

Arthur Ransome, *Rod and Line* ([Sphere Books, 1967](#))

The Winged Ant

I did not go to see the Ant. The Ant came to me. He came not alone but in a crowd. A dozen or so of him (the winged red ant) were crawling in my happily disused fireplace. More were on the bookshelves, on the table, on the floor. After ungratefully spending some time in trying to get rid of them, it occurred to me that they could only have come for one purpose. They were, so to speak, artists' models clamouring for a sitting. So I put one in a small glass test tube and set up the flymaker's vice. Then, as one interested in the history of the art, I looked up the Old Masters and compared their dressings of the Winged Ant with this invader.

The Red as well as the Black Winged Ant has been well known to fishermen as one of those flies which on certain days are good to fill a basket. The Winged Ant's is a shortish season, like that of strawberries and cream. It is at its height in August, when, particularly in wooded streams, the insect finds its way to the water in great quantities when the trout become quickly aware of its nourishing qualities, acquire, perhaps, a liking for the taste of formic acid and gulp it down in preference to anything else. It was known as an artificial fly before the middle of the eighteenth century. A hundred years later, Ronalds (1836) gives a dressing; peacock herl tied with red-brown silk, starling wing, and red hackle. Pulman (1841) remarked that he did not care much about it but gave a dressing; copper-colour peacock herl, red hackle, dark red silk and jay wing. He observed that the wings should lie flat along the body. Theakston (1853) speaks of it with more respect and gives a dressing for it among his flies for June, though his notes on the specimens he observed are under dates in August and September. Of August he says: 'The ants sometimes fall numerous on the waters this month and are greedily taken by the fish'. 'Bright amber' with 'thin glassy wings', 'Body and legs red brown'. 'Took one of a spider's web at Robin Hood, which sparkled in the sun with fire and gold, and of a dull amber transparency.' He speaks of the dark red of head, thorax and body. 'Are altogether glassy and smooth, but a fine short hair may be seen, through a glass, on the parts which in the sun throw off short gilded reflections.' 'They are well taken by the fishes whenever they come on the water.' Theakston's dressing is: peacock body, red or amber tying silk, a few fibres of red brown mohair worked in for legs and wings from snipe or starling.

In this dressing (for a wet fly) peacock is a remarkable ingredient, though even the ruddiest bronze herl can hardly give the luminous chestnut or the apparent hardness of the actual insect. Francis (1867) and Pritt (1885) use the same material, though Pritt hackles his fly with a feather from the Blue Tit's tail. 'It will now and then do great execution, particularly after a flight of ants.' In 1916 Edmonds and Lee, the authors of *Brook and River Trouting*, are sticking to the peacock, though they disregard the red legs and suggest the wings with blue hen's hackle. These are all wet flies. When we come to dry flies, we at least break away from the peacock, though Leonard West gives it an alternative dressing. No. 28 of Halford's new series is the Brown Ant. 'Wings, pale starling. Hackle: two furnace cock hackles. The body is ingeniously made from stripped and unstripped condor quill dyed dark maroon, the unstrapped being used for 'the knob at the tail end'. The result is too thickly hackled to be very like an ant, though it has caught a great many fish. Halford says it is a good grayling fly. West's dressing is much more like the insect. He copies its body in cinnamon quill, gives it 'iridescent' legs, hackle points for wings and finishes it off with mallard horns. He calls it, optimistically, 'a capital fly at all times'.

Finally, J. W. Dunne produced a Red Ant which is a great improvement on all the others, dressed with artificial silk on a white painted hook, with hackle point wings laid flat and a dark honey hackle.

Such is the history of the Winged Ant in the hand of the fly-tyers. Dunne's dressing is so good that it is not likely to be superseded. It is, however, elaborate. White painted hooks are not always at hand and artificial silk is not the easiest stuff to work. I amused myself, with the model before me, in trying to make a likeness of it which would catch fish and could be tied by anybody in a minute or two. Now the chief impression made by the ant on the human eye (and, one must suppose, on the trout's) is that of shape, a pear-shaped body, divided by a very thin waist from the thorax, which is divided by thin neck from the head. Colour, I think, must come second. Now it is not difficult by using ordinary orange tying silk for the thorax and ordinary orange floss silk for the pear-shaped body on an ordinary bronzed hook to copy almost exactly both shape and colour. The floss silk seems extravagantly bright when dry, but when oiled (that is to say in the condition in which it will be fished) it darkens, like the tying silk, to a deep ruddy chestnut. In the actual insect the wings lie flat over the tail and project a little beyond it. This impression can be

reproduced by tying in on the thorax a pair of hackle points. The tips of the hackles are constricted in tying in and the effect is that of narrow glassy wings. I used the palest honey hackles I could find. A few turns of red hackle supply legs and floating power. The body is more easily shaped if the floss silk is split so as to have a narrow band to wind and so one that will not so readily become unmanageable. The total effect is not so much a Frith as a Whistler portrait of the Winged Ant, impressionist rather than realist, but to the human eye at least recognizable.

With half a dozen of these impressionist ants duly oiled in a match-box, on a hot August day, with fair water in the river, it was, of course, impossible not to hurry off to show them to the trout. On the eddy below the stone bridge was an ant. On the bridge there were more. On a flat pool in the wood just above the trout were steadily rising at something I could not see. Was it ants? It presently was. My impressionist ant had hardly floated six inches before a trout had him. Twelve fat little trout (a whole jury) mistakenly declared themselves satisfied of the innocence of my impressionist ant, besides one or two that I missed or lost. Their verdict is enough to satisfy me in offering this extremely simple dressing to those who one day or other are likely to need an ant or two in a hurry. With it should be a warning that on a dull day shortly afterwards, the fish would not look at the ants, but came well to other flies. The Winged Ant is not a general utility fly, but when it is good it is very good. That is when and only when the ants are on the river. That may happen any day at this time of year (August), but is likeliest to happen on a hot bright day. It has been suggested that they are attracted by the glitter of the water.