

Sterkfontein Dam and the most significant Dry-Fly of our Time

By David Weaver

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It's been 23 years that I have been guiding on Sterkies, as we affectionately call it, and I can honestly say that I must be one of the most privileged Flyfishers in the country. Not only have I been a part of its growth but I have also witnessed, and been involved in the development of "the most significant Dry-Fly of our time"

I first fished Sterkies in the eighties, with fiberglass rods, and Invictas. My girlfriend at the time lived on a farm just over the hill. She is now my wife and we cast flies for Yellows. The last trout that we caught in Sterkies was in the previous century.

I will never forget the first Yellow I caught in Sterkies, 1988... I used to drive up from PMB, on a Friday afternoon, via Bergville, fish the evening rise at Sterkies and arrive at my in-laws to be, with fresh trout for breakfast. The one evening I hooked a proper fish, this was going to be my double-figure trout that I had come to Natal to catch. I recall that I was fishing with a Muddlers Minnow tied on a long-shank hook. This was without a doubt the largest fish I had ever hooked into with a flyrod in my hand. It gave a magnificent fight and when it came to the net it was about a 5lb, Smallmouth Yellow-fish. I am embarrassed to say that it was duly gutted, scaled and taken as an offering to the farm. We didn't have it for breakfast, I think it was given to the servants.

When I moved to Harrismith in 1998, to marry and join my in-laws farming business, I was fortunate enough to meet Dr Hans van Zyl. He was a member of the local Maluti Flyfishing club and we soon became firm friends. He, and others were catching Yellows on Connemara Blacks and various other trout patterns, and so I was re-introduced to Sterkies. We walked her banks and I paddled her shores. We caught Yellows a plenty and then I bought a boat, and my life changed.

We started exploring the further reaches of the dam, and slowly started learning how to catch these beautiful fish that inhabited her waters. It was a slow journey, with many 'aha' moments and many, many blank days. It was not a journey that I walked alone, as I was now offering my services as a guide. Together with the fine fly anglers that were my clients, we started unlocking her secrets. I was learning as fast as they were, and by keeping a log and recording every fish that we caught we slowly managed to learn what worked and what didn't. A number of other groups of anglers were going on the same journey and we all shared our ideas through articles in popular magazines and over the phone.

Nymphs were the name of the game, then, and amongst the nymphs the Zak was king. It was by far our best fish catcher, so-much-so that I named my new boat ZenZak. We fished them deep and slow, mostly blind casting but occasionally we would cast them at cruising fish. The favoured technique was a nymph tied behind a strike indicator. We then tried New-Zealand rigs with a dry and a dropper, which worked well until the dry got sunk.

Foam flies were probably around at that time but we didn't know about them. My choice of strike-indicator was a foam cut-out attached to my leader. On one fine day, on the dam, I noticed that fish kept coming up to inspect this blob of foam and some of them were actually mouthing it. On that day I had an 'aha' moment and went and put one of these foam disks around a hook. I then tied this as my top fly in my dry and dropper rig and caught fish. I lost a fish that snapped the line at the bend of the hook and while I was tying another rig onto my 'foam blob' fly, a lovely fish came cruising along. Without a thought, I cast this single bright yellow 'foam blob' fly out and the fish swam up and took the fly. My first fish on a foam fly.

And then came the Good Dr's Foam Beetle, it was a fly that would forever change the way we fished on Sterkies. I recall including it in my selection of best flies for Sterkies in that great FOSAF collection of books, "Favoured Flies and Select Techniques of the Experts". Little did I know what a significant pattern it would become.

Dry-fly fishing on Sterkies was only pursued by the purists and those that had Elk-hair Caddis patterns. It was difficult fishing the dry, one had to keep the fly dry and the rough waters of Sterkies didn't help much. So only a select bunch of nuts were fishing the dry-fly. The Beetle changed all that, here was a fly that Joe-first-time-fly-fisher could throw out and with time a yellow would come up and smack it. It was also a great pattern to use as a strike indicator.

The development of the beetle was slow and had many changes, it is still a dynamic pattern, that is still going to morph and adapt as time goes on. There isn't a week that doesn't go past that Hans doesn't call me to ask us to Research and Develop a new style of beetle or

hopper. I am only too happy to test these new patterns and so are my guests. We report back to Hans on their performance, make suggestions and so this wonderful journey continues.

So, Sterkies moved from being an extreme destination to an extremely popular destination. I am not for a moment going to consider blaming Hans for popularizing the dam, no, that was done by the festivals and competitions, I am going to congratulate Hans for making the wonderful world of dry-fly fishing at Sterkies available to the average flyfisher.

We could say that the Beetle was years in the making, and it will forever be a fly that hatched out of Sterkfontein Dam. I can only say that I am proud to call Hans my friend and pleased to have played a small part in what I consider to be the fly that has had the greatest influence on flyfishing in this country, well, the greatest influence on dry-fly fishing for yellows on Sterkfontein dam.