

# Heroin for trout

by Andy Cockcroft

His eyes shone as he gazed at the battered fly in his left palm “Its like heroin for trout” He muttered, pausing for generous gulp of cold Cascade, “they just can’t leave it alone”. A more compelling endorsement of a trout fly would be hard to imagine under any circumstances but coming from an experienced fisherman who just returned from the very area I was due to fish in a few days time made the recommendation even more emphatic. “Those will work” he said as he ran an eye over one of my opened fly boxes containing my version of the same fly “but I like mine tied a bit fatter”. So what was I doing in a waterside pub in Hobart peering into other people’s flyboxes with more interest than a teenager with his first Playboy - more importantly what was the fly he was talking about?

But let me backtrack a bit – in late 2003 I learnt that my application to attend the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference and Workshop on Lobster Biology and Management in Hobart Tasmania the following February had finally been approved. Despite the mad scramble to put my conference paper and presentation together I did two most important things – I contacted that veritable mine of information piscatorial, Ed Herbst and casually asked if he could refer me to any good books about fly fishing in Australia and particularly Tasmania. Well after a day or two I received a message from Ed that I could pick up something from the reception desk at his workplace, and expecting a book or two and a list of book references, was bowled over by a box of about a dozen really first class books on fishing in Australia and Australian fly patterns – a veritable treasure trove of information. The second was that I sent an email to the head of the conference organizing committee (luckily a colleague who I had met at an earlier conference) asking him to refer me to a keen local fly fisher who could put me on the right track for my proposed two week fishing trip after the conference. Well I hit the jackpot because, to cut a long story short, I ended up not only receiving tons of good information about locations, flies, tactics and travel in Tasmania but an invitation to fish in some prime waters with a really nice guy who was prepared to take a week’s leave after the conference and show me around.

Based on my reading of Ed’s books and the articles sent to me by Bruce (no really, Bruce) I began to get an idea of the type of fishing and some of the flies used. I duly began to tie up my versions and soon had a box of flies that I hoped would do the trick. The one fly that appeared to be a real standby, particularly when sight fishing or “polaroiding” for browns in Tasmania’s lakes and tarns was the Red Tag, a very simple beetle imitation. A quote<sup>1</sup> on the effectiveness of the Tag– “place fly over feeding fish – if it refuses – go down a size - if still not taking – go up two sizes – if still not interested – Go Home!!!” ensured that I tied up a few in various sizes for the trip.

During the conference, after much asking around, I learned that a colleague’s partner and a few friends were out fly fishing in Tasmania’s Western Lakes area while she was grafting away at things academic. As he was returning the night before the conference ended I was eager to meet up with him and pick his brain for local knowledge. We arranged to meet at the pub and I wasted no time in asking about relevant information like flies, locations and tactics. Well after he produced his heroin Red Tag analogy I was more than





*Arthurs Lake, one of the myriads of Tasmanian s stillwater venues that provide outstanding trout fishing.*



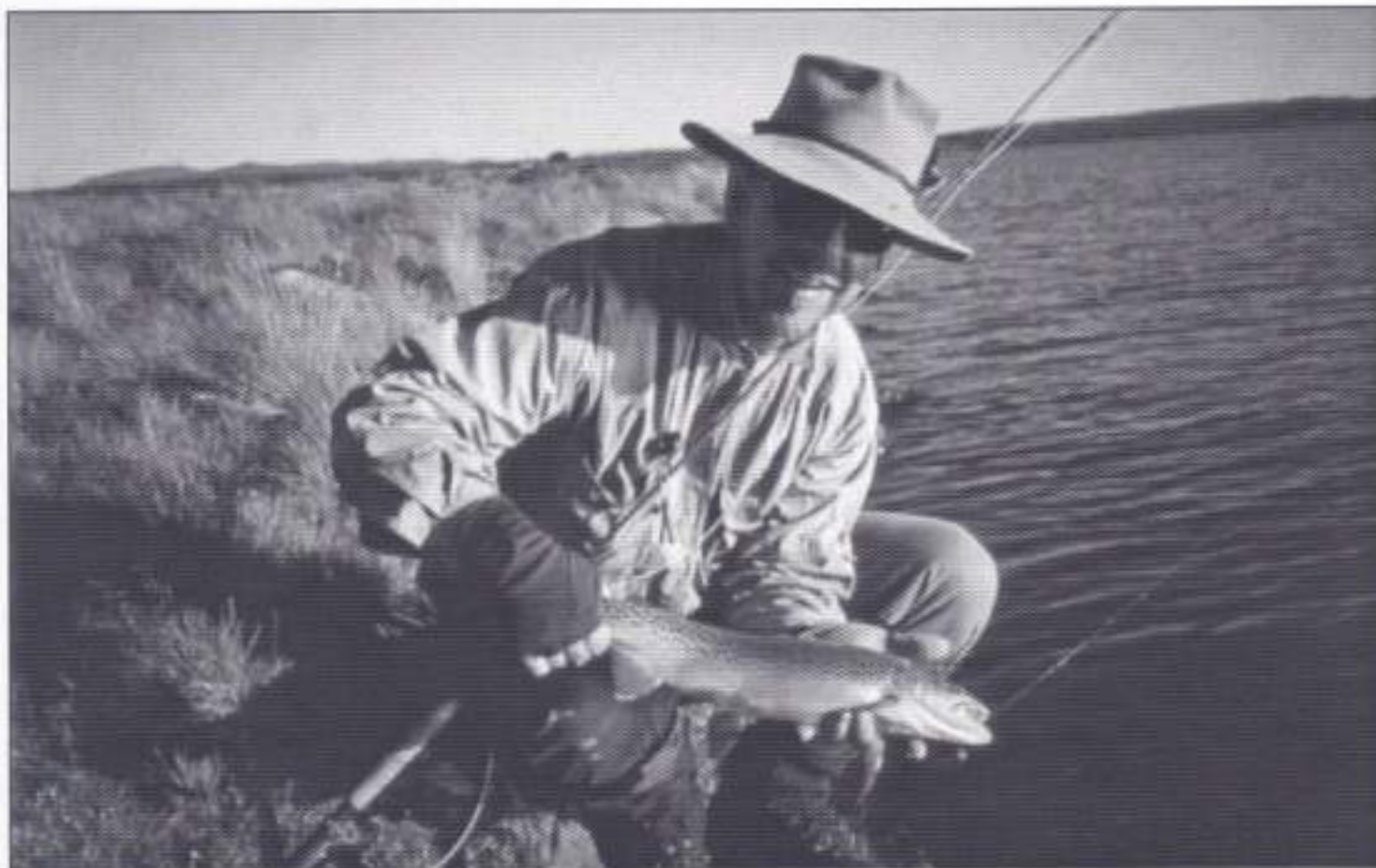
*Another Tasmanian brown trout is seduced by the Red Tag.*



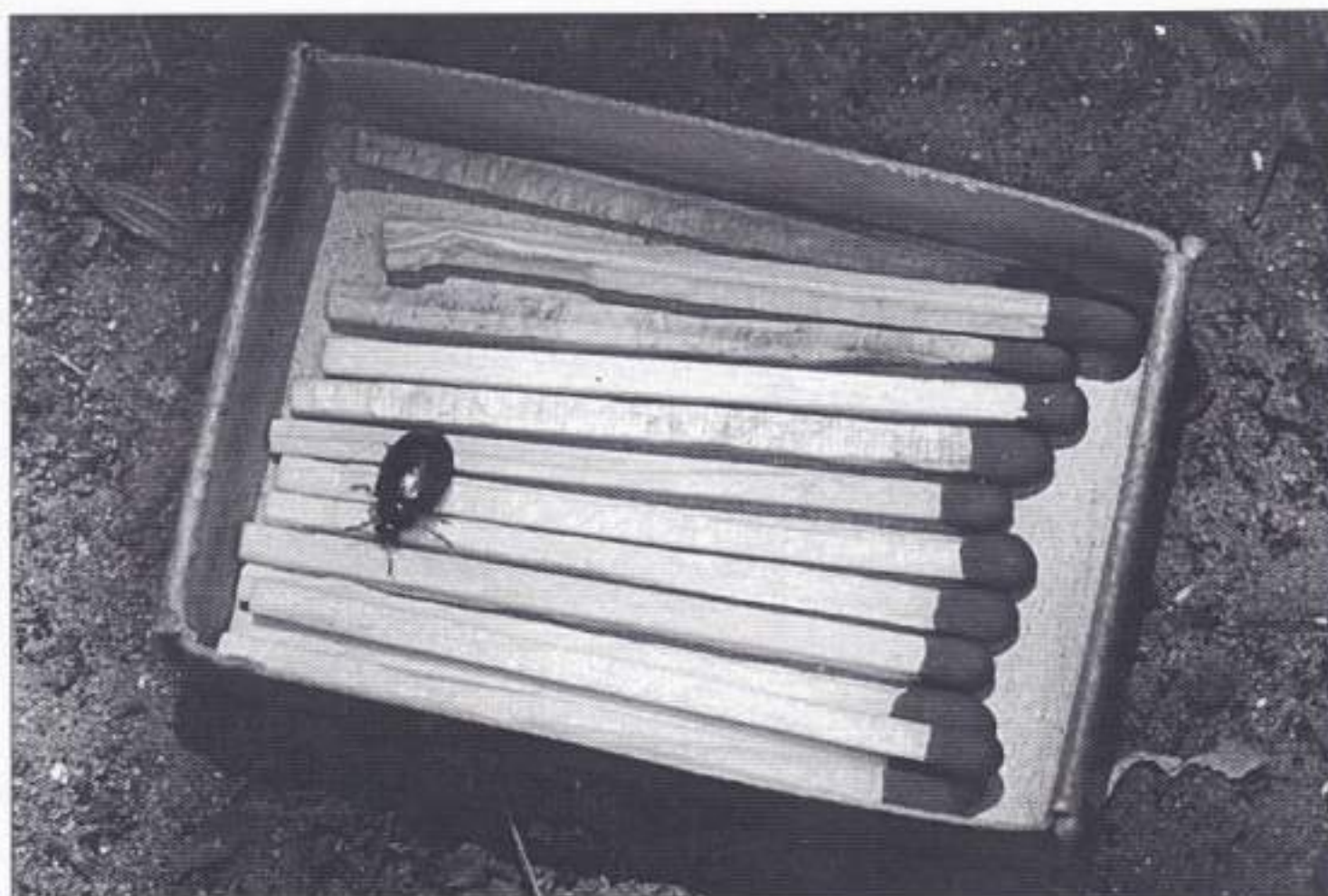
a little eager to give it a try (the fly that is).

The conference ended and Bruce and I proceeded (towing his very well appointed 4.6 m aluminum boat with 50hp outboard) to what he called the "shack" owned by the Tasmanian Fly Tying Club. Some shack – beautiful location overlooking Great Lake and close to literally dozens of other excellent fishing locations, roomy, very well equipped and comfortably furnished without being overdone - a fishing oasis. Our fishing strategy was decided by the weather and Bruce's excellent local knowledge of what would be happening in terms of hatches. We fished Arthurs Lake from the boat on the first few days and the English style drift fishing using a drogue, essential in the wind, was a first for me. Although I was not highly successful (Bruce had no trouble landing a few nice brownies), I really enjoyed the challenge of a new technique and new surroundings. Drift fishing was interspersed with frantic activity during the odd small dun hatch in some of the sheltered bays, which brought the browns to the surface. My first opportunity to try polaroiding was at a tarn called Ada Lagoon near Lake Augusta. We arrived on the waters edge after a short walk and with the sun in front and a headwind parallel to the bank (good for sighting trout), conditions were in our favour. Bruce suggested that we move upwind slowly "prospecting" or fishing blind while keeping an eye peeled for trout lying close to the bank. We separated, giving each other enough space to fish. I moved along the bank slowly sending out a few speculative casts across the wind, trying to keep one eye on the size 14 Red Tag (the fly of choice, no contest) and the other searching for trout shapes or shadows. I had just decided to stop the searching casts in order to concentrate on sighting when the shape of a beautiful brown trout lying motionless just off the bottom materialized in a window between the wind chop. The fish was lying in about three foot of water and about five foot off the bank, only about 10 foot away. The wind induced chop on the water was the only thing that saved me from being seen as the water was gin clear. I dropped slowly to one knee and put out a short cast that should have landed the fly just behind the fish. Instead the cast landed in an untidy heap near my feet with the fly 5 feet behind the fish (lesson 1 – never under estimate the wind in Tasmania). Well that's stuffed that up I thought, fully expecting the telltale signs of a spooked fish. To my amazement the fish turned slowly, swam leisurely directly towards me, surfaced about six inches behind the fly with its top jaw out of the water, closed the gap and crunched the Red Tag with a snap that sounded like a pistol shot. The contrast between the casualness of the approach and the ferocity of take was quite extraordinary. I lifted the rod and the fish took off for the depths. That's when I realized that I had let the spare line rest of the ground ... Despite some nifty footwork that would not have been out of place at an Aboriginal dance festival, my best efforts to extract it from the tenacious indigenous gorse-like vegetation behind me were unsuccessful and the ending inevitable (lesson two: control the line at all times - the vegetation around Tasmanian tarns is plentiful and particularly unforgiving). Well, that episode pretty much sealed my belief in the efficacy of the Red Tag and it wasn't too long before I had landed a few nice brownies using the same fly. Later that day, after a short hike to the nearby Talinah Lagoon where we saw and caught nothing, we returned to Ada and started to search the bank opposite to one we had been fishing that morning (sun angle important). A fish rose nearby and Bruce had a fly (not a Tag) out within seconds (covering a rise quickly was something I found was pretty important, especially on the larger waters like Arthurs Lake) and I watched in fascination as the brown slowly and casually swam right up to millimeters of the fly – and then dropped magically out of sight. As the fish was not spooked Bruce suggested I put my fly out (the same Red Tag I'd been using all morning)





*Bruce with An average size Tasmanian brown that took, what else, a Red Tag.*



*The Red Tag could be used to imitate the Chrysomeledae leaf-eating beetles that are found on willow trees and form a significant component in trout diet in the Barkly East/Rhodes/Maclear area.*



just in case. The fly landed in the general vicinity and a few seconds later the fish appeared behind the fly, swam slowly towards it and took it with quiet confidence. The Red Tag had undoubtedly proved its worth and although I experimented and caught fish on other flies it was always the one that I tied on when the going got tough (kind of makes me a recreational heroin user, I guess). The fly is easy to tie (see Australia's Best Trout Flies<sup>2</sup> for two versions), durable and catches fish when other flies fail. I'm convinced that it would be just as effective on local brown trout waters and plan to give a thorough testing on both local rivers and still waters in the near future.

This was not meant to be a travelogue of my trip to Tasmania (that's another article) but a few pertinent points on why fishing Tasmania is a must are called for. The most important is the huge number of fishable venues (especially lakes and tarns although there are plenty of fine rivers as well) in both easy to reach and really remote areas. The great variety of locations and habitats allows for all types of fly fishing techniques but the sight fishing or polaroiding is fantastic. Add to this some really interesting scenery and the sight of Wallabies, Paddymelons (small Kangaroo like animals), Wombats, Spiny Anteaters, Tasmanian Devils and many exotic (for me) bird species in the wild makes the experience even better. The sight of a Duckbilled Platypus paddling around close to the bank in the evening light on Ada Lagoon was just unforgettable. Getting there is easy, the infrastructure is superb, the costs are reasonable and people and local fishing fraternity friendly and willing to share information.

The fishing in Tasmania is great as it offers a variety of challenges and forces one to re-assess one's fishing comfort zones – the fishing is good but the fish are no push over. A classic example of how finicky the browns can be was brought home to me right at the end of the trip. I had spent a long and frustrating day on Lake St Clair casting to browns that were actively feeding on something moving below the surface, which despite my best efforts with the all the nymphs, emergers, stick caddis, dry flies (I threw the box at them and not a few expletives), remained unmoved and unhooked. As I was walking back to the car I saw a decent brown move through a patch of spiky grass into about 6 inches of water and take a yellow wasp-like insect that was doing the classic figure of eight pattern on the surface as it tried to take off with one wing. The trout repeated the performance for the second struggling insect and by the time it returned for the third and last, I had what I thought was a perfect match in colour and size floating about twelve inches in front of the moving natural, directly in the path of any fish approaching. The brown came in, virtually lifting my fly out of the way with the bow wave, ate the natural and then passed my fly again on the return journey without even the courtesy of a sideways glance.

Got to get back there!

1. Taken from [www.redtagtrout.com/fly](http://www.redtagtrout.com/fly) (26/11/03)
2. Australia's Best Flies. Compiled by Malcom Crosse and edited by Robert Sloane. Fly Fish Australia Inc.

*Editor's note: According to British fly fishing historians, Courtney Williams and T Donald Overfield, the Red Tag was first called the Worcester Gem and is believed to have been invented by an angler in the south of England, a resident of Worcestershire called Flynn who fished the River Teme. It owed its subsequent popularity and reputation to articles by a noted contemporary angling writer, Francis M Walbran who used it on his own northern*



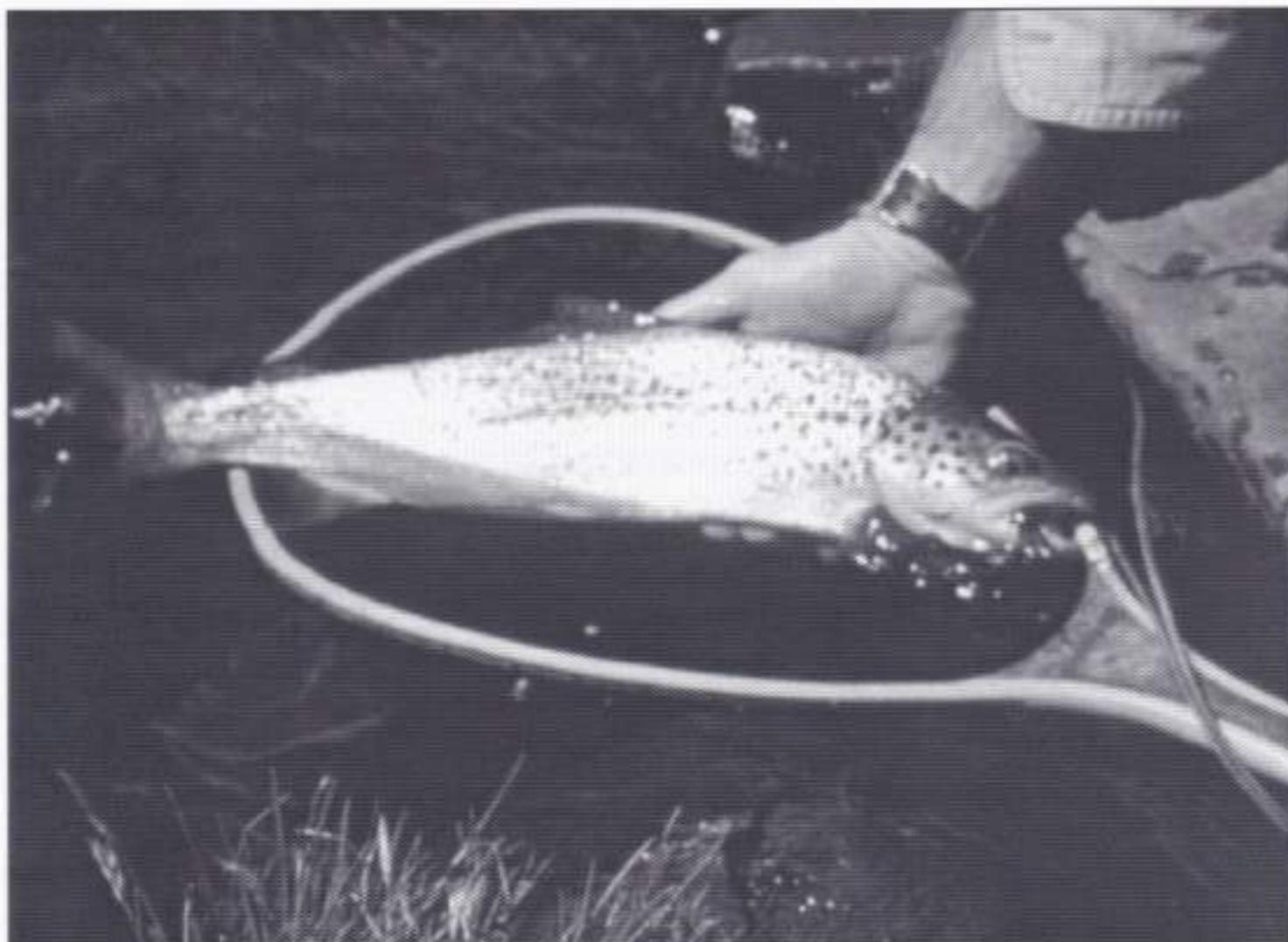


*The tying sequence for the Red Tag taken from Peter Leuver's Fur and Feather: Fly-Tying For Trout, Kangaroo Press, 1994, ISBN 0 86417 403 9.*



*Bruce Barker shows that British-style, loch tactics, utilising a drifting boat, slowed by a drogue, also work on Tasmanian lakes.*





*Brown trout, introduced to Tasmania more than century ago, have created a world renowned fishery that earns the country significant tourist income.*

*rivers such as the Yore and the Wharf as a grayling fly. He wrote that, on the first occasion that he used it, he brought 25 fish to the net.*

*"It is a MUST for all anglers fishing in Tasmania, and I can still remember a clear day at Arthur's Lake when a large Brown trout had a beat that took him past me. I tried at least eight different flies, when I remembered the Red Tag. As soon as he saw the fly floating in his path, he tipped up and took without hesitation. On another day in the Tassie highlands, I landed ten fish - all on the Red Tag." Allen Fish:*

*<http://members.tripod.com/~outdoorsman/terest.htm>*

*"The Red Tag is an Australian icon. It is a fly that everybody who has fished for trout has some time or another used and more than likely with some degree of success. It is revered on the lakes up top in Tasmania as being probably the single best pattern available. Used in just about every situation it has caught fish consistently; those feeding heavily on duns, at first light in midge hatches, rainbows in wind lanes sipping terrestrials, in shallow lakeside margins when fishing to tailers, moochers and foragers, in 150 feet of water and three feet waves, while wade polarising small lagoons in the Western lakes. There is very little more need be said about its effectiveness and status down south." Antony Boliiancu. ([www.goulburnvlyflyfishing.com](http://www.goulburnvlyflyfishing.com)).*

