



THE SAND FLEA

Leonard Flemming

When you mention mullet in the Cape, you envisage a skinny, dried and salted food item that, locally, is called a Bokkom (*Liza richardsonii*) and hardy West Coast fishermen using throw nets to capture the live fish along sandy beaches. Besides its importance as live bait in kob fishing, you will rarely excite a serious fisherman with this little fish. Or am I speaking for myself?

As a child, I spent a large part of my life in Kleinmond, a little beach town on the south-western Cape coastline. My father was a keen rock-and-surf angler and to keep me busy while he was concentrating on the bigger stuff, he'd hand me a light spinning rod with a huge champagne cork, a size 6 hook and some red bait to play with in the shore break. Now I wonder if he didn't have it all planned out, since the only fish we ever returned home with was a bucket full of mullet caught on the light spinning rod. So I learnt that mullet are fantastic fighting fish and you don't need a 5 metre surf rod to reach them.

In certain small bays around Kleinmond and Betty's Bay, I witnessed a regular occurrence that captured my interest and fired my imagination. This only took place under specific conditions, which happened more often than I initially realised!

With the adverse weather conditions in the Cape, many northwesterly storms wash shredded kelp onto the shoreline. Sand-fleas, also known as beach hoppers (*Talorchestia capensis*), ingest the kelp and the 15 mm, grey amphipods appear in their thousands on the beaches after such a storm. Many larger organisms, and specifically mullet, include sand-fleas in their diet and, when they get trapped in the shore break, they are readily eaten by shoals of patrolling mullet.





This gave me the opportunity to experiment with different patterns that imitate sand-fleas. I started by slowly stripping a small fly known as the White Death and scud patterns under the surface and took the odd fish every now and then, but the result was not satisfying enough. After several visits I noticed a pattern in weather conditions and that sand fleas that got blown onto the water were readily engulfed. After observing feeding fish, I noticed that the

majority of the sand-fleas were actually taken off the surface and that they floated well. I then developed a foam-backed pattern that proved to be very effective.

One thing led to another and before I knew what was happening, I was catching mullet on a dry fly that imitated sand fleas bobbing in the surf. Whenever the sand fleas were thick on the beach (usually on a spring high tide), large blennies also joined into the frenzy and they would always

be a colourful surprise between all the metal-grey mullet. It was one of the most delightful kinds of medium to light fly fishing I had tried and to watch saltwater fish rise and sip an artificial fly that represented a small crustacean off the surface was peculiar and just seemed out of place.

The approach is rather simple because the fish are so distracted in their feeding frenzy that they hardly notice human activity. Mullet can be extremely 'line-shy' though and fairly light tippetts of 5 to 6X fluorocarbon can be essential, particularly in clear water and calm conditions. I have had several fish 'nosing' a fly before I retied it onto a lighter tippet which produced a fish on the very next cast.

Mullet readily take dries and wet flies, either offered on a dead drift or with subtle movement (slow to medium figure of eight retrieve) - as long as it resembles a sand flea. A tandem rig (tied New Zealand style) with a dry

at the top and a small wet fly as the point fly, works well when mullet are abundant in large shoals. I initially started fishing for mullet with a 6-wt because of strong wind and the distance of the cast that is often needed, but I have since had good fun on a 3-wt when the wind is not blowing.

The Sand Flea dry fly as I tie it today differs very little from the original pattern I used on the first successful outing. I still fish for mullet from time to time, and although a little scud pattern that closely resembles sand fleas fished as a dropper below the Sand Flea dry fly works really well, I prefer the single dry fly simply because I get a kick out of watching a mullet rise to the surface. It is an addictive kind of fishing – mullet are fussy feeders and prefer a dead drift, making it all the more 'my kind of fishing'.



Dressing

Hook: Size 14 -16 medium wire hook

Back: White foam

Hind and forelegs: Two Crystal Flash strands tied in on each side, at the bend and at the eye of the hook

Body: White or chartreuse dubbing (synthetic for shine) and a palmered grizzly hackle

South African Fishing Flies by Peter Brigg and Ed Herbst – see [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) – is available from Exclusive Books and other book stores.