

Caddis on the Holsloot

By Ed Herbst

"This is the story of a fly, a fisherman's fly. It is a humble fly, a fly without the glamour of the favourites of the chalk streams, or the wet flies of the West Country and the North. No Kingsley has sung its praises, no Plunkett Greene has given it immortality; neither Skues nor Dunne afforded it more than a passing glance. When the talk is of Blue-winged Olive, Iron Blue, Mayfly or Alder, when the merits of Pheasant Tail or Greenwell Glory are praised in the gatherings of fly-fishers, or when the learned converse of Baetis, Procloeon and Centropilum, the spirit of the hero of this story, always ignored, hangs its head in shame and sorrow." Fisherman's Fly, David Jacques, 1965.

We look but we do not see. I have fished the Holsloot, Elandspad and Smalblaar for more than twenty years and although I was aware of the presence of caddis, especially the micro-caddis which scurry so busily over the rocks, I never gave them a thought in terms of imitation.

I was thus somewhat nonplussed when CPS chairman, Gerard Barnardt wrote the following in the August 1998 issue of *The Complete Fly Fisherman*: "I think that most people don't realise the importance of caddis flies in the Western Cape. I figure perhaps the reason for this could be the influence exerted upon us from our reading of fly fishing accounts from the UK where the mayfly is seen as a deity. From my own readings of books on US trout streams, I know that anglers there have recognised the importance of the caddis fly, and through experimenting I have now come to realise that other anglers should do the same.

"The caddis flies in the Western Cape are smaller and darker than most of those in the US, but the fact is we have a lot of them on our streams and we certainly get some good hatches throughout the year."

I revised my opinion after a day on beat six of the Smalblaar when, at the junction of the Elandspad and the Krom streams, I saw dozens of small grey caddis.

Then I read Tim Rolston's article on fishing small flies in a recent edition of the CPS newsletter, *Kingfisher* and another piece was slotted into the puzzle.

The epiphany came when I fished beat five of the Holsloot with Philip Weideman on October 12. As always in early spring the fish were feeding hard and they came steadily to my hopper and a bead head nymph. As I sat down for a sandwich, a fish across the river from me splashed at a caddis which was hopscotching across the current, dipping its abdomen into the water to release its eggs. There were several Micro-caddis on my Aigle thigh waders and here and upstream from me I could see fish rising sporadically.

Because my hopper was working well I kept it on and caught the odd fish and it was only at 2 pm, normally a dour time on the Holsloot, that I changed to a size 18 caddis pattern –

an imitation based on the Harpoon caddis illustrated in Darrel Martin's *Micropatterns*, a copy of which is in the library and is essential reading. This is just a simple tie using a brown feather palmered over the hook, starting with the base of the feather at the bend to produce the tent-like shape, sloping forward towards the hook eye, of the caddis – a back to front Bi-Visible as it were. I palmered the feather over some black holographic tinsel, included two micro-fibbets for antennae and clipped the feather fibres beneath the shank to expose the tinsel and get the fly to sit flush with the water surface.

My change in fortune was dramatic and I must have taken a dozen fish in the next hour and a half, the biggest about 14 inches. What surprised me was the aggression with which they took the fly – dramatic, splashy rises which is consistent with the overseas experience of trout feeding on caddis adults. The fish has the rapidly-flitting adult in its window only briefly and must attack before it is gone.

After a while I started fishing across and down, throwing in an upstream mend and now, with the light at a different angle, I could see the fish surge up powerfully from the bottom, sometimes from almost a metre down in a good flow of water.

Eventually I started casting downstream to rises and got takes even when the fly was almost static and hanging in the current. This was not unusual because it mimics the behaviour of the egg-laying adult caddis which alights on the water surface and then makes an erratic lunge upstream, using the current to pull the eggs free of its abdomen – what Leonard Wright called 'the sudden inch' in his book, *Fishing the Dry Fly as a Living Insect*.

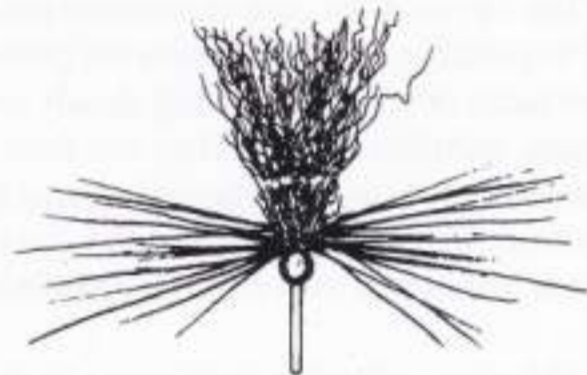
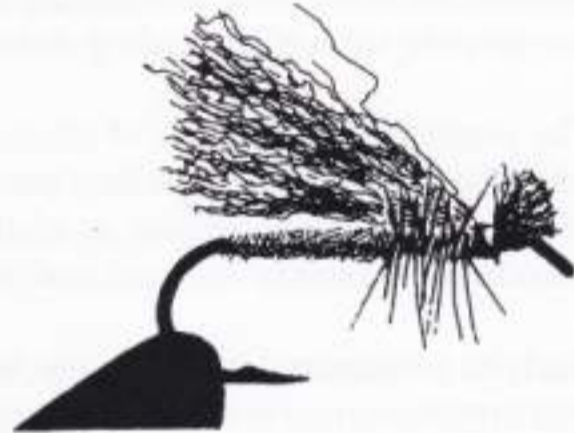
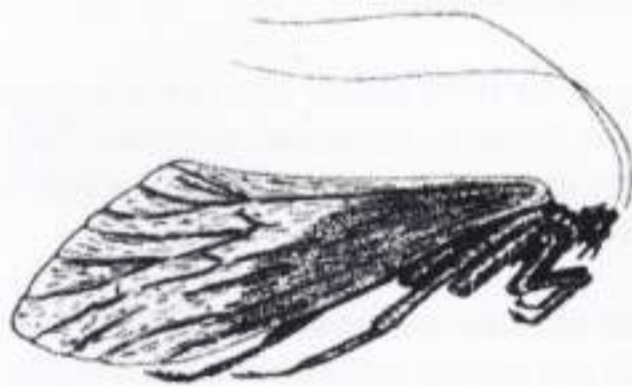
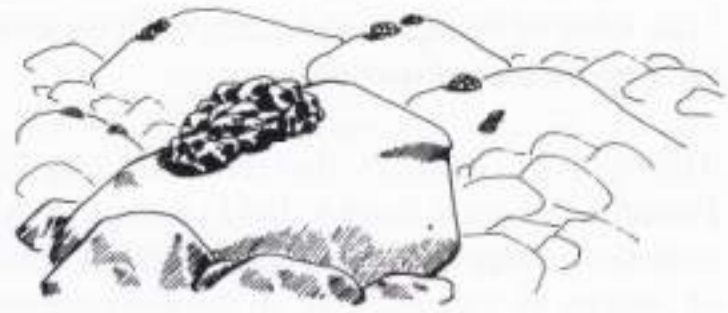
Then, I looked into the water and found that almost every boulder a bit bigger than a football had up to a dozen of the little snail-shaped 'sand castle' homes of the micro-caddis on the upstream side. I broke one open and, sure enough, there was the little larva.

That night I consulted the doyen of modern fly fishing writers, Ernest Schweibert: "Literally thousands of *Glossosoma* cases cover the bottoms of most American streams. Hatching is found throughout the entire summer and early autumn, and the three stages of larva, pupa, and adult are readily taken by the trout. The genus is a staple in their diet. (*Trout*, 1979.)

Intrigued and excited I phoned the authority on South African caddis, Dr Ferdie de Moor of the Albany Museum in Grahamstown. He said the micro-caddis was probably *Glossosoma agapetus*, part of the Rhyacophiloidae family and that, in the Western Cape, caddis were at least as prolific as mayflies!

A week later Neil Hodges and I humped cameras, close-up lenses and ring flashes down the mountain side. There was a sprinkling of large mayflies on the rocks well away from the river, a few Blackfly adults had put in an appearance but the micro caddis were everywhere! Every midstream rock protruding from the water had a dozen or more scurrying around, some shamelessly involved in activities which are not the subject of polite drawing room conversation.

Under the magnification of the close-up lens the drab pumpkin became a magnificent



Clockwise from top left: A Saddlecase maker - a *Glossosoma* larva in its case. *Glossosoma* cases on the rocks. Three views of Gary Berger's Poly Caddis and a *Glossosoma* adult.

"*Microcaddis* (Hydroptilidae) are tiny sedges, with a forewing length that rarely exceeds 3-4mm. They are frequently over-looked and, because of their small size, rarely imitated, despite the fact that they may occur in huge numbers and during a hatch or fall of egg-laying females the fish may take them selectively. *Microcaddis* are identified from other sedges mainly by their small size; they also have conspicuously hairy wings and short hairy antennae. Colour varies from pale sandy buff, through a range of browns, to black." Malcolm Greenhalgh & Denys Ovenden, *The Complete Fly-Fisher's Handbook*, 1998.

gilded coach, some of the little caddis seemingly sprinkled with gold dust - the best analogy I can think of being the iridescence of peacock herl but in the burnished bronze colour of an Olifants River yellowfish.

This type of caddis is also referred to by Gary LaFontaine in *Caddisflies* (Winchester Press/Nick Lyons Books, 1981) a copy of which is in the library: "Surely, in this age of imitation, every important trout food has been at least identified and copied with some sort of pattern. In the course of all the recent research on nymphs and larvae it could not have been possible, for example, to completely overlook a predominant insect in the trout diet. Or could it? Surprisingly, a caddisfly larva that is extremely abundant, vulnerable, and available has never been mentioned as worth imitating; and yet this insect often forces trout into selective subsurface feeding during the summer and autumn.

"The inconspicuous species of *Glossosoma* have never been highly rated even among caddisflies, possibly because they are case makers as larvae and emergers as pupae. They are not particularly prominent as adults either. They are easy to dismiss overall as only a secondary food source for trout, one of little consequence to the fly fisherman.

"Such an assessment, however, has been a serious mistake, underestimating one of the most important insects in cool, running waters. Not just among caddisflies, but among the entire fauna in many trout rivers, the larvae, pupae, and adults of *Glossosoma* create more selective feeding situations than any other organism at certain times of the year.

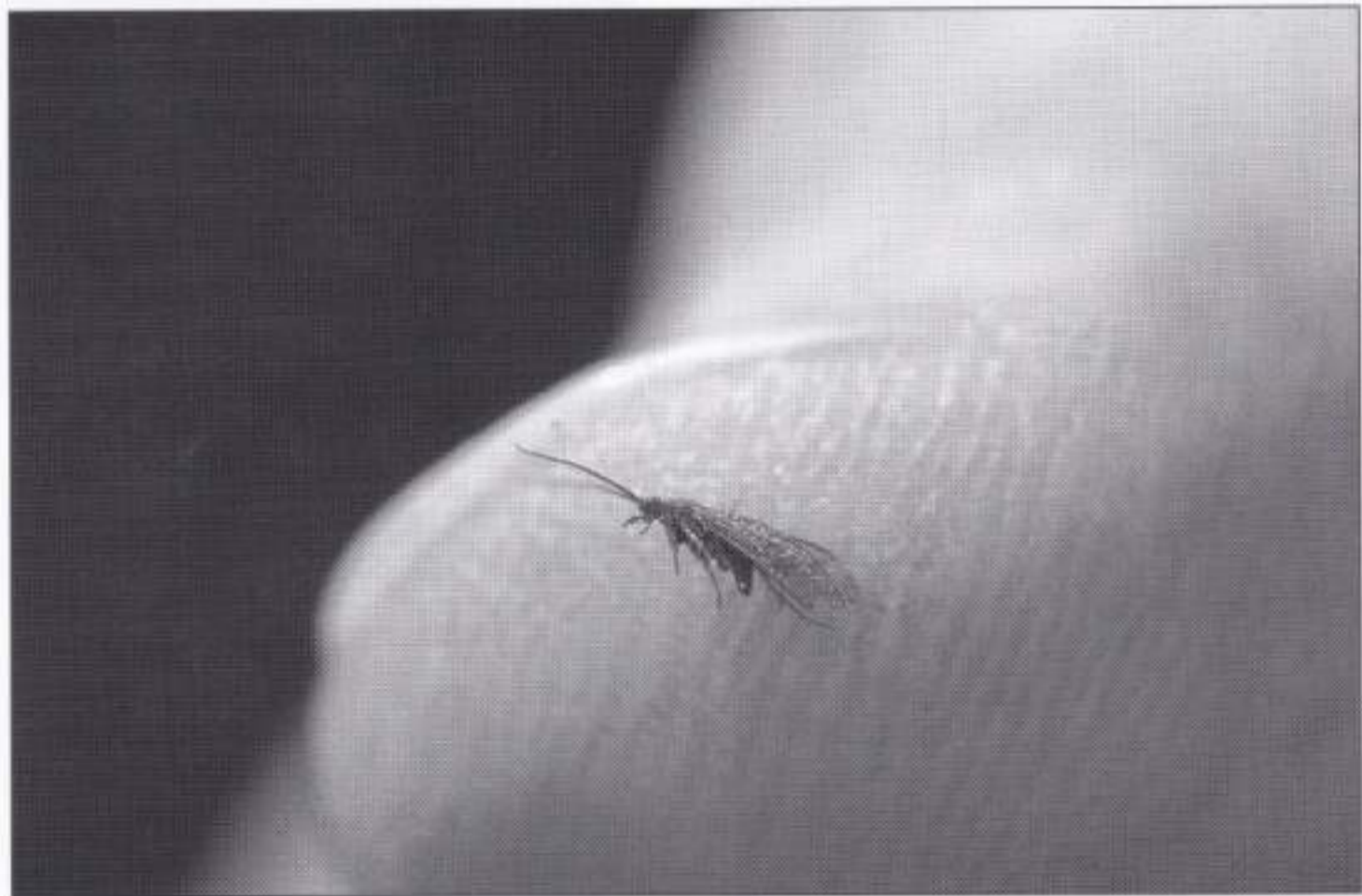
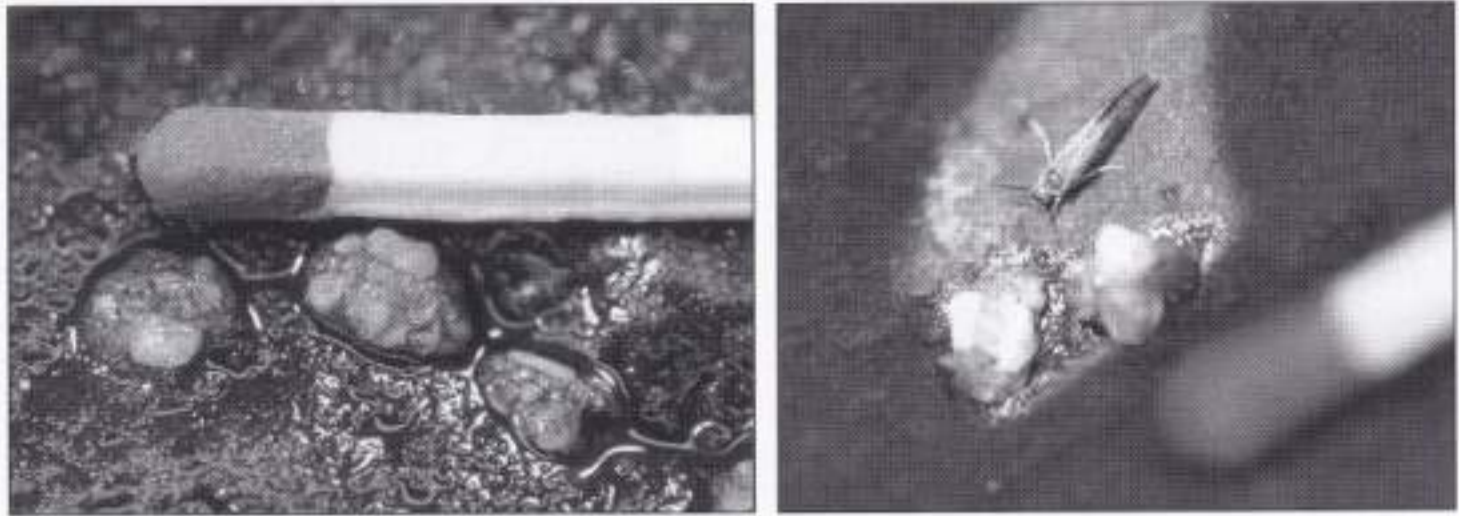
"The larvae, with their distinctive turtle-shell cases, inhabit a specialised area in streams. The portable shelter provides the protection that allows them to feed on the exposed upper surfaces of rocks. Crawling slowly over a stone, the insects scrape diatoms and fine organic particles from it. They can feed while entirely underneath the case, silk skirts along the sides forming a tight seal against the current. There are two identical openings on the bottom with a strap of silk across the middle. The larvae easily reverse position inside the case, feeding or moving with head in either direction.

"This case, adhering so strongly to the stone, should apparently eliminate the insect as a drift item. However, the unique feature of the case is that it is unsuitable for enlargement. Periodically, the larva simply abandons the old one and builds a new shelter."

LaFontaine says that these temporarily homeless larvae are frequently washed from the rocks but, in our conditions, without drift-net research, this knowledge would be difficult to profit from.

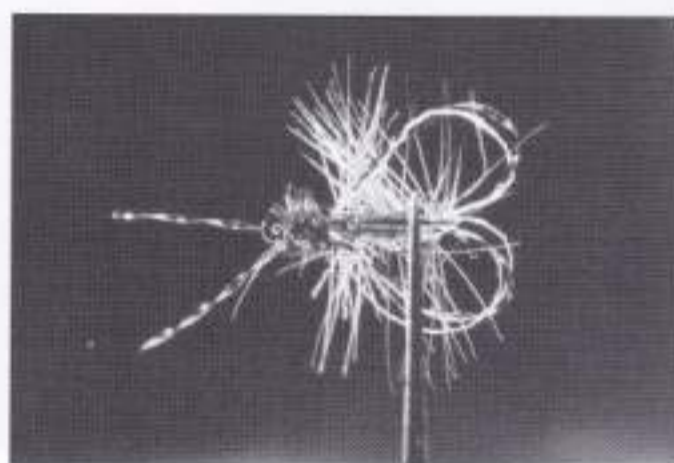
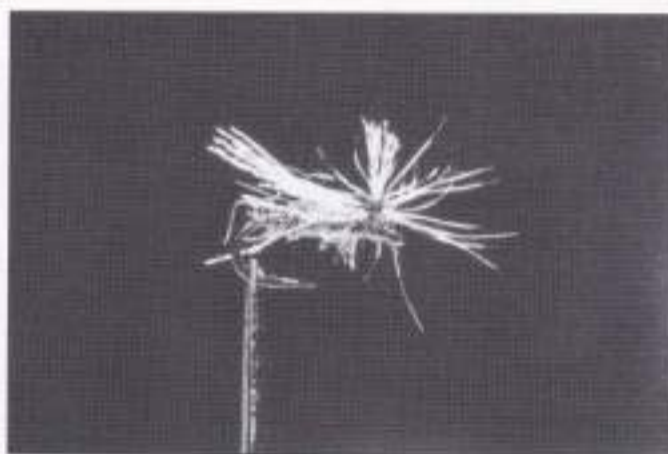
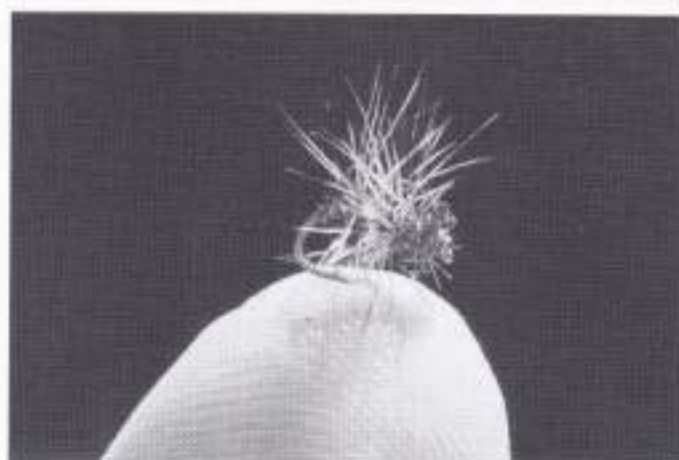
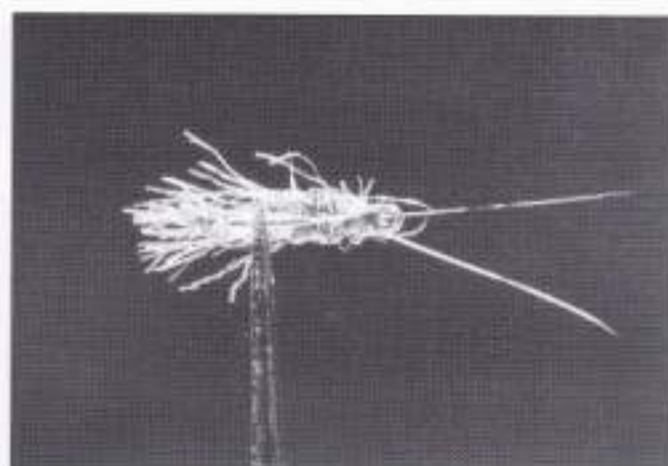
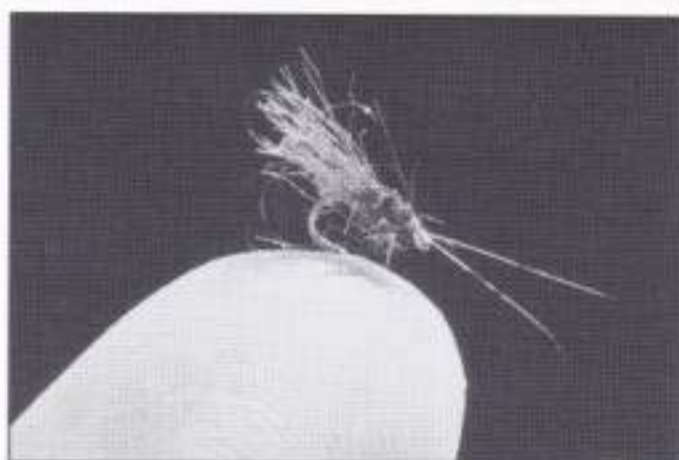
"Trout also feed on the emerging pupae and egg-laying adults. The population of a single species of *Glossosoma* can be very high in a stream, but usually in western waters there are a number of species sharing the habitat. When their activity overlaps they can be collectively important. The various species are enough alike in habit, size, and coloration to constitute a uniform and abundant food source.

"The small flies attract even decent fish if they are presented with active twitch techniques. The slight motions of a fly controls the selective response for these trout as much as the appearance of the pattern because both the natural pupae and adults are



Clockwise from top left: Larval cases of Glossosoma; an adult next to the cases, and an adult - note the antennae which are almost as long as the body.

"Sedge flies are much neglected by anglers. They may lack the beauty and delicacy of mayflies, and may be drab, but are very conspicuous. It is likely that many successful daytime dry flies are, in fact, taken for small sedges, particularly when drag, or a twitch or sudden change of direction in a floating fly excites the attention of a trout which might otherwise have let it float on by."
Bryn Hammond: The New Zealand Encyclopaedia of Fly Fishing.



Early experiments in imitating the micro-caddis. Clockwise from top left: two views of a #22 poly caddis with micro-fibbet antennae; a #22 organza winged pattern with the organza used as a post for the grizzly parachute hackle; two views of a #18 loop-wing caddis in which the black krystal flash is also used for the antennae. Note the post of shocking pink organza on top of the hook shank which serves as an easily-visible sighter; a # 22 palmered hackle pattern.

*"These small mothlike insects are also known as sedgeflies. Their rapid, uncertain flight may give an impression of inebriation to the imaginative observer. This led K H Barnard to name a Cape caddisfly *Schoenobates potes*, which means 'drunken acrobat' - in recognition, so he said, of its erratic flight and black and white colouration, reminiscent of a well-known brand of scotch."*

Bob Crass, Trout in South Africa.

vigorous swimmers."

LaFontaine points out that, to lay her eggs, the female *Glossosoma* dives beneath the surface to paste her eggs to the rocks and is thus familiar and vulnerable to trout during this process. As I have mentioned, I also saw other species of caddis which were displaying a different form of egg-laying behaviour so there were obviously several species active.

Taff Price, an old friend of South African anglers and of the Society, makes a similar observation to LaFontaine about micro-caddis in Britian in his excellent book, *Tying and Fishing the Sedge*, (Blandford, 1994): "A large number of sedges that are food for trout can, by their very size, remain unnoticed by most fishermen. The importance of the microcaddis, as they are termed, is a comparatively recent appreciation. Due entirely to their size, they have been inadvertently ignored by most anglers. At both larval and final winged stages they are only 5 mm to a very maximum of 8 mm in length, so it seems reasonable that such small creatures have been missed by many anglers.

"In the UK there is a decided lack of established patterns for such sedges. I tend to adapt existing flies and scale these down in size, tying up various coloured sedges on tiny hooks around size 18 to size 20. In recent years, on the various rivers that I have fished, I have found that my success rate has gone up considerably since I resorted to using small flies for general dry fly fishing. Nowadays any hook above size 14 looks extremely large to me and I very rarely fish anything larger now on some of the wild rivers. As a general rule most of these minute sedges are of a greyish-brown colour, mainly due to the pubescent hairs on the wing."

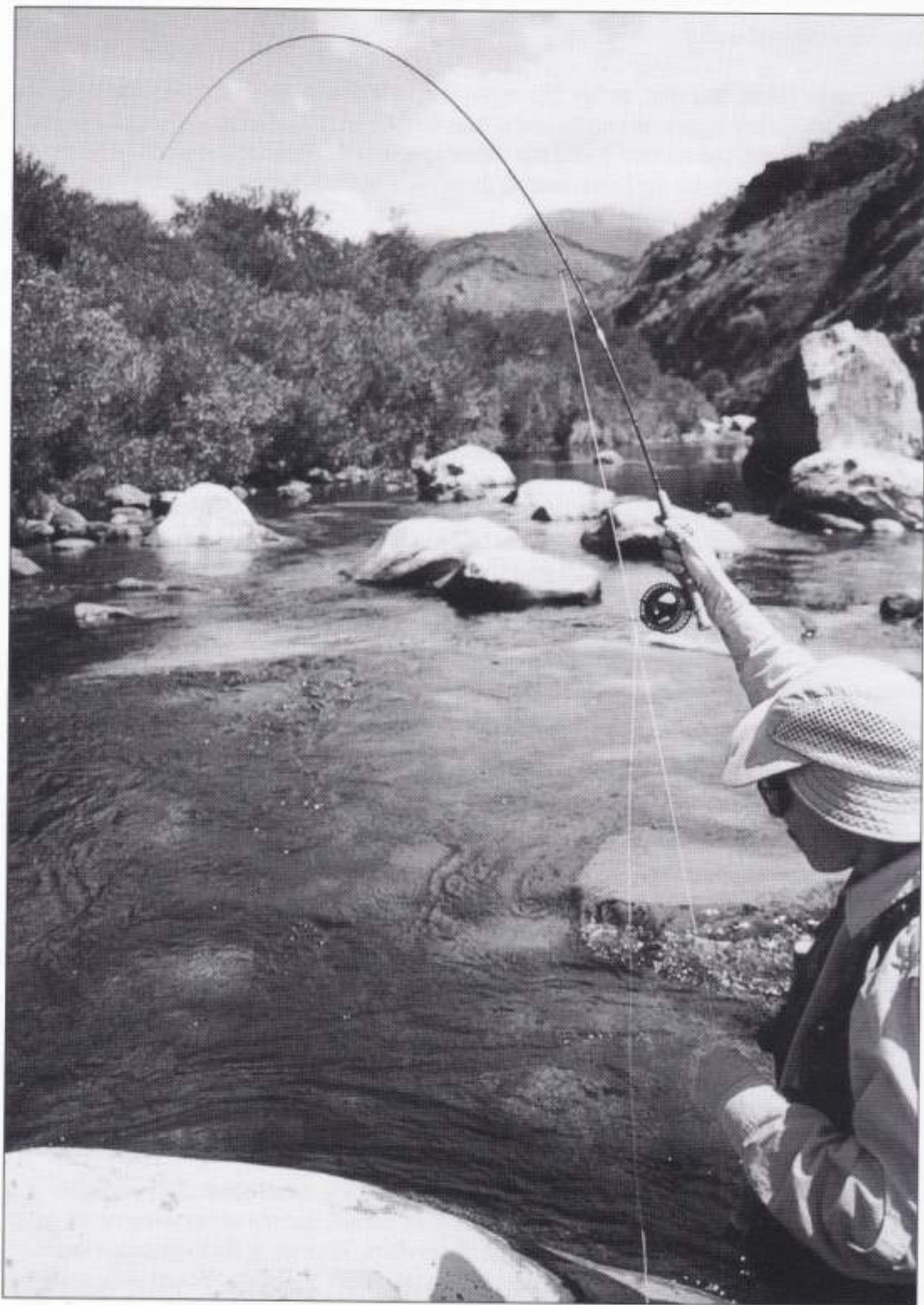
Taff describes a *Glossosoma* species, *Agapetus fuscipes*, saying: "Very large numbers of this sedge can occur on some streams. It is common in France, Switzerland and Germany as well as all over the British isles." *A. Fuscipes* has a smokey-grey wing and is about 5 mm long.

I bought some elk-hair with the intention of tying some tint versions of Al Troth's famous elk hair caddis but found the material to be sharply-pointed and hard. I preferred the palmered Hardoon Caddis and Gary Borger's Poly Caddis, as described in one of the most outstanding fly tying books of all time, *Designing Trout Flies* (Tomorrow River Press, 1991), a copy of which is in the CPS library.

Borger developed the Poly Caddis in 1972 as a derivative of elk-hair caddis which would be easier to tie in sizes smaller than 18.

"The coarse poly fibers made great wings. Slightly kinky, translucent, and available in a spectrum of colors, it nicely suggests the delicately haired, membranous wing of the natural. It has the correct shape when seen from underwater. It's a great fly to simulate the fully emerged adult or a female that is laying eggs at the water's surface. When pulled underwater, it catches a bubble of air and carries it down, just like the natural."

"The Poly Caddis is a great imitation for the delicate little micro-caddises. Over the last two decades it has provided me with many wonderful memories, like the time five of us caught and released over 500 trout from the Yellowstone River in one incredible day's



Bringing a micro-caddis hooked rainbow to hand on the upper Holsloot near the dam.

fishing. The trout were feeding on size 18-20 sedges when we arrived at 7 am and were still feeding on them when we left at 9 p. m. It was a good thing we had a well-equipped fly tying case with us because we lost more than our share of flies that day".

Borger also describes an evening on the Test with the Poly Caddis when it did great execution on trout feeding on egg-laying caddis.

To make the size 20 and 22 caddis patterns easier to see, I lay a piece of flashabou and a few fibres of brightly coloured yarn on top of the wing and one of the most promising experiments has been to use these materials as a parachute post and to wind a grizzly hackle around it, to represent the legs of the insect.

I have also borrowed the idea originated by John Goddard and Cliff Henry for their G & H clipped deer hair sedge. Prior to spinning on the hair, Goddard and Henry left two threads dubbed with fur hanging at the bend of the hook. Then, when the body was finished, they would pull the dubbed threads forward underneath the body and tie them off at the eye. I have substituted a piece of black holographic tinsel or flashabou for this purpose.

I am also experimenting with Lee Wulff's loop wing design in which horizontal, heart-shaped wings made of black krystal flash twisted together with nylon organza filaments are tied in at the bend of the hook and then folded forward to the eye.

One of the most successful European micro-caddis patterns, as illustrated in Martin's book, is the Tular, which has a wing of CDC fibres tied in at the bend and then folded forward over a palmered hackle to make a tent-shaped wing.

On the day I visited the Holsloot with Neil Hodges, he reported seeing fish rising in still, shallow water which barely covered their backs. His surmise was that they were feeding on caddis which had ben blown from the bankside bushes. This caused me to reflect on other clues which I had ignored down the years - the many times that I had disturbed caddis while moving through the bushes on the stream bank. That night, in Norman Marsh's *Trout Stream Insects of New Zealand - How to Imitate and Use them*, I read the following: "A good shake among most streamside bushes will send a cloud of caddisfly up and about and, in one of nature's wonders, they will be nearly all the same species. Because of the habit of settling among the border grasses, they are often fair game to trout resting under the overhang, a fact anglers should be aware of during no-rise periods."

There is still a great deal of research to be conducted and knowledge to be gained about the role that caddis play in the diet of western Cape trout.

"There is often a hatch of very small caddisflies, which some call microcaddis. Always carry a few patterns to match these. I like Gary Borger's polypropylene imitation. Of all the caddis dry fly patterns, the most popular, and deservedly so, is the one developed by Al Troth, called the Elk Hair Caddis. It is not suitable for imitating the microcaddis, but for all other caddisfly hatches, I find this fly to do the job very well. Lefty Kreh, Advanced Fly Fishing Techniques, (Delacorte Press, 1992).