

Of small streams, big bugs and dark pools

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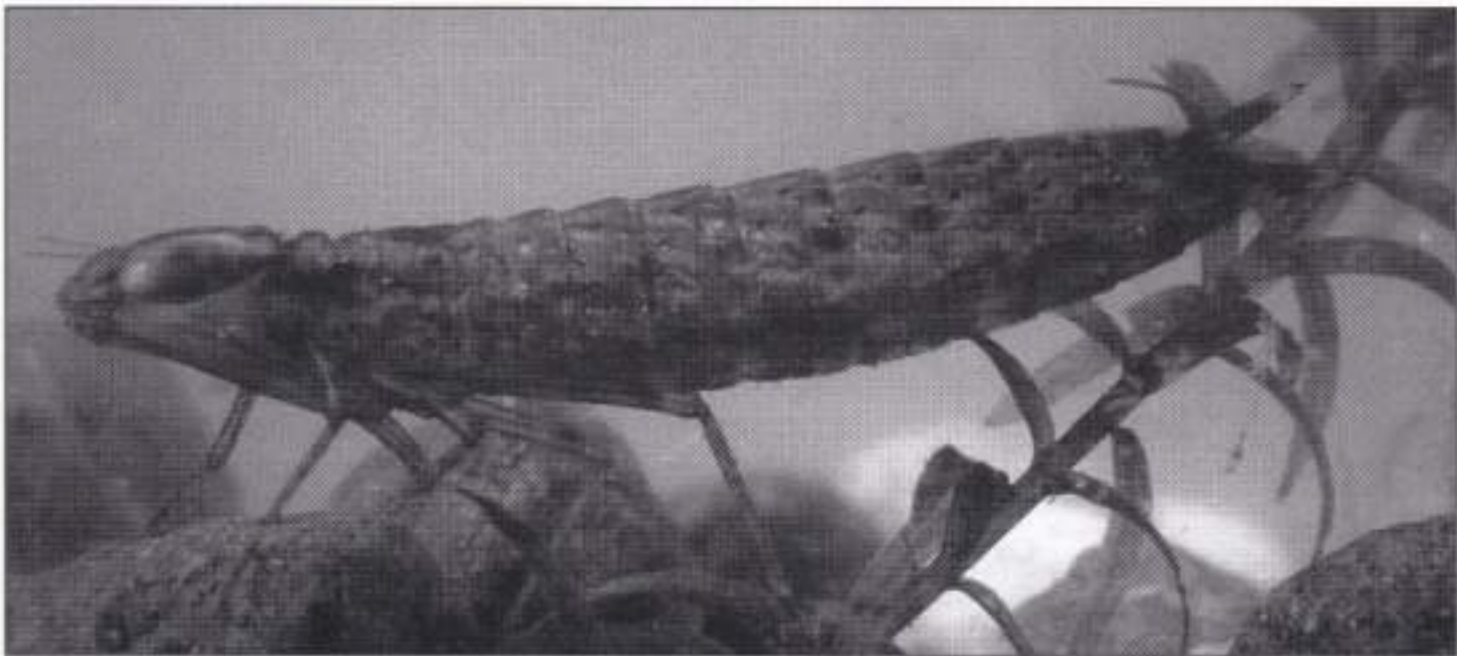
Oflate I have developed somewhat of a love affair with small streams and the pursuit of tiny wild trout in beautiful surroundings. This has had a bit of a snowball effect on my fishing life and as a result my whole approach to trout fishing has undergone a massive revamp. I've scaled everything down, from my expectations to the tackle and flies I fish with, and I can honestly say that I'm now having more fun than ever. Fishing micro patterns is highly effective and not just on small streams. Micro patterns are tiny, size 20's and smaller. If you regard a size 16 fly as being small, then micro patterns will force you to adjust your frame of reference regarding what small is. Since I started fishing these diminutive bits of nothing, a whole new world has opened up to me. Fish which were previously 'uncatchable' are now finding themselves on the end of my line more frequently and all I did was to adjust my mindset slightly.

Recently however I've been forced to look at the other end of the scale regarding this. It all happened on Beat 1 of the Elandspad. I was fishing this lovely stream late in the season. Mid January is not exactly the best time to be fishing the Elandspad. The fishing was proving to be hellishly difficult on this particular day with the fish refusing everything I threw at them.

A week prior to this I had a chat with Phillip Meyer of Flytalk. He told me about the large dragonfly shucks he had come across on Beat 3 of the Elandspad. I made a mental note and tied up some patterns for next time.

Well, what were the chances, I thought as I stood staring at a deep pool full of slumbering fish. Out of sheer desperation I tied on one of my dragons and cast it up and across the deep pool, gave it some time to sink and then worked it back with short erratic jerks. It was as if someone had turned a switch on. Two large trout shot out of nowhere and started chasing that nymph down in a manner reminiscent of a Garrick homing in on a popper. I kept calm (which was tough at the time) and just as I was about to lift the fly from the water the larger fish of the two greedily grabbed it. It cavorted up and down that pool like an angry pit bull and, after a few heart-stopping moments which felt like a lifetime, was brought to net. I was stoked. I had caught the Grandpa of the pool, a wise old rainbow, and that on a dragonfly nymph of all things.

In retrospect I'm not that surprised. Dragonflies are frequently found on small streams, in fact, they're quite common. As a child I recall digging up burrowing dragonfly nymphs in a little stream in the central Drakensberg while playing in the mud. There were plenty of them too. Traditionally these nymphs are imitated by still water anglers. What we as fly fishers tend to forget, however, is that they are equally important in rivers. In Bob Crass' *A preliminary report on the food of trout in Natal*, (*Piscator* 131, November 1999) he states that according to his research dragonflies were found to be the third most prominent food source found in the stomach contents of Natal river trout. Mayflies came in first with crabs being second. Food for thought.



Imitations of dragonfly nymphs (above) can prove extremely effective in slower, deeper pools, the author says.

In the good old days it was not an uncommon practice to cast a large Mrs Simpson downstream on a sinking line and retrieve it against the current. Many trout were caught this way, and big fish at that. River trout in excess of 8lbs have been recorded in the North Eastern Cape and Lesotho. Although this practice negates the reasons why we fish small streams in the first place, it does highlight a very important point: river trout don't necessarily only eat tiny organisms and relish a mouthful every now and then.

We tend to view river trout as gentle creatures but what we lose sight of is the fact that they are highly effective predators. Yes, they are more than happy sucking little titbits off the surface, but are just as adept at tackling larger food items. I have on more than one occasion witnessed trout attacking snakes in mid swim. And they don't suck them in either, they hunt them down like a great white chasing a seal.

Am I advocating that we now all tie up some snake imitations and rip them across the surface? Not at all. That would be madness. Snakes are not a common food source and ripping massive flies across the surface of a tiny stream is just not cool. The point I want to get across however is this, by imitating some of the 'less common' food forms one can capitalise on situations which were previously limited regarding one's prospects. Even small streams have sizeable pools and it is these places that are best suited for dragonfly nymph, crab and minnow imitations. Prospecting a large, dark pool with a tiny nymph will get you the odd fish, but this is not the most effective way of fishing these areas.

As these pools tend to be slow-flowing, one can actively retrieve one's fly through these areas. This will ensure that you cover water. In a normal stream context the current will do this for you but, having a limited flow, larger pools are often fished more effectively with an active retrieve.

The patterns I fish rarely exceed a size 10. This might not seem that large but in a small stream it is pretty huge. My preferred method in this kind of situation is to concentrate on structure, very much in the same way a bass angler would. In the Cape streams, a lot of these larger pools are flanked by rock walls. Casting one's fly close to these walls, giving it time to sink and then moving it back is a tactic which has seen numerous fish come

undone. Undercuts are also worth prospecting. Big midstream boulders are another feature to look out for. Trout will often lie in the shadows cast by these boulders waiting for any unlucky bug that happens to swim by. The weir pool on Beat 1 of the Elandspad comes to mind.

Another reason not to ignore fishing those larger pools is that, due to their depth, they often have areas which are far cooler than the main stream during the heat of the day. One can thus find fish actively feeding in these areas when the rest of the stream might appear like a graveyard.

This I discovered while targeting smallmouth bass late in summer on Beat 6 of the Smalblaar. Among the bass I would take trout fairly regularly and some good fish at that, the largest one going 17 inches. These fish all came to dragonfly nymphs and streamers. By adapting one's approach one can thus explore possibilities which one was previously unaware of. Give it a go, who knows, you might just catch your best trout of the season in that pool you normally give a miss.

Editor's note: When I first starting fishing the Cape streams thirty years ago one of my mentors, Tony Biggs, would always say: "Don't neglect the still water", i.e. the deep, slow-flowing sections.

*In those days CPS members would kill their fish and record the stomach contents in their catch returns. Big Alderfly nymphs or 'Toe-biters' (*Coryadellus* sp) – also called Dobsonfly nymphs or hellgrammites - would feature regularly, particularly after spates in late autumn when they would be dislodged by the increased water flow.*

Fishing big nymphs with an active retrieve was also recommended by Darryl Lampert in his article Bugging around on the Jan du Toits, (Piscator 138, November 2006).