

Salmon and the UV factor

Our choice of fly is based on what we see, not what the salmon see, says **Mick Bell**, who makes an intriguing case for patterns that glow in the water

A FRIEND OF mine once said that being a salmon fisherman was like having a cocaine habit but twice as expensive. There's no treatment for the addiction and the more we fish the more addicted we get; even the 12-minute "high" of actually catching a salmon doesn't offer a cure. In fact it compounds the addiction.

My name is Michael and I am a salmon fisherman. There - I've said it, and I feel much better.

The first symptom of this ailment manifests itself as irrational behaviour. Imagine, if you will, being taken to the best pool on the beat by the gillie, who advises you to put on a size 14 Stoa's Tail, then ignoring his advice and, when his back is turned, changing to a three-inch Waddington. You proceed to fish all morning without a touch and when the perplexed gillie shakes his head in puzzlement - because it was a size 14 Stoa's Tail that had taken the seven fish caught that morning - you just shake yours in reciprocal bewilderment and say nothing.

So if you are reading this, Donald, I confess to being a total prat, with the IQ of a fencepost. But it's not my fault - it's the medical condition from which I am suffering.

It is a well-known fact that there are more flies tied to catch fishermen than there are to catch fish - which means that our decision to choose a particular fly is governed, quite naturally, by what we see as opposed to what we think the fish see.

When we open our fly-boxes we are faced with an array of beautiful creations in all colours and sizes and our decision-making process begins. This process is governed by a number of factors that are quite logical - past performance, favourite patterns for the river you are fishing, and the advice from one's gillie.

But what if we were to go right back to basics and think about what the fish actually sees?

The light that humans see is just a small part of the total electro-magnetic radiation that is received from

the sun. We see what is called the visible spectrum. The actual colours within the visible spectrum are determined by the wavelengths of the light: the longer wavelengths are red and orange; the shorter wavelengths are green, blue, and violet. Many fish, however, can see colours that we cannot, including ultra-violet.

So what exactly is ultra-violet light, and how do you see it? The simple answer is we can't see it but scientists have proved that many species of fish, especially salmonids, use UVA light to find their prey. Ultra-violet light's source comes mainly from the sun and, to a lesser degree, other stars. Ultra-violet light causes some objects to glow, or become "fluorescent" upon contact. Molecules in the object gain energy on contact with UV light and then release the energy in the form of visible light. This glow is what some fish look for when searching for food.

For humans to see this glow we must use an ultra-violet torch. These are the clever gadgets used in forensic science to check the validity of bank notes. For us fly-tyers they are invaluable for curing UV varnish on the heads of flies. When you shine the light from a UV torch on to popular salmon flies the UV light "picks out" certain colours and they shine much more brightly than others. Colours such as red, orange and black look very neutral, whereas green, yellow and pink are vibrant, especially if these colours are dyed with a particular type of fluorescent dye. It is important to recognise that not all dyes have the UV factor... and the strongest fluorescent dye may be called "hot orange" but appears a bland cream colour under UV light.

When I first started my UV journey in January last year, it seemed logical to design a fly using materials that shone the brightest

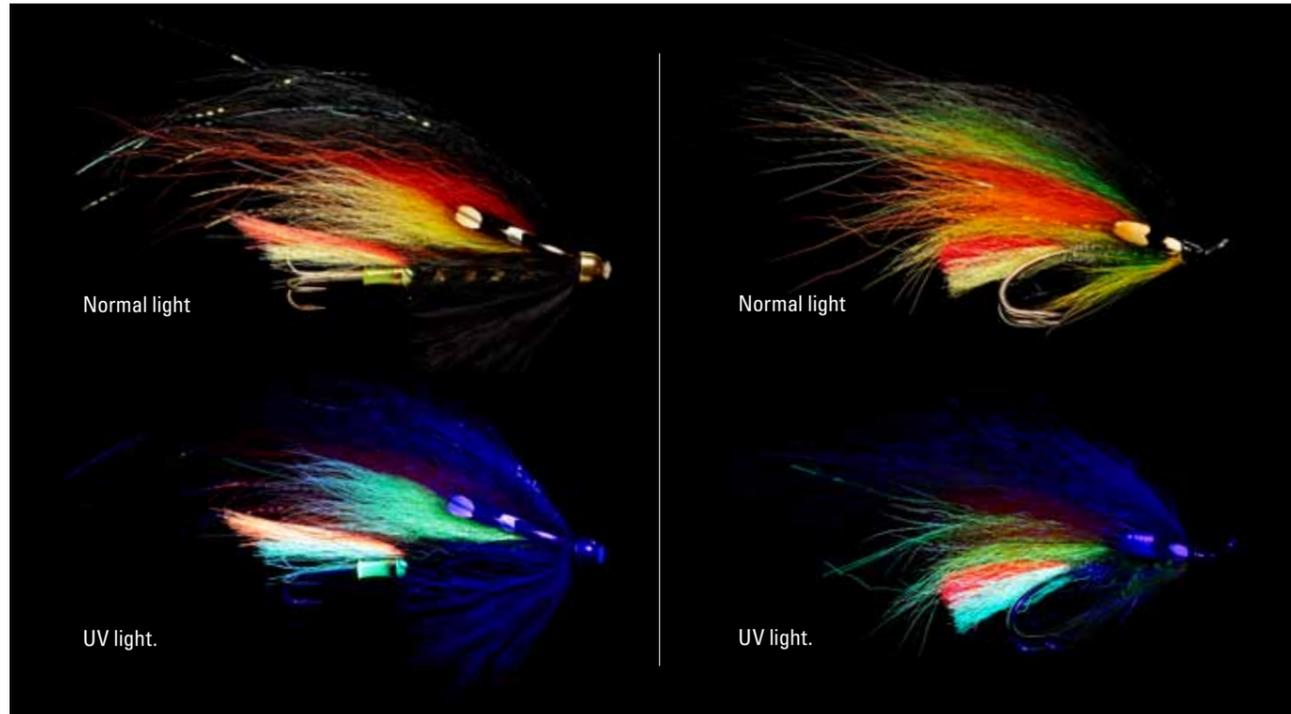


Mick Bell is the managing director of Bluemoon Fishing, whose interests include the Ettrick Valley Smokehouse, Mashama hooks and Bloke fly-rods. He fishes for salmon most days of the season.

"Not all dyes have the UV factor - the strongest fluorescent dye may be called 'hot orange' but appears a bland cream colour under UV light"



A typical salmon-fisher's fly-box photographed under UV light. See how the dyed-yellow jungle cock, FITS tubing, orange coneheads, Glo-Brite, mono ribs and some bucktail wings show up.



Tony Black's flies: we see bright red, yellow, green and flash (top). But under UV light, some materials are luminous, others darken.

under UV light. The pattern I came up with, which I named the Ettrick Special, utilises predominantly pink and yellow materials.

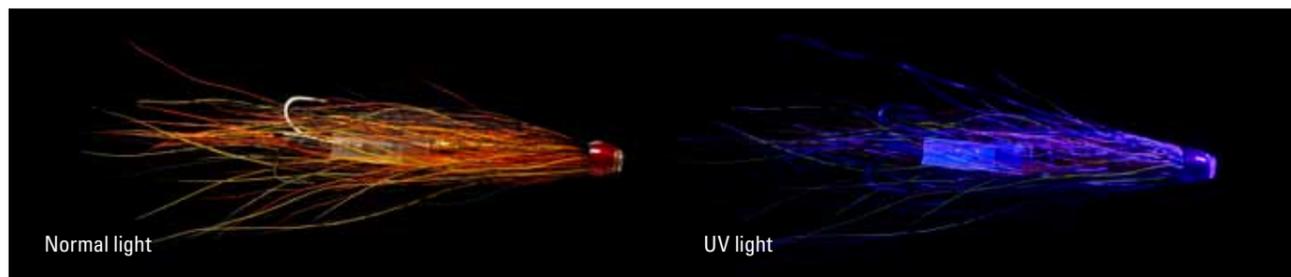
Last year I caught 49 salmon - and 45 of them were on the Ettrick Special and a variant I named Mistress Beth, which is similar but with the addition of a fluorescent yellow and black hairwing. While I freely admit that this is hardly proof that these flies are better than any others, at least they did catch fish.

In early March I was fishing the Aberdeenshire Dee with Tony Black, a well-known gillie on the Tay. Tony has "form" on the Dee in the spring and invariably outfishes everyone else. We managed seven fish on our six-rod beat and six were caught by Tony. Last year we managed 11 fish for our two weeks and seven were

caught by Tony, who was only with us for two days! Now Tony is a fine fisherman, but I like to think that the rest of us are pretty useful on a good day. Tony ties his own flies and very generously gave me six patterns when he left. As soon as I got home I zapped his flies with my UV torch and guess what...

The major difficulty I encountered when designing the Ettrick Special and Mistress Beth was finding the correct material: not all yellow templedog hair or pink cock capes have been dyed in the same way and only certain types of dye seem to react under UV light. As my tying skills are not up to much I commissioned a local fly-tyer, Mike Roberts, to come up with the correct materials. Unfortunately he is reluctant to tell me what dyes he has used but the flies

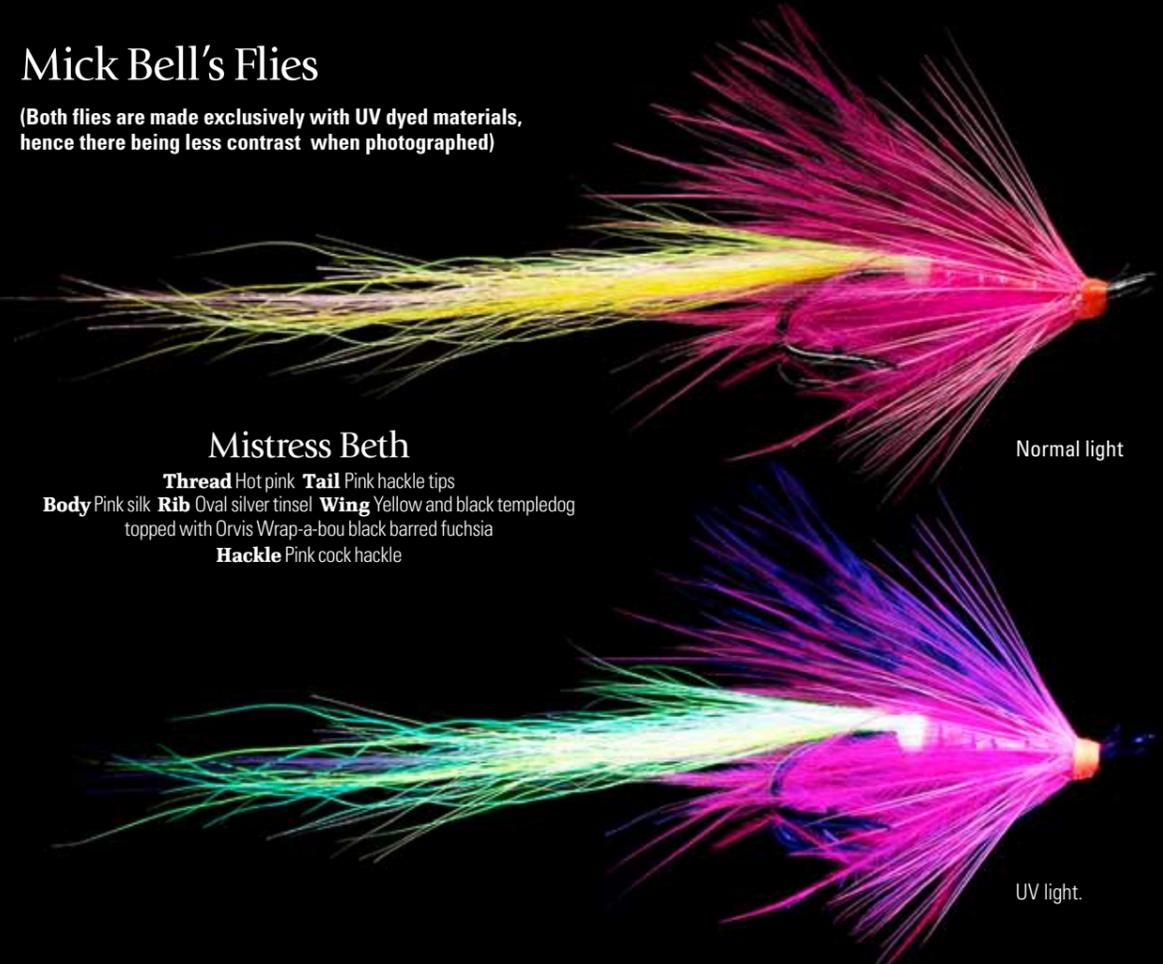
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A Willie Gunn photographed, left, under "normal" studio light and, right, under a UV beam. Nothing "shows up" under the UV, which suggests that none of the materials in this very successful fly reacts under UV light and, therefore, while the UV theory has credence, it's no panacea.

Mick Bell's Flies

(Both flies are made exclusively with UV dyed materials, hence there being less contrast when photographed)



Mistress Beth

Thread Hot pink **Tail** Pink hackle tips
Body Pink silk **Rib** Oval silver tinsel **Wing** Yellow and black templedog topped with Orvis Wrap-a-bou black barred fuchsia
Hackle Pink cock hackle

Normal light

Normal light

UV light.

Ettrick Special

Thread Hot orange
Tail Fluorescent yellow and green bucktail
Butt Fluorescent green silk **Body** Hot pink floss
Rib Oval silver **Throat** Pink marabou
Wing Orvis Wrap-a-bou black barred fuchsia

UV light.