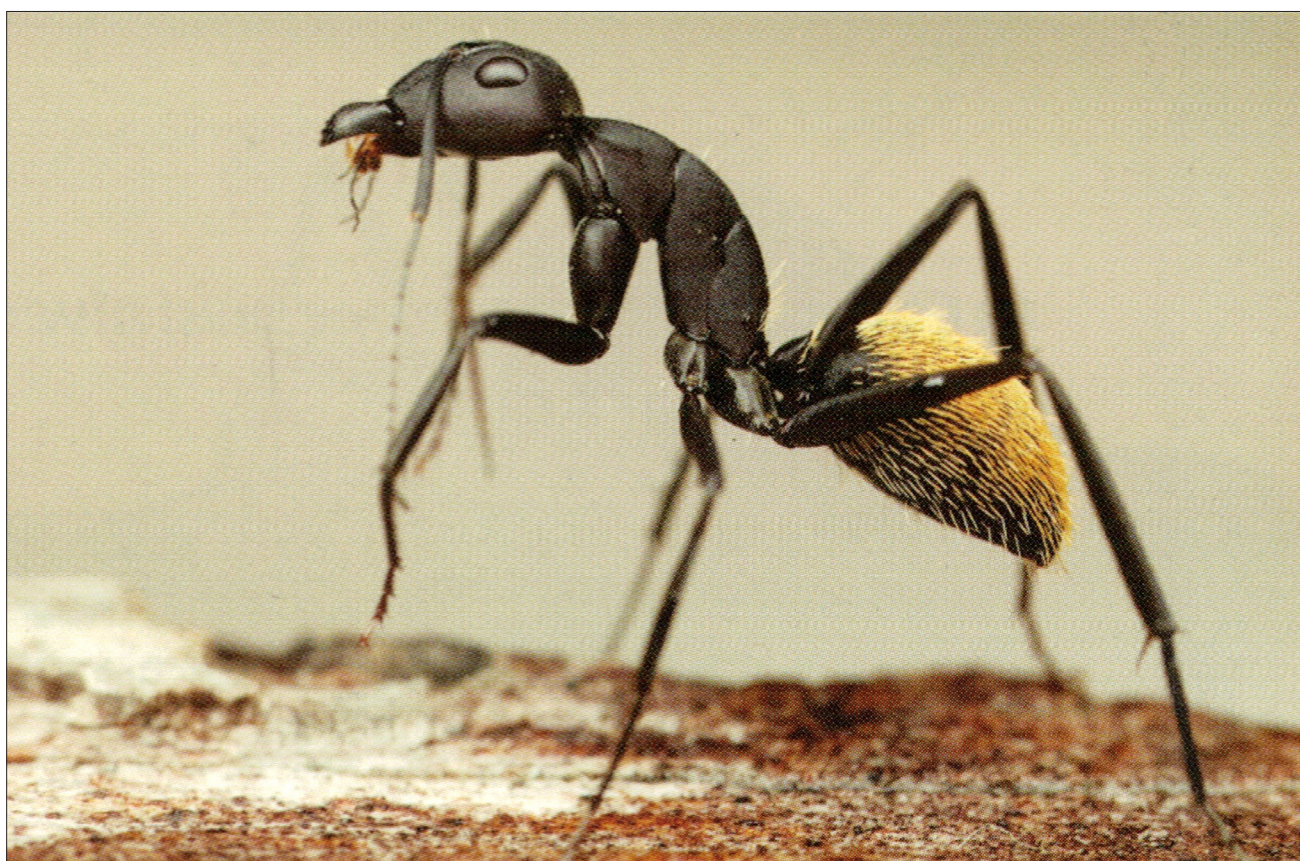




Chapter 16

Part 2

Further thoughts on the small stream ant



“TROUT go crazy over ants but seldom seem greatly impressed with ant patterns. Ant patterns that look cool in the fly box rarely work as well as they seem like they should. The answer is in front of your eyes... if you go underwater.

Real ants are covered with minute bristles that have a tendency to trap numerous small bobbles of air. An ant that looks black from our vantage point, very often is sparkly silver from a trout's view. Typical ant patterns simply look dead in the water.”

Ralph Cutter Fish Food: A Fly Fisher's Guide to Bugs and Bait (Stackpole, 2005).

The photograph of a Camponotus Sugar Ant (Balbyter) by Philip Herbst at the top of this article

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illustrates the point made by Ralph Cutter and is a scan used with permission from Peter Slingsby's wonderful book *Ants of Southern Africa*.

In the first part of this chapter, I described the revelation of the role played by the Smalblaar Myrtle in habituating the trout in the streams near Cape Town to the presence of ants and how I failed to grasp the significance, some 40 years ago, of catching one with a Black Cocktail Ant at the front of its mouth and one almost disappearing into its gullet.

In the context of ant pattern design, there have been, I feel, four other revelations, two recent and yet unproven.

According to scientists there are 2.5 million ants for every human on earth and, if nature followed fly tying, they would all drift downstream head-first and with heads and abdomens pointing skywards.

They don't - as the following photographs prove...



Ants, pinioned by water tension, whether in a farm irrigation tank (above) or a glass of water (below) do not assume a single position



My friend, Peter Brigg, whose 'Call of the Stream' website is a photographic celebration of small stream fly angling beauty, tells me that the ants that drown in his garden birdbath are invariably found

on their sides and in a foetal position.

A useful illustration of this can be found on Fred Steynberg's Linecasters website under the title 'Ants that Fly' and a Vimeo video interview showing him tying his imitation can be found in the two-part series 'A Fly Tying Journey with Ed Herbst and Friends'.

The four ant pattern design factors that I found significant, in addition to the role played by the Smalblaar Myrtle were:

- Ralph Cutter's scuba-diving discovery that bubbles clinging to the hairy bodies of ants when seen from below, give them a silvery glitter and that the way to emulate this by coating fur-bodied ants with water-proofing desiccant powder;
- The experience of a client of professional fly tyer Marcel Terblanche - @driftflyfisher - who made a last-minute order of Edward Truter's legendary 'Balbyter' pattern before a trip to Lesotho's legendary Bokong River for yellowfish. As he did not have fine rubber leg material, Marcel substituted Krystal Flash and his client reported a significant increase in catch rate. The light rippling up and down the twisted mylar material creates a greater visual impression of movement than the rubber legs can provide. You can find an article by Edward on this fly in the 'Ants on the Menu' folder on this website;
- The idea by Cape Town split cane master Stephen Boshoff - @boshoffbamboo – to add a tiny dot of clear UV resin to the tip of leg material on ant patterns to increase light dispersal and movement in the counter-weighted leg;
- The significant increase in response by trout in the peat-stained streams of the southern Cape when Marcel used a fly with a purple wire rib and the equivalent trout response to purple flies in rivers and streams with a high humic acid content in the USA.

The Dubbed Fur Ant

This pattern probably dates from the experiments by Bob McCafferty and Vince Marinaro on Pennsylvania's Letort Spring Run more than half a century ago. It gets new relevance with Ralph Cutter's observations that sunk fur patterns dusted with powdered silica gel attract air bubbles just as hairy insects such as Balbyter ants do.

This bears out the experience of stillwater fly anglers, as the following quotes confirm. They all found that when a fur fly was first attached to the tippet, they got an immediate response because of the air bubbles clinging to the fur. However, as the fly becomes water-logged after repeated retrieves and the bubbles disappeared, the number of strikes diminished.

Marvin Taylor: *Float tubes, fly rods and other essays: Idaho 1979*

"For several years I've experienced a fishing phenomenon, which, for a time I had dismissed as a coincidence. I noticed that when fishing wet flies or nymphs, particularly in lakes and reservoirs, I had more strikes on a fly I had just tied on than on one which had been fished for a time. In talking with other fishermen, I confirmed my observations of the phenomenon.

Coincidence you say. I've no reason for such a thing to happen. I'm not so sure. It has happened too many times to be purely coincidental. I spent considerable time on one trip recently, experimenting with different patterns to see if the 'phenomenon' held up. On five different occasions, after unsuccessfully fishing a brown leech pattern through some high percentage water, I changed to a fresh copy, and each time I got a strike on the first cast.

The possibility is that the new fly traps air bubbles and moves naturally through the water, thus appearing more palatable to the fish. Angling author Pete Hidy, who along with Jim Leisenring wrote 'The Art of Tying the Wet Fly and Fishing the Flymph' has given credence to the theory of nymphs hatching in a bubble of compressed gas, which is generated in hatching. The flies Pete dresses have

dubbed fur bodies and soft, hen hackle legs that trap air bubbles mimicking the natural hatching nymph. I see a relationship between the 'flymph' theory and my 'first-cast' theory and have arrived at several conclusions.

First, I find the theory works more often with mohair or fur-bodied patterns than it does with chenille or hard bodies. The fur or mohair traps air more easily and gives the illusion of the natural nymph.

Second, I find the theory works better when I'm fishing a floating or slow-sinking line. I believe fish are looking for hatching insects, with the accompanying gaseous bubbles, and when the freshly tied-on pattern floats into view they pounce on it.

Third, the flymph theory might explain why mohair patterns are so important to float-tube fishermen. Mohair, particularly the long -strand variety, holds more air and thus would appear more 'natural' to the fish. Most of us who have fished mohair patterns so religiously thought the translucence of the material attracted fish. It is probably the combination of translucence and trapped air which makes mohair so attractive."

Fly Fish the Trout Lakes with Jack Shaw: Canada 1976

"Aquatic insects that are air breathers carry air in the form of bubbles which reflect silvery light somewhere about their body. Notable among these are the water boatmen and backswimmers.

There is also another cause of air bubbles on aquatics that is often overlooked by even the most experienced fly angler. This is the process whereby aquatic plants convert light to oxygen in the form of very tiny bubbles that rise in little strings like the tiniest of pearls to the surface. Dragon and damselfly nymphs that move through and about the weeds will on occasion gather these bubbles about their bodies. This usually occurs on bright sunny days when the process is at a peak.

Often it will happen when using a fly with a furry body, a fish will be caught on the first cast or two, thereafter it may no longer produce. The reason for this is that the natural insects are carrying these tiny bubbles. The furry body of the imitation, having at least some natural oil in the hair, will retain hair on the first few casts. While these bubbles are trapped in the imitation the fly is a success, but after the fish has mouthed the fly the air bubbles are gone and the offering no longer has the appearance of a natural and thereafter will fail to produce."

Lake flies and their imitation – A practical entomology for the stillwater flyfisher by C.F.Walker 1960

While discussing the effect that silver ribbing has on making lake flies more effective, Walker writes: "While on the subject of air bubbles, it may come as a surprise to those fishermen who have never seen their flies beneath the surface at close quarters to hear that, on entering the water, a previously un-wetted artificial carries down with it a small reservoir of air in exactly the same manner as a Corixid and with the same visual effect of silver. This does not usually last very long however, for as the fly is drawn through the water, the air gradually detaches itself and rises to the top in a series of bubbles which may possibly afford an explanation of the frequent success of a fly fresh from the box soon after alighting on the surface."

Later he writes: "This may come as a surprise to those who have never looked below the surface, but the fact is that an air bubble under water looks exactly like a drop of quick-silver. There is a green algal growth at the bottom of my aquarium at this moment which is covered with small air bubbles, the effect being as if someone had broken a thermometer over a billiards table."

Mercury Midge – Pat Dorsey – Tying and Fishing the Tailwater Flies (Stackpole Books, 2010)

"Back in the mid-1990s, Bill Black, president of Spirit River, sent me a plastic bag filled with an assortment of small glass beads. There were several colours and sizes – all applicable for tying tiny

mayfly and midge imitations. Nobody has these yet, said Black. Experiment with them and let me know what you think.

One glass bead in particular – the clear, silver-lined one, caught my attention. Wheels began to turn and I immediately headed to my fly-tying room. I put an extra-small one on a #20 scud hook and proceeded to tie a midge larva pattern.

When I looked at the completed fly, the thorax resembled a tiny thermometer tube filled with mercury and I quickly named my new little midge the Mercury Midge.

The following week, I took the Mercury Midge to the South Platte River in Cheesman Canyon and tested it rigorously. I was pleasantly surprised to see discriminating rainbows move 8 to 10 inches to intercept it. I knew there was something special about the bead that persuaded trout to eat this fly but I could not put my finger on it. Later it occurred to me that the silver-lined glass bead imitated the gas bubble that gets trapped in the midge's thorax when it emerges."

According to J R Harris, in **An Angler's Entomology** (1956) "The end of the hatching nymph ... assumes a much-increased lustre, and in fact strongly resembles a section of glass tube which has been filled with mercury."

Dorsey continues: **"Ralph Cutter's DVD, 'Bugs of the Underworld', demonstrates this phenomenon well. His footage shows an emerging midge becoming fidgety and restless, moving up and down in the water column, and the noticeable gas bubble that forms before the pupa emerges into an adult. The mercury beads on the Mercury Midge and Mercury Black Beauty imitate this gas bubble perfectly.**

After discovering the success of the Mercury Midge, I put the clean, silver-lined glass beads on other patterns like RS2s, Pheasant tails, Brassies, Buckskins, cased caddisflies, blood midges, Baetis nymphs and Pale Morning Dun nymphs. Umpqua Feather Merchants picked up the entire line and called it the Mercury Series. These patterns, like the Mercury Midge have also proven to catch a lot of trout."

In fact, Cutter devotes an entire chapter **'All that glitters'** to the fact that these bubbles are an absolutely significant trigger:

"Bubble-encased bugs are extremely visible underwater and trout often swim right past other food items to snare a glittering insect. Many times, trout will key in on and feed only on sparkling insects."

What is not irrelevant in this context, is the way Rhodes-based guide, Fred Steynberg adds epoxy to the bodies of his foam rubber floating ants. You can find a photo of his well-proven ant pattern in an informative article 'Days that Ants Fly' on his Linecasters website.



The two DVDs, now available on Vimeo, which featured interviews with top South African fly tyers tying their well-proven fly patterns.

A decade ago, Andrew Ingram and I produced two DVDs which featured interviews with the country's top freshwater fly anglers as they tied their flies which had become local staples. Entitled **'A South African Fly Tying Journey with Ed Herbst and Friends'**, they are available on Vimeo.

(L) Andrew Ingram filming Fred Steynberg in Rhodes for our dual Vimeo DVD

During the interview Fred told me that

ants glisten when in the water – no doubt caused by water adhering to their hairy bodies - and that re-creating this visual impression had brought increased success. Epoxies that were in use back then have been replaced by UV light-cured resins derived from dentistry.

While writing this chapter I had a flashback to a day spent fishing dry flies with fellow CPS member Darryl Lampert. He is one of the most skilled and cerebral fly anglers and tyers I know and his Hi-Vis CDC Midge is a staple on our streams. I dried my sodden fly, coated it with Loon Ride and was about to blow off the excess when he stopped me saying that, in his experience, a dry fly encrusted with the glittering white powder, prompted more rises than one without.

This is now easy to achieve with Loon Fly Dip, a liquid product which clearly has a strong silica gel powder component. I pop my dry flies into the bottle and, after they have dried on a sunny window sill, they have a distinct white powder coating.

There are, I feel, two dubbed fur fly patterns that have the most potential when it comes to imitating size 18 – 20 ants, Tim Rolston's Compara Ant and Gary Borger's Parachute Ant.

Both have become easier to tie thanks to the advent of thin, strong GSP threads such as Semperli's Nanosilk 20 D and Textreme's even thinner Extreme thread.

In my experience there are two standout dubbing materials for ant patterns – one is Semperfli Kapok which has quickly become renowned for its buoyancy. The second is Hareline's Quick Descent dubbing which is unique in that it is made from metal – hair-thin strands of aluminium. The name Quick Descent is a misnomer as Ed Engle described in his authoritative micropattern book, *'Tying Small Flies'* (Stackpole, 2004). Used in small quantities, it does not sink flies. Its advantage is that it clings so tightly to thin threads that you can build bodies that are very small.



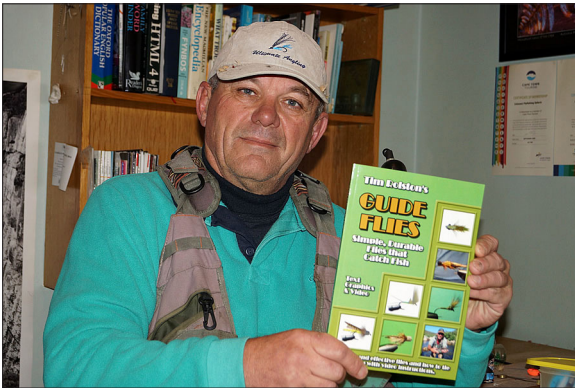
Quick Descent Dub, the author's favourite, which is made from ultra-tin aluminium strands

Quick Descent has a few silvery strands in the mix which is another reason I favour it because I feel this helps mimic the air bubble effect to which Ralph Cutter refers.

Tim Rolston's Compara Ant

Tim Rolston, for decades Cape Town's leading guide but now living in Wales, says his biggest trout

caught on local streams have all been deceived by ant patterns and he eschews legs altogether on his dubbed body, floating ant patterns which are tied in sizes 18 – 20. I watched him tie them in about three minutes and the pattern is included in his fascinating and informative book, *Guide Flies – Simple Durable Flies that Catch Fish*, to which I wrote the foreword.

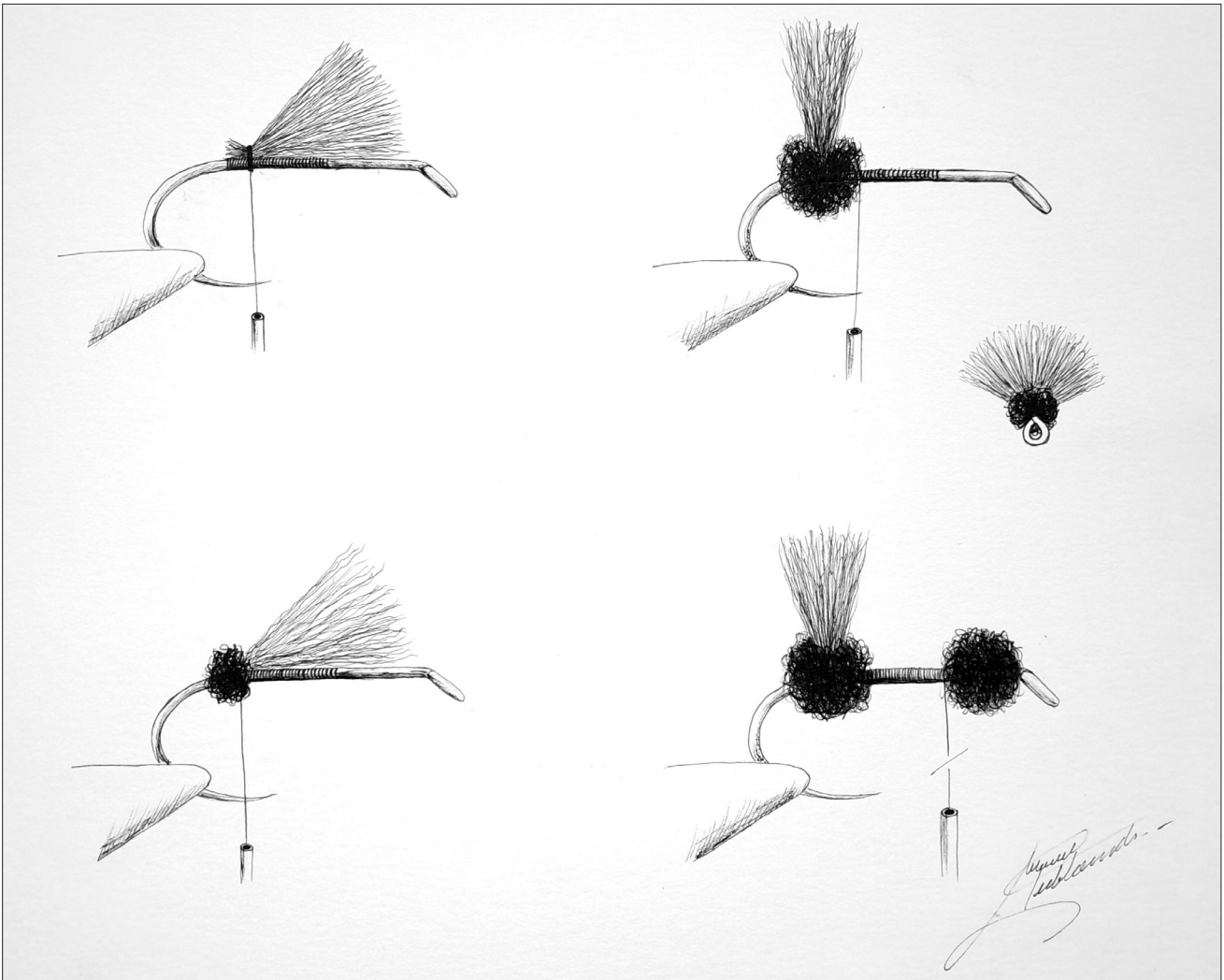


(L) Tim Rolston, now living in Wales but for many years Cape Town's leading guide, considered size 18 – 20 floating ants to be the most effective fly on the trout streams near Cape Town

At my request, he wrote a fascinating article 'Ants on the Menu' and it heads the folder of the same name in the articles archive of the Cape Piscatorial Society.

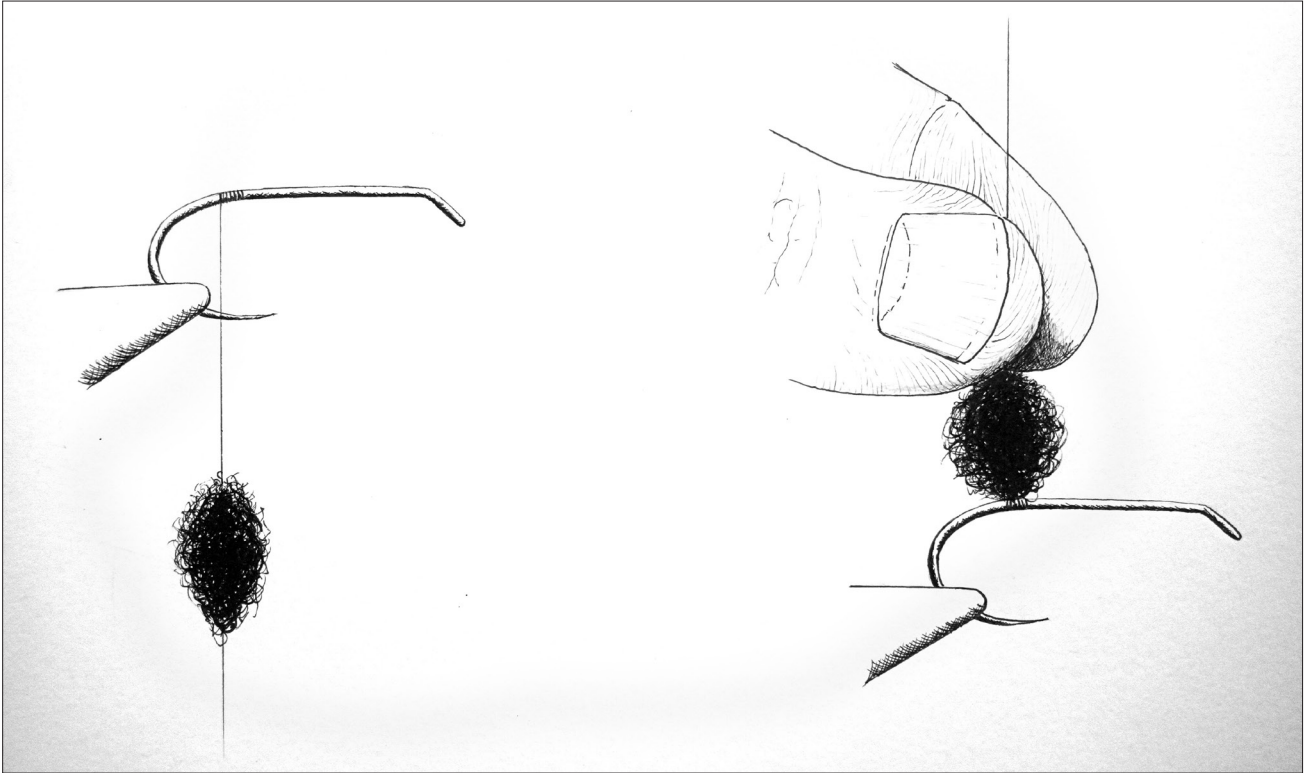
The best wing material for this pattern, in my opinion is Deadly Dazzle by Fishient because not only does it include varied colours of poly yarn but also ultra-thin strands of UV mylar.

Their sparkle in the drift makes the fly easier to follow on the water.

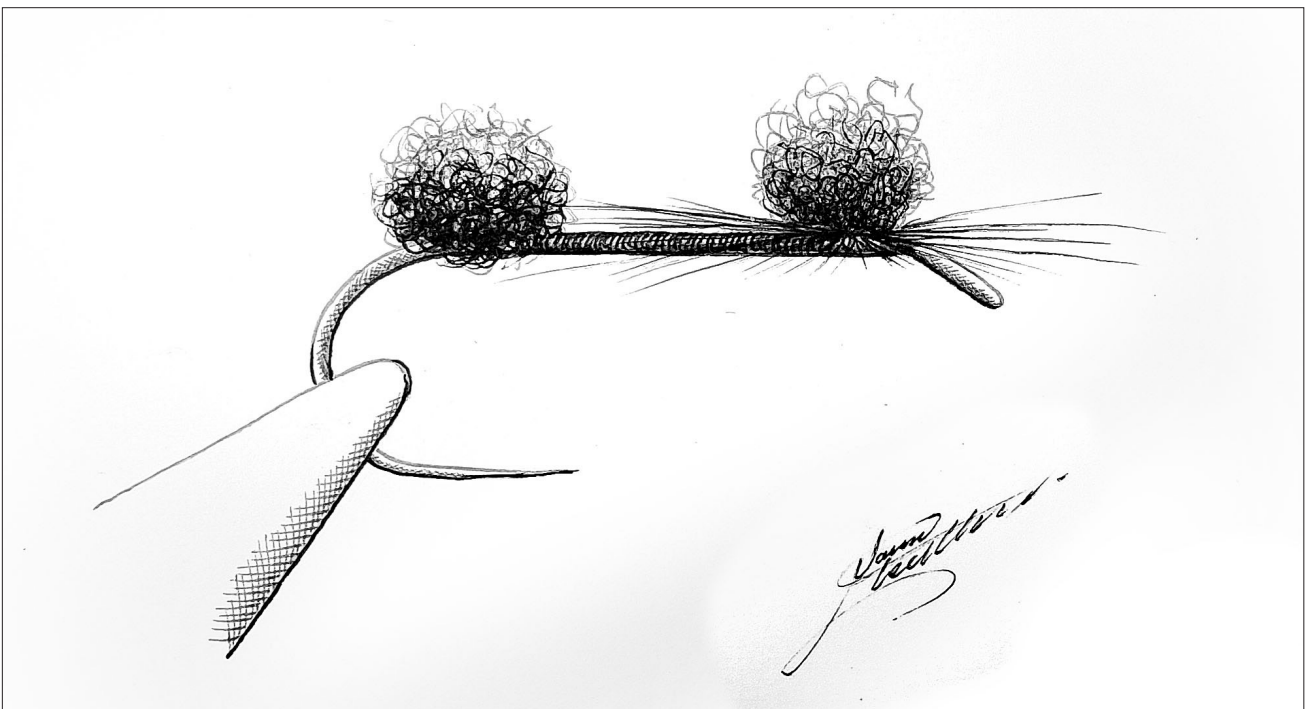


Tim's Compara Ant – illustration by Marcel Terblanche

The other definitive floating ant design is found in Gary Borger's stellar 1991 book, *Designing Trout Flies* and it draws on the work of Rene Harrop.



The first step in tying Gary Borger's Para-Ant, a Rene Harrop concept



Gary Borger's Para-Ant design which floats flush with the water surface

Between these two designs, I believe you have covered the bases when it comes to dubbed fur floating ant imitations. The Borger ant has no material beneath the hook shank which enables the use of the relatively narrow gape Daiichi 1110, designed by Jim Lepage and the Orvis Co. and patented as the 'Big Eye' hook, in 1990.

It's available down to #26, but its advantageous big eye means that you can use a more practical 6x tippet on these smaller hooks if you are fishing small streams where you are hemmed in by vegetation

THE DELICATE FLY FISHER - ED HERBST

on the bank and casting room is minimal.

More to follow: The ubiquitous *Camponotus* sugar ant and its foam rubber imitations.

