

ANGLING IN THE MACLEAR DISTRICT (1928-32)

By DOUGLAS HEY

I FREQUENTLY accompanied my father and his friends on their weekly trout-fishing expeditions to the rivers of Maclear which in those days were estimated at over 600 miles. At the time I did not appreciate how privileged I was to see these waters in their pristine condition. Before dawn I was awakened by the sound of the primus stove in the kitchen on which water was being boiled for the early morning coffee. To this day I still associate this characteristic hissing roar with fishing. After packing the rucksack with our food for the day, and serving our breakfast, my mother would return to bed as we set off in the early dawn to one of the many rivers in a friend's car.

My role was chiefly that of cook and bottle-washer. On arrival at our destination the adults would select their respective beats and decide where to meet for lunch. I was expected to have the chops grilled and water for coffee boiling when they arrived. After lunch I would wash up, gut the morning's catch, wrap each fish in clean newspaper, and tidy the picnic site, taking care to douse the fire. Nevertheless, I had a great deal of time to myself, and this was spent exploring the cliffs above the river or collecting aquatic insects, which were my chief interest at the time. In addition to beetles, bugs and dragonflies there was an interesting variety of larvae: stoneflies, mayflies and caddis flies.

Stonefly larvae are to be found under stones in shallow, swift-flowing water. They are usually black or dark-grey, about 15 mm long and have slender antennae, large compound eyes and two long tails. Being predators, they crawl about feeding on any smaller larvae they can catch. More than 70 species of mayflies have been described from the Cape and Natal. Some larvae live on the muddy bottom of pools while others inhabit rapids, as do the stoneflies, from which they can be distinguished by their three tails and seven pairs of feathery gills extending from the sides of the abdomen. They feed on detritus, and when fully developed, which may take up to two years, the nymphs rise to the surface and the adults emerge. Adult mayflies are very short-lived, being aptly named *Ephemeroptera*, which means 'winged insects of but a day'. They usually hatch in large numbers in the evening, 'dancing' in swarms over the water, but die before the morning, mating and egg-laying having been completed. The caddis flies are a large

group of rather nondescript aquatic insects somewhat resembling moths. The larvae are slender and inhabit silk-lined cases that they build from a variety of materials. The larva attaches itself firmly inside the case by a pair of hooks at the end of the abdomen, but can extrude its legs and thorax to move about while feeding. These larval cases are characteristic of the species, being adorned with sticks, leaves, stones, grains of sand or bits of shell. Some cut leaves into rectangular pieces and fix them around the silken tube; others arrange the leaf material in thin spirals. Some use fine grains of sand to build a trumpet-shaped tube, while others arrange sticks lengthwise, like a log cabin. A few species do not construct cases but weave underwater nets of silken threads for trapping food. The specimens I collected were placed in glass tubes and preserved in a weak solution of formalin for display in my 'museum'. Little did I realise at the time that one day I would be employed as a fisheries biologist at the Jonkershotk Trout Hatchery, where I would meet two leading authorities on these aquatic insects, viz., Mr. A. C. Harrison and Dr. Keppel H. Barnard.

In the course of our angling expeditions we encountered many varieties of snakes. I well remember one large pool on the Wildebeest River which was greatly favoured by snakes, particularly during the heat of the day. This long pool was situated in a bend of the river, and when the fish are not taking, which is frequently the case during the midday hours, I enjoyed lying on a large flat rock overlooking the pool and observing the scene below. On some days I might see as many as five kinds of snakes, including cobras, puffadders, grass snakes and water-snakes. The lithe, bright-green water-snakes were the most active and it was fascinating to see how gracefully they glided across the surface. While it was obvious that some of these reptiles were intent on crossing the river, others appeared to have taken to the water merely to cool off. It is remarkable how their coloration becomes accentuated when wet. Snakes are unable to tolerate ground temperatures much in excess of 40°C, and are therefore usually active in the morning and later afternoon, sheltering during extremes of heat or cold. In areas with a very cold winter, snakes seek dry, warm holes in which to hibernate. The American rattlesnakes, for example, are said to congregate in large numbers in suitable caves in winter.

On one particular day we were accompanied by a visitor from Scotland. During the drive to the river conversation turned to the subject of snakes, and our visitor was warned to keep his eyes open for these reptiles and never to step over a stone or log without watching where he placed his foot. He was also advised to tread heavily so that any snake lying in the path would be warned of his approach, although this, incidentally, might also put wary trout down. Coming from a country with no comparable venomous snakes, our visitor expressed the hope that he would see a puffadder. Shortly after the party had split up and each gone to his beat, my father happened to come upon a large puffadder at the water's edge. He scooped the reptile up in his landing net and, giving the net a twist to imprison the snake, left it on a flat stone in the river. His well-intentioned action nearly resulted in a nasty incident, the full facts of which we only learned later. Our guest was fishing slowly upstream when he spotted the landing net and its contents. Assuming that the snake was dead, he bent over it to examine it more carefully and then, wishing to see the size of the fangs, he put his rod down and with two matches attempted to prise open its mouth. This was too much for the snake and, hissing in indignation, it struck at the Scotsman, but was fortunately curbed by the net. The sudden hiss of a big puffadder is enough to send a chill down anyone's spine, and it gave our guest such a fright that he fell backwards into the water. When we met him half-an-hour later he was soaked to the skin and still shaken, and it required cups of hot coffee laced with Scotch to restore his equanimity. I am sure that he never forgot his first encounter with a puffadder.

Strangely enough, despite the large number of snakes to be seen along the rivers, no member of our party was ever bitten, although there were a few close shaves. This

was fortunate for although we all carried a 'snake bite outfit' consisting of a tourniquet, razor blade and a small tube of permanganate of potash, I have subsequently learned that this remedy is completely useless for neutralising venom and could, furthermore, result in tissue damage. At the time, however, it was regarded as an infallible antidote and we were instructed, in the event of being bitten, to make two deep longitudinal



The visiting Scot and the puff-adder.

Drawing by the late Donald Swan, a Founder Member of the Society.

incisions at the bite, suck the wound if possible, and then rub permanganate crystals into the incision. We now know that although permanganate is a strong oxidising agent, the venom has already dispersed through the tissues by the time it can be applied. Immediate sucking of the bite is helpful, provided there are no open wounds in the mouth. The use of a tourniquet between the bite and the heart is also considered useful, particularly in cases of snake venom affecting the nervous system, but this *must* be released every ten minutes to prevent tissue damage. The only really effective antidote for snakebite is the correct antivenom serum, provided that the snake has been identified. People differ in their reaction to snake venom. In some, death may ensue within a

short time while others seem to possess a degree of natural resistance. It is of interest to note, however, that snakes are able to control the amount of venom they inject into the wound, which may account for the instances of people recovering from the normally fatal bite of a poisonous snake.

In general, snakes are far less dangerous than is generally believed. It is estimated that there are approximately 2 500 species of snakes in the world. They occur in most countries except Ireland and New Zealand, and are particularly numerous in the tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, Asia and America. The majority of snakes are not really dangerous or are quite harmless. Examples are the blind snakes, worm snakes, house snakes, mole snakes and slug eaters. These last are beautiful creatures and an asset in any garden for they assist in the control of slugs and insect pests. Some snakes, such as the file snake, water-snake and egg-eater, may attempt to bite, although they are not venomous. Today all non-poisonous snakes are protected in the Cape Province.

During the years we lived in Maclear my father and I spent most of our leisure time camping and angling in the rivers of East Griqualand. Consequently, in our home trout was frequently on the menu, fresh during the open season, or preserved in the form of pickled fish. My mother was an expert at preparing curried fish, consistently producing a dish far superior to any I have tasted elsewhere. Unfortunately her recipe was never passed on to her family. In retrospect it is strange to note that while the wild trout of the rivers of Maclear were outstanding table fish with firm, bright pink flesh due to the diet of crabs, few of the local riparian owners would eat them, despite the fact that fresh sea fish was seldom available in Maclear. Farmers rarely have time for fishing and it was also the local belief that fresh water fish have a muddy flavour. It was my father's practice on arrival at our destination always to seek the owner's permission before fishing his water, and on our return to call at the homestead to thank him, usually leaving a trout or two. We only learned after we had left the district that one of the ladies on the Upper Mooi River, who always accepted the gift of fish with old-world courtesy, would instruct her servant to bury the trout in the rose garden. It was claimed that she grew the best roses in the district! The local Xhosas did not eat trout, although they were plentiful in many rivers in their territory, due to tribal taboos, and consequently never poached.

In those days Maclear was renowned for its trout fishing and attracted many visitors from near and far, including some from overseas. As the most competent angler and authority on the condition of the rivers my father's services were much in demand. Among the distinguished overseas visitors we accompanied on fishing trips were the Earl of Athlone, the Earl of Clarendon, American Ambassador Totten, Sir Baden Powell, Admiral Bentinck, Capt. Birch-Raynardson, Col. Devenish and many other high-ranking military and naval officers. At the time the rivers were excellent trout waters, well-stocked with good-conditioned fish judged by any standards. In one afternoon my father took six trout from the Big Pot River, every fish being over 2 kg. The autumn months of March and April provided the best angling conditions, but despite the frequent summer rains, which brought the rivers down in spate, it was always possible to find some headwater which was not too discoloured for angling.

Anglers, and particularly those who are office-bound during the week, are inclined to be optimists and live for the weekends which are planned far in advance. My father always kept a keen eye on the weather with a view to the angling prospects. Yet, despite a sharply falling barometer and threatening thunder clouds, he seldom cancelled a planned trip. The weather notwithstanding we would set off for some stream which he thought might offer the prospect of a trout or two. Consequently we were frequently caught in sharp thunderstorms which soon turned the dirt road into slippery muddy tracks and small mountain streams into raging torrents. When the car could be coaxed no farther we alighted and set about the dirty work of putting on the chains, which in

those days were standard equipment for country driving. There was usually no difficulty in securing the outside clips of the chains, it was the inner ones which were the problem. Try putting your arm over a wheel caked in mud to feel for and secure a clip in the narrow space, usually clogged with mud between the tyre and the inside of the mud-guard! With chains fixed one could usually progress slowly on the muddy roads, except on the steeper inclines of red-clay soil. One of the worst soils in wet weather, however, is the so-called black-turf, which simply packs on to the tyres until the car is virtually immobilised. To assist the car over particularly slippery sections we would lay shrubs and branches in the tracks to afford better traction for the wheels.

There were numerous drifts to cross and few bridges. Even the most insignificant streams often became impassable when in spate. On arriving at such a stream I was required to wade through it to determine the depth of the water and the presence of any boulders. If the drift was not considered too deep, in other words the water was below the level of the distributor and sparking plugs, the fan belt would be loosened to prevent the fan from throwing water over the engine; a hose attached to the exhaust pipe and secured above anticipated water level; and a waterproof placed over the front of the radiator. Selecting the lowest gear, the driver would then attempt to ford the stream driving at a steady speed, while the passengers followed, ready to push should the car falter. In cases where the car was hopelessly bogged down or stuck in a drift one was obliged to seek help from the nearest farm, and hope that the flood waters would not rise further before the team of oxen arrived to pull the car out. Needless to say, one arrived home late at night wet, cold and caked with mud. In those days travelling in the country could be an adventure in itself, compared to which motoring today is very tame.

A problem which exercised my father's mind for as long as I can remember was how to determine the conditions which cause trout to come on the feed. In other words, what are the ideal weather conditions for angling? Although he was the most successful angler I have known, I do not think that he ever solved this problem. A most skilful angler, his success was largely due to his perseverance: "You can't catch fish unless your fly is in the water," he said. "Trout will usually come on the feed most days, even if only for half an hour. Therefore your fly must be in the water when this happens." He seldom returned home empty-handed. He firmly believed that the effect of barometric pressure on fish was more important than all other factors including wind, cloud formation, or the state of the water. He advocated fishing on a rising barometer no matter how low it might be, rather than on a falling one. Falling barometric pressure puts the fish down, he believed. One occasion I well remember was on the Mooi River near Maclear. It was a hot, sultry day with ominous black storm clouds and a barometric low. We fished all day without even a touch. At about 4 p.m. the first big raindrops started falling. Suddenly the fish started rising and for the next half-hour as the rain intensified the water literally boiled and we enjoyed superb angling until the river became too discoloured. The fish seemed to go mad, snatching the fly almost as it hit the water.

As I have said above, it was estimated that in those days there were over 600 miles of trout fishing in the Maclear district. As a schoolboy I did not realise how privileged I was to enjoy unlimited access to these virtually unspoiled waters. It is tragic to see how the angling in many of these magnificent trout streams has gradually deteriorated over the past 50 years. Natural food supplies have become depleted, the water quality has declined, and some rivers have silted up due to improper agricultural practices and poor veld management in the catchment areas. Streams which were once swift-flowing and clear are now sluggish and discoloured and during storms they become torrents of liquid mud. What a tremendous recreational asset and tourist potential has been lost to our country!

The same pattern has been recorded in many other virgin waters into which trout have been introduced. Provided that the water quality is suitable and there are no indigenous predatory species, trout, once established, thrive on the rich food supply and reproduce, so that the river becomes well stocked within three to five years. Unless the water is properly managed, and this includes maintaining a healthy balance between the fish and their food supply, it will soon become overstocked with small stunted fish. This is characteristic of such virgin waters which should be heavily fished, and may even require the use of traps to prevent overstocking. If this is not done the fish will lose condition and there may even be mass mortalities during hot dry spells. There is always the tendency to over-protect newly stocked waters and I believe that more waters have been spoiled by under-fishing than over-fishing. Viewed objectively, angling with a trout fly is probably one of the most difficult and ineffective means of catching fish!

Eventually nature will restore a balance, as has happened in the waters of the Western Cape, but the production of good quality fish will be much lower than it was in the early years after the initial stocking. Only by augmenting the food supply can productivity be increased. How this can be done will be described in a later article.

(Certain extracts in this article have been taken from my book, Water Source of Life, by kind courtesy of Oxford University Press.)