

The March Brown Spider – a rediscovery of soft hackle magic

by Peter Smith

Certain experiences remain with you for life. Some are good, others bad and a few brilliantly humorous - albeit at the expense of another. As a child I loved trips to the Drakensberg with my dad. He would rent a cottage, which included rights to a productive still water, not far from the Umzimkulu River. We would fish for ten days and worries were few and far between.

All went on holiday, meaning the immediate family, the maid and both the dog and our Siamese cat. In the sixties, the route to the berg would require careful negotiation of the Umkomaas valley – then, an untarred tortuous road – and Dad often lost the hubcaps from his car, a white Chrysler Valiant with a black vinyl roof.

If viewed from above, the cottage looked peculiar, yet it was practical and had a left and right wing of bedrooms, conjoined by a common living area of lounge, kitchen and dining room.

The chef was also the gardener and would cook mouth-watering roasts on a huge, coal stove. The fire was never out, coffee was always on the boil and, on occasion he would scold me for walking in with muddy boots when I was seeking the warmth of the kitchen.

I would long for the dinner bell and, on one cold evening, happened to glance left as I headed for the dining room to see our Siamese cat perched precariously on the parapet above the fire in the lounge.

Dad, as always, had placed his rod butt first and fully tackled on the parapet. In the absence of any hook holder, the size 12 fly had drifted free of the first stripping guide and the cat was padding it with her paw watching it swing to and fro.

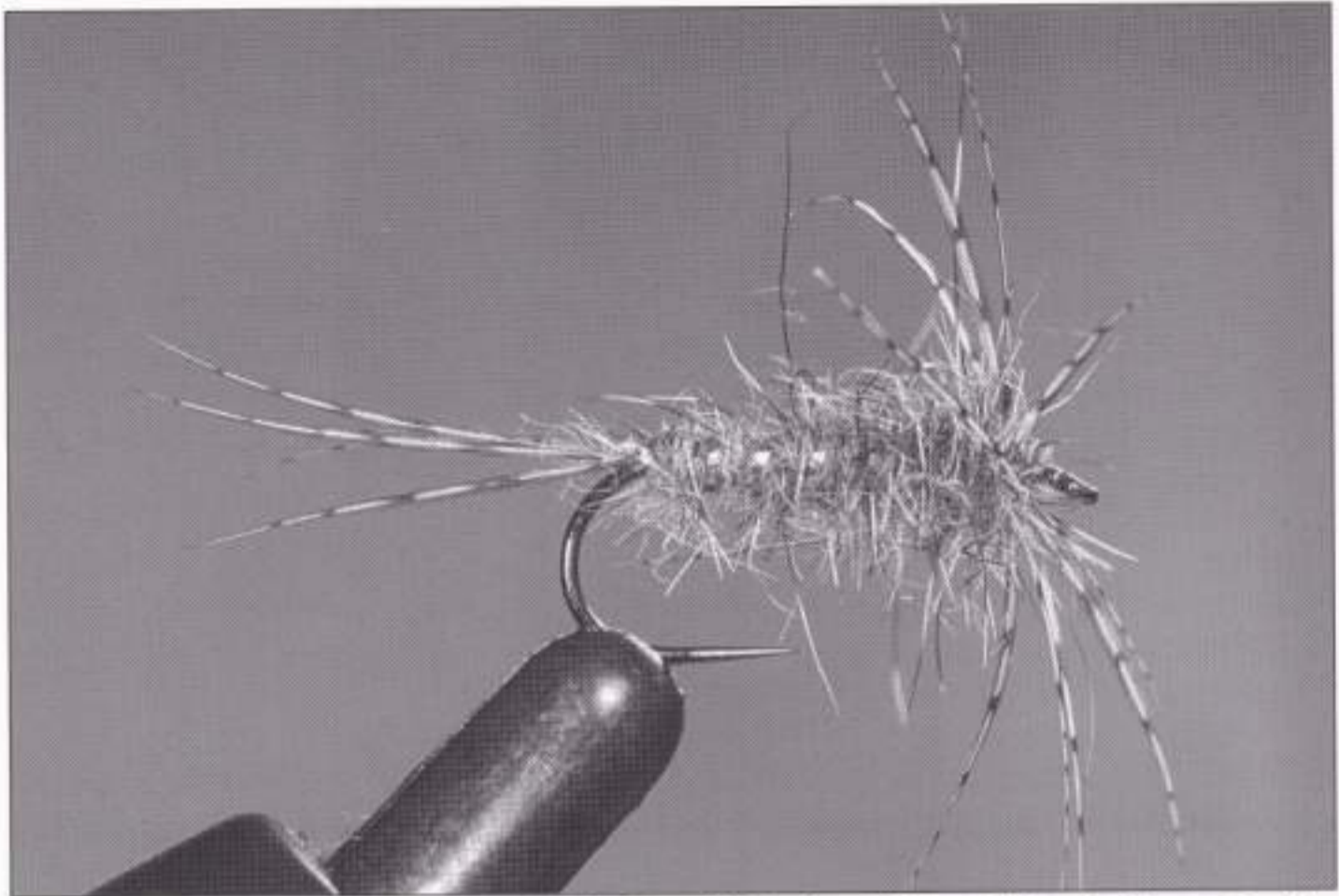
I had just asked for seconds, and Dad was telling me about the fly he had used on the river before any hatch, when all hell broke loose!

The sound of a crash to the floor was followed by Siamese swearing and, a nanosecond later, the ratchet of the reel screamed as the cat took off down the west wing with the fly lodged in her mouth.

The release was painful for all involved and I can still see the animal, in a hunchback position, flicking her tail and cursing the experience.

To break the tension, Dad showed me the fly which he introduced as a March Brown Spider and mentioned that it accounted for all the river fish stored in the coal-walled fridge outside.

As it was not commercially available, I forgot the fly, and never worked out how one



A March Brown Spider, which could also be called a Partridge and Hare's Ear, as tied by the editor.

ended in my box some 35 years later. I was on Beat Five of the Smalblaar in late December. The water was low, it was uncomfortably hot and, to make matters worse, the southeasterly wind was roaring up the valley, making casting difficult.

Having tried a RAB, PTN, GRHE and a Zak, I was running out of acronyms and other good options. To be honest, I tied the March Brown Spider on in jest and, keeping an eye on the troop of baboons settled close by, I sent a shaky cast up stream. Eight fish later my spirits were lifted. Being in debt wasn't so bad, our annual trip to Cape Town in the hectic month of December was a good idea and, I really should consider buying a 4x4 even though most my trips were on tar! In short, I felt great!

A year later I fished the Hotel Beat of the Smalblaar with my six-year old son. I tied a March Brown Spider on for him, cast the line upstream and passed him the rod and his first river fish simultaneously.

I knew I was onto something yet was continually greeted with glazed eyes and loss of interest whenever I raised the subject of its success or related books, in particular, those written by Sylvester Nemes, which I enjoy so much.

When I met my brother at the train station in Bristol, England, I was extremely excited. He had booked us into the Gliffaes Country House Hotel, which included two days on their River Usk beats. I justified the exorbitant accommodation and fishing charge on the premise that the 18 hours of June light would allow four sessions as opposed to two, and this, together with any other relevant calculations, helped put my mind at ease for the personal indulgence.

The River Usk, situated in Wales, is wide and runs fast. Due to heavy rains it was also discoloured and made for dangerous wading. My brother had insisted I wear an automatically inflatable life jacket which, together with several layers of under and over clothing, made me feel like the Michelin Man. Day one was rough, the beat was agonisingly short and the fish were small browns.

Day two was cloudy and cool with a brisk wind and a blank in the morning. We sat on the river bank together at lunch time to salvage the remnants of our food and tackle bag which had been nudged into the water by the resident cow! Sandwiches wet and coffee cold, I hunted through my flies for some thing that could turn my day in to success and spotted a mangled March Brown Spider.

The take on the second cast was the upliftment that one dreams about and a two and a half pound brown was released a short while later.

While I previously never included the March Brown Spider after fishing trips with the list of the flies successfully used, return visits to the Umzimkulu served to confirm its success. I handed out many to accompanying fly fishers, only to have equivalent joy when they rendered catch returns with commendable numbers of fish.

It's not a difficult fly to tie and can be adapted to the conditions. Some are best weighted others not. The tail fibres should be sparse and always tied precisely on top of the shank. The Hare's Ear body should always be tapered like a cigar and, the best tinsel – which should be tied in under the shank on commencement - is the light weight version found at haberdashery shops. One turn of the finest, darkest partridge you can find should be followed by a small head. Sizes 12 or 14 work well and, ignore the comments like the one from the elderly woman standing in for her husband at the "Field and Stream" shop in the quaint town of Keswick in the lake district of England. I spotted some commercially produced tied March Brown Spiders and was intrigued at how beautifully they were tied

"Don't buy that," remarked the woman, "Its June already and you will have little chance of success as March was two months ago!"

March might have been two months previously, but the fly had taken twelve fish a day before! Still, it wasn't worth a mention as that glazed, unbelieving look would have reappeared. It's a great fly and it opens a world of soft hackle opportunities long overlooked but successfully used by our predecessors.

"Without any shadow of doubt, the artificial March Brown is one of the most universally used flies and few patterns have maintained their popularity over such a lengthy period. Cotton gave a dressing for it and so did Chetham (1681) who called it the Moorish Brown. Bowlker in 1747 gave the tie as hare's fur ribbed with yellow silk and with a wing from either a partridge or a pheasant, so that the pattern has remained practically unaltered for two hundred years. Since the first mention of it, almost every angling author has made some reference to the fly and has recommended it as being one of the indispensable patterns." A dictionary of trout flies, A Courtney Williams, A & C Black, 1973.