SOUTH AFRICA'S SQUIRREL HAIR DRY FLIES

Ed Herbst

A Google search seems to indicate that, internationally, squirrel tail hair has played and is playing a negligible role in the design of dry flies and then only in down wing caddis patterns.

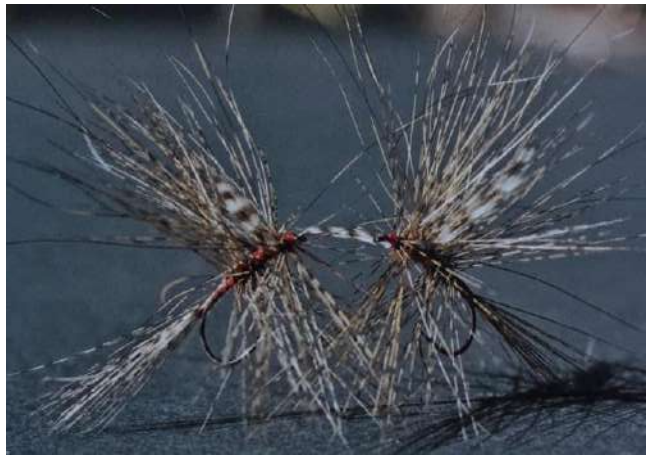
The situation is very different in South Africa and can be traced back to April 1968 when Tony Biggs first used the concept of 'legs' in his Variant design which became legendary as the RAB. Tony chose the shiny fibres from a egyptian goose primary wing feather which have a lovely iridescence.

To my knowledge, the use of feather fibres in this way is otherwise restricted to a few British crane fly designs which use knotted pheasant tail fibres but extending horizontally. Tony incorporated them into an upright, conventional dry fly hackle to create more movement and enhance the impression of a vulnerable, crippled insect and I can find no equivalent of this approach outside of South Africa.

Searching for an alternative Tom Sutcliffe tried water mongoose guard hairs which have a lovely translucence but are very stiff. He wanted to achieve the appearance of an insect struggling on the water surface and he settled on squirrel tail hairs which he found to be softer and more flexible thus creating increased movement on the water

He tells the story in the online article, *Tying a High Water RAB* posted on his Spirit of Flyfishing website in July 2010.

That, in turn, eventually morphed into a parachute and, in its latest form, is used in Peter Briggs' size 18 Paraklink

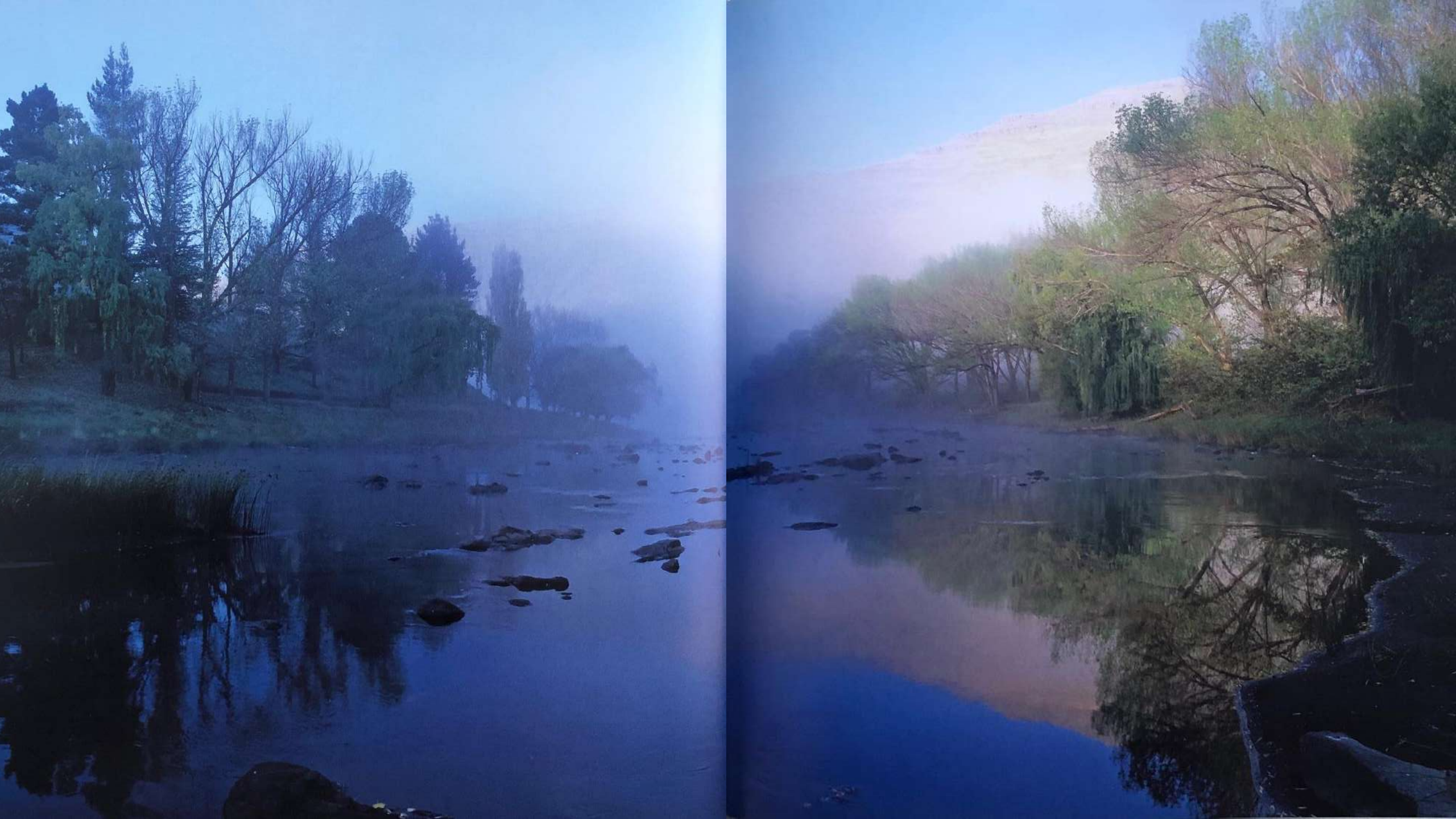


The High Water RAB variant, tied by Tom Sutcliffe, incorporating squirrel tail hair.

It was in 2007 that the High Water RAB made the transition from vertical hackle Variant to dual-hackle parachute combining a small rooster feather with a bigger umbrella of squirrel tail fibres and the architect of this transition was Philip Meyer.

Philp says, "Up till 2007 I had never fished a RAB but in that year the trials for the Protea team to represent South Africa at the world fly fishing championship was held in the Western Cape.

"In preparation for the trials I was fishing beat one of the Elandspad and although I was catching the odd fish on a black Klinkhåmer and an Elk Hair Caddis



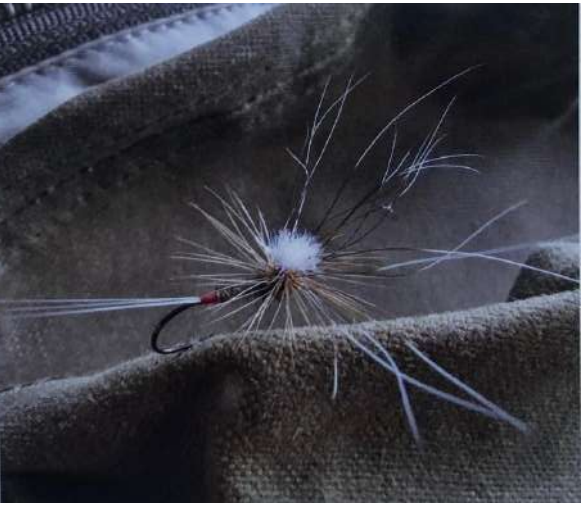
I was not satisfied. “I changed to a RAB and immediately my catch rate picked up, but it was difficult to cast into the wind and so I fished downstream – with equal success.

“What I needed was fly that had the movement trigger of the RAB, but was easier to cast into the wind.

“My first ParaRAB used water mongoose tail fibres but they were too stiff and squirrel tail provided the solution. I have seen trout drift below a ParaRAB and the moment a breeze activates the squirrel tail fibres, they take with confidence.”

Philip’s brother in, law, Mark Krige, demonstrates his version of the ParaRAB on Tom Sutcliffe’s website, but ties it almost as an emerger.

Gordon van der Spuy made several changes to the basic ParaRAB substituting a goose biot for the Pheasant tail body ribbed with fine copper wire.



Phiip Meyer’s innovative ParaRAB, which has become one of the most popular modern dry flies.

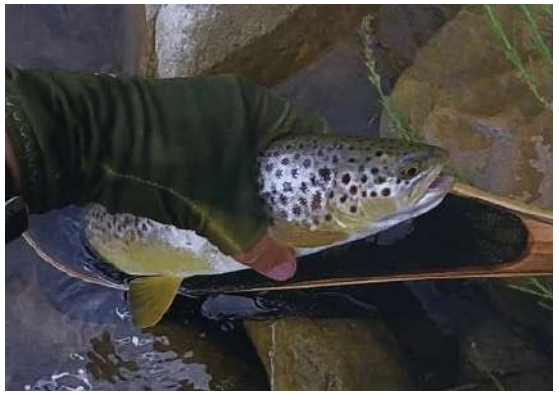
Gordon says, “Biot bodies are quick and easy to tie. They are durable and provide taper. I also changed the tying sequence. I tie in the squirrel fibres first pointing forward over the hook eye. I tie the post on top of this and then I continue as normal which makes the fly easier and quicker to tie. I also approach the squirrel tail parachute differently. I prefer the squirrel fibres to be independent from the post while Philip ties them to the post when he secures them in place and they then stick up in the air. I prefer the parachute to be splayed into a flatter profile. I split the fibres on either side of the hook eye and then dam thread up against the fibre butts. By doing this these fibres are independent from the post and thus provide more movement as they are free to actually move.

I also on some versions replace the squirrel with vervet monkey guard hairs (MC Coetzer pioneered the use of this material several years ago). The vervet fibres have a lovely sheen, are mottled and are slightly stiffer than the squirrel ensuring that the parachute hackle maintains its shape after prolonged periods of use. This is a good option for fast water.

“I tie my ParaRabs on a standard shank dry fly hook. The tail needs to be as long as the hook shank and I use Gallo de Leon – no more than six fibres – less on small flies. The parachute hackle is as long as the tail and hook shank of the fly combined. Tied like this you get a pattern which has balance as it descends at the end of the cast. I hate twisted tippets, so getting the balance right on flies is very important to me.

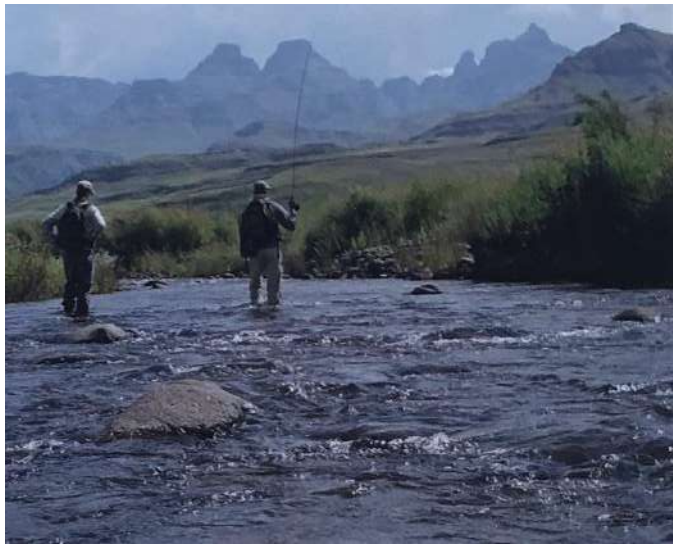
“I fish these flies in larger sizes #14-#16 early in the season. By the end of the season I fish smaller #18-#20 micro ParaRABs, I tie them sparser too and the micro version has proved very successful.”

Peter Brigg took the concept of a parachute hackle created with squirrel tail fibres a step further when he created what he calls the Squirrel Klink. To quote Peter: “I wanted to create an emerger pattern



The diminutive size 18 ParaKlink, created by the author for small streams, using squirrel tail hair as the hackle in this parachute styled fly.

that leaned more towards a Klinkhåmer design than some of the other patterns using squirrel tail hair tied as high riding and surface flies. The inspiration for the Squirrel Klinkhåmer came from Tom Sutcliffe’s RAB variation and the ParaRABs tied by Philip Meyer and Gordon van Der Spuy.



"The Squirrel Klinkhåmer is intended to represent a crippled or emerging insect struggling in the surface film. The squirrel tail hair hackle has just the right softness and flexibility to provide movement for this purpose. The method used for creating the hackle is the same as that used by Gordon van der Spuy in his ParaRAB variation and in my Crane Fly imitation described elsewhere in this book. It involves initially tying the squirrel hairs facing forward over the hook eye and later forcing them back and manipulating into a hackle around the post before securing with tight thread wraps hard against their butts.

"Using a suitable Klinkhåmer hook style in sizes 16 to 20 like the TMC 212Y or Varivas 2200 BL, the Peacock quill abdomen hangs just below the surface imitating the natural during this vulnerable stage of its transformation into an adult insect. The white CDC Puff post is also a good sighter and representation of the insect's unfolding wings.”