



THE MAGIC OF THE BIGGS FLY

By T. SUTCLIFFE

What it's all about. H. A. Biggs talking about trout flies.

(Photos: Tom Sutcliffe)

IF you suggested that Tony Biggs tied the perfect fly, I might argue the point. But if you said he tied an effective fly, I'd be with you every time. In fact, so impressed am I by his approach to fly-fishing in general, and fly-tying in particular, that I feel moved to make some comments on the subject.

To the uninitiated Tony Biggs is one of South Africa's most successful exponents of the gentle art, proficient especially on the rivers, strong on still water and, as I've said before, an effective fly-tier. He learned his skills on the fast waters of the Western Cape, taught himself to tie the most appropriate flies for the job, and rapidly became the province's leading trout catcher. In fact, few of the then leading fly-fishermen could hold a candle to him. But before I digress too far, I want to get back to his flies, because these are what intrigue me most. Even in those days he produced them by the gross for the tackle shops, where they sold like hot cakes. The demand was great, the product unusual, and the end-result satisfactory to all parties.

The now famous R.A.B., a name coined by another master of the fast water—dry-fly stuff—the late Mark Mackereth, had its origins on Tony's bench. It's still used today, but around the mid-1960's any fly-fisherman worth his salt on the Smalblaar used it or at least knew of it. And there were other patterns too, most of them nameless, most of them sparsely tied and Palmer hackled, bearing the unmistakable quality of all Biggs' flies as if he'd signed his name on the barb in gold plate. Looking at a

... An array of caterpillar-like creations.



return from Tony in the PISCATOR for summer 1966, we find reference to his use of the "Rough and Buoyant" fly, a name that described almost any of his dry flies. Later on, an entry dated 24.3.67 reads: "Twenty-five rainbows of size, 16 retained, fish in high condition, the largest 1 lb. 2 oz. Many fish returned and a number of good fish lost. All taken on dry-flies, R.A.B. Black Spentwing and Wickham's." Heady days those on the Smalblaar, and H. A. Biggs, more than anyone, was making the right fly for those conditions, just that much better.

Exactly what these extra qualities are that his flies have is hard to define, and that they play an important role in his fish-catching ability is beyond doubt. In essence the recipe has changed little from the Smalblaar days, and what he used then he uses now, more or less. The dry flies are ultra-light, tied with a single hackle (except for the R.A.B., which is bi-visible) held onto the hook with lurex or ultra-thin terylene. The hackles are much longer than the orthodox (sometimes as much as 2 inches long)



Tony Biggs tying a dry fly.

and so are the tails, which tend to be light but prominent. The Nymphs (and here is a possible slip in Tony's nomenclature; if we're going to stick to the niceties of exact definition these are ultra-sparse woolly-worms) might be lightly weighted and stubby-tailed and exceedingly long-hackled, tied with no more than two or three turns of feather, held in place with red terylene. The effect under water is one of movement, contrast and colour, and I rather suspect that these nymphs from the 1960's are the prototypes of the woolly worms of the '70's which have proved so successful in Natal.

In simple terms, Tony is an impressionist fly-tier, shunning the Halfordian dogma of strict imitation, critical of the formal and stylised school of traditional wet and dry fly-tying, regarding it all as a total waste of time and effort. His fly box carries none of the orthodox patterns; no *Invictas*, *March Browns* or *Connemaras*, but rather an array of caterpillar-like creations that are all unlisted, unnamed and very individual. I can't even get him to admit that fly-tying to a pattern is a means to an end in itself. But what I must admit is that, in spite of being devoted to the formal art of fly-tying myself, I'm looking at things in a different light these days. I should be tying a simple fly, with little regard for neatness, striving only for the correct effect.

I should disengage myself from the boxes, and boxes within boxes of fly-tying equipment I own, move the lot into one shoe-box as Tony does, and call it quits. Certainly I won't catch any less with the end product and, possibly, a good deal more.

Or is it that the insect-like appeal of the Biggs' fly, simple as the dressing might seem, is in fact extremely difficult to copy? As in most things, the greats in the game are capable of making a difficult task look absurdly easy. Possibly what I'm seeing in his flies is the horribly difficult to achieve pinnacle of the fly-tier's art. Perhaps Tony does tie the perfect fly after all. I'm still trying.