

# Mayfly magic

by Eddie Gerber

In the early morning light we stood in awe and watched as the delicate little mayflies hatched off the water in their thousands, forming dense clouds in the still air over the river and along the road. I had never experienced a hatch of this magnitude on any of our Cape streams before. It seemed as though every fish on the Smalblaar was rising, which sent both Leonard, my fishing partner, and I into a manic state of "Salmo Fever." For the entire duration of the hatch none of our offerings seemed to be noticed by the feeding fish all around us. Only when the hatch stopped did we start taking fish.

A couple of days later I mentioned the size of the hatch to Ed Herbst at a fly tying evening, and after describing the mayfly in detail, he identified it as "*Baetis Harrisoni*", more commonly known as the "Yellow Dun".

The Yellow Dun is a Baetid mayfly and nearly all the small duns and spinners described by British writers as "Olives" (except the Blue-winged Olive), the Pale Wateries, the Iron Blues etc., belong to this family. They are the stock-in-trade of the dry fly angler and their nymphs often form the bulk of the living-drift trout food and are a cause of "bulging" and "tailing" often seen on our waters. The Baetid nymphs exist in our rivers in great numbers, and are usually equipped with fringed tail whisks for rapid darting between stones and weed beds. When research on Cape mayflies was started in 1930, not a single species had been identified even though it was evident that many representatives of the family were present. Many of the trout taken from our rivers were often filled to capacity with them and the water could be seen to be teeming with darting, drifting and "hatching" Baetid nymphs. The majority of the research and identification on the Cape mayflies can be credited to AC Harrison and Dr KH Barnard.

Often, rainbows seen poised near the surface feeding continuously on seemingly invisible objects, will be taking dislodged nymphs of which Baetids will generally be the more prolific. A small nymph pattern, such as a PTN, GRHE or "Hare & Copper" fished on it's own or a couple of inches below a dry fly, will usually be effective for taking these fish.

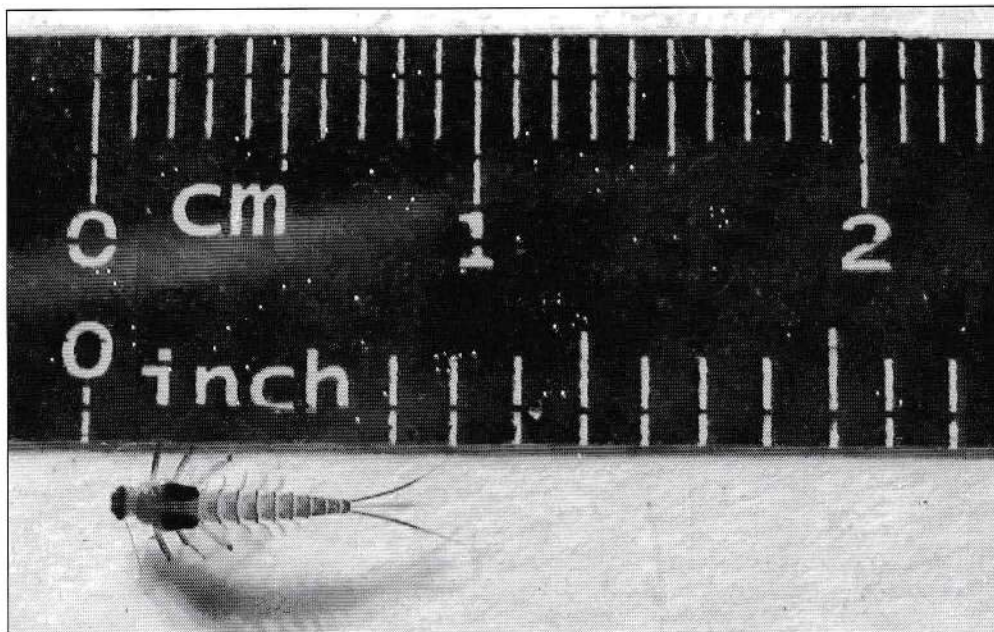
## Adults:

The adults are active all year, but most plentiful in spring and summer. A number of the subimagos (duns) are pale yellow or primrose. Hence its descriptive name, Yellow Dun.

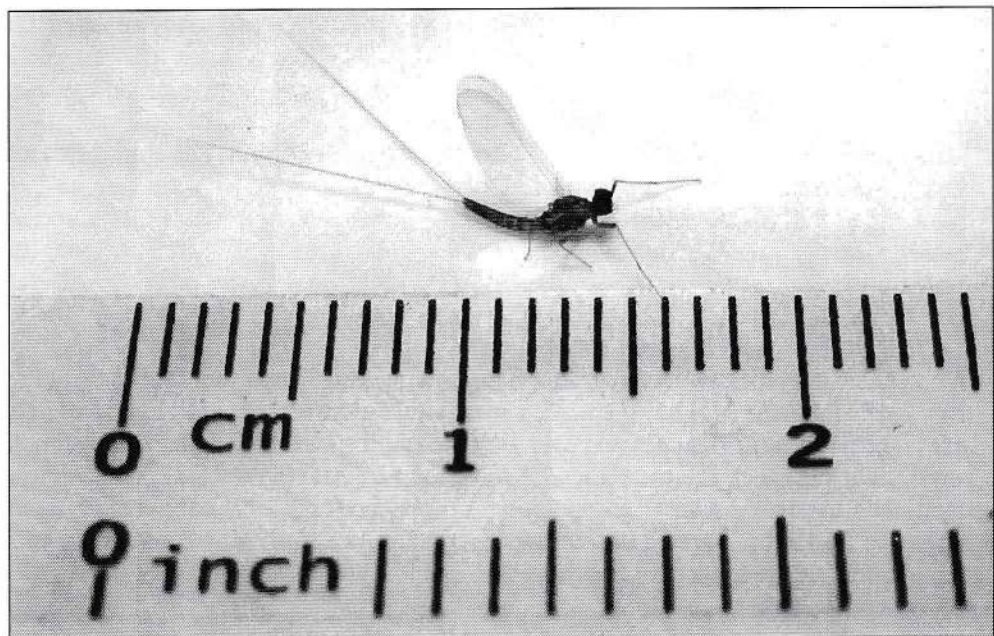
The male dun is 5-6 mm long in body and forewing, and the female 6,5-8 mm in body and 7,5-9 mm in wing length. There are only two tail whisks, which in the male are twice the length of his body. These sizes correspond approximately to the British Olive and Pale Watery duns. The imago (spinner) has a wine-coloured hue when seen in flight.

## Nymphs:

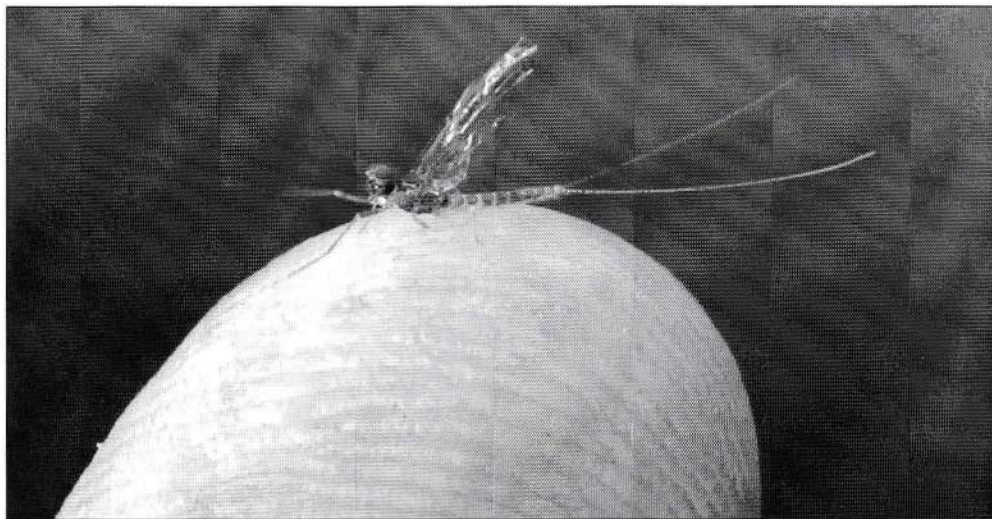
The mature nymph is up to 9 mm. long with three hairy tails of 4-5 mm. long. The middle tail is shorter than the outer two. There is often a dark band across the middle of the tails which shows as a dark dot under the swimming nymph. The body is spindle shaped,



*The nymph of Baetis Harrisoni, a mayfly species named after A C Harrison, the first editor of Piscator. Photograph Eddie Gerber.*



*The adult, having emerged from within the nymphal shuck, is slightly smaller than the nymph.*



*A Baetis harrisoni adult on a fingertip giving an indication of its size. Note the conical eyes. Photograph Eddie Gerber.*

usually pale brown or straw coloured above and whitish below. Some show a well-defined pattern which is continued in the subimago. They have leaf shaped gills on both sides of the abdomen.

The female imago (spinner) of this species makes use of ovipositing to lay her eggs. This means that she enters the water with wings folded along the body by crawling down partially submerged rocks to lay her eggs-masses on submerged stones. Air is trapped under the wings and after laying their eggs this air helps them ascend to the surface again. Hundreds never make it because they get swept away in the current. The largest fish look for the easiest meals under the water and this is what makes patterns such as the Sunk Spinner and Soft Hackle so effective. Even when fish are eating spinners off the surface, fishing a sunk spinner to them will produce some surprising results. Often the spinners that trout are rising to, are more abundant under water. Sunken spinners present a safer and easier meal for trout.

When fishing dryflies to Baetis feeding fish, the three most important factors that I have found to be the difference between success and total failure are, tippet size and length, fly size and colour. Baetis hatches make for very demanding and challenging fishing, but the rewards far outweigh the frustrations. I have found flies from # 16-22, depending on conditions, to cover just about any situation. In the Feb/March 2004 edition of Flyfishing magazine Ed Herbst covered the sunk spinner and in the April/May copy he did an in-depth article on the egg laying Baetis.

Tying Baetis patterns and fishing them successfully are a challenge and extremely satisfying when you have success... Try it - I'm sure you'll agree!

