

Young trout forget (1)

By G W Nickson

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Most of us are familiar by experience or hearsay with cases where a fish has been caught wearing in its jaws the insignia of a previous encounter in the form of a missing fly or (where no member of the FFC was involved in the affair) of a missing lure.

When such a fly or lure can be identified, then of course the interval between capture or recapture can be fixed. I know of a fish which was hooked on a minnow around mid-day, by the tenant of a beat and escaped with the minnow, a trace and swivel and a Hillman lead; only to be caught again (in another part of the mouth) soon after lunch and some six hundred yards upstream, on another minnow by the owner of the beat; who then kindly returned to his tenant both fish and hardware.

The fish, I need hardly say, was a salmon; and salmon are notoriously stupid creatures.

Such an instance will show the actual interval of time which did, in fact, elapse between capture and recapture: but it does not necessarily show the minimum interval which a given fish needed for recovery before repeating its mistake.

I once had the perfect opportunity for measuring this minimum interval - in the case of one particular fish, at any rate. It is surprisingly short. And this fish, mind you, was a chalk stream trout - a crafty fish, we like to think, and one dignified by Isaak Walton with the epithets 'subtle, fearful and sharp-sighted.'

I will tell you, though I do so with diffidence; since almost all members of the FFC already know almost everything.

I was standing knee-deep in a small side-stream of the upper-middle Test, hard up against a tall background of riverside herbage, and therefore well placed for concealment and observation. No more than ten yards above me was a trout, in a clear weed-pocket of that sunlit stream, swinging to and fro to intercept the nymphs which were coming to him from the trailing fronds above. I can see him now, looking grey-and-lemon in the bright water, fat as butter and just asking for trouble. I thought he would reach the pound-and-a-quarter limit then in force for that water, on which I was a guest.

He turned and lifted to a small Greenwell nymph. I pulled into him as he straightened out, and there we were.

He was cross for a fish of his size, and also became involved in the weeds before reaching the net. So he was quite tired. I held the net in the water, while I fumbled in my bag for a spring-balance, weighed the net with the fish in it, did a sum, and reluctantly decided to

give him the benefit of the doubt. I sank the net in the water, felt for the hook, shook it from his mouth and he was free. All this had taken time, and was quite an experience for him. He drifted wearily out into the stream, a few yards from me, and lay doggo on the bottom, thinking things over.

He did not appear to see me; and I glanced idly at my watch, wondering how long it would take him to recover and move away. In less than two minutes he began to move slowly, foot by foot, up the bed of the central channel; and in another two minutes he was back in his weed-pocket - though still on the bottom. But in a bare minute more he rose to mid-water, hung there for a few moments, and then - to my utter astonishment - he was up and on the fin again, to resume his interrupted meal. The time taken since his release was just under seven minutes.

I cast again at once, with the same nymph. Of course I should have left him, and you needn't tell me so because I know it. But the temptation to complete the experiment was irresistible.

He took me again, first cast - this subtle, fearful and sharp-sighted trout. A wild trout, too, let it be said. The humiliation was too much for him, and this time he surrendered at once. Released with all speed, he faded away under the weeds close by me, to hide his head in shame. I gave him five minutes more, by my watch: but, surprisingly, that was he last I saw of him.

He had given me interest and entertainment; and I like to think that he was none the worse for the experience but rather profited by it, and so grew to be a three-pounder - to fall victim some day to my host.

I record this incident in the hope that it may be of interest to some members. If not, well, I'm afraid it's too late now.

Young trout forget (2)

By Ed Herbst

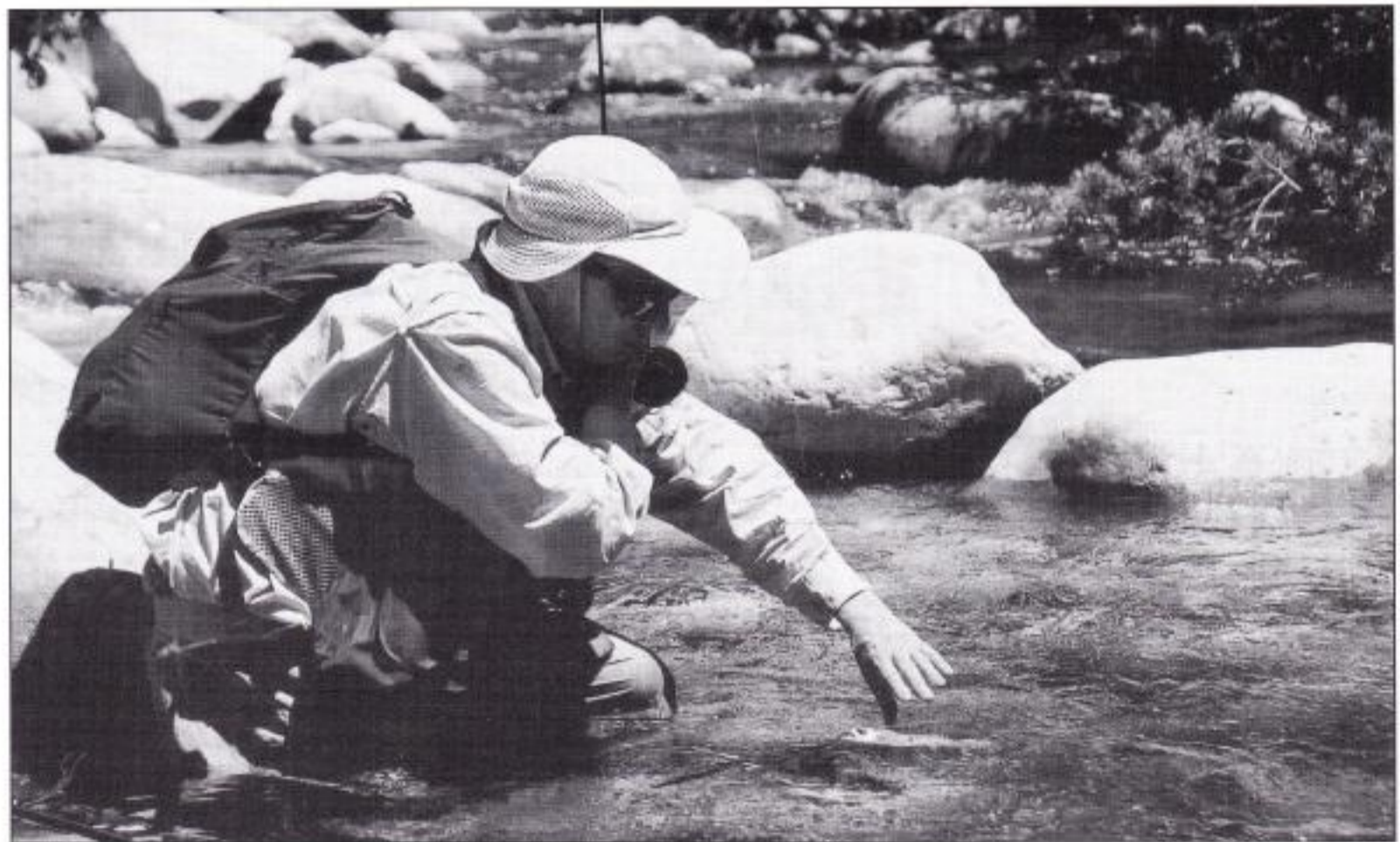
Many years ago, when Tony Biggs and I used to be young and fit enough to make the long hike from the car park to the upper Witte stream, there were days when success eluded us. These were not days when you could blame a falling barometer, high water temperatures, an approaching cold front or any of the usual array of excuses that might otherwise have served as balm to our disappointed souls.

They were golden days, a gentle upstream breeze helping to persuade us that our casting left little room for improvement, still less the need to practise. They were days made in heaven specifically for fly fishers - aside from the irony of a stream seemingly barren of fish.

Most fly fishers would have said that fish were not on the prod but, after decades of



The editor hooks the same trout on the Holsloot stream seven minutes after being broken by it.



*The fish comes to hand but is lost.
Photos by Jeanne Welsh.*

experience, Tony had one immutable theory to explain our failure and, like most such ideas, it could, potentially have been true. It was a conspiracy theory of sorts and had merit in that, in those days, the CPS had not implemented a beat system for the Witte and it was a case of first come, first crack at the fish.

“The bastards have got in ahead of us”, Tony would growl. “Been tramping on their heads.” Now getting your head indented by a wading angler would undoubtedly have traumatised the browns in the Witte, notorious for their shyness but, somehow, when Tony was with me, the 'bastards' ahead of us often turned out to be nude women hikers, accompanied by the occasional man, sunbathing in what they assumed to be an uninhabited river valley.

I don't suppose trout care to differentiate between a wading boot and the delicate pedal extremities of nymphs *au naturelle*, but an experience at the head of the Witte valley caused me to question Tony's all-encompassing but expedient theory.

The stream is tiny here with just the occasional pool to provide holding water. I was standing in such a pool, my left hip hard against a rock face when I spotted a brown of about ten inches feeding in a staircase pocket, fractionally higher than the water I was standing in. A small neck of water connected the two. It had my fly first cast but my strike was too swift and I only pricked it. It shot downstream through the small inflow into the pool I was in and took up station about a metre from me. I gently eased myself onto a convenient shelf on the rock, took out a sandwich and watched the fish as I ate. After seven minutes it slid back into the pool above. I finished eating, got into position and cast to the fish again. To my disgust the fly was about a foot to its left but, without hesitation, it moved sideways and took the fly. I landed and released it thirteen minutes after first hooking it.

More recently, on November 11, 2001, I had an even more startling experience on the Holsloot. It was just after noon and very hot. For the previous half hour there had been little indication of any fish, let alone feeding ones. I was fishing a # 18 bead-head Hare's Ear on a metre-long 6 x tippet with a small piece of orange Orvis strike putty on the first knot above the fly. I cast the fly just off the main current, stripped out the slack and the line stabbed fiercely forward, snapping the tippet at the knot. Somewhat startled I told my girlfriend that I had been broken by a 'big fish'. I returned to where she was sitting in the shade a few metres downstream, tied on a 5 x tippet and another example of the same pattern. I returned to where I had lost the fish, cast the same fly into the same run and was immediately taken again! The fish raced downstream, jumped, and revealed itself to be about ten inches long. I assumed it to be a companion of the first fish but was dumbfounded to see two pieces of Orvis strike putty trailing behind it. “It's the same fish that broke me earlier”, I shouted. But, as I got my hand to it, it wriggled off my fly and shot away - but not before I saw my first fly in its jaw.

My girlfriend had managed to get some pictures of the action and, afterwards, we agreed that no more than seven minutes could have elapsed between the two takes.

Trout can prove surprisingly impervious to pain. A friend, Mario Cesare, told me of an occasion when he spotted a trout that was feeding hard in a private dam near Dullstroom.

He waded carefully into position and was taken first cast. He landed the fish after a spirited fight and was astonished to find that it had a gaping wound, inflicted by a cormorant, on the lower part of its stomach. So grievous was the wound that the stomach lining had been penetrated which meant that whatever the fish ate would simply end up in the stomach cavity or the water. Despite this the fish was feeding normally.

If trout in our mountain streams, that are terrifying torrents during our winter rainfall season, and low and hot in mid-summer, were to stop feeding for hours every time they were frightened, they would probably not survive long.

The lack of success that Tony and I suffered on occasion on the Witte was thus probably due to factors other than the trout having heavy impacts administered to their craniums by “the bastards who got in ahead of us.”

