

Wattle Trees & *Micro Beetles*

Rob Sloane investigates the tiny,
striped beetles of autumn.

These little beetles are well hidden in the wattle foliage.

Some time between the gum-beetles of summer and the red and black jassids of late autumn, Tasmania's forest-shored lakes produce another 'hatch' that often goes unnoticed. From late February through until Easter, tiny, striped beetles may appear in great numbers on mild afternoons, creating significant rises.

About the size of a match head these handsome little beetles are micro-versions of the more familiar gum beetles, and belong to the same chrysomelid family. Other than the distinctive colour striations on the wing cases and their much smaller size, there is another important distinction to be made and this relates to the fact that these little 'fireblight' beetles prefer acacias to eucalypts.

Understanding that wattle trees—in particular the silver wattles that grow in clusters around the shores of many popular highland lakes—are their preferred habitat, is a vital clue towards understanding the often localised distribution of the fireblight beetle, although on warm windy days they scatter far and wide.

MICRO BEETLE HABITATS

If you search a lakeside wattle tree closely you will find these little beetles hidden amongst the delicate leaf fronds, and the adaptive significance of their small size and striped appearance will immediately become apparent. In flight, and on the water, they are just as hard to see. The first hint of their presence may be subtly rising fish, and the first evidence of the true nature of the rise may not be revealed until a later examination of stomach contents should you be lucky enough to actually catch one.

Although these tiny beetles may be present on the water in numbers great enough to totally preoccupy the trout, their presence is often masked by more conspicuous autumn delicacies including gum-beetles, jassids, crane flies and flying ants. A lack of success when confronted by rising fish on calm and bright autumn days is often blamed on the conditions, or saved by one or two fish that were less selective, particularly at the beginning or end of the rise.

Shore based, it makes sense to choose wattle-lined banks and to take

advantage of the action around mid-day as soon as the tiny beetles start to fly. Later in the afternoon the best fishing generally moves offshore as the little beetles drift with the breeze and build up in slicks and wind-lanes where trout continue to rise long after the beetles have ceased their reckless flights.

However, if you can find a shore where the breeze is blowing along and quartering in, you may find trout lined up along the very edge, following the food trail and making the gentlest sipping rises.

Offshore, in any sort of ripple, you will have to keep your eyes peeled because trout will sneak along and barely break the surface. Polaroids will help, because with so many little items to target, the trout rarely swim up and down for them; instead they wait until there are sufficient numbers on the water and then cruise along just under the surface, even over the deepest parts of the lake. With the low autumn sun reflecting off their flanks they light up and yell "here I am." Naturally you have to plan your attack to allow best visibility into the

water, positioning the boat to take advantage of the low-angled sun and the reflection of tree-lined banks.

Often in rough water it's only when you see a fish through the polaroids that you realise it is actually rising. In fact, the takes can be so subtle when using small dries to match this hatch that I've often felt a tug on the line before even realising that the fly has been taken.

MICRO BEETLE FLIES

If there is a mixed bag of food and the trout are being cooperative then just about any beetle pattern will do. No doubt, some will ask what all the fuss is about; just track a fish and present a Red Tag or Gum Beetle in its path. But if it is calm and bright and the trout decide that tiny, striped beetles are all they are going to eat, you'll soon discover that your size 12 Red Tag is a complete waste of space, along with nearly all the other summer favourites in your fly box.

The first trick is to lengthen your leader out to about 12 feet, and use 4 lb tippet despite the risks. The next step is a giant leap of faith because you will need to tie on the tiniest little beetle in your collection.

I use miniature Plastic Beetles for this job. Just a twist of hackle for legs and a buoyant foam back coloured with waterproof marker pen. You will get away with a 14 or 16 hook provided the body profile is suitably small. I spend hours with an array of pens trying to match the bright little iridescent stripes of the genuine articles but when I'm running out of suitable flies even the previously over-looked, dodgy colour jobs seem to work just as well. It's the size and shape, and the way the beetle floats, that trick the fish. If you don't have anything tied to suit, try the smallest Coch-y-bonddu in your collection.

MICRO BEETLE TRICKS

Unless your eyesight is a lot better than mine, a significant problem must still be overcome. Having spotted a trout heading in your direction and made a good cast, you won't be able to see the micro beetle at the end of that long, fine leader and you'll doubt the trout's ability to see it either. So, to inspire more confidence, I suggest you attach a favourite summer floater on a dropper, several feet further up the leader. A size 12 deer-hair or palmered Red Tag is just the ticket.

The dropper will provide a fall back in case you have misinterpreted the hatch, or the trout are out to prove me wrong. More importantly it will give you a sighter to judge when to strike should a suspicious bulge, rise, nose or dimple appear just beyond and directly in line.

If you prefer to put your faith in a single fly as I usually do, then judging whether or not your little foam scrap has been eaten will become a fascinating and often frustrating adjunct to the whole business. However, a quick strike is not essential as the tiny foam beetle is rarely rejected and the trout



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These tiny little beetles often go unnoticed by anglers, though not by the trout.



FIREBLIGHT BEETLES

Colours vary from green to fawn/yellow but shape and size seem more important.

are often hooked well inside the mouth. If in doubt 'feel' for the fish by raising the rod tip and, if it's not your fly that's been taken, the short induced movement may attract the fish to it. You will miss a few takes with this tentative approach but you'll avoid spooking fish when ripping the fly and line off the surface in a full blown strike.

The down side of the two fly approach is that in the sticks and logs along the shores where I often find myself fishing, the dropper has a habit of snagging while a fish is being played, and I hate losing two flies even more than losing one. Likewise, my friend Murphy says it takes two to tangle, and this is bound to happen just as the best fish of the day cruises within range.

It also takes longer to extract two flies from the fish's mouth, as I discovered the other evening when unbeknown to me a rainbow trout had swallowed my micro beetle and then moments later clopped down my deer-hair dropper!

MICRO BEETLE DELIGHTS

The small size of these autumn beetles definitely presents an array of challenges, but there are advantages too. Most importantly the trout never seem to tire of them and will rise all afternoon. Maybe they are tastier than gum beetles and easier on the digestion, or perhaps it is just a numbers game with ten times more wattle beetles (and consequent rises) required to pack a stomach.

The firelight beetle, Pyrgoides orphana, feeds on the leaves of wattle trees, in particular the wide-spread silver wattle Acacia dealbata. The name 'firelight' relates to the scorched appearance of wattles when defoliated by these beetles. The life-history is essentially the same as that of the more familiar chrysomelid beetles that attack eucalpts. Eggs are laid on the underside of wattle leaflets during late-autumn and the grub-like larvae feed on foliage, developing rapidly during spring. When fully developed, the larvae drop to the ground to pupate in the soil. Adult firelight beetles emerge in early summer but take shelter to avoid the summer heat. They reappear with the onset of cooler weather in autumn and again feed on the wattle foliage before laying eggs.

Autumn is a favourite time on the Tasmanian lakes. The days are short and sweet. Morning mists signal cooler weather as they mingle with the distinctive dry scent of the surrounding forests. Full sunshine and calm water are no longer the deterrents that they were in the heat of the January doldrums. The best fishing coincides with a leisurely post-lunch outing and the rises are often prolonged, extending through until evening time. The rainbows are in prime condition and the browns patrol the edges in full sunlight with an eagerness not seen at other times.

Best of all, the little wattle beetles add a technical twist, a touch of deli-



WATTLE BEETLE

HOOK: Size 14–16, dry fly
THREAD: Yellow or black
HACKLE/LEGS: A couple of wraps of ginger cock, palmered and clipped off on top
BACK: Strip of high-density foam, coloured using permanent marker pens
FINISH: Coat back with clear nail varnish to strengthen and fix colour

TYING NOTES

This is just a mini version of the Plastic Gum Beetle pattern developed by Tony Sloane many years ago and published (1986) in The Truth About Trout Flies (the book is reproduced in the magazine section of the FlyLife website www.flylife.com.au). Wrap thread along hook shank, then tie in hackle, and clip off on top. Next, pinch and firmly tie in coloured foam strip at rear, stretch forward and tie off in front. Trim foam at front and rear for a neat finish and touch up with marker pen before applying a coat of nail varnish.

cacy and refinement, to end the season on the highest of notes and to remind us that there is often more to fly fishing than immediately meets the eye. There are hidden levels and secret doors, hatches within hatches, for those wanting to discover more. **FI**