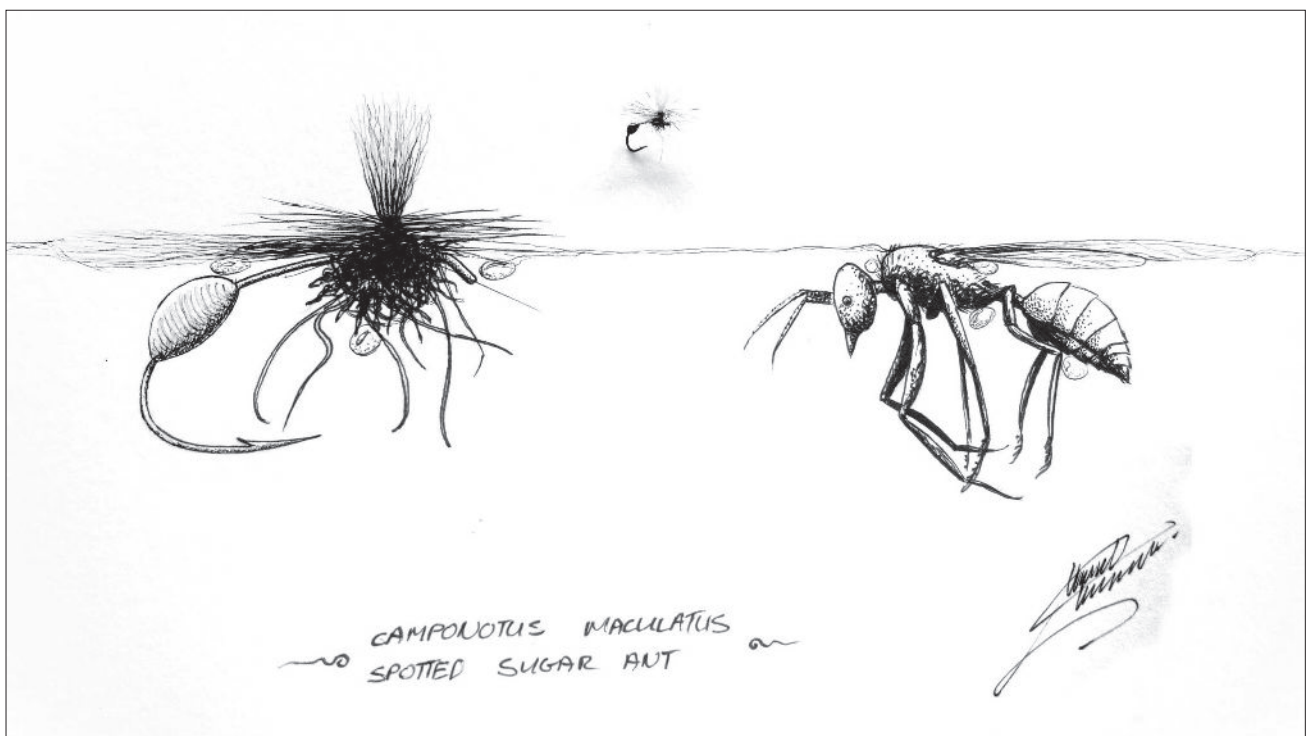




CHAPTER 16

Part 5

Drifting and Sinking Ants



A sketch by Storms River artist, Marcel Terblanche, of his drifting Sugar Ant

"After our success with the Sunk Ant pattern, I adapted it by using a parachute hackle to make a dry ant pattern that could be tied in small sizes. The concept is not new and draws from the Japanese poodle dry flies which are tied on Klink or caddis hooks with an abdomen that sits under the surface film, suspended by the para hackle. With ant patterns it's important to observe a clear separation between the thorax and abdomen to suggest a natural ant shape."

"This Sugar ant dry has proven its worth on the small streams in the Cape and also in the densely forested streams I have fished more recently."

Marcel Terblanche— FOSAF Fly of the Month – November 2023

When it comes to drowned terrestrial insects drifting downstream, gravity determines that the heaviest part of the body will be lowest in the water column. With both the ant and the hopper, that body part is the abdomen.

I have long admired the elegance of the Japanese 'Poodle' flies in which the middle of the hook shank is left bare between two segments of dubbing or peacock herl. I don't know if the ant was the inspiration behind this design, but I would not be surprised.

Marcel has always recognised the importance of ants to trout in the Western and Southern Cape and it was he who brought home to me the beneficial role that the most prolific bankside tree on the trout streams near Cape Town – the Smalblaar Myrtle (*Metrosideros angustifolia*) plays in housing the nests of the Black Cocktail Ant.

His Sugar Ant Dry fly article is available on the 'Ants on the Menu' folder on this website and it is an intriguing design in that the poly wing is divided into three segments, two in a spent wing configuration and utilising the third as a parachute post.



The basic wing structure of the Sugar Ant imitation by Marcel Terblanche

Parachute flies with half the body beneath the surface have a strong vulnerability factor and provide the best of both worlds in that they are visible to the fish and the angler – the Klinkhåmer being an obvious example. Marcel's design is ingenious in that the laterally-splayed wing acts as a supportive outrigger while also suggesting vulnerability and the vertical centre piece provides a means of locating the fly in the drift and an anchor point for the parachute hackle.

The Drifting Ant – part two

'Life changing ants' is the title of chapter 5 in the second of Gordon van der Spuy's two 'Feather Mechanic' books which are so refreshing a change in format from the run-of-the-mill fly-tying books of the past few decades which rely on step-by-step photographs for illustration.

They combine his common-sense writing on fly construction with his attractive step-by-step colour drawings and the result has seen them distributed by Amazon and earning him a burgeoning world-wide audience.



My thanks to him for allowing me to use his illustrations for this chapter on a pragmatic and effective drifting ant pattern which combines the submerged body of the Poodle/Klink approach with a dual parachute design which provides the lateral support of a rooster-feather parachute and the subtle movement of a CDC feather, also tied in a parachute format.

(L) The final stage of Marcel's Drifting Sugar Ant pattern

Between these two local designs you have different approaches that proffer a combination of general-impression-of-size-and-shape plus the vulnerability factor which so distinguishes the Klink-type flies.

There's more. You will find an alternative wing approach which could be incorporated in a drifting ant design – 'Pieter's Maury Split Wing' – a brilliant design by Pieter Snyders in the tutorial section of the Stream and Sea website. The key words for an internet search are 'streamandsea.com + tutorials + Pieters-maury-splitwing'.

The Spent Wing Drifting Ant

I have a conceptual idea of the small drifting ant and again I draw inspiration from tiers of the past. In this case it is Neil Patterson, who introduced the Suspender Nymph, The Funnel Dun and the Sunk Spinner among other patterns in his 1995 Merlin Unwin book *'Chalkstream Chronicle'*. For the Sunk Spinner, Patterson lists a copper wire body ribbed with mono and a cream badger wing tied spent. I substituted poly yarn for the wing.

I had a lot of success fishing my Sunk Spinner equipped with a 1.5 mm black brass bead. I fished it using my usual greased hi-vis leader and yarn strike indicator.

The idea of fishing a spent wing fly beneath the surface makes just as much sense with a drifting ant pattern.

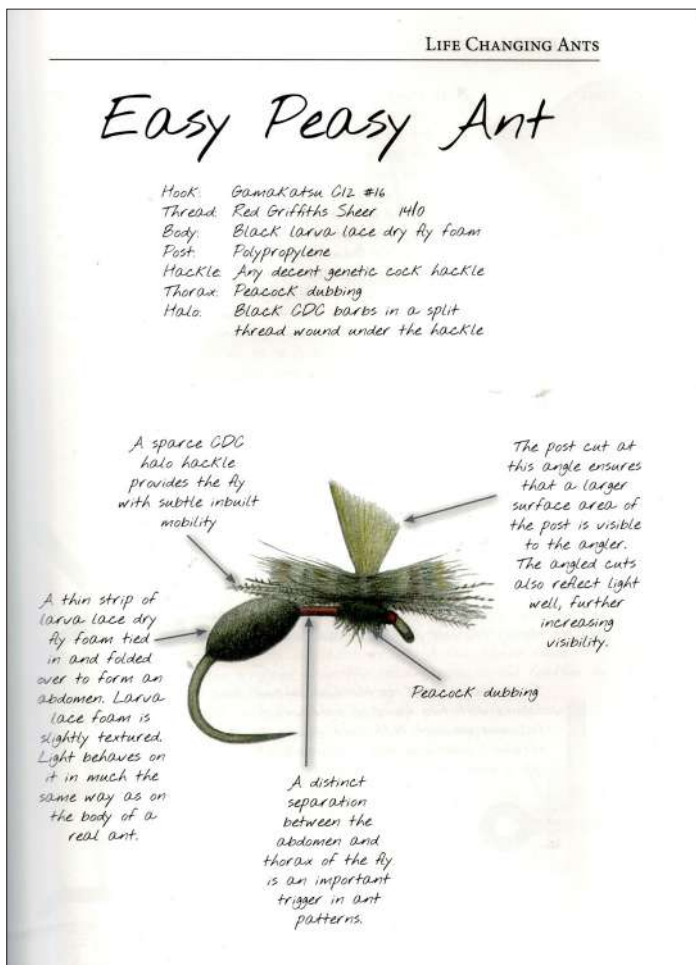
To me, therefore, a logical design path was to combine the spent-wing approach of Patterson's Sunk Spinner with a Poodle-type body in which the middle of the hook shank is left bare.

The spent wing drifting ant, tied poodle-style, is slightly weighted only at the bend, using Hends ultrafine lead wire. My idea is that with its spent wing configuration, which is the very essence of vulnerability, it will drift just below the surface where it is more visible to the fish. Hends wire is fragile,

so I wind it on in open turns on top of the hook shank, and slide them together. Place some superglue on the hook bend and slide the wire into position at the bend of the hook. This will turn the hook, point upwards, and ensure that it drifts vertically with the wing uppermost.

The body material, Hareline EZ Magic Dub, is chosen with specific intent and the inspiration came from the underwater observations of Ralph Cutter in his milestone 2005 Stackpole book, *'Fish Food: A Fly Fisher's Guide to Bugs and Bait'*. Cutter found that ants have hairy bodies to which minute air bubbles adhere making them glisten underwater. EZ Magic Dub is an ultrathin chenille with tiny hairs protruding from it, so it meets Cutter's requirements in that regard. First coat it in a thin paste floatant and then dip it in some desiccant powder. If you examine this material under magnification after you have first applied a thin floatant paste and then dipped it in the desiccant powder, you will see that a tiny grain of the powder adheres to most of these fibres.

(L) The dual-feather parachute hackle used by Gordon van der Spuy on his drifting ant pattern



THE DELICATE FLY FISHER - ED HERBST

At the hook eye, we separate the poly wing with a foam rubber shellback – stretched orange Hareline Fettuccine foam rubber in this case, and dubbing – I have used Hareline's Quick Descent Dub because of its ease of use, but kapok would probably be better.

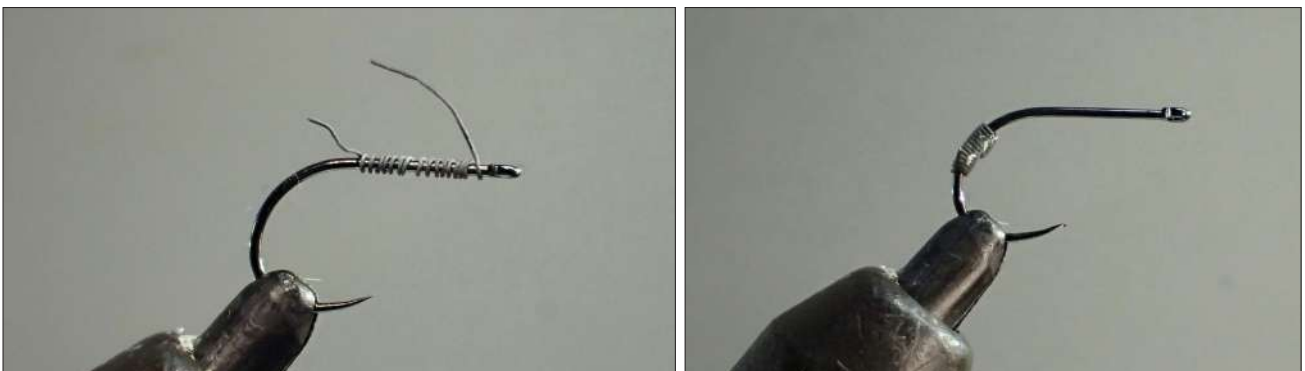
I chose the thread – white Textreme Extreme – because it is the thinnest GSP thread on the market and effectively transparent so, instead of whip finishing when you have completed the abdomen, you can wind the thread forward to the eye and it is unobtrusive, thus maintaining the essential bare midriff profile. Semperfli 20D is slightly thicker. Don't, however, make the mistake I made when photographing the tying steps of this pattern. The most effective method to keep the midsection uncluttered is to whip finish after completing the abdomen and then start again at the hook eye. If, to save time, you simply wind the virtually transparent thread forward, remember that it will turn white when you dip it in the desiccant powder. You, should after completing the fly, use a black permanent marker on the midsection to disguise the thread.



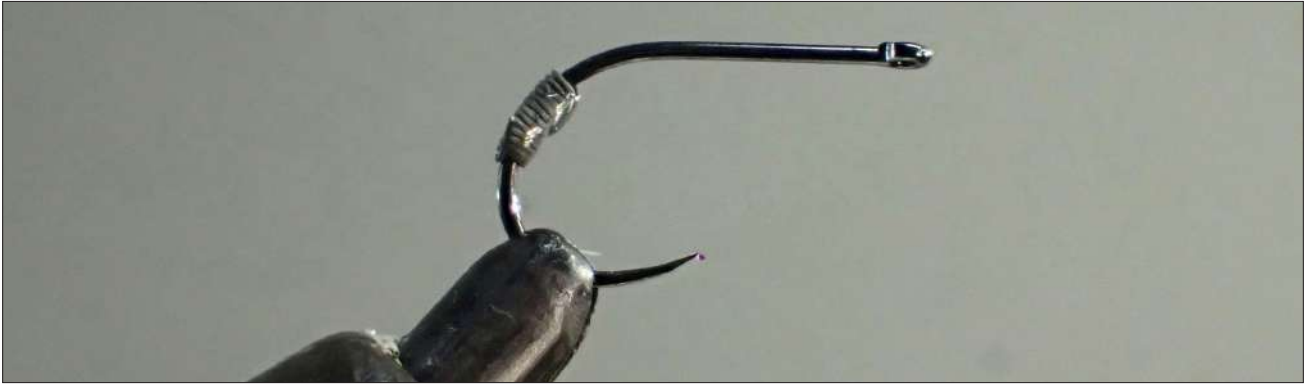
The materials used by the author on his spent-wing drifting ant concept

So, here's the dressing followed by a photographic sequence of its construction:

- **Hook:** *Hanak H550BL Allround or up eye sedge hook such as the TMC 206 BL*
- **Thread:** *Textreme Extreme or Semperfli 20D*
- **Hook bend weighting:** *Hends fine lead wire of Veniard flat lead*
- **Body:** *Hareline EZ Magic Dub covered by paste floatant to which the subsequent application of desiccant powder will adhere.*
- **Wing:** *Poly yarn or wedding organza tied at right angles to the hook shank*
- **Shellback separating wing:** *Foam rubber*
- **Thorax dubbing:** *Kapok preferably or Hareline Quick Descent Dub*



Apply the Hends wire in open turns and then push them together



Place a drop of super-glue at the bend and slide the lead wire onto it



The finished fly – penultimate step



(L) The completed fly after the application of paste floatant and then the bubble-creating desiccant powder

I must say that I am bewildered that fly tyers in general have not acknowledged or taken cognizance of Ralph Cutter's scuba-diving discovery that ants glitter underwater because of the tiny air bubbles adhering to their bodies. There are numerous segments on YouTube taken from their video, *'Bugs of the Underworld'* and their

book *Fish Food: A Fly Fisher's Guide to Bugs and Bait* is available through Amazon in the Kindle version.

The weighted ant fished with a strike indicator

'A miracle'

"As a matter of fact, the first fly I ever tied, around 1940, was Hard-bodied Black Ant.

While I may have tied some silly flies when I first started tying, the Hard-Bodied Ant was my first effective one. I have found that the larger black ants, #10 to #16 are the most effective, while the Hard-bodied Cinnamon Ant is best in #18 and #20. The late Bob McCafferty is credited with the hard-bodied ties and, according to Charlie Fox, also originated the fur-bodied floaters as well."

'Ed Shenk's Fly Rod Troutng' (Stackpole Books,1989)

'Confidently, I tied on one of Ed Herbst's ant patterns onto my 6x tippet below a tiny, black yarn indicator and made the first cast. I spent two hours taking fish at will from underneath the bank, ranging in size from 12-18 inches. Yip. I have to gloat a bit, an 18-inch rainbow is a trophy from any stream, but, on the Eerste, it is a miracle.' Pieter 'Seun' Taljaard **The Pitter-Patter of Ants** Piscator 138, November 2006.

The concept of fishing sunken terrestrials first resonated with me when reading Mike Weaver's *Trout & Salmon* articles about fishing the streams of the Yorkshire Dales, articles which culminated in his 1988 book *'The Pursuit of Wild Trout'*. He heaped praise on a sinking beetle, the Black Bug – a size 16 to 20 weighted peacock herl pattern: ***'When the rivers are at their lowest and clearest ... I turn to a small and sinking beetle, the Black Bug. For some unknown reason, even the most supercilious trout in smooth and shallow water is vulnerable to this fly when presented on a long leader with a very fine point.'***

Equally persuasive was a 1975 article in *Piscator* by Eric Horsfall Turner – *'Comic Yorkshire Fly'* which can be found in the 'Patterns from Piscator' folder on this website. It was essentially a weighted Coch-y-Bonddu with a yellow tag, fished on a greased leader, and the combination proved the nemesis of many selective trout.

However, as I pointed out in chapter 12 of this online book, I came to realise that the beetle season – spring in the Fynbos biome of the Western Cape, was of brief duration but that the Smalblaar Myrtle which lined the banks of our streams hosted the nests of the Black Cocktail Ant which provided a never-ending supply of food to the trout in these streams throughout the year.

My response was the Copper Wire Ant, inspired in part by Vincent Marinaro's description in his classic, milestone book, *'A Modern Dry Fly Code'*, of the inner glow of the red ant:

'Consider for example, the startling fact that in two different species of the same family, the black and the red ant, there is tremendous variance, the former being absolutely opaque in the body and the latter glimmering and glowing as though lighted by some inner fire.'

The great benefit of copper wire in this role is that it is malleable, so you create two ovals, one big and one small, flatten them with a pair of fine-nose-pliers and cover them with nail polish (back then) or UV resin today. If you add glitter dust available at craft stores to the UV resin, you create a mottled effect.

I used to fill the gap with legs created with a fine, crinkly nylon material such as Unique Hair which is most often used in salt water streamers.

There is a reason for this approach. If you are fishing a floating ant on a South African mountain stream in bright sunshine, the chances are that the trout will see it in silhouette in which case Tim Rolston's 'bare midriff' approach will provide a convincing 'general impression of size and shape' perceived image. If, however, the fly is below the surface, the trout can see it in more detail and from further away, so building in legs and antennae can pay dividends.

I described this more complicated approach to tying the sinking ant in an article, 'Tying Ant patterns' which appeared in the November 2004 issue of *Piscator*.

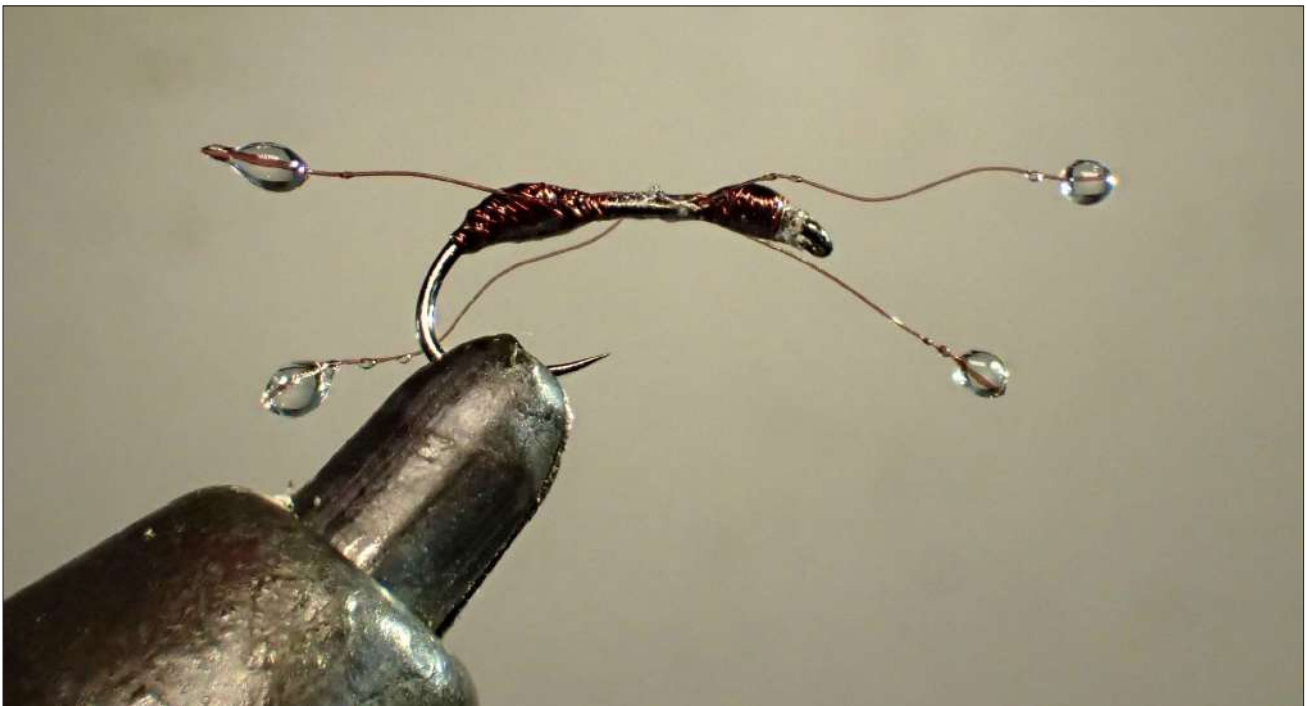
That was the sort of sinking ant used two years later by Pieter Taljaard, as quoted at the beginning of this section, when he had a day of unprecedented success as a student studying at the University of Stellenbosch and fishing the Eerste stream where it flows through the town.

His 2006 article 'The 'Pitter Patter of Ants' in the 'Ants on the Menu' folder on this website, describes a day of success with the copper wire ant on sections of the Eerste stream which he had not previously experienced.

The 'Miracle Ant' he used was drew inspiration in part from an article I had written for *Piscator* two years earlier but, when I tried to replicate that ant for this article, I found that age had taken its toll, failing eyesight and trembling hands made the task more difficult than I expected.

But technological advance had in some measure ameliorated my difficulties. I'm talking about white Textreme Extreme, the thinnest GSP thread on the market which is almost transparent. It eased the difficulty of tying in the Unique Hair legs and I added some Solrare Medium Viscosity globules to the tips of the legs to add some shine and wobble – the idea of split cane rod builder, Stephen Boshoff.

Silvery bubbles are common to so many aquatic insects that they might prove to be a trigger.



A size 16 Copper Wire Ant with its Unique Hair legs tipped with globules of UV light-cured resin – an idea I gleaned from Stephen Boshoff's, 'Light Bulb Legs' approach

Using a bobbin holder to hold the spool of ultrafine wire, allows one to build the body of the Copper Wire ant with greater ease and precision and I use the wide tube Stonfo Bobtec Bobbin Holder (See the video clip 'Stonfo Bobtec bobbins Presented by flytier: Per Ivar Ekeberg').

Marcel Terblanche experienced a similar copper wire ant epiphany when he hiked into one of our most intimidating kloof (canyon) streams near Cape Town and you can read his account on Tom Sutcliffe's 'Spirit of Fly Fishing' website.

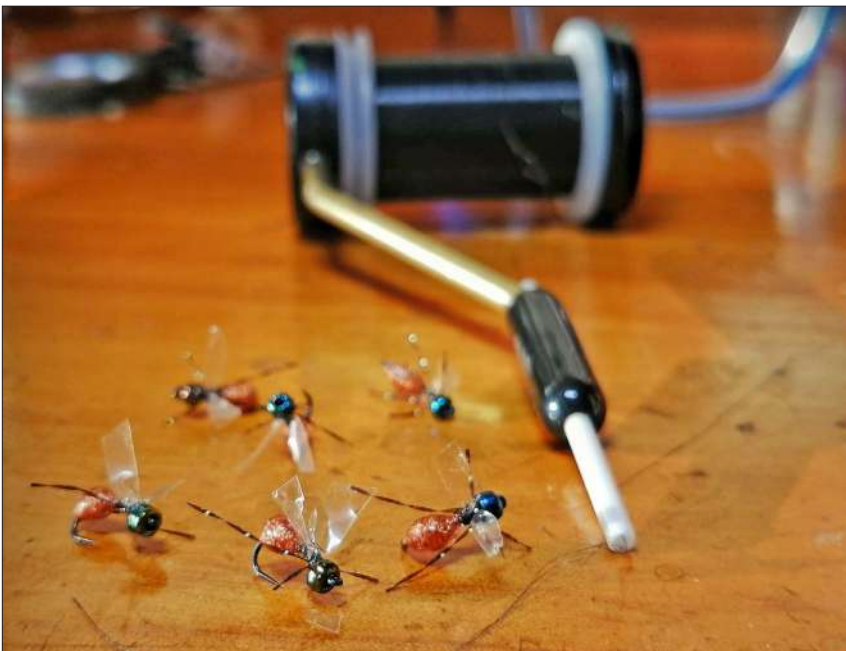
The article is headlined 'Sunken Ants on the Witels' and three of the four brown trout caught were deceived by the sunken copper wire ant using wedding organza to imitate the wings of ants in the alate stage.



A Witels brown trout deceived by the sunken ant – Photo by Marcel Terblanche



A Witels sugar ant and its weighted imitation. Notice the distinct banding on the abdomen which some fly tyers incorporate in their patterns – photo Marcel Terblanche



In Durban, Peter Brigg – whose ‘Call of the Stream’ website beautifully illustrates the beauty of the Drakensberg small streams – had similar success with his own version of the sinking copper wire ant which used plastic wings and Krystalflash for the legs.

(L) This version of the Copper Wire Ant has proved very effective for Peter Brigg in the mountain streams of KZN

In the past two decades or so, technological advances have made the sinking ant far more efficient and very different from Bob McCafferty’s varnished thread

ants which he introduced some 80 years ago.

These advances mainly pertained to weighting and more advantageous hook design which availed creative fly designers more latitude in expanding the sinking ant repertoire.

A quantum leap in sinking ant design occurred when Roman Moser brought into being the most important design factor in modern fly tying - the bead head - in the late 1970s.

You can read his story – ‘The history of the gold bead’ on the Global Fly Fisher website.

Tom Sutcliffe used to ask prominent local fly anglers to name their favourite stream flies and MC Coetzer whose opinions I value, listed a sinking ant consisting of two metal beads, one slightly larger than the other with an organza wing.

The key words for an internet search are: ‘MC Coetzer’s favourite stream patterns.’ It’s an article worth reading, not least for his advocacy of orange in the rubber legs used on hopper patterns – logical given that many of our hoppers have red upper legs and a flash of red in the wings.

MC later switched to a very sparse hen hackle between the black metal beads.

Ideally complementing the use of metal beads in sinking ant patterns was the later introduction of tiny up-eye sedge hooks such as the Tiemco 206 BL which is available down to #24 and the Hanak H360 BL which is available to #20 and the Hanak 550 BL Allround which is available down to #14

As mentioned, drowned ants drift vertically with the heaviest part of their bodies, the abdomen, drifting closest to the stream bed and the head close to the surface. The curved shape of these two hooks, enables one to replicate this body position without reducing hooking ability.

Competitive fly anglers tell me that jig hooks are at a disadvantage when it comes to hooking ability and when you weight a curved hook, it automatically flips into a hook point up position, so I discount jig hooks for sunken ant patterns. If, however, jig hooks are your preference, there are lots of solutions:



A combination of copper wire and a slotted bead provide the weight on this sinking ant tied on a jig hook



Keep in mind that the wings on alates extend slightly beyond the abdomen as reflected in the photo

In the quest for slightly-weighted drifting ants, Hends 0.2mm lead wire plays a useful role when used at the bend of these hooks. It does not occlude the hook gape but pulls these hooks into a position where it is drifting hook point up and with the hook eye closest to the water surface.

Fly anglers have known for decades about the trout's almost obsessional predilection for ants.

For the trout, there is an energy-conserving benefit if the ant imitation arrives at the depth where it is holding.

I witnessed a startling commitment of trout to holding lies which offer them respite from the buffeting, energy-sapping current, which brings them food and hides them from predators. They will defend such favourable lies against perceived intruders such as a rainbow-hued perdigon nymph.

I witnessed this myself.

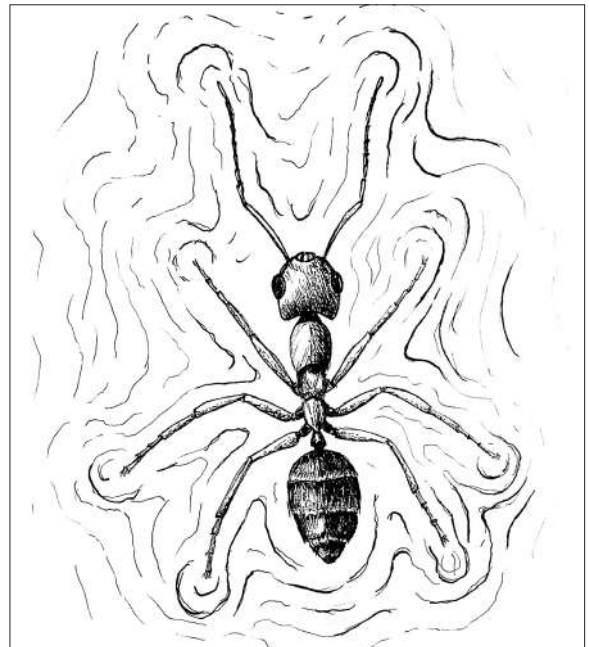
I was sitting on the banks of the Eerste stream which flows through the university town, taking a break and enjoying a sandwich. I spotted a trout a few metres ahead of me, holding tight against a boulder, its head precisely aligned with a spot of the rock. It took my flipped dry fly and I removed the

hook, filled my wide-brimmed hat with water and carried the trout for several hundred yards before releasing it several pools higher upstream. I returned to my half-eaten sandwich and several minutes later, the trout swam past me holding tight to the opposite bank. It circled back and resumed its original position with its head exactly aligned with the spot on the boulder where I had first spotted it.

I witnessed similar example of such behaviour on the Witte stream, one of the few brown trout streams near Cape Town. I was perched on a high rock when I spotted a brown which spooked at my cast and shot upstream. I noted the time on my watch and waited. Exactly 13 minutes later it resumed its place where I had first spotted it and I caught it on next cast. What that told me is that trout have short memories.

What is interesting in the context of the sunken ant, is that Lefty Kreh was invited by Jason Randall when he was writing his 2017 Stackpole-published book *'Nymph Masters – Fly-Fishing Secrets from Expert Anglers'* and one of his seven choices was the decades-old varnished thread ant with a sparse hen hackle representing the legs.

The sunken ant is the deadliest form of ant imitation and YouTube has a number of examples, for example on Kelly Galloup's website, but none utilise the 'glittering ant' discovery of Ralph Cutter or Stephen Boshoff's 'Light Bulb' idea of tipping the hackle or synthetic leg with tiny drops of resin to add flash and movement and none mottle the fly by adding glitter dust to the clear UV resin.



Stephen Boshoff's CDC 'Light Bulb' sinking ant – a principle that can also be utilised with hen hackle or synthetic legs. The constant movement of a drowning ant - sketch by Marcel Terblanche

Ant movement.

About 30 years ago I was fishing a stream near Cape Town and the auguries were not auspicious.

It had rained the previous day leaving the soil moist and porous.

Today it was hot and humid, your shirt sticking to your back and, in the stultifying heat, nothing moved – except the ants.

The stream was carpeted with ants but, of the gluttonous feeding that normally characterise the response of trout to the nuptial flights of ants, there was no sign.

Then, I spotted a smallmouth bass, in a side eddy. The water was shallow and clear and its behaviour fascinated me.

Clumps of dead ants – a lot of protein – drifted past the small bass and were ignored. Then a single ant, struggling mightily, would drift towards the bass and the rise was instant.

That moment lives with me still.

Later there was to be another epiphany.

Having read the articles by *Trout and Salmon* columnist, Mike Weaver, about the efficacy of his sunken beetle the 'Black Bug' and other similar accounts, I became a fervent convert to fishing a slightly weighted beetle imitation on a greased high-vis leader in combination with a small yarn strike indicator.

Then came the day, a hot summer day, when the beetle was not delivering. I sat down in the shade of the streamside trees, realising that the flowers of spring had long since disappeared and so too had the hordes of pollinating beetles such as the Brown Monkey Beetle.

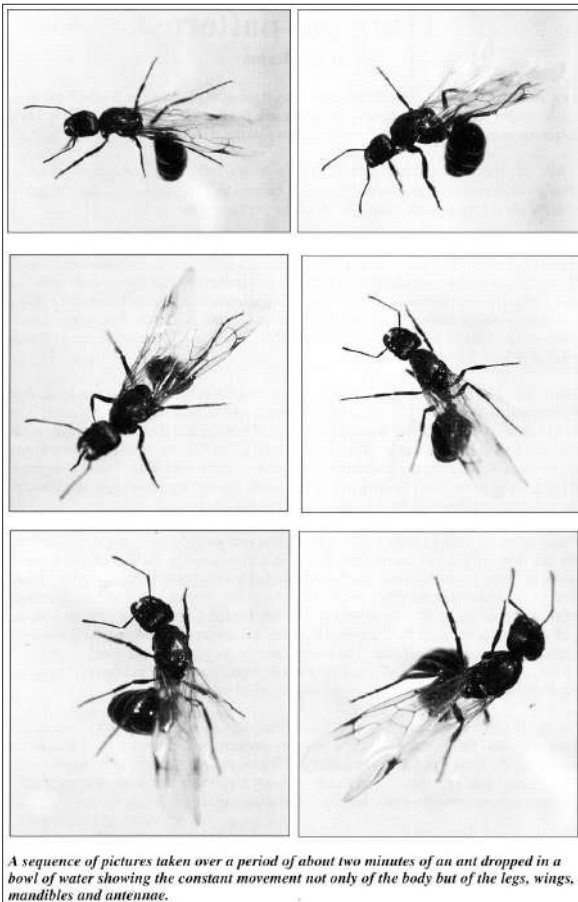
Glancing up I spotted the Papier Mache nests of the Black Cocktail Ant nests and realised they were everywhere.

At that stage I was not aware of the fact that of the symbiotic relationship between this ant and the Smalblaar Myrtle - *Metrosideros angustifolia* – which grew so prolifically on the banks of our streams and fed a constant flow of ants into the water.

That, for me, was the start of fishing a copper wire ant in the same way that I had fished the sunken beetle.

My reasoning was that while Tim Rolston's 'Bare Midriff' floating ant would suffice as a dry fly because it would be seen in silhouette against a usually bright South African sky, an ant imitation seen at eye level had to be more realistic and that this could be achieved by adding legs, antennae and wings to the weighted body.

In 2004 I dropped an ant into a bowl of water and photographed its writhing with a macro lens.



It was in constant motion. Whether that movement would be discernible to a trout as the ant was swept past its holding lie in fast, turbulent water is moot, but I wrote an article 'Tying Ant Patterns' – available in the 'Ants on the Menu' folder on this website which analysed ways in which thin materials like Fluro Fibre and Unique Hair could be used to imitate legs and antennae of small ant patterns.

Adding antennae is easy – a tiny dab of superglue just behind the hook eye. Then, tie an overhand knot in the chosen material, slip it over the hook eye to rest on the superglue and tighten. A bead or dubbing imitating the head of the ant then forces it into the required V shape projecting forward, separated by the hook eye.

The thread I use when tying these small sinking ants is Textreme Extreme in white because it is the thinnest of the GSP threads and can be coloured with a permanent marker.

Since then, there have been what I consider as two significant advances in ant tying, Stephen Boshoff's counterweighted 'Light Bulb' leg – which I call the 'Pendulum Leg' and Ralph Cutter's idea of creating glitter on a furry ant body by adding desiccant dust. Tying the ant back to front with the smallest bulb at the bend of

the hook so that the hook bend is less occluded is also an advance, I feel.

Ant colour

The concept of 'triggers' which cause an instinctive reaction in various animal species has been well researched by Nobel laureate Nikolaas Tinbergen and others.

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 become excited. He realised that they were responding to the passing of the bright red vehicle belonging to the Dutch postal service. Male sticklebacks have a bright red stripe, the females 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 ignoring the male and female fish present.

Tinbergen called these exaggerated features, "super-normal releasers" – in other words they triggered extremes of behaviour.

Tinbergen and other scholars of animal behaviour postulate that predators seek positives rather than negatives, looking not at the object as a whole but for special features they recognise. This explains why trout ignore the hook bend and point.

So, what the fly tyer seeks is to exaggerate the positives and minimise the negatives while at the same time incorporating the triggers which will prompt the fish to move further than usual from its holding lie or to choose their pattern in preference to a plenitude of the real prey.

The most obvious trigger is movement and we have all witnessed a cat's reaction to an object on a string either pulled or swaying backwards and forward in front of it.

In fly fishing this reaction has been well documented. In the USA, Leonard Wright wrote a book, *Fishing the Dry Fly as a Living Insect* based on his observation of trout reaction to egg-laying caddis which land on the water and then scoot upstream in a brief spurt which he called, "the sudden inch".

Manipulating the fly during the drift to simulate movement has long been practised, Sawyer's 'induced take, and the Leisenring Lift being the most obvious examples.

Tenkara rods, long and limber with their delicate tips have excelled at inducing movement, facilitated by the forward-facing, soft hackled sekasa kebari flies.

In Barkly East and Maclear where the rivers carry a heavy load of seeds, leaves and twigs, the dead drift is not nearly as effective, in many instances, as a fly cast downstream and twitched back against the current.

The goal for the fly tyer is to incorporate features or materials that will provoke a greater than usual response from fish.

One such material, for example, is "twinkle organza" a thin fluorescent white thread, crimped at regular intervals to produce a Krystalflash effect.

It is used in white wedding dresses and can be bought by the metre. In an article, in the issue of the American magazine, *Fly Fishing*, Gary Borger described how trout feeding selectively on tiny *Trico* mayfly spinners, chose his artificial with twinkle organza wings in preference to the real insect.

Materials which make flies attractive to trout have been used by anglers for centuries before the advent of such synthetics however – peacock herl and the fur from the ear of a hare are obvious examples.

Colour

And then there is the question of colour...

I have been fascinated by the experiments of two fly fishers, T.C. Kingswill Moore in Britain and Charles Meck in the USA, both involving blue materials.

Kingswill Moore was a judge in the Irish Supreme Court, and kept meticulous records of his experience of seventy years of fly fishing on 32 Irish lakes and 36 rivers. He came to the conclusion that there are three magic materials and three colours which do not regularly occur in nature but nevertheless provoke an unusually positive response – hare's ear, black ostrich herl and the shoulder feathers from a blue jay.

There are indications that trout can see colours in the infra-red and ultra violet spectrum that are not visible to humans and Kingswill Moore believed that three colours, not all that prevalent in nature, are particularly attractive to trout: bright orange, claret and gentian blue. His faith in black ostrich herl was the result of his belief that true black would reflect infra-red-light rays making them more discernible to fish. He photographed various material on infra-red film and under infra-red light. Black ostrich herl and black silk showed up as true black, other materials as grey.

And then there is orange and the mystery of the Orange Quill.

McFlylon is an interesting material – it stretches, has a subtle sheen and a wavy texture. Furthermore, it is lighter than water – and is most often used in fish egg imitations.

I sent some to Heather Ralph - @fishnwine – in Rhodes with the suggestion that it might make a useful strike indicator material.

She greased this poly yarn indicator with Loon Aquel floatant and, fishing the Bell River where it runs past the village, she had a rainbow trout rise to it in three successive drifts.

Whether it is rainbow trout on the streams near Cape Town or browns in the Bushmans River in Kwa Zulu Natal, the attraction of orange poly yarn strike indicators is universal and frustrating. But why does this happen? Why do they ignore the nymph or sunken beetle drifting towards them ahead of the orange strike indicator, waiting until the little bit of floating orange yarn reaches their holding lie before rising in an attempt to capture it?

G E M Skues, in his 1932 book, *Side-Lines, Side-Lights & Reflection* wrote that he had no idea why the Orange Quill was the most successful dry fly during the evening rise to the Blue Winged Olive, a Baetis species: ***'It may be asked why the Orange Quill is taken at night for the BWO. I answer frankly, I don't know.'***

(See: *G.E.M. Skues and the hatching BWO puzzle* on the Rackelhanen website.)

I believe you will find the answer on page 206 of Gary LaFontaine's book *The Dry Fly – New Angles*: ***'When the sun was hitting the cliff, after 4:30 PM., various orange patterns caught almost three times as many fish as they did during the morning.'***

LaFontaine believes that the colour of the ambient light plays a significant role in the success of dry flies and, if trout are used to seeing floating prey bathed in orange light in the late afternoon, would they not, then, associate an orange yarn indicator with food?

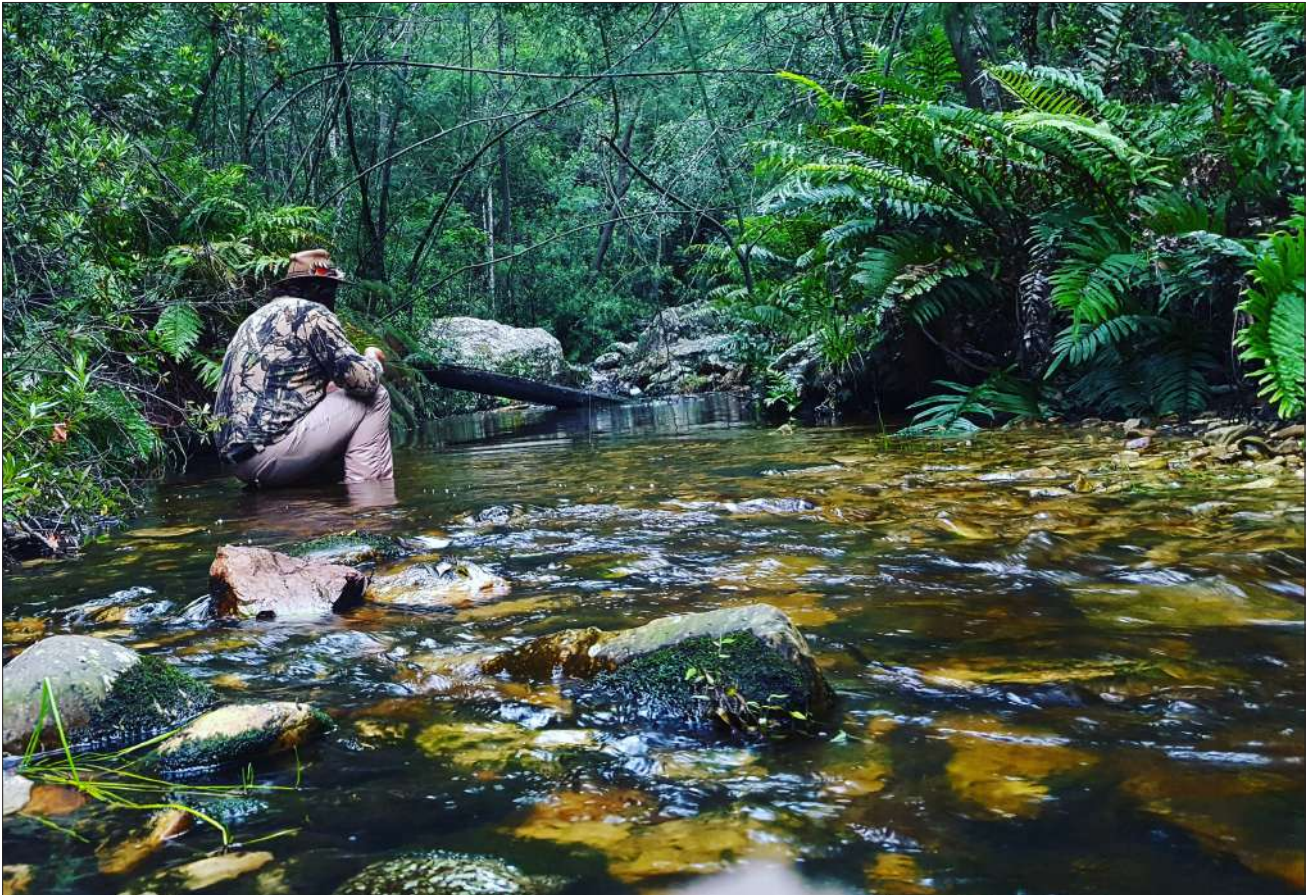
But the realization that orange is attractive to trout predates Skues – most particularly in that most attractive of flies – the Partridge and Orange.

And then we come to blue.

I am ambivalent about blue materials in flies because most of the insects upon which trout in mountain streams prey, are characterised by cryptic browns and olives.

Blue, nevertheless, appeals to trout. T C Kingswell Moore, in his 1960 book 'A Man May Fish' wrote that there were three mystery colours, gentian blue, claret and orange – rarely found in nature – which had a special appeal for trout. In their 1973 study, Ginetz and Larkin fed fish eggs in different colours to rainbow trout and their preference was, in order, blue, red, black, orange, brown, yellow, and green. In 1985, Charles Meck used blue flashabou instead of peacock on his Royal Patriot and substantially increased his catch rate. In 1988, Australian guide Ken Orr fished an effective black seal's fur nymph with a hot orange tag but its success rate increased so radically when he added a rib of blue wire, that he called it the 007 Nymph.

And now, purple.



Marcel Terblanche fishing a tannin-stained brown trout stream in the southern Cape where a soft hackle ribbed with maroon wire, elicited a remarkable response

'The dark, peat-stained and acid waters which extend around the southern tip of the continent for about 300 miles, from the Elgin district above Sir Lowrey Pass along the Garden Route to the Humansdorp district, have been tried with trout since the beginning of the century with but little success.'

That's a quote from an article in the Autumn 1966 issue of *Piscator* by its then editor, A.C. Harrison.

Tannins in stream water are the result of rotting vegetation and in the heavily-forested areas surrounding the Tsitsikamma Mountain range with its high annual rainfall, the high concentration of humic acid results in trout eggs being smothered by what has been termed a 'colloidal coating'.

Brown trout survive in a few tiny streams fished by Marcel which are so heavily vegetated that moving upstream along a chain of tiny pools requires using the paths created by bush pigs – (*P.larvatus*) a wild boar which weighs between 60 to 80 kg (130 to 180 lb.). The most easily observable insect here is spiders.

Early in 2024, he was fishing one of these tiny streams using a small soft hackle – black thread body ribbed with black wire and a sparse partridge hackle - which he hoped would imitate the spiders. After an hour or so without success he changed to the same pattern but ribbed with ultra-fine, wine-coloured UTC wire.

The change was dramatic, with trout moving from the opposite bank to take the fly.

Could this indicate that trout in such streams – like those close to Cape Town where the levels of tannin are lower – are triggered by purple?

I found the answer in a 2013 book by Geoff Mueller – ‘*What a Trout Sees*’ - reproduced here.

“Colors that have intrigued me most in recent times, and seem to have the same effect on trout, are those that fall into the purple and blue end of the spectrum.

It’s been contemporary Rocky Mountain guides singing the virtues of purple Prince nymphs, Poison Tungs, Purple Hazes, Purple Renegades, and purple and blue worms that have sparked a new revolution on the water.

On a recent spring trip to the Missouri with the crew at Headhunters Fly Shop out of Craig, Montana, we experimented with purple Cripples in addition to standard hatch-matching colors during a Baetis storm that brought the river to a froth with rising trout. When the weather turned overcast in the late afternoon, our little purple pills proved far more intoxicating to trout than their more exacting-colored counterparts.

Colorado fly- tying wizard Charlie Craven confirms that he also does best with his killer purple Jujubaetis nymphs under a grey sky that draws unseen characteristics out of patterns that trout find irresistible.

North Platte Lodge/Reef Fly Shop guide Stu Birdsong tells us of the phenomenal success he’s had experimenting with purple and blue patterns—in particular the worm.

His clients hook hundreds of sizeable browns and rainbows on the Grey section of the North Platte River and on other prime Wyoming tailwaters with them annually. In the river and under the water, he’s tested it against chartreuse, pinks, and reds, and his findings are striking:

Purple continues to produce over and above other color options. Birdsong attributes the phenomenon to underwater characteristics, rather than low—light scenarios which seem to drive the success of purple and blue dries.

The Reef runs with a high sediment load through most of the season. Water clarity, although good, is highly different than the streak-free glass view you see on other tailwaters such as the Missouri and Green. He says when purple is viewed against brownish or tannin-colored water, it takes on a more natural light, in addition to having more ‘pop’ or ‘stage presence’ than the traditional colors of the past.

His results from the high-water seasons of 2010 and 2011 are telling. Birdsong says, “We would throw a purple and a red simultaneously and most of the time, no matter what the color combinations, you were best off fishing two purple worms. The first couple of weeks of spring,” he adds, “it was a pretty good split- trout seemed to eat the purple more, but they would eat other colors. As the season progressed and those fish saw more and more worm patterns, purple continued to produce over and above red, pink, or chartreuse. In fact, purple fished so well for his clients that Birdsong and fellow Reef guide Seth Kapust stopped fishing the alternatives altogether. “When purple is viewed against brown or tannin water, I think it takes on a more natural color, but one that sticks out better than other colors.””

Might this explain the success of Tom Sutcliffe’s Zak Nymph which uses purple DMC embroidery thread as a rib?

(Read the article ‘*Tying Zaks – Critical factors*’ on his ‘Spirit of Fly Fishing’ website.)

Purple has not been a ubiquitous colour in the annals of fly tying - I can think only of the Snipe and Purple and Oliver Kite's Imperial.

More recently, we have seen Craig McDonald's Duracell jig nymph become a staple in competitive fly fishing. It uses Hareline UV Brown Ice Dub for the body but, to me, it looks more purple than brown.

Fishing purple and orange ants might well be a game changer.

Pictured here is an ant which combines a black bead at the hook eye and a purple wire abdomen tied by Marcel Terblanche. He says that, by using a dentist pick or dubbing needle, one can actually bend kinks into Krystflash legs to suggest the natural leg joints.



An ant with purple wire abdomen by Marcel Terblanche. The crinkled Krystflash legs could be tipped with a tiny blob of UV resin to add flash and movement

The only disadvantage of fishing ant patterns is that they are difficult to follow in the drift, but the advent of the greased hi-vis leader coupled with a waterproofed yarn strike indicator, solved that problem for me.

Translucence

If you do an internet search for 'ant flies Archives + The Mission Fly Fishing Magazine' you will be taken to three useful articles, the most intriguing of which, for me, is 'Solar Ants – Fly Tying SBS' by one of my favourite fly angling writers, Leonard Flemming. His invention of the Sand Flea imitation and the Wolf Spider, both of which feature on this website, are singular milestones in South Africa's trout fly evolution.

The most memorable quote on translucence in some ant species (most are opaque) came from Vincent Marinaro in his ground-breaking book '*A Modern Dy Fly Code*' – originally written in 1950 and subsequently reprinted: ***'Consider for example, the startling fact that in two different species of the same family, the black and the red ant, there is tremendous variance, the former being absolutely opaque in the body and the latter glimmering and glowing as though lighted by some inner fire.'***

That inspired my Copper Wire Ant originally covered in nail polish and later by UV resin that inspired

'Pieter 'Seun' Taljaard's *Piscator* article, '***The Pitter-Patter of Ants***' which can be found in the Terrestrials folder on this website.

I had vaguely considered tying glass bead sinking ants but the trout streams near Cape Town are strewn with boulders and the chances of breaking a glass bead ant were, I reasoned quite high. This was disappointing because seed beads are tiny and some are lined in a different base colour offering exquisite translucency. Fire Mountain Gems is a website giving useful information on these beads. The three major manufacturers that I value are Toho and Miyuki which are Japanese and the Czech-made Preciosa-Ornela which makes the smallest beads I have been able to source – 16/0. That means that sixteen of these beads laid side by side will cover one inch. Toho and Miyuki make 15/0 seed beads and the generic name for such small beads is rocailles.

What made me re-think the possibility of glass bead ants after reading Leonard's article was that since I wrote my articles – 'Tying Ant Patterns' and 'Tying the Copper Wire Ant' years ago – you can find them in the 'Ants on the Menu' folder on this website -we have seen the advent of protective coatings most specifically the UV light cured resins.

- Leonard recommends Solarez UV-Cure F-I-e-x Formula
- Alan Hobson recommends 'Liquid Fusion' which is available locally through a company called Doodles-Café dot co.za
- Platon Trakoshis, a member of the Mission team, recommends PATTEX Extreme Repair All Purpose Glue – Read his article 'Pattex 100' in the Mission magazine website.
- I'm intrigued by Gorilla Glue because it foams if placed on a wet surface forming minute bubbles which is precisely what Ralph Cutter mentioned about ants glittering under the water surface as tiny air bubbles adhere to their hairy bodies.

Why?

'The principal reason why trout eat ants is that they are both available and abundant'

'To Rise a Trout' John Roberts (The Crowood Press, 1988)

The question that has yet to be answered is why trout on occasion become frenzied in their reaction to an ant fall, throwing caution to the wind and why they will abandon selective feeding on a specific insect hatching in profusion and divert their attention to an ant – Ken Miyata's 'Anting the Hatch'. Miyata wrote of catching trout on his dubbed fur ant pattern at midnight and when the river banks were covered in snow and ants had been hibernating for months. He wrote of catching sea run browns in estuaries where their exposure to ants had been minimal. Furthermore, Leigh Perkins, the man who made Orvis a household name in America, used nothing but a #14 red fur ant during a hatch of the diminutive Trico mayflies because he had proven on many, many occasions that it works.

In 2004 I collated a selection of ant quotes when I was editing *Piscator* under the headline 'Experts on Ants'. The majority of people quoted were from America where the *leitmotif* of fly angling is the mayfly - as it has been in the fly angling lexicon of England and France.

There is an anomaly here because the majority of ants are found in countries below the equator where mayflies are scarce and yet the majority of dry flies used here are mayfly imitations from the Adams to the Royal Wulff, in both shoulder hackle and parachute iterations.

Why, then, are trout so attracted to ants? One of the reasons put forward was the fact that they communicate through pheromones – chemical signals produced outside the bodies of insects.

'In fact, ants are little chemical factories, continuously producing an array of substances, called pheromones, that serve as the ants' language. Through these pheromones the ants can convey messages ranging from the location of food to the presence of danger. They use pheromones as well to orchestrate social behaviours as diverse as tending the young, grooming the queen, marking their

territory, and mating.' Bert Holldobler, *Ways of The Ant*, National Geographic, June, 1984

References to ants in fly fishing literature date from Walton's time with Charles Cotton giving dressings for an imitation in the 1676 edition of *The Compleat Angler*.

Subsequently, other British fly-fishing authors, including Alfred Ronalds (1836), G.P.R. Pulman (1841), Michael Theakston (1853) and Frederick Halford (1913) all listed ant patterns in their books. What is relevant here, for our purposes, is that ants are far more prolific in sub equatorial Africa than they are in the cold climes of Britain.

In Britain, the nests of Wood Ants, (*Formica Rufa*) have the pungent, acidic odour traditionally associated with urinals and this has been recognised in literature for centuries, leading to the medieval name for ants – "pismires".

He is as crabbed as an old pismire,

Though he has everything he can desire.

-Chaucer (c.1342-1400), *Canterbury Tales*, 1386-1400, *The Summoner's Tale*

Why, look you, I am whipp'd and scourged with rods, Nettled and stung with pismires, when I hear of this vile politician, Bolingbroke.

-Hotspur, in Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Henry IV*, 1598, part 1, Act 1, Scene 3

But it is only in the last seventy odd years that anglers have sought to attribute to formic acid the trout's attraction to ants, an attraction which they have empirically proven through countless successes with flies representing this insect.

It was Edward Ringwood Hewitt, one America's most significant fly-fishing innovators, who first publicised the fact in his book, *A Trout and Salmon Fisherman for Seventy-five Years* (Charles Scribner, 1948)

'One evening, on the Neversink, we noticed a great rise of trout in the large pool at the Big Bend. They were located where the current runs along the ledge. My son and I fished for about two hours without hooking a single one. We tried all patterns of flies with no results. There were large numbers of small black flies in the air, sometimes even clouds of them, as well as other insects, and even larger flies.

'Finally, one of these clouds of black flies came around my head, and as I opened my mouth to speak one or two of them got in it, and to my surprise they tasted quite bitter. These were small flying ants, and were bitter with formic acid. The fish were evidently taking these small flies on account of this taste, and would not touch anything larger until these insects had all disappeared.

'I took some No. 18 flies and cut down the wings to make them about the size of the flying ants, and at once began to get fish. We took a dozen good-sized ones in a little while.'

Not everyone has bought into this theory...

'For some reason trout seem to find ants particularly attractive. It can't be their size, surely; they hardly seem big enough to bother about. It was left to E. R. Hewitt to suggest that it is the tartness of their taste that appeals. He put forward the theory that the taste of their formic acid content is strongly attractive, and, being a chap to put his mouth where his money is, he ate some to prove it.

This must be one of the most pointless angling experiments I can imagine. Hewitt assumed trout to have the same degree of taste that humans enjoy, and that because a taste is tart it is pleasurable to trout. Other fly fishers have followed Hewitt's example only to find ants tasteless.

I am an angler who likes to put theories into practice but I stop short at tasting flies to see if trout might like them. Mayflies, caddis, caterpillars, dragonflies are all available - why did Hewitt stop at

ants? The principal reason why trout eat ants is that they are both available and abundant.' John Roberts, *To Rise a Trout*, 1988.

Research in the past few decades has shown however that ants, unlike caterpillars, dragonflies et al, communicate through a complex mix of extremely potent chemicals.

Lacking both voice or hearing, they use these chemicals in a variety of ways; to create trails for others to follow, to recruit others when there is a need to attack and subdue prey, to raise the alarm when an attack from another colony is imminent and to threaten the attackers etc.

No less than five glands produce these pheromones. Beginning at the head there is a mandibular gland that exudes alarm odours as does the Dufour's gland in the abdomen.

Also in the abdomen are a poison gland that produces formic acid and other venoms, a sternal gland that summons workers from nearby and a rectal gland that secretes trail-marking odours.

These chemicals are extremely potent as research at Cornell University has found – so potent that the possibility of using them as a cure for Alzheimer's disease is now being researched:

'Gas chromatographic and mass spectrometric analyses in the Cornell laboratory identified four components in the multipurpose fluid from the ants' poison glands. They are N-isopentyl-2-phenylethylamine, a key compound never before identified from nature; anabaseine (3,4,5,6-tetrahydro-2,3'-bipyridine); anabasine [3-(2-piperidiny)pyridine]; and a fourth chemical never before found in ants, 2,3'-bipyridyl.'

Ants can detect just a few parts of their pheromone in a billion parts of air but such sensitivity is not unique in nature. Salmon and trout can detect similarly minute levels of chemicals in the water and this is shown by the ability of salmon and sea run trout to return to their natal rivers.

My sense, however, is that the most prosaic reason why trout fixate on ants is, as John Roberts, suggests, it is the insect that they see and eat most often.

Habitation

Scientists estimate that there are an estimated 2.5 million times more ants on this planet than people which works out at 20 quadrillion – the majority being found in the southern hemisphere. What that means for trout, I assume, is that they would be accustomed to seeing more ants than other insects and thus take them with less suspicion.

Furthermore, they don't have much response time because the ant with its distinctive silhouette sweeps in an out of its window quickly and they have competition from other trout to worry about.

Fly anglers in the USA have learnt to trust the ant as a fly that has universal attraction for trout no matter what the circumstances and I believe it is equally deserving of trust here, given that they exist in greater numbers locally than in the colder northern hemisphere.

In England, Tom Saville wrote:

'I've seen boats drive right through a shoal of trout rising to ants, and the fish have continued to rise in the wake, so intense was their desire.'

(Reservoir Fishing with Tom Saville – Trafalgar Square 1991)

But it was a reference in a Tasmanian book that, for me, best captured the extraordinary power that ant patterns have to tempt, the most fastidious and, in this case, the most sated trout and it is this passage that I leave you to contemplate along with the advice contained in Proverbs, Chapter Six verse Six:

'He cast the small ant pattern onto fast water in the neck above the deep Willow Pool and found himself fast to a good fish of about a kilogram which took the little fly ravenously. The trout was

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duly landed and when cleaned was found to contain a fully grown field mouse – and yet it could not resist that tiny ant.'

Tony Ritchie, *Dry Fly-Fishing for Trout*. (Kangaroo Press, 1994)

