



THE JAM FLY

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Catching grunter on fly in the Western Cape estuaries is the most challenging fly fishing known to humankind. At least it is to those who have tried it. Not even permit can match the selectivity and temperamental nature of a grunter in the Breede River or at De Mond on the Duiwenhoks River in the Western Cape and for many years this presented us with the ultimate saltwater fly fishing challenge. Even today I consider catching a tailing grunter as the ultimate experience that saltwater fly fishing can offer.

Until approximately ten years ago we fished patterns such as Grunter Charlies and Deer Hair Prawns (both developed by Doug Swannell of Port Elizabeth) but we only had limited success with them. In fact, landing two or three grunter in a season was considered to be exceptional. These patterns were developed for the Eastern Cape estuaries where grunter behave in a completely different way. In these waters the grunter are far more aggressive and they readily eat impressionistic patterns fished blind in the general vicinity of cruising or feeding fish. The reason for their aggressive feeding pattern can be linked to the singular behaviour of their primary food source, namely mud prawns, which often leave their burrows to swim freely at all levels of the water column and are therefore exposed to predation by grunter and other estuarine species.

Mud prawns behave in an entirely different way in the Western Cape waters. Here it is very unusual to see mud prawns swimming in mid-water or even crawling along the bottom and this is the reason why



Two examples of the JAM fly, showing colour variations used to imitate mud prawns found in most estuaries along the South African coast.

grunter are so difficult to tempt on fly – they simply do not expect to see a mud prawn out in the open and the result is that they are extremely reluctant to take the fly. A grunter will only take the fly (or a real mud prawn) after a close inspection. In the Western Cape estuaries, where it is rare to see a free-swimming mud prawn, the grunter have to work much harder for their food. They are thus forced to actively hunt their food and they do so by ‘blowing’ them out of their burrows. They do this by either sucking them out of the burrows or by forcing a strong jet of water into the prawn’s burrow. Depending on water depth this feeding pattern



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can take one of two forms. In shallow water we refer to ‘tailing’ fish because their tails often protrude well above the surface of the water and in deeper water we refer to them as ‘mudding’ fish because the only sign of fish activity is a cloud of mud.

Approximately ten years ago, fly fishing for grunter changed dramatically for our group of friends when my fishing partner, Jannie Visser, came up with a totally new and innovative tying style to create a far more realistic imitation of a mud prawn. The pattern was further developed by Jannie, August Lohann and I (this is where the name comes from) to create a very realistic and highly successful pattern. I don’t consider many fly patterns to be truly innovative but this style of tying and use of materials had never previously, to my knowledge, been combined. The primary and innovative ingredient incorporated in the new design is a translucent sheet made of Polar Fibre and silicone. This sheeting

material is made by coating wax paper with a thin coat of silicone and then pressing Polar Fibre fibres into the silicone to create a thin but durable sheet. This sheet is then cut to size and shape to create the nippers, legs and shellback of the JAM Fly.

Over the years we’ve all developed our personal styles of tying the JAM Fly and they all work equally well. There are, however, a couple of characteristics worth emphasising.

The first is the posture and swimming direction of the fly in the water. A mud prawn always remains in an upright position when it finds itself in open water and it was therefore important for the fly to also remain in that position, even when static. This characteristic was easily addressed by incorporating a small piece of closed cell foam in the head of the fly.

A newer invention, the Avalon Fly (which was designed by Mauro Ginevri in 2009 at the Avalon Resort in Cuba as a shrimp imitation for permit) uses sliding 2.8 mm stainless steel beads strung on a loop of 20 lb nylon to act as a keel for the fly and keep the hook pointing upwards regardless of the speed of the retrieve. This feature has now been incorporated in Jannie’s latest version of the JAM Fly. When a mud prawn is disturbed from its burrow it moves in quite a fast and erratic fashion in the direction to its tail and, because of our fishing tactics, our flies are tied to move in this manner when retrieved. When a mud prawn swims along the surface or crawls along the bottom they move at a slow and constant speed but in the opposite direction and for this reason it is worth carrying a few flies which facilitate the retrieve that mimics this behaviour.

The natural colour of mud prawns varies greatly and they can be found in shades ranging

from a very pale tan, all the way through to dark olives with hints of rusty orange also being quite common. The colour is therefore not that important but bright egg pouches should be avoided at all costs as a mud prawn’s eggs are a very dark and a dirty shade of orange. I believe that the bright materials used in the bulk of commercial patterns put the fish off.

When targeting tailing or mudding grunter it is critically important that the fly reaches the fish’s feeding depth within a couple of seconds. This is because grunter never linger in an area where they have attempted to extract a mud prawn from its burrow. Flies should therefore be tied in a range of weights that cater for water depth and current strength.

The combined weight and density of the JAM Fly leaves you with a fly that’s difficult to present gently. For

this reason we specifically target tailing fish where the noise created by the fish’s tail masks the impact of the pattern. When fish feed at greater depths the impact of the fly also presents less of a problem but in both instances it is critical to land the fly as close as possible to the visible fish while it is still actively ‘blowing’. Takes are very positive and normally happen on the drop or within the first foot of retrieval.



Dressing

Hook: Size 2 Mustad 34007 – this hook isn’t as popular as it used to be because of all the more modern models on the market. However, I still consider it to be the perfect hook for a JAM Fly because of the gape to shank length ratio and the wire thickness which is relatively light.

Underbody: Floating fly line tied in along the rear half of the hook shank with lead wire wraps closer to the eye of the hook.

Head: Tan/olive Polar Fibre; mono eyes; nippers and legs are made from Polar Fibre and silicone sheeting; a strip of closed cell foam.

Body: Tan synthetic dubbing.

Shellback: Polar Fibre and silicone sheeting.

Rib: Fine mono.