

Ants on the menu

by Tim Rolston

"TROUT seem to have an innate attraction to ants. Time after time, I've watched rising trout completely ignore mayfly and caddis adults (as well as other normally attractive insects) as they floated the entire length of a pool. However, any ants present in the same pool stood little chance of survival; the trout nailed them." Ted Fauceglia, *American Angler*, May/June '98.

In autumn, I am very partial to deer hair hopper patterns. They are durable, float well and represent a fair meal to trout that, with the major mayfly and other hatches long over, have become more dependent on terrestrial insects. Sure, in slower water, or if there is a hatch on, it is worth changing to a small parachute mayfly pattern or an Adams – but most fish on most days are fooled by a hopper if it is well presented.

Well, I can tell you that while that may hold good more often than not, it is not always the case.

A few years back, Gordon Mackay and I fished the Jan du Toits stream near Worcester and if it had not been for a small pattern tucked away in the corner of my fly box – the result of some experiments at the vise a few months previously - then our three-day hike into the mountains would have been wasted.

The pattern was a #16 ant, tied with a small piece of chenille and with a minute hackle to represent the legs.

I had not even tried it, as it is impossible to see when it is more than a metre away and thus not really suitable for general prospecting.

We were well into our first day when we came upon a good, solid fish feeding quietly and steadily. It was clearly visible and we were rather worried that we might also be.

Ducking low behind the boulders, Gordon (it was his turn and if you don't fish in this manner with your partner on the river, you are missing half the fun) presented his hopper with a perfect cast. It landed about a metre above the fish on our side of it and with an exact line of drift. It tensed for what we felt must be a sure thing but, apart from a minor adjustment of its fins, the trout ignored the fly completely. We realised that we were in for a bit of difficulty.

As we could see nothing on the water to provide any clues I suggested that he try a small mayfly. A #16 parachute was delicately presented and, if anything, received even less attention. I said to Gordon the last resort is to plop a nymph behind the fish in the hope that it would spin about and grab it. This often works, but there is a risk of putting the fish down. Well, it never batted an eyelid and I thought that this time we had spooked it for sure. But no, it kept on rising and was obviously still unaware of our advances.

Eventually we noticed that on some of the rocks there were the remnants of a previous



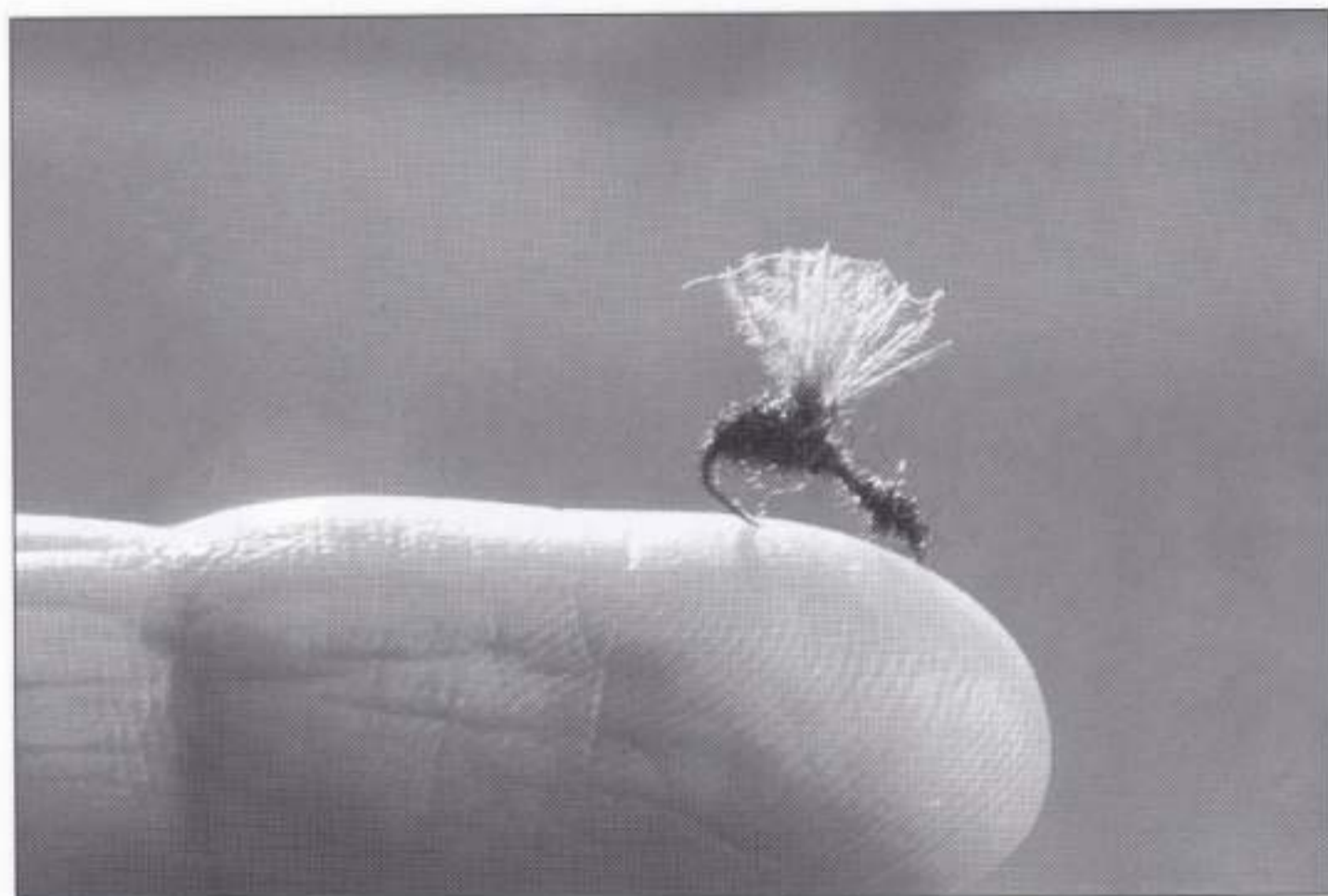
A rainbow trout holding station in the crystal clear waters of the Jan Du Toit's River in the Western Cape.



Fishing up the lower section of the JDT's. Note the backpacks in preparation for overnighting on the river.



Catch and release on the JDT's, CAR is essential to the well being of this beautiful but vulnerable fishery.



Tim Rolston's #18 ant with dubbed fur body and CDC wing.

flying ant fall, and Gordon thought it was these that the fish was concentrating on. It was then that, in a fit of desperation, I discovered the long-lost ant pattern in the corner of my fly box and Gordon suggested that I give it a go.

Well, I couldn't see the fly, so I watched the fish. It never hesitated, didn't speed up or slow down, just confidently adjusted its fins, drifted across with the current, and sipped it in. No fuss, no scrutiny just "slurp", and it was on.

That single fly caught us all the bigger fish of the trip. All were spotted feeding and all were first tried with alternative patterns (I didn't want to risk losing our only ant pattern unnecessarily). By the end of that trip, we had caught six fish of up to three pounds on that one fly.

We passed it to one another with the care reserved for a newborn baby, and even rescued it at times from various types of herbiage.

But that was what the trout wanted and that was what they got. Even after its legs had fallen off, it worked and only it worked.

The fish were definitely single-minded about ants. There were not a lot of ants about really, but a steady few. The last rainbow to respond to the ant proved the pattern's worth to us once and for all. On removing the fly from its mouth and letting the fish go, I could clearly see, stuck to my imitation, a real ant that had, moments before, been swallowed by the fish.

Selectivity is not an everyday occurrence – but don't dismiss the concept completely. It does occur and that's when the flies you have hoarded for months may become your saviour.

These days I always carry ant patterns, all the time, every trip. You might go a season or two without ever needing one, but on the days that you do find yourself in the middle of a nuptial flight of ants they can mean the difference between failure and uncompromised success.

For some reason fish like ants. Ant patterns also have a distinctive shape and the noticeable "waist" of an ant's body seems to provide some sort of trigger for the fish. Much as you might instantly recognise a Mac Donald's "M", so the fish seem to associate the waisted pattern of an ant with an invitation to feed. I often use ants where there are none about as you are unlikely to see them anyway if they are not present in numbers. My almost inevitable choice is a CDC "compara-ant" pattern because it floats well and is far easier to see than the chenille- body version we used on the Jan du Toit's.

On heavily fished waters the fish quickly get the idea that big flies are bad news, a case of "if something looks too good to be true, it probably is", and small patterns often outperform larger ones. Combining the small size with the distinct shape of an ant makes for a deadly fly, which is particularly effective on tricky trout and in calmer waters. I can tell you that of perhaps ten fish I have taken on the Cape streams that were over the magical 20-inch mark, at least half have fallen to an ant pattern. Add to that those that have fallen to

beetles and there are not a lot left.

Being terrestrial insects and abundant to boot, some ants are always likely to be on the water, even when you can't see them. Furthermore, for the most part, the fish don't expect them in large numbers but do recognise them for what they are when they do see them. The very essence of terrestrial fishing is that the fish "know" the pattern is not going to escape, often has a far higher calorific value than some half-empty spent spinner and, with ants, they just seem to be fond of the taste.

Ant patterns vary from simple to overly complicated. The Mc Murray ant, much loved by American anglers, and consisting of nothing more than two "blobs" of balsa wood, demonstrates or at least confirms, that the single most important aspect of an ant pattern is that it has a distinct waist. Over-hackled commercial flies often lack this feature, and as with your date on a Saturday night, if she doesn't have a waist, your interest is likely to be limited.

The Americans also seem to get some very large ants and in a variety of colours. For my money, on local waters you need little more than a size 18 black ant with a white wing so that you have some prospect of being able to see it on the water. Ensure that you don't lose the waist if you add a wing or hackle legs, (the legs I don't usually bother with, mostly because it is too time-consuming and fiddly). Some anglers like to fish sunken ants, but for me the allure of dry fly fishing prevails and I exclusively fish floating patterns on long, thin leaders, mostly to sighted fish.

Ants are a recognised means of overcoming selective hatch situations, and there is a lot of, at least subjective, evidence that fish will interrupt selective feeding patterns to intercept a well-presented ant, or even one not so well presented. A concluding example of this phenomenon occurred last season when I saw a fish in flat, calm water feeding happily. Sure that I was going to spook the fish with the first cast, I lengthened the leader, down to 7X and made a "trial cast" just to get the distance right, before what I hoped would be the "killer throw", right on its head. The trial cast placed the fly a good two metres to the side of the fish, only just in the water, perhaps a foot from the bank. I never got to make the "proper cast" and the fish never hesitated. When the ant landed, it turned, "sprinted" across the stream and hammered the ant so hard that, completely unprepared for this suicidal behaviour, I snapped the tippet. I didn't get that fish, but I learned a valuable lesson. Trout love ants and will behave in odd ways to get their teeth into them. So you really should carry a few, and fish them more often than you might think. With some experimentation and a little success you will soon come to regard ants as one of your favourite patterns.

Editor's note: Tim Rolston is a professional flyfishing guide and a member of the South African Flyfishing team. He also runs yellowfish camps on the Orange River under the name of Inkwazi Flyfishing Safaris and can be reached via his e-mail, rolston@iafrica.com or web site, www.inkwaziflyfishing.co.za

