

On preserving materials

By Ian Cox



My annual Christmas tidy up extended beyond cleaning out the garage this year. My wife had got there first so all I had to do in the garage was sort stuff back into a format where I could find it. So I turned my unrequited tidy up bug to sorting out my collection of fly tying materials.

I am fortunate in this regard as I have a permanent fly tying station own where I have contrived to store materials in a number of those steel filing drawers that were used once upon a time to store blank forms.

There is a story to this. Many years ago I did considerable good to the state of my marriage by handing over the old garage to my wife to use as a woman cave. In return I got the passage between our bedroom and the new garage I built to replace the one that had been lost. I also got a workshop of sorts in the shape of an old Zo Zo shed we used as servants quarters while we built new servants accommodation. Much to the amusement of my kids I lost the workshop to my wife but have managed to hang onto the passage. And very proud of it I am to.

It was thus with some consternation that I discovered that this splendid space had not been that good for my fly tying materials. Yes they were splendidly arrayed in a multitude of separate drawers but in truth this had not been good for them. Durban's humid climate is not good for fly tying materials and dust can be just as bad. Worse still bugs had got in and were rapidly destroying some of what I had.

Urgent action was required.

It turns out that storing material loose in drawers is not very clever. Fly tying material needs to be stored in a sealed environment. Tupperware containers are best suited for this task but fly fishing evenings spent with mates who do so has revealed that this is not the most practical solution. It's a swine to find anything that that is tucked away in a plastic box. You either cannot find the stuff you are looking for in the box or you cannot find the right box amongst the mountain of boxes you have accumulated. Hours get wasted in searching for the right materials or sorting and re-sorting them into the right box. There is a reason why we still use drawers. They work!

My solution was to sort materials inside those draws into zip-lock plastic sachets. The purpose of this was three fold. First it was to seal, thereby keeping most of the moisture out. Second it was to isolate thereby avoiding or at least minimizing the risk of cross contamination. Thirdly it was to sort.

Thus each cape has its own plastic packet as do skins. Dubbing is sorted by type – ice dub, uv, synthetic and natural. Similar rules apply to feathers with CDC being stored in one sachet and biots in another. Marabou is separated by type with the long plumes you use to tie semper flies being separated from the stuff you use for woolly bugger tails. Hair patches which are particularly difficult to keep in good condition in Durban are all stored separately in sealed plastic zip-locks bags which are sorted into larger bags by type. I think you get the idea.

A major challenge was dealing with the damage caused by my inadvertent neglect. The risk of such damage increases hugely when you source material from roadkill or as I have done by acquiring material from deceased estate or from those who are emigrating. The trouble with that stuff is that you do not know where it has been.

I did a lot of research as to how best to treat this material and in the end have settled with a combination of a deep freeze treatment coupled with a bit of the good old dog collar. Oh I also spray the draws with doom every now and again.

Deep freezing materials for a week, letting them thaw and repeating the process for another week will kill off most if not all bugs. It also has the additional advantage of drying the material out. A small piece cut from a flea collar and placed in the bag with the material should sort out any other bugs. I don't like naphtha because it pongs and is not very healthy. Bay leaves don't work.

The experts say that you should freeze you material every six months or so. I have not got round to that but I think it is a very good idea especially in the case of skins. Don't freeze the

material in their bags as this will just encourage condensation when the material thaws out. I stick the stuff in old shopping bags which I throw away afterwards.

It is not a good idea to tell your wife why you are freezing your material. They generally do not react happily to the idea of the family food store being used as a debugging machine. Happily mine grew up freezing mice and other roadkill to feed her pet owl and other wildlife so these reactions are muted, provided of course the material is bagged before freezing.
