

Black Magic Spider

Rob Denson in praise of a simple fly that saved his bacon in Iceland

BACK IN May 2003, Arsenal - the highest scorers of the season - travelled to lowest scorers, bottom-of-the-table and already-relegated Sunderland. My online bookmaker felt that home advantage somehow gave Sunderland significantly more than a cat in hell's chance. I gazed, open-mouthed and wide-eyed at what I can only assume was either a gross error of judgment or the result of using cheap batteries in a calculator.

I was on it like a tramp on a bag of chips. Sunderland 0; Arsenal 4. Ill-gotten gains should always be spent on fishing, so it was. A few phone calls and another stroke of luck saw me taking up a last-minute cancellation and boarding the Heathrow-Reykjavik flight for a week's trout hunting in the company of John Goddard and well-known guide and tackle developer Klaus Frimor.

John was a few weeks away from his 80th birthday that summer, yet within hours of our arrival on the banks of the Minnivallalaekur River, it became obvious why he had achieved what he had in life, and in angling. Infectious enthusiasm, energy and passion oozed from the man, rest his soul.

For most of our party, retirement being a dim and distant memory, second helpings at dinner washed down with a Scotch or two on the veranda had a distinct edge over an evening session in the cool Icelandic half-light. Klaus and I were the youngsters by some considerable margin, so, bursting with trout fever and full bellies we set out each evening into the gloaming. The fourth evening of the trip presented a problem. Klaus had spotted a group of rising fish: sea-run Arctic char. All well and good, only we were targeting sea-trout that evening, and in terms of dry-flies, were woefully ill-equipped. A frenzied fumble through two or three fly-boxes drew a blank until I turned over the last leaf of my Wheatley. My lucky streak was holding: there in the corner was a Black Magic Spider, deposited in the wrong box from the morning's trout session. Not exactly a classic dry-fly, or char fly for that matter, but I reckoned a spot of Gink on the hackle might just hold it in the film long enough to get it noticed. It did just that. My first "dry-fly-caught" sea-run Arctic char was a modest 1½ lb, but every ounce the hooligan, and not in the least bit impressed by being deceived by a tourist with a trout fly. Therein lies the magic of the Black Magic Spider: versatility, simplicity, something-and-nothingness, yet everything - as close to perfection as you'll ever get with half a belly-button's worth of fluff.

Surprisingly, the Black Magic Spider did not come into common usage until the 1960s, publicised by



Hook Any standard wet- or dry-fly hook **Body** Black thread **Thorax** Peacock herl **Hackle** (standard version) Very soft black hen - two turns in front of the thorax **Hackle** (Stewart-style, as above) Tied in behind thorax and wound through to eye



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Frederick Mold in *Presenting the Fly to the Trout*. I say "publicised" as opposed to devised as I find it incredible to believe that a fly of such simplicity was not fished on Derbyshire streams by men in felt hats and leather boots, if not by men with swords and sandals, on the Astraeus.

Either way, Mold gave us the version we know today: the exact same fly that deceived my char. In recent years, though, thanks to the char, I have added a slight twist in the form of a Stewart-style hackle - three or four turns of hackle through the peacock - which keeps it higher in the water, where it belongs, for longer, and adds more movement and presence. My favourite way with the Black Magic is to team it up with similarly skinny and simple wet-flies, on a floating or slow intermediate line, letting them settle to fish "damp" for a moment or two before beginning a slow figure-of-eight. Stream or stillwater, this is another true "super fly" I implore you to tie and fish. **T&S**

TYING TIPS

● There's not much to say about this one, other than keep it sparse, watch your proportions, and do aim for the neatest tie you can. Yes, scruffy flies can often outfish textbook tyings, but aim high with your tying, and produce the scruffy look when you want to - not every time! Aesthetics, purity and quality of the tie are an integral part of fly-tying, and the confidence gained from this will transmit down your fly-line.

RIGHT The original Black Magic Spider.

