

Witsand leervis: a survival pack

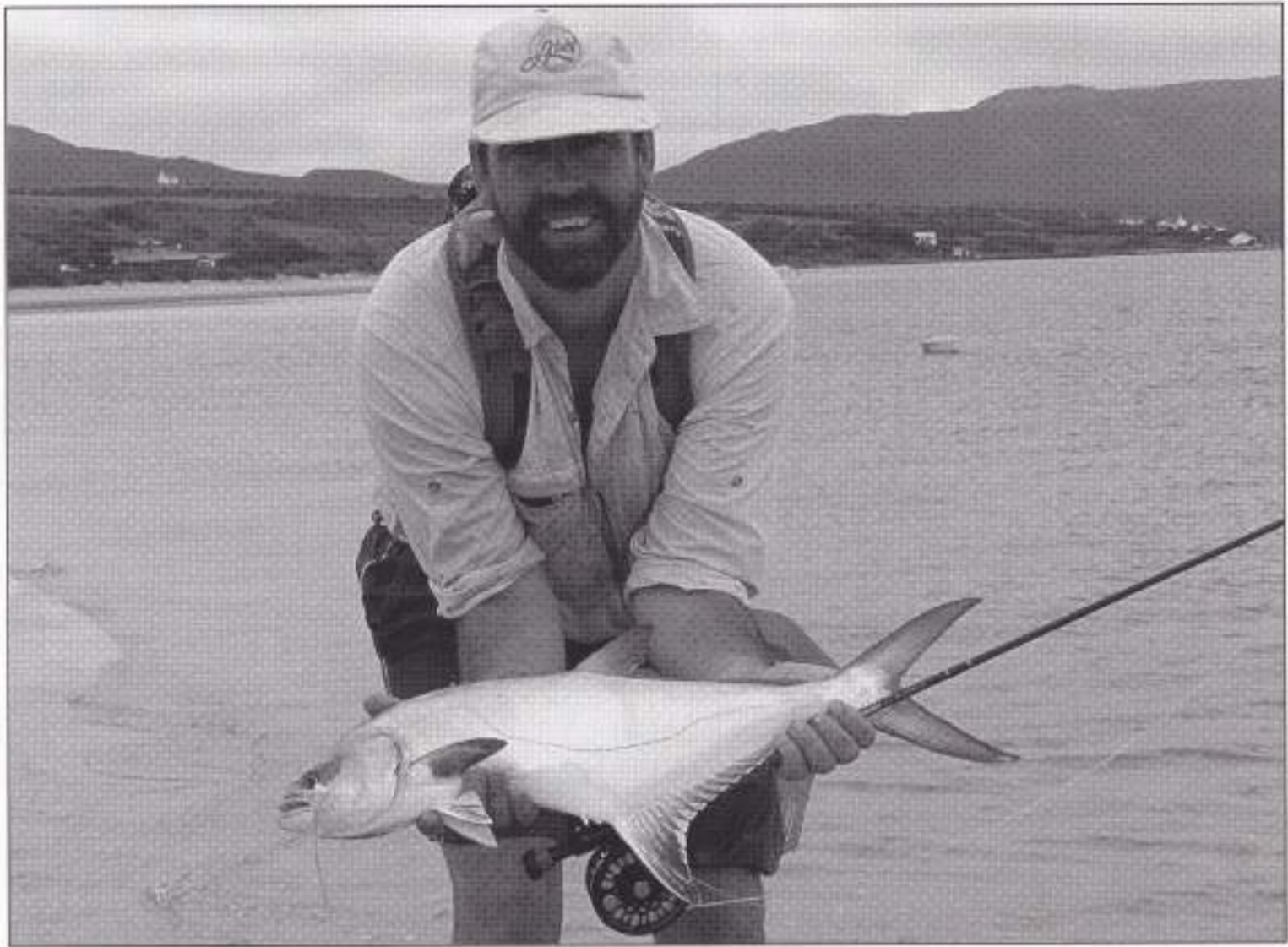
by Paul Taylor

“Many of the most highly publicized events of my presidency are not nearly as memorable or significant in my life as fishing with my daddy.” - Jimmy Carter

No doubt about it, I was irritable. I had forgotten to put sun block behind my ears; I had the sum of Soussevlei sand dunes in my shoes and could feel the gentle tingle of an impending bathing costume rash. It was 10 am, I'd been awake for five hours and fishless for three days and I wasn't going to wait a minute longer for the plane to fly over. I stood on the balcony, refreshment in hand, and looked across towards Infanta and the Sedgewick house. I had learnt my first lesson of the Breede – humility; I was about to learn my second – luck.

The tide was pushing on a clear calm day, a swirl, a large swirl, a large cormorant the likely culprit. Then another. Time to get out the binoculars. No fleeing fish, just swirls in the middle of this large river. “PHISH” as my 3-year-old niece would say. What ensued was one of those magical few hours in fly-fishing where you remember few details other than intense concentration and utter contentment. The leervis hung around for a few days and then it was back to early mornings and blank days.

Fly-fishing the mouth of the Breede can be challenging because wind is a constant companion, and it is a large expanse of water with tidal extremes. Nonetheless, Witsands remains a premier destination in the Western Cape. The season generally hots up towards the beginning of October and can be productive until the cold fronts become a regular occurrence at the end of April. November and March are my favourite times to fish due to the lack of traffic on the water. Big water requires local knowledge and is readily available at Witsands. Ask for Kosie who now has the oyster concession - not a fly fisher but a local angler with an intimate knowledge of the river. Time of day is less important than the tide, the fish will feed at the most opportune moment when the prey collects and is vulnerable. The best times to fish for leeries would be the two days before the spring tide until two days after the tide. Moving water seems to be best - attempt to fish the incoming tide. Observation is key. Look out for diving terns, schooling baitfish and rips caused by the darker river water mixing with the clearer seawater. As a general rule, during neap tides fish the lower reaches of the river while the upper parts, as far as the White House, are productive during spring tides. Although leervis may be classed as a top water species, the larger specimens can often be found some way below the surface. This, compounded by the excessive tide movement, would lead me to suggest fishing deeper, often with an intermediate line or even a light lead core (I favour the Teeny TS 250 grain). The choice of fly is less important than the size. When the schoolies are present (20 to 40 cm fish) use small flies, size 4, with the total length of the fly being no longer than 5cm. When targeting the larger fish, a bigger fly will be necessary even going as large as a 20. Although streepies, cape moonies, elf, squid, river anchovies and needlefish are prevalent in the river, the major prey of the leervis is the mullet. The fly should then follow this long thin profile with colour combinations of white and grey, tan, black, olive and chartreuse. If I were to choose one outfit it would be a 9ft, nine weight with a 10 weight intermediate line. A leader of 8ft and a # 2 weighted chartreuse and white Clouser



Mike Dolhoff with a typical Witsand leervis. Photo by Mike Dolhoff.



Dawn on the Witsand estuary. Photo by Bryan Mincher.

minnow with a generous amount of flash. But why be so restrictive? The Breede offers so many opportunities to experiment.

Sedgewick's Bay

This is best fished off the flat rocks on the river side of the bay on the falling tide of neap. If this tide coincides with early evening with a gentle southerly wind, expect elf. The occasional larger leervis makes its way through the bar but elf remains the primary target hanging just off the current less than the two metres from the shore. An intermediate line, shock tippet (hard mono) and durable flies are required. Recommended flies include epoxy minnows, Clousers, Bendbacks and Deceivers in white, tan and chartreuse in sizes 2 to 10.

The Mouth

This offers some of the most exciting drift fishing. A boat here is essential. Wait for the tide to push, creating rips where the fresh and salt water meet. The best fishing is just before the main sandbank. Don't be tempted to anchor the boat as this is both dangerous being close to the sea and limits your water coverage. Start your run on the sea side of the mouth and let it push you up river towards the main sandbank. This is a little fished spot and you will generally have this stretch to yourself. Fish sink tip or intermediate lines with larger flies including Woolhead Mullet, Enrico Puglisi Mullet, crease flies, Skok's Mushmouth and weighted Clousers in size 10. As to fishing baskets, when fishing from the boat I favour a washing basket as the wind won't blow the line out of the drum taking it under the props. When wading I tend to use the shopping basket variety as it allows for a deeper wade and is also less cumbersome.

Witsands Point

A favourite spot for those without a boat residing on the Witsands side of the river. Wait for the tide to push over the point causing a wash from the water escaping and entering the river. Cast diagonal to the bank towards Infanta and retrieve along the drop off. In these rough waters, poppers, sliders, bangers, gurglers and snake flies are effective, although a heavily weighted Clouser can also produce. This area doesn't always fish well as it can kick up sand, nullifying the fishing.

Main Sandbank

If the angler is shorebound other opportunities to consider would be *Skuitbaai* off the weed beds, the government jetty when the commercial fisherman return and *Begraafplaas* on a falling tide. Many anglers visiting the Breede mouth for the first time have been advised to fish the main sandbank opposite the hotel on a pushing tide. Over the holiday period this can become a gauntlet of flapping fly lines. Getting a cast out can be as difficult as getting a sunrise past a rooster. The best time to fish is on the spring tide an hour to two after low when the tide pushes, creating a colour line and some turbulence. The fish to be found here are sometimes of the schoolie variety so smaller flies are recommended. Although it is tempting, don't stand on the edge of the sandbank casting towards the opposite shore. The fish patrol the drop-off where bait fish are being forced off the flats into the deeper water. Cast up river, parallel to the shore, retrieving along the drop-off. This is a good area for those just being introduced to the sport as little wading is required and distance casting is not a prerequisite. A six weight rigged with a floating line, fishing small Bendbacks, Gummy Minnows and Epoxy Minnows elicits strikes.



Craig Mincher fishing the Breede River mouth at Witsand for leervis. Photo by Bryan Mincher.



The Breede River estuary looking towards the mouth at Witsand. Photo by Bryan Mincher.

Groenpunt

Upriver from Oyster beds, the stretch to Groenpunt is fairly shallow offering shots at grunter and large mullet (both species continue to skunk me, although I did witness a young angler land a 4lb grunter on a Bitch Creek fishing this water). At Groenpunt the water drops off to two metres providing the leeries a vantage point to ambush the baitfish coming off the mud bank. Fish the pushing tide with gurglers on floating lines or weighted Clousers on intermediate lines. As the tide pushes, cast towards the far bank and take a few steps upriver as you retrieve. This will keep you in constant contact with the fly before drag sets in giving the fly an unnatural arc. It also has the advantage of allowing you to cover more water. A word of warning, this location can be subject to much boat traffic in season as boats head upriver and conventional anglers also fish this area and collect bait.

Moddergat

A favourite haunt as the bay collects baitfish coming off the main current and feeding on the mudflats. The bay often has a good collection of tailing grunter on the low tide. As the tide pushes, the action gets under way on the drop-off. This is a fairly severe drop-off of up to three metres and anglers should be cautious when wading. The spring tide offers the best fishing - use big flies and expect larger fish. Try to match the size of the baitfish in the vicinity. Deceivers and large Woolhead Mullet in size 10 are productive although poppers can invoke vicious strikes. Rumours of a 22 kg leerie taken by this method abound. Again this fishing is under pressure in the holiday season as the flotilla of boats passes through.

Power lines

The middle river from Groenpunt to Karools Kraal can see large schools of small baitfish assembling as the spring tide pushes upriver. Drift fishing this area with a small fly and sinking lines might provide good sport. The fish will be easy to spot with swirls, wakes and flashes below the surface. Although the fish appear to be feeding on the surface, the bulk of the feeding is happening some way below. These fish tend to be slightly smaller and can be selective, so attempt to 'match the hatch'. Wind and boat traffic can affect this fishery. The mudflats from Karools Kraal to Power Lines offer some of the best fishing on the river. Congestion and boat traffic is greatly reduced - on my last outing I observed a fish eagle and a large turtle on this patch of water. The drop-off is gradual to the main channel with many large mullet feeding off the weed beds. Wading is difficult in the thick mud while distance casting is imperative to get to the deeper water. To complicate this the angler is often casting into the prevailing wind. If this sounds a lark, the rewards can be great. Start fishing the turn of the pushing tide. Fish larger flies with a touch more flash than downriver, I prefer angel hair, mirage flash and Puglisi EP fibre material, flies like Skok's Mushroom and Enrico's Mullet.

White House

From Dammettjie to the White House the fishing can be off the chart. To reveal your favourite area is somewhat like turkeys voting for Christmas, but this certainly, at present, would be it. This area should be fished from a boat as private land, cliffs and reeds border it. The water is deep and the best fishing is to be had on those few calm days that coincide with a pushing spring tide. The larger leeries travel upriver with the tide, so drift fish (or use an electric motor if you have one) along the tide line. You'll soon know if the big boys are about. Use the largest fly you can comfortably cast on an intermediate or sinking line.



Sunset over the Witsand estuary. Photo by Bryan Mincher.

Fish the middle of the river. The fishing picks up later than further downriver as the area has longer to wait for the tide. A word of warning; although generally quieter than further downriver the waterskiing / wakeboarding section of the river starts close to *dammetjie* and this can quickly ruin the fishing.

Challenges

The fishing options on the lower reaches of the Breede River are extensive. Many exciting new fisheries are starting to be explored. Fly-fishing for Kob at night, cracking the grunter and mullet code, fishing the rocks and gullies from Susie's towards *Moody se put* and beyond to *Vermaaklikheid*. One of the biggest challenges happens on the falling tide beyond the bar behind the breakers. The Leervis bullies congregate in the area waiting for the bait to be forced through this narrow strip of water. Before venturing out to this area, another word of warning. To go beyond the river the boat should have 2 engines and have safety equipment in good working order. Only go through the bar on the calmest of days with an experienced, licensed skipper. Now for the exciting news: Bonito in Saint Sebastian Bay. From late February to early April, large schools of Bonito are resident in the bay. The fish average 10 to 14 lbs feeding on anchovies. Travelling with the bonito is the odd large yellow fin tuna up to 30lbs. An 11 weight with a lead core should be part of the armoury. Flies include zonker anchovies in chartreuse and tan, epoxy minnows in olive and Enrico's mackerel in sizes 1 to 10. Spear fisherman often tell of large yellowtail off the rocks of Infanta towards San Sebastian Point, again on calmer days. There is every reason for fly fishers to target this species.

The forces of nature are continually at work on the river, leading to shifting sandbanks opening new fisheries and the closure of previous favoured locales. In short, be observant, look for deeper water that collects baitfish coming off the flats, eddies creating turbulence and schooling baitfish. The Breede is a fishery under pressure; members are encouraged to practise catch and release, use barbless or circle hooks and pass this ethos on to others on the water.