

The Balbyter

Edward Truter

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A Balbyter tied by Gordon van der Spuy –the body is made of Lava Lace foam rubber, the wing is CDC and black Crystalflash is used for the legs and antennae

Ed Truter, reveals the origin of his pattern, the *Balbyter* (Ball-biter), perhaps the most lethal fly on Lesotho's incredible Bokong River.

I was beside a rocky run, crouching over a slab of basalt on Lesotho's Bokong River, trying to keep out of sight of the stream of fish jostling past me in the current. I'd caught enough of them over the preceding days not to need to catch anymore. But, I do relish experimenting, and an endless flow of fussy eaters in plain view is a perfect laboratory.

For a long while I had been trying to tie the perfect hopper, an insect which is in constant supply in Lesotho's summertime meadows. My dry fly box was so crammed with hopper variations that I had to prevent them from escaping each time I opened the lid. I would tie on a hopper, present it to the nearest pod of fish and study their reaction. The responses varied from being spooked silly, to the odd soft take. In my mind, that was a complete failure.

My philosophy is that each fish that's willing to feed is catchable, and if my fly is failing to get eaten by even one such fish, then it's time to look closer at things and adjust both theory and application. After trying six different hoppers and not scoring high enough, I changed the subject completely. Typically, chunky terrestrials are the flavour of sunny days in Lesotho and the new tie was a big-ant imitation with an added dash of beetle, a pinch of iridescent wasp and an appetising footprint of CDC (*Cul de canard* aka duck's arse). The first fish to spy the fly almost left a cloud of scales behind in its haste to suck it down. From there it was a one hundred per cent win and the *Gevaarlike Balbyter* (dangerous ball-biter) was born.

The idea for this fly was spawned when I was sifting through Pierre Swartz's fly tying kit while he was based on the Bokong. Among the motley mess of Pierre's supplies I scratched out a section of non-slip rubber mat. It was that stuff that's a gauze that looks like it's had blobs of foam rubber dribbled on to it. I noted that the blobs of foam had the forms of an ant's head and abdomen respectively, with the section of naked fibres in-between the blobs forming the thorax. So I snipped off a section, and strapped it to a hook. An Egyptian goose CDC hackle, some peacock herl and rubber legs tied in the middle, all with red thread, and that was that. Of course very few flies are really original, in each of our minds we have a database of thousands of images of all that we've absorbed over the years, and that's often the framework that serves as the foundation for something "new".

The foam rubber foundation of the first fly was soft and disintegrated after about ten fish. But what remained, dominated by the CDC, continued to attract zero-hesitation takes. Seeing that response really affirmed for me the importance of CDC in a dry fly. One of the things about the dynamic of CDC fibres interacting with the water's surface and in the film, is the way that there's a play of light with the mix of fibres. Tiny hairs and air bubbles create an optical, visual footprint that looks nearly identical to that which forms around real insects trapped in the film. To see this, one can do a few experiments in a drinking glass with insects and CDC flies, assuming the CDC is correctly tied in. The end result is that the fish sees something that's already been imprinted on its brain, a food trigger that screams, "Something alive is trapped in the film!" So that explains the CDC hackle.

The white CDC wing is there because it's a great sighter and also because CDC is so buoyant; it helps bring the fly up in rough water. I believe there's something in white wings that turns fish on. Think about proven fish catchers with white wings like the Royal family of dry flies; like the Royal Wulff.

The peacock herl is there because it's got fish-catching magic, and it adds some scruffiness to what would otherwise be hard-lines along the thorax. Hard lines should be avoided in a fly even though they exist on some real insects. Beyond the use of CDC, scruffy edges help create the optical pattern, discussed earlier, that typically forms around a real insect trapped in the film.

Flash in the wing (one strand per side) is there because many insects have subtle iridescence in their wings.

The red thread, tied scruffily, is there because historically, we know that red, especially when used in conjunction with peacock and white, really works. Red also has great contrast when set against olive green should the fly taking a swim in the turbulence. In most clearish waters the background is green.

The legs should be flat silicone because it doesn't perish like rubber and moves more. The antenna are there for the silhouette.

No-one's balls got nibbled in the naming of this fly. The pattern is simply named after the 1-2 cm long *Camponotus* species of ants called sugar ants, but officially known in Afrikaans as *balbyter* ants. The real *balbyter* ants actually have furry, tan-orange, abdomens. The fly is meant to imitate any ant or similarly-structured terrestrial. Its form and silhouette, with clearly defined head, thorax and abdomen and bold legs, leaves little doubt in a fish's wiring that it's seeing an insect. And in streams like the Bokong, where fish focus heavily on terrestrial fallout, especially when the river is crammed-full of yellows and there are many mouths to feed, it's playing straight into the fish's game.

The version I use hasn't evolved much, but others have fiddled with it a bit. I don't think that any pattern is ever static. I've seen some versions that use a synthetic wing, but I'm not a fan of that because, although it may be quicker and easier to tie-in the synthetic, the qualities added by having a white CDC wing are lost. Substitutions and changes are all good, but shouldn't be done just to mess around, they should be carefully thought out and considered, and one should ask oneself the questions: Does substituting X material take away the magic that Y material was adding? Am I really using the "best" material (i.e. most fish-catching material) for the job? Some people have also experimented

with how and where the foam is tied in, but again it's important to ask oneself questions about form and function. For example, foam interfering with how the CDC hackle lies could compromise how the CDC flares and gets trapped in the film, negatively affecting the formation of the footprint that makes the fly what it is.

I tend to try it everywhere I think I might get a bite on a dry. I used it as a suspension-indicator fly on the Smalblaar River and when the day warmed up and the rainbows switched from nymphs to dries, they ate the balbyter every time. I've also used it successfully in flying ant (termite) hatches, the most memorable of which was on Lake Tanganyika, when schools of usually very difficult to catch *Varichorhinus* (chiselmouth) turned on to the storm-downed insects. And just a few days ago I sight-cast it to basking blue kurper who were sufficiently moved to idle over to it and sip it down in a Southern Cape pond.



Another view of Edward Truter's ant imitation as tied by Gordon van der Spuy