

Tom Bird - Modern Dry Fly Fishing

I have always thought that in the early days of reservoir fishing in the Midlands, anglers living in Cambridge were at a disadvantage in so far that the fishing at Grafham was so good that there was little inclination to visit other reservoirs further to the west. I remember seeing Draycot almost 50 years ago from the M45 when that was the only motorway route to Birmingham but I have never fished it. I am intrigued by the numerous submerged islands distributed around the reservoir.

The trout fishery is under the management of Ifor Jones and has earned an envious reputation. Hence we were pleased to welcome Tom Bird, the fishery manager, to talk about Modern Dry Fly Fishing. He acquired a taste for reservoir fishing following a spell working at Stocks straight out of school. He enrolled at Sparsholt and ended up at Draycot and earned an England cap by the time he was 19!



Dry fly fishing was the preferred method of fishing the chalk streams back in the 19th century. Halford v. Skues comes to mind! Encouragement to try dry flies on the reservoirs was scuppered in Tom Ivens book "Still Water Flyfishing" which authoritatively stated that wet fly techniques will always out fish dry flies. Even in 1975, Brian Clarke, author of "The Pursuit of Stillwater Trout", with a comprehensive description of rise forms, described dry fly fishing as a very minor tactic. Fortunately, by the end of the decade, competitors in the Benson and Hedges competition demonstrated otherwise and it was the start of dry fly-fishing proper with patterns such as Bob's Bits, the Carrot Fly, Shipmans, and Hoppers. These patterns bore no resemblance to river patters which mostly relied on exact imitation.

Tom described various rise forms:

Fish tilting – a barely detectable movement of the surface film caused by a gentle movement of the fish.

Head and tailing – probably the most recognisable rise form, typical of fish moving up a wind lane.

Flashing – caused by the fish turning sub-surface without causing a noticeable disturbance

Boil - a fish probably coming up from the depths at high speed and causing considerable disturbance of the surface.

Bow waving – fish moving quickly possibly feeding on fry or even hatching sedges.

Calm patch – a flattening of the surface ripples probably indicative of a slow movement.

Kiss rise – a gentle dimpling of the surface film, sometimes heard as a quiet slurp. *(this sounds like something which happened on a club trip when the fish were feeding by poking their heads vertically out of the water. I don't recall anyone sussing what they were up to on the day but a subsequent speaker, on learning our dilemma, thought that they may have been taking corixa).*

Detecting some of these rises takes good eye sight and concentration, something that few of us can maintain all day.

Anglers will be familiar with many of the modern (“modern” = 40+ years!) dry - fly patterns. Tom uses mainly small flies in the 12-16 range. Emergers will include CDC patterns. I was interested to see patterns such as the Crippled Midge and the Big Red were tied parachute style with the hackle wound around a pillar formed from the breathers; these consisted of strands separated from Tiemco Aero Wing. Again, I did not realise that this product, made up of hollow polypropylene fibres, was available in coarse and fine versions. I also confess of never having heard of a pattern called the Midas. This is a bulky fly tied on a Fario short shank special 8 which fits the International gauge as a 10. The heavy hook assists in getting the fly to sit in the surface film as quickly as possible. The fly is especially useful in a high wave because of its visibility. It was claimed to draw fish up from the depths. According to Tom it was only necessary to cast about 3 rods lengths. Any further and the flies cannot be seen. The flies were progressively cast in a fan array and left on the surface for no longer than 5 to 15 seconds. Tom did not use the drogue for this style of fishing.

Dry-fly fishing requires a rod with a bit of give in the tip. I think the model he allowed us to flex was the Airflo Airlite V2 but do not take my word for it. It retails for around £250. *A feature at Draycot is that you can try tackle before purchasing.* Tom uses a Rio Premier Gold line (£90+), sometimes in calm conditions a No. 5 but more often, to gain stability in a breeze, a No.7. Both, I

think, have a 47-foot head length but if the angler is only casting 3 rod lengths – say 30 feet, I wonder if this line will fully load a rod? Not to worry, the line is only £99! The preferred leader was also Rio, in this case Fluoroflex Strong Tippet in 4.4kg (8.6 lb) BS at a claimed gauge of 0.204mm. It will set you back ~£18 for 30 yards but you can go for 100 yards at a mere £39.39! I noticed that the boats at Draycot carry the Rio logo so I can only assume that mates rates apply to employees!! Fluorocarbon can be a problem in a big wind as it tends to pull flies under and through the waves. In those circumstances Tom prefers a copolymer leader, again supplied by Rio. He occasionally uses a floating polyleader which I presume comes from Airflo?

He would only consider using a single floating fly in a flat calm, 9 to 12 feet in length with a final tipped diameter of 0.15mm (5.2lbs.b.s.). He would mostly use 2 flies with a spacing of 9 feet on an 8lb tippet. 3 flies would be separated at 8-4-5 feet with a Midas fly at the top, used as a sight fly. He is not averse to using rings to facilitate linking of lengths of leader. *I am not sure if this is legal when fishing to International rules?*

He used “Loon Aquel” floatant applied sparingly, firstly to the back of the hand, and then transferred to the fly as a thin film held between finger and thumb. Tom mentioned TMC “Dry Magic” which is another silicone-based gel which, according to some reports, is very effective with CDC flies. Flies were dried using Hunts “Slime and Grime” which is a container containing silica balls which are highly absorbent. Tom suggested that similar products can be found on e-bay by searching “silica deliquescent powder”. At the other end of the scale there was Hunts “Dive Deep” which is a paste loaded with tungsten powder which ensures instant leader sinking as well as flash removal. Look up “Hunts Original” on the web (which seems to show that most of their products are out of stock!).



Tom demonstrated his fly-tying skills. I wondered if he had just had a big Premium Bonds win as the vice he was using retails at £525. Should anyone be interested, it was a FNF “Talon”. I was relieved that he wasn’t using a top of the

range HMH vice as that will set you back £825!!! Sorry, but I am still in the £.s.d era: my first vice was made from scrap metal and was used until I received a Veniard (£3.75) model as a Christmas present. Apparently, our friend Lindsay Simpson has been evaluating a “Talon” and may be able to offer a personal opinion at the February meeting.

Tom has a preference for barbless TMC hooks (except the Midas as previously noted) for these surface flies. Unwaxed thread is UTC, fine wire from Flybox, seals fur from Veniard and F&F, and Metz capes. He is not a fan of using UV resins or at least he did not show it during the demo.

There is no point in my trying to describe his tying technique but examples of the flies he produced on the night are shown below. The Midas is the big hairy beast! Further info can be gained from the web, although unlikely to precisely follow the materials and techniques used by Tom.



Crippled midge



Big Red



Midas

I found this a very informative presentation and attracted an audience from some distance around. It was a foul night with at least 3 accidents in the Cambridge area alone. I may have injected some of my personal views for which I apologise to our speaker if they are considered unwarranted.

Dave Jones

Dec 2021