

Persistence pays off on the Smalblaar

by Philip Hills

It was one of those days on the Smalblaar River where every hard-earned trout you manage to raise is a noteworthy achievement and feels like a cause for a small celebration. Johan van der Westhuyzen, and I knew already that it was going to be a tough day when we passed the little waterfall on the Du Toit's Kloof pass and it was barely trickling over the moss. The amount of flow here is normally a good indication of what the level of the main river will be.

On the bridge at the bottom of the pass, our suspicions were confirmed. A dry winter and a long, hot summer had taken their toll and the river was intimidatingly low and clear. Many fly fishers give up hope in these situations but trout can be caught in such thin water. In fact, I have had some of my most interesting and educational fishing days on the Smalblaar under such conditions.

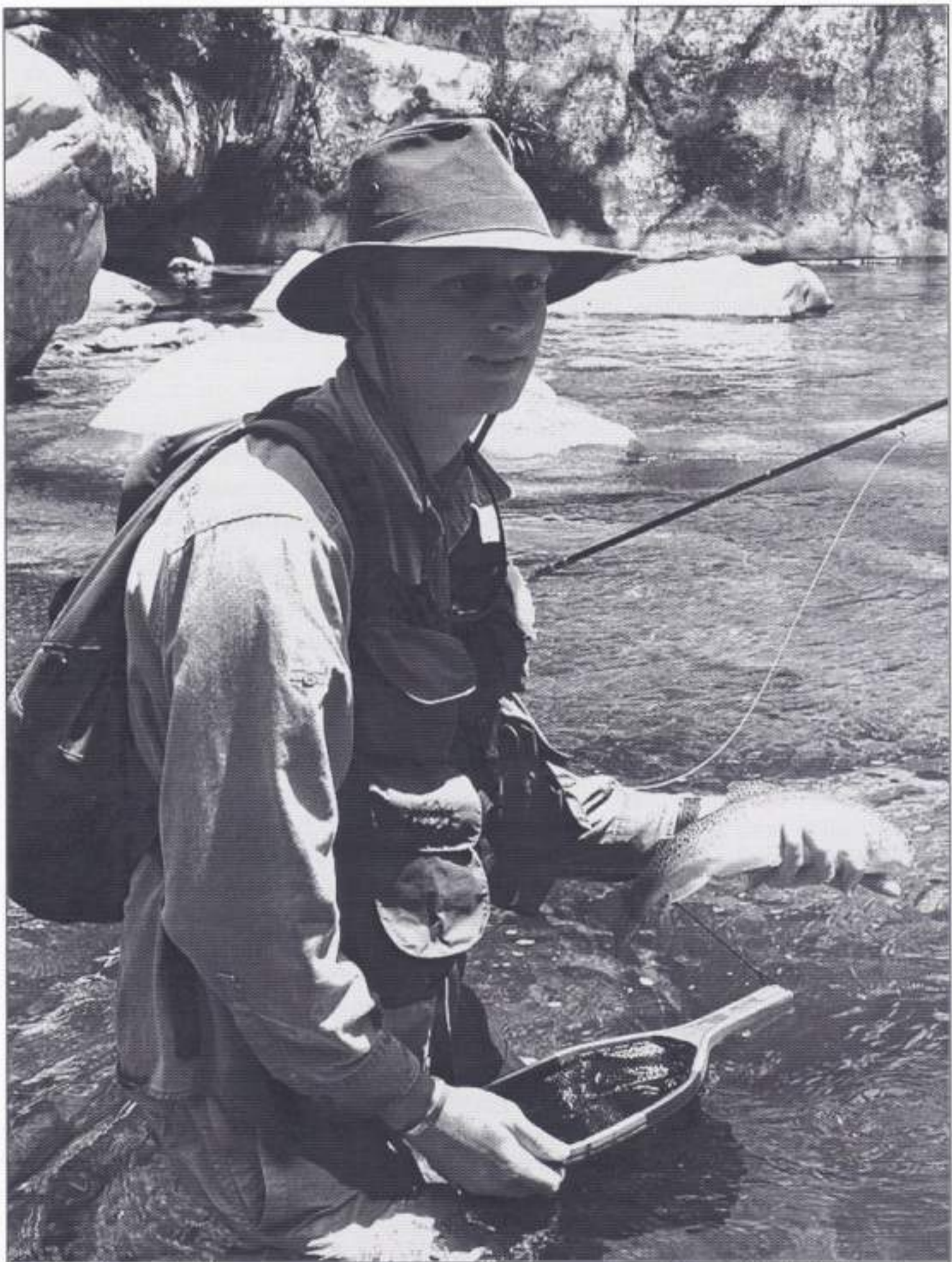
I love sight fishing and, had it not been for the wind, I would have been really excited about the prospects for the day. It was blowing hard downstream, the kind of wind that could blow your RABs right out of your box if you opened it carelessly.

Wind on a river makes spotting trout difficult, if not impossible. Accordingly, we had little alternative but to fish blind. At about 07h00 a small rainbow lifted up from a deep run to take Johan's fly. Contact was brief and though he lifted smartly into the fish, the hook pulled out as pressure was applied. Soon after that I had a take but missed it. Then things went very quiet. Gradually the wind got stronger and before long throwing or big-hackled RAB Variants became futile. We changed to Parachute Adams and Elk Hair Caddis, shortened our leaders and stepped up on tippets.

Although we managed drag-free drifts through most of the good looking areas, not another fish moved to our flies the rest of the morning. By 12h30, the water had warmed considerably and the wind continued to blow, albeit in gusts.

In a brief lull between gusts, we spotted a subtle movement in a shallow run up ahead. I like to examine any suspicious signs very carefully before fishing. Between gusts and in the overcast light we could just make out a ghostly shape dancing over the stream bed. As we watched, broken shadows took form and it became clear we were looking at a feeding fish. We froze immediately and crouched low to the water. From this angle it was almost impossible to see the fish but, in my mind, I marked the spot where it lay and, painfully and slowly, inched forward. Under such conditions opportunities are scarce and nobody wants to waste what might be the best chance of the day. Many times in the past I have crawled flat on my belly for a ten-inch fish. This one looked more like sixteen.

He was lying about two metres up from a tailout in about a foot of water and, being closer now, I could see he was feeding hard, ducking from side to side with the white of his



Philip Hills with the trout that took his foam beetle after refusing five other flies.

mouth flashing regularly. Every so often something on the surface that was completely invisible to Johan and I would catch his attention and he would tip up lazily and sip it in. Johan graciously offered me first cast to the fish. It was not going to be an easy presentation and he grinned when I asked him if the offer had been made purely out of generosity.

Having seen that the trout was prepared to eat off the surface I decided to let him have a look at the #16 parachute Adams I had on. I lengthened my leader and added two foot of 6X tippet. I moved slightly to my right to avoid the drag at the lip of the run and waited for a gap in the wind because I wanted to observe the fish's reaction. It wasn't long before the gap I was waiting for came and I sent out my most delicate cast, keeping the rod low so as not to draw too much attention to myself. The fly landed two and a half feet ahead of the fish and drifted perfectly into his feeding window. Johan and I tensed instinctively as the fly drifted down. The fish began slowly to lift. It had seen my fly.

For a moment our hearts stood still, and then the fly was over him and he sank back down again. I was sure the size had put him off. I bit off the Adams and tied on a #20 Klinkhamer.

Two more perfect - as far as I could see - presentations with the #20 elicited not even a glimmer of interest. The fish continued to rise and was still swinging actively back and forth in the current, apparently taking nymphs. Past experience has taught me that peppering a fish with the same pattern after two good presentations have been refused will, more often than not, arouse suspicion and send the fish bolting for the nearest cover.

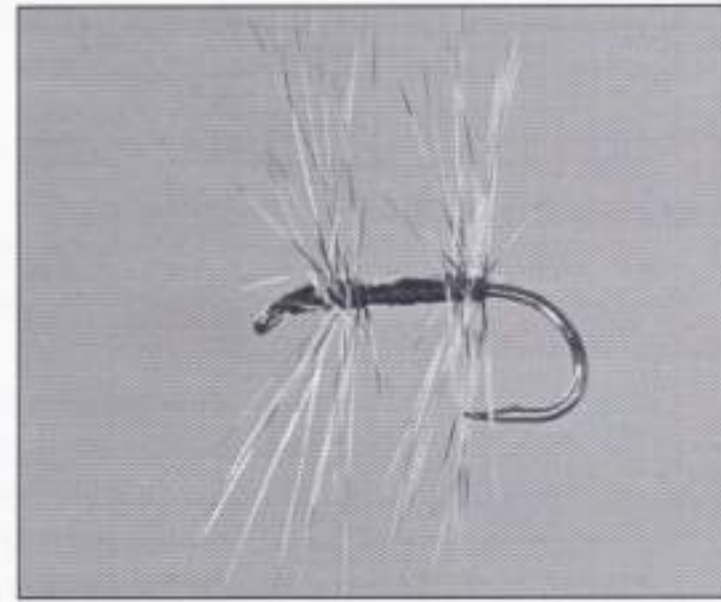
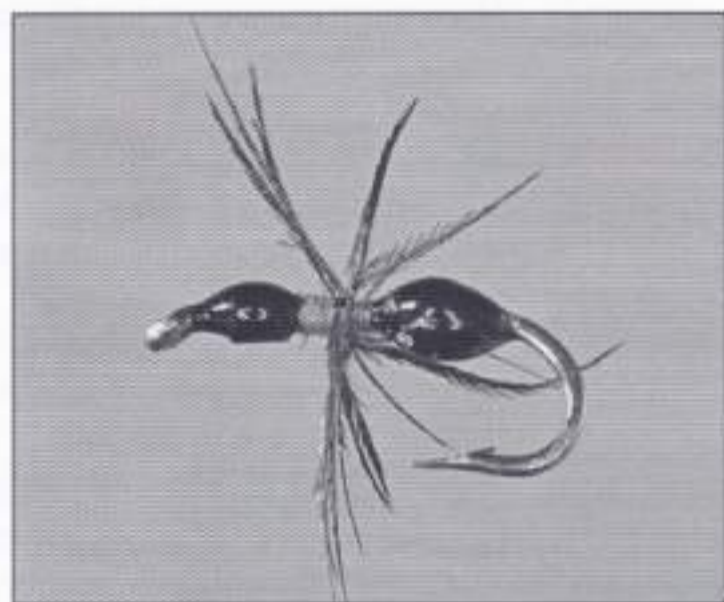
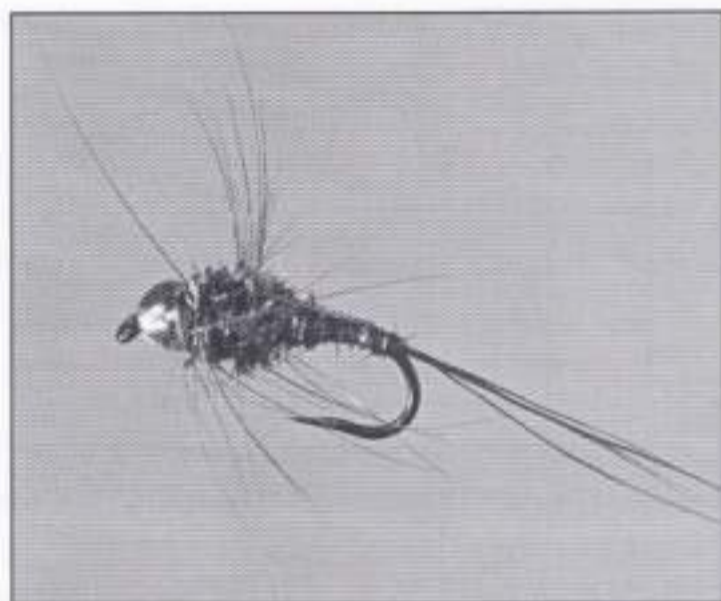
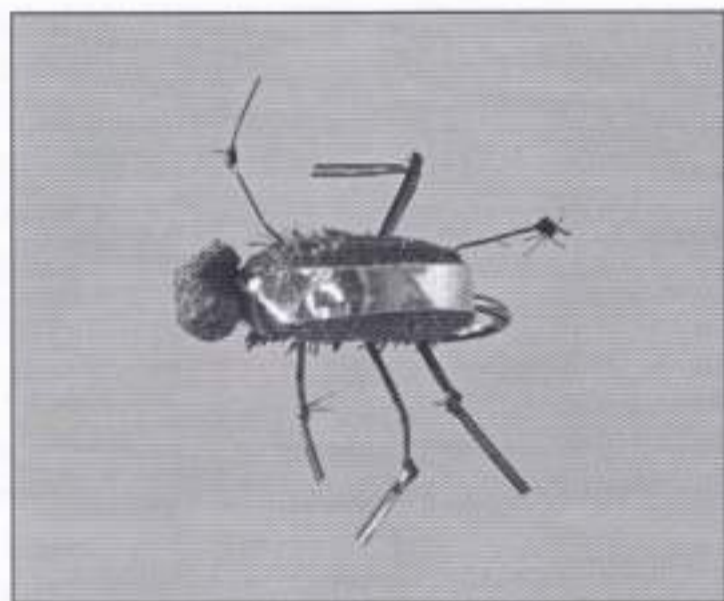
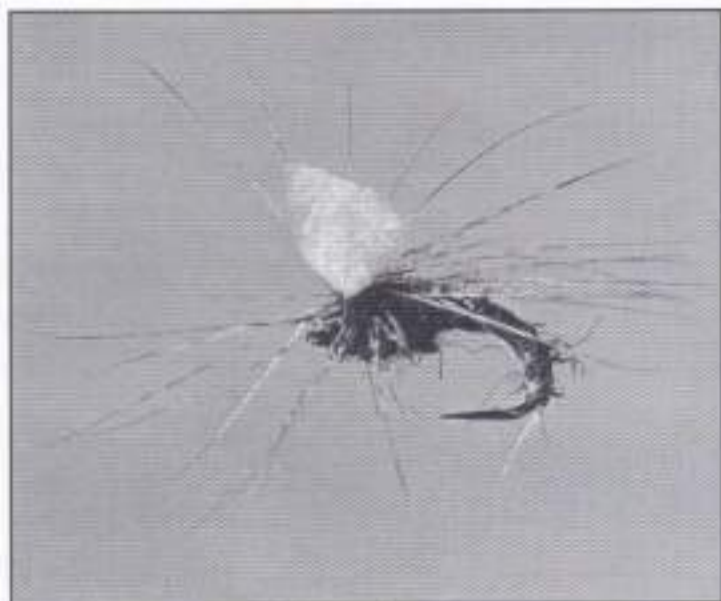
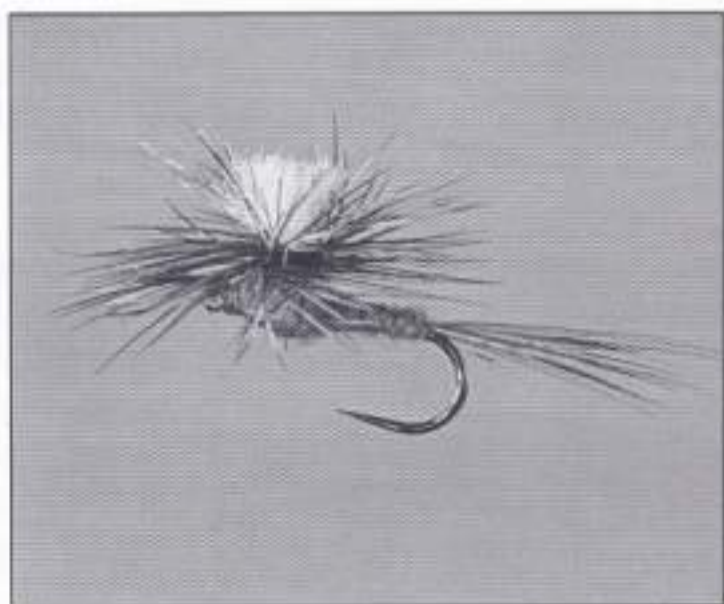
So it was time to change again. I selected a tiny Zak Nymph from my box, attached it to my tippet and waited for another gap in the wind. This time I aimed the cast a little higher up so as not to alarm the fish when the fly landed. I couldn't see the nymph so I watched the fish intently. Just as I estimated the nymph had drifted into the fish's window, it moved sharply to the left and, as it turned, I struck. Nothing. Had he accepted my fly or had he taken a natural? There was no way I could be sure, so I had two more casts over it with the nymph. The fish ignored both offerings.

I bit off the Zak, added two feet of 7x mono and selected a #20 Fore and Aft. I was crouched low and as I looked over the surface, I could see the familiar fluttering of mountain midges (*Blepharicidae*) being blown about in the wind. I convinced myself that this was what was eliciting a response from the trout.

The Fore and Aft landed ever so gently on the water and the slow current carried it down to the fish. This time it turned towards my fly looked at it and then clearly refused it. I knew there was no point in casting the Fore and Aft again and I remembered a little trick I had learnt from a good friend. I put the fly in my mouth and gave a quick suck to dampen it. This would allow it to just break through the surface film instead of floating. It is a highly effective little tactic and has accounted for some good fish for me in seasons past.

It was not to yield a fish for me today however and, after two further refusals, I was changing flies yet again. Now was the time to try something slightly different...

Responding to a series of recent articles on their effectiveness, I had tied a small army of ants that I was certain would come in handy at some point. I was looking at them now.



Clockwise from top left, the five flies that were refused and the one that was accepted: Parachute Adams; Klinkhamer with ethafoam wing; Zak nymph ribbed with UV krystalflash; Fore and Aft; Ant and the foam backed, peacock herl-bodied floating beetle that was accepted. Note the legs made from knotted, stripped peacock quill.

There were about six or seven of them tucked away in a corner of my box. I chose the one that had especially pleased me the night I tied them and fastened it to the point of my tippet.

It was mighty difficult to see the tiny ant on the broken surface of the water, so I reverted to watching the fish again. Three drifts later I was removing the ant. I hadn't been fishing it confidently and trout discern that quickly.

After changing flies a few more times, I began to realize that I was clutching at straws. There was no longer much logical thought going into my fly selection and the patch on my vest was quickly filling up with little specks of dubbing and hackle, none of which had enabled me to make the breakthrough I was looking for. I thought it would be prudent to back away, allow the fish to rest and to rethink my approach to the situation. This apparent selective feeding was an interesting conundrum for me because it wasn't something I had come across very often on our streams.

While sitting a few yards away, munching a Bar-One and watching my adversary continue to eat its own lunch, a wave of inspiration came quite suddenly to me. It actually made perfect sense and I wondered why I hadn't thought of it sooner. I opened up my fly box and took out one of the most insignificant-looking flies it contained. The tiny, foam-back beetle I held between my thumb and forefinger was such a simple little fly, yet it was deadly and I knew it. It was hot and windy and there were bound to be beetles on the water today, blown off course by the gusting wind and drifting helplessly down the river. A trout wouldn't need to do anything more than lift up gently to suck them in.

Without any hurry, I finished my lunch and crept carefully back to my casting position, now with renewed hope and the little black speck of a beetle attached to my tippet. I pulled a metre of fly line from the top guide and flicked the fly up the run without even a back cast. The beetle hit the water with a bit of a plop and instantly the demeanor of the fish in the water changed. I had its attention. Its pectoral fins flared as it gave a lazy kick of its tail, lifted nonchalantly and ate the beetle so confidently that I almost felt guilty at the absolute and total deception. *Almost...*

I lifted my rod tip ever so gently to set the hook. As the line tightened, the trout took off upstream, my reel protesting loudly as flyline was stripped from it. I had to play the trout carefully to protect the 7x mono but, remarkably, it held and a short while later the trout lay still in my hands. I think it was Gierach that said: "One of the finest things about catching a trout is being able to turn it sideways and just look at it". To me a rainbow trout is truly one of God's masterpieces. It was so pretty it broke my heart to let it go, but I knew that it was a stolen pleasure and that I had to put it back. Our contact with these magnificent creatures may be fleeting, but oh what a great privilege it is to hold a trout in your hands. As it swam away I saluted a worthy opponent - and a worthy fly.

"It is wrong to wed oneself to tiny flies simply because the beck and the fish are small. Although the fly life from the water is limited in range, the fish come to rely on terrestrial insects carried by the wind, heather flies, moths and beetles and so on. And fishing those becks is like going back to school. The casting has to be accurate, the stalking like Geronimo and the striking like Mercury." Geoffrey Bucknall. To Meet the First March Brown.