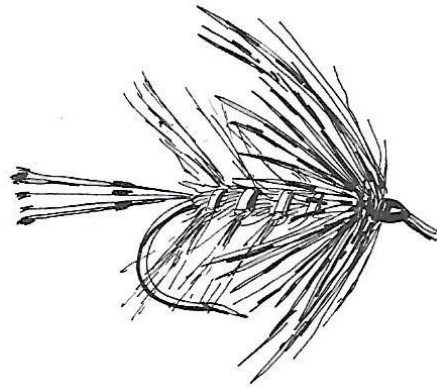


*From the Flyfisher's Chronicle: In Search of Trout and Other Fishes and the Flies that Catch Them,
by Neil Patterson, published with the kind permission of Neil, the book is available from
all good booksellers - ISBN: 9781472119162.*

South Uist

Ian's Bumble



Hook: No. 16-12

Thread: Black

Tail: Golden Pheasant Tippetts

Body: Dark claret seal fur

Rib: Gold wire

Body Hackle: One black and one claret cock hackle

Head Hackle: Black hen hackle, with two turns of blue jay wing feather in front

Machair Magic: Where Rods, like Wands are Waved

TONY BENNETT LEFT HIS HEART IN San Francisco. I left my nose in South Uist.

This is the story of how this happened.

Flying up to the Highlands and Islands from London, I pulled out my little leather collar box - my Portable Fly tying Kit (now in a black Muji toilet bag) - pulled down the tray in front of me, clamped a vice onto side and started whipping up.

On the way to Glasgow, I got half a dozen half-decent Claret Bumbles dressed up if I was in the aisle seat with multi-elbow room; only two if I was stuck in the middle. These days my Portable Flytying Kit looks like a bomb factory in my hand luggage, so now goes in the hold, but my record was fifteen flies between Miami and Cancun, with my left shoulder to the window: Crazy Charlies with milky coffee-coloured wings. There was turbulence. My lunch took flight.

Only grown-up islanders, their friends and relatives from the mainland were on the flight from Glasgow to Benbecula that Saturday morning at the end of June. The rest were stockbrokers on their way to Grimersta, wearing pinky, peachy, plum-coloured cords from the first floor of Farlows — and a handful of hangers-on in Alice bands.

By the sound of it, the islanders were from North Uist. Supposedly one in sixty Scots speaks the Gaelic — or jockenese, as one guide on the island refers to it -- and more people speak it in North Uist than in South.

My host, Wegg Kimbell, is not an islander. He doesn't speak jockenese. but he speaks with great knowledge about the island's history and its people — but, most importantly, its fishing. Although he's only been living there for four and a half years, his love of the island equals that of any old-timer. On the way to his lochside croft, twenty minutes from the airport, where he has been running a bed and breakfast for over four years, we pass a roadside shrine to the Virgin Mary filled with empty 'tinnies'.

'I just love it here,' he says.

Wegg may have only recently set up home on the island, but in between forays to Patagonia and Slovenia, and some very serious jobs in advertising media agencies, he'd spent most of his stray hours fishing the South Uist Estate lochs. These take some knowing — let alone fishing — as I was to find out.

Kinloch, the 'lodge at the head of the loch', sits off the road in a jungle of rosa rugosa, escallonias, phormiums, fuchsias, lupins, alders firs and collared doves — ring-neck doves that collect in a miniature cedar tree and coo-coo the day away. Wegg had to become a gardening expert to convince the lady selling the property that he should be the next owner. He — and his free-range hens. They say that if Wegg's not tracking down browns on the lochs, he's searching for brown eggs in his jungle. I told him his poultry needed taking in hand, but he's as good as married to his twelve chickens.

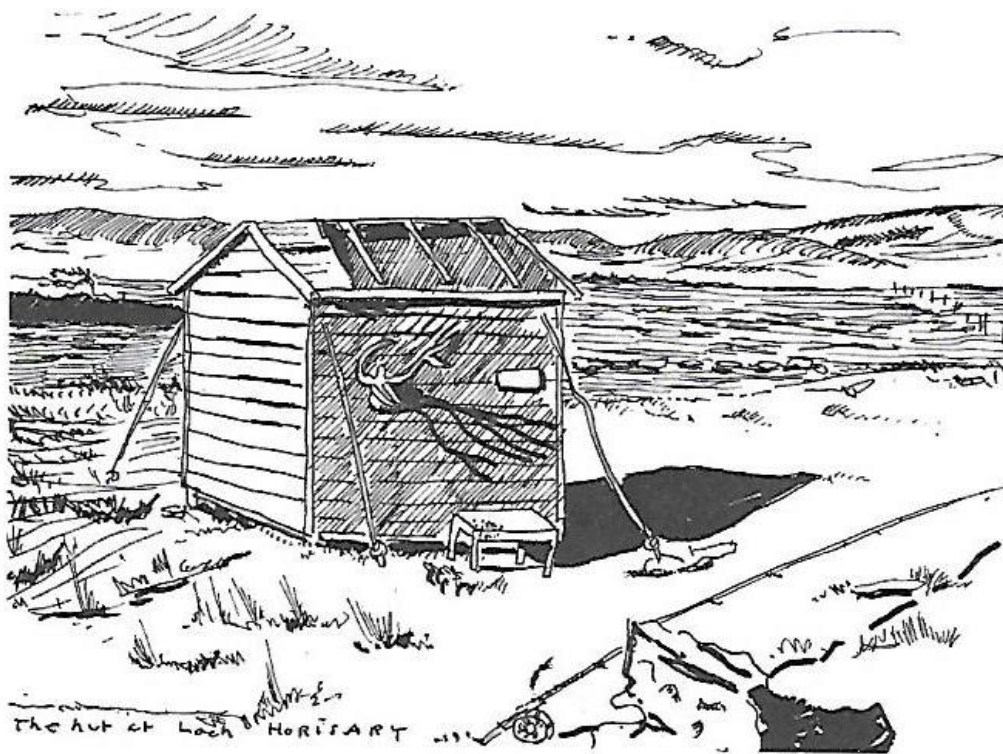
However, it isn't the cock crowing that gets me up at five on my first morning; he is tucked up in bed. It's me. The sun is pouring through the bathroom Velux and I can see Loch Druidibeg through the jungle — and trout rising.



This dry, sunny weather is something I haven't seen for a while, it being the month of June where, back in dampest, dampest southern England, towns are under water and more salmon are being run over on the M25 than hooked on the Wye. The islands have been free of rain for three weeks. The lochs are low and my first three brownies grab my tiny Silver Invicta hastily before the sun gets too high. The smell of smoky bacon rises out of the jungle, stinging my nose that is starting to peel in the unexpected Mediterranean dryness.

Early settlers in the Outer Hebrides lived by the shore. They were fishermen, not farmers, choosing to settle on the west coast of South Uist. This island is unmistakably shaped like a foetus, and is split into two distinct areas. The east is hilly and peaty while, in the west, sandy dunes protect a string of clear-water lochs with very little peat in them. These are the `machair' lochs; the most special of special lochs. Lochs haunted by brown trout over four pounds and a place where monster sea trout visit.

These shallow machair lochs are sunk into a landscape of crushed seashells. Rich in alkaline and health-giving properties, this mini ecosystem promotes the prodigious growth of kingcups and orchids, corncrakes and crustaceans — and a population of speckle-backed, white-bellied trout with eyes that sit like pince-nez on the ends of their noses.



Trout that cannot resist the dancing fly. And few anglers I have fished with know how to waltz a fly across a curling wave with greater expertise than my two boat partners, Wegg, and Ian Kennedy, the son of John Kennedy who, as keeper of the keys to the lochs, has taught his son well in the ways of wildness and the wonderful world of the machair.

'You're the only gay in the village,' Wegg enlightens me as I help him wind chicken wire round some stakes, putting an end to his chicken's free-range days. 'The only angler on the island fishing the machair lochs, I mean. Take your pick.'

I was more than just gay to discover this. I was jubilant.

From the top of the islands, the machair lochs on offer are Lochs Bee, Grogarry, Stilligarry, Mid and West Ollay, Kildonan and finally Upper and Lower Bornish. The best of these lochs represent the 'estate fishing', although the Angling Club can provide access to a select few of them.

I chose Stilligarry because walking through a sea of buttercups and orchids on a June day to get to one's fishing is almost as pleasing as the fishing itself. Plus, with sporadic blasts- from the Qinetiq missile range, there was no danger of me dropping off and dreaming I was paradise. I am in paradise.

There is a gentle breeze in our faces as we pull off the gravels, even though the Gulf Stream washes this coast with a warm sea making it unusual for it to be cold during the trout-fishing season,

I'm layered with every possible layer that Yvon Chouinard, founder of the Patagonia Clothing Company, could supply. My nose sticks out into the sun and salty breeze through a gap.

Wegg takes the oars and whispers instructions to himself from a sub-surface map he has planted deep in his brain. I sit there in the hull watching my ghillie finger every inch of the loch lying under the waves with his knowledge. It's like reading Braille. The exact position of every tiny pebble and mossy rock is relayed back. An oar dips here, or strokes there, positioning the boat where a fly might just be able to lift a fish out of a known lie, when the wind is in a certain direction. Today a bad wind swings from north to north-east. It had been doing this for ten days.

Ian rolls his fly out in front of the boat. It is hard to see what constitutes his team, but I can see they are not the flies I imagined we'd be using. They're tiny. Wegg asks if he can take a look at my fly box and give advice. It explodes in his hand. The lid springs open on contact, bounced asunder by a mass of seriously overdressed, closely packed flies that are so bushy, so springy, you could sit back in my box and watch television.

Ian has a fish in seconds. It crashes through the waves at eye level as a large wall of wave rolls in front of the boat. One scoop of the net and a brownie of two pounds is returned. Now I get the chance to see Ian's flies. Minuscule, scantily dressed Olive and Claret Bumbles tied on 14s. Flies dressed with a delicacy that doesn't match the fingers of the tyer who passes me one to try.

Most of my early boat-drifting days were spent on Orkney lochs, flicking flies on the end of a cast as short as I was tall at that time — a way my grandfather had taught me.



'Fishing is a relaxation,' this eminent doctor from Montrose told his small grandson, giving me my first lessons in boat fishing and health education.

But it was while sharing a boat with Stan Headley on the South Uist lochs that I learned to develop a retrieve that starts with a long cast, where you fish the attractor patterns on the middle dropper and point while this retrieve is on the move. But then, at the end of the retrieve, you fish the imitation pattern on the bob — an Olive Bumble or Claret Bumble — raising the rod sharply so that it stands perpendicular, surfacing the bob fly and sweeping it over the wave to the boat until it touches the wood. Stan has written about this 'lift and hang' technique in his seminal book on loch fishing.

Stan's initial long cast was a revelation, mainly on account of the fact that its effectiveness was proven almost immediately. The fly at the end of a cast that had delivered two-thirds of my fly line out into the loch had barely touched the water when it was grabbed by one sea trout or other over the two-pound mark. It once caught me the biggest sea trout ever caught on one of the lochs. I believe this sea trout is still the largest on record taken from that loch. But that was a sea trout on Loch Fada late on in the season. (More about this later.)

Today Wegg and Ian are both employing a different drift style to spellbind the fat June browns of Loch Stilligarry. It is back to my grandfather's leisurely ways, for both roll-cast their flies out no further than three rod lengths from the boat, lifting their rod tips up smartly the moment the tail fly pierces the surface. The bob is only ever allowed to sip at the surface, not skinny-dip. From this moment on, the fly appears to have a life of its own, unconnected to angler and rod. The latter follows the fly, rather than leads it as it weaves hypnotically from left to right and back again. It's the wind doing the fishing.

'Why bother with the tail fly?' I ask Wegg.

'All part of the magic?' he replies.

These secret machair lochs are becoming less of a secret. The number of visiting Irish flyfishermen, who no longer have the shallow loch sea trout fishing that they once had, has started to increase. Hardly surprising, for many of the favourite Hebridean loch patterns are of Irish descent.

Suddenly, while that flaky nose of mine is poking around in my cushion box searching for a change of fly, the surface erupts two feet from the boat and Wegg lifts into a brownie nearer three pounds than two.

In the spray and iridescent spume of the image of that moment that I hold in my memory Tinker Bell tings the tip on Wegg's rod with her wand, a rainbow arches over the island and I realize that no matter how well you attempt to describe any technique, in the end, it's as good as useless. Unless, that is, you learn how to add a tad of magic to your fly.

It was time for me to bandage up my nose and fly home, to come back again next year for another lesson from the island's magicians.

