

W.C. STEWART AND THE SOFT HACKLED 'SPIDER'

By Gordon McKay

It is nearly 150 years since A&C Black first published W.C. Stewart's classic *The Practical Angler* and, as one would expect, a great deal of the old masters advice has since been rendered obsolete by modern science and technological developments.

For example, I doubt very much if the majority of modern flyfishers, accustomed as they are to one and two ounce graphite rods, would bother with the sport if they were forced to wield the 'light' rod advocated by Stewart - which weighed around 14oz.

With his enormous rod, brass reel, horsehair casting line, and shod in leather boots which weighed 5lbs apiece, the angler who pursued trout in the Scottish Border country of the 1860s laboured under a tremendous handicap when compared with his modern counterpart. All things considered it's a wonder that he caught fish at all.

Of course, many of Stewart's contemporaries did struggle to catch fish, and the saying that 90% of fish are caught by 10% of fishermen would seem to have been as true in the 1860s as it is today. Stewart talks of "English anglers... in Scotland counting their takes by the brace and not in much danger of going wrong in their reckoning either."

This on the same water as James Baillie, "whose hazel rod and string tied to the top of it were familiar to all those in the habit of frequenting Leader or Gala" who "maintained himself and family from March to November by fly fishing exclusively." Baillie, "...killed on an average from twelve to fourteen pounds at each excursion, and, being in delicate health, he only fished for four or five hours a day."

But professionals like Baillie were masters of their craft and exceptions to the general rule.

As Stewart observed, "it must be admitted that there are few anglers like those whose ingenuity and perseverance are stimulated by necessity."

Contrast this with his views on the recreational sportsman, "If our amateur friends had to make their living by fly fishing, there are few of them we would care for dining with often" - a statement which is probably just as true today in spite of all our advances in tackle and knowledge!

So can the modern flyfisherman fishing the streams of the Western Cape learn anything from the old professionals like Stewart and Baillie, separated from us as they are by six thousand miles and a hundred and fifty years.

Well, we can as a matter of fact. Stewart and his like may have been fishing with tackle which would make most of us despair, but they were tying their flies with silk and feathers, just as we do today. What's more, those flies caught fish in sufficient numbers to support men and their families in spite of the tackle to which they were attached.

The streams which Stewart fished, although slightly larger, were not dissimilar in many ways to our own Cape rivers. The headwaters of the Tweed and the Whitadder are also fast tumbling streams with the same rocky runs and short pools. In addition, they share the same apparent sparsity of flylife for much of the year. As a result the trout they contain are deceived not by 'matching the hatch' - because there is none - but by presenting correctly a lifelike food form which can be easily seen in fast water. And that purpose is better served by the lightly dressed spider patterns used by Baillie and Stewart than by American or British flies currently in use, many of which are completely unfamiliar to our native trout.

To quote Stewart again, "When trout are taking, winged flies will answer very well; and sometimes, but very rarely, we have found them more killing than spiders. But in the summer months, when trout are well fed and become lazy, or when they are much fished for, and become shy, we have found spiders much more deadly than the most tempting winged fly that can be made." To me that sounds like a man who knows what he is talking about and whose opinions bears further investigation.

So what are these 'spider' flies and how do we fish them? Stewart had three favourites and I give you his dressings verbatim.

1. The Black Spider. "This is made of the small feather of the cock starling, dressed with brown silk, and is, upon the whole, the most killing imitation we know. We were first shown it by James Baillie, and have never been without one on our line ever since."

2. The Red Spider. "Should be made of the small feather taken from the outside of the wing of the landrail, dressed with yellow silk, and is deserving of a very high rank, particularly in coloured water."

3. The Dun Spider. "This should be made from the small soft dun or ash coloured feather taken from the outside of the wing of the dotterel. This bird is unfortunately very scarce; but a small feather... from the inside of the wing of the starling... will make an excellent substitute."

Stewart gives us no body dressing for this last fly, but in the illustration contained in the 1907 edition of his book, it would appear to be dressed with orange silk.

Unfortunately the original tie for the Red Spider with its dressing of landrail wing is scarcely a practical proposition these days. Landrail wing has an almost translucent reddish honey-brown colour to it for which there is no really accurate substitute. A soft light red hen hackle is the closest approximation of the colour but is not as mobile in the water. However, even tied with hen hackle, this fly will still catch fish.

To Stewart's brief list we can add one or two more of these soft hackled patterns most of which hail from the north of England.

The first of these is the Partridge Hackle, tied with a body of whatever coloured silk you have most confidence in (I favour a dingy brown myself) and hackled with the mottled body feather of the English Partridge.

For anyone who wishes to give it a go I've also had fair success with a Partridge Hackle tied with a body of gold lurex. The lurex doesn't so much shine as reflect the surrounding river bed, giving the fly the appearance of a naturally camouflaged inhabitant of the river.

For a darker fly the same combination can be tied using the body feathers of the red grouse and for a lighter fly the feathers of a French Partridge.

In addition to the feather hackled flies we can add the Hare's Ear tied with a very lightly dubbed body. The guard hairs are then picked out in a sort of ruff to approximate legs or wings and to impart movement and life.

All of the above are very, very effective flies indeed in the Western Cape, with the proviso of course that they are fished correctly.

For the last year or so I've fished with spider patterns nearly all the time, trying them out in different combinations and circumstances. Starting with Stewart's book as a guide I've played around with different sizes and patterns. In the Cape size 14 flies seem to work best as a rule although early in the season size 12 works as well or better.

As to pattern I have to go along with Mr Stewart. Fished in combination with other spiders, with

winged wet flies or weighted nymphs, or even in tandem with a dry fly the Black Spider comes out tops 90% of the time.

I recall one memorable day on the Holsloot when every likely lie produced a fish, and every one of those fish came to the black spider. My fishing partner, who persevered with a dry fly was rising about one fish to my ten despite ringing all manner of pattern and size changes. It's not always like that of course, fishing would be very boring if it were, but if I was fishing for my life the BS would be the first fly these days that I would tie on my leader.

The way to fish soft hackles is on as short a line as possible upstream so that the fly drifts down naturally over the fish without drag a la dry fly. The whirls and eddies of the stream will be sufficient to work the soft hackles and impart life to the fly. The fly, or flies, if you fish the traditional 'team', are light and sink less than 12 inches below the surface in anything of a current. This means that you can normally see the trout take the fly in clear water.

The hardest part is knowing exactly where your fly is at any given time. If you are looking in the wrong spot, even if you are only a foot or two out, it's easy to miss the take. Fish sometimes come with a splash, as they would with a dry fly and then it's straightforward. More commonly, they just materialise in mid water from nowhere, drift quietly and slowly back a foot or two, and just as quietly and slowly vanish back to where they came from. In the meantime they've taken the fly, and if you are not looking in the right place you will either see nothing at all, or else by the time you do realise what's afoot, the fish will have rejected the fly.

A strike indicator helps, but even then it's surprising how far a fish can move a fly before the indicator registers a take. I have to admit, I have something of a prejudice against indicators, more I suppose, on aesthetic grounds than anything else. I just think it spoils the quintessential beauty of flyfishing to have a lump of wool or plastic adhering to the leader. A better system if you have trouble spotting takes on spider patterns is to tie a dry fly on as top dropper and use that as your indicator. It also has a chance of catching fish in its own right. By far the best ploy though is to fish short, and thus give yourself the best chance of seeing the fish.

Stewart himself was a firm advocate of this policy. He asserts, "In contradistinction to the maxim of throwing a long line, we advise the angler never to use a long line when a short one will, by any possibility answer the purpose."

Very prettily put, and crucial advice on fast streams like those in the Cape where fishing short not only helps the angler to see the take, but also helps to minimise the effects of drag on the fly.

For some strange reason many fishermen have the notion that drag on a wet fly is of no importance, even that it may be a good thing. So it might be when fishing a fancy fry imitation in a dam, but when imitating a drowned dun or spinner in the river it is very much to be avoided.

Again Stewart goes straight to the heart of the matter. He points out: "We must suppose that the trout take the artificial for a dead one, or one which has fairly got into the stream and lost all power of resisting. A feeble motion of the wings or legs would be the only attempt at escape which a live fly in such a case could make. What then must be the astonishment of the trout, when they see the tiny insect which they are accustomed to seize as it is carried by the current towards them, crossing the stream with the strength and agility of an otter?"

A pretty fair question, and any dry fly fisherman will tell you the answer. The astonished trout quickly becomes a suspicious trout and the chance of catching him is lost.

Any competent dry fly fisherman will quickly adapt to fishing spider patterns because the basics are the same. However upstream wet fly of this kind is a more difficult branch of the sport. Not only is it more difficult to see the take, it is also more difficult to spot drag on the fly. If you rely on a little wake to tell you that your fly is dragging you are going to have an uphill job taking fish on spider patterns.

However, most dry fly men sense drag even before they see it, and if you are one of these you can have a lot of fun by going subsurface with spider patterns. Not only do you rise more fish than with a dry fly, you do so by more skilful means. Give it a try.

You certainly can't fish a fly with a better pedigree. On the subject of fishing, Stewart was of the opinion that "...there is more merit, and therefore more pleasure in excelling in what is difficult."

Yet his book was titled *The Practical Angler* and in an age when class distinctions were the rule, his heroes were common men like James Baillie who earned a living and fed their families by fishing the very same fly from the end of the hazel wands.