

The South African Fly-Fishing Handbook

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Chapter 36

RAB by Tony Biggs

Any fly tier who has had the opportunity of looking into Tony Biggs' fly boxes, would immediately notice a special trait in all his flies: they are designed to catch fish and not fishermen. Tony considers his approach to fly tying to be unorthodox and has never followed a technical fly tying manual. Instead, he has allowed his imagination to lead him, and flies such as the RAB bear testimony to this philosophy. This fact, along with his renowned fishing skills, has perhaps accounted for his name featuring prominently amongst the country's most competent fly fishermen. Tony is associated with, and a regular contributor to, *The Complete Fly Fisherman*, a speciality South African fly fishing magazine.

While Tony has been responsible for the development of several flies in South Africa, it is his RAB that has carved a permanent place for him in South Africa's fly fishing annals.

Tony was born in Britain and after moving to South Africa, he cut his teeth on the fine freestone waters of the Western Cape. He fished a great deal with the late Mark Mackereth, an angler renowned for his angling skill, particularly with dry flies, and it was Mackereth, along with John Beams and Tom Sutcliffe, who ultimately influenced Tony's fishing style and fly tying philosophies. Mackereth's flies were simple palmered patterns and it was only after the dissection of one of Mackereth's bottle brush-type dry flies that Tony discovered just how simple they really were. This simplicity carried over to Tony's tying, and his RAB is an excellent example of Mackereth's influences.

Tony unravelled the mystery of Mackereth's fly tying one evening after "un-tying" one of two Mackereth dry flies, the other having been lost to a trout during a particularly productive day's fishing. What Tony found was that Mackereth's flies were extremely simple patterns, and in subsequent tying sessions, Tony discovered that there was ample scope to experiment beyond what he terms the "classical style of fly tying".

The RA.B. is probably one of the easiest dry flies to tie, and evolved during Tony's early fly tying days when he was forced to make ends meet by tying flies commercially. During those years, Tony was an avid reader of Negley Farson's "Going Fishing". Farson strongly advocated the use of red materials in the construction of trout flies. As a result, Tony used a great deal of red in his patterns, but was to discover that the colour was not as visible at long ranges under water as he had initially been led to believe. The colour red was therefore chosen for completely illogical reasons, yet there can be no doubt in most fly tiers' and anglers' minds that red is indeed a highly effective colour.

The bivisible hackle used in the RAB was chosen for its optimal sighting qualities, while the white tail was chosen primarily to provide colour balance. What is interesting about the hackles on most of Tony's flies, including the RAB, is that they are extremely long, as are the

tails. Some hackles are as long as two inches, which aids in floating the fly through choppy water.

The prototype RAB used Egyptian goose fibres for both the butt and "legs" and it was these "legs" that Tony considered the most important aspect of the fly. Unfortunately, Egyptian goose is a difficult tying material to acquire, even in South Africa, and Tony now substitutes the Egyptian goose fibres with pheasant tail or blue crane fibres for the body and legs.

Probably the most interesting feature of this fly is the manner in which it obtained its name. Tony, a friend, and Mark Mackereth had spent a day during the April of 1965 fishing on the lower Smalblaar River with limited success, with only Tony and Mark having anything to show for their efforts. As a result, they decided that a change of venue was in order, and they moved to the upper river which, according to Tony, usually fishes better in the afternoon. Tony parted from his companions, and by the time he had reached the hotel situated on the banks of the river, he had taken five fish ranging from 12 inches to 16 inches and had returned several others, all of which had fallen victim to the prototype R.A.B. Mark and his companion, however, had had only limited success, taking only one small fish between them and Mark was convinced that it could only have been the fly that could have accounted for Tony's success. When Mark examined the fly attached to Tony's tippet in the beam of the vehicle's headlights, he called it a "Red-Arsed Bastard", and it was from this name that the fly took its initials. This name could never have been printed in the hallowed pages of "Piscator", the journal of the Cape Piscatorial Society, and as a result, the Society secretary at that time, the legendary A. C. Harrison, changed the name to "Rough and Buoyant".

The RAB was designed as a fast water dry fly and it excels under these conditions.

While my personal approach to fast water dry fly fishing embraces the use of heavily hackled dry flies, such as the Royal Wulff and Humpy, Tony's is the opposite, and patterns such as the RAB are a tribute to his fly tying approach. The philosophy behind these patterns is that they should be dressed as lightly as possible and should essentially ride on the very tips of their hackles. The use of an extremely long tail and hackles ensures that the body remains well off the water and the fly essentially takes on the appearance of a variant or skater pattern. Although the pattern is lightly dressed, it appears much bulkier than it actually is and will often bring fish up from deep, fast water. Tony fishes the R.A.B. in both fast and slow water, and has found it equally effective in both, simply varying the amount of hackle used in the fly, more turns of hackle being used for patterns tied for fast water use. The pattern is also an effective stillwater pattern, and Tony has used it as a nymph, simply reducing the amount of hackle in the imitation.

The usual fast water dry fly techniques apply to fishing the RAB, with one exception. Due to its hackle size relative to its hook size, the RAB has a tendency, with prolonged use, to twist tippets. This becomes even more pronounced when the angler has to contend with strong winds often encountered on many Western Cape streams. The solution is simply to step up the tippet size until this problem is eliminated. Since the R.A.B. was designed primarily for use in fast water where fish have only a few seconds to decide on the fate of a morsel

drifting in the current, the increase in tippet diameter will have a negligible effect on the effectiveness of the fly.

The RAB is one of a handful of truly original South African fly patterns, and is a proven taker of trout. Tony's records indicate that the pattern has taken several trophy fish, including a thin brown from the Witte River in Bain's Kloof which was estimated at over seven pounds; Jan van Huysteen took 18 rainbows in 18 casts in the eastern Transvaal using the RAB, the largest a fish of over 5 lbs.; the editor of The Complete Fly Fisherman magazine, P.J. Jacobs, took a fish of 8 lbs. from the Spekboom River in the eastern Transvaal using the pattern. It is a dry fly that works throughout the country and all anglers who enjoy prospecting the faster water on our rivers and streams should reserve space in their boxes for it.

HOOK: Tiemco 100, # 12 - # 18.

THREAD: 8/0 prewaxed, red.

TAIL: White or cream hackle fibres. Tony uses between three to 12 in number, depending on the hackle density used.

BODY: Red tying thread.

BU'TT: Egyptian goose, cock pheasant tail, or similar fibres, wound through with tying thread.

LEGS: Egyptian goose (dark green primary wing feather), cock pheasant tail, or similar feather fibres. HACKLE: Ginger/red and white (Tony prefers a white spade hackle).

- 1) Strip between three to 12 fibres from a white hackle and tie them in above the hook barb. The tails should be approximately equal to one and a half times the hook shank.
- 2) Tie in four cock pheasant tail or similar fibres by their butts, and leave the thread at a position just ahead of the tie in point of the tails.
- 3) Gather the feather fibres together and wind them forward, covering approximately one third to one half of the hook shank. Attach hackle pliers to the fibres and leave them suspended at this point.
- 4) Wind the thread forward towards the eye through the feather fibres in open turns, making sure that the thread wraps are not wound too close together.
- 5) Part the feather fibres around the hook shank so that they stand out in various directions. They should be approximately equal to three times the hook gape. These will form the legs of the fly.
- 6) Tie a ginger or red hackle in directly in front of the legs, with its concave side facing away from the shank. The hackle fibres should be one and a half to twice the gape of the hook.
- 7) Take two to four turns of hackle around the shank, either taking all the turns of the hackle in front of the legs, or one or two turns behind the legs and one or two turns in front of the legs.
- 8) Tie in a white hackle directly in front of the first hackle with its concave side facing away from the hook shank. The hackle fibres should be approximately three times the gape of the hook.
- 9) Take two or three turns of hackle around the hook shank, tie off and trim the excess. Form a small, neat head, half hitch and trim the thread. Apply head cement sparingly to the thread wraps.