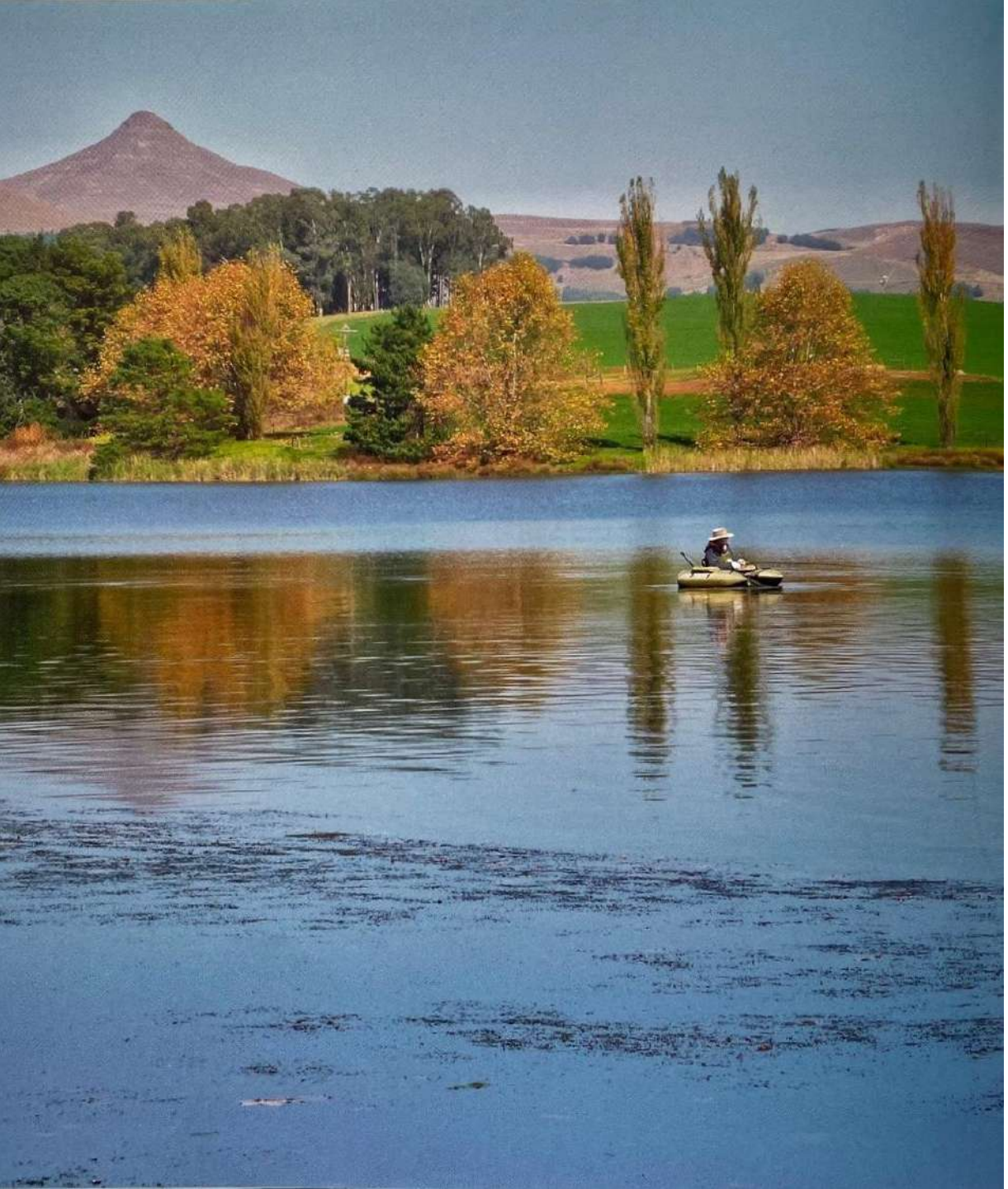


THE PAPA ROACH

Herman Botes

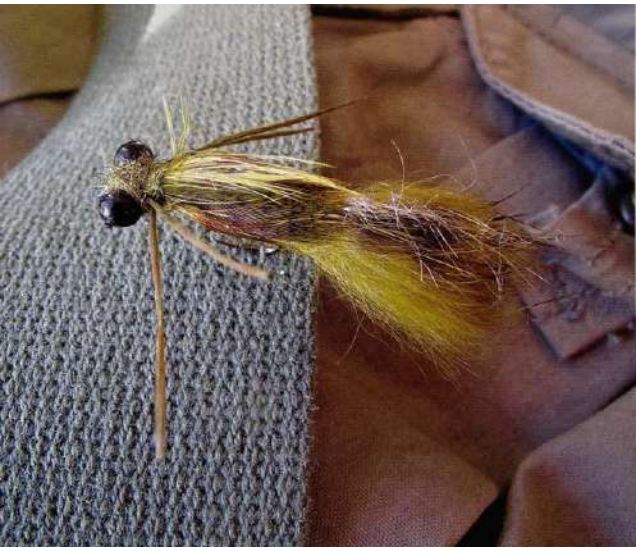
I tie flies as much for myself as I do for the fish. Fly tying to me is more than just a means to an end. I view it as a creative mixture of design and art. Designing a pattern starts long before the actual dressing of the fly. It starts in the mysterious underwater world of bugs and fish where our imagination dwells.

I am fascinated by fly tying, fly tyers and their creations. To me, most good tyers have a signature style that reflects their philosophy of fly tying and fly fishing. Of course the two go hand in hand, and no matter how technically correct or aesthetically pleasing their creation of a pattern might be, the fish will always have the last say. I have been influenced by both local and international contemporary experts. My fly tying principles are based on age-old truths that form part of the foundation of good design. Ideally one seeks sparseness in patterns, a controlled 'bugginess' and purposeful imperfection, which better imitate nature. I guess this means that I prefer my patterns to not be technically perfect masterpieces.

Over the years I have standardised on using hooks that have a greater hook- gape to shank-length ratio, especially on small flies, because I have repeatedly experienced the improved hooking advantage of these designs. The Papa Roach is basically an extended-body pattern, with the hook acting as a keel, and this is why I prefer standard or 1 x short hooks. The fly is designed for a very slow retrieve, not for stripping, so the risk of short takes is reduced.

I have never restricted myself to a specific thread and like to use a variety of colours that assist in creating subtle triggers. I prefer using thin threads like Gordon Griffith 14/0 and, more recently, Semperfli Nano Silk which is thin but has exceptional strength for its diameter. I enjoy synthetic materials as they create such strong colour triggers and working with them requires innovative thinking. I have a particularly soft spot for glass beads, urethane beading cord and Spandex fibres. But no matter what material one uses, the pattern must possess the impression of life. In my assessment this very important feature in fly design is created by transparency, bioluminescence (the production and emission of light by a living organism as the result of a chemical reaction during which chemical energy is converted to light energy), the reflecting and refracting of light, and most important of all, the independent movement of materials. This brings me to the Papa Roach.

When I started developing this fly in 2002, I spent a lot of time fishing stillwaters in Mpumalanga. What was very obvious in contemporary accounts of stillwater flyfishing in South Africa – particularly the contemporary writing of Dean Riphagen – was that dragonfly nymphs are a staple food source in the diet of these trout. To me, though, the existing imitations were tedious ties. The patterns were bulky, some were lifeless and creating the abdomen was always a time consuming process. Fly tyers seemed to have difficulty in developing a relatively simple pattern that closely imitated the characteristics of the nymph



An example of the Papa Roach tied to imitate large dragon fly nymphs found mainly in local stillwaters – tied by its originator, Herman Botes

while, at the same time, creating the impression of life.

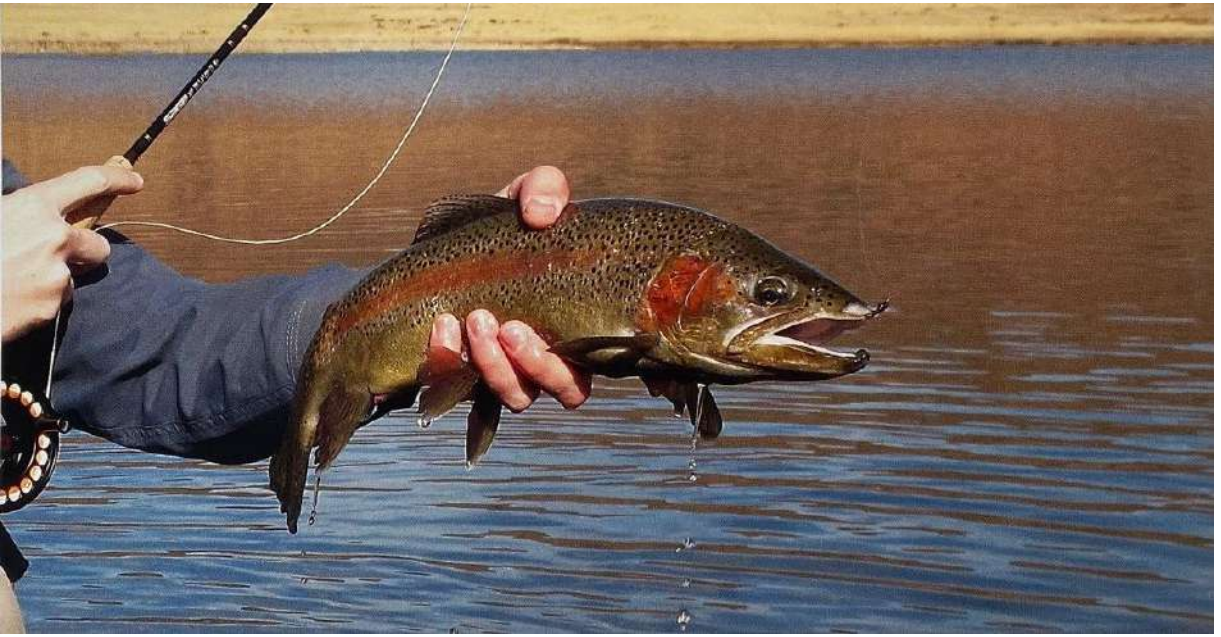
All that changed when I saw detailed photographs taken by Wolf Avni who runs the Giants Cup Wilderness Reserve near Underberg in the foothills of the southern Drakensberg mountain range in KwaZulu-Natal. They clearly showed that the large abdomen of the Anax imperator dragonfly nymph is actually flexible. I have always felt that the general silhouette of a zonker strip resembles the outline of the Aeshnidae dragonfly nymph. The problem was to prevent the long fibres from flailing all over the place when the pattern is fished slowly and with regular pauses. At the time I was particularly interested in the design and dressing of contemporary salmon flies and how materials were used to control the shape of the fly. This led to the specific use of four small mallard flank feathers (two matched on each side) to form a 'tent' over the front section of the fur abdomen. They cup and sheath the zonker strip and prevent excessive movement of the fur fibres while allowing enough static movement to create the impression of life. My aim was also to allow the different materials used in the construction of the fly to flow into each other so that the pattern looks like an integrated whole and not like a combination of disparate anatomical features.

After developing this pattern I compared it to the life-size photo of the Aeshnidae dragonfly nymph in the booklet produced by the Department of Water Affairs, Aquatic Invertebrates of South African Rivers by A Gerber and M Gabriel (2002). When I placed one of my flies on this photograph I realized that it very accurately replicated the size and the silhouette of the insect.

Bear in mind that the head of the dragonfly nymph is large, about a fifth of the body length and the eyes are very prominent – so, to imitate them, I use large plastic bead chain which adds very little weight to the fly. The inexpensive plastic bead chain, which is available in black, is used in roller blinds so shops that sell blinds and awnings, as well as some haberdashery shops, stock it.

What makes the Papa Roach so quick to tie in comparison with previous patterns is that by tying in the zonker strip you have created the abdomen. Use olive-dyed, an eighth of an inch wide grizzly zonker strips. They are made from the fur of a Chinchilla Rabbit and the hair has mottled tips. When creating the thorax, keep the dubbing (which fills the space between the zonker strip and the head, and beneath the mallard flank cover of the thorax) above the hook shank, so the shank forms the flat base of the fly.

I use a technique developed by Scott Sanchez in the USA which he calls 'clump dubbing'. It enables one to quickly construct a shaggy thorax using long-fibre, synthetic materials. Just fold the dubbing around the thread and position it where it is needed, almost like you do with placing and tying in rubber legs. What I normally do is clump-dub the Ice Dub above the hook shank and then I brush it out and upwards,



orienting the strands around the upper section of the fly to form a soft veil around the zonker strip.

News of the success of the Papa Roach spread and on 19 May 2003 the fly made its public debut when I was invited to demonstrate it at a fly tying evening organized by the Transvaal Fly Tyer's Guild in Johannesburg. The Papa Roach was first featured in The Complete Fly Fisherman magazine in August 2004 and, shortly thereafter, it was declared the winner in a fly tying competition being run by the magazine. Since then, its popularity has grown significantly. It has established a reputation for duping big trout, especially in the KwaZulu-Natal and North Eastern Cape trophy dams where dragonfly nymphs form an important part of the fish's diet. From the feedback I have received, its singular benefit over its predecessors is the zonker strip body which simultaneously makes the fly easier and quicker to tie and significantly enhances its movement in the water.

I came up with the name because of the very impressive cockroach appearance of the original patterns. I wanted to call my fly the Roach but felt this name was too similar to Lefty Kreh's classic tarpon fly, the Cockroach and so I added the Papa. Only later was I to discover that this was also the name of an American rock 'n' roll band.

After I had first tied the fly, small changes followed, mainly to minimize unnecessary procedures and to increase the speed and ease of tying. The design of the integrated abdomen and thorax with its over-arching cover of small mallard flank feathers, which is fundamental and individual to this pattern, has remained unchanged.

You can fish the Roach on any line depending on the depth you are targeting, but I mostly fish the pattern on a floater and for deeper water on an intermediate line. The reason for this is that the first and biggest impression the pattern made on anglers is that one gets a surprising amount of takes when the pattern is sinking slowly(on the drop) or almost static and not moving much. Personally I think this is the biggest impact the pattern made – the fact that it started to change the way anglers fished dragonfly nymphs in dams. The spectacular results made us suspect that the big nymph fished deep on a sinking line with fast retrieve was never really taken as a dragonfly nymph. So the way I and other converts fish the pattern is to cast it out, staying alert for takes while the pattern is settling (it does not sink like traditional flies in some form of dive, but sits almost horizontally while it descends). Then, start a slow retrieve once you feel the fly is at the correct depth.

The retrieve I use is a mix of slow or snappy figure of eights or slow, steady, long pulls interspersed with lulls of various time lengths (you can let the pattern sit for a while).

I have witnessed first hand the way an Aeshnidae nymph moves and can tell you that everything everyone ever wrote (unless they struggled to explain themselves) is wrong. The nymph just takes off and steadily glides through the water for quite a distance (or until it reaches another piece of vegetation) and then it simply hovers while slowly descending until it does the same thing again. The best way to describe it is to think of a movie example of an astronaut in outer space just hovering outside the spacecraft and then moving in a direction when he starts his jetpack. I have also heard of anglers doing really well with the pattern suspended under a strike indicator and just doing a controlled drift in the wind.

For all these methods one thing is absolutely crucial - the pattern must be fished with a loop knot connection to the tippet. I always use the. Lefty Kreh non-slip mono loop knot for most of my stillwater flies and situations.

On my floating line I fish a 12 – 15 ft leader (including tippet) so I can cover more depth if needed and, on my clear intermediate, a leader of 8 – 12 ft (including tippet) depending on the water clarity. My standard tippet size is 3X, but I will step up to 1X fluorocarbon if bigger fish are around.

Another thing to bear in mind is the standard roach is tied on a size 6 standard shank hook and therefore has a relatively slow sink rate. If you want to fish really shallow or skinny water you can tie the pattern on a size 8 longshank steamer hook or even size 10 extra long shank streamer hook. This will result in a fly with very slow sink rate – almost a hover pattern.

Dressing

Hook: Size 6 short shank wet fly hook – Gamakatsu S10 2S.

Thread: Olive .

Abdomen: Olive grizzly zonker fur strip.

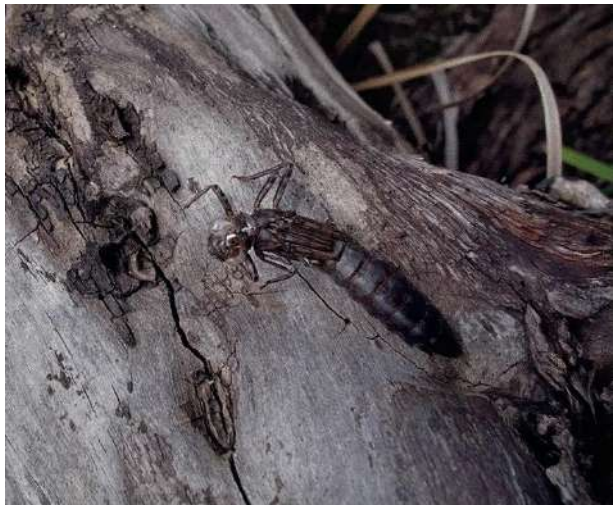
Thorax: Light olive UV Ice Dub.

Thorax cover: Four paired small mallard flank feathers (two each side).

Legs: Olive Spanflex or Sili Legs.

Head: Olive dubbing – same colour as abdomen.

Eyes : Large plastic bead chain (black).



A dragon fly nymph exoskeleton left behind after the insect has hatched into adult flying insect form.