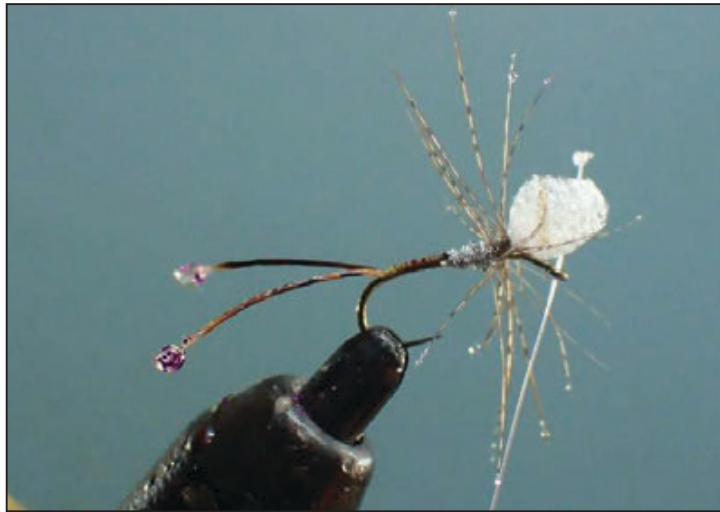
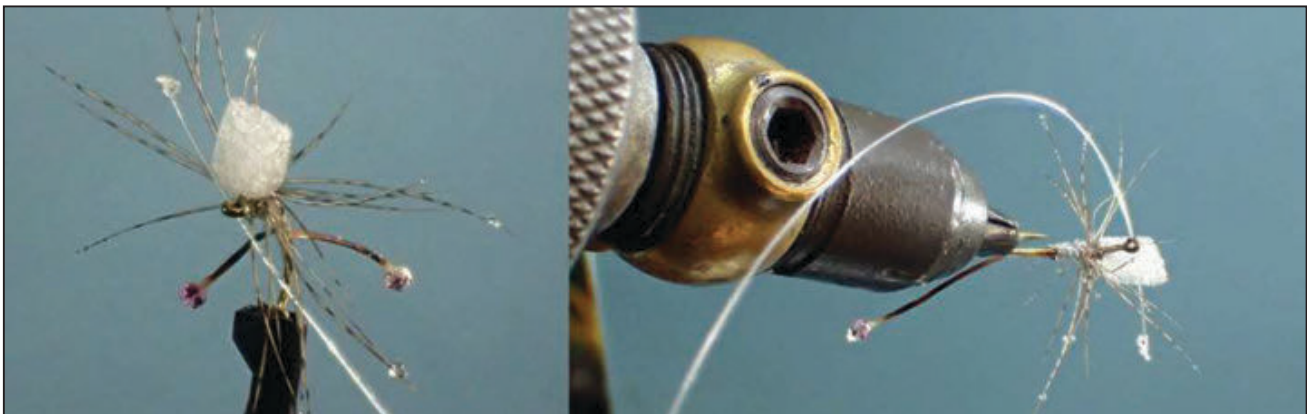


SLIP-KNOT EMERGER

Ed Herbst



A Slip-Knot Emerger tied on the Tiemco 108SP-BL showing the UV resin 'Light Bulbs' on the tips of the rubber tails and the stop knot which allows the fly to pivot freely around the end of the tippet

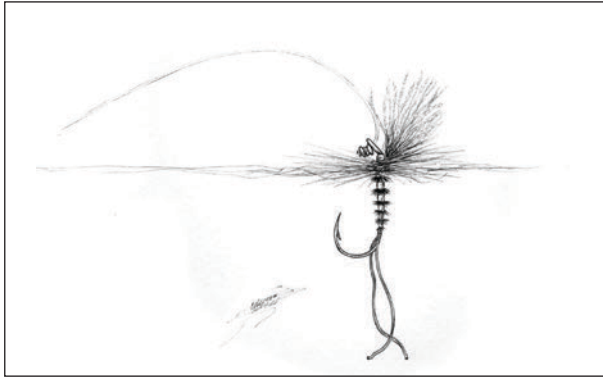


Two views – left and right – of the author's Light Bulb Slip-Knot Emerger

Aquatic scientists tell us that trout locate their prey through movement and contrast but I think you cannot rule out vulnerability as a factor. Aquatic insects are at their most vulnerable when they are pinioned in the surface film at the moment of eclosion.

The English Mole Fly and the French Pont-Audemer show that fly anglers have recognised for centuries that an aquatic insect is at its most vulnerable when it reaches the water surface and transitions into an adult insect.

NOTE: This piece on the Slip-Knot Emerger first appeared in *"The Delicate Fly Fisher"* by Ed Herbst published in 2025 by the author and available from the Xplorer fly-fishing shop in Durban.



The Pont-Audemer re-imagined by artist Marcel Terblanche as a Slip-Knot Emerger

The video potential of modern mirrorless DSLR cameras shooting at multiple frames per second has given us unprecedented visual evidence of how trout predate on emerging aquatic insects such as mayflies. What is conclusively proved is that trout will swim around a mayfly which has successfully shed its shuck and is about to fly away. The preferred option is a mayfly where that process has been unsuccessful and it is unable to escape. That combination of frantic movement and vulnerability is key to which insect will motivate a trout to rise.

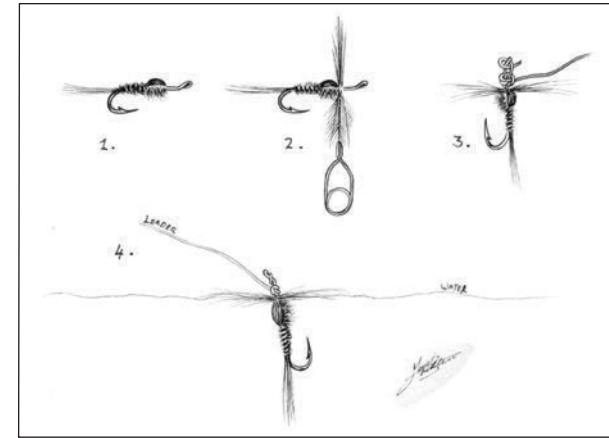
That ideal, a fly pinioned in the meniscus, resulted in different design approaches in the US and in England.

In the USA the goal was to imitate the emerging mayfly and Vincent Marinaro's Hanging Emerger, illustrated on page 82 of his book, *In the Ring of the Rise* (Crown Publishers, New York, 1976), shows that he forced the hook into an upright position by using a riffling hitch.

In the description of the design rationale for this fly (pages 84-85) Marinaro says: "I wanted above all to try to duplicate the performance of the nymph touching or clinging to the underside of the surface film with its head exposed and about to emerge."

Describing how he solved the problem he refers to the hook he chose: "The wire is rather heavy in the bend then it tapers very finely to the eye. This is ideal for the hanging nymph because it helps concentrate the weight near the bend."

He then says: "The body and thorax should be finished at least 1/8 inch short of the eye." He calls for a



My thanks to Storms River artist and fly angler, Marcel Terblanche, for this rendition of Vincent Marinaro's sketch of the riffle hitch hanging emerger

"...wide, sparse, spidery circle of stiff fibres around the neck. The tie-off point should still leave some space behind the neck.

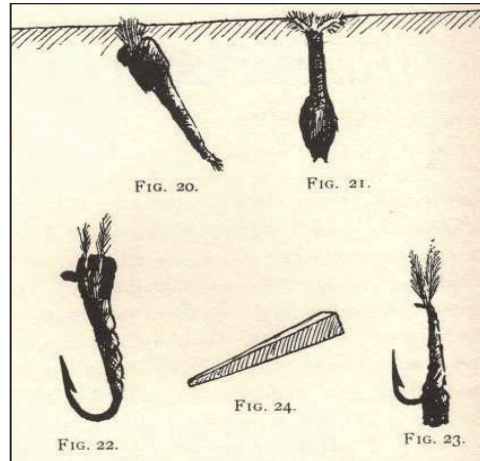
The last and very important step is to tie the leader with a Turtle or some such knot, after which a riffle hitch or two half hitches are made around the neck of the fly. The fly will then be knuckled and standing out at right angles to the leader. The fly should be cast into the air above the water and be given time to upset so that the heavy bend falls and penetrates the surface film. Its descent will be stopped by the large thin spread of hackle resting on the surface and acting as a buoy, allowing only the head to emerge. That is the hanging nymph or emerger."

In a note accompanying the illustration he says:

"The riffle hitch will force the nymph to take a position at right angles to the leader and cause it to fall tail first into the water but holding it against the underside of the surface film by the surface support of the widespread, spidery hackle."

In England, imitating the chironomid pupa at the moment of eclosion was the design goal and Blagdon Reservoir, constructed in 1905, provided the research opportunity.

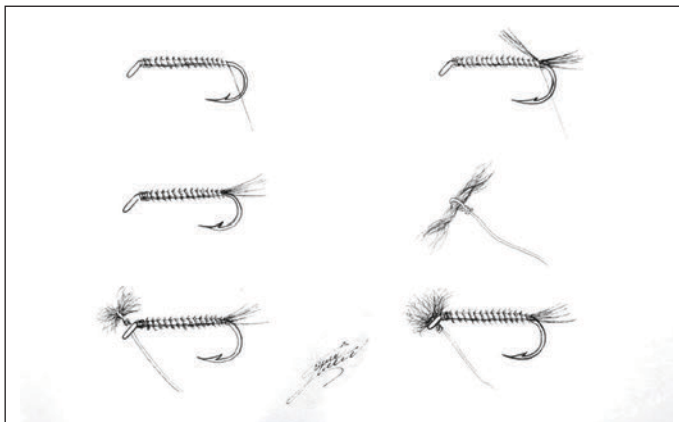
Dr James Cecil Mottram, a doctor specialising in cancer research, used cork at the hook eye and a greased leader for his midge pupa imitation, described in his 1913 book, *Fly Fishing: Some New Arts and Mysteries*.



A scan from J C Mottram's 1913 book showing how he used cork strips to suspend the buzzer pupa imitation vertically in the meniscus

The next and singular pattern which also contributed to the evolution of my Slip-Knot Emerger was Frank Sawyer's Bow Tie Buzzer which was developed in the late 1950s at Alex Behrendt's Two Lakes fishery.

Sawyer was a pragmatist whose fly designs were based on an intensive study of aquatic insect behaviour – in this case the movement of chironomid pupae as they emerge. He realised he could more closely emulate that movement if the fly was free to pivot around the tippet.



Frank Sawyer's Bow Tie Buzzer as depicted by Marcel Terblanche – a singular inspiration in the design of my Slip-Knot Emerger

Nick Sawyer, Frank's grandson describes how he designed a pattern which broke away from convention which is a fly rigidly tethered to the tippet.

"The important thing is to thread up through the hook eye, then disregard the actual nymph on the leader and fashion a slip-knot at the end of the tippet. Put a piece of wool into the slip-knot and pull the knot tight. Then with a sharp pair of scissors, cut away all but a tiny bit which should be held firmly in the knot. A small piece is enough, just sufficient to prevent it from pulling through the eye of the hook. If you make the bow too big the general effect is ruined and fish refuse to take. When rigged properly the bow tie should seat nicely in the hook eye when the nymph is slid down to it, and yet it should be free to move. The actual hook eye of the nymph is free on the leader and so rigged that it can wobble from side to side or spin completely round as though swivelled. This combination of movement is sufficient to delude fish into thinking the nymph is alive."

Sidney Vines, Sawyer's biographer, quotes him on this subject in his 1984 book 'Frank Sawyer – Man of the Riverside' which is available through the Internet Archive.

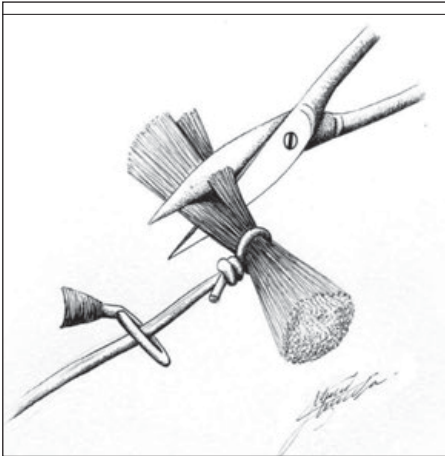
"Buzzer nymphs cannot swim in this sense; their movement to or from the surface is mostly in a vertical plane, upwards and downwards, not through the water. They have no real legs or setae to act as propulsion units. The manner of ascent or descent is by a series of loops or convulsions, a wriggle more than any straightforward swimming."

"Because of this and because also these nymphs have a habit of hanging in mid-water and at the surface, I found it extremely difficult to incorporate anything in the tying which could simulate movement, the kind of movement a fish expects to see."

"Then it occurred to me to try a nymph in two parts. One of the main features of the buzzer is the white fringe, or Celia, present at the front of the head. This shows very prominently when the nymphs are about to hatch and is in continuous movement. And I felt, if I made this separately, and so that it could have free movement in the water, that I would accomplish something worthwhile. Then it struck me that this could be carried on the end of the leader. A little bow-tie, in fact, which could move in the eye of the hook. At the same time, I accomplished something else for, with this attachment, the nymph could hang almost vertically in the water and, if so desired, the body could be made to spin around the leader."

"So now the secret, if indeed it is a secret, is out. All you have to do is to make up a nymph body of a size, shape and coloration to suit the natural, and then make up the bow at the end of the leader at the time you want to fish."

All I did was replace the wool bowtie with a stop-knot – the Surgeon's Swivel – which, when cemented with Loon Knot Sense, was strong and allowed the size 16 Orvis Big Eye hook model number 4641 - which is the same as the Daiichi 1110 Big-Eye - Ring-Eye Hook - to spin around the 6x tippet in response to current pressure. I believe the Tiemco 108SP-BL – illustrated below – with its sharply downturned eye could also be useful in tying the SKE – I just wish the eye was bigger.

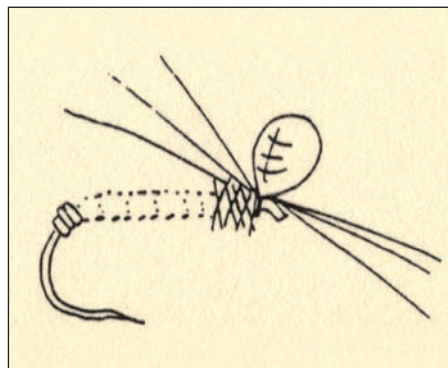


A Marcel Terblanche sketch showing how Frank Sawyer enabled his Bow Tie Buzzer to pivot around the tippet

The next pattern which contributed to my thinking on the Slip-Knot Emerger was the Suspender Midge – a collaboration between John Goddard and Neil Patterson. The story is told in Patterson's wonderful 1995 book 'Chalkstream Chronicle' (Merlin Unwin Books) wordplay on what, in oldertimes, held the stockings up. This pattern, in turn, was inspired by the Natant Nylon Nymph of Charles Brookes, and merely substituted foam rubber for the dubbing which Brookes had encased in the stocking material.



The author's favoured hooks for tying the Slip-Knot Emerger



A scan from Neil Patterson's book of his Suspender Midge

The goal as Patterson puts it, was a midge pupa that "...hangs from the surface film like a ceiling light".

'Umbrella Posture'

A game changer for me was reading the account by Dave Hughes in his book 'Trout from Small Streams' (Stackpole, 2002) in which he describes how the 'umbrella posture' of traditional soft hackles radically changed his catch rate on a small mountain stream.

Hughes had, without success, been fishing one of the steep-gradient, crystal staircase rain forest streams near his home in coastal Oregon.

Its trout were entirely disinterested in his usual small stream attractor dries or that old reliable, the Elk Hair Caddis.

Then he recalled that he had a small tin of soft hackles inspired by the books of Sylvester Nemes in his pocket. A size 10 Partridge and Yellow produced a Damascene moment and he took trout after trout, sometimes in successive casts.

The soft hackle acted like a parachute and held the fly upright in what he called an 'umbrella' posture and this, he believed, was what made it so deadly:

"The bright soft-hackle, with its yellow body and hackle of gray partridge, white speckled with black spots, was easy to see. Because it was tied on a dry-fly hook, it sank scant inches, then drifted along at the same level. Its posture was most interesting. You remember Mary Poppins descending over London in the opening scene of the movie, suspended from her umbrella? Take away Miss Poppins and a soft-hackle adrift on the currents would look precisely like that umbrella. The fly, probably because the hackle acted as a parachute, took the open, upright position, its splayed hackle up, its body vertical beneath it, the hook bend precisely like the handle of an umbrella held up against rain."

"The wet fly prompted all sorts of antics from trout the rest of that day. I'd be able to see into the water and watch them rush it in a bunch on the first cast to any pool, sometimes five or six of them at a time. The largest would often inhale it instantly, before any smaller trout could get to it. I'd play that trout to hand, unhook it, and drop it into the pool downstream from me, where I'd already fished. Then I'd cast again, the cloud of trout would appear again, and the next largest trout would take it, though slightly less swiftly. I'd play it out, release it downstream, cast again, and hook another, often in descending order of size."

I had two questions after reading that account:

- How can I hold a soft hackle in the surface film in the 'umbrella posture'?
- Why did this radical change in strike rate occur?

Holding it in the 'umbrella position' in the meniscus and at right angles to the tippet was achieved by me using a piece of foam rubber at the hook eye as John Goddard did with his Suspenders Nymph and a greased leader combined with a Surgeon's Swivel knot, popularised by, but not invented by Art Lee.

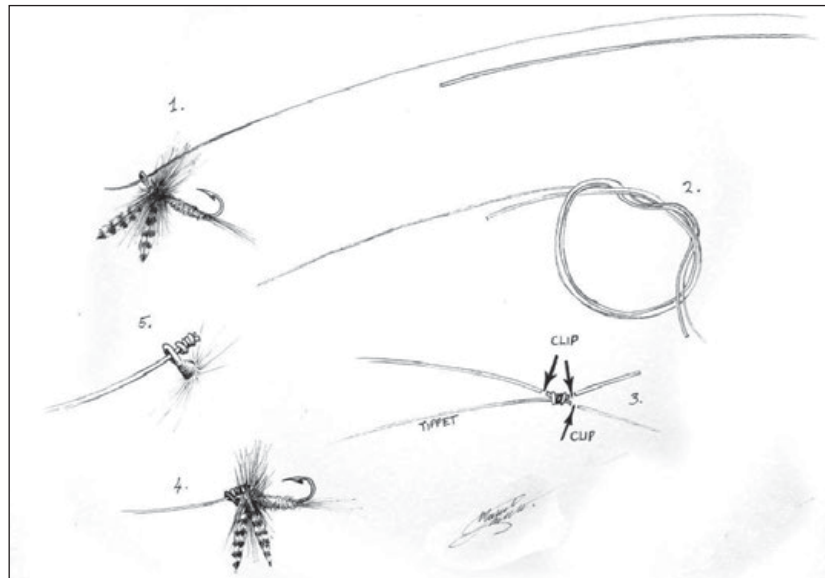
The Surgeon's Swivel is just a triple overhand stop knot with the tags cut off and it allows the fly to pivot freely around the tippet.

The original idea of the Surgeon's Swivel Knot was to use it with big-hackle Variant dry flies to prevent tippet twist.

To construct this knot, slip the fly onto, say, a 6x tippet. Take a few centimetres of 5 x tippet, lay it alongside the 6x mono tippet and tie a triple overhand knot using both sections of mono.

Lubricate with Loon Knot Sense and slowly tighten. Clip the loose ends.

Then use a small UV torch to cure the knot or expose it to sunlight. This fused knot should not fail you on small stream trout particularly when using today's softer-actioned fiberglass rods which are finding increasing favour with small stream fly anglers.



Tying the Surgeon's Swivel Knot – fused with Loon Knot Sense when tightening

In creating a 'hanging fly' with maximum movement - Sawyer's goal - I had one advantage that he did not – the Orvis Big Eye hook in straight-eye configuration.

It's a 1x fine hook patented by Jim LePage of Orvis in 1990. What is important in the context of the fly being able to pivot on the tippet in response to the pull and push of the current is that the internal diameter of the eye is much wider than is usual for this hook size, the same size, in fact, as a conventional size 10 dry fly hook. It is made by Daiichi who also market it as their 1110 model. The Tiemco 108SP BL in #16 might also have potential in this role.

The greased tippet

"And I grease the daylights out of my leader. The whole thing, right down to the fly. I originally started greasing my leader with silicone dry-fly paste because I had trouble following my fly in a pocket water stream that never seemed to see the sun. I found I could trace the fly better by looking for the shine of the leader on the water, and it didn't bother the trout at all."

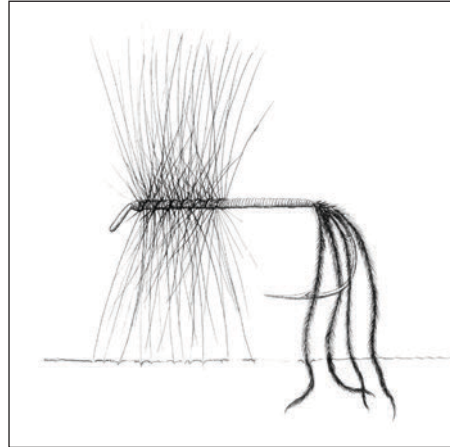
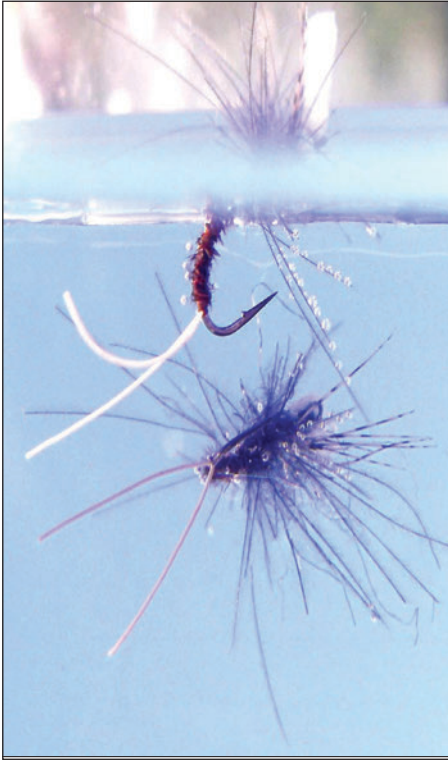
After I read that sentence in Tom Rosenbauer's 1993 book *'The Orvis Guide to Prospecting for Trout'* my fly angling became more enjoyable and more successful. A leader greased with Mucilin was an essential element in holding the Slip-Knot Emerger vertically in the surface film and I covered this subject in chapter six of this book. Frank Sawyer treated his leader with floatant when fishing his Bow Tie Buzzer.

Trout ignore floating mono on the rippled surface of small streams just as they ignore the hook in artificial flies – what they don't ignore is drag, and a greased tippet reduces drag because the moment a portion of it sinks, it is subject to the pull of the current.

The attraction of the dangling tail

The photograph on the next page was taken in 2006 when I still had a macro lens-equipped DSLR and Stephen Boshoff had built a slant tank for Tom Sutcliffe and I. At the time I was experimenting with CDC in the hackle of the Slip-Knot Emerger. It illustrates the role that dangling rubber tails can play in increasing the vulnerability factor and the movement in crippled emerger imitations.

I am fascinated by fly design in the context of movement being a trigger – the 'Something Strug-gling' idea I outlined in chapter 9 – and I return again and again to Gary LaFontaine's 1990 book *'The Dry Fly New Angles'*.



ABOVE: Gary LaFontaine's Shroud as illustrated by Marcel Terblanche. LaFontaine described the movement of the dangling marabou tail as a major trigger – something that vindicated my use of fine rubber strands for this purpose

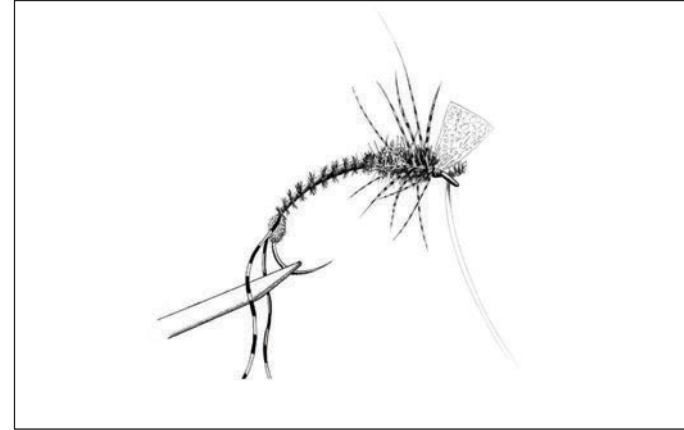
LEFT: CDC in the hackle of the Slip-Knot Emerger

This is his Shroud, a dry fly with a marabou tail. Here's the sentence that resonated with me: "In our observations of attractors, the dangling tail was a tremendous trait for pulling trout from a long distance."

After reading that, I added dangling rubber tails to my Sawyer-style soft hackle emergers and I was convinced that they were a significant trigger. They were thus an integral design feature of the Slip-Knot Emerger as I tied it some two decades ago, using trigger colours such as black, silver and red.



The author's Sawyer-style soft-hackle emerger with the dangling rubber tails



The Slip-Knot Emerger, as sketched by Marcel Terblanche, my favourite fly for fishing the trout streams near Cape Town before illness ended my angling days in 2010



A Peter Brigg photo of an experimental Slip-Knot Emerger I sent him which used CDC for the body of the fly – an idea derived from Hans Wielenmann's CDC and Elk

The slight extra weight at the hook bend of the rubber tails assists in holding the fly in a vertical position. They also increase the leverage of the current on the Slip-Knot Emerger facilitating the rotating motion of the fly on the tippet and increasing the fly's movement.

By adding rubber tails, you double the size of the fly, making it easier for the trout to spot it at a distance without making it any more difficult to cast.

These ultra-fine but durable rubber strands were first marketed by the Montana Fly Company as 'Tentacles' and then by Hareline Dubbin as 'Daddy

Longlegs'. Hareline has now introduced a more flexible rubber strand called 'Micro Flex' which can be mottled, like the other brands, with a permanent marker.

You can adapt this procedure to your favourite emerger, whether it is Bob Wyatt's Deer Hair Emerger, a shuttlecock emerger such as the Plume Tip of Jeremy Lucas or an Australian pattern, the Possum Shaving Brush.

In 2013 I gave some of the MFC rubber strands to Rhodes-based guide, Tony Kietzman, promising him that they would double the catch-rate of his favourite fly, the Klinkhåmer. So much did that prove to be the case that he named the combination the Edhåmer.

The second question which needed answering was why the trout on the small stream being fished by Dave Hughes were indifferent to normally-successful attractor dries and relatively accurate imitations such as the Elk Hair Caddis on the surface but were so responsive to a soft hackle which was drifting just below the surface in the 'umbrella position'.

I found the answer in the fascinating 2013 book *'Fly Fishing Outside the Box: Emerging Heresies'* by Peter Hayes.

Hayes describes the period when *Baetis* mayflies drift to the surface after laying eggs on the stream bed as 'Fly fishing's new frontier'. He says:

"I have a very strong suspicion that the success in fast, rocky rain-fed rivers of the classic 'northern' spiders is due to their success in imitating the float-up Baetis spinner."

This is corroborated by the following extract from Ralph Cutter's outstanding 2005 book, *'Fish Food'*:

"Baetis spinners are very buoyant and seem to have a difficult time retaining a grip on the streambed. They very deliberately lift and place one foot down at a time; sometimes they will reach out with a foot and tap the substrate in front of them as if they are testing for the best foothold. When they get lost to the current, it is all over; the mayflies don't struggle, swim, or attempt in any way to save themselves. They passively float to their doom. Baetis spinners are unique in that they 'fall up', floating upward wings-first. When they hit the surface film, they immediately get flipped and adhere to the meniscus on their sides. The wings remain stuck together holding that bubble of air, and from underwater it looks like they have a single wing sprouting out the top of the thorax. The spinners that reach the surface get stuck under the film, making them nearly invisible to the angler looking down into the water."

Baetis is the most common group of mayflies on most small streams and the trout streams in Cape Town are not an exception to this rule.

In 1994 I met Rebecca Tharme, an aquatic entomologist, while fishing a local stream. She was working on a doctoral thesis at the University of Cape Town.

I asked her to give me a percentage breakdown of the number of aquatic insects per square metre of stream bed substrate and the results surprised me. I expected *Baetis* nymphs to dominate and they did – by a tiny margin – 4542 which made



LEFT: The photo of an egg-laying *Baetis* female was taken by Helen Barber James a decade ago when she was with the Albany Museum in Grahamstown. She is now Senior Curator of Natural Sciences, National Museum of Northern Ireland. She found it midstream and placed the rock on the stream bank where the mayfly completed the egg-laying process in about 15 minutes. RIGHT: Rocks on the bed of the Sterkspruit stream in Barkly East are covered in *Baetis* egg patches

up 36.2 % of the total. Chironomids were almost identical in numbers, 4382 which made up 34.9% of the total.

The *Baetis* float-up phase includes the male which has a sacrificial role in the egg-laying process. To increase survival chances, the male accompanies the female, each with a bright and silvery air bubble between the wings. When egg laying is complete, both drift to the surface, buoyed by the air bubble.

The late Shane Stalcup, author of the 2002 book, *'Mayflies from Top to Bottom'* believed that the ideal material to mimic such air bubbles is silver Hareline Dubbin's Quick Descent Dub. It is by far the easiest dubbing to use for small flies because it is made of ultra-fine aluminium shavings and almost glues itself to the thread in tiny quantities.

All of these concepts coalesced in my most successful fly on the trout streams near Cape Town.

Although the foam post makes the Slip-Knot Emerger relatively easy to follow on the water, the greased leader can guide



The ideal dubbing to represent the air bubble in the ascending post-egg laying stage of the Baetis adult

your eye to the fly particularly if, at the 4x section of the leader, you incorporate a yellow and red piece of Loon Two Tone Indicator tippet material. You can make this mono even more visible by using black neon Skafars wax where the yellow and red sections meet.

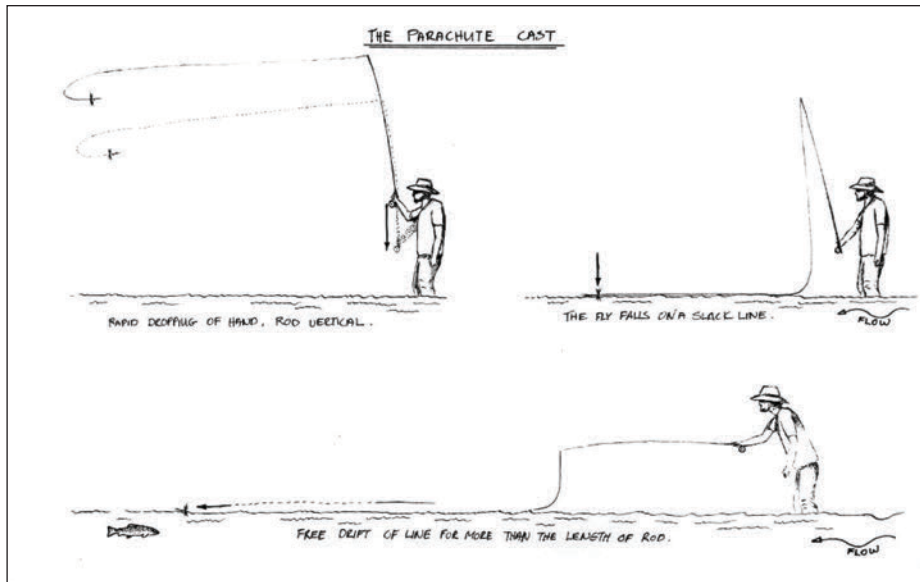
I first tried the Slip-Knot Emerger when I was fishing a small stream near Cape Town with Tom Sutcliffe. He claims in his much-loved book *'Hunting Trout'* that I am always last on the water leaving behind at the vehicle what looks like 'a grenade explosion in a well-stocked tackle shop'.

This, of course, takes poetic licence too far and so it proved when I first tried my Slip-Knot Emerger.

I was ready to go, sitting on the bank and looking downstream while Tom was still busy stringing his rod.

Keen to see what my new creation, with its antecedents in Marinaro, Sawyer and Patterson, looked like on the water, I executed what Charles Ritz described as a 'Parachute Cast' in his wonderful 1959 book, *'A Fly Fisher's Life'*.

Stop the rod high on the forward cast, drop the elbow to pull the energy out of the cast and feed line to facilitate the downstream float.



An illustration of the downstream Parachute Cast by Marcel Terblanche – as depicted in the 1999 book by Charles Ritz, *'A Fly Fisher's Life: The Art and Mechanics of Fly Fishing'*

I noted with satisfaction, as my new creation bobbed merrily downstream, that the white Ethafoam post was easy to follow on the water.

In my fascination, I was caught completely off-guard by the rise of a trout which was clearly not a tiddler.

I reared back, fortunately without hooking up in the bushes behind me.

Waiting for few seconds to regain my composure, I put the fly back in the same current seam and, this time, there was a properly-timed strike and a hooked fish.

First cast with the Slip-Knot Emerger, a rise.

Second cast with the Slip-Knot Emerger, a sold take.

What struck me thereafter when fishing this pattern on a greased leader and tippet was that trout started a slow rise much earlier in the drift than I had previously experienced.

My sense was that, thanks to the movement of the dangling rubber tails, they picked up its approach when it was still some distance away.

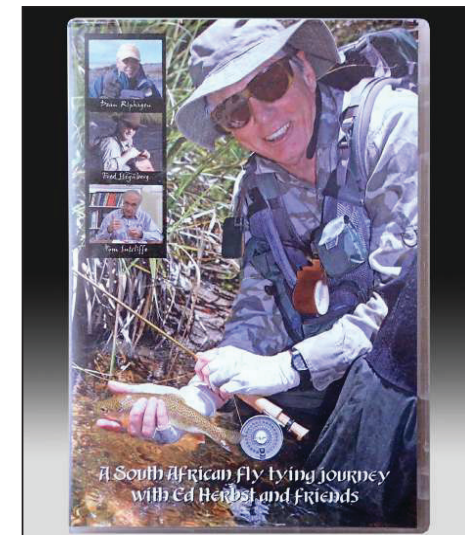
The movement of the latex rubber tails and the fly's posture in the water signalled vulnerability and the general impression of size and shape was something familiar to them given the number of up-drifting, post-egg laying and exhausted Baetis adults they would previously have encountered.

When Tom reached me, he took a photograph of me and my catch which I later used as the cover of a DVD which is available on Vimeo



ABOVE: My first trout caught on the Slip-Knot Emerger. RIGHT: CD case cover photo of the first trout caught on its second take on the Slip-Knot Emerger

[PHOTOS: Tom Sutcliffe]



Dressing

Hook: Orvis Big Eye Ring Eye size 16 or Daiichi 1110 – an untested alternative is the TMC 108SP-BL. Its sharply downturned eye would allow space between the Surgeon's Swivel knot and the forward-projecting Ethafoam post.

Thread: White Textreme Extreme 10 denier which is the thinnest GSP thread on the market and almost transparent. Other substitutes would be 24/0 Nanosilk. UTC 70 denier and Veevus. 16/0

Tails: Ultrafine silicone strands such as Hareline Micro Flex tipped with UV light-cured Loon Knot Sense mixed with purple glitter dust. Veniard sells barred ultrafine 'Centipede' strands, but they are not translucent.

Body: Pheasant tail

Thorax: Hareline Quick Descent dubbing - silver

Hackle: Partridge

Foam post: Ethafoam packaging material

I start the fly by tying in two pieces of latex rubber strands on either side of the hook shank. The body is pheasant tail tied in by the tips

Take the pheasant tail forward and tie off, leaving a space for the Ethafoam post, the partridge hackle and the dubbed thorax of silver Quick Descent dubbing.

Tie in a post of translucent Ethafoam packaging material projecting forward over the hook eye. Gary LaFontaine believed this widely available and inexpensive material has exceptional light-dispersing properties.

The best technique for tying in the partridge hackle can be accessed on YouTube using the key words 'Tim Flagler Tight Line Production Grey Partridge soft hackle'.

Above the body and behind the hackle, create a small thorax of silver Quick Descent Dub to represent the air bubble held between the wings of the ascending and post-egg laying *Baetis* adult.

The 'Light Bulb' soft hackle

If I were to tie the fly now, I would use the recent 'light bulb' technique, inspired by Cape Town-based split cane rod maker, Stephen Boshoff – tipping the ends of the partridge hackle and the dangling tails with a mixture of UV light-cured Loon Knot Sense.

On the resin tips of the tails, I would add purple glitter dust which would add to their movement and allow trout to more easily detect the fly visually. The photographed example at the start of this chapter gives some idea of this pattern



Split-cane rod maker, Stephen Boshoff, whose 'light bulb' concept is a significant fly-tying innovation

evolution which I believe is a step along the journey towards what Peter Hayes described as 'Fly fishing's new frontier.'

Purple is the chosen colour for the glitter dust because the trout streams near Cape Town owe their whisky colour to a high level of tannin and experience has shown here and in the USA that trout respond very positively to purple flies in water with a high humic content.

I believe the Slip-Knot Emerger with its 'Light Bulb' dangling tails, held vertically on a greased tippet is a design which takes us closer to the 'frontier' described by Peter Hayes. Assisted by Vincent Marinaro, Frank Sawyer, Neil Patterson and Stephen Boshoff.



A Slip-Knot Emerger on a size 16 Orvis Big Eye Hook tied by professional fly tyer Caleb Wilcott - @ wild_mutt_flies - whose flies are now sold through the Upstream fly-fishing shop in Cape Town