How to Dye Feathers



Do you have fly tying material in your inventory that just is not the right color? Or perhaps you are lucky to have been given surplus fly tying materials - something which happened to me - but you need a different color.

Dyeing feathers is easy and fun and sometimes can lead to surprises. This article will show you how to dye and how easy it is.

I have found liquid dye provides more uniform color coverage than powdered dye. I use Rit® liquid dye for my feathers. Also, if I want to add another color to create a different hue, I mix the dye before I add it to the water bath. The colors that I selected for this project were Harvest, Dark Brown, Dark Green and Wine.



Tools and Supplies:

Large Pot (aluminum or porcelain lined)	Apron
Colander (preferably metal mesh)	Paper towels
Large bowl (glass, porcelain, or stainless steel)	Oven mitts
Large strainer to remove feathers from pot	Liquid dish soap
Latex kitchen gloves	Long tongs
1 cup liquid measure	Rit® liquid dye
Large towel you don't mind staining	Bags (for feather storage)
White Vinegar (1 cup per batch)	

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Step 1: Choose pot deep enough to hold your feathers

I use a Granite Ware Porcelain Water Bath Canner which is large enough to submerge all the feathers underwater. Porcelain lined pots are preferable so that any residual stains left from the dyeing can be bleached out. I do not use this pot for food preparation due to the caustic chemicals used in the dyeing process.



Step 2: Clean the feathers

Cleaning the feathers of grit, blood, and natural oils is an important step and helps the feathers absorb color.

Fill pot with lukewarm water. Add a tablespoon of liquid dish detergent. Gently move the feathers with tongs, so that all the feathers are exposed to the soapy water. Allow the feathers to soak for at least one hour to become fully saturated which aids in the even absorption of color from the dye.



Step 3: Rinse the feathers with cool water.

Bring your pot of feathers to the sink. Place a colander in the sink under the faucet. Remove a few feathers from the soapy water and place them in the colander. Rinse the feathers in cool water. Continue to rinse the feathers in the colander until the water runs clean of any residual color, debris, or soap that may remain on the feathers.

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Step 4: Soak cleaned feathers

Transfer cleaned feathers to a bowl. Keep the feathers covered in cool water until you are ready to place them into the dye bath.



Step 5: Prepare dye bath

I use the porcelain water bath canning pot for the dyeing process.

Place pot onto stove top. Add water, liquid dye, and 1 cup white vinegar (which acts as a color fixative). I use 12 cups of water and a whole 8 oz. bottle of Rit® dye (if you want subtle colors, use less dye). Turn on burner to high. Do not let the water boil since high heat can dry feathers out so that they become brittle. As soon as there is steam coming from the surface, immediately turn the burner off.

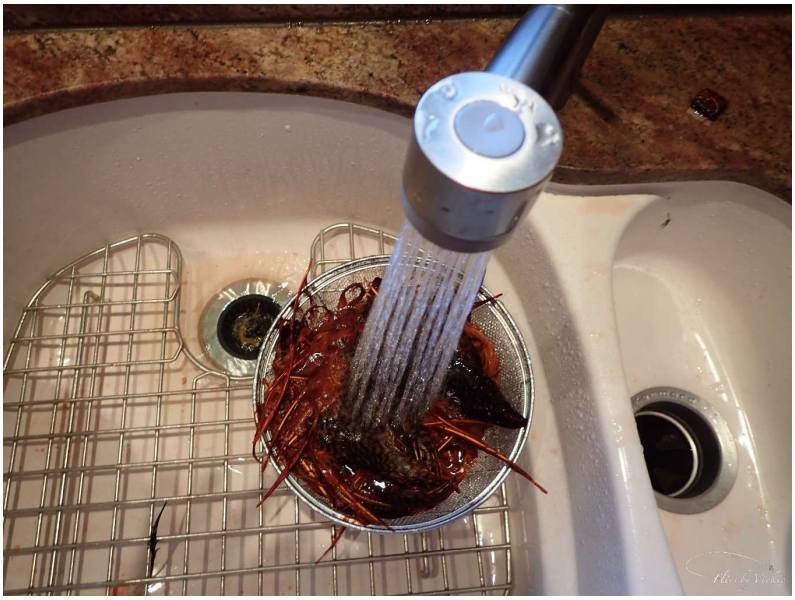
Step 6: Dyeing the feathers

Place a sample of feathers into the dye bath. Keep track of the time in the dye. Remove the feathers, then rinse the sample under cool water to see if the desired color has been achieved. This may take as little as a few seconds, or as long as a few minutes. If the feathers have not absorbed the desired color leave them in the dye bath longer.

Note: the color will appear darker when the feathers are still wet.

Once you are satisfied with the color, add the rest of the feathers to the dye bath. Remove the feathers when the right color has been achieved.

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Step 7: Rinse feathers

Place feathers into a colander in the sink. Rinse with cool water until the water runs clear.



Place the rinsed feathers into a bowl and continue to rinse with cool water until all the water runs clear.



After the water is clear, return the feathers to the colander to drain.

Don’t discard the dye bath until you are satisfied with the final color, as you may need to reuse the dye bath if the color is too light after the feathers have completely dried.

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Step 8: Air dry feathers

Drying the feathers can be done outside on a sunny, windless day. If desired, feathers can be placed on paper towels and dried inside.

Note: Prolonged exposure to hot sun will dry the feathers out and make them brittle.

As they dry, check to see if the desired color has been achieved. If not, you can reheat the dye bath and place them back in for additional dyeing.

I usually start the drying process outside, weather permitting, and then finish drying them inside. Check to make sure that they are completely dry before putting them into storage.



Surprises do happen!

It is preferable to start with the color white because it is easier to control the outcome of the desired color. However, we must work with what we have, and these were the colors that I had available.

Some of the colors were subdued. I wanted more vibrant hues which was accomplished with a quick dip into the dye bath.

The final color is influenced by the original color of the feathers, amount of dye used, and the length of time the feathers are in the dye bath.

For example, one surprising outcome for me was the yellow marabou. I wanted an olive colored marabou, so I selected a dark green liquid dye color.

The dark green dye made the color of the dye bath look blue rather than green. But the yellow marabou, when dyed, resulted

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in the exact color of olive that I wanted. This is because when you combine the colors yellow and blue you get green.

On the other hand, when dyeing a naturally colored grizzly saddle in the exact same dye bath, the final color turned out blue-gray.

It is important to test various dye colors to ensure that you create the desired colors. You cannot assume that the name of the color of the dye will provide you the exact color that you are trying to create.

While surprises do happen the results of your efforts can be stunning!





Now I have the exact color for the neck hackle and marabou that I needed to complete my new leech pattern!



Vickie's Predator Leech

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