

## MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE GXULU

by Colin Vary

In my last letter, I promised to disclose a few events which led to my "love affair" with the "Gxulu" at Keiskammahoek.

Although it does not have the lively, bubbly charm of the Wolf, the Gxulu has a deep incomprehensible mystique, akin to that which writers often attach to those veiled ladies of the Middle East. The old adage that "still waters run deep" certainly apply here, for despite the fact that I fished this river more in that two and a half years than all others in the area, she never revealed all her secrets. This may make me sound like a romantic but after all, aren't all trout fishermen romantics? For wasn't it Izaak Walton who wrote, ". . . and see how pleasantly that meadow looks; nay and the Earth smells as sweetly too. Come let me tell you what holy Mr Herbert sayes of such dayes and flowers as these, and then we will thank God that we enjoy them, and walk to the river and sit down quietly and try to catch the other brace of trouts."

Twenty years ago, fishermen in the area divided the Gxulu into two parts, the upper and lower. The upper section started from the junction with the Carta and the Mnyameni, down to where it crosses the road at the second bridge from Keiskammahoek. The lower stretch flowed from there down to where it joins the Keiskamma river near the town. This lower section had a reputation with local fishermen for being non-productive and therefore was never fished. Most trout fishermen will agree that certain sections on any river will consistently produce fish while others will not. Catch a trout out of a particular run and a week later another fish has taken up residence in the same spot. This so called productive section may stretch two to three hundred metres or more, then for no apparent reason it will stop. The next two hundred metres may then be as dead as the proverbial dodo and anyone fishing that water would swear it had been poisoned. So it was with the lower Gxulu.

The top section by contrast was very popular and fish between 1 and 2 lb were not uncommon. This stretch gave the fisherman every conceivable variation of water, from slow deep winding parts with grassy banks, to rocky terraced pools. The fish were lively and fought like tigers to the net and sometimes after, a fact to which my old fishing companion, Pitt Fennel, from East London will confirm. His first day on the upper Gxulu, and indeed his first trout on this water gave him an unforgettable fight before it was brought to the net. Picking up a stone in one hand and holding the glistening 1 lb trout in the other, Pitt began administering the last rites. With two sickening "cracks" which I can still hear to this day, and sufficient to paralyse a 10 lb salmon, he prepared to deliver a final blow when the creature somehow managed to wriggle free from his grip and jump into the water. Fully expecting it to be floating belly upwards I looked down to see an incredible sight. The trout hit the water right way up pointing towards the deep and without a moment's hesitation, darted off. It is said that a salmon is capable of accelerating from zero to top speed in 1/10th of a second - this fish would have made even the fittest salmon look sick, which gives some idea of the stamina of these remarkable trout.

Having fished the upper section of this river for over a year, I had never put a fly anywhere near the lower half, nor was it ever suggested by any of the local "experts" that I should. The message I got from the few times I had raised the matter, was that fish did not live there, this I found hard to believe.

When I arrived at the hotel late one Friday afternoon for a week-end's fishing, the proprietor's son, Danie Barnard, eagerly told me as I stepped from the car, that we could do an hour's fishing immediately if I was keen. Three minutes later we were in his bakkie and heading for the bridge at the bottom of the top section of the Gxulu. Danie suggested that due to the lack of time we should park at the bridge and fish upstream till dark. When I suggested fishing down from the bridge he was adamant that we would be wasting our time, stating that he had tried for a kilometre or so once and didn't see a fish and so we agreed to fish upstream. Danie's rod was already assembled in the back of the bakkie and he was fishing the first pool above the bridge before I'd finished tackling up.

The pool downstream from the bridge looked good, the shadows were long with the lowered sun and a few dun-like insects were emerging from the still water next to an interesting run. Not able to resist this tempting sight, I moved downstream. My fly barely touched the water when it was savagely taken by a fish which shot into the fast water and fought and felt twice its size. Danie came running to my shouts and helped me net a beautiful 1½ hen rainbow which was still boring down and using every inch of the pool when he arrived. Danie hesitated momentarily when I suggested we move downstream. He took one more look at the fish and agreed. The first 100 metres or so was unproductive due to undergrowth and unsuitable water, after which it turned left then right and opened out into a magnificent, deep pool. I suggested that Danie have first try, while I lingered at a small pool which was half covered with branches from a bush growing alongside. It was not a spot that I would normally fish, but I held back allowing him access to the pool. On my first cast, my fly picked up a small stick about 60 mm long which became visible when it crossed a shallow sandbar in the centre of the pool. At this point I noticed a trout of about 2 lbs following close behind it then turn and disappear. I hastily removed the stick and tried again but to no avail. Danie caught two nice fish in the pool, one of ¾ lb and one of 1 lb while I caught a small fish at the tail of the same pool. Light stopped play and we returned to the hotel, planning to continue downstream the next morning for the entire day.

We were dropped early next morning at the bridge and armed with lunch and all our gear, set off downstream to fish our way back to the hotel. I tried the small pool under the bushes where I saw the fish the night before and drew a blank. (As a matter of interest I subsequently caught that fish from the same spot after several more attempts a month later – it weighed 2 lbs.) The next kilometre proved to be what everyone predicted, barren. Not only that, I only remember one pool in the entire stretch which looked promising and that was unproductive. After fishing for over an hour without either of us seeing a fish, I began to think that the stories were true, while Danie was saying, "I told you so". We came upon a stretch which had a level low grassy bank on one side where the water flowed slowly along its edge, the side nearest to me had no bank and the flat ground was covered with round river stones about the size of my fist. The water on my side was shallow and started among the stones. It then sloped toward the far bank to a depth of about 1½ metres. It was in a rather distressed state of mind that I cast to the far bank and let my line sink. I was immediately taken by a trout which took off like an express train before I had time to set the hook properly. The fish came straight towards me with such a speed that it became airborne and landed in the water among the stones about three metres away. Before I could recover myself or the line, it was back in the pool and gone, leaving my fly on the rocks and me wide-eyed and open-mouthed. The river then ran into some high ground with huge sloping rock-face on the hilly side then opened out into a series of bends with long wide pools and clear banks. Danie cut the corner allowing me to fish the head of the pool. My first cast produced a hen fish of 2 lbs, while he was soon into a one pounder. The next 100 metres produced another two fish of ¾ lb and 1¼ lb.



Colin Vary with the fish caught on the Gxulu. The two fish caught on the first day (left) weighed two and one and a half pounds. The other is the two pounder which was missed and later caught.

The river narrowed again for about 50 metres and became fishable from one bank only, due to heavy undergrowth, so Danie and I fished alternately. The stream then made a slight turn with a narrow run feeding a long deep pool with an enormous round boulder in mid-stream at the tail end. While I tried the centre of the pool, Danie fished the run. On his first cast he missed what he described as a "mooi" fish. Inviting me to try, I flipped my fly into the head of the run and let it sink. My line straightened and I struck. Instead of the usual wild flurry which follows the hooking of a fish up to 3 lbs, this fish moved quickly downstream, staying deep all the time. After about 7 minutes of what could only be described as "heavy fighting", I still had not seen the fish. Despite the fact that I was applying maximum pressure with my rod, I appeared to be making no impression on this one at all. With the recent feel of a 2 lb fish fresh in my mind, this trout felt at least as big again. After another minute or so my wrist was starting to tire, but still the fish was boring heavily down. Danie began to get impatient. "Come on, come on", he shouted, "let's have a look at the damned thing." Like a fool, I put even more pressure on the rod, while the fish was still deep and swimming strongly. Although the weight I was exerting was near to the point of actually breaking the rod tip, the extra pressure applied made no impression on the fish. It was at this moment that the hook let go. I curse myself to this day for listening to someone's advice whilst playing a fish. The size of the trout? At that stage I had no idea except that up until then it was the biggest fish that I had hooked in my life. One always hears of the one that got away – well you will be hearing more about this one as I was determined to catch it if it was the last thing I did. The tail of the pool where I had lost the big fish produced a trout of about ½ lb and several other fish were caught that day. The rest of the water from there down to the hotel proved to be generally unfishable, due to overgrown foliage, and most of the fishable water was unproductive.

The nights that followed were restless ones for me as I relived the episode of the big trout and planned my strategy for its capture. On my first return bout I approached the pool like a deer stalker and, crouching down on one knee, I worked the run where I had first hooked it. After flogging the water from the large boulder to the head of the pool with everything I had in my fly box, I was almost ready to give up but decided to try Bricknells "Keiskamma Special". This was a weighted nymph invented by Mr Bricknell, a tailor from East London. The body of the fly was tied with a strand of wool from a grey tweed which had a blue and red fleck, and I understand it was unravelled from one of the imported tweed suit lengths in his shop. It was the same fly which caught one of the 4 lb trout taken below the hotel at Keiskammahoek. I cast across to the far bank where the current from the run flowed slowly, almost dragging the bottom. As my fly crossed a small sandbar in front of me, I prepared to make another cast slightly further upstream. In doing so I took my eyes off the fly. At that moment there was an enormous swirl on the sandbar below, and I looked down to see a huge wave and bits of leaves and sand swirling around from the bottom. The fish must have gone for the fly as I was lifting it from the water. It probably saw me and shot back into the deep again. I never saw the fish but, from the splash, there is no doubt that it was the same monster I had hooked before.

Two weeks later I made the long trek back to the pool again, catching a few fish on the way. When I arrived I decided to start fishing at the tail of the pool and fish every inch to the head. The tail end below the boulder produced nothing and instead of moving past the huge boulder, which was about 2½ metres high, I decided to climb on top so that I could fish the water between there and the far bank. I rested my rod on top of the rock and let my line and fly sink into the water below while I took off my fishing bag and jacket. By this time my fly had been lying on the bottom for some time and I picked up my rod to begin fishing. Just before the fly reached the surface the water exploded and a monster trout, with a back as broad as an otter, thrashed with head and tail on the surface and was gone. The event happened so quickly and took me so completely unaware, I was incapable of doing anything except gape. Had I been expecting the fish to take, I would have set the hook and, who knows, it might have been mine. From what I saw in that split second, I place its weight at between 4½-5 lbs. As it was, it lived for another day.

When the season opened again four months later I only had one chance to fish there before moving to Natal but there was no sign of the big fish, despite the fact that I spent all day trying. It had given me three chances and I had missed them all. That was the last time I fished the Gxulu and I have never fished there since but after 20 years the memories of the days I spent fishing this fascinating water are still etched deeply in my mind.