THE ZAK, DDD AND SINGLE FEATHER MIDGE

Tom Sutcliffe

The Zak underwent design changes over the years following its development as an all-purpose mayfly nymph in the 1970s. This may seem a minor point, but I think it is relevant. The changes the Zak went through invariably brought improvements, either to its effectiveness or in the ease with which it could be tied. This underscores the benefit of continuing to question the basic merits of any pattern, no matter how established and useful it may be.

The Zak was an attempt to broadly imitate the dark-coloured Baetid nymphs found in streams in KwaZulu-Natal. It began life as one of the most unlikely nymph creations you could imagine, a pattern that surprised us all by catching a heap of fish. It was called the Mud-eye Nymph. The body was built up of many layers of stripped peacock herl and even the head was made of stripped herl wound around black chenille eyes. It was a painstaking fly to tie, but it worked, though for obvious reasons it didn't last long. From the laborious processes of the Mud-eye Nymph at least the Zak was born.

As such, the Zak is something of an enigma in that it works consistently well for so many anglers, especially when the chips are down, yet, outwardly, it's just a straightforward nymph pattern. I remain uncertain about some key aspects of its design, not least the value of the violet blue DMC Fil métalisé thread (colour number 4012) used in the body. The rationale was that water absorbs certain wavelengths of light as depth increases, the reds and oranges disappearing first, later the yellows, greens and purples and last the blues.

It's very hypothetical, but while I can't say this hypothesis undoubtedly works for the pattern, equally I can't say it doesn't, and while you can't exactly explain something, you naturally remain reluctant to change it.

The other feature of the Zak (seldom used by commercial and other tyers) is the tail of water mongoose fibres. Some maintain they are too stiff and would obstruct a take, but the essence of the mongoose hair is to use the softer inner fibres, not the spiky guard hairs that are hard and stiff. These fibres, if carefully selected, are long, variegated, curly and soft and add enormous movement to the pattern, far in advance of, say cock hackle fibres, which are straight and stiff.

The stripped peacock hearl was an attempt following from my experiences with the Mud-eye Nymph, to emulate the segmented, crustaceous-looking body of the natural nymph, and the use of added peacock herl at the thorax was to provide a prominent and dark thorax suggesting a mature nymph on the point of emergence.

The addition of a bead was imply in line with the now almost universal trend use beads on nymphs as a trigger or to add weight.

A small advance of late is the use of curved hooks. The traditional Zak certainly incorporates a bunch of key triggers that give the impression of a Baetid nymph, but not the position naturals most often take up in the drift, which is a slightly curved, foetal form. The use of a curved hook has added a hint of that.

Key elements of tying a Zak that are almost always ignored in commercially tied patterns:

The fibres should be stripped off one side of the hackle before tying it in at the thorax to avoid a bulky, bottlebrush look.

The hackle should be carefully twisted with the body rope before finally wrapping the thorax. The point of this is to have the hackle fibres spread in different directions. It is far more natural in appearance and is obviously quite the reverse of how a conventional fly is palmer hackled.

Ensure a very sparse, splayed tail at least the length of the fly.

Dressing

Hook: Standard nymph hook 1X or 2X long shank, or a curved hook, of your choice, in sizes 10-18

Thread: Black or red waxed 8/0 of your choice

Beads: Blue, red or silver-lined glass, gold or silver brass, or tungsten in pewter, gold or hot orange, depending on the sink rate required for the type of fishing you will be doing and your preferences

Tail: Water mongoose fibres, or squirrel tail fibres, or dark cock or hen hackle

Under-thorax: For lightly weighted Zaks build up an under-thorax with a single strand of natural wool the wool slowly absorbs water with fishing and the fly gradually sinks. For medium to heavily weighted Zaks, use brass or tungsten beads or add a few turns of lead wire or fuse wire

Body: Two or three stripped peacock quills, one natural peacock quill, fine copper or fuse wire and one strand of DMC Fil métalisé thread, colour 4012. The peacock herls are attached by their butt ends, together with the wire and DMC thread, just behind the under-thorax. This 'rope' as I call it, is then wound down the side of the hook shank all the way to the tail, thus increasing the lateral diameter of the body. The tying thread is then taken forward to the thorax area. The body elements are lightly twisted together and the 'rope' wound from the tail to the thorax to form a conically shaped body

Thorax: Add one or two natural peacock herls (depending on hook size) and a hackle (see below) to the body rope. The additional peacock herls and the stripped hackle feather are tied in by their tips right alongside the body 'rope', then twisted together, as in the previous step, and wrapped forward to build a bulky thorax. With the additional peacock herl the thorax will be darker than the body

Hackle: Preferably use a genetic hackle for the fineness and relative shortness of their fibres. I favour a dun, but any small, dark hackle will do. All the fibres are stripped off one side of the hackle to avoid bulkiness.

Heavily weighted Zaks: If I have added a tungsten bead of lead wire to a fly, I often use red tying thread to 'code' the additional wight by wrapping thread over a tiny segment of the hook shank under the tail fibres

Unweighted Zaks: All the Zaks I tie with glass beads are unweighted, but have an under-thorax of a single strand of four-ply wool, colour of your choice.

The DDD

The DDD, while now often used in rivers, was first and foremost a Stillwater dry fly, though it got there in a roundabout sort of way.

To go back to its origins, my stream notes, dated 23 November 1976, record a day fishing a backwater on the Umgeni River in the Dargle area in KwaZulu-Natal, when there was a 'hatch' of large, grey-coloured beetles. In these notes, which I still have to this day, there is a sketch of both the beetle and my concept imitation of it. It was initially tied using klipspringer hair on the advice of Ivan Steytler, a former professional hunter. Klipspringer

is courser, more variegated hair than deer hair and its floats better. The hair was spun around the hook shank and then trimmed to shape. Strands of klipspringer hair were drawn forward over the body and tied off at the head to represent a beetle shell, with a few strands left out, fore and aft, as legs. The head was built up with black silk.

The pattern was tested on our syndicate stillwaters near Impendle in the Dargle area and caught fish for quite some time in this livery, but then it was not uncommon in summer to have beetles landing in those lakes.

However, the klipspringer beetle later changes to a more conventional, spun klipspringer dry fly and a physician colleague of mine, the late Bill Duckworth, was responsible, at least in part, for its metamorphosis. I introduced him to fly-fishing around that time and, being new to the sport, he found it easier not to have to

cast too often and was quite happy just watching a big, high-floating beetle imitation bobbing around on one of our syndicate stillwaters.

Bill became a frequent guest on our lakes and later a shareholder in the syndicate and he caught heaps of fish on dries, including the klipspringer beetle pattern. In fact, it quickly became his favourite dry fly and I couldn't tie enough of them for him. He later drew my attention to other spun deer hair patterns, probably flies like the Rat-faced McDougal, or the Adam Irresistible. This was around 1979 according to my book, Reflections of Fly fishing, and it was then that I first tied a fly with a klipspringer tail and body and a conventional hackle. This may well have represented the first 'true' DDD. Bill loved them tied big, as in size 10, and on long shank hooks, and a year or two later he was tying his own. They were the biggest, scruffiest dry flies I have ever seen!

The late Taffy Walters, also a frequent guest at the syndicate around that time, was the person who actually gave the fly its name: Duckworth's Dargle Delight, or the DDD as it's now known. By then the fly had firmly taken on the characteristics of a more standard deer hair dry fly than a beetle imitation, although its size, the roughness of its tying and its broad body made it more a general terrestrial imitation than anything else.

Hugh Huntley introduced the most important change to the DDD some years later when he replaced the cock or hen hackle with spun klipspringer hair. This added enormously to the buggy, windblown, vulnerable terrestrial look I was trying to imitate.

My addition of a strand of Pearl Flashabou around that time also greatly improved this fly, not so much in attracting more fish as was probably my initial intention, but in making it more visible. The Flashabou is useful when a DDD is cast into choppy water or into the sun. Broken water can momentarily 'hide' a DDD from sight, creating a sort of 'çhoppy water blind spot' as it were, especially on long casts. After you lose sight of a fly, even for a fraction of a second, it can be difficult to locate it again, because it's often not quite where you imagine it should be. By transmitting an intermittent wink of light, the Flashabou immediately helps locate the fly. The same goes for DDDs cast into the sun. they are hard to follow at the best of times and often what you save is the glint of the Flashabou.

I don't skimp on the length of Flashabou I use. As a rule, the single strand should extend at least 2 cm on either side of a large Stillwater DDD tied, say, on a size 10 hook. The Flashabou is attached to the hook shank just ahead of the body after it has been trimmed to shape. If tied very firmly it tends to naturally take on an upright 'V' shape. The subsequent collar of hackle helps to finally position the Flashabou.

There is debate around the best colour for DDDs and while I'm aware that empirical experience carries with it a cluster of imponderables, if I had to nail my colours to a mast I would say that it's worthwhile using dyed yellow hair rather than natural or dyed green hair. And that holds good for rivers and streams. There is some value, I hear, in tying them with black hair, but I have never tried this.

For dams they should be tied on wet fly hooks with a wide gape. The reasons are simple; big Stillwater trout can easily straighten light wire dry fly hooks and because klipspringer hair is relatively broad compared to deer hair, the gape is easily crowded, reducing the chances of the hook setting properly.

Klipspringer hair is not readily available, but it is important to know what you can tie very serviceable DDDs using deer hair. White-tailed deer rump and body hair is great for spinning, is long, has mottled tips, a thing wall and a large inside diameter so will float well. Avoid coastal deer hair as it is short and won't flare well.

Dressing

Hook: Standard wide gape wet fly hook (for added strength) in sizes 8 – 14. I tie mine mainly on size 10 hooks for stillwaters and on size 14 for rivers

Thread: Kevlar in yellow or white, depending if the DDD hair is yellow or natural, or Danville's 210 denier flat waxed nylon. However, with care, Danville 6/0 thread in similar colours works well

Tail: Fibres of a small bunch of natural klipspringer hair or dyed yellow, green or black or white-tailed deer similarly coloured. It should be the same length as the body and tied to splay out somewhat

Body: Spun klipspringer or white-tailed deer hair, natural or in colours as above, trimmed conically from the tail to the head and trimmed flat underneath

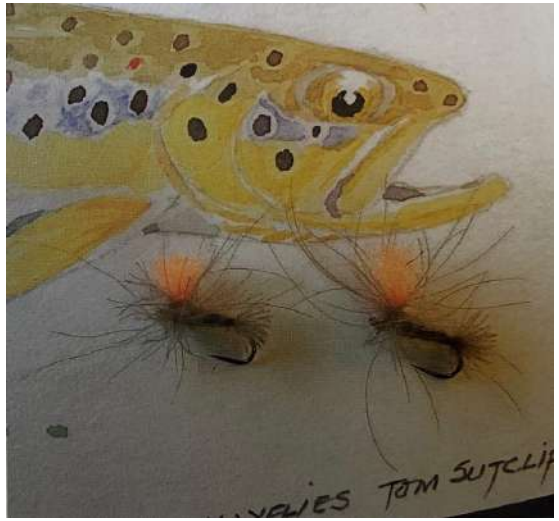
Lateral flash: Pearl Flashabou or Krystal Flash tied as a single strand as described, and cut long, i.e. 1 – 2 cm depending on the size of the fly

Hackle: Klipspringer or white-tailed deer hair (stacked to align the tips) tied to splay through an arc of roughly 180º above the hook shank. This is a tricky process that requires practice. First trim the butts of the hair stack, align them to the top of the body and then trap them with two turns of thread before tightening. Use your fingers to spread and compress the hair

Head: Thread built up to help push the hackle into place

The Single-feather CDC Midge

The Single-feather CDC Midge has been a revelation in simplicity and effectiveness. It was designed to fool trout feeding selectively on net-wing midges in Western Cape streams, hatches known to produce difficult risers where it's easy to get skunked. I now feel more confident fishing these hatches, which counts for something, although the patterns is a long way short of being a panacea.



Tom Sutcliffe's Single-feather CDC Midge shows his innovative thinking as a fly-tyer using just a single CDC feather to create this effective fly.

To add fuel to the notion that fly patterns are there to confound the theorists, the Single-feather Midge has also worked well when trout are not feeding selectively on midges, and in streams as far afield as the Bokspruit and Sterkspruit in Eastern Cape Highlands, and even the Test and the upper Itchen in Hampshire in the United Kingdom. To explain that I'll resort to the simplest answer I can think of and that is that this pattern just looks crazily bugge on the water, full stop. And as with any small, nondescript, low-floating parachute-style dry fly the size, colour and shape of a fleck of windblown wood ash, it's hard to follow in the drift, meaning the touch of orange Poly Yarn mounted above the thorax is vital as a sighter.

I prefer to select longer, darker, natural dun-coloured CDC fibres for this pattern, but have recently had enormous success using patterns tied with a dyed CDC feather.

Dressing

Hook: Grip 11801 size 16

Thread: Fine black or dark-grey thread such as Gordon Griffiths 14/0, but for smaller patterns (sizes 18 and 20) any of the ultrafine threads such as Veevus 16/0 (Black) are preferred

Post: Tie in a bright orange or white Poly Yarn post, pretreated with Loon Hydrostop or Watershed, one-third of the way from the eye of the hook or at least 2 mm behind the eye in order to leave space to tie trap the tip end of the CDC and form a head

Tail: In effect there is no tail to this fly, as is the case with the natural adult midge

Body: A natural dun-coloured CDC feather tied at the bend of the hook, and wound on flat not twisted. Attach the feather with two loose turns of tying thread over its quill, then pull the feather through until just a millimetre of it remains before tying it in firmly. Take your thread to just behind the eye of the hook.

Ribbing: None

Thorax: A few additional turns of the same CDC feather used to form the body can be made around the post. In practice this is rarely possible as CDC fibres are invariably not long enough. Some tyers have suggested a peacock herl or Hareline's Peacock or black Ice Dub, but I mostly dispense with any thorax at all or I use some CDC dubbing

Hackle: One or two turns of the same CDC feather used to make the body of the fly are wrapped around the post while it is firmly held. Trap the CDC with horizontal wrappings of thread around the post and then form a tiny head and tie off. Now trim the post to size