



THE FLIES OF HARRY STEWART

Ed Herbst



I first met Harry Stewart in the late nineties when I travelled to East London for a Federation of Southern African Flyfishers (FOSAF) function.

He started fishing when he was seven years old on the Gryffe River in Scotland with home-made rods. He got his first proper rod a year later. It was made of greenheart and had a spliced joint and he would bind the two pieces together with insulation tape. At ten he started tying flies for trout. By the age of 15 years he was tying flies for pocket money for Alex Martin Ltd in Glasgow.

After six years in the British army he immigrated to Zimbabwe in 1951 and for the next 30 years he fly fished for trout in the Nyanga district.

Two of the happiest years of his life were between 1964 and 1966 when he and his wife Doreen ran the estate at the Troutbeck Inn in the Nyanga mountain range of the then Rhodesia.

In 1968 he started Stewart's Trout Flies in the backyard of his Salisbury home having trained five young men. At the same time he was a partner in a transport and civils company and in the evenings his wife, Doreen, and his four children would assist in packaging the day's fly production for postage, mainly to South Africa but also for local use. "We had our own Coch-Y-Bonddu hens which became quite tame. When I wanted neck feathers I would go into pen and they would line up to be picked up and held under my arm while I removed the feathers I needed!" Eventually he sold his companies and retired to East London



where he continued to tie his signature flies on a small personal scale, but, failing health eventually saw him and his wife immigrate to the cooler climate of New Zealand

He died peacefully at his home in Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 11 February 2008, but his legacy lives on in the men he trained as fly tyers and in the innovative flies he bequeathed to ensuing generations of flyfishers.

Two of his flies, by my reckoning, deserve to join the pantheon of indigenous patterns by virtue of the materials he chose and innovative design.



London. It contains both brown and rainbow trout. In the November 1997 issue of *Piscator*, journal of the Cape Piscatorial Society, Harry wrote of the Millionaire's Taddy: "I gave this fly to my grandson, Keith Rose-Innes, when he was 14 years old. He won the Gubu Dam Fishing Competition – both senior and junior sections! That was five years ago and the orders for the Millionaire's Taddy increase by the day!"

As with all flies, similar concepts have existed before or elsewhere but this does not detract from what is an elegant and tactile response to the need for creating a pattern which embodies movement and a familiar silhouette to dam trout. Some 40 years before Harry created the Millionaire's Taddy, Alan Yates wrote a series of articles in *Piscator* which recorded significant indigenous flies of that era. One of them was Ricky's Mole. It had a few hackle fibres for a tail, a black cock hackle and a body of mole skin which had been dyed black. "The skin is prepared by cutting a suitable strip approximately one-eighth of an inch wide, which is tied in at the tail and wound evenly up to the head, the inner side of the skin lies against the silk foundation of the hook shank." (*Piscator* No 43, Spring 1958).

The fly was the brainchild of Guy D (Ricky) Ricquebourg of Eshowe in KwaZulu Natal and it was a truly original and ethnic design. It preceded by 16 years a similar design by the American angler Charles E Brookes, the Assam Dragon – which used seal's fur on the skin – and which was described in his book, *The Trout and the Stream*, (Crown Publishers, 1974).

Mole skin, however, is extremely thick to protect the animal while underground and it is difficult to wind onto a hook. Furthermore, the skin is small. With the current availability of farmed mink and other furs, rabbit and squirrel hides, using mole is no longer justified.



Harry Stewart's Termite was the first to imitate flying ants

Harry's Termite

Gubu Dam was stocked regularly by Martin Davies, the famed pisciculturist from Rhodes University in Grahamstown. He has always advocated stocking with fry which meant that the trout which survived to any size were essentially wild. It was here that Harry tested and refined his patterns.

On humid days in summer, a host of termites would leave their nests and many would end up in the dam. Harry said this was champagne fishing as the trout went on a frenzied feeding spree.

Harry developed a pattern that was taken with utmost confidence. Much of the fly was conventional. It had a body of spun and clipped deer hair on a size 14 fine wire hook and a brown hackle. But it was the wings that were an

ingenious departure from the norm. He would take two partridge feathers and strip the fibres from the left of one and the right of the other. He would then marry them at the quills and tie them in a tent shape over the body so that the quills ran down the centre of the body. The wings are approximately twice the body length.

He said that when cast to a selectively feeding fish, his termite imitation was never refused but that it was essential not to strike when the fish rose to it. The fish would first swirl at the fly to drown it and then turn again to take it. Harry said it was imperative to only strike when the leader slid away.

Eben Dowd, the fly fishing columnist for *Tight Lines/Stywe Lyne* magazine, says that yellowfish display exactly the same behaviour when taking floating flies.

Harry described the fly in an article he wrote at my request for *Piscator* No 129, November 1997: "The flying ant was made on a size 12 hook with spun deer hair body trimmed to shape. Two body feathers from the Rhodesian Partridge – light coloured and trimmed to the wing shape of a termite – are then tied flat over the back, and a red cock hackle in front. This was a good floating fly. It was good to look at – very realistic.

"It could be mistaken for the real flying ant. I fished it at Gubu Dam during a flying termite hatch where they were lying thick on the water and had been wind-blown in lanes along the banks – 15 to 20 feet out. The trout were in a frenzy.

"When I put this ant on, I had immediate success. Most of the fish caught were large, taking a lot of line and jumping a number of times, seeming to fight much better than when taken on a wet fly!"

The Millionaire's Taddy is a fly that achieved almost cult status on Harry Stewart's home waters at Gubu Dam outside Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape.

The Millionaire's Taddy

The first and most famous is the Millionaire's Taddy. It is a streamer, tied on a long shank size 8 to 10 hook and has a tail of black marabou mixed with a few strands of Flashabou.

It is the body, however, which sets it apart - soft, short-fibred mink.

I suspect Harry sourced this from a mink coat, hence the name. The Millionaire's Taddy is a sleek fly which greatly resembles a tadpole and that probably accounts for its success. The mink zonker strips which are now commercially available have much longer fibres and do not provide such a slim profile. The Millionaire's Taddy is a cult fly in the Eastern Cape and made its name at Harry's home water, the 108 hectare Gubu Dam that lies on a dirt road between Stutterheim and Keiskammahoek and about 100 km from East

