

THE XMAS XADDIS

By Ed Herbst

While trout have an exceptional sense of smell, can pick up sounds through their ears and sense water displacement through the lateral line on their bodies, they are essentially predators which rely on their eyesight. An examination of a trout's brain shows that the most prominent features are the extremely large optic lobes and thick optic nerves and, slightly smaller, the cerebellum which is responsible for the co-ordination of complex muscular movement and balance. The latter enables the trout to maintain its active life-style, but with vision being by far the most important sense for prey detection, anything we can do to improve its chances of seeing the fly will significantly enhance our chances of angling success.

Laboratory experiments have shown that trout can detect moving objects 15 to 20 % further away than similar stationary ones. Indeed, in one experiment in which trout were fed on frozen brine shrimps in an artificially created river in a laboratory, they showed themselves unable to detect the motionless shrimps on the bottom, even when the shrimps were right beneath their noses! A trout's eyes have 14 times less ability than a human's to resolve fine detail. This is probably one reason why they ignore the hook in our flies and why you will often see them rise to floating seeds and bits of twig, mouth them and then spit them out.

Clearly then, the greater the distance at which we can alert the trout to the presence of our flies and the greater the extent to which we can simulate movement, the greater our potential to hook them.

Proof of this fact is the degree to which materials like flashabou and crystal flash have improved our success. Even those die-hard anglers who swear by a Mrs Simpson fished downstream on a sinking line have started to add a strand or two of crystal flash to their old traditionals, because they have found that this tactic has led to them catching more fish.

The trout's optic nerve contains many nerve fibres which have the specific function of detecting movement and one type of these movement detectors responds exclusively to small spots which contrast with the background. Crystal Flash, which sends out little, separated sparks of reflected light, would be easily picked up by such nerve fibres. The presence of these nerve fibres probably also explains the success of fly patterns which incorporate barred feather fibres, such as the grizzly hackle in the ever-successful Adams.

The Xmas Xaddis is a combination of existing facets of fly design and two new materials which, when incorporated in a dry fly, significantly enhance its appeal. The materials are cactus chenille and nylon organza, a fabric used extensively in wedding dresses. The fly had its origins in an article by Gary Borger, "The New Synthetics" carried in the February 1994 issue of the American magazine *Fly Fishing*.

Gary sets great store by a snail pattern which is essentially a version of the American fore and aft pattern, the Renegade. It has a brown hackle at the bend of the hook and at the eye with a peacock herl body in between. In the article Gary mentioned that by replacing the peacock herl with cactus chenille, the fly was much improved. Cactus chenille, like any other chenille, consists of a material trapped between two twisted threads but in this case the material is Flashabou.

I had tied up a single example for a trip I planned to Barkly East which, for several reasons, never got off the ground. I forgot the fly and it sat in my fly box for several months until a trip to the Holsloot River near Rawsonville on the 14 of December 1996. My diary entry after that trip reads: "What a fly!"

It was a cold, blustery day which promised little and initially lived up to that promise. On the previous weekend Tom Sutcliffe and his son Robbie had fished the Smalblaar in the adjoining Du Toit's Kloof valley and caught several trout which had been packed with beetles.

I started off with the only beetle pattern I had but after an hour without so much as a hint of a fish, I lost it. The only remaining fly which looked like a beetle was Gary's cactus chenille snail which was tied on a heavy-wire, wet fly hook. Somewhat dispirited and without much hope I tied it on and threw it up the next run. It seemed to float quite well despite the heavy hook and, as I was pondering on this, a fish catapulted vertically out of the water and dive bombed down on the fly. I was so startled that I didn't strike and the fish missed the fly. Once

again the fly was cast up the run and, to my amazement, the fish repeated its kamikaze manoeuvre with the same result except this time I struck without success. On the third cast the fish rose to the fly in the conventional manner, I struck and after a second he got off. One again I threw the fly to the head of the run and this time a bigger fish suddenly materialised, took the fly and after a brief flurry was gone.

By this time I was so disconsolate that I decided to take a break for lunch and made my way back to the car which was parked near the wall of the Stetynskloof Dam at the head of the valley. After lunch it was still cold and miserable so I decided to walk the short distance to where the water coming over the dam spillway entered a large pool at the foot of the wall. Without much enthusiasm and having checked to see that the hook point was not missing, I cast my fly into the current tongue which swept through the pool. The water was dark and foreboding and flowing strongly, but the fly had only moved a few centimetres when it was strongly taken and I was broken by a fish which seemed to be far heavier than the norm for the Holsloot. Five casts, five takes! A monument to my ineptitude for sure, but why had this fly proved so successful when previously I hadn't been able to move a fish in more than an hour of hard fishing?

It started to rain so I packed up for the day, pondering on the attraction of Gary's cactus chenille snail as a dry fly. The conclusion I came to was that the strands of flashabou, sticking out at right angles to the thread which trapped them, reflected many little points of light. In so doing they created the impression of movement just as a series of still images, when projected onto a cinema screen, give the impression of motion.

One of the other materials mentioned in Gary's article was nylon organza, also known as Twinkle, Crystal or Sparkle Organza, which is readily available from fabric shops and which, according to Gary, "has filaments that twinkle and shine with a pearlescent glow". Gary uses the filaments, which are not only fluorescent but also have a crimp in them like a miniature Crystal Flash, for the wings on patterns imitating spent-wing mayfly spinners. He said that, in a dense hatch of *Tricorythodes* spinners, normally selective fish took the organza wing pattern in preference to the real insect! I decided to combine the twinkle organza filaments with the late Lee Wulff's loop-wing technique in which the wing material is tied in at the bend of the hook and then looped forward on either side of the hook shank to produce a heart-shaped wing, very reminiscent of a moth or sedge. To further enhance the wing I twirled the nylon organza round a piece of crystal flash or the new Orvis holographic tinsel which produced an effect like a string of pearls.

For the rest the fly had a head of peacock herl over which the hackle was palmered and two crystal flash antennae. To further enhance the sparkle, the cactus chenille body material was wound in spaced turns over an underbody of mixed Lite Brite dubbing and seals fur or SLF seals fur substitute blended in a coffee grinder.

Cactus chenille comes in a variety of sizes and forms including the new Orvis Lite Brite dubbing brushes in which hair-thin flashabou fibres are trapped at right angles between two strands of fine copper wire.

The Xmas Xaddis floats reasonably well because the broad base of the loop wings gives it a stable platform and there is a lot of material in it to soak up floatant. It is also easy to see because the sparkle material on top of the fly reflects light, making it twinkle as it bobs along in the current. The same effect under the water is what, I presume, attracts the fish.

I have adapted the combination of nylon organza loop wings and cactus chenille body to my sunken beetle imitation. This pattern has Crystal Flash legs and a peacock herl shellback and I fish it like a nymph – upstream with a strike indicator. It is a deadly pattern in high summer and late autumn when most of the hatches of aquatic insects are over and the fish have come to rely on terrestrials. The two materials which Gary highlighted in his article have really improved what was already a very effective pattern.

Finally, how did it get the name of Xmas Xaddis? Well, the cactus chenille looks like a miniature version of the stuff you drape around Xmas trees and the Lee Wulff loop wing style and Crystal Flash antennae gave it a caddis appearance, so the name was fairly logical.

Those who have tried it find that it can often bring about a dramatic change in one's fortunes, and remark on the way in which it will pull trout from under bushes and banks to take it – and that they take it with vigour! I think the sparks of light it emits create the impression not just of movement, but of frantic movement – like an insect struggling to escape – and that is what

triggers the strike. Movement, or the impression of movement, is the key factor. Tom Sutcliffe feels it would probably bring greater success on dams than his DDD which, incidentally, is improved if you spin a few strands of Flashabou or Crystal Flash in with the deer or klipspringer hair before clipping it to shape.

Fly tyers around the world are constantly experimenting with new materials and combining them with existing designs. Proof of this was an article by Steve Parton, a columnist with the British magazine *Stillwater Trout Angler*, in which he said: "The secret is out – cactus chenille dry flies are deadly." Parton's fly was a very simple tie – just a hackle palmered over a cactus chenille body – not unlike a cactus chenille Griffiths' Gnat.

It is clear that cactus chenille and the new holographic tinsel, like Flashabou and Crystal Flash before them, hold exciting prospects for fly tyers and that its use is limited only by one's imagination. Having just received a batch of flyfishing catalogues from American mail-order companies, I note with interest that several are now offering Woolly Worms and Woolly Buggers with cactus chenille bodies instead of, or in addition to, the more usual chenille or peacock herl bodies.

Materials

Hook: Size 8 to 18 dry fly

Thread: Orvis 12/0 ultrafine

Underbody: Mixture of Lite-Brite dubbing material and seals fur or SLF substitute blended in a coffee grinder

Body: Cactus Chenille (preferably brown)

Rib: DMC metallic thread (preferably number 4270) or Anchor Lane embroidery thread (preferably shade 322) or fine copper wire. DMC or Anchor threads are available from embroidery or wool shops

Wing: Crystal Flash or Orvis holographic tinsel plaited with organza filaments.

Head: Peacock herl

Antennae: Crystal Flash

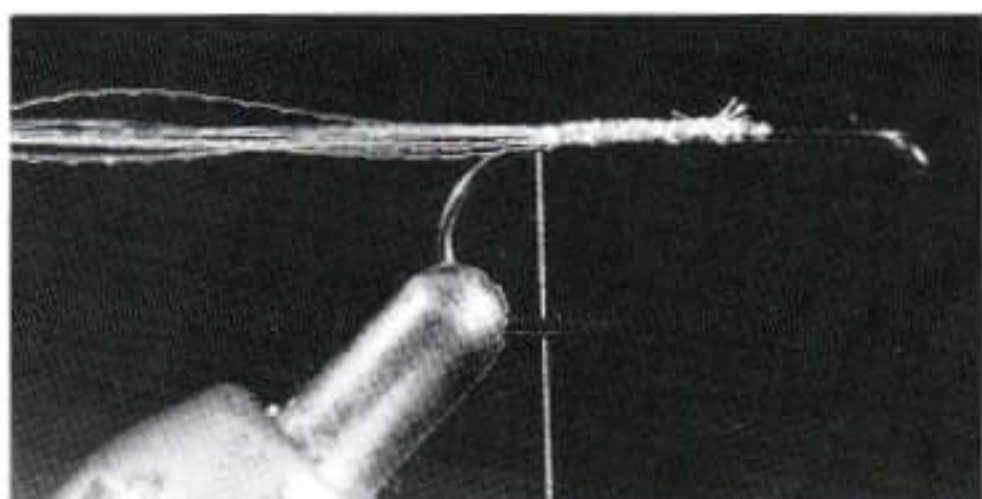
Hackle: Brown or Grizzly

Method

- 1) Tie about a dozen organza filaments and a piece of grey or pearl Crystal Flash on either side of the hook shank pointing backwards.
- 2) Tie in your ribbing material and the cactus chenille at the hook bend.
- 3) Dub the thread with the blended seals fur and Lite Brite dubbing and wrap forward to about a centimetre from the hook eye (size 8 hook). Tease out the dubbing to make it as fluffy and loose as possible.
- 4) Wrap the cactus chenille forward in spaced turns over the underbody which should blend with it. Rib with the embroidery thread or copper wire.
- 5) On each side of the hook shank, wrap the organza filaments round the Crystal Flash and then fold forward and tie off at the end of the body material creating a heart-shaped silhouette.
- 6) Tie in two or three strands of peacock herl and your hackle. Tie in two vertical pieces of Crystal Flash as the antennae and then wrap the peacock herl forward to the hook eye and tie off. Palmer the hackle forward over the peacock herl and tie off at the eye. Whip finish and varnish.

*‘The angler hopes for nothing and prays for everything;
he expects nothing and accepts all that comes his way.
And although he knows all along that he will never sink
his hook into a trout stream’s true mystery, the desire to
try, to cast once more and once more again, is never
unquenched, for there is always that chance that one
more cast will carry him beyond skill and luck and bring
him untarnished magic.’*

Harry Middleton, “The Earth is Enough”



The Xmas Xaddis – Step 1



Step 2



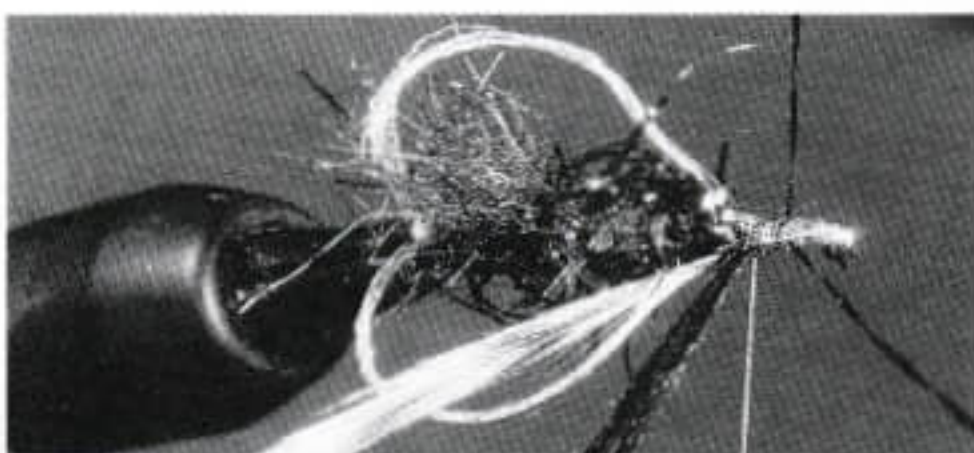
Step 3



Step 4



Step 5



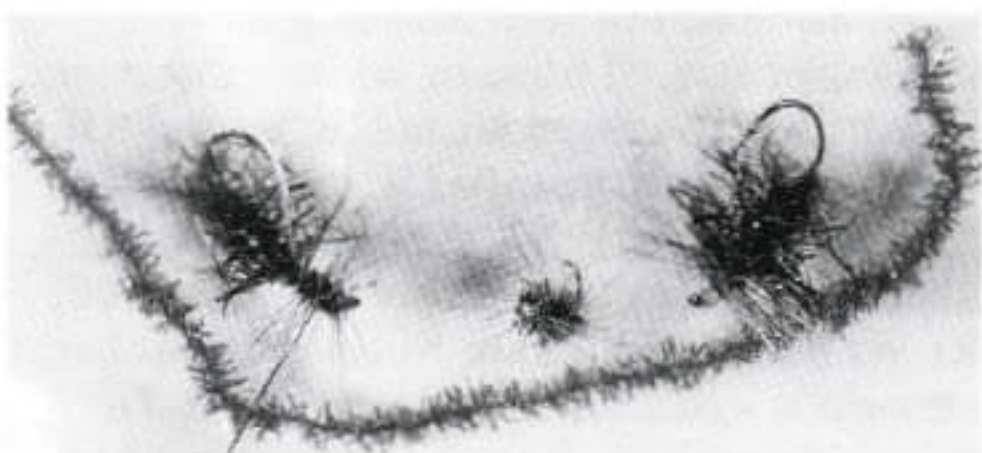
Step 6



Step 7



Step 8



Cactus Chenille dries.



Steve Parton's Cactus Chenille Dry Fly.