

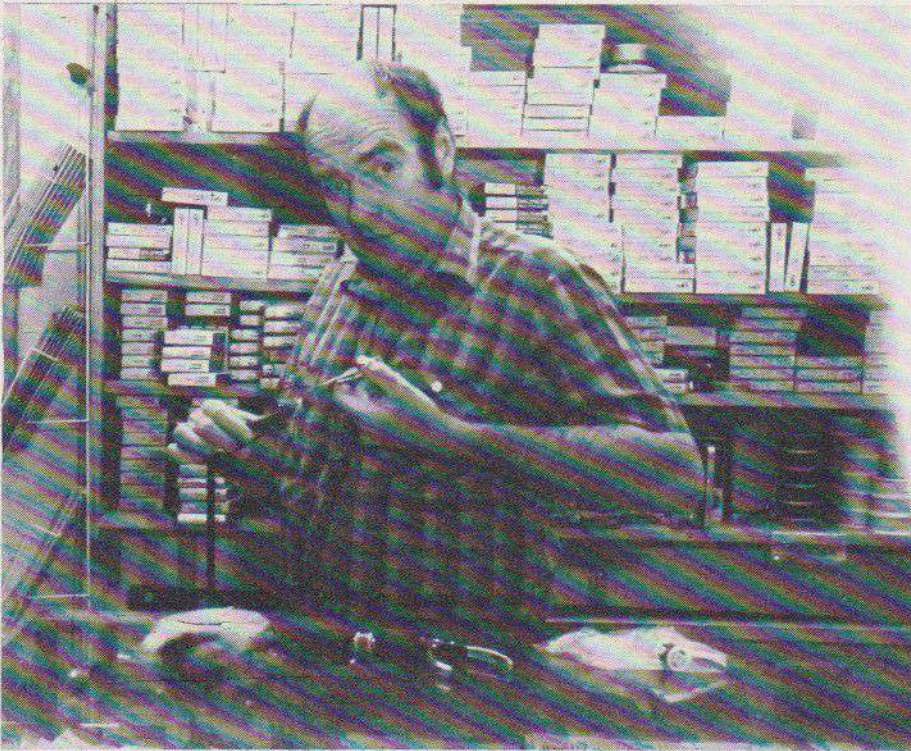
PISCATORIAL PERSONALITIES

ROGER BAERT

By ED HERBST

A CYNIC—no doubt a woman—once remarked that boys change little during their transition into adulthood and that the only significant difference is the quality and cost of their toys. Be that as it may, I cannot deny that my fascination for and preoccupation with fishing tackle catalogues has not diminished with the passing years and I attribute my present meagre stature to angling writers such as Ray Bergman and Al McClane—I starved as my lunch money at school was hoarded until sufficient capital had been accumulated to buy the latest copies of "Outdoor Life", "Sports Afield" or "Field and Stream".

Rober Baert is a happy man for, unlike the rest of us, his boyhood preoccupation now earns him his living. The son of a diplomat, he was born in Shanghai and his boyhood years were spent in many parts of the world. His first memory of fishing was at the age of five on the coast of Japan—a broken arm prevented him from swimming with the other children and he was taken fishing instead.



Roger Baert at his Fly-tying Bench.

Photograph by Ed. Herbst

Like so many other young anglers around the world, Roger found Al McClane to be both inspiration and tutor, and at the age of 19 realised an early ambition to go fly-fishing after scraping together enough cash to buy a split-cane fly-rod while at a university in his native Belgium. In the next few years he fished widely for trout and grayling in Austria, Germany and Scandinavia.

On leaving his university he entered airline sales management, a peripatetic calling which again took him to many parts of the world. Some of his happiest years were spent in Iran where he ran fishing, bird-shooting and photographic safaris. The Caspian Sea was a paradise for migrant waterfowl from Siberia and the Lar River, below Mount Davadand, the highest in Iran, held a very fine head of native brown trout. Later he worked for Air Comoros, promoting angling for sailfish and wahoo as part of the tourist attractions of those islands.

He then returned to South Africa, having spent four years here between the ages of eight and twelve. Three years ago he entered the fishing tackle business, working first for Webber's Fishing and Sports (Pty.) Ltd. in Durban, and then for Leo Rosettenstein's in Johannesburg before taking charge of The Flyfisherman shop in Pietermaritzburg. While in the Transvaal he fished the Dulstroom and Belfast areas almost every week-end as a member of the Transvaal Fly Fishers Club, but the weather has been less than kind since his arrival in Natal, although he has been pleasantly surprised at the average size of the fish he has taken there so far. He concedes, of course, that he has yet to experience the best trout fishing in the country, that of the Cape; but hopes to make good this shortcoming in his piscatorial education in the near future.

Roger's short list of favourite flies is very short. He favours a hirsute device which could charitably be called a nymph and which is of such dubious parentage that he gets no further—if he can be persuaded to talk about it at all—than calling it a 'no-name-nymph'. Those who have actually set eyes on this beast aver that the major constituent is beaver fur, but they are never quite sure. Roger stoutly defends this creation, saying that it has proved effective in many parts of the world, but his resolution is wavering. "I heard so much about the John Beams Black Woolly Worm when I got to Natal that I decided to try one on the dropper in tandem with my own nymph. Unfortunately all the fish I caught were taken on the dropper," he says.

Roger holds court surrounded by what must be the largest and most varied selection of fly-fishing equipment under one roof in this country. A shop devoted exclusively to the esoteric needs of the fly-fisherman is a bold experiment, but Roger has never wavered in his belief that South Africa offers some of the finest fly-fishing in the world. He says that this is largely due to a comparative lack of angling pressure but specifically attributes it to the fact that our trout river waters, and a goodly number of our still waters, are, and always have been, confined to fly-fishing only. Having experienced shoulder-to-shoulder angling in Europe and the Antipodes in particular, often in competition with anglers using bait, plugs and spinners, he knows what he is talking about when he says that local, less-travelled fly fishermen don't realise quite how lucky they are.