Fly tying is an illusionary skill; we’re out to create an illusion of life. But illusion can extend beyond just the appearance of life in a fly. The fly pattern demonstrated here has become a great favourite and is a perfect example of creating the illusion of bulk without actually having weight to match that bulk.

Fly tyers and fly fishers need to take notice of the shape of baitfish and look to re-create the profiles we find in nature, as well as the details of shade and colouring. Baitfish come in three fundamental shapes; the broad flat profile of a sardine or herring; the fat round shape of a hardyhead, small mackerel, pilchard, garfish, or mullet; and the slender profile of an anchovy. Fine tuning details such as colour, flash, movement, eyes and red gill flashes all keep us, the tyers and the fly fishers, happy and confident. This state of happiness should not to be underestimated, but the silhouette a fly casts should not be neglected either. Most predators strike from below and this highlights the fly against a bright sky. This silhouetting effect results in shape having far more prominence than individual detail.

The need to create a bulky profile without weight has been an ongoing exercise, testing the minds and skills of many generations of fly tyers. Early models made from natural materials become weighty when submersed in water and many find lifting and casting these waterlogged flies a challenge.

Dan Blanton’s Sar-mul-mac (sardine-mullet-mackerel) is a great fly that has been deadly for thirty years (and remains so) but the large chenille head and the use of feathers make for a fly that holds water. In the hands of a caster like Dan Blanton it’s a most effective fly but others can struggle with its weight.

One of the doyens of saltwater fly tyers, Bill Catherwood, produced magnificent, fat, spun deer hair flies for striped bass in particular, but their durability in the land of things with teeth and rough treatment always kept them in the reserve box.
Bob Popovics produced his silicon coated wool heads for a fat profiled fly that has been the inspiration for many tyers, and Kate Howe’s Dean Butler-inspired Fat Albert became a very popular fly amongst those looking for big barra, especially in discoloured tidal water; but it’s a tough fly to tie.

Many other tyers around the world have worked away at a variety of methods and have developed all sorts of bulky mullet profiled flies using many different materials and techniques that are a blend of others ideas and their own. Many of these flies catch fish.

This push to create lightweight but fat, as well as profiled, water shedding patterns has had me wandering down many paths, including a pack of ‘dingo flies’, the consequence of a fly tying night when inspiration flowed from a bottle of red, and the results just didn’t look very good in the morning.

My early attempts were heavily influenced by Bob Popovics (who hasn’t he influenced) and began with the use of carded wool, spun like deer hair, packed tight, and clipped to shape, but without a silicon coating and with the addition of lead eyes - what still remains my best barra came on one of these, drifted in under a snag on the East Alligator River.

It is a great imitation of a mullet but is hefty to cast, especially in ‘big fish’ sizes - wool absorbs a lot of water and very quickly becomes a liability in the wrong hands. There had to be a better way to produce bulk, silhouette and that underwater ‘push’ element - movement vibrations that fly fishers hope can be detected by the many dirty water sensors in a fish.

The Fat Boy flies are my own contribution to this evolution, although of course these have come from elsewhere, cannibalised from other’s patterns and ideas, but most of fly tying is like that anyway. Alan Rogers sent me a fly he tied and used to land a barra estimated at 50 pounds when fishing with Steve Jeston south of Hinchinbrook Island, and it certainly falls bang into the category of a Fat Boy. Alan used a foam ear plug as a mould.

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Some years ago I fished with Peter Pakula for threadfin in the Northern Territory. He fished a pattern of his own design to catch some big threadfin in discoloured tidal creek systems. He tied them using clear plastic hose to form the shape of the bulky heads on these flies. This is a pattern style I've been playing around with for a number of years, constantly tweaking it as a consequence of results and failures in the bluewater and in estuaries.

What I like so much about this pattern is its simplicity, its ease of tying, and the variability that can be created within the pattern. Most importantly it's also a very effective fly style when it comes down to the point of all fly styles - actually catching fish.

A good pattern in my opinion should be easy to tie, light to cast (relative to expected depth function), foul proof and effective. Fat Boys are usually made entirely from synthetic hair and are fundamentally hollow, so there's nothing to hold water. But this hollow space can also be filled with several materials to completely alter the potential of the fly for different situations.

In an effort to overcome the inherent rigidity of most synthetics (and certainly my favoured synthetics for this fly) I've added variations that also incorporate natural materials to produce a seductive tail action - there aren't many things that give more movement in the water than rabbit strips and saddle hackles.

Over the years I've tried a number of materials to form the mould over which to set the 'fat head' shape and a number of different hair materials to form the body. Craft pom-poms slid onto the hook shank worked okay and so did a clump of chenille (to add weight I used lead wire and then wrapped it with chenille).

The idea to use Ezi-Body came from a fly or a magazine...
I’d seen somewhere and the moment I saw it, a light came on. There are alternatives to Ezi-Body as well. Shaun Ash alerted me to a product called Tekflex and Tiewell sell a product called Flexotube. These products come in a wide range of sizes and it is important to use this variety to enable you to build up a range of fly sizes.

My early models had been made from super hair and the all important heads were finished with silicon, but in spite of a very solid appearance, they did suffer at the teeth of fish and the wear and tear of fishing. Eyes tore out easily and the fly lost its shape. Epoxy produces a head that is hard and if the gape is closed with epoxied material some hookup potential is lost. I have settled on finishing the heads of these flies with Zap A-Dap-A Goo II (a brilliant fast drying adhesive) and then gloss is added with a coating of T-shirt paints bought from a local art supply shop - this stuff is also fantastic for this job.

This is a style of fly that can be used to create bulky patterns for many different situations, from freshwater species through to the bluewater. In discoloured water they provide that ‘push’ and in clear water they provide a fat baitfish profile, but in all situations this is a pattern that provides an appearance of bulk well beyond its actual casting weight. It’s most important to not use the same proportions for flies aimed for different use. Keep the bluewater flies sparse and bright and flies for dirty water dark and bulkier. The flash tail version is a great bluewater fly and the mobility of the rabbit and deceiver tails makes them ideal for situations where subtle and seductive movement are the triggers required, such as on barra and cod water. The head creates a vortex of currents when the fly is retrieved and this sets the tail in motion.

Sparse, pale coloured flies, weighted and natural, are great favourites of mine in the bluewater. I usually use them on fast sinking shooting heads; down deep they would disappear to almost an illusion of a baitfish. The solid head and appearance of a transparent body is a very common feature of many bluewater baits and I’ve found over the last few years that when mackerel are about, and the flies are constantly being trimmed, they begin to work better as they get leaner or more abstract. This has prompted me to tie them even sparser. The shot of lead in the head gives them a terrific head-first sinking attitude. They have accounted for many fish on the sink and on both slow and fast retrieves.

Fat Boys are not completely original; they’re an amalgamation of ideas gleaned from many sources. The base pattern has tremendous versatility from freshwater to bluewater. Like any good pattern it can be adapted and modified to suit local conditions, species and bait sizes. Above all it’s a successful and proven pattern that’s been doing damage to fish egos for a number of years. Give some a swim.

This style of fly can be tied using a selection of different head and tail configurations.
Tie in the Ezi-body braid facing forwards. Wrap the lead wire (or solder wire) in at this point, or tie in the foam, or even leave it clear for a slow sink fly. Make sure you leave plenty of room between the tie in point of the braid and the eye of the hook – a centimetre is good – you’re going to need it to make a neat fly.

Push the braid back over the lead/foam/blank body – in this case I have used lead.

To set the tails of these flies in place and to help prevent fouling (this works on a lot of other flies as well) put a smear of superglue about 2 centimetres long at the butts of the feathers, or in this case, the flashtail. For the double bunny strip I use Zap A-Dap-A Goo II (the best tying cement I’ve ever used) and glue the leather sides of the strips together for about the same length. This reduces fouling to almost zero.
Secure the braid to form a cone. This forms the underbody that gives the fly its fat profile - then cut away the excess braid that's facing forwards.

The flies can be made with several different synthetic 'hairs'. I prefer the softer ones and find Tiewell's streamer hair to be very good and also the H2O SF Flash Blend. Turn the hook over and do the belly first. Taper the hair by pulling it at the ends – this is easier than cutting it to a taper later. Spread it into a thin veil then lay it around the cone and hold it in place while you tie it in. Turn the fly over. At this stage you can lay in multi colours to create counter-shading for baitfish patterns. You can tie in a layer of flash over the cone and then lay the hair over it to create internal flash too. Thin veils are best.

Using a dubbing needle smear Zappa Goo all over the head to set the hair in place against the cone. Always apply it from the head backwards. This stuff dries quickly, however it's best to put this fly aside and start another one while it sets properly.

I buy this head finish material from a local craft shop – it's a T-shirt paint and its brilliant. It's as tough as nails and comes in a wide range of colours to create really strong, solid heads. Glue the eyes on first (Zappa Goo) and then work around them with the squeeze bottle.