



## A BEETLE STORY

*Dr Hans van Zyl*

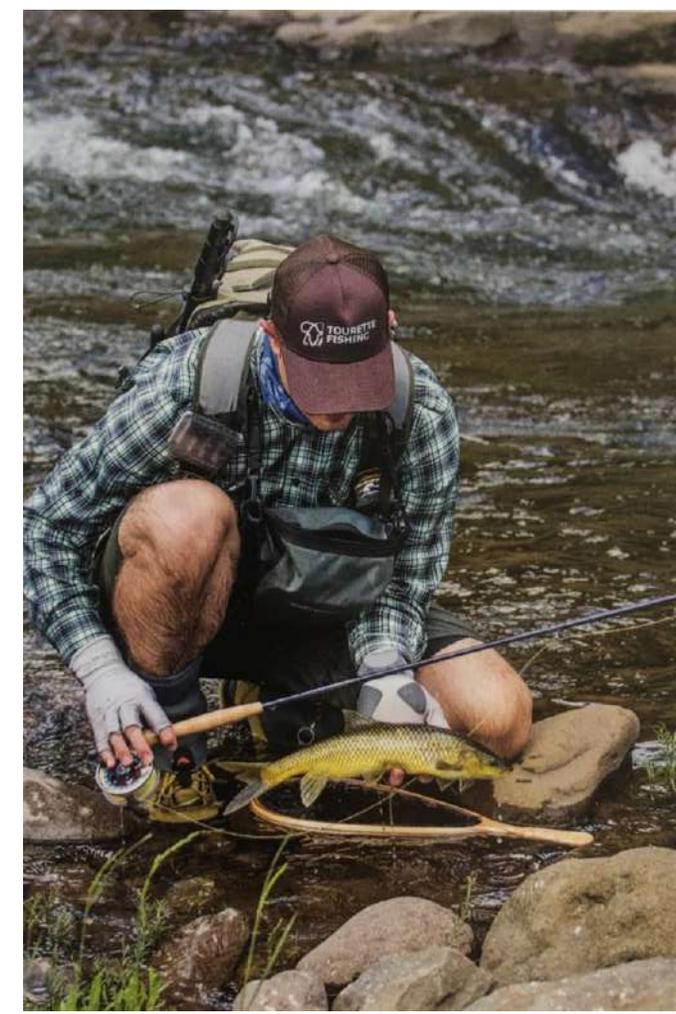
**M**y good friend Dennis de Klerk introduced me to fly fishing in 1990 on Swartwater Dam in Qwa-Qwa in the eastern Orange Free State. We targeted large trout from float tubes with sinking lines and all sorts of wet flies and nymphs like Wooly Worms and GRHE's.

Very soon we had to start tying our own flies simply because we lost so many, mainly through inexperience. Dennis knew the 'Big Guns' like Dr Tom Sutcliffe, Hugh Huntley and a young Mark Yelland in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu Natal, who came to fish the Swartwater and Gibson Dams near Harrismith in the eastern Orange Free State.

Hugh went to a lot of trouble to introduce us to fly tying and will forever be one of my heroes for his vast knowledge so spontaneously shared and the fact that he smoked two cigarettes to my one. We started off tying the flies we knew and by 1992 we were fishing Sterkfontein Dam near Harrismith for yellowfish and gradually changed to floating lines and dry flies.

Since then I must say that fly tying became both my passion and my Prozac.

In the spring of 2005 a visiting fly fisher from Johannesburg gave me a black and lime green foam beetle in exchange for some GRHE nymphs. Before then the mainstay of our dry fly patterns had been all sorts of caddis made from deer and klipspringer hair, as well as the more classic small flying ant patterns. Mayflies were too difficult to tie. Having fished other beetle patterns before such as



the Coch y Bonddu and beetles with a peacock herl body covered in a Quality Street sweet paper, I decided to give this fly a try on a spring day when the fish were being particularly difficult.

This traded beetle, tied on a size 8 hook, was really ugly, but I decided to cast it out while enjoying a mug of coffee and a Camel cigarette. I had hardly lit my cigarette when a big yellowfish struck that beetle in such spectacular fashion that, more than seven years later, I am still tying and fishing beetles rather than any other fly. I am a self-confessed strike-junky.

My first patterns were tied in black foam which I painted with purple nail varnish and with the same dubbing I still use today. In December 2005 Mark Yelland phoned me to ask what patterns are working well on Sterkfontein Dam

and I suggested beetles.

Mark said he was already at the dam and had no suitable imitations so I volunteered to take him some, hoping for an invite to join him for an afternoon of fishing. When I got there I found, to my surprise, that Mark and the company Wild Fly, were busy filming their first DVD program on Sterkies. My beetle imitation was so successful that the owner of Wild Fly, Gareth George, suggested it be named 'The Good Doctor's Beetle'; the name stuck and the rest, as they, is history.

Nail varnish was expensive and my favourite colour, purple, quickly went out of fashion and became difficult to find. In desperation I tried a copper-coloured beetle and, somewhat to my surprise, it proved to be very appealing to the Sterkfontein Dam yellowfish.

Only then did I really start to research which beetles are most common on our waters and the one that stood out was the well-known 'Akkerboontjie' or Christmas Beetle.

I collected hordes of them by inserting a funnel into the neck of a Coke bottle and placing it beneath the light on my verandah. As an experiment I threw some of the captured beetles onto the water with amazing results. The fish rose as freely to these beetles as they did when flying ants were on the water.

On the eastern shore of the dam, where maize is farmed, copper-coloured beetles predominate and on the veldt of the western shore, the iridescent black/purple dung beetles, *Scarabaeidae*, are prolific.

Raiding my daughters' art box I came across some Heritage Metal Paint in copper. The Heritage range of products is used by decoupage hobbyists, but I found that this paint would only last for a fish or two before it peeled off. For more than a year I tried various other methods without success. I was then introduced to a product called Heritage Seal Skin that provided a protective coating for the paint and the combination proved to be very durable. I could now, in advance, prepare a number of foam strips and use them whenever I had a chance to tie.

Initially I tied on whatever hooks I could find until local fly fishing guide, David Weaver, introduced me to Arno Laubscher who owns the Grip hook company. At last I could tie beetles of the correct size one after the other.

In about 2007/2008, Andre Burger, owner of a tackle shop in the small Orange Free State town of Bethlehem, asked me to tie some flies for *The Complete Fly Fisherman* magazine-sponsored weekend at Sterkfontein. After that the popularity of the beetle increased exponentially. In 2010, after sermons from David and with the help of Arno, I started using the Grip 14723BL barbless hook. Along the way I had lots of advice and input from various better fly fishers and tyers than myself. David Weaver and Dennis De Klerk, along with the clients they guided, did a lot to steer me in the right direction My flies are available at Andre Burger's Present A Fly shop and a step-by-step sequence of photographs showing how the foam strips are prepared and the fly is tied, can be found if you Google 'Present A Fly'.

November 2015 was the tenth anniversary of my beetle pattern but while it is usually my fly of choice when fishing Sterkfontein Dam, I also tie and use foam hoppers so as not to spoil the yellowfish or myself.

To fish the beetle I use a 5-weight floating line, a three metre tapered leader and two metres of 4x tippet.



*Two variations of the Good Doctor's Beetle, tied by their creator, Dr Hans van Zyl.*

My rule on catch and release is the so called 'One Breath' rule: Don't take the fish out of the water for longer than you can hold your breath. Barbless hooks save fish and flies!

## Dressing

**Hook:** Grip 14723BL size 6 - 12 or Grip 12804 size 6 - 10

**Foam back:** A 2mm black foam strip beveled on the sides and painted with Heritage acrylic paint in copper or a dark purple then sealed with Heritage Seal Skin

**Body:** Ice Dub UV Black for the purple beetle or Ice Dub Holographic Golden Orange for the copper beetle with a palmered black or brown hackle

**Legs:** Liquid Lace of suitable diameter and colour

