

Night Shift

WITH CHANGES IN CLIMATE, DROUGHT AND LOW-WATER, NIGHT FISHING IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE APPEALING.

Brad Harris & friends put in some overtime on the Snowy Mountains lakes.

Tom sets down the phone, and comes out of the office with a smile on his face: “Matt just left work, he reckons he’ll be on time.” That phone call is just another step in a sequence repeated dozens of times through the year. It began with four guys packing more than just a pen and lunch for work this morning, expanding their ‘work gear’ to include a rod, reel, fly vest and head torch, and a big bag of jumpers (except for Wilko, who always bludges one off someone else).

These are the men of the night shift. They’ll put in their full day in tackle shops, offices, government departments and work sites in places as far away as Canberra. But after lunch, their minds are on the clock and the weather. After they knock off, invariably early, they’ll be in the car and off ‘up the hill’ for a stint on Lake Eucumbene or Jindabyne that often lasts until midnight, and that’s not including the drive home.

“I’ll just go and grab some dinner over the road. What do you want?”

It’s only 4.30 p.m., but they’ll eat dinner now, or in the car on the way. There’ll be no stopping to eat once

they start fishing, except for maybe a muesli bar if it’s slow. *Really* slow.

WEATHER WATCH

With changes in climate, drought and low water, night fishing is becoming more and more appealing. Daytime water temperatures are often just too high in summer, and the fish move out into deep water. In the cool of the evening, they venture back into the shallows, staying longer with each pass through the edge zone as the night wears on and the water temperature drops. The other time that delivers good fishing during the hot months is dawn, but it’s really impractical for most of these guys. They’d never get to work if the fishing was good!

About four days ago they checked out the weather websites. They picked this night because of an approaching high pressure system with a big stable pattern. That means not too much wind, milder temperatures, and better conditions for a hatch, or a fall of terrestrials if it’s hot. It can really only be ruined by an easterly sea breeze, and even then they’ll still go. A sea breeze dies off, eventually. Added to the

weather, tonight is approaching a full moon, which will be good for mud-eye feeders but not so good for shrimp feeders, which are better targeted on the new moon.

These aren’t just fair-weather fishermen though. You’ll just as easily find them heading off on a bitterly cold night in the depths of winter, but perhaps then they will be heading to the Eucumbene River, where it enters the lake, for spawn-runners. Tonight, in early summer, Lake Jindabyne is their destination. The boys in the tackle-shop have heard that there have been good caddis hatches on the western shore and several big rainbows have been caught, some of them just inches from shore. That’s a red rag to a bull for this crew, so the calls went out.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Matt pulls up in the Alpine Angler car-park right on 5.45 p.m., a bit late. Nothing unusual there. Andy has been waiting half an hour while the shop-boys locked up, and gear is being transferred into one vehicle. Most of the small-talk is about where to go, which bay, and the latest fishing reports.

The drive from Cooma to Jindabyne is spent catching up on each other’s week, eating, and for at least one of the crew, tying on a new leader and dressing a line.

Shadows are lengthening as they pull up just metres from the sandy shore and pile out, already anxious to get on the water. Rods are put together, mostly 9-footers of about 5- or 6-weight, and floating lines pulled through the guides. In winter, for the spawning run, an intermediate line would more likely be used to get to the bottom of the channel. But for this close edge fishing, and because they’ll be using dries and slow sinking wets, a floating line will be fine.

Leaders don’t have to be longer than 8–12 feet, tapered to 6 or 8 lb breaking strain. Darkness allows you to be a bit more relaxed about leader-spook, although on a bright overcast night with a moon shining through the clouds, the strong backlighting of the fly and leader can make the fish a little more cautious: they see every detail silhouetted against the sky.

Reels don’t have to be fancy unless you work at a tackle-store. A reason-

Daniel Wilkins sends out a cast with the lights of Jindabyne not far away.



Matt Daniel and Andy Moore rigging up in the late afternoon sun.

Night Shift . . . continued

able drag is a nice luxury, and a bit of backing is good to have for the odd times when you actually need it.

Even though the temperature is still in the high 20s, the boys rug up with extra layers and throw a heavy jumper in a backpack. If you were game to look, you would probably find them wearing thermals under their breathable waders, even in summer, and a couple of pairs under neoprene waders during winter. It takes some good gear to battle the cold, standing for hours submerged to your waist in water as cold as 4°C. They head off once Wilko has chosen a jumper from the three on offer.

ON THE JOB

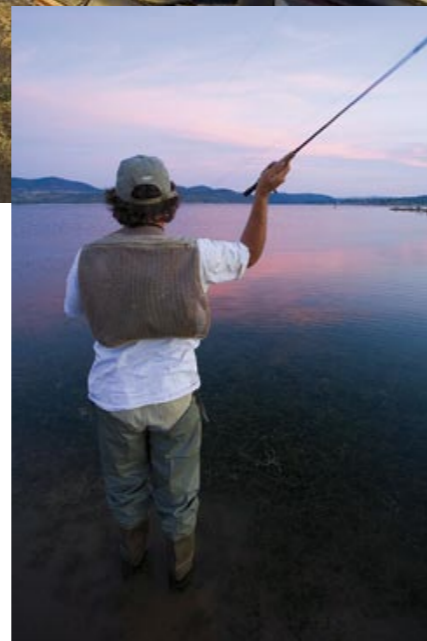
Keeping an ever-watchful eye on the water, they walk briskly to their favourite spots. Tom likes the rocky points, something that might concentrate the fish from several different depths and distances from shore. Andy and Wilko prefer weedy bays where the fish sneak in to the shallow water to search slowly for all sorts of little wriggling things. Matt just keeps on casting and moving until he finds a fish, and then works the hell out of that area.

While it's still light, most of the guys start with a nymph or small wet, but will change immediately if they see a

few rises. If there are obvious numbers of a particular insect around they start with a matching pattern, but if none are visible, they could generally expect to draw fish up to beetle patterns such as a Humpy or Red Tag. If they get a refusal, they will usually start a process of elimination and educated guesses. A midge pattern, then maybe a caddis emerger. An unweighted stick caddis, then a dry caddis on the surface. Then a may-fly emerger. They follow a sequence which not coincidentally represents the relative insect numbers found on these waters.

Right on sunset they'll go to a tandem rig, probably a dead-drift beetle with nymph trailing, or strip a buoyant mud-eye pattern with a 'wee wet' trailing, and cover a lot of shore, searching for and casting to any rise or swirl. This action could last for up to an hour, and they'll refine fly selection as they catch fish or get refusals.

This is prime mud-eye time, and if fish are rising with a 'gloop' sound, it's a fair bet they're taking them just under the surface. If they feel a tug or tightening, they'll strike immediately, but if they see or hear a fish rise to the fly, they'll pause for a moment before strip-striking. Fish sometimes slash at an insect, especially mud-eyes, to disable them before coming back



Calm weedy bays are ideal places on sunset.

to finish them off. Strip-striking 30 cm of line leaves the fly close enough for the fish to come back and still find it. A normal rod-lift strike moves the fly too far.

INTO THE DARKNESS

With the onset of darkness, it's time to get to some favourite terrain and settle into a rhythm. It's now that they fall back on experience and a trusted technique, and rely on confidence to bring the fish to the fly.

Tom, working the point where the bottom drops away a little steeper, has tied on a size 10 Woolly Bugger and is casting a comfortable distance from shore, then impatiently waiting 30 seconds for the fly to sink to a good depth. He has to count them out to himself so that he doesn't start early. He retrieves in fast little 5 cm strips, each about a second apart, with his rod tip on or in the surface of the water.

In the gloomy depths his fly will be dancing along in rhythmic leaps, its black marabou tail swaying and flowing behind like feelers, fins, legs, or some other body-part in lively motion. A trout couldn't think it is anything but something alive and edible. The colour isn't really important: it's the subtle shock-wave transmitted through the water that a fish first detects, and then sees just that hint of movement or shape when it gets closer. That's usually enough.

When Tom feels a take, which he will immediately because of the low rod tip, he lifts the tip with a sharp flick of the wrist to set the hook, and then tries to gain some line. When you are fishing tight like that, fish often hook themselves, but sometimes you'll just feel momentary weight and then nothingness. If you fish too loose, you might miss the take entirely, so it is better to take your chances on a tight line.

Back in the bays, Wilko is using a fuzzy green nymph, with the leader greased to within about a foot of the fly to keep it high in the water column. With the rod tucked under his arm, he works the fly with a hand-over-hand retrieve, taking in about 2–3 cm per

Beanies and jumpers are essential year-round in the Snowies.

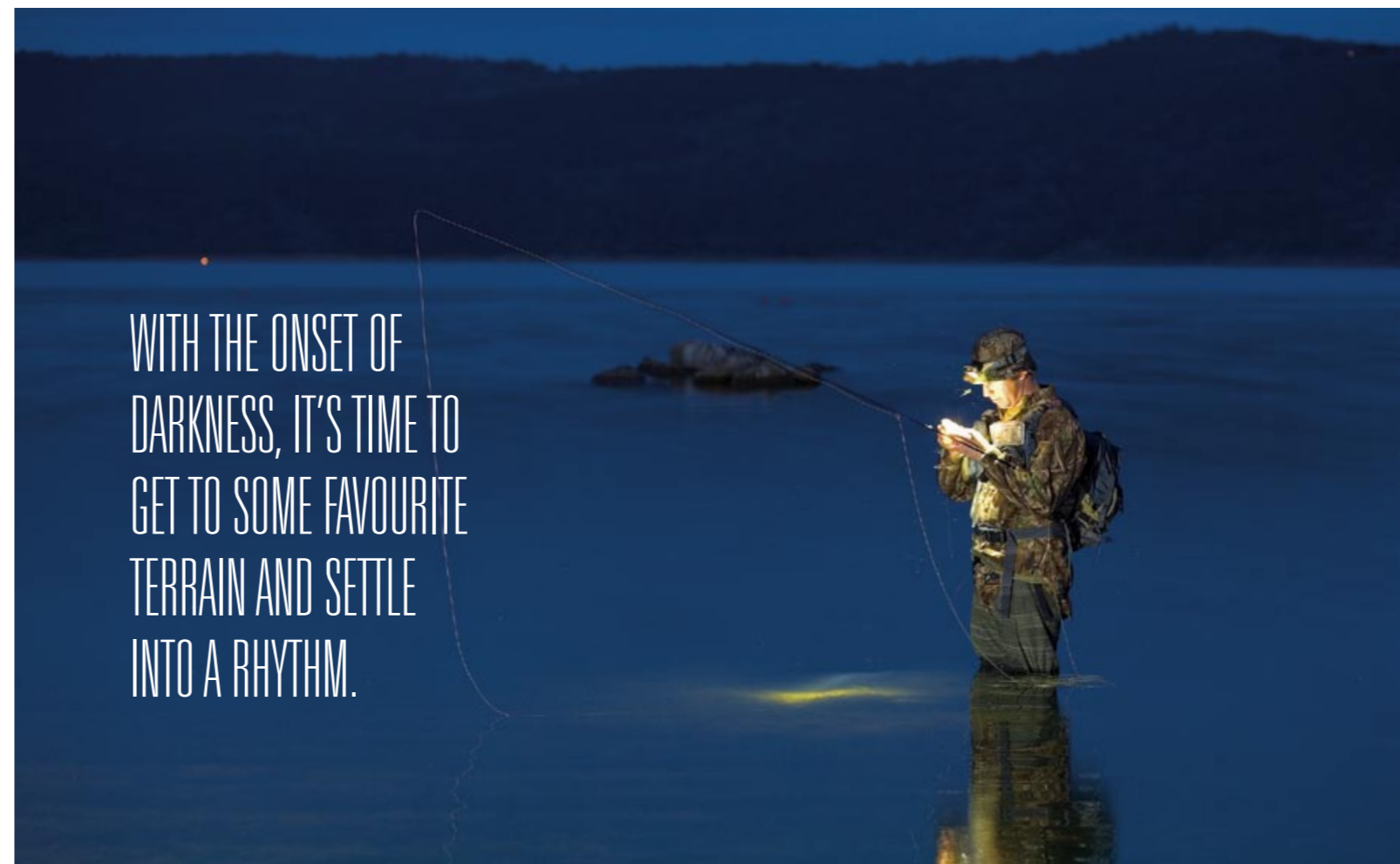


second. This allows him to move the fly at a constant pace through the water, simulating a shrimp or nymph swimming just below the surface. Takes are often subtle when using this technique, so he'll strike at any resistance.

Along the shore a bit Andy is dragging an unweighted Woolly Bugger or Fur Fly just above the weed beds. Like the others, he retrieves slowly

with a hand-twist, adding a short jerk every 10 seconds or so. This both lifts the fly off the weed and sends out a soft pulse through the water. He also has his rod-tip low, to minimise slack line. The take often comes at the end of the strip, and can be quite savage.

Already hundreds of metres from the others, Matt is blasting out casts near every feature—rock, log, point, edge of the ripple—using a tandem



WITH THE ONSET OF DARKNESS, IT'S TIME TO GET TO SOME FAVOURITE TERRAIN AND SETTLE INTO A RHYTHM.

Head-torches leave your hands free for tying flies and swatting mosquitos, and also for recharging lumo-flies.



A Jindy brown that took Tom's lumo-fly.

Night Shift . . . continued



Go the Poodle!

rig of a size 6 Muddler Minnow (in always-fashionable black) and a small Black & Peacock. His approach is much more aggressive, stripping fast foot-long pulls, then waiting three seconds before the next one. This sends out an obvious wake from the surface-riding Muddler to act as a beacon for any trout within 20 metres. The real bait is the smaller fly. When fish come up to this combination, there's rarely any subtlety about the take. They slash and grab and head for

the depths. Expecting this, Matt keeps his rod tip just to the side to act as a shock-absorber when a fish really hits, yet still allowing the line-stripping action to transfer quickly to the fly. When he feels, sees, or hears a take, he'll lift strongly into the fish to take up the slack and drive the hook in. Once he sees a rise or catches a fish, he'll stay for a further 15 minutes to see if it's a hot-spot, then move on if there's no more action.

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

When it gets really dark and the audible rises stop, one of two quite different techniques will be employed.

The first is the time-proven strategy of slowly stripping wets with a strong profile, like Matuka or Bugger-style flies, and waiting for a hit. The other is to use a glow-nymph, tied with luminescent yarn that is recharged with a head-torch or camera-flash every ten minutes or so. The single small fly is easier to cast in the dark, and the glow-yarn pulls fish from far and wide. A dancing retrieve like Tom's is most appropriate when using this fly.

One of the real challenges of fishing Jindabyne is the shrimp-feeders. Figuring out which fly to use and suitable stripping techniques is an ongoing project and an obsession for Matt.

Lately, he's been using a suspending shrimp pattern, but more work is needed to pick up these fussy fish with any regularity.

Being gear-freaks, all the boys have LED head-torches. These are the latest thing in personal hands-free illumination, and they really are amazing. Shining a broad, white/blue light, they can run up to about 150 hours on three AAA batteries, and have variable power settings, so you don't ruin your night-vision every time the light is switched on. Some of the smaller models are virtually weightless on your head.

KNOCK-OFF TIME

At some time during the night the fishing will go quiet, or reality will come crashing back and you have to face the fact that it's time to call it quits. For these fanatics, the time that they actually stop casting and walk back to the car is usually about an hour after the first mention of "I s'pose we should get going," which itself is often close to midnight.

So, back in the car with the heater on, and a pizza on the seat if the shop was still open as they went through town (a rare occurrence), they will debrief their night, re-live catches and misses, compare notes on flies and techniques, then catch some sleep in shifts on the long drive home. After all, they've got a big day at work tomorrow. **FI**



The full moon triggered a flurry of mudeye activity.