

MEMORIES OF THE WOLF

by Colin Vary

The article in the March 1989 edition of "Piscator" describing "A Day (and a night) on the Wolf" river near Keiskammahoek, brought back a flood of nostalgia. My memory bank fairly glowed, reliving the many happy days I spent fishing the Keiskamma river and especially its tributaries, among which was the Wolf. It was some 23 years ago now, soon after my arrival in this country, that I was invited by the Radloff family, who owned the hotel at Keiskammahoek, to spend a weekend trout fishing. Having spent 6 years in England, fishing some of the magnificent trout streams there, I stepped off the SAA flight to East London, literally with a trout rod in one hand and a shotgun in the other. Here I was to spend the next two and a half years before moving to Pietermaritzburg, where I met Ed Herbst for the first time. He had not been smitten by the dreaded bug then, otherwise we may have formed a close-alliance.

My first trip to Keiskammahoek was indeed memorable: drastically different, and my first real taste of Africa. The Radloff's son-in-law was a keen fisherman and it was he who showed me all the right spots to fish in the area.

Strangely the Keiskamma river itself was not favoured, possibly because most of it was encased in dense undergrowth, making it impossible to fish. The section near the hotel was free of foliage and produced some nice trout. Two fish of 4 lbs. were caught on this stretch while I was there, one by a retired colonel whose name has escaped me for the moment – old age, I suspect. A stretch on this river above and below its confluence with the Wolf was also fishable but catches were disappointing.

As you know, the Wolf is a fascinating stream; starting in the Hogsback mountains, it flows about 7 miles, relatively straight and down a narrow valley, through patches of indigenous forest, over waterfalls, into pools with runs, eddies and magnificent long rocky stretches, making it a fisherman's dream. The trout were lively and fought well although a fish over a pound were rare. Unlike the other tributaries of the Keiskamma, the Wolf didn't discolour badly after rain, so whenever the other streams were dirty and unfishable this was where we were to be found. A day on this stream was always restful and rewarding, but two incidents stand out in my memory above all else. The first happened one day when I was fishing with a friend who started at the bottom end near where the Wolf joins the Keiskamma, while I parked a kilometre or so further on and worked up-stream. Using a 6 feet Hardy Phantom Rod, anything longer would have made life impossible on this water, I soon became totally lost to the rest of the outside world. Only another trout fisherman will understand what I mean. The magical sound of water blocking all other noise from my ears, wading quietly, waiting, watching for the line to tighten. Seeing the quick silver flash beneath the surface as I turned another hungry fish eager for my fly – while the steep rocky banks and trees locked me into this tunnel of paradise. In this state, I had travelled further up river than ever before, fishing water which was new and exciting.

A deep pool and rocks on either side made my journey forward impossible and I waded back till I found a spot where I could walk around through the brush. With my mind still on the water below and eager to continue with my fishing, a sound next to me, which I can only liken to that of someone vigorously shaking a blanket, froze me in my tracks. Towering next to me was an enormous witchdoctor, standing over six feet tall and in full regalia, complete with fangs. He had thrown open the cloak which he was wearing to reveal rows and rows of mirrors which were sewn into the inside. His stature and physique could only be described as terrifyingly impressive. My first reaction was to bolt, but instead I was petrified. I could feel the adrenalin burning a hole inside my chest while my heart was racing like a marathon runner. We stood, eyeball to eyeball. I felt that he was expecting me to react, by jumping or running and was rather surprised at my apparent lack of reaction. Had he been as good a witchdoctor as he looked, he would have known that he had gained at least a moral victory. My eyes were

the first to recover and quickly took in his other bits of refinery which adorned his limbs, then I nodded, as if to acknowledge approval of his appearance and walked past as normally as I could in my nervous state, leaving him where he stood. My fishing came to an abrupt end for that day.

The other experience which stands out in my memory happened when I had decided to drive to Keiskammahoeek for a day's fishing. As we drove over the bridge and into the town, the heavens opened up and steam rose thickly off the short strip of tar road which ran through the centre of the town. We took shelter in the hotel while the rain pelted down for nearly an hour. Then as quickly as it had started the rain stopped and within minutes the sun began to shine again. There was so much water about that the only stream we decided, which was not likely to be discoloured, was the Wolf. Our intention was to drive up the Wolf road next to the river and stop at a spot which we called "Cathedral Pool", named because of the arch-like tree formation which covered it. We encountered the same old problem, the road was so slippery after the rain that we were stopped on the first incline. After slipping and sliding we managed to turn the car around and stop a little way back on a flat stretch of road close to the river. The first pool I came to was one which I had fished many times before and had never as much as seen a fish there, even though it was a likely spot. It was a large wide pool, about 30m long, shallow at the tail end with a deep, narrow trough-like run at the top end. Unfortunately due to the steep rock face on the road side and overhanging branches and trees on the other, it was almost unfishable. On that day the rain water was running in from small washes along the edge of the main stream. All manner of sticks and debris were being swept down stream which was still fairly clean but just starting to discolour slightly. Standing at the head of the pool, I cast down into the centre of the pool and began a slow retrieve. There was a sudden take and I struck. Almost immediately, a beautiful hen rainbow of about 3 lbs. exploded to the surface and with one enormous swirl was gone. I was shattered, the biggest river fish I had seen in years and it was gone. I shouted to my friend and told him the story, I'm sure he thought I was exaggerating but he tried the pool for a while with no success. I decided to change fly and try the pool again. I repeated my tactic with the new fly and began the retrieve. It was like an action replay; the trout burst to the surface, swirled again and plunged into the deep, fast water. This time the hook held. What a fight! On my 6 feet split cane rod in that fast water, it felt like a marlin. The result was one of the biggest rainbows to come out of the Wolf in a long time - 3 lbs. exactly. The hotel owner said he thought someone caught a fish there over 3 lbs. many years before but could not remember much about it.

It struck me that with the heavy rain and fresh water washing food off the bank, the trout must have moved up to feed in the run at the head of the pool. So sure was I about this theory that I decided that if ever an occasion like that arose again, I would make for that same pool.

It was almost a year before that chance came, as luck would have it. I arrived early on Saturday morning and had arranged to meet some friends at the hotel and fish the Gxulu, not far from the town. We had just finished lunch at the river, when we were hit by a downpour of rain. My friends decided to pack up for the day but when I said I was going to fish the Wolf I had no starters. Dropping my friends at the hotel, I then raced to my favourite pool. The rain had eased a little when I arrived and I didn't have to wait long before I was able to make my way through the dripping foliage to the river. Conditions at the pool were identical to that last memorable occasion, with rain water running into the stream and beginning to colour the clear water slightly. My first cast was made with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. My line was sucked down by the already swollen waters when I began my first retrieve. The fly had hardly moved when it was viciously taken, and the fight was on again. The result was not disappointing; a lovely hen rainbow of 2 lbs. My point was made, at least to myself, there was no doubt in my mind that the heavy rain washing food into the stream had brought that fish from somewhere in the pool, which normally could not be covered by any fisherman, to a place where it could be reached. Verification of this comes from the fact that it had been fished

dozens of times by as many fishermen, including myself, since the big fish was caught, and not one fish was touched.

After those chapters about the Wolf, I feel that I must mention the other three tributaries near Keiskammahoeck. The Keiskama river rises in the Amatole mountains and is joined before reaching the town, by two interesting streams which also start in the Amatoles. The first is the "Mnyameni", which is joined by the "Cata", it then travels down a broad and winding valley until it reaches the Keiskamma just a short way from the town. This section is called the "Gxulu". The bottom end of the Cata has some interesting pools, but becomes quite narrow further upstream. Although the bottom section contains rainbows, many of the local fishermen have caught browns on the upper stretches which incidentally I fished, and walked to its source, which starts in a natural forest at the bottom of the mountains. On this occasion I saw no brown trout and no rainbow at the top end, but large sections were unfishable due to the rushes which cover the stream almost entirely. The Mnyameni appealed to me more, but I had occasion to fish only a small section a short way up from the junction.

The stretch which I loved most of all was the Gxulu. The Wolf was lively, bubbly and beautiful, creating a feeling of tranquility in any fisherman. But the Gxulu, ah!, this is the stream which I dream about more than any other which I have fished anywhere. Why? Well, to tell the truth I would love to share that secret with you if you would allow me, but it is another story.



Professional Guide Tony Biggs with a four and a half pound Rainbow Trout caught in the Eastern Cape.