



THE POWDER WAD CRAB

Giordano Zamparini



Most South African streams, rivers and dams carry a surprisingly large population of crabs. The dams and rivers around Haenertsberg Village, in the Limpopo Province, are no different. The importance of the crab as a source of food in the aquatic food chain becomes evident when one examines the undigested shell and claw residue found in the otter scats on the banks of our waters. What is less evident however is the fact that both bass and trout feed, sometimes voraciously, on this small brown crustacean.

The female crab in our area - the Natal river crab, *Potamonautessidneyi* - carries its eggs in a pouch on its abdomen. As soon as the waters warm up, early in summer, the eggs hatch and are then deposited in quiet pools or in the shallows of our dams. The newly hatched crabs are exact replicas of the adults in every respect. They don't go through the aquatic to terrestrial stages that insects do, but grow by moulting, adding a new exoskeleton as they outgrow the old one. These fully formed crabs are tiny, some no bigger than a match head and they tend to populate a river by floating down with the currents, not necessarily voluntarily, and in dams by moving through the aquatic vegetation.

The extent of the predation by the various fish species on the crab became evident to me one day while I was fishing Stanford Lake, one of the dams controlled by the Haenertsberg Trout Association (HTA), with spinning gear. Using a rubber crab as a lure, nearly every cast produced a largemouth bass. Stanford Lake is the only water controlled by the HTA



where conventional tackle is allowed. This unusual step, for a fly fishing club, was done in a desperate attempt to try to eradicate the largemouth bass, introduced without thought of the consequences by some ignorant angler, and restore the dam to what once was a beautiful trout and smallmouth bass water.

Catching fish on a fly rod is my preferred style of fishing and so I turned to my salt water fly boxes in search of a suitable crab pattern that I could use to imitate the success of the rubber crab lure. All of the patterns that I tried, including the well-known Velcro Crab and the Merkin, were ignored by the fish.



I am always on the lookout for items and materials that I can use for tying flies especially the sort of material that enables me to tie them with greater ease and speed. So, when I came upon circular felt discs of different sizes in a jar on the counter of a friend's gun and tackle shop, I immediately thought that they could potentially be used as bodies for a crab fly. It turned out that the discs are used as wadding in black powder guns and are made of pure wool. They come in various sizes but I find that the 36 and 45 calibre ones are perfect. Local fly tying material suppliers now stock Explorer Crab Coins in various diameters that

are similar to the wadding referred to.

The discs are easily shaped with a sharp pair of scissors and then threaded, as if you were threading a worm, onto a hook pre prepared with a base of brown thread and with a pair of stalk-like crab eyes, made from 30 lb burnt monofilament. The eyes, I believe, are a significant trigger point. To be tied correctly, they must face up and forward, behind the hook eye. At this stage the felt can be neatened and coloured by singeing with a cigarette lighter or alternatively, a felt tip permanent marker can be used to colour the body.

The best legs are found on the rubber skirts intended for spinner baits. I find that they are better than the thin 'sili legs' that are commonly used on patterns of this type because they are wider and thus imitate the claws and legs of the *Potamonautes* crab more accurately. The best colour for the legs is pale brown with a hint of gold glitter in them. I use a needle threader to insert four legs through the sides of the wad, making sure that they are spaced correctly. More can be used if desired.

Once the crab is assembled the body and all the legs can be secured with Pliobond glue. This is easily done by pulling back the body and applying the glue to the thread base and then pushing the body back into place. If necessary the body can be attached more securely by loosening a small amount of wadding behind the hook eye and tying it in.

The felt crab is virtually unsinkable so if required to sink, thin lead wire can be either threaded into the body or wound around the hook shank. What must be remembered though is that the felt, if allowed to, will eventually absorb water, causing the fly to sink very slowly. This is especially useful on dams.

The crab pattern is obviously very effective with bass, especially around the rocky areas of dams, but what is so satisfying is that it is equally deadly with trout during early summer in rivers.

Early summer, as mentioned previously, is the period when hundreds of the young crabs are released by the female, some of which float downstream. I discovered this by accident one day when I saw trout rising to what I mistakenly thought could be terrestrials. Not having any suitable fly in my box I tried one of my bass crab flies that I found in one of my fly vest pockets. I cast the fly out not expecting much luck but, was surprised when I caught several trout on it. Their stomachs revealed that they had been feeding on many very small crabs.

Dressing

Hook: Grip 14731 in size 10 to 12 (emerger and caddis pupa).

Thread: Brown 6/0

Body: Felt wads 36 and 45 calibre (used in muzzleloaders) or Explorer Crab Coins of suitable diameters

Legs: Rubber legs from spinner bait skirts

Eyes: Burnt 30lb monofilament



The effective freshwater crab pattern reflects the innovative use of unusual materials. These examples are tied by the creator, Giordano Zamparini

Subsequently I improved the fly by making it smaller and I soon discovered that the most effective method of fishing it was upstream on a dead drift with a strike indicator. This imitated the crabs that are swept down naturally and are easy prey for any feeding fish lying in wait. In the slower pools, adding a heavy nymph as a point fly assists the crab fly to sink - this works well for both trout and yellowfish.

In dams the fly seems more effective for bass. I fish it in the shallows on a short leader with an intermediate or sinking line. The fly can be twitched along at a suitable depth. Takes are normally quite explosive.