



SUNKEN TERRESTRIALS

Ed Herbst

“Ever meet a nymph fisherman who wasn’t a bit touchy? Maybe staring at a line tip for hours affects the personality; or maybe only a certain character type becomes a fanatical subsurface fisherman. If ever they start using sunken terrestrial imitations – ants, bees, and caterpillars, as well as grasshoppers – those flies might eliminate the slack periods that even nymph fisherman hit, ruining any chance to keep them humble.”

- Gary LaFontaine – The Dry Fly – New Angles.

I have always been an avid reader and at school I would go hungry, saving my tuck shop money to buy magazines like *Outdoor Life*, *Field and Stream* and *Sports Afield* and revelling in the exploits of anglers like Al McClane, Ernest Schweibert, Vincent Marinaro, Ted Trueblood and others.

So, when I moved to Cape Town in the late seventies, I joined the Cape Piscatorial Society. I thus realised a long-held ambition to start fly fishing and I immediately started buying the American magazine *Flyfishing* and *Trout & Salmon* from the UK.

Then started the restless search for the “silver bullet” which would compensate for my mediocre skills as a caster and fly tyer. As each new wonder rod or the latest fly tying vice came on the market it would be bought but, above all, I was searching for the wonder fly that would prove irresistible to trout.





Drowned beetle imitations tied by co-author and innovative fly-tyer Ed Herbst.

shallow water is vulnerable to this fly when presented on a long leader with a very fine point. Though this pattern sinks quickly, it is usually taken with a visible swirl within a second of hitting the water if it is going to be taken at all. If it does have time to sink before a trout takes, the draw of the leader along the surface is easily seen by the angler in the smooth water”.

Weaver was not the first in Britain to fish such patterns like a nymph. The late Eric Horsfall Turner fished a pattern called “Eric’s Beetle” upstream with the tippet greased up to a few centimetres of the fly. His pattern consisted of a peacock herl body with a tag of yellow wool at the bend of the hook and a turn of black hen hackle at the hook eye. This method proved so deadly that he considered it unsporting.

“The only time I use the method now is when I want a trout to examine the stomach content, or when I want a brace for the table and they are not catchable in any other way”, he said (*The Complete Fly fisher* (Barrie & Jenkins 1984).

It was after reading this that I decided to tie my own version of the Black Bug using, as always, as many of the “magic” materials as possible.

The basic formula for my Sunken Beetle was fairly obvious, a weighted size 16 wet fly hook, black Krystal Flash legs and antennae, hare’s ear body ribbed with fine copper wire and shellback of peacock herl.

I first used the Sunken Beetle on the bottom beats of the Smalblaar a Western Cape stream on December 27 1993.

sense to me to incorporate as many of the time proven materials such as peacock herl and hare’s ear fur - or modern equivalents such as Antron - in my patterns as possible.

My rationale was that the more of these “trigger” materials I could incorporate into a single pattern, the greater my chances of success would be and this, in turn, meant thinner and thinner tying threads.

My favourite fishing is what I call staircase streams, tiny, high- gradient, tumbling flows of clear water where trout hold in little pockets not much bigger than a bath. Whatever lands on the water is taken if the presentation is delicate and the trout is not spooked and this is where CDC is essential. It compresses on the forward cast, pops open like a parachute when the energy of the cast dissipates and then drops gently onto the water.

My fly tying focus is very narrow and confined almost exclusively to small stream trout caught on light tackle. Delicate presentation is as important as pattern and this means small, aerodynamic patterns where possible so that they can be fished with light, drag-reducing tippets.

My approach to fly fishing and fly tying has been immensely influenced by my reading and one of the books I constantly read for reference is *What the Trout Said - About the Design of Trout Flies and Other Mysteries* by Datus Proper (Lyons & Burford, 1996). Two of his dictums are worth remembering in the context of trout from small streams – trout tend to be less suspicious of flies #16 and smaller and that a fly tied with a stiff, extended body on a short shank hook is likely to result in an above average number of missed strikes.

Like most fly fishers I am always looking for the “silver bullet” - the infallible fly - and thus it made

Sunken Beetle

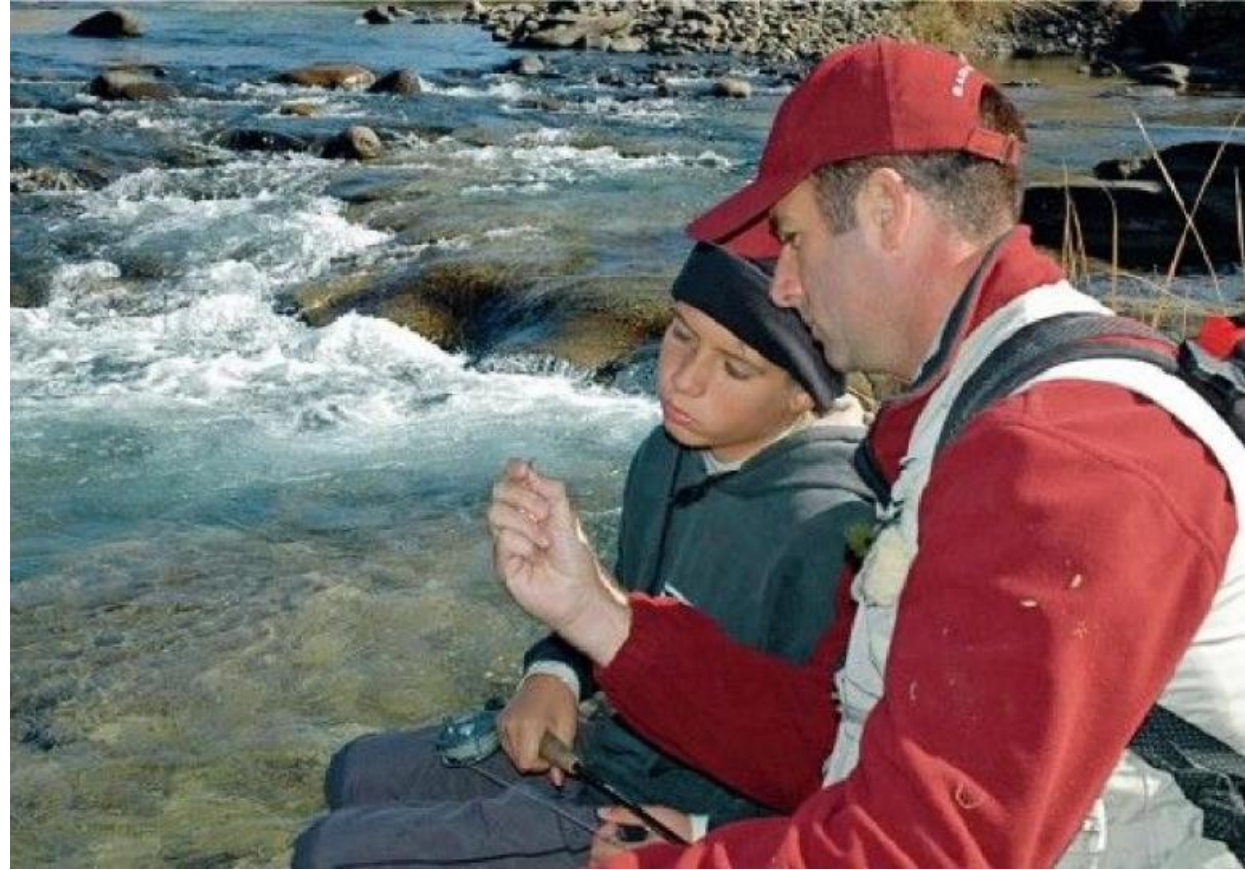
Mike Weaver, who wrote a column on small stream fly fishing for *Trout & Salmon* described a pattern, the Black Bug, which fascinated me. It was meant to imitate a submerged beetle and that resonated with me because, firstly, while nymphs don’t fall from the sky beetles do and, on the few occasions when I had killed a gill-hooked and thus mortally injured trout, the stomach contents always seem to contain a beetle or two.

Weaver’s beetle was tied on a size 16 hook weighted with lead wire and had a peacock herl body covered with a shellback of crow feather.

Weaver wrote that when his standard, deer hair beetle floating pattern was ignored, he turned to his Black Bug and it invariably proved successful. “For some unknown reason, even the most supercilious trout in smooth



Picture taken by Tom Sutcliffe



I was fishing with the late Ronnie Pitt, one of the Eastern Cape anglers responsible for starting the Federation of Southern African Fly Fishers (FOSAF) thirty years ago.

I was fishing with a strike indicator leader that I had developed and which I still feel has great merit for small stream fly fishing. Tie a Perfection Loop at the end of the 3x section of the leader, then link that to another Perfection Loop in the **next**, 4 x section of the leader. Link the two loops and then slide them apart. Thread into the gap between the

loops a centimetre-long piece of Egg Yarn which is used for tying glo-bugs. This must be pre-treated with floatant such as Loon Hydrostop and allowed to dry. Tighten the loops so that the yarn is trapped between them. Trim the yarn on either side of the loops so that what remains is the size of a match head. Grease the leader with thick paste floatant such as Mucilin up to the strike indicator and a few centimetres beyond it. This means that the strike indicator is buoyant and it is supported on the water surface by the greased mono on either

side of it. If you decide to change from nymphing to using a big dry fly, you simply slide the loops apart and remove the strike indicator. The best colour is orange, but at sunset a more visible colour is chartreuse. If you are fishing with the sun upstream of you, black can be easier to see against the glare. Today, I would use the new Rio Two Tone indicator tippet material which has 20 cm sections combining red and yellow and I would use black yarn for the strike indicator.

Ronnie and I fished from the Boundary to Picnic Pool, catching and releasing five fish each. All of his fish were caught on a Caribou Spider so I am not suggesting that the subsurface fly was superior to its floating counterpart. I was however very encouraged by the performance of the fly and the aggression with which fish took the beetle, or chased it.

When bead head flies became popular the fly was updated and updated again when rubber leg material became available. Whenever dry flies proved unsuccessful or the

light made them difficult to follow on the water, my sunken beetle and the bright, easy-to-follow indicator would make my fishing more enjoyable and, usually, more successful. I realised that it had other antecedents and that it merely built on the success of flies like the Coch-y-Bonddhu – ostensibly a dry, but probably taken semi-submerged – and that favourite dam fly, the Black and Peacock Spider.

In American magazines I read that the beetle was a “hatch breaker” and that even the notoriously selective spring creek trout which had locked onto a mayfly hatch, would take a well-presented beetle. This was confirmed when I cleaned a gill-hooked trout on the Smalblaar which had more than two dozen *Baetis* nymphs in its stomach, but could not resist the beetle.



Historically, the first angler to recommend fishing the beetle like a nymph was Dick Wigram in Australia and he used the technique of fishing the pattern upstream with a greased leader which was later adapted by other anglers such as Horsfall Turner and Weaver. In his book, *Nymph Fishing in the Southern hemisphere* (Grason Press, Sidney, 1939), he wrote: “The use of an artificial beetle in various types common to the Southern Hemisphere is closely allied to nymph fishing.

“The wet patterns are fished in much the same way as the nymph. If necessary the cast may be greased to the last link and the gut carefully watched for the sudden draw that indicates a fish.”

Tasmanian angler, David Scholes devotes an entire chapter to the Black Beetle, which he fishes upstream and beneath the surface, in his book *Trout Days* (Kangaroo Press, 1986). "I'd rather fish a beetle than a nymph. As a saver of blank days, the Black Beetle is high on the list", he says.

It is not difficult to understand why the beetle is such a successful fly. While mayflies have become the symbol and leitmotif of fly fishing, beetles are far more prevalent in trout diet. Beetles, or *Coleoptera* to give them their Latin name, are the largest order of living organisms with an estimated 350 000 species. In contrast to this the mayflies have about six hundred different species. Most mayflies breed only once a year and the adults live for about two days at most. Many species of beetles, however, are multi-brooded, producing up to four generations a year. What is even more significant is that beetles are exactly the same shape as another large order in the insect kingdom, the bugs or *Hemiptera* and there are some 60 000 species, such as leafhoppers, cicadas and aphids, in this family. The major difference between beetles and bugs is that the beetles have jaws with which they bite and chew, but the bugs live exclusively on liquids and have sharply pointed

snouts adapted for piercing and sucking either sap from plants or blood from other creatures. Thus we have 410 000 species of insect sharing the same general silhouette - an oval shape with three legs on either side - that are available throughout the year compared with 600 species of mayfly which are available as adults for a brief period each year.

Copper Wire Ant

The number of ants in streamside vegetation substantially exceeds the number of beetles. Sunken ants have been used in the USA for decades, first using thread bodies covered with head cement varnish and then epoxy versions were created.



Another of Ed Herbst's innovative patterns the Copper Wire Ant, designed to represent drowned ants that are prolific in local streams.

I decided to use copper wire instead for two reasons: Firstly copper wire is malleable which means that if you tie an oval shaped abdomen on the hook shank, you can easily create a flattened oval with fine point pliers which means that the hook gape is increased. Secondly, Marinaro described rust-coloured ants as “glowing, as though with an inner fire” (*A Modern Dry Fly Code*) and the copper wire, when covered by UV light cured resin has that quality.

To add weight to the abdomen of the fly in order to ensure that the Sunken Ant drifts hook point up, I attach three short bits of wire to the top of the shank first, one on the top, two on the sides – then I wind on the copper wire.

When this fly is tied on an up-eye sedge hook such as the Grip or the Tiemco, the weight of the abdomen causes the fly to drift hook point up and this works well in rocky riffles where it lessens hang-ups. However it also hooks less well unless you kerb the point i.e. bend it slightly to the side.

The Sunken Ant can also be used as a control fly by tying a small foam beetle to the bend, New Zealand-style, which bobs enticingly in the wake of the anchor fly.

Cape Town guide Tim Rolston feels that emphasising the slim middle section of the ant is a more important trigger than legs and does not use them on his dry imitations of this insect.

I agree and my current (2016) legless version of the Sunken Ant is tied on a size 18 TMC 2488 fine wire hook which is 2 x short and 3x wide. This provides a shank length of a size 20/22 but the gape of a size 16.

To emphasise vulnerability, I incorporate a spent wing of nylon organza. This conforms to Gary LaFontaine's dictum that trout lying deep in fast water will rise more promptly to a wide fly.

The design is very versatile because depending on water depth and strength of current it can be tied with a glass bead or a 1.5mm brass or tungsten bead.

Tungsten Beetle

In 2009 the French company, Bidoz, produced some curved and ribbed tungsten bodies to imitate the fresh water amphipods called *gammarus* in Europe and scuds in the USA. I realised that it could be used to create a small, quick-sinking beetle imitation that would drift hook point up. Combined with a 1.5mm tungsten or brass bead and tied on top of a size 16 Grip 14723 BL or Tiemco 206 BL it is ideal for getting down to fish holding in deep or fast water.

You can apply rubber legs at the junction of the body and the bead or a hackle – starling or hen.

The tungsten bodies can be given a mottled appearance by using a permanent marker and applying successive coats of brown and green.

The body is held in place on top of the hook by combination of super glue and wire wound through the segments in the body. This is followed by a layer of UV light-cured resin.

Like the Copper Wire Ant which also drifts hook point up, the Tungsten Beetle is an ideal anchor fly for a smaller more buoyant pattern such as a soft hackle which is tied to the bend of the Tungsten Beetle New Zealand-style.



The Tungsten Beetle, designed to sink quickly in fast-flowing water and swim hook point up to avoid snagging bottom structure.

