



THE WHITE DEATH

Robin Fick

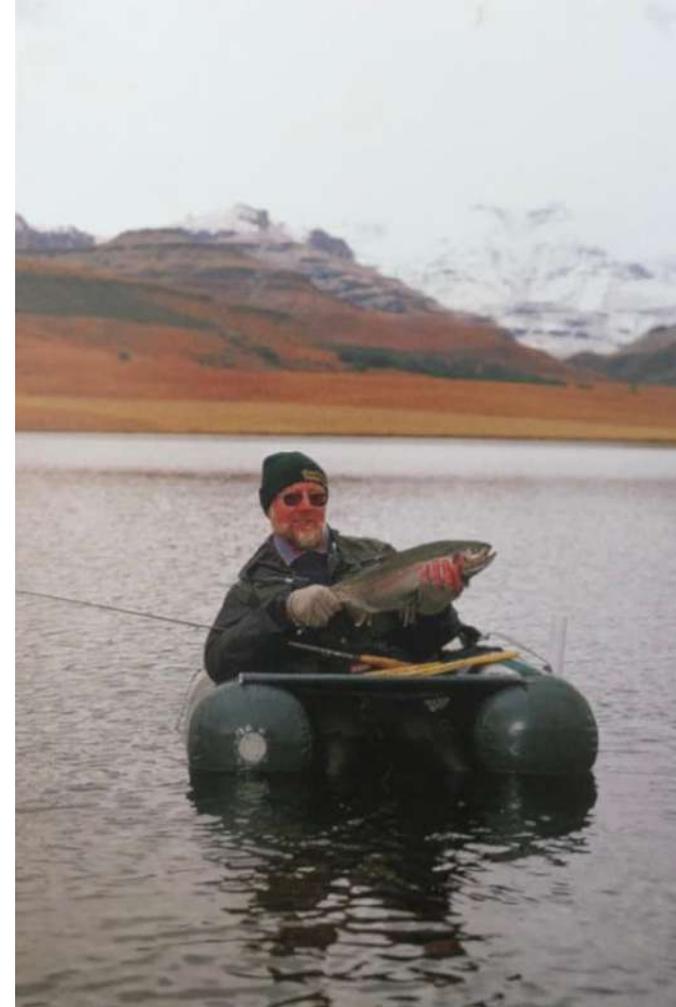


‘The surface of the dam was evenly rippled as the afternoon breeze strengthened into a north-easterly wind. Trout were popping up sporadically but with no specific pattern. To make it worse, I could not find any insects on the water as I paddled around in my float tube. It was summer so I knew I had the choice of Caenis, midges or ants, but I could not locate anything.

‘In desperation, I watched a small area of the dam hoping a fish would rise and give me some clue as to what was interesting them. I knew that if the trout left a bubble on the surface, it had taken an adult off the top. Any other rise form would indicate that the fish were after nymphs or emergers. Although I surface swirls, I was not able to observe a rise. I had to find a concentration of fish, but where? I had a surface area of 160 acres around me.

‘I eased towards the shore onto which the wind was blowing. If anything was in the surface layer, it would be carried onto the windward side. Still the occasional trout showed itself, but again with no set pattern.

‘Then I noticed the duck weed in the shallows. A calm area of water could be seen on the leeward side of each clump of this broad leafed plant and, lo and behold, the trout were working these flat areas where the insects battled to break through the surface. A quick, slashing rise – to caddis for sure. It was 4:30 p.m. and the sun had already lost its intensity so it could not be anything else. A size 16 White Death was soon tied onto the 6X tippet and I followed the path of the trout as it literally chased the caddis flies





A White Death tied by its creator, Robin Fick, and used most successfully during hatches of Caddis flies.

along the top. My fly landed on an intercepting course. Two twitches and I was into my first fish. It was small, about 750 grams, but still ran me to the backing of my 3-wt outfit.

‘I paddled along to the next exposed bed of duck weed and there were three trout working the calm water behind the fronds lying on top of the water. Four casts and I had all three on. Thus it went virtually cast for cast. No blind casting as I paddled my float tube around the weed beds. As dusk set in, the caddis hatch stopped and a midge invasion took its place with thousands of Caenis spinners thrown in as the wind dropped.

‘The dam stilled and the Caenis spinners were being vacuumed up by the trout. The White Death still took its share of fish but it was now time to change flies.’

The above excerpt was taken from the March 1984 newsletter of the Fly Fishers Association, three years after a frustrating weekend in the Kamberg area of the then Natal had led to the designing of the White Death fly. It was during the autumn of 1981, when Jan de Jager and I found ourselves on a dam one Saturday evening where the trout were rising to a suspected caddis hatch. I fished an Elk Hair Caddis dry fly with absolutely no success. Jan

also tried various patterns with not so much as a touch for his efforts. We drove back to the chalets in a very despondent mood, not having established a pattern to lure these fish into taking what I thought was a no-brainer, a caddis imitation fished on the top.

normally we would pack up at lunchtime on the Sunday and head back to Durban to hit the coalface for the week. The rising trout fascinated us so we packed the Kombi and drove back to the same dam where we caught some fish on dragon and damselfly nymphs. Our focus, however, was on the evening rise. With similar weather to the previous day, the caddis hatch started late afternoon and the trout went wild, tearing up the dam.

The more the fish fed, the more frustrated we became. After an hour of not so much as a follow, I stripped in my now soaked light Elk Hair Caddis and was immediately into a fish. After pounding the water further without another touch, this catch, I concluded, was a fluke. We drove home in the dark, still puzzled.

All thinking fly-fishers like a challenge so my mind worked overtime during the week and I went



through my fly-fishing books and many photocopied pages on insects that A C Harrison and Bob Crass had sent to me. My research centred on the caddis as this was, to me, the apparent cause of the fish going into feeding frenzy. I read through Ernest Schwiebert’s chapter on Trichoptera in his book, *Nymphs* (Winchester Press, 1973), and here he stated that it was his experience that most trout ignored the adults and concentrated on the pupa and emerging stages near the surface. One must remember that this was before Gary LaFontaine’s book *Caddisflies* (Lyons Press, 1989) was published so I followed Schwiebert’s and my own reasoning at the time.

The hatching caddis on the dam were light in colour and the pupa arriving at the surface would do so in an explosion of pupal skin and air bubbles. In 1981 fly-tying materials were rather limited so I tied a pattern with a white chenille body on size 12 nymph hook with a tuft of white marabou as a short wing. If I remember correctly, I tied three similar flies, which





was unusual for me as I usually want to tie something different. Anyway, the following weekend found us back at the dam.

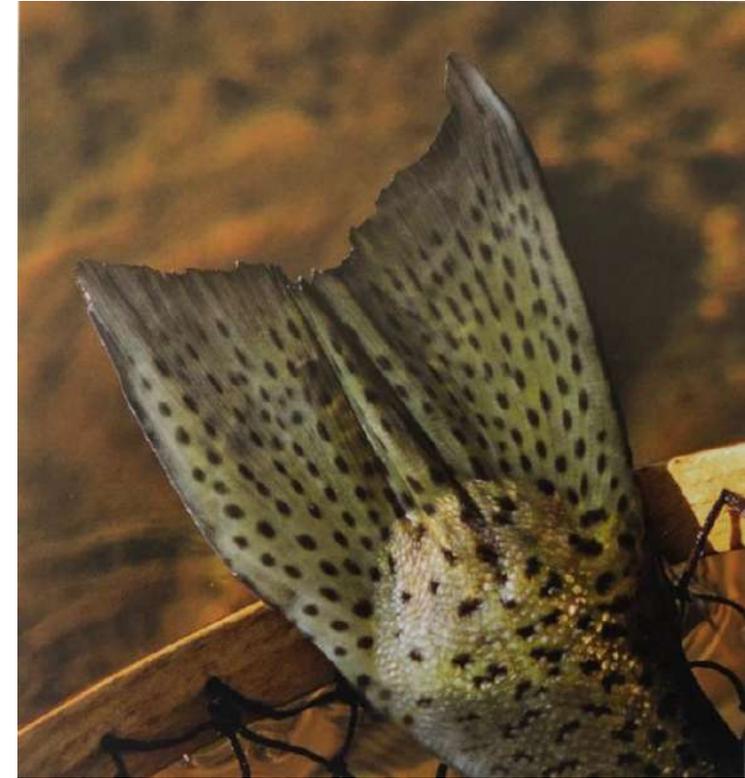
Evening came and so did the invasion of caddis. The trout were going mad and two frustrated fly-fishers were achieving not much more than practicing their casting. Out of desperation, I tied one of the white creations to my tippet, wet it so that the marabou would not float the fly, and cast to the nearest fish working the 'hatch'. I had not moved the fly six inches and I was in and a rainbow hit the air.

Needless to say, anyone within a kilometre knew that I had hooked a fish. The trout was played out and returned, the fly rinsed off and cast to the next active fish, which immediately pounced on the fly. Jan, fishing on the other side of the dam, came to see what all the commotion was about and there it was, a white fly imbedded in the jaw of the trout. Of course, he demanded one of the flies, off he went and thereafter, between the two of us, we lost count of how many trout we caught that evening.

'This fly will be the death of all trout in this dam,' said Jan, and so the name was created for this all-white fly, the White Death. It became a standard for fishing the evening rise in Natal and as local anglers moved to other centres, so they spread the word. I left Natal in 1985, lived in Cape Town until 1990, and then moved to the Garden Route and only then did I see the White Death in Dean Riphagen's book, *The South African Fly-Fishing Handbook* (New Holland Publishers (UK) Ltd, 1998) and subsequent magazine articles, and realise that the fly had become so popular. I also discovered much later that this fly had also caught trout all over South Africa and Europe.

It is interesting to note that there have been cases of anglers using the dressing as a streamer in larger hook sizes and even as a saltwater fly. The White Death is now being used for more types of fishing than originally intended as a Stillwater pattern for caddis emergence.

But what has been intriguing for me is that trout find this very simple pattern so irresistible. I am a real match-the-hatch type of angler; giving the fish an imitation of what they want to eat as this, in my view, increases in my favour the odds of catching them. As modern fly-tying materials came on the market, so I experimented with them and made almost exact copies of emerging caddis and other flies, and caught fish on them, but when the chips were down, out came the White Death and the catch rate increase. Go figure!



Dressing

Hook: Tiemco 2302 in sizes 8 – 18

Thread: 6/0 white

Body: White chenille

Underwind (optional): Pearlescent Krystal Flash

Overwing: White marabou

To create the marabou wing, snip off some strands right at the quill where you will see a gap where there are no barbules. Hold the clump of marabou at a point slightly beyond the length of the wing you wish to tie and wet the part towards the base of the feather. Tie in the wing where you are holding it near the tips. You are thus tying in the wing near the tips of the feather, not the base as is conventional when tying streamer wings.