

SELECTIVITY, IMITATION, INNOVATION AND ETHICS

By Tim Rolston

A group of intrepid travelers and I recently saw fit to take what we considered our considerable talents and Cape trout savvy up to the Transvaal to have fun depleting the population of piscatorial inhabitants on those fair waters. What came to pass was in fact a most interesting and enlightening fishing trip of great enjoyment, educational value and companionship which tested our abilities, sharpened our wits and broadened both our horizons and waistlines.

The objects of our desires were the large and plentiful rainbow trout in the waters of Highland Run, a fishery established by Mr Doug Starling.

We set off in good spirits on the early morning flight enjoying it all the more because most of our fellow passengers were weighed down with briefcases and cellular phones whilst our only encumbrances were a huge and varied array of fishing and flytying equipment.

Our luck progressed as we had to upgrade to a wonderful VW combi at no extra charge from the car rental company and off we set, spirits soaring like the fish eagle we saw along the way.

Now for those who remember Mr Starling's address at a previous annual dinner (and if you don't, rest assured that he most definitely does) his fishery is somewhat unusual by Cape standards. It was much derided by many Cape flyfishermen, I too admit to having been a vociferous opponent of the value and ethics of the whole enterprise and I still hold that for our naturally productive waters the Transvaal approach would be a hanging offense in my book.

You will see however that all things have merit and while I haven't changed my opinion, I have certainly modified it. Highland Run is a stream with a fishable length of some four kilometres. Certainly no bigger than our Cape streams although different in character. The stream has been modified with the inclusion of stone weirs which both slow and speed the flow in different directions. The banks are mildly overgrown with tall grasses and some trees and reeds and the natural setting is only marred by the well worn (or mown) path a metre from the water's edge.

The fish (and are there fish) are large ranging from hatchlings to monsters of seven pounds or more with as many as thirty or so in a small pool or run. The density requires very regular artificial feeding with pellets to not only maintain the fish in excellent condition, which they were, but in fact to prevent the majority from starving to death.

Feeding is performed once a day except when anglers are present on the water and the fish are conditioned to being fed. They are however wild bred and were in spawning colours when we arrived. The slightly tatty tails I suspect may be a result of overcrowding but as time would tell, it in no way impaired the fight of these superbly conditioned fish.

Our first stop was at Fishy Pete's in Lydenburg, for a few flies some tying materials and we hoped a little local savvy. The fish would be difficult we were told, ready to spawn and disinterested in food in general and flies in particular. Still unperturbed off we set on the last leg,

down precipitous dirt roads to the very comfortable cottage that was to be our home for the next four days.

The accommodation whilst pricey comes with a full-time maid who can cook you up anything from filleted trout to roast lamb and all the trimmings and was comfortable bordering on decadent by Cape camp standards.

The first evening a quick foray to the river showed, lots of trout, huge trout, totally and utterly disinterested trout. A few were caught late in the evening (dark) but in the main results were dismal. We weren't worried, we were from the Cape where difficult wild and skittish fish were mere grist to the mill. If you can catch Witte browns then you can catch these overfed pet fish can't you?

After the first of a wonderful series of evening meals we settled into some late drinking to calm the nerves and help us sleep. We wriggled into cosy beds as the frost formed outside and fell asleep to the sound of the river and dreams of singing reels in the morning.

Never afraid of a good walk in search of fish, John and I sallied forth to the lowest beat as it was evident that just like the Cape - fishing downstream in full view wasn't going to cut it.

On our way we met the pellet man (he hadn't been told to stop feeding and all the fish on our beat had received breakfast before our arrival).

Now we start getting into the ethics bit in the title so for a moment shun the shocked expressions because what transpired that morning was if ethically doubtful at least most illuminating.

We grabbed a few handfuls of pellets from the bag beside the road and continued on our way.

On arrival at the lowest point on our water we set about carefully casting nymphs into the clear waters. Standing well back from the water we could see large fish swim by with embarrassing frequency and little response.

For interest value I threw in a few of the pellets. If Pavlov's dogs had responded so urgently to their dinner bell their salivation would undoubtedly have drowned most of them. It was feeding frenzy at the shark tank as pellets disappeared in boiling foam.

Well that was impressive so let's try chucking some near my fly. Same response but no take. This was repeated with frequency and no reward. Both shocked at what we had seen and amazed at the lack of response to our offerings we sat down to consider the problem.

I always teach any fishing pupils of mine that the basis of good, effective and ethical fishing is to find out what the fish are feeding on and copy both its form and movement with your imitation. Well we knew what they would feed on. That was easy and certainly finding fish, the bane of the saltwater man, was no great hurdle. What looks like a pellet? A DDD that was pretty easy, DDDs on, cast out, hushed tones, raised pulse, cruising fish? Nothing, not a glance, a pluck, a twitch. Nothing, just lots of big fish only yards away that had hit the real thing like whippets on a baby rabbit but studiously ignored our offers. If I were honest I don't think they even showed enough interest to ignore the DDDs. They did not even notice them.

Well, back to the drawing board and this time we had a little assistance from lady luck, as is oft the case with effective experiments. (I like to think we were experimenting, it salves the ethical conscience just a bit.)

My DDD got stuck in the grass and, in removing it, the hackle came adrift. It also had got a little soggy at the water's edge. Not wishing to further disturb the water I tossed a cast out, no false casts (false casts are bad news to flyfishermen and warning signs to fish and you forget that at your peril).

The fly landed with a distinct plop and floated in the film, visible but not buoyant. It sat a while. A fish turned downstream to investigate the plop, cruised over and whacked into the fly. To strike would have been suicide. A lift and I was into a three pound rainbow in a small stream on my Orvis two weight. If you can have more fun standing up don't tell anyone - what you are doing must be illegal. Well, that's it then. A piece of cake, soggy DDD nice plop, a fish a throw... the next three days were looking loaded with potential.

So John ripped off the hackle on his fly, a bit of spit and a chew for good measure, a nice high back cast and a measured but distinctive plop.

Wait... cruising fish, pulse rate up, fish speeds up and a huge swirl, the lift and he's in... to a bush behind. Even at that speed the fish turned away. He didn't miss, he changed his mind. No

question, these fish may be big, fed and used to men and pellets but they weren't stupid. In fact we gained quite a respect for them as time went on.

I had some moderate success but John went fishless. OK John plop the fly in, let's get you into a fish, I'll throw in a few pellets that will get them moving.

I must state at this point we never considered taking, nor did we take, out any fish using this method. We fished barbless - our standard and the water's rules. It was simply that in this artificial system we had nothing to work on and were trying to discover an answer to a question I'm not sure we fully understood.

Even amongst the boiling fish and pellets whilst my fly was effective John's was only pushed aside in the commotion. We had a very good look at that fly and under very close scrutiny the only difference to mine was a small yellowish ring of clipped hackle. Hardly visible, but enough.

This is what we found out by the end of our morning:

- The fly had to look very like a pellet.
- Even if it did it had to plop and float in the film.
- Even if it did, should it sink too fast it didn't work.
- With all the above should the fish see it land, it didn't work.
- If other fish saw it land and spooked upstream the target fish wouldn't take.
- If the leader was thick it didn't work.
- If the angler was in full view it didn't work.
- If it dragged it didn't work.

Hang on a minute - if you ignore the pellet angle for a moment you have a classic clear-water, dry fly code right there.

And so it was by lunch we had discovered what we already knew. Any imitation is at best a parody of the fish's real food and you need guile, cunning and skill, not to mention a little assistance from nature to be successful.

This was to be the general *modus operandi* for the rest of the trip and shared with our fellows it was consistently effective but certainly not a slaughter by any means.

You need to use as light a leader as possible - even with these fish on the two weight I fished 3.75 to 4.7lb tippet.

Fish a long leader to avoid drag and keep the flyline away from the target fish (they don't like flylines, men didn't scare them much, splashes in the water not at all, but flyline in the air and on the water sent them retreating every time). My leader was 14 ft, a pig to cast on a small overgrown stream, but required nonetheless.

Get the leader to sink if possible.

Target fish in faster water if possible.

Stay out of sight even if this means you have to crawl. The fish didn't seem to mind you standing there but pick up your rod and you would have to find another fish.

Do not false cast if you can avoid it. Again I found the two weight a big help here, pay out line on land and one flick to target.

Imitate the trout's food. Here that meant a plop of a wet, neutral-buoyancy, non-dragging pellet. The comparison to any other fish food forms is obvious.

To be honest we didn't expect to end up where we should have started. We thought the system so artificial that new rules would apply but in the end the only real difference was that we imitated pellets and I find no shame in that because they had to be very good imitations, deserving as much credit as a well balanced blue winged olive. We used our tactics to land fish in a small stream running to at least 6lbs and on the last day I hooked and lost a cock fish getting ready to spawn in 8 inches of water. He ran a conservative estimate of two hundred metres twice coming back towards me so fast that we thought he was off. He finally snapped the tippet on a mass of sunken tree roots 150 metres from where he was hooked without once showing himself. It was a display of speed and power so dramatic that even after landing numerous fish over 4 lbs during the week it left me open-mouthed and bewildered - a stunned silence from both myself and John (who had watched the entire proceedings) that would have done a cathedral proud.

In hushed and gradually more excited screams and laughter I think we realised that we had witnessed something perhaps never to be seen again in a stream of this size. I'm proud we

deceived that fish, I'm proud we did it through a logical process of thinking the problems through and with some heartache I'm proud he got away, for in my dreams and, I am sure in John's, that fish will live forever.

As to the fishery at Highland Run, yes it's different, perhaps a little artificial, maybe not your cup of tea (or even mine for the most part) but what Doug Starling has created from little more than a ditch full of underfed fish can tax your skill, test your ingenuity and thrill you beyond your dreams. Perhaps most importantly, it will teach you some very good basic lessons in flyfishing technique and fish behaviour to be used to your benefit far afield in the future.

If you fish this water wet, the 'downstream, sinking line and anything fluorescent' mentality, you are very much missing the point. But if you use the opportunity, even in these somewhat odd and unnatural waters, you can emerge a better and more successful fisherman not to mention a happier one.

For the record between four of us we landed fish from 3 to 14" in their hundreds. 120 fish over 2.5lbs with the best conservatively estimated at at least 6lbs.

The one that got away? Who knows, I wouldn't guess below eight. We fished barbless hooks all the time and were at pains to revive the fish before release.

Only five fish were killed for the pot of which none were caught by any devious experimental tactic.

Mr Starling I thank you for the opportunity you give so many anglers and the lessons I didn't expect to learn anew on your water. But just in case one thinks I'm getting soft, feed the fish on the Witte and well...

This article was written with fond memories of a wonderful trip and the companionship of some very good anglers and friends. Their names have been left out to avoid any embarrassment for our initial (perhaps questionable) tactics. Since Vince Marinaro learnt from tossing live hoppers into the Letort, for my part I will only say experimentation is the key to solving fishing problems and whilst I will have no need to repeat the performance my inquiring mind will always be my ally on the river. Experiment and think, for the carbon rod may be a wonderful invention but an inquiring mind will always put you ahead of the game.