

Grabham's Gurgler

Andrew Grabham modifies a classic topwater pattern with some remarkable results.

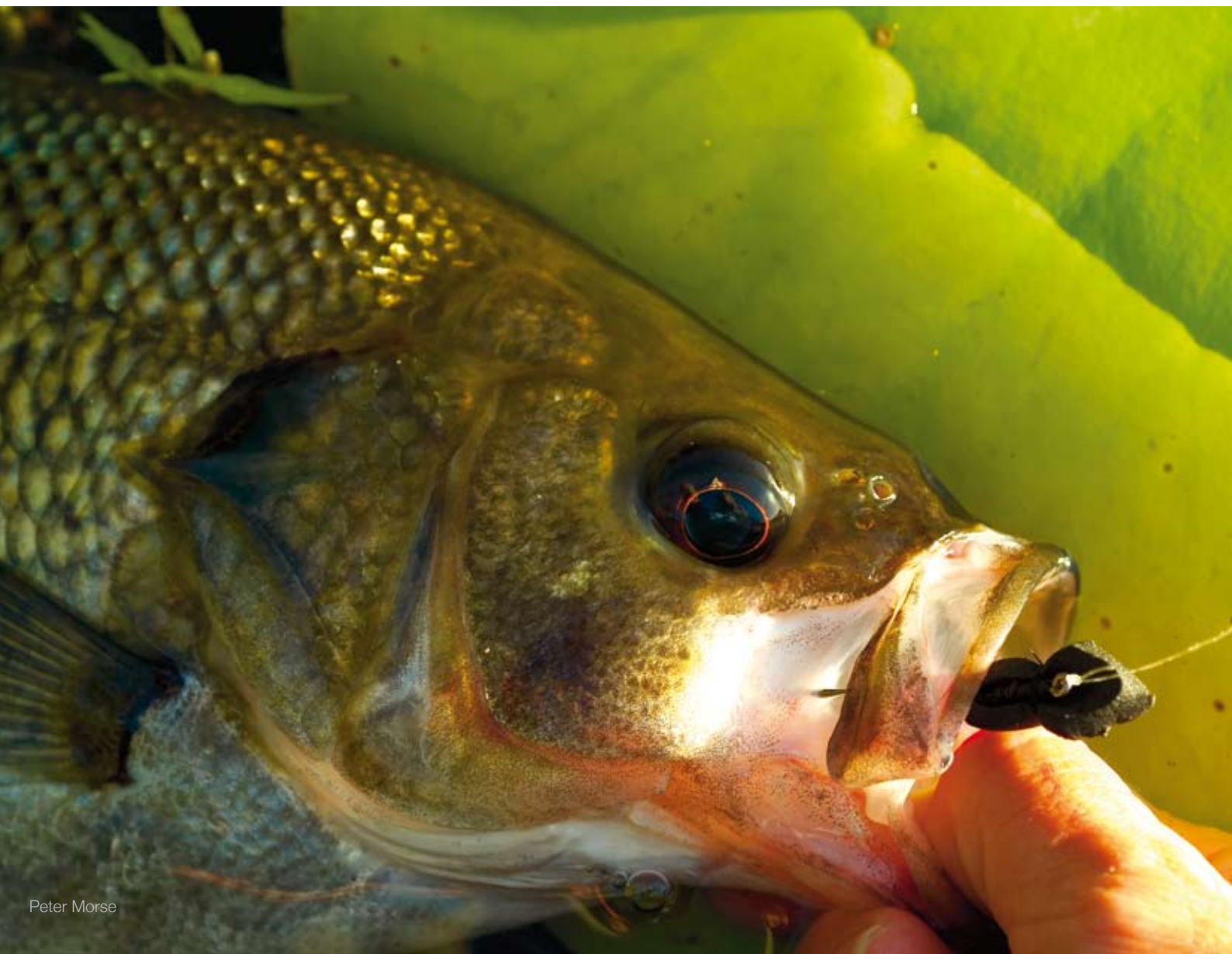
Fly fishers love to recount fishing stories and I am no exception. My local area is home to some exceptional fishers, some of whom I have the opportunity to fish with. Fishing with people who have a wide ranging experience of different species and tackle, and seeing them apply their knowledge and techniques can only make you a better angler if you are willing to watch carefully and set aside preconceptions. One of these is John Haenke, producer of many fishing series for TV and video/DVD, and a fine fly angler in his own right.

The story goes like this. Near my house, not five minutes away, is a lovely dam. It is stocked with golden perch, cod and bass. The predominant way to fish it is with spinnerbaits and deep diving lures. Very effective, but

not very satisfying – at least in my opinion. The other method, rarely used on this waterway, is to fish fly with fast sinking lines and weighted flies down to schools of fish found in twenty or thirty feet of water.

At the time of this story however, the trees surrounding the dam were alive with the sound of black cicadas. These beautiful little insects live a very short life in their winged form (but up to 17 years as a grub) so surely some must be falling in the water after mating. I started to think floating lines and surface strikes might be worth prospecting with! Sure enough, a dahlberg diver cast to the edge of the weed banks beneath the trees was immediately set upon by some heavy weight bass. Twenty or more solid strikes produced a total of

This fat bass fell to a Grabham's Gurgler just after dawn.





The author tries to keep a bass from heading into the thick weedbeds below.

seven fish for the morning's effort. This was too good to keep to myself! I rang John.

"Offshore Productions, John Haenke speaking. Hi Andrew. Bass on surface fly, that's great. Any size to them? Up to fifty centimetres? Your kidding! Yeah, I'd love to get out there but work is too busy and I can't get away. Hmm, let me think about it and I will get back to you."

He rang back the next night and asked if I had been out again. Yes, and the bass are still there and as hungry as ever. "That's enough for me, I will meet you at the boat ramp tomorrow morning. Work is very busy so I will have to be off the water early. I've got Peter Morse coming up the day after to do some filming for a fishing DVD up north so time is pretty tight."

Next morning we set out to the same bank where the cicadas were singing, but the fishing was slower than the previous mornings. Still, we caught a few fish from thunderous surface strikes and John landed a saratoga on a Gartside Gurgler. Saratoga are a fish noted for their ability to throw a hook with their acrobatics and bony mouths.

"That was fun! There's nothing like surface strikes on fly to get your day off to a good start. How about we do a story on this with Peter? We will have a bit of time before we go to do a session on the dam. Want to be a part of it?" I was thrilled at the opportunity and gladly accepted.

However, now performance anxiety started to raise its ugly head. It wouldn't make a good story having surface strikes but no hook ups, and the fish were definitely getting wary. It was no good saying "You

should have been here yesterday." For a job like this you have to use a fly that you are confident with; one that converts strikes to hook ups at a very high rate. I turned to a fly I have enormous confidence in, a variation of the Gartside Gurgler. Thankfully, my faith in the fly was rewarded and we caught some great bass thanks to Jack Gartside and his wonderful fly.

The Gartside Gurgler is one of my very favourite flies. I believe the combination of its essential elements make it one of the best surface flies around and I use it frequently. As with all fly tying thought, tweaking of patterns to suit local conditions is often important to maximise potential. I have found a few modifications to the original pattern have improved its effectiveness in my home waters. For those of us who fear strong winds, hate long leaders needed for shy fish, suffer from lack of time to spend at the tying bench or are just interested in getting out there and putting it to the fish, this fly is for you.

The tying time will vary according to skill level, but from 'go to whoa' it should not take longer than 10 minutes per fly. Once you have it down pat, 5 minutes is all you need. Materials include Evasote closed cell foam, coloured buck tail or marabou feathers, a little crystal flash, flat waxed nylon tying thread, and a long shanked hook like Mustad's Signature C52S BLN Stinger/Deerhair. I generally tie this fly in sizes #4 to 2/0. The cost of the fly after initial purchase of the materials and tools is barely more than the cost of the hook!

This has proved to be a fly that really takes care of some of my pet hates – wind, long leaders and lack of casting skills. This fly is a peach to cast. Firstly, it is not heavy or weighted, so it flows well with the casting

Of all its properties I believe this 'vertical at rest' position is the most important. Why? Hook up rate.



Peter Morse

stroke. Secondly it is not a bulky fly, so it has little air resistance. Dahlberg divers, while a great surface fly in their own right, are down right nasty in windy conditions. Being such a light fly, it won't damage your rod if it hits the blank. This is an important consideration when starting out.

What is it about a fly that makes it work? Who cares, the real test is when the fish eat it! Fish eat Gartside Gurglers! The long slender profile almost certainly is very attractive to fish, looking very baitfish or prawn like. Gartside's lend themselves to a variety of retrieves to suit the mood of the fish. Fast retrieves are possible, skipping and walking the fly erratically across the surface. Very slow, long strips of the line can produce an enticing tail wiggle. Short, sharp strips with pauses in between to let the leader material sink will produce loud pops. To top it off, as if all that was not enough, at rest this version of the Gurgler sits almost vertical.

Of all its properties I believe this 'vertical at rest' position is the most important. Why? Hook up rate. These days I fish surface flies as often as I can, often longer than I should. All it takes is for one surface strike past the accepted cut off time for surface activity to keep me going for another half hour. I use dahlberg divers, hard foam poppers, crease flies and heavily dressed muddlers. All are great flies, and all have their place on the business end of my rods, but none have the conversion rate of strike to hook up that these Gurglers have.

If the Gurglers are not getting hit for what ever reason, well...change fly, but be prepared for the fish to smack it and not take the hook. I think that because the point of the hook in the Gurgler hangs well down in the water there is no refraction to the image the fish sees. Remember how the straight stick seems to bend when you stick it in the water? Maybe this is not the reason, but what ever the cause, the fish almost always find the sharp end of the fly embedded in their jaw. Got to love that!

Like a puppy with two tails, a very happy author holds up another fine bass.

MATERIALS

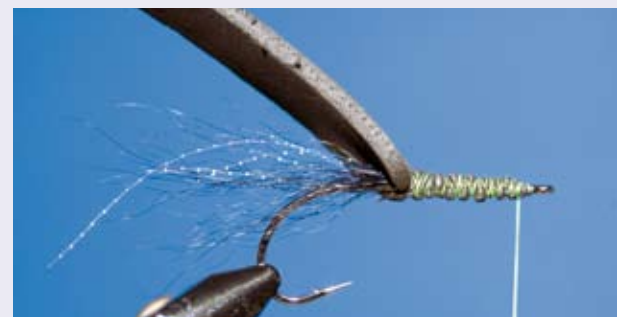
- Hook** Definitely a long shank hook. I use Mustad's Signature C52S BLN Stinger/Deerhair hooks in sizes #4 to 2/0.
- Tail** Bucktail or marabou with a little crystal flash.
- Body** Closed cell foam such as evasote.
- Thread** Flat waxed nylon thread is the best I have found, as it is less likely to cut the foam.



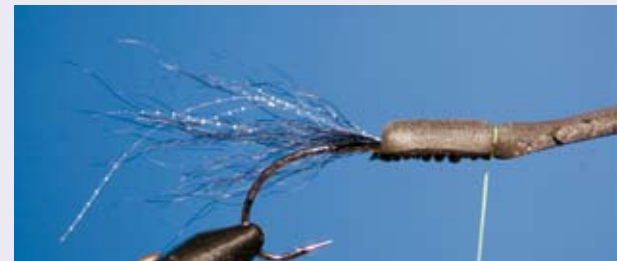
Tie in the thread at the middle of the hook shank. Tie in a sparse coverage of bucktail as a tail, in either black or chartreuse. Once you have taken a couple of wraps, apply pressure with your finger or thumb at the tie in point. Tie in some Crystal Flash over the bucktail. My preference is blue or black, but not enough to take over from the bucktail. This gives the impression of baitfish scales, or the shine from wings or the carapace of terrestrials.



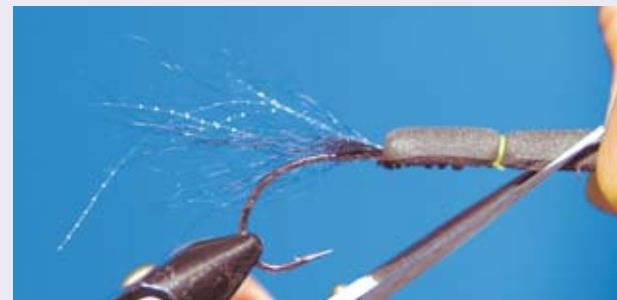
Advance the thread to just short of the eye of the hook. The foam for size #1 to 2/0 hooks should be cut in strips no wider than 10 mm otherwise the sides will wrap themselves around the hook like a hot dog in a bun and the fly will not sit properly in the water. Lay the foam on the top of the shank, and with your material hand (that's the one not winding the bobbin) pinch the foam around the hook. Wind the foam down tightly onto the hook.



Wind the foam back the bucktail. Now take the thread forward to just behind the hook eye, wrapping down firmly any wayward foam. Pull the foam forward along the top of the hook shank. Check to see that the rear end of the foam is at the first tie in point, and not covering up the bucktail. If it is, the splaying that we tried to achieve with the bucktail may be lost. Pull the foam forward, making sure it lies symmetrically over the shank, and secure with a few wraps of thread.



I like to use a whip finishing tool to tie the finishing knots on my flies. I find it most soothing the way the tool moves, and the knots go exactly where I want them. Also, I can't whip finish well with my fingers like some accomplished tyers can. Be careful if bending the foam back as you could weaken it if too much pressure is applied.



TYING NOTES

If you used something other than flat waxed nylon for tying you could be in trouble. Standard trout fly thread has a tendency to cut through materials like deer hair and closed cell foam when tightened. You may be OK because the wraps used to finish the fly don't need to be tightened too much. Flat waxed nylon seems to

support the collar better though, and after a full session and a few fish, the fly tied with standard thread will weaken at this point and will not pop as well or even break off the forward lip entirely. It doesn't really matter though, just tie another one. After it has caught a few fish, who cares, unless it is the last one in your box!