

Mark Mackereth – flyfisher supreme

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I have never watched a neurosurgeon at work but observing Mark Mackereth present a wispy dry fly to a wily trout gets pretty close.

His artistry included playing the double bass, tying delicate fly patterns, getting a trout when no one else could and preparing a connoisseur meal after a day on the river.

The refinement started way back in Yorkshire. His grandfather who died in the trout stream at age 93 trained him to drop a fly into a glass some twenty paces away. He retained the skill and the accent.

He would move his Charles Ritz-designed Pezon & Michel split cane rod as gingerly as his bow across the double bass strings. He was principal double bass player in the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra.

He read and sensed the river. He may well have had a few trout DNA strands somewhere in his body. That would explain why he could predict their behaviour with such uncanny accuracy. Why else would he catch four fish compared to the one between C Ross Munroe and I fishing a Stellenbosch dam with identical flies Mark had tied?

His trout ESP seemed to work on land too. He was an animal whisperer. You could see how animals reacted when this two legged human with the tweed hat spoke their dialect. To Jane, the resident Smalblaar bull terrier, Mark's visits were a highlight. Fast asleep in the pub of the Protea Hotel, managed by her owner Barry Steyn, a mere whisper: "Jane, would you like to go fishing?" would have her at Mark's feet, tail wagging, in about the same time a trout would take to strike a fly. Jane would go fishing with us and wait patiently and silently behind Mark, safely out of reach of the back cast. But she could not contain her excitement once there was a trout on the line. Occasionally she was given a special treat – trout sushi.

Once a leopard crossed the Smalblaar directly behind Mark. I am sure it was no menace to the angler, it merely came along for a chat with him...

Mark gave his admiring peers the Caribou Spider, the nemesis of many river trout. He would find feathers, capes, hackle and other delicate fly tying materials with the same glee an archeologist would display when discovering a rare fossil. The dexterity of those double bass fingers produced countless artworks on hook shanks.

I met Mark as a young parliamentary journalist in 1974. My sea fishing and spearfishing mentor and role model, artist Gordon Hill, was related to the famous AC Harrison, founder of the Cape Piscatorial Society as we now know it. Gordon introduced us in the office of the Society. As a coarse and lure fisherman I sensed I was now on hallowed ground. I worked when Parliament sat in the afternoons and evening and had some mornings free.

Mark Mackereth on the Smalblaar. Photos by Tom Sutcliffe.



Mark never had car and never learnt to drive and he was willing to teach this left handed novice. It was not only a match but a formative friendship.

It became a wonderful ritual. I collected Mark at Leeukop, his Tamboerskloof flat overlooking the city bowl. With his fishing gear, there would be ham and mustard sandwiches and cold cider – lovingly packed by his wife, Eileen.

We would drive to the Smalblaar, other stretches of river and various dams. Even when spinning for smallmouth bass at Voëlvlei dam near Porterville, Mark's mastery was clear. I can remember only a single occasion when I had caught a bigger trout than Mark – on a winter's day at Wemmershoek Dam. He was overjoyed for me and insisted that the three-and-a-half-pounder be listed in the *Piscator's* season records.

A letter Eileen and Mark wrote me in November 1974 encapsulates Mark's par for most fishing courses: "Your teacher had a fine day – limit bag – very nice range of TEN trout and Brian FIVE".

Mark was quite meticulous in serving fresh trout for lunch or dinner – pan fried for the smaller ones and oven baked for the larger. This would be accompanied by a fine white wine, mashed potatoes, green peas and occasionally mushrooms. The minute the dorsal fin could be removed with ease, we had to be ready at the table. I have shared with many Mark's surgical skills in deboning a trout.

Special occasions were celebrated with tea or lunch at Stuttafords. I spent many happy hours listening to Mark's favorite classical music while being given a master class on why this particular solo and passage was so memorable. Mark fished with that same musicality, rhythm and poetry.

He would be acutely aware of the surrounding vegetation, rock formations, bird and insect life. In all but the coldest water, Mark would prefer to wade the river in his ankle length wading boots with thick socks. He was sure-footed and nimble, he stalked and lurked with grace. Unlike replays on television, Mark would give you a preview of what was about to happen. In a whisper he would give his assessment of the river and the potential of the stretch of water.

"I am going to cast two feet to the left of the flat rock. The fly is going to drift down the slight waterfall. As it passes between the overhanging branch and the two round rocks, just on the edge of where the water is churning, we should have a take." We usually did.

His gentle dexterity and control with that split cane rod, his irresistible presentation of the fly, how he could adjust his cast for any situation, how he gently coiled the fly line in the palm of his hand and how he could play and land the fish will stay with me forever. Here was a consummate expert steeped in the tradition of gentlemanly conduct on the water coupled with a deep respect and appreciation of nature and living things. He was only too willing to share his vast, intuitive knowledge and techniques.

Such a mentor comes but once in a lifetime.