

Jimmy the shark man

by Ed Herbst

I spent September 24 celebrating the fly fishing heritage of our wonderful country and Nation. Fellow Cape Piscatorial Society committee member, Craig Thom, had invited me to tie flies at an open day he was holding at his fly tackle junkie's paradise – Netbooks dot coza downstairs and Stream X upstairs – in Milnerton.

He told me that Tom Sutcliffe would be there to sign copies of his new book, *Shadows on the Stream Bed* and to tie examples of his DDD, Neutral Density Dragon and others and the leading trout guide in this province, Tim Rolston (www.inkwazi.co.za) would be tying his quick and easy as well as effective micropatterns. He also mentioned, in a throwaway line, that 'Jimmy the Shark Man' would also be manning the vise.

I was intrigued. Like most people I have a largely irrational fear of a variety of beasties like snakes and spiders and have promised myself that, no matter what the attraction, I would never fish where sharks, crocodiles and malaria mosquitoes were present.

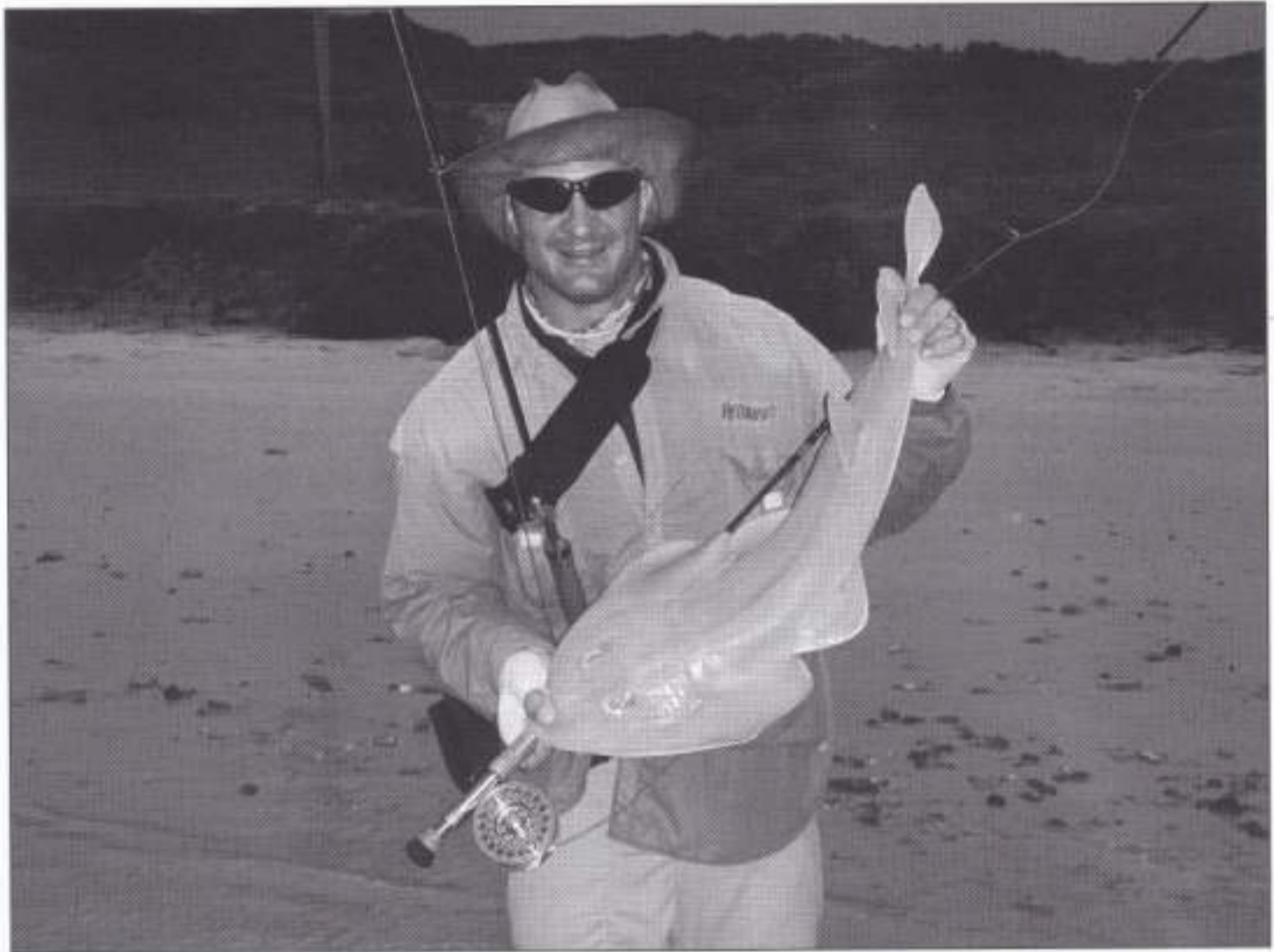
Jimmy, I imagined, would be tying flies as long as my arm that needed the strength of a gorilla and a 14-weight fly rod to cast – the antithesis of the delicate fly fishing that is my passion and the physical obligation enforced by slight stature and the toll of advancing age. The reality turned out to be fascinatingly different and light (if you will forgive the pun) years away from the brooding menace of the soundtrack to 'Jaws'.

The fly Jimmy Eagleton tied was his version of a popular bonefish fly, the Turneffe crab which was tied by Craig Matthews for bonefish in the Caribbean, most specifically the Turneffe Atoll off the coast of Belize.

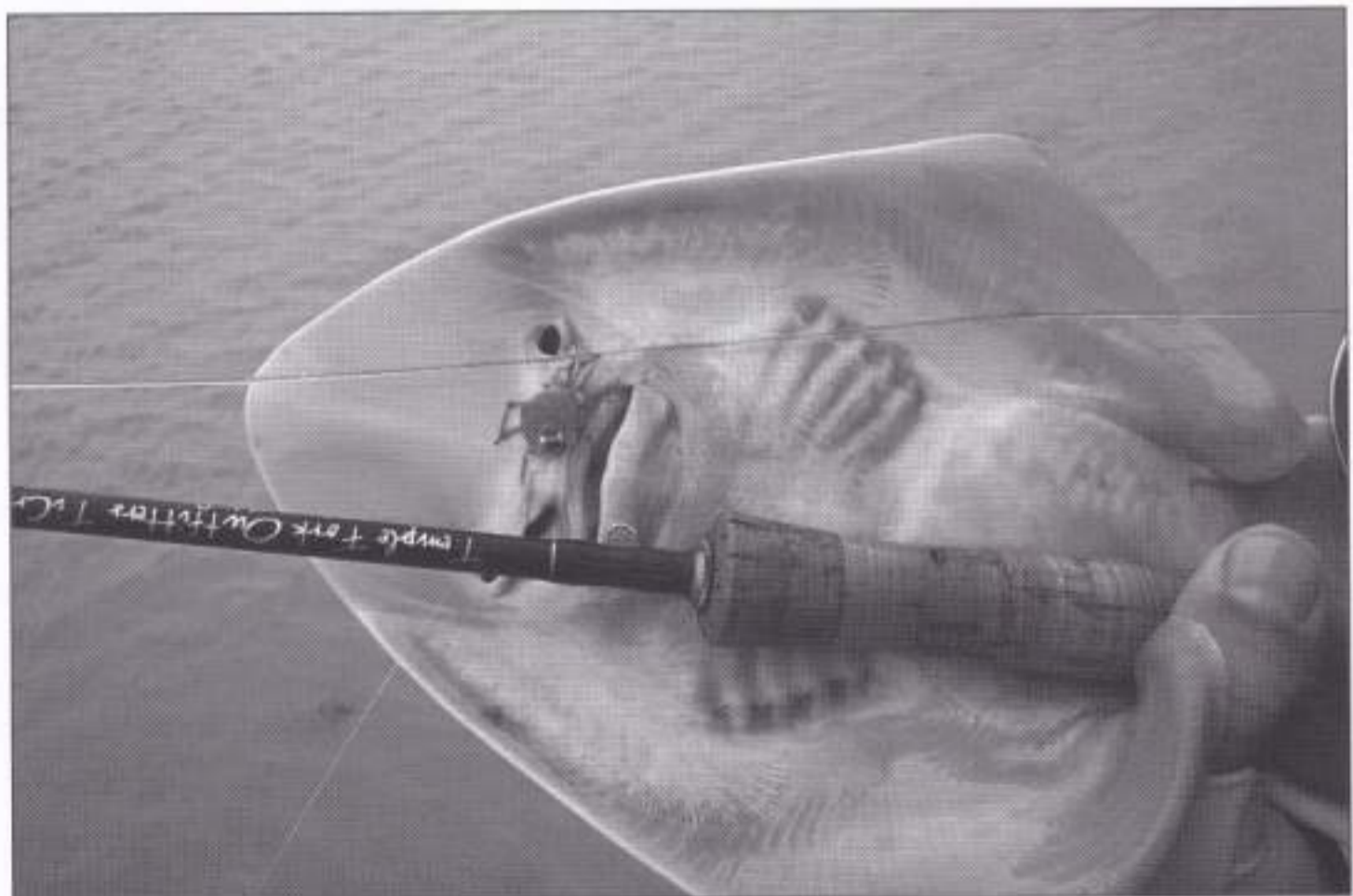
Everything I knew about catching sand sharks on the fly was gleaned from an article, "Catching Sandsharks on Fly" by Sean Mills in the 1999 issue of this magazine and he had caught fish of between two and five kilograms at Club Mykonos at Langebaan on the Cape West Coast on an eight weight rod and a Crazy Charlie variation – the Mud Charlie.

Jimmy said he became interested in catching sand sharks on fly in 2004 when he moved to Cape Town from Gauteng and started fishing the surf at Gordon's Bay. "I was fascinated by the possibilities of targeting sand shark with a fly rod because they can be stalked in clear water often less than a metre deep, they are very wary and because you can watch their reaction to a fly." Because they are so easily spooked, he usually tries not to enter the water but this is not a problem because they are usually little more than ten metres from the shore.

His choice of fly is dictated by what sand sharks eat – prawns, crabs and small fish. When he started out four years ago he favoured the Orange Ruffly, a fly developed by Glen Tagami of California. More recently he started tying his own version of the Turneffe Crab.



Jimmy Eagleton with a typical sand shark caught at Langebaan on the Cape West Coast.



The sand shark – which is actually a ray – showing its small mouth.

He says it is an ingenious design with three layers of differing weighting. It is designed to fish hook point up which is important – particularly when you cannot see the fish you are prospecting for with speculative casts - because sand shark are often found above beds of seaweed. The heaviest weight is the dumbbell eyes tied above the hook shank which turns the fly upside down and allows it to ride point upwards. The middle layer is tan furry foam which gives the body shape and colour and the top layer is a deer hair wing that adds buoyancy and functions as a weed guard by shielding the hook point. To strengthen the area where the relatively delicate furry foam is tied in he uses Alcolin epoxy which comes in tiny and economical sachets which he recommends that you cut rather than tear when you open them. Mottled rubber strands provide movement and mimic the scurrying blur of legs as a crab seeks to escape.

The best time of the year to catch sand sharks is in summer and the best time of the day is on the incoming tide about three hours before high tide until maximum high tide. He says that after about an hour after the peak of high tide, sand sharks take a siesta and bury themselves in the sand, showing no interest in a fly – what he calls 'lie-down mode'.

Jimmy says that a six weight rod and a reel with about a hundred metres of backing is all one needs because the sand shark is a shallow water fish which will swim away from the angler until it reaches deep water and then immediately turn back for the safety of its normal shallow water habitat. "Sand sharks have strength – not speed", he says. I watched some video footage him of landing an average specimen – he says this rarely takes more than five minutes – and he puts a lot of side strain on the fish.

He chooses a weight forward intermediate line because it lies level with the fly in shallow water, whereas a floating line using a fast-sinking fly on a floating line results in the leader angling downward and the sand shark thus tend to bump into it and become frightened. His leader design is simple. Because tapered leaders tend to result in fly splashing down heavily, he uses a single strand of 15 pound breaking strain fluorocarbon on his 9 –weight rod and an eight pound breaking strain equivalent on his six weight. Leader length is "What I am comfortable with", because he says the wind never stops blowing where he fishes.

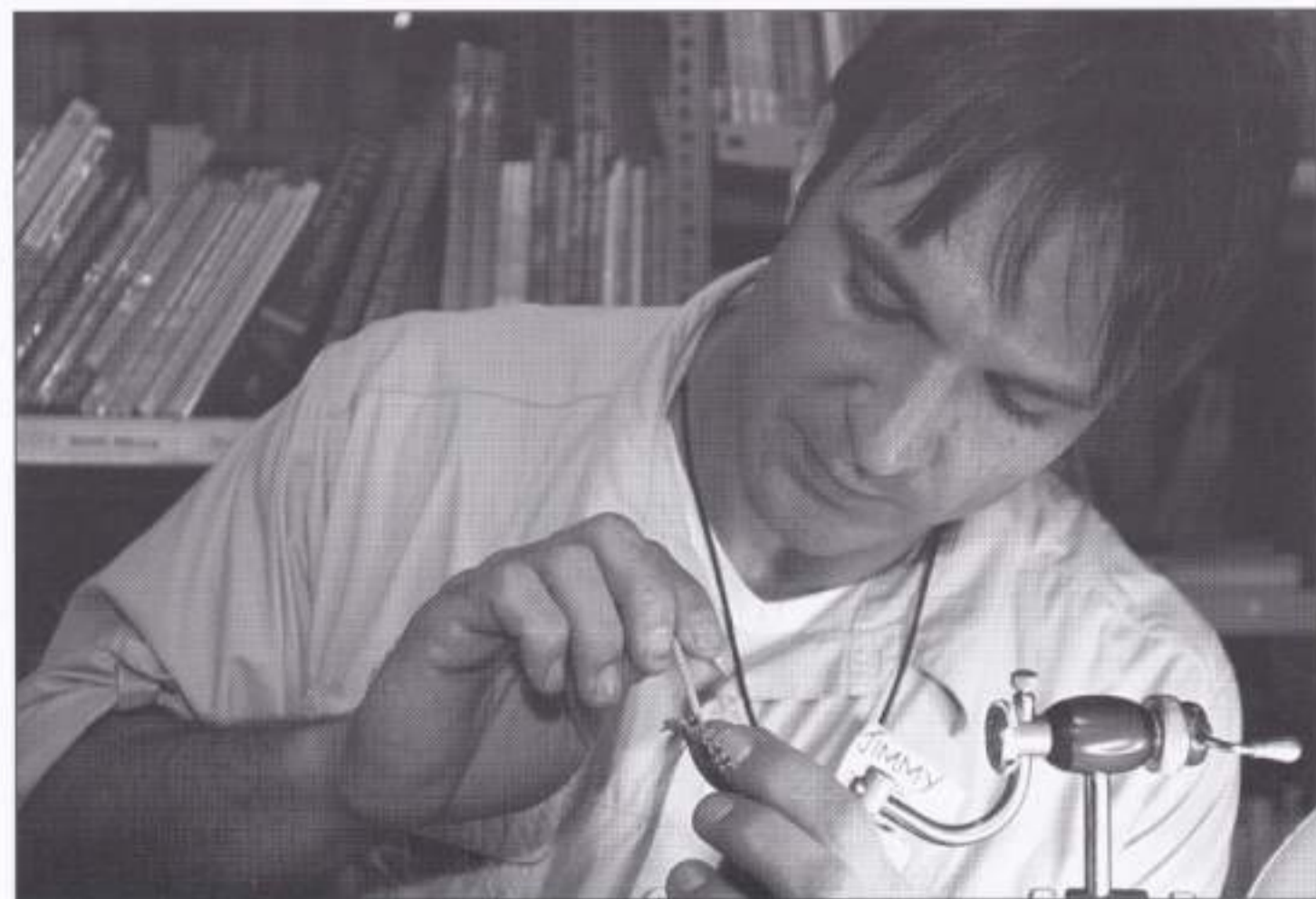
In one of the video clips I saw, Jimmy cradled a big sand shark in his arms and with two fingers in its mouth. He points out that the mouth is not much bigger than a five rand coin and is equipped with grinding plates rather than teeth. This and the way in which the sand shark captures its prey, dictate how you strike.

As Wikipedia points out, what we call a sand shark is more usually called a Shovelnose Guitarfish and is not a shark at all but a ray. The fish hovers over its prey, confines it within the orbit of the fins on the perimeter of its triangular head to prevent its escape and sucks it in by exhaling water through its gills. When Jimmy sees this happening to his fly, he watches the loop of the line between the rod tip and the water and starts slowly tightening the line about 2cms at a time. When the loop straightens and the line goes taut, he simultaneously raises the rod tip and strips line with his reel hand to set the hook.

When I got home I did a web search and found that CPS committee member, Korrie Broos had written an article, "Fly Fishing for Sharks in South Africa" on Jimmy Eagleton and his fishing partner, Jacques Visser for the Global Flyfisher website (<http://>



Jimmy Eagleton tying his sand shark patterns at the open day for Craig Thom's new Stream X fly fishing shop in Milnerton.

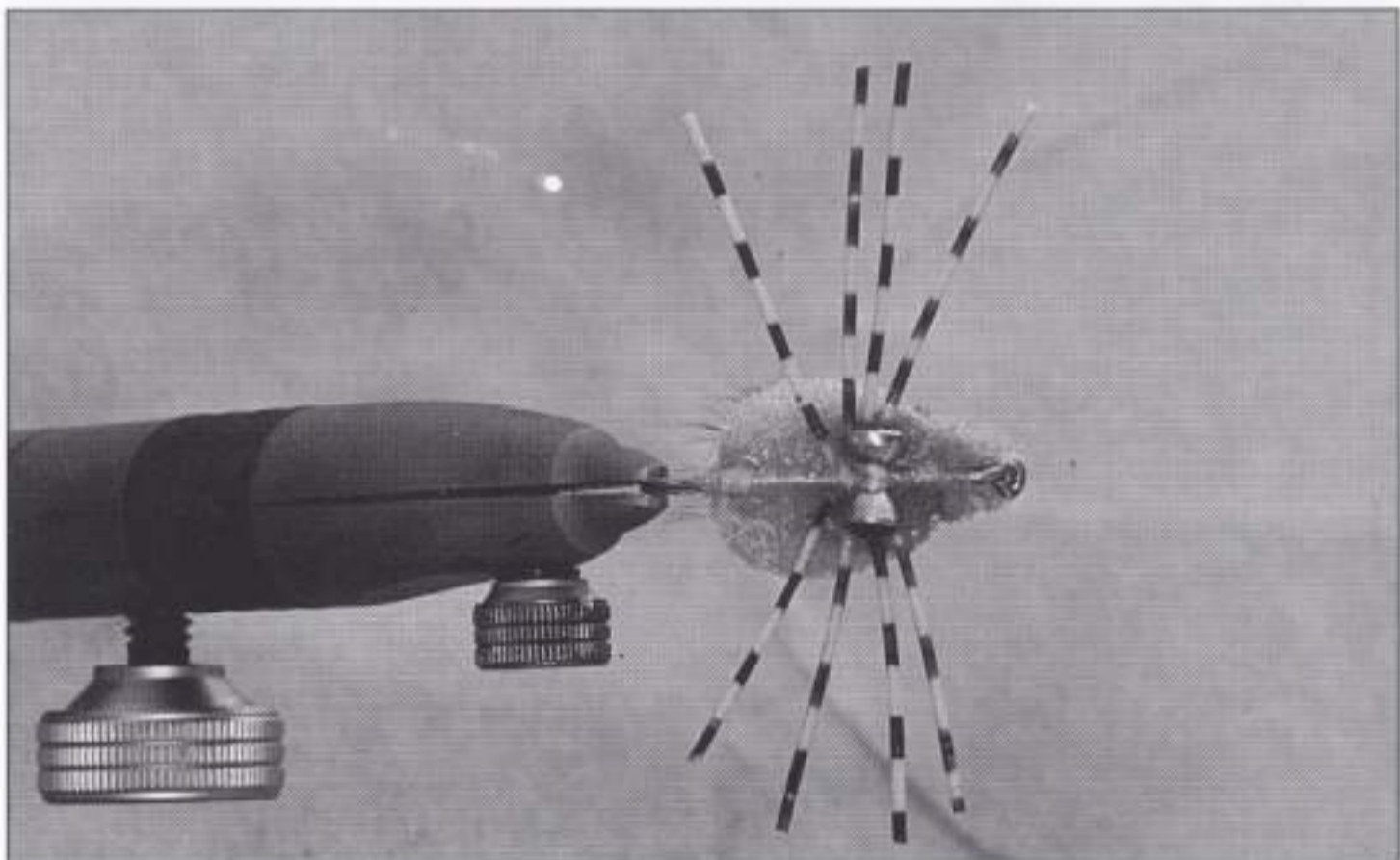


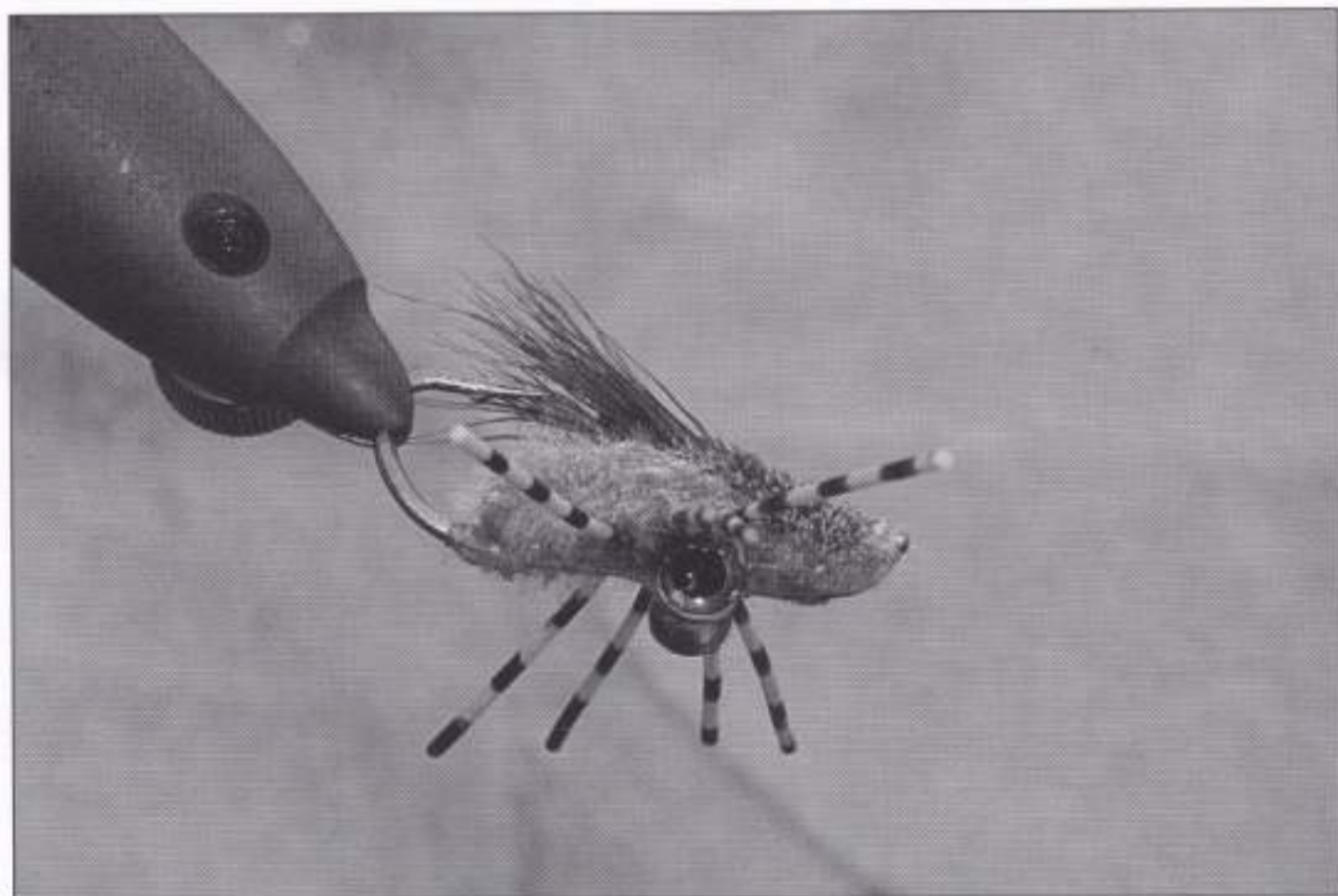
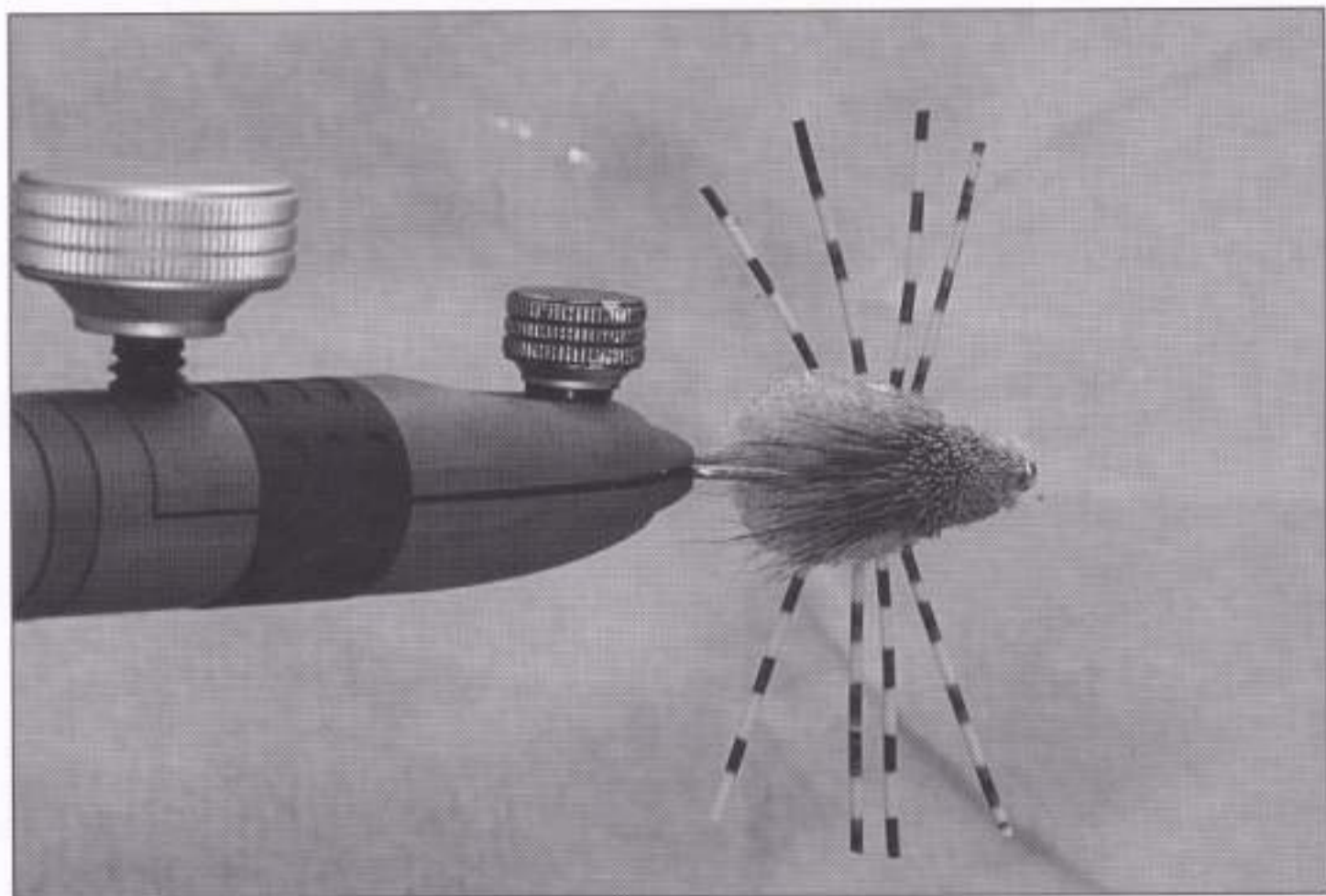
globalflyfisher.com/fishbetter/sharks/). It provided a fascinating insight into the pioneering endeavours of two anglers who have gone where others have literally feared to tread.

At the time of writing this article I am a few weeks away from retiring from my full-time job as a media consultant and moving to Hermanus so the possibility of sight fishing to relatively small marine fish like mullet and sandshark is exciting. The lightest six weight fly rod – by a substantial margin - is the two and a half ounce, nine foot Orvis Helios imported by the local Orvis agent, Jerome Goslett and available through local fly shops like Craig Thom's Stream X in Milnerton, Cape Town but I am also thinking of asking CTS in New Zealand (<http://www.ctsfishing.com/>) to provide me with a six weight blank designed to my specification. When you are in your mid sixties, built like a jockey and suffer from tennis elbow and arthritic fingers, then a long, heavy rod – say nine foot and six weight or more – is anathema.

My 'Sand Shark Special' would be an eight foot, four piece, six weight, with an all-cork, full wells handle (you can get more power by casting with your thumb on top of the blank and a full-wells facilitates this) and a matte-finish blank – which CTS can supply - because in shallow, clear water, the absence of rod flash can be important. I intend getting it built by Mike Newby of Johannesburg (<http://www.ganador.co.za/082-788-8184>). He highly recommends CTS blanks and says the company can supply anything from an Ought Weight to a Tarpon Tamer. An example of Mike's CTS work, a 10 foot 2-weight built for a South African now living in Sweden, is shown the flytalk internet forum (<http://www.flytalk.co.za/forum/showthread.php?t=7089>)

As far as I can ascertain, the lightest reel with a suitable drag system that can accommodate a six weight line and a hundred metres of backing is the aptly named Vision CDC #5/6 which has an advertised weight of 99 grams, about three ounces (<http://www.visionflyfishing.com/>). It is available through retailers via importer Tinus van Wyk ([tinus.vanwyk@mweb.co.za/082 4981470](mailto:tinus.vanwyk@mweb.co.za)).





Three views of Jimmy Eagleton's version of the Turneffe Crab. It is designed to fish hook point up and the deer hair wing facilitates this while making the fly less likely to hang up in sea weed.