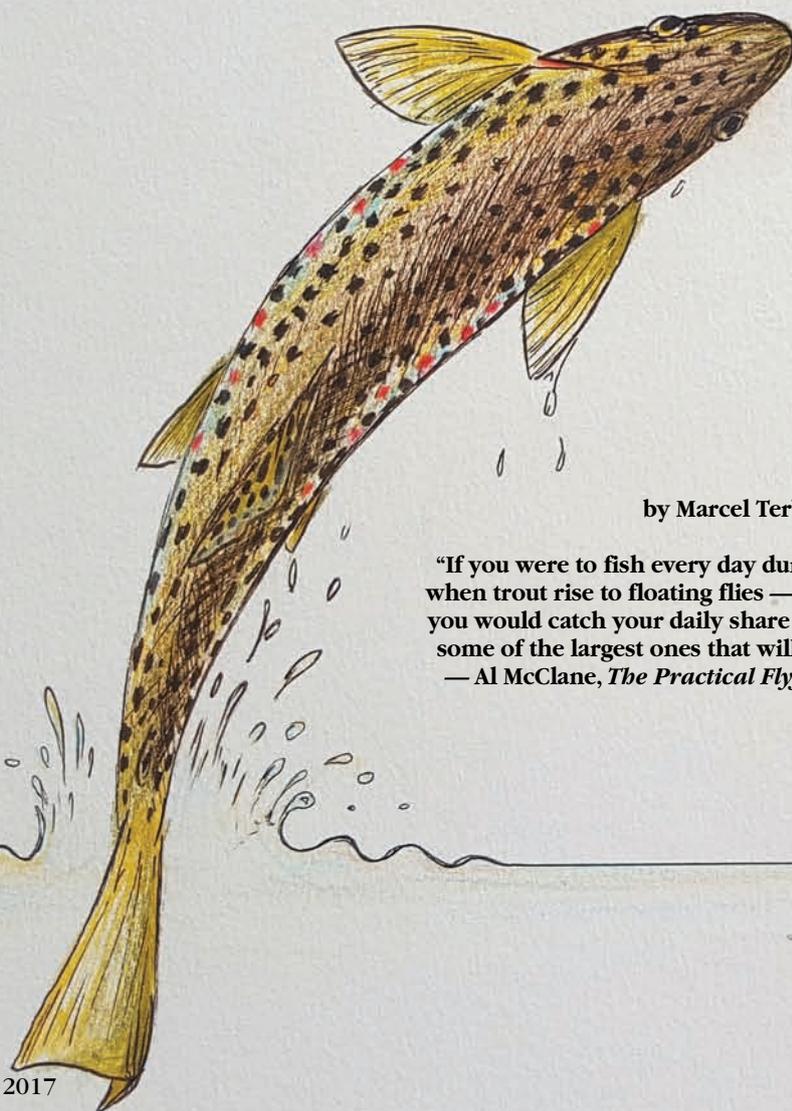


# Variations on a Theme



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OF VARIANTS, DRAGONS AND  
AIRBORNE BROWNS



by Marcel Terblanche

“If you were to fish every day during that period of the year when trout rise to floating flies — using a spider or variant — you would catch your daily share of trout and probably hook some of the largest ones that will ever come to any dry fly.”  
— Al McClane, *The Practical Flyfisherman* (Stoeger, 1978)

LATE last year I spent a hot morning on a brown trout stream in the Western Cape and decided to take a break in the shade of an old waboom protea beside a nice pool. While I was unpacking my lunch there was a splash of water right below me. At first I thought that I had knocked a stone into the water, but I was surprised to see an 18-inch brownie some three metres away.

This brown was on the move, patrolling a set beat along a verge of overhanging vegetation on the pool. There were numbers of dragonflies in the air, mainly the sky blue epaulet skimmer (*Orthetrum chrysostigma*), which is one of the most common dragonflies on Cape streams. I watched a dragonfly flitting downstream and the brown launched itself clear of the surface to intercept it. This explained the splash that I heard earlier. The brown then continued on its patrol.

I had a hopper on and thought that, if it was eating large insects, this should work. I was wrong. The brown came up to my hopper, eye-balled it for a few seconds then refused it and actually sped upstream to the head of the pool where it held station for a while beneath a big rock. It then resumed its patrol and refused a beetle pattern in the same fashion.

I decided to present a large, oversized RAB variant when the trout returned. As the variant was parachuting down the brown twitched to the side and took my fly without hesitation in mid-air. After a few seconds the brown won the battle and made off with my variant. Note that the trout had already seen the fly when it was a metre above the water's surface.

Male dragonflies are territorial and use set perches along the streamside from where they hunt. This was confirmed by Warwick Tarboton, our foremost expert on these insects:

"Odonata are vulnerable to such predation not because they follow set flight paths out over open water, but because they habitually perch on the same emergent plant stems over

the water and they make hunting sorties from these, returning time and again to the same perch. I suppose trout may detect them repeatedly returning to a spot and line up and ambush them in flight as they return to settle on the perch. Also, while laying eggs, the females of many dragonfly species hover slowly just above the water, dipping the tip of the abdomen repeatedly into the water as the eggs are deposited, and these too would be easily caught by trout."

Trout most certainly track insects above the surface, and around the world they have been observed leaping out the water to intercept various insects like dragons, damselfly, caddis and mayfly spinners.

This brings me back to the variants and skaters or spiders as the Americans call them — air resistant, feather-light patterns designed to have oversized hackles and tails relative to hook size. This style of fly-tying was developed years ago in the English countryside by anglers like Dr WM Baigent and they were later made popular in North America by Catskill tyers like Elsie Darbee who tied beautiful grey fox, cream and dun variants.

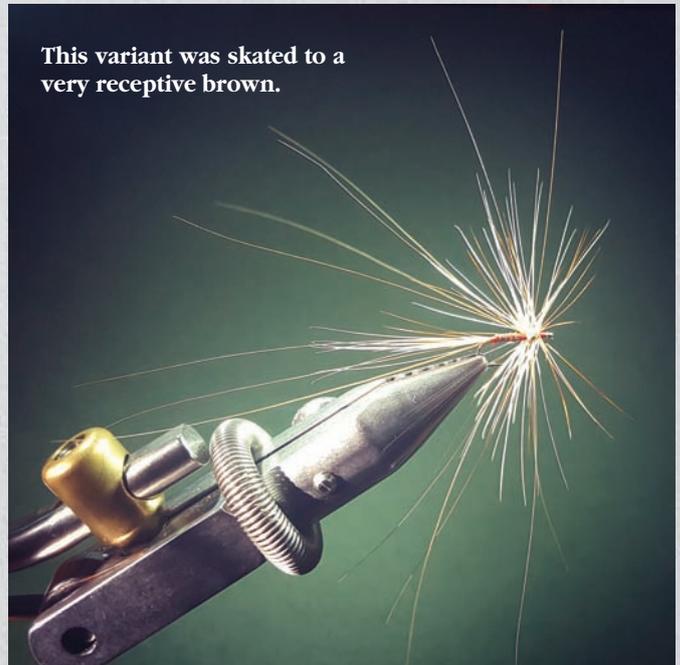
In South Africa we have our very own iconic variant pattern, the RAB, which was invented by small stream guru Tony Biggs. Tony's pattern has become a favourite dry fly with many Cape stream anglers. It has also gone through an evolution and RAB variants now come in all sorts of styles. That's the great thing — there are no set rules for tying variants. The fundamentals are light hooks and oversized hackles and tails, but the rest is up to the individual.

A variant should alight softly on the surface and ride high on its long tips.

I tie variants on #14-18 light wire dry fly hooks and mostly use red, but sometimes brown, Griffiths Sheer 14/0 thread. For "legs" I use pheasant and bustard tail feather fibres, but my



A buoyant highwater variant.



This variant was skated to a very receptive brown.

Marcel Terblanche



This brown trout was caught by skating a large variant beside overhanging vegetation.

favourite is the eye of a peacock feather which has been bleached to remove the iridescent fibre from the individual herls. I tie the "legs" in so that they are one-and-a-half to two times as long as the hackle fibres. The long tips of these fibres add movement and create an impression on the surface of an insect with a larger silhouette. A good example of this is the long-jawed water spider (*Tetragnatha boydi*) which lives on overhanging branches close to the water surface. When dislodged, they scurry across the surface to the bank using the tips of their long legs.

Spade hackles, the feathers found on the shoulders of a rooster work best for variants and they are scarce on the genetic cape now marketed. The Whiting Farm's Coq De Leon capes are perfect for RABs and variants. A good old farmyard rooster will also provide good hackle.

Tying hackles on large variants often bothers fly-tyers because they fear tippet twist. I use two hackles on my variants, wound in opposing directions to counter the propeller

effect created by using a single hackle. Hackle fibres leave the stem at an angle, and a large single hackle creates a vortex of fibres that will spin during casting. Tippet diameter also plays a role in tippet twist, and these are not flies to use with 6 or 7x tippets.

The air resistance of a large variant makes it a good fly for trout that are tracking airborne insects because the variant already starts its work as an imitation during its slow descent. This was evident with the brown trout I mentioned at the start of this article.

At last year's Fly Tying Expo held at Somerset West, my variants outsold my conventional patterns by a big margin — not least because their versatility makes them effective wherever trout streams are found. I am sure they will prove just as popular at the 2017 Expo in Johannesburg.

For more information go to the Cape Piscatorial Society website <[www.piscator.co.za](http://www.piscator.co.za)> and then open the "RABs and Variants" folder under "From the Piscator" menu. 



Ideal hackle shape for variant style flies.