



Chris with a 62cm Leerie taken on a 1/0 white popper (left) and an 8lb mullet taken on a Crazy Charlie

AN ENCOUNTER WITH LEERIES

By Chris Shelton

Summer seemed to be dragging in the Cape. It was mid January and I had not touched a fish in a month. The rivers were all too low and the dams too warm. The thought of having to wait another couple of months for the trout to resurface again was almost too much to bear.

My state of depression was broken when Ron Flack-Davison phoned me one Monday morning, to tell me about some excellent sport he had been having with leervis. Without further ado, arrangements were made and a fishing trip was planned for the coming Saturday.

The next morning found me perusing the CPS library. As I paged through magazines on marine fishing, I perceived that I was becoming a little detached from what was going on in the world of flyfishing. The variety of fish which the fly rod is opening the door to is staggering. Everything from the elusive Permit to the majestic sail-fish have fallen to the fly. Previously, I had skipped over articles which did not have any reference to trout. I realized that I was becoming rather myopic in my approach to the sport and this needed some remedying. It was as if a spell had been lifted and a new era lay before me in my life as a flyfisherman.

The rest of the week was spent in preparation of tackle and fly tying. Ron gave me a handful of his own home-tied poppers which he assured me were guaranteed leerie takers. These were tied on No 1/0 long shank hooks. I could see I was in for a hard day's fishing, as I had never cast anything bigger than a size 6 fly before. Suddenly my six weight Orvis which, in my opinion, is a heavy rod by comparison to my Ultrafine, seemed hopelessly inadequate. Rigged out with a weight forward floating line, the six would have to do. Ron assured me that this would be fine.

Saturday finally arrived. I could hear Ronnie's trusty old beetle approaching at 04h45, fifteen minutes earlier than expected. He was obviously just as excited as I. Without further ado, we were en route into the rising sun. The mountains lay silhouetted before us. Within two and a half hours we reached our destination.

My excitement was difficult to contain as the fresh sea air filled my lungs. The water, slightly obscured by a stand of coastal vegetation lay tantalizing before us. The buck-fever started setting in. I desperately tried to keep my composure as I assembled my tackle. Every couple of seconds, the shrill cry of a seagull would ring out, beckoning me on.

Eagerly, I bounded after Ron and his son, Brent as they led the way down the path to the water. Unbelievably, two flyfishermen, almost up to their armpits in water, appeared in sight as we

rounded a bend. They turned out to be Mike Dohlhoff and his fishing partner, Jeff Bickel. We walked another three hundred metres upstream and stashed our refreshments and excess clobber. The three of us split up about 50 metres apart and proceeded to thrash the water. Ron was taken on his second cast by a fine leerie of about 50cm. Brent and I moved closer. It wasn't long before Brent let out a whoop as a leerie gave chase to his popper. Two casts later, he hooked the fish, while I fruitlessly cast this way and that, all my senses honed for a take. Mikhail Barishnikov would have had nothing on me as I reached out for distance with my slightly under powered outfit. Two hours later we broke for some refreshments. I was still fishless.

After a couple of quick gulps of coffee, I rushed to the water again. With renewed strength, I just about cleared the channel with my first cast. Half way back, my line stopped dead and started moving in the opposite direction at breakneck speed. At last I was into a sizable fish and Ron rushed for his camera. I was amazed by its power. A series of short powerful bursts persisted right to the end, when with an aching wrist, I eventually managed to tail him. What a beautiful fish I thought, all 62cm of him. Ron praised my efforts, saying it was the biggest leerie he had seen come out of that particular estuary. A couple of photographs were taken, before returning the fish safely to his environment. Needless to say, I was hooked.

We each went on to catch a few more leeries in the 40-50cm size category. I was broken on the spot in the afternoon by what I presume was an Elf. I stood with shocked expression and gaping mouth as I watched the severed popper drift away from me in the current.

What a work-out we had, backcasting and double hauling and trying to avoid getting a popper embedded in some vulnerable part of the anatomy. All in all, we had a super time.

For those interested in trying salt water fly fishing, my advice is, GO FOR IT! If you are looking for plenty of thrills, this is it. There is no need to rush out and buy specialized equipment initially. Standard trout tackle is fine as an initiation to salt water. I have a friend who started off with his four weight before buying a heavier outfit. The only precaution is to wash all your equipment thoroughly after your day's fishing. This you would have to do with a salt water outfit anyway. As far as line is concerned, a floating line is a must. Preferably a weight forward. I recommend at least 50 metres of backing.

If your reel capacity allows, 100 metres of backing is far safer, as I learnt on my second salt water outing when I landed an 8 pound mullet. This fish took at least 80 metres of line before turning.

As far as poppers are concerned, a white belly seems to be the most effective colour. The colour on the top of the popper is not too critical and serves more as a visual indicator to the angler. Fluorescent pink is good. Eyes are very important. The bigger the better. Poppers ranging from 1 to 2/0 long shanks are the most popular sizes. Anything much bigger will be too wind resistant and therefore be extremely difficult to cast and achieve any distance.

A quick strip retrieve works well. Another technique is to place the rod under the arm after casting out and use a double handed retrieve. This brings the popper back at a more consistent rate. When selecting a popper, choose one that will create a good healthy plop when stripped.

In the Cape, the leerie season coincides beautifully with the worst time of the year for trout fishing, i.e. mid summer. As an alternative to trout fishing, you will have to look far to beat it. A good place to seek out leeries is in estuaries and lagoons. A likely spot is wherever there is a narrowing of a channel. Leeries cruise up and down the channels in isolated shoals and wherever you can cover a channel pretty well, you are sure to pick up more fish. An incoming tide is preferable, although I caught 15 leeries one afternoon in about two hours with the receding tide. The receding tide on this particular day, caused a slight discolouration of the water, which brought the fish on at the mouth of the estuary. Look for these slightly discoloured patches of water as they definitely produce more fish.

There is really nothing much else to it, so go out there and have some fun. Tight lines!

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I defy anyone to beat me with a single fly against a team.
Arthur Cove, My Way with Trout, 1986

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