



CHAPTER 13

Floating Beetles



At this point, having a fish on camera, regardless of what it was caught on would be great. Out came the secret fly box and Mike pulled out a dark black fly with a little red tuft. "This fly works every time," Mike said.

I peered at it and said, "That's a beetle!" "That's right, Jack," Mike replied. "Everybody thinks that

the Henry's Fork is a match the hatch stream. Well, every time I can't match the hatch, I put this beetle on and it does the job for me. In fact, it might be my favorite fly on this stream."

Mike had a good drift on his first cast and as the beetle floated over that big rainbow, there was a gentle sip and the hook-up. The water exploded as the trout headed downstream.'

Tying Flies with Jack Dennis and Friends Snake River Books 1993

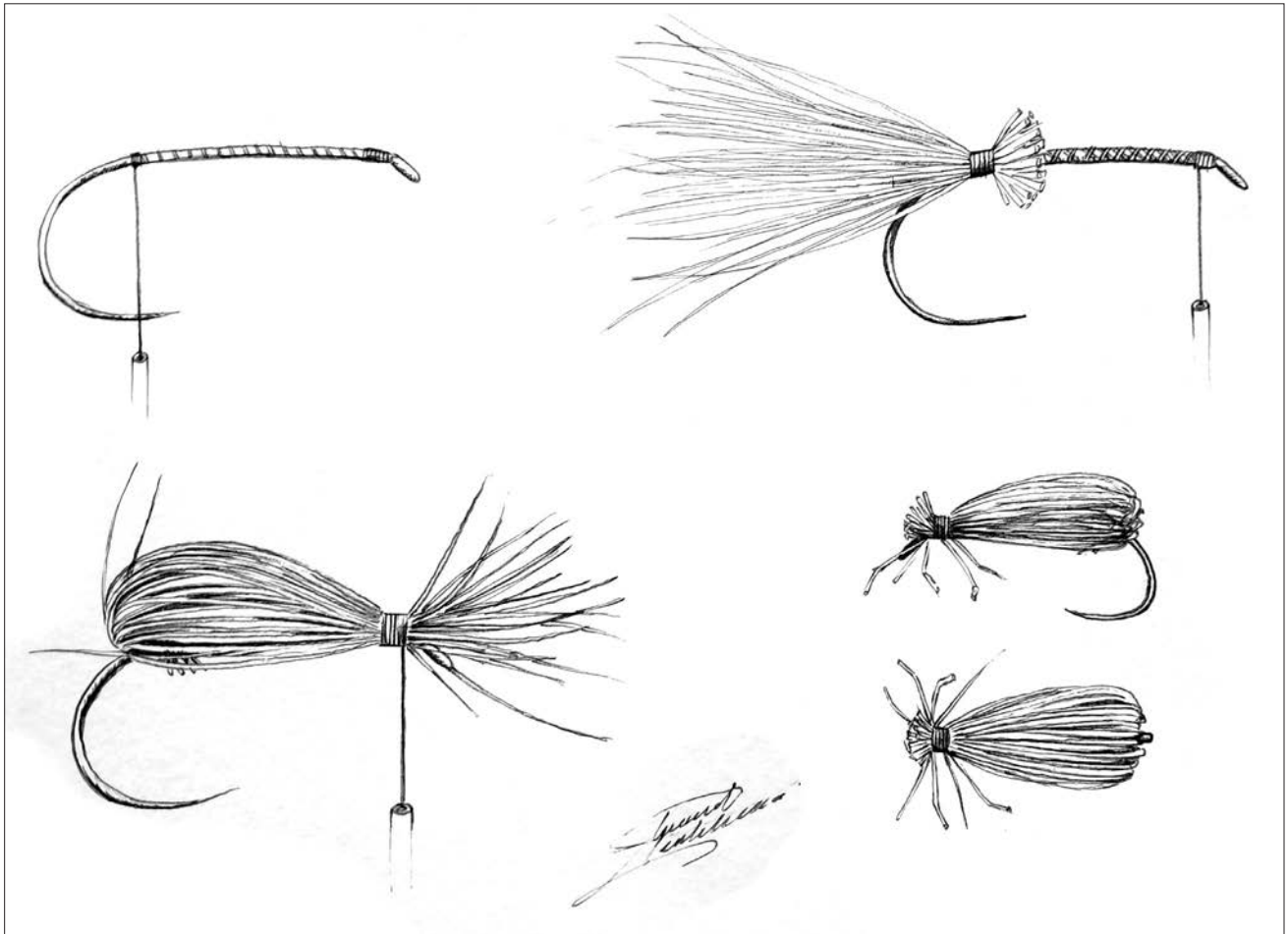
Floating Beetles: Spring in the Fynbos biome of the Western cape sees the wild flowers almost writhing with a multitude of beetle species with the brown monkey beetle, illustrated by Marcel Terblanche at the head of this chapter, being particularly prevalent on the banks of our trout streams.

There's a telling anecdote about beetles by Jack Dennis in the book mentioned here. He was making a video with Mike Lawson on the Henry's Fork.

They had located a big rising trout but, after an hour, and many casts it continued rising having refused a Black Caddis, Partridge Caddis, Pale Morning Dun and a size 24 Griffith's Gnat.

Lawson then attached a deer hair beetle with Krystal Flash legs and the trout took on the first drift.

Beetles Floating: Split Back Beetle



An illustration by Marcel Terblanche - @driftflyfisher - replicating the sketch in John Crowe's 1947 book

Today's foam rubber beetles simply replicate in a synthetic material what John Crowe created with deer hair half a century ago. It is definitely a blue-collar fly, both in origin - the former steel-producing city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania – and in its construction. A single tuft of black-dyed deer hair is tied in by the butts at the bend of the hook, folded forward and tied off at the eye. The stub of hair at the eye replicated the head of the beetle and a few strands, protruding sideways, the legs.

Here's an extract – pages 120 – 123 – from his *The Book of Trout Lore* (A S Barnes & Co 1947):

Having made a few turns of thread about the shank of the hook, tie on a small bunch of deer hair near the bend. Fold the hair forward, and tie it again near the eye.

In trimming away excess, three or four strands of hair should be allowed to remain at the head, to suggest antennae; also a number of individual hairs should extend out to either side, as legs.

To make the modern, commercially-available foam rubber beetles easier to track during the drift, another piece of brightly coloured foam rubber is tied in just behind the eye at the completion of the tying procedure.

On South African dams, Tom Sutcliffe's hair-hackled DDD made of spun and clipped klipspringer or deer hair has deceived thousands of trout since it was first fished in 1985 and the foam rubber 'Good Doctor's Beetle' has deceived thousands of yellowfish on Sterkfontein Dam in the Orange Free State ever since it was first tied by Dr Hans van Zyl in 2005. I've read that beetles are very sensitive to humidity and heat for their ability to fly. As they traverse the crop-covered landscape around this dam, they encounter a sudden change as they cross the water and lose the ability to fly - so the yellowfish are assured of a constant supply of high-calorie food.

Articles on both these patterns can be found in the 'Dam Fishing' folder on this website.

In this relatively calm water situation, the fish have ample time to inspect the fly, but the situation is very different in the more turbulent pocket water that I chose to concentrate on as a small stream fly angler. Firstly, the zone of vision though its 'window' is restricted and the broken surface inhibits close inspection. Secondly, it flashes through that zone of vision very quickly.

About 20 years ago I was perched on top of a rock face on the bank of the Holsloot stream near Rawsonville in the Western Cape. I was looking down on a deep pool where a trout of about 16 inches clearly visible, hovered about half a metre below the surface. Drifting downstream was a twig about the size of a cigarette butt. From my vantage point I could see that it was twig. From its vantage point the trout could not. It duly rose, took the twig and planed downwards. A few seconds later the twig popped to the surface.

That proved two things to me – when fishing dry flies on streams I, and I suspect many others, strike too quickly.

It also proved, to me at least, that what is on top of beetle imitation is irrelevant because all the fish sees from its subsurface position is the underside of the pattern outlined against a bright sky.

In his stellar 1995 book *Presentation*, Gary Borger says that trout have 14 percent less ability than humans to resolve close-range detail. That's what makes it vitally important to increase movement and contrast in fly-tying, two of the most significant factors in the way in which trout discern prey in the maelstrom of drifting particles with which they are constantly surrounded.

So, what you need to do in creating a more successful floating beetle design is to improve your ability to follow it in the drift. You also have to make it easier for the trout to spot which means increasing movement and possibly also using colour to that end and as a means of making it more appealing to the fish.

Harry Murray who fishes the small streams of the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia rates his Flying Beetle as one of his most useful flies. It is a Crowe Beetle with a peacock herl body and a deer hair wing – tied caddis style at the eye – which makes it easier to spot on the water.

Using Krystalflash for the legs and Straggle String for the body as Paul Procter does with his 'Kicking Beetle' creates the visual impression of movement as the light flickers back and forth across these gleaming materials.

Years ago, I came up with the Split Back Beetle idea which was an attempt to solidly anchor the sighter

in the middle of the hook shank and to use both colour and light-reflecting materials in its composition.

You can see it being tied in the second Vimeo video I did with Andrew Ingram 'A Fly-Tying Journey with Ed Herbst and friends' a decade ago

The sighter was a mixture of bright pink Antron for colour combined with a fine shredded mylar such as Hareline's Ice Wing Fiber, Fishient's Shiner or micro Krystal Flash for their ability to reflect light.

To achieve this, I tie a slim post of this combination of materials on top of the hook shank. I then slit the foam rubber shellback of the beetle down the middle and fold the two segments around the sighter. I have recently started using Wapsi Evazote Fly Foam in 'Salmon Fly Orange code WPF 8275. This soft and elastic foam rubber has a subtle sheen and, what is more important in my opinion, is that it is translucent which could be important against our bright, southern hemisphere sky.



A Split-Back Beetle

In 1980, Stackpole published *Chauncey Lively's Flybox* and I subsequently realised that Lively had used this procedure in his Quill Back Japanese Beetle using deer hair, although he did not incorporate a sighter.

Now, in terms of floating beetle imitations, here's a significant insight from Chauncey Lively:

'For a while I tried to imitate the dark metallic green underside of the natural by weaving strands of peacock herl through the deer hair, but I'm convinced it wasn't worth the effort. The herl, fragile at best, not only rendered the pattern less durable but it absorbed water and hindered its floatability. The trout don't seem to mind the black underview of the pattern and they are the most severe critics a fly can have.'

What Lively was emphasising is that with a beetle seen against the bright background of the sky, silhouette is important and it is a silhouette which is familiar to trout.

Emphasising this point is the fact that beetles are the largest order of living organisms with an estimated 350 000 species and they are multi-brooded, producing up to four generations a year.

What is even more significant in this regard is that beetles are exactly the same shape as another large order of insects, the bugs or *Hemiptera* of which there are some 60 000 species such as leafhoppers, cicadas and aphids in this family. The major difference between beetles and bugs is that the beetles

have jaws with which they bite and chew, but the bugs live exclusively on liquids and have sharply pointed snouts adapted for piercing and sucking either sap from plants or blood from other creatures. We thus have four hundred and ten thousand species of insect sharing the same general silhouette — an oval shape with three legs on either side — and which are available throughout the year compared with six hundred species of mayfly which are available as adults for a brief period each year.

In spring, on the trout streams near Cape Town, you will find brown monkey beetles in profusion wherever the sweetly-scented flowers of *Psoralea pinnata* are found next to the stream. It is a bush which blooms between October and December and is often found growing at the water's edge. Unless you have eyes like a hawk, you fish small terrestrial imitations with some form of strike indicator.



The Monkey Beetle is small and has a very distinctive silhouette

Keep in mind though that beetles are not just familiar to trout as terrestrial or land bound insects. There are several species of aquatic beetles and bugs such as Diving Beetles, Riffle Beetles, Water Scavenger Beetles, Whirligig Beetles, Backswimmers and Water Boatmen which swim about underwater and are familiar to trout. Many of these species are found in a stillwater environment but the Riffle Beetle (*Elmidae*) is an aquatic beetle found in the broken pocket water that I preferred to fish.

Tying the Split Back Beetle

The foam rubber Split Back Beetle came about because I wanted to make the sighter an integral part of the fly and not tacked on at the completion of the tying process.

Most beetle patterns today place the foam rubber strike indicator behind the head and where the rubber legs are tied in. In the Split Back Beetle, I moved my sighter post to the midpoint of the hook shank and thus the highest point of the pattern. This also makes the area where the legs are tied in less cluttered.

I also wanted to situate it at the highest point of the fly where it was most visible to me but less visible to the trout.



A Split Back Beetle showing how the two pieces of foam rubber enclose the sighter

Beetle patterns are absolutely deadly. In an article, 'Persistence Pays Off on the Smalblaar' published in the November 2005 issue of *Piscator*, journal of the Cape Piscatorial Society, Philip Hills writes of a sighted rainbow trout that spurned a Parachute Adams, Klinkhåmer, Bead Head Nymph, Fore and Aft (Knotted Midge) and an ant pattern before it took his foam beetle with alacrity. Philip's experience is echoed across the world with Mike Lawson on the Henry's Fork in the USA and David Scholes in Tasmania also singing the beetle's praises. Philip's article can be found in the Terrestrials folder on this website.

There are two schools of thought on the best material to mimic the legs on beetle imitations:

Thin rubber legs which have actual movement;

Krystal Flash where the movement of light along the spiralled strand creates the visual impression of movement.

Initially I chose Hareline Grizzly Krystal Flash a combination which, I believe, enhances the visual impression of movement but then Stephen Boshoff @boshoffbamboo came up with his 'lightbulb' idea – putting tiny drops of UV resin (Loon Knot Sense works well) on the tips of thin materials, as a counterweight which creates extra movement and reflects light.

He first tried it on a CDC-hackled ant but I then realised it would perform the same function on rubber or Krystalflash – what I called 'Pendulum Legs'.

An oft-omitted but important element of beetle imitations are the membranous wings which can be seen protruding beyond the body when the insect is on the water.

If you do a Google Images search for 'beetle wing structure' you will see what I mean.

Renowned American fly tyer A K Best regarded these wings as a key trigger factor and imitated them with hackle tips, but I found them to be fragile and inclined to twist light tippets.

The best material for this purpose, I have found is stretched bubble wrap plastic.

It is durable and has a subtle sheen.

Foam rubber flies are top-heavy and, if tied on fine wire hooks, tend to land not upright,

but on their sides.

Here are the materials I prefer for the Split Back Beetle – keep in mind when tying in rubber legs that the ultra-thin GSP threads such as Textreme Extreme, cut through rubber legs like a knife:

Dressing

Hook: # 12 -14 TMC 100SP-BL or TMC 101

Thread: UCT 70 denier or Veevus 16/0 in fluo green

Wing: Stretched bubble wrap plastic

Sighter: Combined fluorescent pink Antron yarn or Fishient Fluoro Fibre, fluo pink Hareline Ice Wing or orange McFlylon.

A local equivalent for Ice Wing is Fishient Shiner. An alternative is micro–Krystal Flash which is very thin and reflects a lot of light

Underbody: Straggle String or Hareline quick Descent dubbing which is very easy to work with.

Shellback: 3 mm Orange Wapsi Fly Foam

Legs: Fine rubber legs tipped with Loon UV Knot Sense. UV resin does not adhere to latex rubber and I prefer the Wapsi round rubber legs or Veniard's thinner mottled Centipede rubber strands. An alternative as used by Mike Lawson and others is Krystal Flash.

The first step is to tie in the tiny piece of bubble wrap plastic at the hook bend to imitate the protruding hind wing.

Then tie in the Wapsi foam rubber shellback (or Razor Foam for smaller imitations) at the hook bend.

Tie in a short piece of Straggle String – I use Dark Green Olive which has a strong UV component. On the Tuft Back Beetle I twist Wapsi Quick Descent Dub onto the thread which, contrary to what its name suggests, does not sink the fly.

Advance the thread to the middle of the hook and tie in a post of the combined pink Antron yarn and flash material on top of the hook shank.

Wind the Straggle String forward, around the sighter post to the hook eye and tie off.

Split the shellback down the middle and fold the two halves on either side of the sighter post, cupping it in the process and creating a domed oval shape.

Secure the two foam rubber strips at the hook eye and cut off, leaving two stubs of foam rubber on either side of the hook eye to mimic the head of the insect.

Wind the thread backwards for a few turns, creating the space to tie in the Pendulum Legs

Tie an overhand knot in the middle of each rubber leg. This creates a V shape and helps you centre the leg, providing extra purchase for the thread. This was an idea from a YouTube clip of Mak's 'Killer Autumn Beetle'

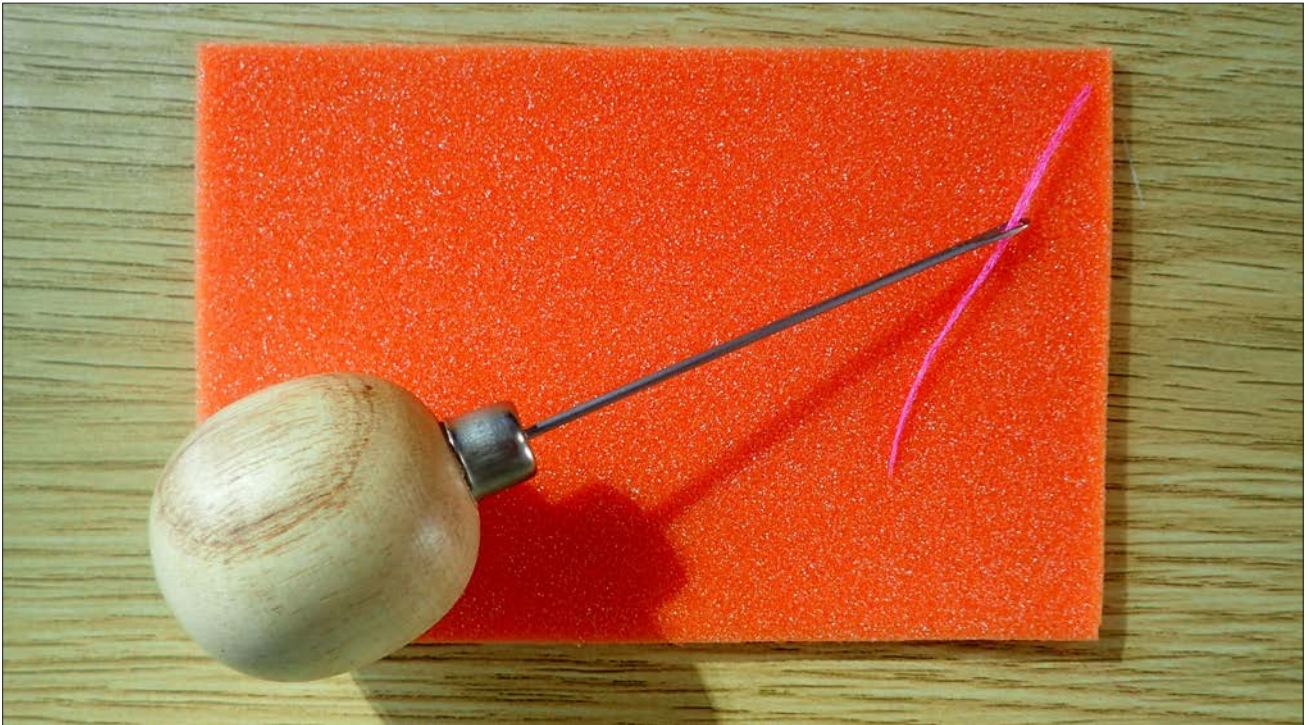
Tie these legs on either side of the hook shank at the hook eye.

Cut the sighter post at an angle sloping downwards and pointing forward to the hook eye. This exposes the tips of the Antron yarn creating little points of light which enhance your ability to track the fly during the drift.

As a final step, add the resin to the tips of the rubber or Krystal Flash legs and cure with your UV torch. You will find that you need to do this twice to give the resin sufficient heft.

There are alternatives.

You can thread the sighter material through the foam rubber shellback using a tool such as Zuddy's Leg Puller. I call this version the Tuft Back Beetle and the fly shown here uses phosphorescent Krystalflash tipped with UV resin for the legs.



Zuddy's leg puller with threaded sighter material on Wapsi's Evazote foam rubber



A Tuft Back Beetle with 'glow-in-the dark' Krystal Flash Legs



The bottom view of the Tuft Back Beetle showing how the Quick Descent Dub keeps the phosphorescent Krystal Flash legs separated

As previously mentioned, most commercially-available foam rubber beetle patterns simply replicate the steps used by John Crowe with his milestone deer hair beetle – tie a strip of foam rubber in at the bend of the hook, pointing backwards and then bend it forward and tie it down at the hook eye.

Both Gary LaFontaine and Scott Sanchez (*'A New Generation of Trout Flies'* - Wild River Press, 2005) use



a simpler method – dubbed underbody and the foam rubber strip tied in at the eye and pointing backwards, projecting slightly beyond the hook bend.

I tied the examples shown here on a #18 Ahrex 507 big eye midge hook using 1mm Razor Foam for both the top of the fly and as a body material. These examples use Glitter Dust - obtainable at craft stores - as a sighter fused to the body with UV resin.

This method is not as visible or as durable as a post threaded through the top section with a tool like Zuddy's Leg Puller.

(Above) View of a LaFontaine/Sanchez -type beetle which is more like a Jassid in construction than conventional Crowe-type beetles

Says Sanchez: *"Beetles are my go-to flies for tough fish. Trout eat them after repeated refusals of other patterns. They are particularly effective on meadow stream and spring creeks."*

