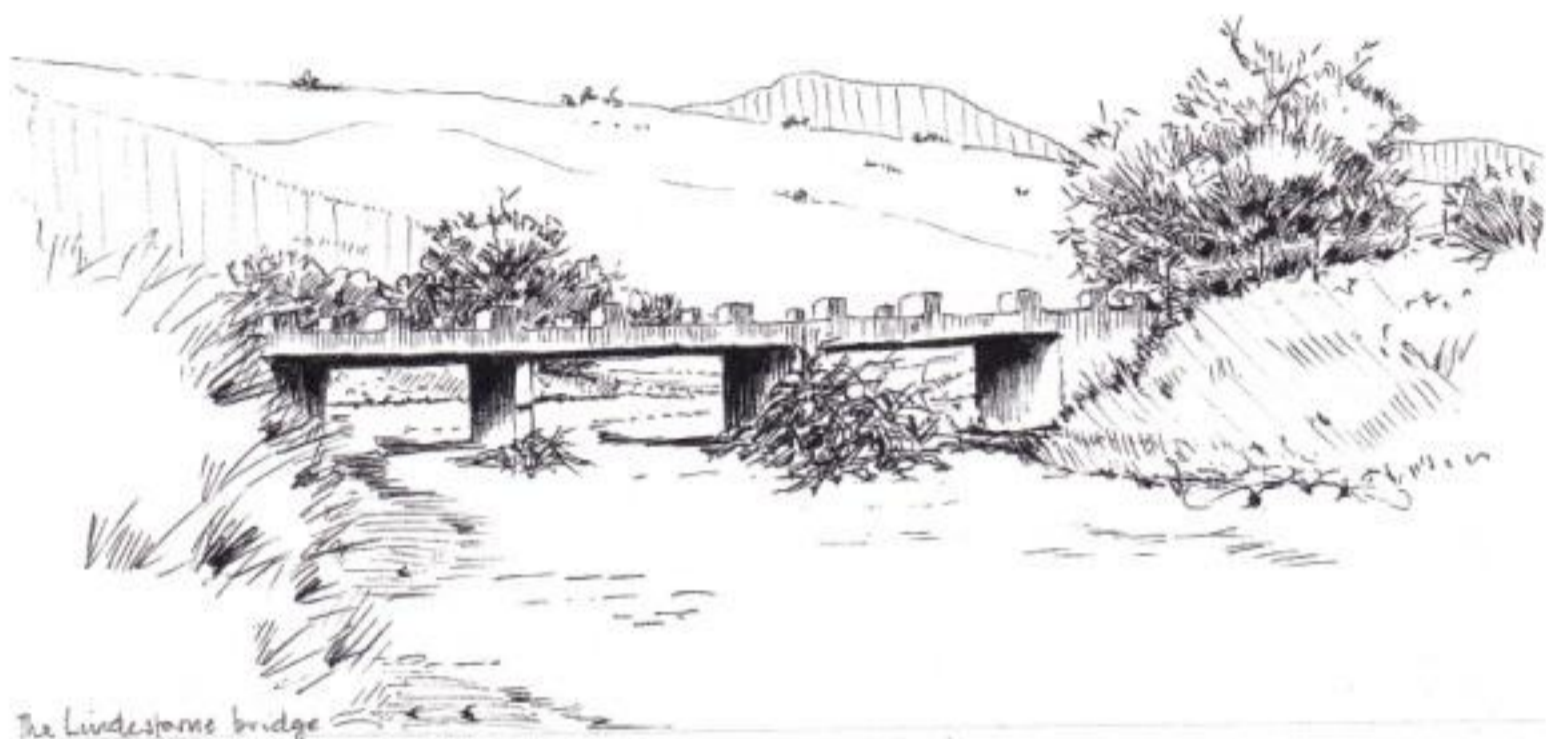


Hunting Trout

Return to Barkly

An extract from Tom Sutcliffe's new book



The Lindesfarne bridge

Carien kindly dropped us where the Lindesfarne bridge crosses the Sterkspruit about three kilometres upstream from Birkhall. It was mid-morning, the sun was out and we planned to fish back to Birkhall, which is relaxing, because there are no deadlines to this sort of fishing other than your own. You just go off and come home when you like - midnight, if it pleases you. There's nobody waiting back at any car expecting you at, say 6:30 sharp, or anything like that. Carien had packed us a light lunch and took the trouble to sit and chat while we set up our gear, leaving only when she was certain we hadn't forgotten anything vital. She'd heard a bit about us, I guess.

The Sterkspruit looked good, the water washing smoke green from under the bridge, flat surfaced as a table, inky where the concrete roof of the bridge threw back a long angular shadow. Whitefronted Swallows stitched the open mouth of the bridge, swift as light on the approach, weaving like windblown remnants of dark blue material blown on the wind, sweeping upward and stalling fan-tailed to reach their nests deep inside the jaws of the bridge, hesitating on the lip of the nest for a brief moment, then peeling away again as if swept up into the air.

The last time we had fished this water it had looked flat and worn out. Now the surface bounced and bubbled, rejuvenated, as low rivers quickly are after a spattering of rain. The water raced between rocks and trembled through runs, the surface winking with reflected light, sparkling in the sun, making the steady quarrelling sounds all quick running rivers make. Even in the big pool below the bridge the levels had risen in the few days since we

had last seen the river, spreading to cover the pebbled tail-outs under an inch or two of water. I stood on the bank watching this pretty sight, thinking what a mighty fine day to find yourself not working - to just stand and let the pleasant anticipation of the imminent pull of trout slowly sink in.

"Looks about perfect, Ed," I said, because after watching a river for a full five minutes in complete silence you have to say something and that's all that came to mind.

"Looks okay," he replied, but, as I said, he's not known for great emotion or getting too loose with words.

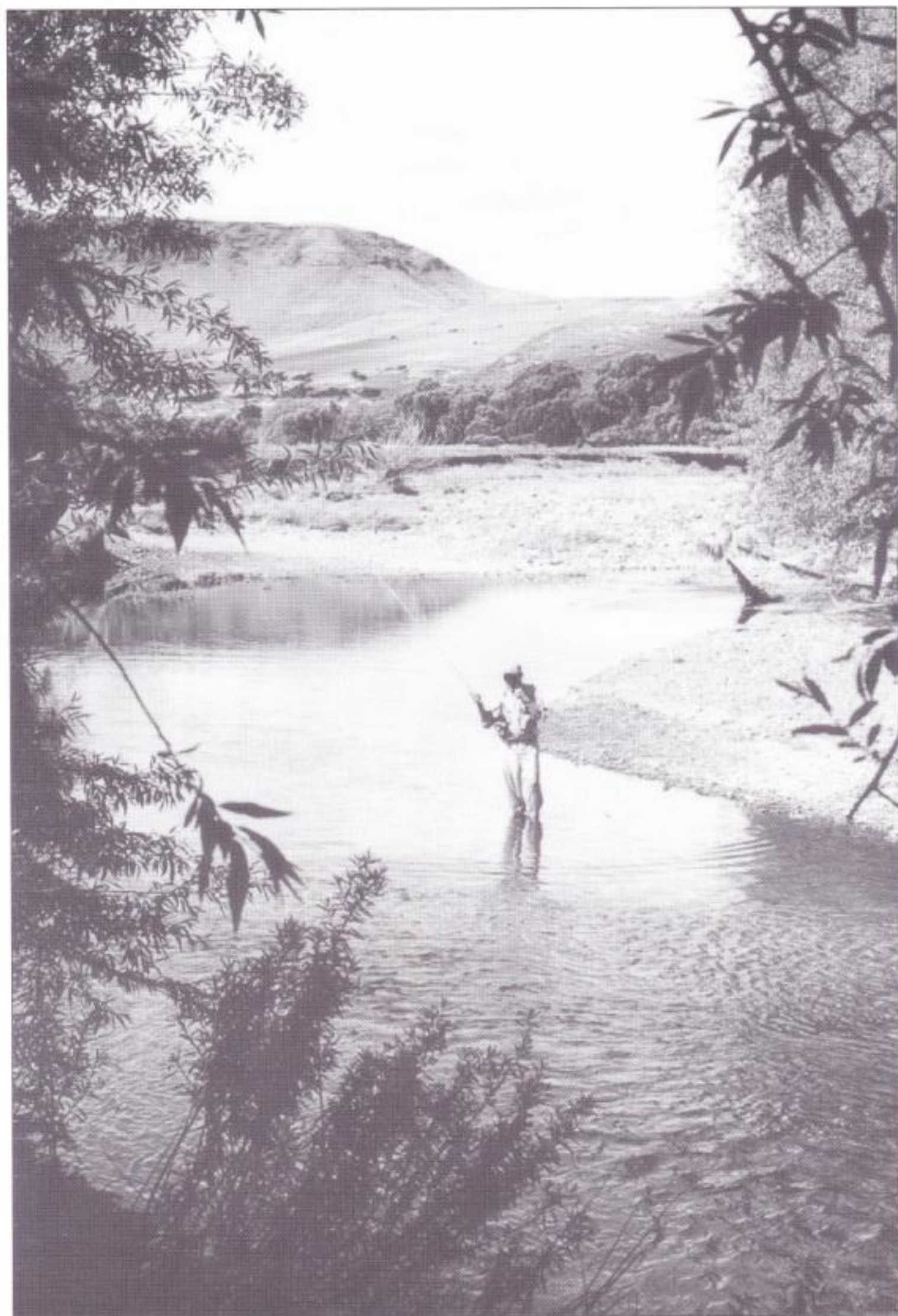
I tied on my standard length of fresh 5X tippet, in other words, as long as my arm, which I can tell you from years of holding the end of the spool under my chin and extending my arm full stretch with the spool unwinding in my other hand. That's how I measure my 'standard' tippet. It works out at around thirty inches. Ed uses a ruler marked in millimetres. There's a fundamental difference in our approach here - I go by feel, he goes by formula - but so far the trout don't seem to have noticed the difference. But then I end up doing a fair amount of tippet doctoring during the course of a day's fishing, most of which comes down to adding length when I'm using a dry fly, or shortening it when I'm nymphing shallow mountain streams, or using heavy flies.

I picked the best Zak I could find in my box, about size 14, lightly dressed and with a well-defined thorax (a non-negotiable requirement on Zaks as far as I am concerned) and a buggy look to it, threaded the fly onto the tippet and tied it on with a Duncan loop. It's a knot that gives the fly movement, at least in theory, but I've since changed from the Duncan to a loop that's supposed to be stronger and doesn't slip closed with pressure like the Duncan does. I went through a phase once testing the strengths and qualities of different knots, but I gave that up when I started to suspect there were few real advantages to any particular one for average trout fishing. But I do think this new loop is enough of an improvement that I use nothing else now. I don't know if it has a name, but here's how you tie it:

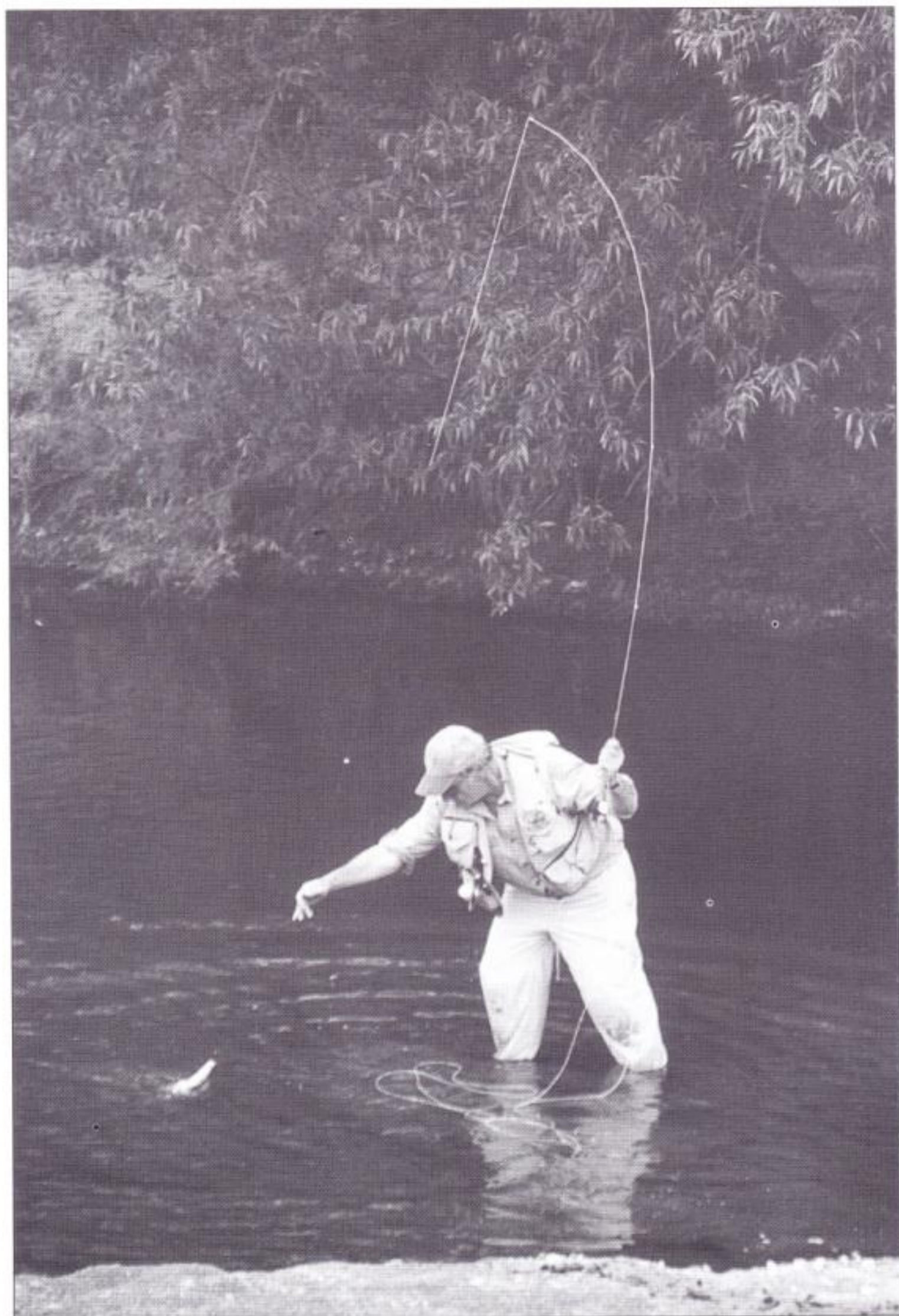
Throw a simple overhand knot in the tippet material then pass the standing end through the eye of the hook. Bring the nylon point back through the overhand knot from the same side as the nylon left it. Wrap the nylon five or six times around the tippet material above the overhand knot, then bring the point back through the overhand knot, again entering it on the same side as the nylon left. Moisten, pull up slightly then, holding the standing end of the nylon, tighten the knot and trim.

I added a little fluorescent strike indicator putty, which is convenient stuff because it's easy to get on and it's bright enough to spot on the water from a mile off. The drawback is it's a little heavy for light streams. It smacks the water too hard, so I keep it for times when the river is bouncing after a little rain.

I didn't fuss much about how far the indicator was from the fly (which, of course, has a bearing on how far the fly can sink), leaving that problem to solve if I didn't get takes. Then I'd start telling myself that the fly wasn't getting down to the trout, and when I'd finally convinced myself that was the trouble, I'd add distance between the two by moving the



Tom Sutcliffe fishing the Sterkspruit River on Basie Vosloo's farm, Birkhall.



A Sterkspruit River rainbow brought to hand by Tom Sutcliffe.

indicator back or lengthening the tippet.

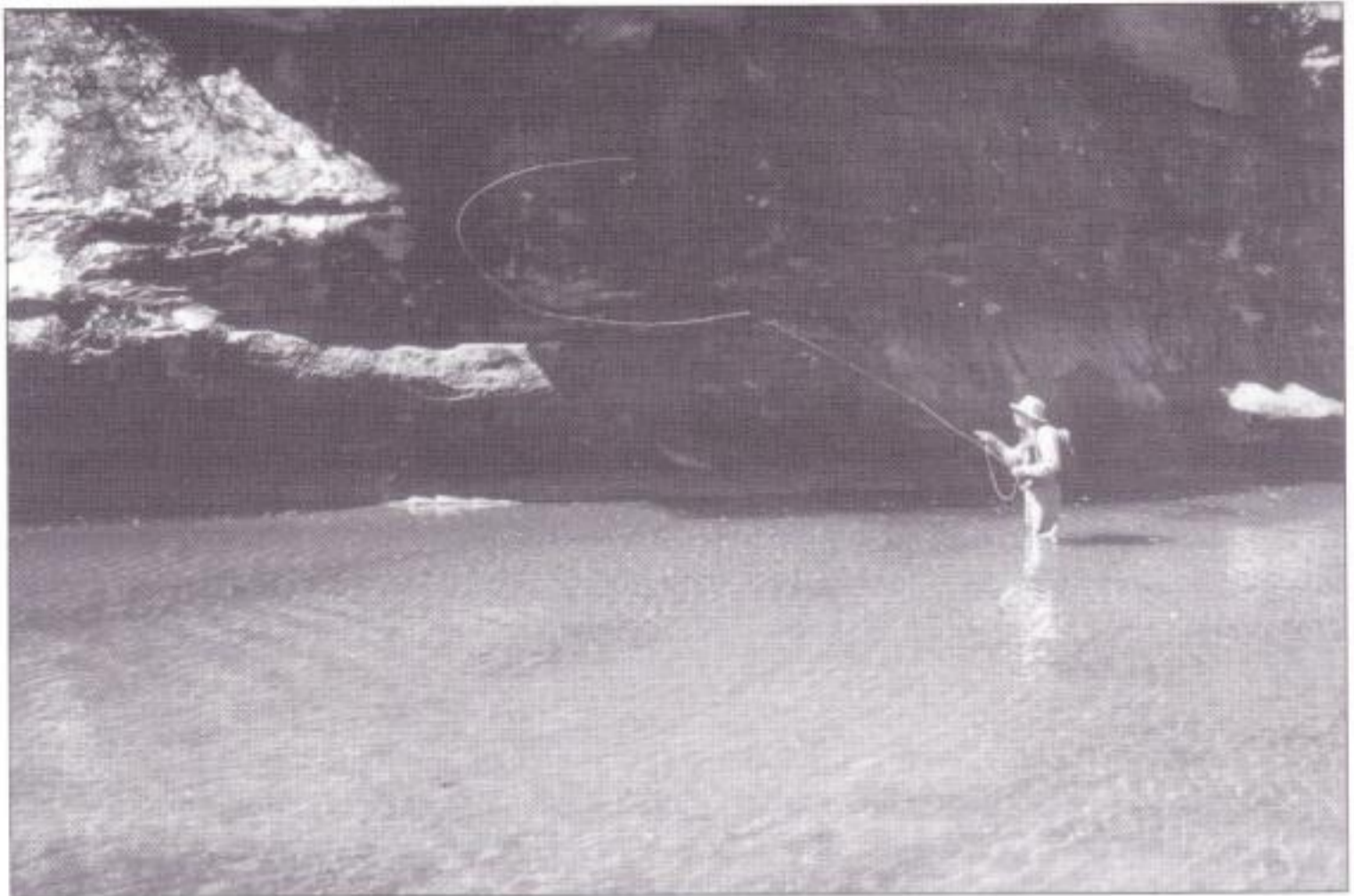
I took plenty of trouble over all these rituals, especially the knots, because the Sterkspruit can suddenly become a very serious trout stream, as you can find yourself into a fish of six pounds and over. On some streams you don't have to worry too much about big trout - a mild convenience in itself - but the Sterkspruit is not one of those streams.

The day, in a manner of speaking, was straight out of heaven. Ed and I fished together for a while, but eventually we split up and I didn't see him again until I got home that night. He went downstream to find some space for himself and I took my time following behind, fishing the first couple of runs very slowly to put distance between us, enough distance to make sure the trout had settled after Ed had moved past. Going downstream, of course, means you first have to walk alongside a run or a pool, keeping just out of sight, then wade in to fish back through the water you just walked past. Which is not ideal because it wastes time and it's easy to spook any big fish that happens to be sitting out in feeding lie as you go past on the bank.

In the fast water the trout were around ten to twelve inches and there were heaps of them. You could have caught them all day. They liked the Zak drifting freely and I found most of them in the head and neck of the runs where the water was better oxygenated. In the slack water it was a case of wading up soft silt-line in the centre of the stream if that was possible (and on many runs it was), then dropping a nymph into the deep slots against the bank. In the slack water the fish liked a little movement in the fly, though I hung on as long as I could with a dead drift, just because I like that sort of fishing more than I like taking trout when I have to move the nymph. There were a few really deep slots, where the water had a dark, bottle-green glow to it and I fished them with care, letting the fly sink and then slowly drawing it up with rod lift. In these places I got bigger fish, and one of sixteen inches.

At a spot Basie had described as 'hot' - a deep hole under the hang of a large willow - I had a solid take on a heavily-weighted Hare's Ear, that twisted the rod handle around in my hand and bent the tip dangerously before I could release pressure. The fish fought on the bottom, tightly, occasionally tearing off into dark places under the bank where there was a tangle of twisted roots, and I had to lean heavily to check it. After a good few minutes it struck me that in spite of keeping really tight on the fish it was showing no signs of tiring. You need to turn big fish quickly so you can lead them out of the deep water (where they can get a grip on you), into the shallows where they're not as powerful, and that can take as much pressure as your rod or your nerves can handle. I held the fish firmly, with the rod flat, nearly parallel to the water, and eventually got its head around and walked it to the tail of the run like a dog on a lead. I should have held the rod a little higher maybe, to cushion the pressure (or so the books say), but you just don't get the leverage you want without sweeping the rod low. It was a very large rainbow hen and after I freed the hook she lay still for a while on the bottom of a shallow scrape, seemingly avoiding my gaze, panting hard enough to lift little puffs of grit under her gills. The sun danced watery-yellow rosettes along her back and I ran my fingers over her spots until she got tired of my advances and slipped away, sinking slowly into the stream until she blended with the shadows of the deep water and vanished.

My knees were shaky as I slopped out of the water. I climbed the bank, lay down in the soft



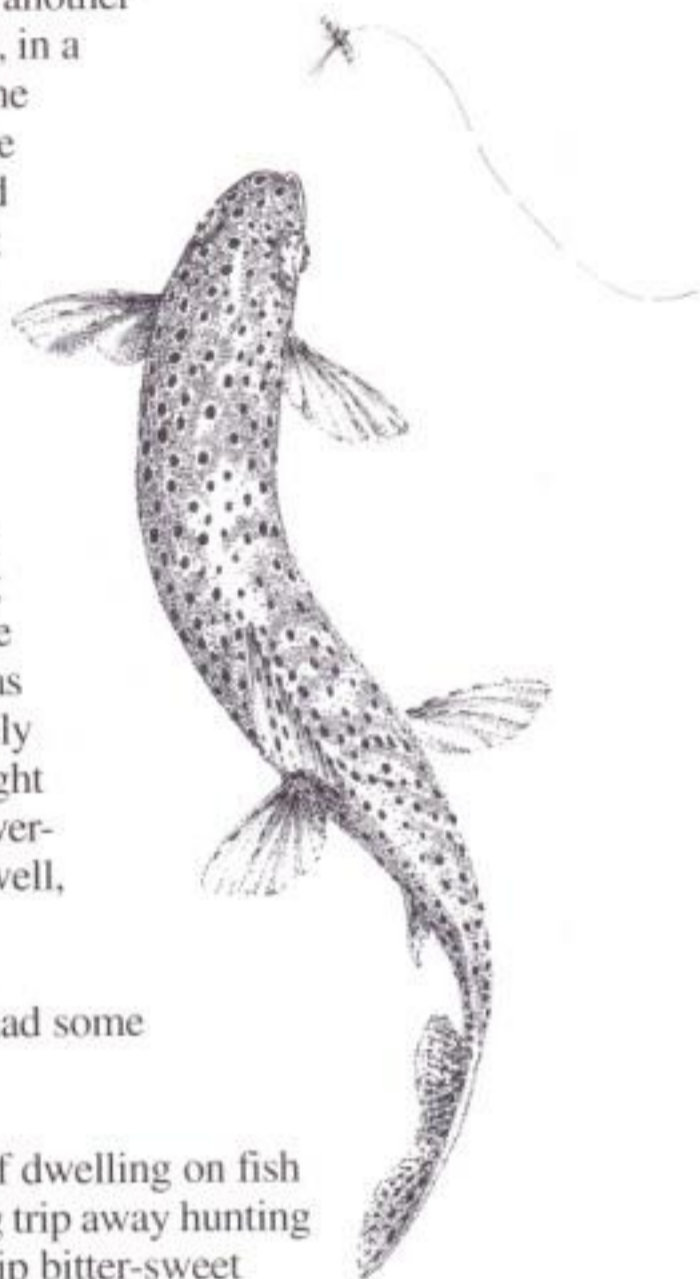
Ed Herbst fishing the Sterkspruit River below the Lindisfrane Bridge.



A Sterkspruit rainbow puts a bend into Tom Sutcliffe's fly rod.

grass under a willow and lit my pipe to think it all through, every magical moment, then remembered I'd forgotten to measure her.

It was dark by the time I got home. I had hooked another monstrous trout right at the death, in pewter light, in a long reach of deep water where a fence spanned the river. To say I wasn't expecting that fish would be generous. It took the nymph softly in the sink, and unexpectedly, as many big fish do on a quiet evening. When it felt the hook it took off going straight across the river for the opposite bank, its shoulders plowing deep waves through the water. It felt very large and I knew it would be seconds before we parted company, and that came just as the line hit the first strand of the fence. The size of that fish ...? I don't know, but it was big enough to leave a tremor in my hand. I could see the tremor when I took my rod down, and it was still there when I got back to the house. Fortunately by then I was too tired to agonise over what might have been and besides, I'd had a pretty good day overall. If I'd lost that trout in the first run I fished, well, that would have been a different story.



I say 'lost,' but a fish is only lost when you've had some measure of control over it, and I'd had none.

Ed and I were leaving the next day so, instead of dwelling on fish that pop tippets, I packed my gear. After any long trip away hunting trout there are always enough of those end-of-trip bitter-sweet sentiments around to keep your mind occupied. The mix of feelings comes from the conflict between the sweet anticipation of returning home on the one hand, and on the other, leaving the rivers, and all the good fishing you know is still in them. It's a strange amalgam of emotions, but I notice I have to be away quite a while for the condition to become fully developed.

"Tying our own flies is where many of us go off the deep end with fly fishing. That's how it happened with me, and I was even aware of it at the time. I mean. I was young and crazed and I was sort of looking for the deep end." John Gierach, Good Flies, The Lyons Press, 2000.