

Who says size doesn't count?

by Tim Rolston

"Trout can see items in the drift that are smaller than anything you can tie, and they seem to be less suspicious of smaller flies: I've had them take nymphs as small as a size 26 when they would refuse a 22". Tom Rosenbauer, Prospecting for Trout.

Apart from the fact that we have some really good stream fishing in the Western Cape, (and you only need to guide a few overseas anglers to get confirmation of this) the fishing is getting better. Well, lets qualify that. I, and a good many other anglers, think it's getting better (although there are some voices of dissent) because it is getting tougher.

The behaviour of the trout in our streams has changed and one must assume that, at least in part, this is the result of increased fishing pressure and catch and release angling.

In the good ol' days we were blessed with fishing that was, to be frank, really quite easy. Discussions in the CPS clubroom rarely involved hatches and we regarded the concept of 'selective' fish as an affectation invented by our American and English counterparts to make them seem both cleverer than us and their fish more difficult to catch. I have to admit to at least discussing (and I may have even put into print) my belief that 'selectivity' was a load of old cobblers - an excellent excuse for poor angling technique because it covered all the bases and allowed the angler to 'hide behind' a veil of apparently selective trout when, in reality, he or she was clueless and needed a few casting lessons and some improvement in their presentation.

What's different?

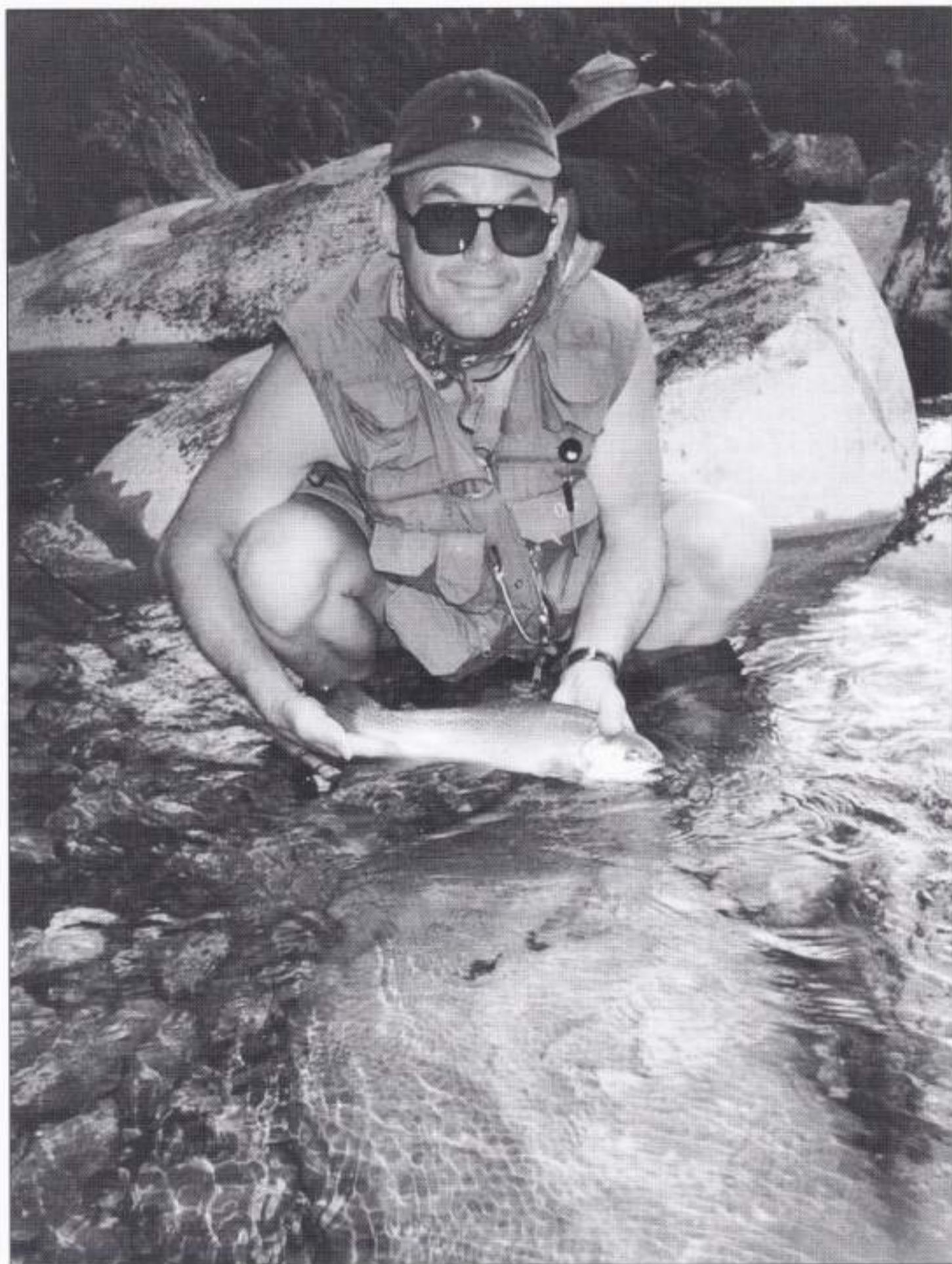
The fish rise with far more circumspection now than they did five years ago. Clients from Europe tell me that our rainbows behave like brown trout and that their rainbows are rather more flamboyant on the take.

This cautious rise enables the fish to take careful note of the fly and its behaviour and they are declining an imperfect presentation with increasing frequency.

Second chances come less frequently than they used to - in years past it was common to finally hook a fish after missing the take two or even three times. Today, if you miss the take, your chances are reduced to near zero. Even a refusal spells trouble unless you change flies immediately.

All this has led to the use of much smaller flies. The size 20, 22 and 24 flies we read about in American magazines have now become an integral part of our arsenal. Initially we only used such flies on difficult fish that had refused standard patterns or were holding in flat, thin water. Today I may even start the day with a size 20 fly.

The first ultra-small flies that we started fishing about five years ago were flying ant imitations. If you have ever been blessed (or cursed) by being on stream when a fall of these tiny, flying terrestrials occurred after their nuptial flight, you would recognise the significance. Initially I regarded such events as a curse because it was one of the first



Tim Rolston and a Smalblaar rainbow which was deceived by a micro-fly.

'hatches' that I ever experienced when complete and utter selectivity was the order of the day. Trout were everywhere, rising freely to insects that were almost impossible to see without putting one's nose to the water and seeking out the minute gossamer wings crucified in the film. Fortunately I had a solitary ant pattern in my box and, without it, the day would have been a complete bust. At the time we were in the mountains for two days and it would have been an exercise in frustration but for that lone ant which was passed back and forth between two anglers with a reverence normally associated with precious metals and gem stones.

From then on we started fishing the ant, sometimes during a hatch (more properly an ant fall) and, at other times, in thin water to difficult or spooky trout that appeared edgy or had refused more conventional patterns. Trout love ants and, much of the time, they will move a considerable distance to get them. We regarded the ant as the finely tuned, cutting edge of our trout fly armoury and it was reserved for special occasions. We felt pretty clever when it deceived a trout and, when it failed, we assured ourselves that the fish was very difficult anyway and we had tried our best to get a take.

After a while though, I began using the ant more frequently because the streams have been getting lower in the past few years and we were spooking more fish in the slower, clearer water. It became quite obvious that small flies (at least those that were carefully designed) were indeed more visible than you might imagine and a survey of the local aquatic life persuaded us that there were a good many food items of minute stature that would be worth imitating. It seemed that the fish were getting tired of being hooked on size 14 dries and were much more comfortable eating smaller titbits that seemed (if trout can think in such terms) safe.

The next two patterns I developed were a standard parachute mayfly #20 with a wing of white synthetic material to imitate the midges that abound on our streams and a micro version of the Elk Hair Caddis. The micro caddis is, in fact, an extremely common insect on most Cape streams but we had ignored it for years, simply because it is so small that we never considered imitating it. To these patterns I have now added micro versions of the Parachute Adams, beetles, black stoneflies (also a very common insect on the streams) and tiny Cul de Canard emergers.

Some advantages of Micro patterns:

- Not everyone is using them so it seems the fish are less suspicious.
- Most of the aquatic and terrestrial insects in our riverine environments are tiny and small flies thus more closely resemble the bulk of the food that trout eat.
- You can (indeed need to) fish them with 7x tippet which are less visible and more supple - giving a more natural drift to the fly.
- The trout take them with confidence and it seems that, as they have a size 20 or 24 fly in amongst a mouth full of water, it takes a lot longer for the fish to recognise the fraud and spit it out. Surprisingly, experience has shown that, by adapting your strike, the hook-up rates with these skimpy patterns can be as good or better than with more conventional flies. Lilliputian flies require fewer materials and are thus less expensive to tie. As John Gierach

says "For a fly to be really worthwhile one should be able to put it at risk amongst the branches of a tree with total disregard for its potential loss."

Furthermore, because they are so small and weigh so little, these anorexic patterns can be simplified to exclude expensive hackles and complicated tying procedures. Once one has adapted to the small size it is quite simple to tie as many as 18 of these miniatures in an hour.

Thoughts on design

There is little new in flytying and I would not be so bold as to suggest that my thoughts are original but, for what they are worth, here goes:

I like my micro flies tied on straight-eyed hooks; it seems foolhardy to reduce an already diminutive gape with a down-turned eye. I also like them to carry little or no dressing that might impede hook-up so, with a few exceptions, I tie all the hackles parachute style leaving the gape unobstructed.

On the caddis patterns I add no hackle at all, using only a body of ultra-fine dubbing and an elk hair wing. Being so skimpy, micro patterns float easily and a hackle would reduce hook-ups and waste expensive material for little gain as far as I can see.

My ant patterns carry no hackle at all. Many ant imitations use a big, bushy hackle which ruins the segmented effect of the insect's narrow-waisted body, something that has, for many years, been regarded as vital in tying successful simulations. Again, simply because of the minuscule size, these are buoyant patterns.

I also like soft materials on these flies in particular, the idea being that I don't want the fish to 'feel' anything out of the ordinary until I strike. Experiments have shown that micro flies with stiff wings and tails have reduced hook-up rates. In *Micropatterns - Tying and Fishing the Small Fly* (Lyons & Burford, 1994), Darrel Martin writes: "On small patterns, stiff hackle may prevent hooking. After missing several grayling rises on the Slovene Unec, I noticed how truly bristly the barbs were on my Grey Palmer. The short, stiff feather barbs prevented point penetration. I pruned the bottom hackle and immediately connected."

For those who suffer from the 'short arm' syndrome there are options such as the Orvis big eye hooks which make tippet-threading easier or Polaroid glasses with small bifocal inserts that magnify enough to help. Not drinking the night before might reduce the shakes a little too if you are really battling.

Thoughts on fishing micro patterns

If you have not previously used such elfin flies it pays to work your way down from #16 to #18 and so on until you get used to them.

Give your eyes time to adapt - flies that seem impossible to spot on the water start to show up quite well after an hour's fishing and, when you use these petite patterns all day, they actually start to appear quite large after a while.

Keep your micro patterns in a separate, dedicated fly box. A micro fly sitting next to a #12

Wulff looks so tiny you will never have the confidence to tie it on; in their own box such flies start to look quite reasonable.

Make sure your casting is up to scratch. Most of the clients I guide can't see their fly because they are looking in the wrong place. Make sure you know roughly where your fly should be. If all else fails, fish for a while with an indicator, as you would a nymph, to help get your eye in.

It is important to modify your strike. Slow it down and make it slightly slower and gentler, yet positive. Once ingrained, this technique will dramatically improve your hook-up rate and reduce the number of snapped tippets.

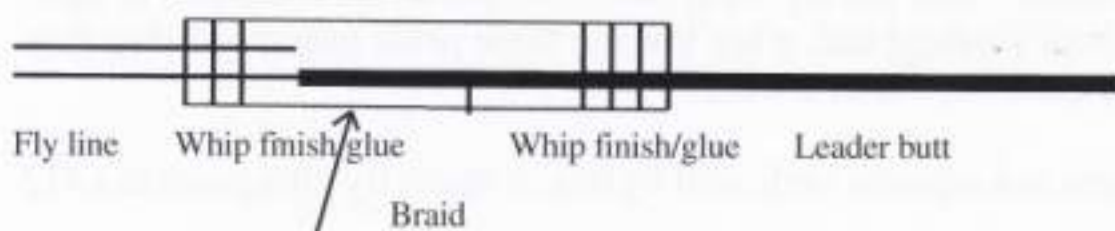
Don't fish these flies all the time. Although I fish them ever more frequently, I don't limit my angling only to these micro patterns; there are some pretty good hatches of #10 and #12 mayflies on our streams on certain days and, much of the time, the fish are still up to grabbing the odd hapless beetle or hopper.

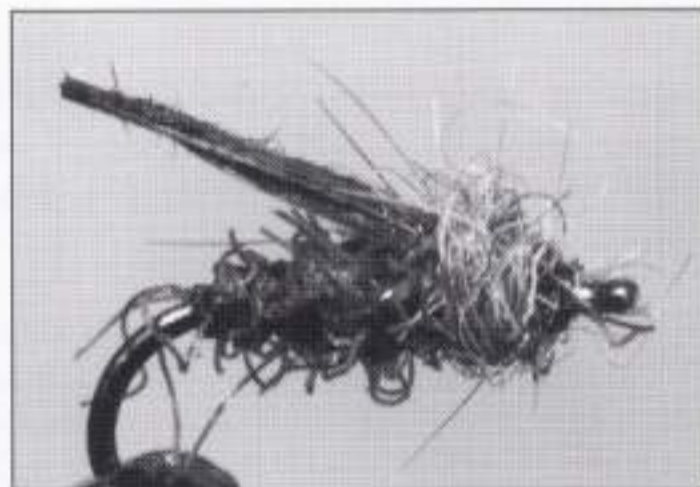
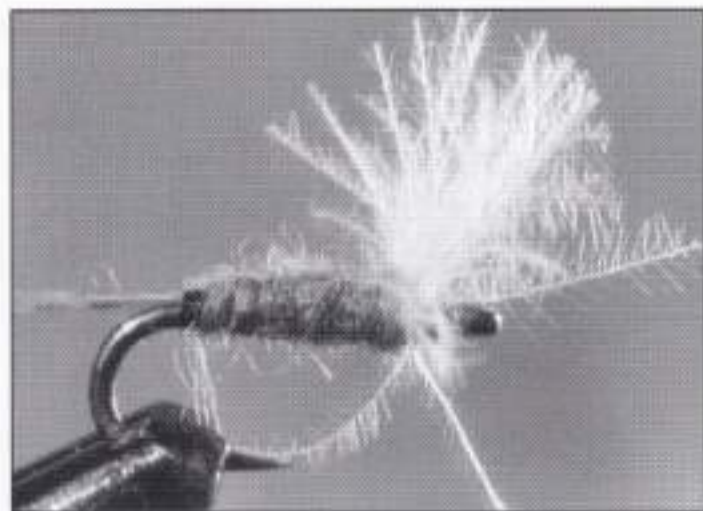
Thoughts on tackle and its set up

Microflies don't require great changes in standard river tackle but there are some considerations that should be borne in mind. Firstly tiny flies fish best on long, fine tippets (4x won't even go through the eye of a #20 hook). I generally use leaders down to 7x for size 20's and smaller. The leader should be as long as reasonable under the circumstances which, for me, means from 14 to 20 feet. That may seem extreme but the drifts are far better with long leaders. Your average 4-weight rod will simply not fish short casts and long leaders well, and 0-3 weight rods are to be preferred. Just as bigger flies, depending on their construction, differ in terms of aerodynamics and thus their castability, so a #20 elk hair caddis (an extremely aerodynamic and castable pattern) will fish better on a longer leader than a parachute of the same dimensions. Small hooks and ultrafine tippets require a cushioned strike, so soft-action, lightweight rods again offer an advantage. The currently popular super-fast rod tapers are a distinct disadvantage here. Four weights and over will pop your tippet too often to be useful.

Leaders in particular

Because the base of my leader, which exceeds the rod length by a considerable margin, always comes through the tip-top guide when landing a fish, I want a smooth joint which, being more aerodynamic, also aids casting. During casting, braided leaders discharge a bright spray of water vapour which caused me to stop using them. I prefer a knotless 9-foot mono leader tapered to 4x. To this I add approximately a metre of 5x, a metre of 6x and, if called for, a metre or more of 7x. The butt section of the leader is attached to the line with a sleeve (not loop) made of Cortland braided nylon shooting head backing. The butt of the leader is sanded lightly and the line and leader threaded up the sleeve from opposite ends. It is then whip finished with fly tying thread and completed with a drop of superglue. This gives me perfect continuity for casting and no knots to catch in the tip-top guide.





Tim Rolston's micro-flies clockwise from top left: A CDC mayfly dun, a poly-winged-parachute, the Bedge/Seetle and an elk-hair sedge.

Knots

I don't use any special knots although I find that the finer tippet material seems to hold up best when linked to the leader with a surgeon's knot rather than the blood knot. A word of warning, some fluorocarbon tippet material seems to suffer from very poor knot strength. Orvis Super Strong, Rio tippet and Orvis Mirage fluorocarbon all work well.

Proof of the pudding

There have been numerous examples of fish taking micro flies after refusing bigger patterns. Once, on the upper Witte, Andrew Spillebean and I spotted a feeding brown. He had first cast and his size 18 fly was on the button, landing softly and drifting towards the fish right in its feeding lane. It acknowledged the presence of the fly with a slight upward tilt but that was all. I had the next cast but my size 22 fly was a foot wide of the mark. I waited for the fly to drift past the fish so that it would not be spooked by the pickup when, to our surprise, it sidled across and sipped in the fly with absolute confidence!

In mid-October last year Andrew and I were fishing separate beats of the Smalblaar. I came to a flat stretch where several fish were rising confidently. Nothing I tried worked and they continued feeding. Eventually I stood in the water with my little aquarium net, trying to solve the puzzle. After a while I discerned in its mesh several tiny beetles, little bigger than a comma. I took my smallest mayfly pattern, cut it into a little black blob and was rewarded with one of my biggest fish of the season, a 20-inch rainbow.

Later, back at the parking area, I met Andrew whose first question was; "Did you see the beetles?" He had fished through several pools where fish were rising before deciphering the clues. He then walked back downstream and re-fished the same pools using a #20 pattern, which is an ant/sedge/beetle with a hackle tip, tied 'wonder-wing' style, i.e. with the hackle fibres pulled back. It matters not whether the resulting fly is a 'Seetle', a 'Bedge' or a 'Bant', it worked on the beetle-sipping Smalblaar trout when bigger, conventional patterns had failed. His dressing on a #20 hook is a dubbed body, topped by a reverse-stroked hackle point as a wing and a hen hackle tied in as legs.

But, to be fair, I have also had trouble catching fish during a hatch of large (#12) dark Dun Mayflies because I didn't have a big enough fly in my box. Micro flies are just another aspect of matching the fish's natural food. Thus they shouldn't instil blind faith but, equally, they should not be written off as unfishable affectations created in the mind of someone looking for the subject of an article.

Micro patterns become more important in late summer as the water levels drop and currents slow down, so make them part of your overall fishing strategy. Despite what you might have read in Men's Health or Cosmopolitan, size does count ... but bigger is not always better!

Editor's note: Tim has been fishing since the age of three and fly fishing since the age of 12. His primary interests are fishing and designing flies for Western Cape streams, although he has caught many different fresh and saltwater species as well as trout on fly tackle. He has won the CPS 'Fly Tier of the Year' award on several occasions and currently manages Upstream fly-fishing shop in Newlands, Cape Town. He also runs Ultimate Angling (www.durandel.co.za/flyfishsa) which offers fly fishing courses, guiding and on-stream tuition to both local and overseas anglers.

"A fundamental rationale for this book is the contention that selective trout appear less intimidated by smaller patterns. Trout may take large insects, but the small insects often constitute the principal diet of selective trout". Darrel Martin, Micropatterns - Tying and Fishing the Small Fly (Lyons & Burford, 1994).

"There are countless variations on small-fly patterns, but most anglers agree that having the right size fly is often the most critical criterion for success when trout are being picky. Shape and silhouette are next in importance, followed by colour. No doubt you will find fish that adhere to no rules and have ways of dealing with humanity on their own terms. Defeats are usually more inspiring than success when it comes to fly tying, though we certainly like to win in the end!" Neale Streeks, Small Fly Adventures in the West (Pruett, 1996).