

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

By Lawrie Kingma

The canoe drifted in the slow current of the deep water, so gentle here compared with its speed in the rapids at the head and the tail of the great pool. I sat quietly in the canoe, with the warmth of the midsummer sun in his blue vault enveloping me, relaxing after one of the greatest fights that I have ever had with a big bass. Now he lay at my feet, golden green and massive, my fifth largest largemouth.

I had hooked him on the baitcaster and a Heddon Dying Flutter, for some reason a deadly lure in this river, especially for the big ones. He had seized it in a turmoil of broken water and spray. I quickly got the canoe between him and the palmeto island, which was his home, and hung grimly onto the rod as he came out in a high jump, flaring his gills. He fought like a lassoed wild bull, unrestrained, almost unstoppable. He made several attempts to dive under the canoe and tangle my line in the palmeto, and, but for my forethought, would have done so. I never felt certain of landing him until at the second attempt, I got my thumb in his jaw.

I did not know it then, but that was the last four pounder I was to catch in the river. The previous autumn (1983) I had caught nine bass of an average weight of 3lb 13oz, the largest 4lb 10oz, the smallest 3lb 4oz, my greatest catch in the Breede. Although I made five more trips to the river during that year, I caught very little, when before my catches had been very consistent. Later I came to the conclusion that the great floods of 1980 and 1981, which were reputed to have brought down dissolved chemicals in their devastating rush (six farms below the junction of the river from Montague with the Breede applied for relief as all their topsoil had been stripped) had killed much of the young stock.

I paid occasional visits to the river until 1988 but my catches were poor, although, as ever, I enjoyed the canoeing.

It was on the last day of 1971 that, with my companion, a boy of fourteen, I paid my first visit to

the Breede. It was an exploring visit, but we were fortunate, as we found Flip se Gat, a great circular hole in the river some way above Drew ridge. It was a maalgat (whirlpool) and spun like a top in the winter floods. At high water there was always a strong back current. The Gat was the pivot of our camps, above were steep rapids leading to the wonderful Stone Pool which ended in a small island. Still higher lay the long canal like 2 mile pool which also ended in rapids, usually the limit of our voyaging. Below the Gat were shallow rapids, after which the river split into two, with a few deep pools before the Bridge. My companion caught his first four pounder in one of them.

Below the Bridge was a great pool to wonder at. Then it had five palmiet islands and extensive weed beds but three of the islands and many of the weedbeds disappeared in floods. The pool ran from rapids to a long stretch of deep water, ending in a huge clump of palmiet above the small mouth place, a deep, stony run. Such was our domain, our proving ground, our school. Even though I was an experienced flyfisherman, I was lost and uncertain on this great river, and my companion had to learn from the beginning. We learnt together.

We had expected to see bass everywhere, but actually they are few and far between. The dominant fish were the great carp, I caught eleven averaging over twenty-one pounds, my companion's best was one of thirty one pounds. Blue gills were a good forage fish, and there were many springers, besides the beautiful tench. Eels were plentiful, but they smashed all my companion's lines.

We soon found that the fly rod was perhaps inadequate to cover the river properly. Eventually, from glass blanks, I built a good flyrod for my companion, two light spinning rods, and two bait casters, and top class reels to fit them. Only the best could take the hard river fishing. Thus equipped, we could make progress.

We fished consistently throughout the summers and autumns until Easter 1986, when my companion left for two years service on the border. We did make occasional trips to Clanwilliam, Rietvlei and the Witels, where he was particularly successful using skills he had acquired flyfishing the Stellenbosch Eerste with nymph and dry fly. But our main interest was always the Breede, and we steadily made progress, finding out where the bass lay at different water levels. Our catches were never large, but the average size was very good. All fish under two pounds were returned. We caught more over three pounds than ever before, and my companion distinguished himself one still evening, when at the Palmiet above the smallmouth place he caught a great smallmouth of almost four pounds on a mouse. That was some fight. Earlier he had a two pounder, while I got one of five ounces! Gradually, without really realising it, we were becoming capable river fishermen.

One late November morning I waited for my companion, holding the canoe in the slow current. We had decided to go to the top of the 2-mile pool to try our fortune.

It was a beautiful, still morning. The sun shone in his blue heaven, the early morning light glinting off the wet rocks in the rapids above the Gat. The beautiful mountains loomed in the distance, the slowly moving air fanned my face, the flowing water laved my feet, and the flowering earth was all about me. Truly, I thought, this is probably as near paradise as I will ever get. A deep content filled me.

Slowly we made our way upstream. It seemed that my companion was as content as I was, for he was very quiet. For once we passed the beautiful Stone Pool without fishing it. It was very good water, three reefs of rock ran out right angles from the far bank, and I was in later years to catch many good bass there, particularly smallmouth. The long, canal like 2-mile pool seemed to go on for ever. But eventually we reached the top, where the river split into two. My companion went upstream with his flyrod to fish for the smallmouth, while I went downstream for the deeper water.

Presently I heard him calling urgently. I hurried up, to find that he had hooked a great smallmouth on the fly. I judged the bass at over three and a half pounds, near the top weight this species attain in the Breede. Quickly I directed him to the bank.

I looked at the 16 year boy, whose face portrayed like a minnow the emotions that were coursing through him. I wished with all my heart that he would land this fish for in his progress as an angler it was very important that he should do so.

But I was with him, all the way, in his astonishment, in his wonder and his joy, while I shared his overriding anxiety - would he land this wonderful fish, or would it get away?

For the smallmouth, in the manner of his kind, was putting up a prodigious fight. The water was shallow and fast, he could not dive like a submarine which had blown its emergency tanks. Nor did he try and bolt for the deep water as a big trout would have done. Instead he took to the air, skittering across the surface in a turmoil of water and foam. Once he walked on his tail, which I had never seen a fish do before. The boy was spellbound, but was nevertheless equal to the occasion. Everything held, and eventually I managed to get my thumb in the jaw of the big bass. That day happened a long time ago, but the deep, satisfying memory of it is as vivid in my mind as if it had happened yesterday.

My companion never looked back after that day, he caught three bass between four and four and a half pounds before I attained that mark, including a beautiful smallmouth. He began to display a steady competence in his fishing, particularly with the light spinning rod I had built him, using a minnow. It was a pleasure to watch the delicacy of his fishing, and I became an addict also, eventually using this Rapallo minnow. I caught many of my big bass, of both kinds, on it.

When Easter 1976 came, I was a free man, retired from employment on my sixtieth birthday, free to do what I wanted to do. And the river drew me like a magnet, its free-flowing water, never the same from one day to another. It always had some surprises in store for me. I could never plumb the depth of its mystery, never come to a full understanding. I was fit and strong, which was just as well, for the next twelve or fourteen years were to be some for the most vigorous and satisfying years of my life.

First I proceeded to catch four big carp from the Gat, using a medium weight spinning rod and twelve pound Stren line, the reel filled with two hundred yards on the spool. I hooked the first one at the top of the pool. In one tremendous run he shot for the rapids at the bottom, but came back when he felt the thin water, the line trailing long streamers of green weed. After some considerable trouble I got him in, a twenty-five pounder. The next weighing thirty pounds, I caught some days later. He gave me eight long runs on the surface, but came in at last. The third one, a twenty-four pounder, I hooked in the dark. He was an exceptionally strong fish, and I despaired of even landing him. In the morning I discovered that he was the most beautiful carp that I had ever seen, fully scaled and marked like a great brown trout. The last, a twenty-one pounder, was caught to the order of one of the labourer's wives. I gave it to her son, in an half an hour he was back, his mother wanted a bottle of oil to fry the fish!

While my diary records that I had some good fishing in the 1976-1977 season, my greatest catches in the Breede were definitely in the period November 1977 to March 1980, when I caught 64 bass, 31 largemouth averaging just over three pounds, and 33 smallmouth averaging just under that mark. My companion was amazed at my seemingly never-ending good fortune. It all started during November 1977, when I caught six bass of an average of three pounds, the best a magnificent smallmouth of 3 lb 15oz. In December I found Elandia district the other side of Worcester. Beautiful, alluring Elandia, I shall never forget that part of the river, even though in the great wide pools the water ran inches deep over the sand. The water was fast and shallow, but between the pools were deep cuts fringed with palmiet. In them lurked the smallmouth, there were no largemouth. I enjoyed the most fascinating canoeing of my life, ranging far and wide, up and down river, sometimes for seven hours, never seeing another person. In the middle reaches the largemouth attained a weight of four and a half pounds, while their cousins went to three and three quarters. Here the largest I caught was just over three. But they were very fat and strong, the two pounders just fifteen inches in length.

In March 1978 I discovered the new water eleven miles nearer Swellendam than Drew. There I was to catch ten of the twelve four pounders I got in the Breede, losing a few in sunken branches and palmiet. I had the scales of the big fish read, and established their top weight as four and a half pounds and their life cycle as five to six years.

The great pool was nearly two miles of deep water ending in a run out at right angles through a tremendous bank of palmiet into a series of rapids. The run-in pool was very attractive, the water coming in from rapids into shallow water lined with palmiet, the clean swept rock showing very clearly before the water suddenly deepened. Here I was to catch six big smallmouth up to 3lb 13oz. It was a fascinating place to fish in the very late evening.

The most productive places were this pool, the runout pool and the two islands in mid reach. But

I encountered very big largemouth in indented coves in the precipitous far bank. Some of them were too clever for me. But, at times, one could encounter big bass almost anywhere. I looked for reefs running out at right angles for the smallmouth, particularly lower down the pool. At one of these I caught two smallmouth, the first, a three and a half pounder, gave me a tremendous fight that no bass of either species was to equal. Just below my camp was a sunken tree in deep water. In the course of time I caught five bass there averaging four pounds, including a smallmouth of 4lb 7oz, a magnificent fish. My companion was naturally very keen to pay a visit, but due to bad weather and heavy rain, only once had any luck, catching four big fish.

With the bad weather so common on this stretch of the river I was lucky if I had one successful camp in three. Rain came often from the north-west, and heavier still, from the south-east. One would wake up one morning to find a heavy bank of black cloud on the south-east horizon, with softly blowing wind. One would have a feeling of apprehension the whole day. The rain would come the following night, continuous heavy rain. In the late eighties I did three 3-day hikes with companions in the beautiful Swellendam mountains. Twice we were rained out, once we arrived just after a heavy snowfall.

But if the weather often disappointed, with its floods and mud, the magical times more than made up for it. Times when everything went well for you, when you fished with a sureness of success. Like the day when I caught three smallmouth totalling 9 lb on the fly rod and bug at Drew, the first ever of that species. Or the five largemouth up to 2 and 3/4 lb also at Drew, which I caught casting to a weedy bank, using a pointed bug and my old Hardy flyrod. Wonderful fishing. Or the four pound smallmouth I caught on a bug from one of the channels through the palmet at the run-out pool. My wrist was sore after I landed him! Or the day when I caught five fat smallmouth at Elandia. But perhaps the edge of the dark encounters had the greatest power of being remembered. For instance, when in the thin water of the run-in pool I caught three largemouth on the spinning rod and minnow. And the great three and a half pound largemouth, which was so powerful, from a hole just above the palmet and shallow water. Those and many other encounters are indelibly engraved on my mind and are rich in remembrance. One's senses are tuned to their sharpest pitch, and one feels part of the flowing water and the soft dusk. How fortunate I am to have such times to dwell upon.

However this wonderful two years or so, when the bass came so freely to my lures, the best period of all my years on the river, came to an end. In late March 1980 the first landslide at Montagu occurred and the Breede ran yellow with mud. I had very little fishing in the river that season. Worse was to come. In January 1981 there was an even greater landslide at Montagu. The same weather was to cause the flood which claimed so many lives in the small Karoo town of Laingsburg. I was at camp that weekend. Fortunately, because of the heavy and continuous rain, I packed up and left on the Saturday afternoon. Early on Monday morning the flood, in its tempestuous rush, swept through my camping place. The pollution proved to be even heavier and more damaging than the earlier landslide.

For me, the fishing was never the same again. Even though I was still to make some of my greatest catches, most notably in the autumn of 1983, the fishing was very patchy. This, I am sure, was a result of most of the infant bass being killed in the flood. I gradually gave up fishing the river and went hiking on the various mountain trails instead.

But the river still lives very strongly in my mind and memories. How could it not, when I had devoted so many years of my life to it. So many years I had lived the natural life of camping, canoeing and fishing, being so conscious of the birds in the bushes, of the life in the river, of the beautiful still mornings when all the birds the river sheltered, seemed to be about their business. I tried to identify as many as I could. The bishop birds were very prominent, and their green and gold cousins. So were the divers and egrets in their great flocks at roosting time. One saw eagle owls at dusk and the crows noisily announced themselves. Once I saw a fish eagle perched on a dead tree, only when he flew away did I notice his great spread of wing. At home I had identified the Burchell coucal, a big, glossy brown bird. Only then did I notice the deep calls of the bird as I travelled down the river. And, of course, many kinds that I could not identify.

So now, in the fullness of my years, I am housebound but my rich memories sustain me. I think of the hours and days so carelessly spent, as if life went on for ever. In my dreams I still steal out in my canoe in the beautiful, still morning, or battle my way downriver against the blustering southeaster. Or go out quietly in the never ceasing magic of the dusk, seeking my fortune, and content even if it failed to materialise. Or pay another visit to the Stone pool, and seeing in my mind's eye the beauty of the many great smallmouth I took from it. Why, I have lived and had my being, I do not regret an hour or a day that I spent on the river. It possessed my thoughts and will continue to do so as long as I live.

If there is such a place as Paradise, and millions believe there is, then surely a river runs through it.