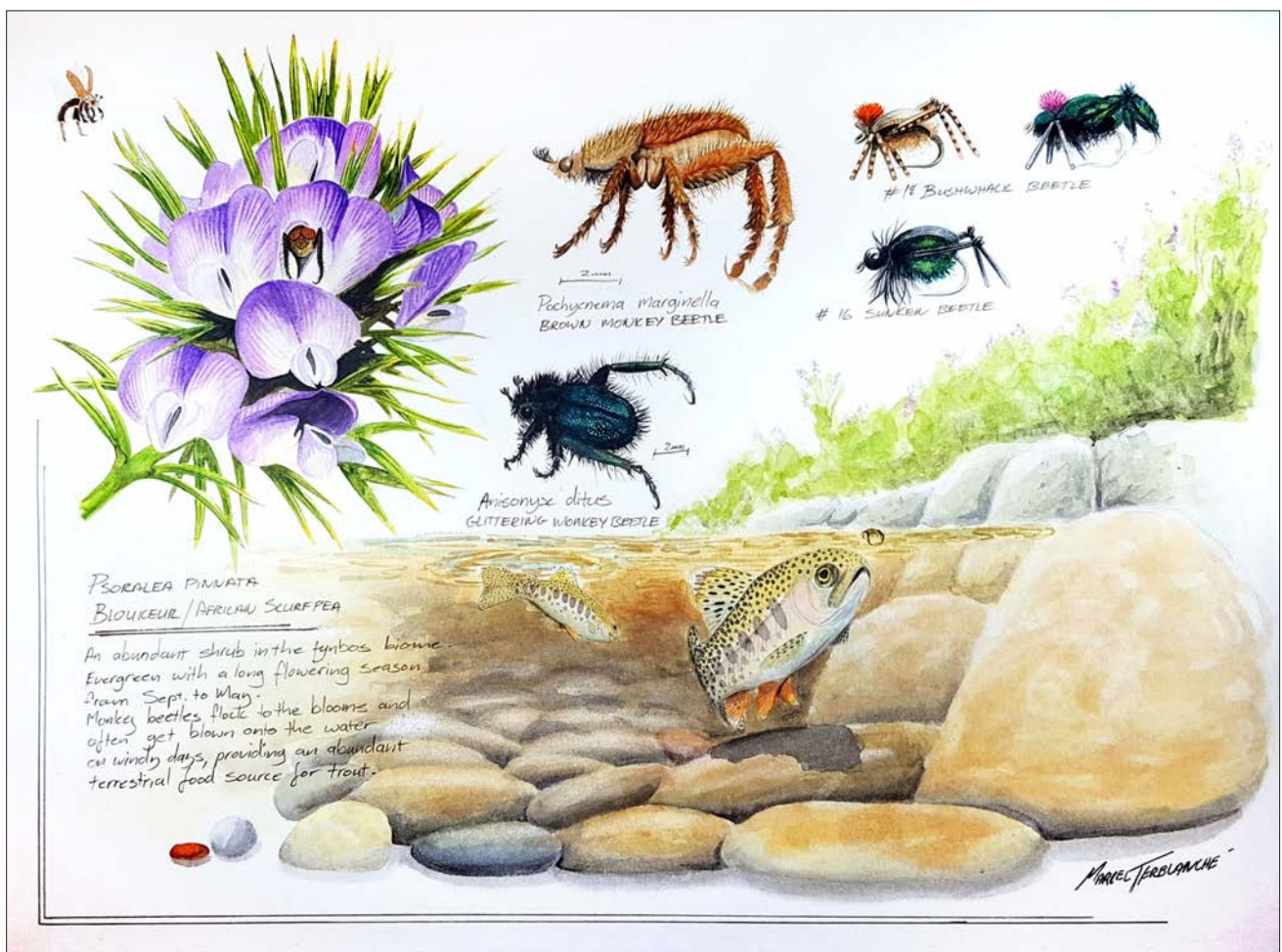




CHAPTER 14

The Sunken Beetle



The conclusions reached by the study groups were: (1) Over the year, terrestrial insects outnumbered aquatic insects on the study streams. (2) When aquatic insects were at a peak of hatching (spring), trout took them in almost exact proportion to their availability. (3) When terrestrials were at their peak (early fall), trout took them in almost exact proportion to their abundance. (4) More terrestrials were taken in the course of the season because they were available more hours of the day than were aquatics, which hatched sporadically."

"Match the hatch when there's one on, but if there is not, look to terrestrials."

Charles E. Brookes' *The Trout and the Stream*, Crown Publishers, New York, 1974.

"The beetle serves me better than a grasshopper or an ant pattern as a general terrestrial fly simply because the ubiquitous beetle is much more prevalent in the trout's diet than most fly fishermen realise; a trout's stomach isn't always jammed with them, but there are always a few in any stomach sampling." Gary LaFontaine, *'The Dry Fly: New Angles'* (Greycliff Publishing, 1990)

The logic behind fishing small, weighted imitations of beetles and ants upstream and with a strike indicator on narrow, heavily-bushed headwater trout streams is irrefutable.

The closer the vegetation is to the water the greater the number of fall-in insects.

Over the course of a year, most trout food is terrestrial in origin and they have, therefore, to constantly monitor the water surface.

If they can capture these land-based insects beneath the surface they will because there is less expenditure of energy and exposure to predators involved.

As Randall Kaufman pointed out in his 1991 book, *'Tying Dry Flies'*, 'Only a few flies have the power to break the feeding concentration of selective fish and the beetle is one of them.'

'Anting the Hatch', the title of an article written for *Flyfisherman* in 1982 by a Japanese scientist, the late Ken Miyata, has similarly become part of the fly angling's nomenclature.

The idea of fishing sunken terrestrials like a nymph was first mooted in print by Dick Wigram, a G E M Skues protégé.

In his book, *'Nymph Fishing in the Southern Hemisphere'* (Grason Press, Sidney, 1939), he wrote: ***"The use of an artificial beetle in various types common to the Southern Hemisphere is closely allied to nymph fishing."***

The wet patterns are fished in much the same way as the nymph. If necessary, the cast may be greased to the last link and the gut carefully watched for the sudden draw that indicates a fish."

I avoided the smooth stretches in my small stream fly fishing with my sunken beetle because pocket water hides a multitude of stalking and casting sins. Furthermore, these insects move through such areas quickly and prey capture, when it is at the trout's level, requires less energy than rising for an insect at the surface.

Furthermore, they can see the fly in its entirety rather than as a silhouette against the sky.

In spring, in the Fynbos biome of the Western Cape province of South Africa, the area around mountain streams literally writhes with small pollinating beetles as the wild flowers bloom in profusion.

Veld & Flora is the quarterly journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa and its September 2018 issue contained an article 'Beetles in the Blooms' by Raquel De Castro Mia in which she describes finding 157 beetles and bugs including eight different beetle species in a single protea in this area.

Prolific among these species is the scarab monkey beetle (Hopliini).

They are attracted to yellow daisies and, as Storms River artist and fly angler Marcel Terblanche points out in the painting above, they are also attracted to the blue, sweetly-scented flower of a small (12 foot) tree, *Psoralea pinnata*.

It blooms from October to December and its distinctive blue flower is a magnet for monkey beetles. As luck would have it, its favourite habitat is along stream banks and there is often a chum line of monkey beetles downstream of such trees.

Tracking such small cryptically-coloured flies, particularly in choppy pocket water is difficult, so one automatically uses some sort of strike indicator of which there are several.



Brown monkey beetles are significant pollinators of yellow daisies and other flowers

So, already, you are fishing a terrestrial imitation like a nymph and there are several advocates of such an approach – read my article ‘Sunken Terrestrials’ in the ‘Terrestrials’ folder on this website.



**The author’s imitation of a brown monkey beetle tied on a #18 Orvis ‘Big Eye’ hook –
Daiichi 1110 - using 24/0 Semperfli Nanosilk thread**

I first fished a weighted beetle pattern in 1993 using a yarn strike indicator held between two Perfection Loops mid-leader and, in so doing, I had found my niche. My less than 50/50 vision was no hindrance because it was easy to follow the waterproofed yarn indicator (today I would use waterproofed orange Hareline McFlylon) which affects the aerodynamics of the cast creating an automatic tuck cast.)

This chapter of The Delicate Fly Fisher looks at the materials that have come onto the market in recent years which enhance the tying of small sunken beetles and assesses potential design changes which would make them more able to deceive trout into thinking that they are high-calorie prey.



The author's current version of a sunken beetle - the equivalent of a # 18 – using a 2mm bead

What was common to Dick Wigram's Riffle Beetle which, from the 1940s, he fished upstream and dead drift like a nymph in Tasmania and the 1990s when Mike Weaver adopted a similar approach on the small streams of the UK, was that a slip of black crow feather was chosen for the shellback because of its sheen.

Tasmanian angler, David Scholes in his book 'Trout Days' (Kangaroo Press, 1986) describes a similar pattern, the Black Beetle, which he ties on a #14 hook. ***"The elongated oval body is of black wool over which a strip of crow quill is drawn to the head after the hackle is put on. In this way it becomes a 'throat hackle' and is of soft red cock or hen."***

Saying, ***"I'd rather fish the beetle than the nymph"***, he adds: ***"As a saver of blank days, the black Beetle is high on the list. I have unusual faith in the hooking and holding qualities of the Black Beetle. Perhaps this is because of the bold way in which the trout usually takes it and, in consequence, the way in which the strike can be timed so exactly and the hook driven home so solidly."***

This approach was also used by Canadian fly angler, Dave Engerbretson, an editor at large for Flyfisherman magazine and author of the 1986 book 'Tight Lines, Bright Water'.

In the book he professes his faith in a pattern he called, 'My Beetle'. It is tied on a size 16-18 hook and consists of only two materials - a shellback of duck, goose or turkey wing fibres and a dry fly quality hackle. He ties the wing quill in at the bend and then ties in and winds the hackle forward. He clips off the hackle fibres on the top and bottom of the hook leaving a few fibres sticking out at the sides to resemble legs. The wing fibres are then pulled forward to provide the back of the beetle and tied off at the eye of the hook.

Two fibres are left sticking forward over the hook eye to resemble antennae.

Engerbretson said: ***"Since I first realised just how much trout like to eat beetles, this pattern has become my ace-in-the-hole fly in many difficult angling situations in all parts of the country. If I am fishing to rising trout in still water, and they show little interest in the fly which, to me, appears to be a good imitation of the natural - I tie on a beetle. If they aren't taking what I think they are taking, I don't have a close match for the natural, or I don't know what they are taking - I try a beetle. Or,***

as so often happens after a major hatch is over and the big 'bank feeders' are sipping insects from the wind row of bugs that have collected along the edge of a stream - a beetle is usually my number one choice. And in the late summer when most of the hatches are over and the terrestrials make up a large portion of a trout's diet, you guessed it! I opt for my box of beetles. You should too."

These flies weren't weighted but they would not have been buoyant because they would have soaked up water.

All terrestrial insect imitations are most effective when fished below the surface because they require less effort to capture and less exposure to predators than those at the surface – its that simple.

Gary LaFontaine, a fervent devotee of the sunken hopper, simply added lead wire to existing floating hopper patterns and Ernest Schweibert, in his monumental double-volume book, 'Trout', wrote about Charles Wetzel fishing his sunken ant made of lacquered tying thread. More recently Kelly Galloup produced a video 'Tying the Sunken Ant Jig'.

I first fished a sunken beetle in 1993 and it utilised the materials available at the time.



The sunken beetle which I started fishing with a yarn indicator in 1993. It proved to be the most effective in spring, being supplanted by the sinking copper wire ant in summer and autumn

It was tied on a size 16 wet fly hook, had a shellback of peacock herl, a dubbed hare's ear fur body and black Krystal Flash legs, chosen because the way they glinted suggested movement.

With that combination of materials, I have little doubt that it would still be effective today.

Previously, weighting wet flies involved lead wire but, this time, I had a new option.

Roman Moser was the man who started the bead head trend on his home river, the Traun in Austria. Anglers using spinning reels in the rivers of the Tyrol mountains had for years been using little lures which featured glass beads and Moser decided that lead wire behind the glass bead would help to sink the fly. The results were astonishing, so much so that he was accused of bait fishing. Moser then produced countersunk brass beads in gold.

It would have remained a local method but in 1988 Moser produced a video *Neue Wege mit der KocherFliege* – subsequently produced with English commentary as *New Ways of Fishing the Caddis*. One of the patterns featured a caddis pupa imitation with a brass bead at the hook eye and, with leading writers such as Hans van Klinken in Europe and Malcolm Greenhalgh in the UK, becoming enthusiastic converts, the die was quite literally cast.

Theo Bakelaar helped promote these bead head nymphs when he appeared at the Dutch Fly Fair in 1990 with his face painted gold.

Then, in 1992, Orvis, with its significant marketing clout, started selling – and promoting – bead head nymphs.

“How would you like to discover a fly that will catch trout when nothing is rising – in deep water and shallow, cold and warm, in those periods when a trout stream seems as lifeless as Death Valley?” the Orvis marketing director Tom Rosenbauer, wrote in the company’s monthly newsletter, Orvis News, in February 1992.

In Britain, Greenhalgh added the bead to traditional favourites such as the Hare’s Ear and Pheasant Tail nymphs and reported unprecedented success – including 42 grayling in a day using a bead head PTN on that most testing of chalk streams, the Wiltshire Avon.

There can be little doubt, given the world-wide adoption of bead head nymphs, that they qualify to be called ‘super-normal releasers’.

The concept of ‘triggers’ which cause an instinctive reaction in various animal species has been well documented by Nikolaas Tinbergen and other scientists in the field of ethology, the study of animal behaviour.

Shortly before the start of World War II, Tinbergen, a young Dutch zoologist, noticed something strange happening in a fish tank containing sticklebacks, a small local minnow. The fish tank was on a window ledge and Tinbergen noticed that, at the same time each day, the male sticklebacks would adopt aggressive postures. He realised that they were responding to the passing of the bright red van belonging to the Dutch postal service. Male sticklebacks have a bright red stripe and the females have swollen bellies. He built models which hugely exaggerated these features and found that the males would attack the model which had the largest element of red and that when a model of a female with an exaggeratedly swollen belly was introduced into the fish tank they would become amorous. In each case the male sticklebacks concentrated on the models with exaggerated features and ignored the real fish.

Tinbergen called these exaggerated features, ‘super-normal releasers’ – in other words they triggered extremes of behaviour and, I believe, placing a metal or silver-lined glass bead – Pat Dorsey-style - at the eye of the hook on subsurface patterns falls into this category.

Storms River artist and professional fly tyer, Marcel Terblanche has pleasant memories of my first attempt at a sunken beetle when, as a schoolboy he fished the Eertse stream which runs through

Stellenbosch and, at weekends, the Smalblaar stream in the Du Toit's Kloof valley near Worcester:

"I remember your original sunken beetle very well from my high school days - it used to be one of my favourite flies to use on the Eerste stream in Stellenbosch.

It was equally deadly at the Idas Valley Dam above the town, one of the dams which supplied Stellenbosch with water. If you spotted a trout cruising close to the bank and could get the sunken beetle slightly ahead of it, it would invariably accelerate to take it.

A few years back we were fishing on the Smalblaar stream near Worcester and while we were walking upstream past a very shallow, fast riffle that didn't look like it held fish, we spotted a nice trout next us, holding right along the edge of this rapid water.

I tried the RAB I had on and it didn't even move. So I tied on your original sunken beetle and put the fly down about a meter above the trout. It instantly shot upstream to get to the fly, triggered by the glint of the bead and the metallic sheen of the peacock herl."
The smaller you can tie a sunken beetle, the easier it is to cast – here is my current tie:

Hook: Dohiku 303 'Beetle Hook' in size 14, a short shank model which is an effective size 18.

Bead: Black 1.5 or 2mm countersunk bead in brass or tungsten or silver-lined glass bead.

Thread: Semperfli Nano Silk 20 denier.

Protruding Wing: Bubble wrap plastic which is durable and has a nice sheen.

Shellback: Hareline Mini Flat Fly Braid - olive.

Body: Black Hareline Quick Descent Dub – when it comes to ease of use, there is no alternative to this dubbing which is made of finely-shredded aluminium shavings. Being made of metal, it is compressible with fine-nose pliers which enables you to widen the hook gape.

Legs: Krystal Flash or fine rubber.



Two examples of Quick Descent Dubbing which is made of thin strands of aluminium and is the easiest to use when tying small flies

The big breakthrough for those who wished to follow the above-mentioned fly anglers and fish the sunken beetle like a nymph was the advent of synthetic materials which rendered the crow feather shell back redundant.

There are several and their big advantage, aside from the availability in different colours and increased durability, was that they are elastic and also translucent. By stretching them, they can more precisely cover the dubbed body and enable smaller patterns to be tied than the traditional feather shellback.

Among them are Chewee Skin, Scud Back and various braids.

My favourite is Hareline Mini Flat Fly Braid in olive.

My hook of choice is a size 14 Dohiku 303 model, aptly called the 'Beetle Hook'. It is a short shank, medium wire hook which creates a #18 fly with a wider-than-standard gape.

Tying sequence

Attach the bead to the hook and tie a tiny trailing piece of bubble wrap plastic at the bend of the hook to represent the diaphanous hind wing which is covered by the hard and protective elytra. If you do a Google Images search for 'Beetle Hind Wings' you will find many examples. When the beetle is in the water, the tip of their wings often protrudes beyond the body providing a translucent recognition point.



Fold the braid double and tie it in at the eye of the hook leaving a small space behind the bead for the whip finish



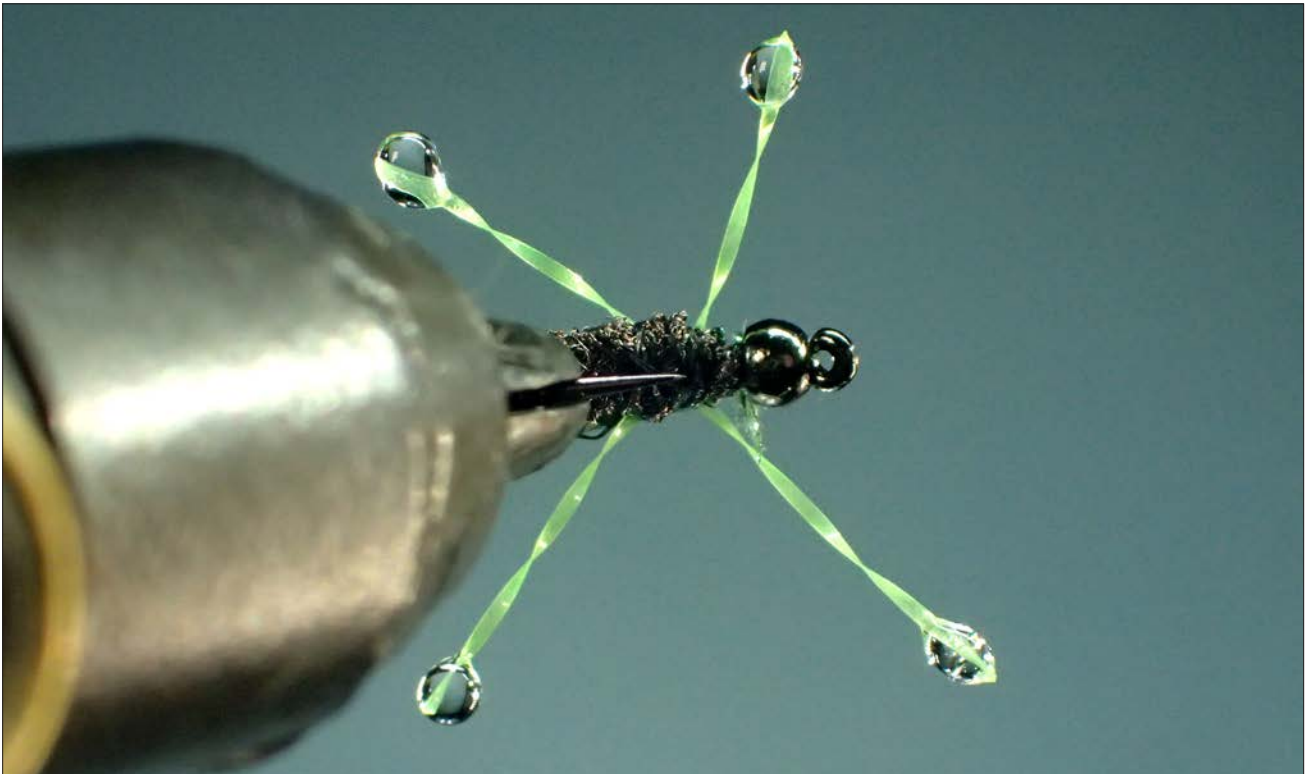
Create a dubbed body with the Quick Descent Dub. One of its advantages is that it can be compressed with small pliers to maximise the hook gape



**Place the legs in an X shape in the middle of the hook and on top of the dubbed body and hold them in place with a few x-wraps of the dubbed thread.
I am using Veniard barred rubber legs here**



Advance the thread to the eye of the hook and fold the two pieces of backward-facing braid forward to the eye of the hook and whip finish behind the bead



Once the fly is complete, counterweight the legs with tiny drops of Loon UV Knot Sense to add movement and light. This idea comes from Cape Town split cane rod maker Stephen Boshoff – @boshoffbamboo. You will need to do this twice to create sufficient size and weight in the drop.

Trout will see far more beetles the size of your little fingernail – particularly when it comes to bugs – the Hemiptera – with their stylet (shaped like a straw) sucking mouths than they will be seeing much bigger versions of this type of insect which would be imitated using #10 -12 hooks.

The main trigger when it came to contemporary beetle pattern design was the arrival from Japan in the USA a century ago of the alien and invasive *Popilla japonica* - about half an inch in length. Vincent Marinaro gave a full breakdown in his milestone 1950 book *A Modern Dry Fly Code*. He and Charlie Fox use to set beetle traps and anyone was free to use these beetles to chum the trout on Pennsylvania's Letort Spring Run.

The black clipped deer hair fly they settled on was tied by Ed Shenk and described by Ed Koch in his 1990 book 'Terrestrial Fishing': "It was trimmed flat on the bottom, oval on the sides and round on top."

That was it - just a beetle-shaped blob. The Crowe Beetle, described in a previous chapter, appeared at about the same time but was slightly more realistic.

Koch, however, came to an important but logical conclusion which is why I refer to him here.

After many refusals, he decided to try smaller beetle patterns and the trout response was positive. He tried a #18 version of the original pattern fished on a 7x tippet.

"They all took the little black beetle without hesitation. I was pretty sure that it was the size that had made the difference between refusal and acceptance. With the smaller size the trout were once again eager to take the imitation."

In the context of sunken beetle design, what does the future hold?

What can be done to enhance the trout-attracting abilities of an already deadly pattern?

As I see it, there are two main options - we rethink already-proven flies such as the Red Tag in the sunken beetle genre or we seek to add more movement to sinking shellback patterns such as Mike

Weaver's Black Bug.

Half a century ago Eric Horsfall Turner contributed an article 'Comic Yorkshire Fly' to Piscator - you can find it in the 'Patterns from Piscator' folder in the articles section on this website.

In the nineteen forties he had been sitting on the banks of the Derwent River in Yorkshire watching a large trout that had ignored all offerings. A beetle fell into the water and was instantly eaten. All Horsfall Turner had that resembled a beetle was a huge, winged peacock herl-bodied fly of Norwegian origin. Stripping off the wings, he offered it to his tormentor – to be tormented no more.

He subsequently refined the fly and his approach, producing what is now known as 'Eric's Beetle'.

It has a peacock herl body, a yellow wool tag and small, starling or black hen hackle. He fished it upstream on a greased leader. When he was stymied by a rising fish refusing his dry fly, he would use his beetle with a greased leader and success was usually assured: ***"For some unknown reason, even the most supercilious trout in smooth, shallow water is vulnerable to this fly when presented on a long leader with a very fine point."***

A marrow spoon would indicate what they were feeding upon – whereupon the 'Comic Yorkshire Fly' would be removed and replaced by a dry fly which imitated what the trout had been rising to.

The general assumption is that Eric's Beetle was tied to represent one of the diving beetles which returns to the surface to replenish its air supply and the yellow tag was meant to imitate the bubble.

Why not, I asked myself, emulate that bubble with a silver-lined glass bead?

Pat Dorsey, author of that wonderful 2010 book, 'Tying & Fishing Tailwater Flies' has proved with his Mercury series of flies that such beads are super normal releasers and this offers a significant avenue of exploration when tying slightly-weighted beetle imitations designed to fish just subsurface.



Silver-lined clear glass beads imitating air bubbles provide the potential of another trigger on sunken beetle designs. The shellback is Chewee Skin

This basic design of the sunken beetle has a universal appeal for trout wherever it is fished, something very relevant in the relatively infertile mountain streams of southern Africa where mayfly hatches are not only sparse but sporadic. The seminal study on trout diet in such streams was the two - and - a - half- year, state-sponsored PhD study, Biology of Trout in Kenya Colony, published in 1948 by the late Dr Vern von Someron. He wrote that mayflies hatch in penny numbers and mostly at night. His study found that Baetid mayfly nymphs and blackfly (simulium) larvae were the main constituents of trout diet but that beetles, ants, grasshoppers, wasps, bees and other terrestrials were always present in trout stomachs and were often the preponderant constituent in such examinations. An extract from this thesis, 'Kenya trout Feeding Behaviour' can be found in the folder headlined 'Trout Behaviour and

Diet' on this website. The attraction of trout and yellowfish to beetles whether in dams in or streams is a matter of repeated record. The most obvious stillwater example is the universal use of the Good Doctor's Beetle at that fabled yellowfish venue, Sterkfontein dam near Harrismith in the Orange Free State. Dr Hans van Zyl tells his story in the Dam Fishing folder in this archive and there is another on this pattern by David Weaver, a guide at the dam.

Alan Hobson's study of the role of predaceous diving beetles in the diet of trout in Mountain Dam in Somerset East is equally telling and examples can be found on his 'Wild Fly Fishing in the Karoo' website and on his **@karootrout** Instagram page.



An example of Alan Hobson's predaceous diving beetle imitation - a deadly pattern for stillwater trout - proving that beetle imitations have a universal appeal for trout and yellowfish

The biggest potential for future research in designing more effective beetles lies, I believe, in making the legs more mobile and Stephen Boshoff's idea of weighting the tip of the leg with a tiny blob of UV resin, what I call 'Pendulum Legs', has much merit. I think the tip could be made even heavier if it is knotted before the resin is applied. Adding UV resin to the top of a synthetic material shellback is another avenue to explore, providing increased durability and translucence. Black glitter dust could be added to the resin to give a mottled effect.

Fishing the Sunken Beetle



A photo by Marcel Terblanche of one of the six foot, six inch one ounce small stream rods he builds for tiny, heavily-bushed streams in the southern Cape

The smaller the stream and the more closely the bankside vegetation encroaches on it, the more important a role that drop-in terrestrial insects like ants, beetles and spiders play in the lives of the trout that inhabit it.

Short rods cast tight loops which is why the Japanese fly anglers who were featured in Rolf Nylander's classic 2018 YouTube documentary, 'The Great Shaku Hunter' did not choose to use 12-foot Euro-nymphing rods.



A brown trout caught by Marcel Terblanche on a southern Cape stream using a self-built 2-weight carbon fibre rod which weighs 15/16th of an ounce. Note the weight- saving rubber O-ring securing the Wychwood reel to rod handle

If I were to fish my bead head sunken beetle today, I would choose a Palm Grip, 3-weight fiberglass rod of around seven foot in length. I'd use a 3-5 foot furled leader ending in a split ring. The ring would be covered with a small blob of Rio Bio Strike putty to act as a strike indicator. The leader would end at 6x.

In closing, a quote: ***"An imitation of a small black beetle floating on top or fished underneath at various depths, either motionless or twitched, is arguably Tasmania's most effective single trout lure over a full season."*** Tony Ritchie – 'Finding Feeding Trout' (Kangaroo Press, 1994).

