

## October 2006 Donner und Blitzen Newsletter

Hello All,

Well, fall is coming so I'm currently planning on my return to Oregon to enjoy the dual duck season opener at Summer Lake and over on the coast. In the interim, I have a tightly packed fishing schedule, hoping to enjoy the consistency of the Crooked and Alsea, along with the newness of the Chewucan and far, far upper Williamson above Klamath Marsh

I'm putting together a limited edition set of fly packages for Christmas, including a Wheatley fly box and four dozen original patterns from my books and articles, guaranteed to arrive gift wrapped by Christmas. If you're looking for gifts for your fly fishing friends, keep your eyes posted for the November and December newsletters with more details on these sets.

The "summer special" on my two books, [An Angler's Guide to the Oregon Cascades](#) and [Small Stream Flyfishing](#) continues through the fall. Books ordered directly through me will come with a FREE selection of one dozen of my patterns that appear in the books. Both books are \$24.95 each, and are mailed at no cost to you. To place an order, contact me at [donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com](mailto:donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com).

Enjoy the last few warm days of fall and hope to see you on the water!

Jeff

Jeff Morgan  
PO Box 20204  
Stanford, CA 94309  
[Jeff.morgan@stanford.edu](mailto:Jeff.morgan@stanford.edu)  
[donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com](mailto:donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com)

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## CLASSES

### Advanced Fly Tying

This two-evening course will cover a variety of advanced tying techniques and patterns covered in my books and Westfly columns. Dubbing deer hair, paraloops, creating CdC bubbles, CdC hackles and more will all be covered. Learn skills to become a better and more consistent fly tier. Class includes all materials, eight model flies, and recipe pamphlet.

Dates: October 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 7:00pm-8:30pm

Price: \$60

Location: Northwest Fly Fishing Outfitters, 10910 NE Halsey St., Portland, OR

Contact Info: John Hagan (503-252-1529) or Jeff Morgan

[\(donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com\)](mailto:donnerundblitzen@hotmail.com)

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## FEATURE ARTICLE

### Rethinking the Leech

Omnipresent, relatively large, and with a seductive style of locomotion, leeches seem like the perfect trout food. Woolly Buggers, Seal-Buggers, and Krystal Buggers have dominated Western stillwater fly fishing for the past several decades. These patterns are often the first patterns anglers try on new waters and they certainly catch many fish. But before we get all hot and bothered with how leeches should be imitated by all stillwater anglers all the time, we need to ask a simple question: do trout eat leeches?

The great success of Woolly Buggers had long deterred me from pursuing this apparently superfluous question. Woolly Buggers are some of the the best stillwater patterns, they superficially resemble a leech, so trout must eat a lot of leeches--end of story. Right?

After spending the past decade intensively sampling stillwater trout all over the country, three things made me question the exalted status of leeches. One, I never located many leeches in trout stomach samples. Indeed, it would be shocking to find just one or two. Secondly, the "hot color" of leech imitation rarely coincided with dominant color of natural leeches in a particular body of water. This ran totally opposite to "match the hatch" principles that apply to all other trout prey, from chironomids to dragonflies to mayflies. Third, many, if not most, Western anglers that I know successfully fish their Buggers in some sort of a trolling retrieve. Even the most rudimentary observation of natural leeches would suggest that even the Carl Lewis of leeches would have difficulty matching the clip of even a laxidasically kicking float tuber.

If you take stomach samples on trout from stillwaters, you may think "Why do I rarely find leeches if they are so allegedly important to fish?" One reason maybe that leeches are soft bodied, and are quickly digested without any trace (save serology tests, and I know no recreational angler who would go through that trouble). As most leech predation takes place at dawn and dusk, if you only sample fish caught in the afternoon, you will likely never find a leech among your samples. Yet even professional studies, which take into account these chronological and methodological problems, still show a limited importance of leeches to trout.

Looking through the few professional studies of leech predation confirmed my skepticism over the leech. I found that the "leech question" was investigated in a 1985 study where over a dozen stomach samples from brown trout in British and Irish Lakes were reviewed and compared. Over the course of sampling these 2000+ trout, leeches showed up in only about 8% of the trout, for a total diet composition of under 5%. Another

study on one of the legendary trout stillwaters of America, Crane Prairie Reservoir in Oregon, revealed that leeches comprised, at most, 0.5% of the trout diet!

Subsequent professional investigations also found a very modest representation of leeches in the diets of trout. Based on all the samples I've located for North America, a liberal estimate for leeches in the diet of the average American stillwater trout is a paltry 2-5%.

Leech predation is far lower than the 15-20% claimed by most stillwater experts. This low contribution to the total diet of trout may not elicit a ton of confidence when fishing leeches. Besides the simple statistics, it is also important to consider the *availability* (leeches are mostly nocturnal, so trout don't normally encounter them except at dawn and dusk) and *desirability* (one leech equals dozens of chironomids) of leeches to trout. A trout is less likely to pass up a leech meal than say a backswimmer or mayfly nymph.

The true key to imitating leeches lies in distinguishing when trout feed specifically on them from when trout opportunistically feed on anything that looks like a bulky life form, i.e. a kick-trolled Woolly Bugger. When trout really focus on leeches, we should be prepared with the appropriate ultra-thin patterns fished in a manner that mimics the unique natural movements of the leech.

### **Ecology of a Bloodsucker**

There is no doubt that leeches can appear in incredibly dense numbers in trout waters. Some waters harbor as many as 700 leeches per square foot of bottom. Leeches can live anywhere, but are most common in slow moving rivers, lakes, ponds, and springs. However, leeches can inhabit an enormous range of saline, acidic, thermal, and dissolved oxygen conditions. They can be found in sterile mountain lakes, as well in waters with higher salt concentrations than sea-water. Some species will survive the absence of oxygen for up to sixty days! A few species can be found in fast moving trout streams, often in the pool sections, but generally are more common in the slower water downstream of prime trout habitat. They need something to attach themselves to in order to rest, so they are not incredibly abundant on streams with substrates of pure mud, silt, or clay. Regardless of what type of water they inhabit, leeches thrive in waters less than six to eight feet deep, and rarely venture into the open water or the profundal zone.

Leeches vary significantly in size, anywhere from a few millimeters to upwards of six inches. Trout prey mostly on smaller leeches in the 20 to 45 millimeter range. Much of the size factor depends on how long particular leeches live. In northern waters, some leeches live two years before reproduction and can grow to a large size. In more temperate trout lakes, the average trout-consumed leech is only about 25mm (a size 12 4XL hook).

Like Shepard Smith, leeches are hermaphroditic, but they need a partner to be able to reproduce. Many leech populations have a staggered reproduction season, with a spring brood and a late-summer brood. For fish this is important, as it means large leeches swim around throughout the angling season (April-September). The relative importance of leeches to trout generally increases from summer through fall, as the phantom midges, damselfly nymphs, dragonflies, *Callibaetis*, and caddis progressively emerge and leave the ecosystem.

### **Leech Keys: Color and Motion**

Colors of leeches can vary greatly. While most anglers presume leeches are dull black, brown, or olive creatures, many specimens have a brightly mottled, spotted, or longitudinally striped body. Pinks, yellow, and orange spots or lines are not even out of the question! When the leeches are preserved in an alcohol solution (or the acids of a fish gut), they lose most of their flamboyant coloration, and that is why most anglers settle for the standard “red, brown, and black” colors for their leech imitations. Two other things that tiers should keep in mind: leeches often become paler under the cover of darkness (meaning they are lighter eight feet under the surface than in your hand), and the belly color of leeches is commonly less intense than their back color.

Leeches move in four primary motions: *crawling*, *swimming*, *searching*, and *alert freezing*. Understanding leech motion is essential for the angler and fly tier because it tells us much about the body shape and the location of the leech.

*Crawling* takes place along the bottom, much in the manner of an inchworm or caterpillar. This motion is difficult for a trout to recognize, so it is relatively safe for leeches.

*Swimming* leeches use either an up-and-down (dolphin-style) or a side-to-side (trout-style) motion. For the most part, leeches swim well, but you can often find some individuals more or less “treading water”: thrashing madly with little forward propulsion. These may be the most important for trout, since they draw attention to themselves and are unlikely to quickly escape.

*Searching* is a slower motion than swimming, when the body waves slowly and the head moves seeking vibrations of potential hosts or prey. This motion makes the leech vulnerable to predators, because it makes the leech highly visible to predators while in an exposed location.

*Alert freezing* occurs when a leech sees a predator and ceases its spastic movement in the vain hope that it will remain undetected. Sometimes it works, other times, it makes them an easier target. When a leech freezes it extends its body and remains motionless for some time, usually slowly sinking in the process.

Regardless of how they move, most leeches only move at night since they are nocturnal. Anglers should imitate leeches at dusk and dawn, when natural leeches are most active.

### **Imitating Leeches at the Vise and on the Water**

The modern tier has myriad material options when imitating the motion of leeches. Lets start with the obvious one: marabou. It is critical to select the right marabou for your leeches. Many tiers take the spiky barbs at the tips of the feather, but you want the supple, feathery barbs at the rear of the feather stem. Good quality marabou will have enough barbs on each side so that each feather should tie two flies. You don't want many of these soft barbs, 15-25 should be sufficient to give your pattern an adequate tail. Too many and your fly will actually have a reverse taper, which is not what you want.

My favorite leech body material is leather. The ideal form of leather is known as "ultra-suede" which is available in craft stores in a number of leechy-looking shades. It is significantly thinner and suppler than the thick leather often used on Whitlock's Leech or similar patterns. A properly crafted and weighted ultra-suede leech can barely be distinguish from a natural leech in a swimming or alert freezing motion.

When tying the Leather Leech, keep a few things in mind. The tail should be tied into the middle or front of the hook shank, for the longer tail has better motion underwater.

For the "body" portion of the Leather Leech, woolly chenille, mohair yarn, or loosely dubbed fur or sparkle dubbing can be used to create the effect you are looking for. I personally prefer mohair, but it is important not to tease out the mohair so much that you create an obese blob rather than an elongated swimming leech. A loosely-dubbed thorax or mohair collar will help create the illusion of movement without adding unnecessary bulk.

Hard-core leech imitators have long debated the question of "weighting." Most all agree that some weighting is necessary to achieve a proper swimming motion. The argument usually rests on where to place the weight: at the head (like a bead head), at the front of the hook with lead wire, or elsewhere. I fall into the elsewhere camp. Weighting the front of a fly results in a fly rising and falling in a linear manner, like a popsicle stick on a string. Weighting an imitation in this manner mutes even the spastic motion of marabou. By placing the weight at the rear of the fly, the imitation achieves a more disjointed, disfunctional, and subsequently lifelike motion underwater. Weight-forward flies certainly work well, but by applying alternative weighting to your flies you actually better imitate leeches and create patterns that at times can radically outfish standard models.

Unsurprisingly, many aquatic creatures appear different out of the water than in the water. Leeches are a case in point: most leeches are longer and narrower than we imagine. While they can be rather long (many reach 3-5 inches while swimming), they

certainly do not appear obese while swimming through the water. How leeches appear on the bottom, on your skin, or in your hand is not worth a hill of beans when trout only encounter them when they swim. For this reason, keep your leech imitations sparse and long. Heavily-hackled patterns or patterns with thick marabou tails deaden movement, making your fly look like Shaq instead of Kobe. “Bunny leeches” leave much to be desired. Bulky attractor patterns they certainly are, but they do not match the realistic elegance of a sleek leech imitation.

Leeches patterns allow the angler an amazing latitude in terms of color. With the recent boom in tying materials, the creative tier has a nearly unlimited range of color, density, and weight to work with. I have tried dozens of shades, and amazingly enough, most of them have had a moment when the trout wouldn't touch any other color. Black, brown, maroon, and a deep olive are essential colors for leech patterns. Highlights often effectively spice up leech patterns, by imitating the natural spots and lines that decorate many natural leeches. Yellow, orange, or purple spots and lines can be added with strips of Flashabou or spots of “puff” or fabric paints. Of course, some basic two-tone patterns (black-olive, black-brown, brown-olive) are essential for any lake angler. Krystalflash nearly always makes leech patterns more effective, though since leeches don't have any natural “flashy” stages, there is apparently no biological reason why.

I like to have flies that can imitate the various movement patterns of leeches (crawling, swimming, searching, freezing). Many “swimming” imitations exist, as any weighted pattern will reasonably imitate a moving leech, so the challenge to the tier is to imitate the crawling, searching, and freezing leech movements.

Crawling leeches can a headache to imitate. First of all, they move slowly, right on the bottom, and tend to keep a thicker body profile than leeches found swimming in open waters. For this, a stout, full-bodied mohair leech with dumbbell eyes, like the W.C. Fields Special is effective, as it is thicker and can be bounced directly off the bottom without snagging.

Searching leeches move with a slow, ambling, and curious motion. When trout target leeches in this motion, a floating leech outshines all other patterns. The Brakeman Leech pattern is constructed with foam, leather, and a bit of sparkle dubbing or mohair to help obscure the silhouette and add a bit of motion. Because the fly floats or at least has neutral buoyancy, an ultra-slow hand-twist retrieve will maximize its action.

I like constructing my floating leeches with a thin foam underbody. The amount of foam is important, because you don't want your pattern to rise at rest. Also, it should be a long skinny pattern, since natural leeches stretch out when falling—possibly to make themselves look larger and less vulnerable to trout. This can be a superb mid-summer and early-season pattern when trout shy away from flies.

A freezing leech can be tricky to construct, because it cannot be weighted, otherwise it sinks too quickly. I tend to use the same Brakeman Leech pattern I use for a searching leech, and just kill my retrieve every couple feet. Let the fly sit at rest for 5-15 seconds before resuming the retrieve. Generally, I imitate both “searching” and “freezing” leeches on the same cast.

How leeches are fished is as, if not more, important than how you tie them. Try utilizing the “killing” technique when you miss strikes with leech imitations. As mentioned above, when leeches sense danger, they freeze. Unfortunately when many of us get strikes with leech patterns, we set the hook and quickly strip the fly in; exactly what the natural *does not* do! We should “kill” the fly on any strikes that do not hook themselves. As you slowly strip in the pattern and you get a strike, stop retrieving and drop your rod tip. If you are trolling the fly and feel a strike, drop your rod back as far as you can to let the fly descend for as long as possible, then set the hook hard. A hard strike picks up all the slack line you gave the fish and gives the fish no chance to feel the line resistance that occurs when you strip in slack prior to a soft hookset. This technique, especially when using an unweighted or semi-buoyant pattern mimics the “death feign” perfectly, and can make a huge difference at the end of the day. Killing a fly is counter-intuitive and takes some restraint, but it does pay off.

With leeches, it is tempting to blow off the reins of ecology. Traditional “leech” patterns have probably fooled more stillwater trout than any other pattern over the past two decades. However, by distinguishing the times when specific leech imitations work better than general “life imitators” like Woolly Buggers, and vice versa, we perhaps will question the standard “Western stillwater paradigm” that holds that stillwater trout only eat chironomids, mayflies, damsels, and leeches. Not only will we better understand the role of leeches in the trout diet, we will start to better understand why and where certain colors and sizes of Woolly Buggers catch as many trout as they do.

## **Patterns**

### **The Randall Woolly Rickards Seal Flash a Bugger**

Hook: Dai Riki 070, #4-14

Tail: sparse marabou to match body

Flash: 1-2 strands of Krystalflash on either side of the fly

Body: Woolly Chenille, olive-brown, light olive, brown, black, or seal fur to match

Hackle: sparse to match body

Beadhead/conehead: optional, but not recommended

Essential the same woolly bugger pattern that dozens of tiers have attached their names to over the past two decades, this fly doesn’t really imitate a leech in any sort of functional sense, but looks very “alive” underwater and catches no shortage of trout. Keys

to this pattern are a sparse tail and long, soft hackle on the body. The fly relies on motion, so design the fly to emphasize that motion.

### **WC Fields Special**

Hook: Dai Riki 700, #8-12

Tail: Black marabou

Sparkle: 1-2 strands of red krystalflash

Underbody: Black sparkle chenille

Body: Black mohair yarn

Head: Black lead dumbbell eyes

This pattern works well for a “thick, crawling leech”—ideal for murky water or low-light conditions where fish feed by vibration rather than sight. A bead-butt variation works well, though I usually start with a bead head or dumbbell eyes to get a stronger “jigging” motion to bounce the fly off the bottom without snagging.

### **Leather Leech**

Hook: Dai Riki 270, #8-14

Underbody: sparkle dubbing to match body

Body: Ultra-suede strip, 2-3 times the length of the hook

Sparkle: one or two strands of Krystalflash

Collar: one or two wraps of mohair yarn to match leather

Head: brass bead

This is my best true leech imitation, working on everything from trout to bass to perch to even walleye, saugar, and drum. Rarely does it work as well as a woolly bugger as a true attractor, but when fish do target leeches, this is what to turn to. Make sure the leather strip is roughly ten times long as it is wide to ensure fluid movement when stripped through the water.

### **Brakeman Leech**

Hook: Dai Riki 270, #6-14

Bead: black or olive-brown at rear of hook

Body: foam to match leather

Overbody and Tail: Ultra Suede leather, pulled back over the top

Ribbing: fine gold or copper wire or 4X monofilament

A pattern specifically to imitate the “thashing” motion of a crawling leech, one should fish the Brakeman in rapid, short strips to make the fly wiggle furiously. The foam and bead combination ensure that the fly sinks butt-first, but very slowly, so that the fly still works on a slow retrieve.

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## **MATERIAL REVIEW**

### **Dubbing Brushes**

Like flies, some materials are designed for marketability rather than practicality. Case in point, the dubbing brush. At some point, a tier at a vise struggling to create a dubbing loop probably said to him/herself “boy, if I can sell these, I’d be a millionaire!” If the early dubbing brushes were as buggy as real dubbing loops, they might have been.

Unfortunately, most commercially available dubbing brushes bear a striking, and stultifying, resemblance to common craft store chenille almost never justifying their high cost. Nu Dub burst onto the scene about a decade ago, running about \$4 a package, one of the most expensive per-fly products of the era.

Most dubbing brushes blend wire and dubbing material to create a heavy, buggy rope with more weight and texture than standard chenille. Some, like Root’s Dubbing Products Dubbing Brushes, offer plenty of buggy long-fibered furs blended with thin, flashy strips. These can create excellent bodies on simple leech patterns, as well as thoraxes on sparse damsel nymphs or large mayfly nymphs. Of course, the price of these easy patterns is often \$4.00 for enough material for a dozen flies.

Besides the high quality fur loops sold by smaller producers, purchasing pre-made brushes with difficult-to-loop materials like CdC can be a good investment in time. Montana Angling Supply makes excellent CdC brushes with 6/0 thread (rather than wire) and a variety of colors and lengths of CdC material. CdC brushes can create super simple CdC spinners, CdC Comparaduns, and a variety of buggy attractors.

Generic dubbing brushes, produced by Wapsi and marketed under the fly shop name usually prove disappointing to the tire. Sure they make tying bodies easier, but they differ from pipe cleaners in color only. Most commercially available brushes have uniform short fibers that create a tight, dull body.

However, making your own dubbing brushes can be extremely rewarding and will allow you to create excellent composite blends of natural and synthetic dubbing. It also aids the tier in working with more difficult materials like CdC, marabou, or deer hair. My favorite material to throw in a dubbing brush is light or dark partridge, which comes out like a perfect rope of tiny, mottled legs. Most fly shops carry dubbing brush spinning blocks, but if they don’t, check out these from [Simans](#), Roots, or

Some online companies (especially European ones like [Simans](#)) carry a wide selection of dubbing brushes with exotic materials, but they are relatively expensive and dubbing brushes are a material that the buyer should examine in person.

The home tier might want to invest some money into a dubbing rope spinner.  
Roots and

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## PATTERN OF THE MONTH

### [Holographic Midge Pupae](#)

Hook: Dai Riki 135 or 125, #16-22

Body: Krystal Flash to match natural

Thorax rabbit or squirrel fur

Head: CdC bubble

The kind of simple midge pattern that I love, the Holographic Midge is nothing more than a Krystalflash body, fur thorax, and a CdC bubble at the head. It closely resembles a Shuttlecock Midge, but in smaller sizes, the macro structure of the CdC bubble aids the oils and microstructure of the CdC feather barbs.

This photo shows the pattern in a rather poor color combination. I like black, black peacock, olive, creamy, and red bodies with a squirrel thorax and a dun CdC bubble. Sometimes a metallic copper or silver body will motivate aggressive feeders into a strike. However, the white CdC bubble is useful for those who have trouble seeing this low-floating pattern on the water.

The CdC bubble makes this fly a great choice for “busy” water below riffles, which may sink sparse imitations.

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## FLY TYING SITE OF THE MONTH

### [The Fly Tyer's Page](#)

Hans Weilenmann's page is a treasure trove to any tier interested in the diversity of the world's fly tying. From Idaho to Iceland, this site has archived 2841 fly patterns from nearly two hundred of the world's best tiers—from well-known American greats like Harrop and Steeves to some of my cult Euro favorites like Germany's Sacha Putz and Finnish Flymph master Johan Klingberg. Simply click on a tier to see a cache of their patterns, then click on the pattern to get a blown up picture and the recipe. The site is bare-bones (i.e. no step-by-step instructions, no “tying tips,” etc), so beginners might find it a bit daunting, but for advanced tiers this site might just provide more ideas than any pattern book on the market. Plan on spending hours here

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## TYING TIPS

\*\*For those seeking cheap tying materials, many tiers pillage their local craft stores. I have also found many cheap materials at regular general-product stores like Fred Meyers, Walmart, or Target. Look for ostrich feathers in feather dusters, sparkle spray paint, epoxy, superglue in hardware sections, or cork boards in the kitchen sections. General purpose and hardware stores also carry a wide variety of paints and specialty adhesives that are often just as effective as what you can find in fly shops.

\*\*I fell in love with circle hooks years ago when bait-fishing for catfish. Regardless of the size of the hook or how long I let the cat chew on the bait, every single catfish was hooked in the lips. They cost a bit more than standard hooks and can be difficult to locate in many fly shops, but they can work very well on scud, caddis pupae, and Czech nymph patterns. Check out Mustads' selection [here](#).

\*\*Many fly tiers supplement their supply boxes with the feathers and fur of wild game taken during fall hunting season. To prevent infestation by moths or other unwanted pests, be sure to freeze all feathers and fur for at least ten days to kill any larvae and eggs

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# FLY SPECIALS

**\$12 per dozen, 33% off my normal rate of \$18. Mix and match as you please, but minimum total order is one dozen. As always, the shipping is free.**

**Diving Baetis**: For those who love those fall hatches of bwo's, remember that many trout focus on the females that dive or crawl to lay their eggs on the bottom. This pattern matches the small gas bubble that accompanies the diving bug. Swing it like a wet fly or dead drift it like a nymph (size 20).

**Pale Baetis Nymph**: The most common drifting nymph in the fall, *Baetis* are important on every stream. This slim-profiled nymph matches the pale color of many naturals. (size 18-22)

**Fuzzball**: While October Caddis season never seems to produce as many rising fish as we'd hope, trout certainly do some damage to the pupae. Trout hang along current seams that border slow margin water looking for pupae that drift too far out into the current. Pair the orange version of this nymph with a larger, orange soft hackle (size 8, orange or olive)

**Alexandra**: Few flies rival the Alexandra for fall brook trout, with its combination of peacock, silver, and red. Fish it like a streamer in lakes or swing it through rivers. Also a killer springtime bass, crappie, and bluegill pattern (size 8-12).

**Seal Midge Emerger**: Midges regain their importance to trout as fall progresses and this pattern works great for those smutting risers. With no tail, the rear of the pattern hangs below the surface film while the hackle creates an illusion of movement on the surface. (size 12-16, rusty, brown, olive, and black)

**CdC Bubble Brassie**: The best nymph in my fly box over the past three years, it can imitate a range of pupae and larvae. It is dense enough to sink quickly in fast water, sparse enough to fool fish in slow water, and the CdC bubble captures and retains an air bubble (size 12 and 16, olive, maroon, chartreuse, black, brown, copper).