



IMITATING THE AFRICAN CLAWED FROG

Alan Hobson



Growing up on a farm in the Karoo I learnt the benefits of patience and observation and it kindled a desire to understand the magnificence and mystery of nature. This, combined with the enthusiasm of my father – whose every spare moment was devoted to whatever form of angling and fish species was available – laid the foundations of my insatiable thirst for knowledge. The angling memories that we shared as a family constantly remind me of the meaning of life, hence my ambition to turn my passion into my business. This journey has been largely self-taught so the influences of reading books and magazines, of surfing the Internet and meeting and fishing with others who share this passion, provide the inspiration and mould my thinking.

In life we constantly strive for moments of perfection and the art of fly-tying and fly-fishing offers those opportunities all the time. Gathering nature's clues, whether one is designing a new fly pattern or at the water's edge fly-fishing is, for me, like a crime scene investigation – putting all the puzzle pieces together and working it out. If success results then the sense of achievement is immense and if you can share it with others it becomes even more precious.

Nature has the knack of keeping it simple but we, as fly-fishers, are often guilty of complicating things. This is how I try to approach both fishing and tying. Matching the hatch, reading the conditions and, more importantly, understanding them so that one fishes with a



purpose, is the essence. The fact that there are so many variables and that no day or experience is the same stimulates me to constantly look for a slightly different angle and that is why this sport consumes me. My fascination for tying realistic flies has driven me to make silicone moulds of insects and to create unsinkable dry flies by using micro balls of glass filled with air.

Living in the Karoo and trying to promote its unexpected and largely unexploited richness as a fly-fishing destination inspires me every day. Learning to successfully



fish these diverse waters and consistently fool several species by developing and tweaking fly patterns gives me a rush and reaffirms my decision to leave the Johannesburg rat race behind.

Hobson's Original Tadpole – also known as the HOT Fly – is an imitation of the tadpole stage of the platanna, *Xenopus laevis* – commonly known as the African clawed frog – which occurs prolifically throughout the freshwater environment in southern Africa. The ability of the platanna to adapt to localized conditions makes it one of the most significant food sources for trout in our dams. Their

instinctive urge for survival means they are very adept at breeding at every opportunity, usually after heavy rains, be it winter or summer. If the water they inhabit dries up, they simply bury themselves in the mud until it rains again. The female lays up to 1 000 eggs at a time and can repeat this every month. Metamorphosis from a tadpole into an adult frog takes 49-64 days. Good rainy seasons could mean a constant supply of many tadpoles throughout the year. Here, in the Eastern Cape, sighting shoals of tadpoles, much like schools of marine baitfish, is very common.



When trout move in on the shoal the water erupts as the tadpoles scatter to avoid being devoured. The platanna's cannibalistic behaviour, feeding on any living thing, including their own, contributes to their growth rate and survival. Adults can reach 130 mm, and the tadpoles in our dams at the advanced stage of development with a tail and legs can be just as big. Anglers are often fooled into thinking there is a rise on a dam, when in fact it is the platannas feeding on hatching insects.

When stocking waters with fry one needs to be mindful of the fact that the platannas will feed on them. If there is a healthy platanna population in a dam, then the preferred size of trout for stocking should be 70 mm fingerlings or yearlings, rather than fry, to ensure higher survival rates.

The platanna anatomy allows them to practice exceptional predator avoidance strategies. The well-developed back legs and small front legs with tiny claws enable them to jump and swim both forwards and backwards. They have a speckled, greyish upper body and white underbody. When danger is sensed, they dive for the muddy bottom and use their front claws to throw mud and sand over themselves to remain camouflaged. In the early stage of their life the tadpoles feed on plankton and Daphnia, commonly known as the water flea.

When my wife, Annabelle, and I started the Angler and Antelope guest house in Somerset East in 2005, I created a water feature, not only to make the garden more attractive, but also so that I could use it to study aquatic animals. My observation of

the platannas which I had introduced was fascinating. Much of their diet consisted of emerging chironomid pupae and they would hover in the surface film, absolutely motionless and legs apart, so as not to frighten their prey. This is the behaviour which you must mimic when you fish the adult frog pattern – incorporating pauses in your retrieve.

The HOT Fly tadpole imitation

This pattern evolved over several years of researching the stomach contents of trout caught in Karoo dams. Both tadpoles and adult frogs were consistently found. The triggers are the multicoloured marabou tail which incorporates blue Flashabou, and the orange wool at the bend of the hook.

The wool represents the orange abdominal organs which can be seen through the transparent belly of the tadpole. This wool also prevents the tail from wrapping around the hook shank. The third trigger is the white underbelly and the black upper body. The black bead at the eye of the hook plays a critical role in mimicking the movement of the tadpole. The weight of the bead just behind the hook eye results in the front of the fly dropping when there is a pause in the retrieve. As the front of the fly drops, the marabou tail moves upwards and this provides a natural swimming action. The best retrieve combines a long, slow pull while simultaneously bouncing your finger against the line, which activates the tail as the fly ascends. A pause of several seconds between strips is advised because tadpoles seldom swim very far.



Alan Hobson is a fly-fishing guide and innovative fly-tyer, as shown by his HOT fly, an imitation of the numerous tadpoles found in the water around Somerset East.

The HOT Fly tadpole imitation

Hook: Grip 12804 size 10

Thread: Veevus E01 8/0 black

Bead: 2.8 mm Black Nickel

Abdominal organs: Orange wool tied in at the hook bend and beneath the marabou tail

Tail: three layers of marabou – twice hook shank length – with white on the bottom, tan in the middle and black on top. Two strands of blue Flashabou are tied between the bottom and middle layers

Body: Cactus Chenille (Large Pearl Hareline CCL 284), coloured on top with a black permanent marker

NB: Should you want to tie a smaller tadpole, use a Grip 12804 size 12 hook with a 2.4 mm Black Nickel bead and medium Pearl Cactus Chenille for the body.



Hobson's Platanna is an imitation of the African clawed frog, Xenopus laevis.

Hobson's Platanna

This is an imitation of the adult frog, but a small one, as platannas can grow to the size of your hand.

For the front legs use three strands of black and three strands of white ostrich herl knotted together and tied in behind a 4 mm black bead. The black ostrich herl must be on top and the white below.

The body is made by combining pearl Crystal Chenille with a black zonker strip cut very thin and winding them towards the hook bend. The hair of the zonker strip is longer than the fibres of the Crystal Chenille and the fur on the bottom of the hook shank is trimmed away.

To create the oval silhouette of the frog I use two guinea fowl feathers tied in by the quills, one on top of the other and with the shiny sides facing upwards. They are attached behind the bead at the

start of and on top of the body. Mottle the white spots on the feather with a light brown or tan permanent marker to more closely approximate the colour on the frog's back.

To imitate the the hind legs of the frog, I then tie a pine squirrel zonker strip on either side of the hook shank, pointing backwards in a 'V' shape. The fur side of the zonker strip must be on the outside. To keep the legs apart I tie in some natural sheep wool, about the width of a pencil, at the bend of the hook. This flares slightly outwards from the tie-in point and helps separate the zonker strips.

If the fly is retrieved using a double strip, it imitates the front and back legs doing the breaststroke swimming action of the frog.

The pale inner side of the zonker strips exactly mimics the leg colouring of the adult frog and I believe this to be a significant trigger.



The Hobson's Platanna is an evolving pattern and, as a possible replacement for the 4 mm bead, I am currently experimenting with the small (1.3 g) brown Sculpin Helmet made by the Flymen Fishing Company in the USA. This more closely mimics the flat, triangular head of the platanna and correctly places the very prominent eyes on top of the head.

Dressing

Hook: Gamakatsu B10 Stinger Hook

Thread: Veevus E01 8/0 black

Bead: 4 mm

Front legs: Three strands black and three strands white ostrich herl knotted together, black above, white below

Body: Cactus Chenille (Large Pearl Hareline CCL 284) combined with a narrow strip of black zonker fur and palmered to the bend of the hook. Clip the fur at the bottom of the body level with the Cactus Chenille.

Back: Two guinea fowl feathers mottled with a light brown or tan permanent marker and tied in on top of the body

Hind legs: Pine squirrel zonker strips with the tanned leather side facing inwards. Separate the legs with a tuft of natural, unwashed sheep's wool tied in at the bend of the hook.