



## THE RAB

*Tony Biggs*



*“If you suggested that Tony Biggs tied the perfect fly, I might argue the point. But if you said he tied an effective fly, I would be with you every time.*

*“In simple terms Tony is an impressionist fly tyer, shunning the Halfordian dogma of strict imitation, critical of the formal and stylised school of traditional wet and dry fly tying, regarding it all as a total waste of time and effort. His fly box contains none of the orthodox patterns but rather an array of caterpillar-like creations that are all unlisted, unnamed and very individual.”*

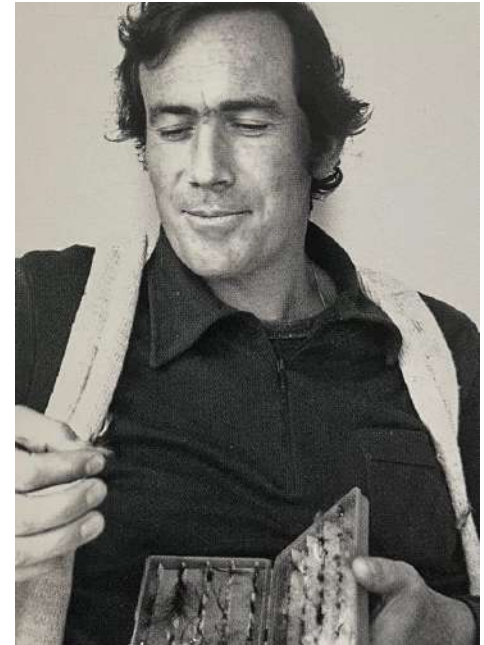
- Tom Sutcliffe, “The Magic of the Biggs Fly”, Piscator 102, Winter 1978.

The initial concept of the RAB, aside from being based upon the marrying of myriad observations of both water-borne and terrestrial life forms, was triggered by the remains of a much-used, heavily-battered and disintegrating bivisible dry fly. It was the sole survivor from a batch of my first serious attempts at fly tying.

This entity, despite the collective efforts of numerous trout to annihilate it, continued to produce results. The more fractured and bedraggled its appearance became, the better it worked. So much for the argument for exact imitation! Eventually this “enigma” was retired and for some years it enjoyed pride of place on the top left pocket flap of my fishing vest. A more sorry excuse for a fly would be difficult to imagine with its unravelling red thread and disintegrating hackles. These straggly ends provided the initial thoughts on the inclusion of “legs” in the tying of the RAB.

There is not a great deal more to add on this score apart from the oft-relayed detail of how the fly eventually gained a name.

The event occurred in April 1965 on the Smalblaar stream in DuToit’s Kloof between Paarl and Worcester. I had been



*Tony Biggs, creator of the iconic South African fly, the RAB.*



*An original Tony Biggs RAB. Since its development, many variations have been tied by local fly-tyers, but it remains one of the most used dry flies.*

fishing in the morning and early afternoon in the company of Mark Mackereth and another angler. At about 4pm we split up and Mark and his friend decided to fish the stretch between Donkergat and Cathedral pools. Up till then the fishing had been poor with the three of us collectively catching few fish.

I decided to head up the road and fish the stream where it flowed past the hotel, a hitherto untested stretch, and it turned out to be a revelation. The as yet un-named fly certainly worked its magic,

resulting in a memorable few hours of incredible fishing.

Upon returning to the spot where we had agreed to meet, I was surprised to learn that my companions had enjoyed little success. Mark then enquired about the fly I had been using, implying that it had to be the fly rather than the skill of the angler that explained the disparity in our catches. I explained that it was, as yet, nameless. He closely examined the now disintegrating fly in the beam thrown by

our car headlights, finally commenting that it needed a name and that, in his opinion, “Red-Arsed Bastard” would be appropriate. So there it is – and the name stuck.

The use of the fly’s abbreviated name first appeared in print thanks to the late A C Harrison, the founder of the Cape Piscatorial Society and then the editor of its annual journal, Piscator. Later, when asked what the letters RAB stood for he replied that they meant “Rough and Buoyant” which some might say was an adequate description of the fly. In those more conservative and formal times this was probably a

wise decision as the use of the fly’s full name would undoubtedly have provoked an adverse response.

The initial use of the fly was largely confined to the Western Cape streams such as the Elandspad, Smalblaar, Molenaars, Witte, Witels, the Stellenbosch Dwars and the Ceres Dwars. Thereafter anglers started using it in Natal, Transvaal and the Eastern Cape where it also enjoyed a measure of success. Soon, variations of the RAB with their allied innovations also entered the fray.



*A couple of variants of the original RAB. The Lammergeyer RAB on the left using extra-long squirrel tail hairs for the legs and, on the right, grizzly hackle feather tips added as wings.*



## Random thoughts on the RAB:

- In essence the RAB is an impressionistic form of tying.
- Seldom are any two flies tied alike in appearance, even when identical materials are used.
- I attempt to use natural material, when available, in tying these flies i.e. silk, feathers and hair.
- My preferred materials are: red silk thread (Pearsalls), spade hackles – the front hackle (a sighter) is white/cream. The rear brown/ginger hackle should have barbules that are 25-50% shorter than those on the front hackle – apart from the colour variation, the darker and smaller feather at the back supports and buttresses the longer front hackle and also the feather fibre “legs” which are wrapped through the rear hackle and progressively splayed.
- The number of hackle turns varies from one for the white front feather to 2/3 for the darker rear hackle and this depends on the type of water being fished – heavier flows demand more hackle turns to increase buoyancy.
- A variety of materials have been used for the “legs” including the glossy and iridescent primary wing feather on an Egyptian Goose, pheasant tail, Blue Crane and squirrel tail, but they should be as light and airy as possible.
- The average length of these legs is 2.5 cm but on bigger hooks I have used them as long as 6-8 cm.
- The addition of wings is another consideration. Ideally they should be blue dun feathers about an inch long and tied in the horizontal “spent” position.



## Dressing

**Hook:** Size 12 - 18 light wire.

**Thread:** 8/0 - 16/0 pre-waxed, red.

**Tail:** White or cream hackle fibres. I use between three and 12 depending on the hackle density used. The tail is approximately double the hook shank length to balance the hackle.

**Body/Legs:** Egyptian goose, cock pheasant tail, or blue crane herls, wound through with red tying thread.

**Hackle:** White in front of ginger/brown – length, two to four times the width of the hook gape.