



MARIO'S INCHWORM

Mario Geldenhuys

The beauty in tying flies is not always in the way the flies look, or what they may suggest, but in what they are. Uncomplicated, yet effective. For me, to complicate your passion for the art is to deprive it of its beauty. Whether I am tying flies, building a fly rod or handcrafting a landing net, this philosophy has been the golden thread on which I base the pursuit of my passions.

Having been privileged to grow up near some of the most pristine trout streams that the areas of Rhodes, Lady Grey and Barkly East in the North Eastern Cape have to offer, my love affair with trout in small streams started at an early age. In my wife I found a kindred spirit who shared my love for the beauty surrounding us, and with the support of my young but growing family, I was allowed to develop my skills as an angler and craftsman.

Growing up and living in the small town of Aliwal North all my life, my needs for tying flies reflected my lifestyle and outlook on fishing. To become an indispensable pattern in my fly box, the fly must be made of materials that are readily available and it must be uncomplicated in design and durable.

For a long time the inchworm/sawfly 'hatch' was a major event in the fishing calendar of most anglers visiting Barkly East and Rhodes. This 'hatch' usually occurred in summer when sawfly larvae, the little green caterpillars, known generically but incorrectly as 'inchworms', emerged from their eggs and literally covered the crack willow trees (*Salix fragilis*)





The Inch Worm, created by Mario Goldenhuys primarily for the rivers of the northern region of the Eastern Cape Mario is also recognised as a leading rod and net craftsman in the local fly fishing community

lining the riverbanks. At times, the mass of hatched larvae was so thick that entire trunks and branches were covered with a writhing green blanket of these little caterpillars.

During this period, fish would selectively key in on the caterpillars dropping into the stream from the overhanging crack willow branches, and would gorge themselves on this non-stop conveyor belt of food. This made fishing for both trout and smallmouth yellowfish a joy, provided you had a serviceable imitation on the end of your tippet.

(The true inchworms are the larvae *Geometrid* moth and, because they have two pairs of feet fewer than other caterpillars, they move by stretching their

bodies forward and then arching the rear section of their bodies up to the front feet which resulted in them being given their common name of loopers. The caterpillars found in Rhodes and Barkly East are the larvae of sawflies which are a primitive form of wasp that selectively and exclusively predate on the foliage of the crack willow – so called because the twigs making a 'cracking' noise when broken but also because old trees often develop a large crack in their trunk and are prone to collapse.)

While there are many inchworm patterns available, none of them really ticked all the boxes for what I wanted. Many are tied with



green chenille in the classic San Juan Worm style. These patterns, however, had to be treated with floatant, and eventually sank, and then had to be re-treated before they would float properly again. Other foam-bodied patterns had no segmentation, something that I felt the pattern needed to fool the most selective of fish.

The pattern I envisaged had to float for long periods of time, be easy to tie, be durable and also *look* the part. After tying a few extended body mayflies with deer air one evening, the idea of an extended-body inchworm imitation came to mind. After a bit of experimenting, I finally came up

with a pattern that combined all the features I considered necessary. After tying up a few prototypes, I was actually a bit embarrassed with the final outcome. Not because the pattern did not resemble what I had in mind, but because it was so simple, almost too simple.

The trick was to get the foam tied 'off the hook', on a needle and then attached to the hook at a later stage - a technique similar to that used for making extended-body deer hair mayfly patterns. The body is then slid off the needle and attached to a size 18 short shank, up eye sedge hook such as the Grip14723 BL, the Tiemco 206 BL, the Hanak 360 BL or the Allen N205BL.



So out came the sewing needles and within a few minutes I had about a dozen little worm bodies lying on my bench

The pattern was quite simple, a single material (excluding thread) and an offset (kerbed) dry fly hook. Green closed-cell foam – I prefer Larva Lace – is the material of choice, and importantly, a thread that is not so thin that it will cut through the foam as you segment the inchworm's body. My thread choice is 17/0 Uni Trico or Veevus16/0 in white.

The advantages and benefits of this simple little pattern over some of the more commonly-tied imitations of sawfly larvae were surprising to say the least. Even when the inchworms were not present in the willows, the pattern still took fish. It soon proved to be a viable pattern to search with and drift under overhanging willow branches where you'd usually expect to find trout and yellowfish.

After sharing the pattern with a few friends online, the pattern resonated with the occasional fly fisher but it never really had a *wow* effect on anyone – too simple I guess. I did, however, get some good

feedback from a few anglers who have fished New Zealand's willow grub hatch with this pattern. They all took fish on this fly, when other more conventional patterns did not have the same attraction. This was the final confirmation to me that this was indeed a pattern that you need to include in your fly box.

Sadly, the days of the massive sawfly hatches on my home waters in Barkly East and Rhodes are a thing of the past. The invasive crack willow (*Salix fragilis*) is being removed from the river banks by the government's Working for Water Project and, with their removal, the masses of writhing little green worms have also disappeared. This pattern, however, has remained in my fly box, and still moves a fish or two when needed.

Dressing

Hook: Size 18 Grip14723 BL, alternatively the Tiemco 206 BL or Allen N205BL.

Thread: 17/0 Uni Trico or Veevus16/0 in white

Abdomen: Green Larva Lace closed-cell foam