has too much long hair, so most hair that people give away is too long for wings and is only good for spinning.

The second practical solution to your deer/elk hair needs is to just call Chris Helm, <http://www.whitetailflytyeing.com/> or Blue Ribbon Flies, <http://www.blueribbonflies.com/> tell them what you are looking for, i.e. winging for size 16 caddis, and they will send you what you need. The stuff is cheap so expert selection is worth it in this case. Plus, they have the best.