

A Game Of Change

By Dawid Rossouw

I am sure that virtually every fly fisher is aware of selective feeding by trout. In the Western Cape we rarely experience this phenomenon so our knowledge of it is more theoretical than empirical. It usually occurs when there is an abundance of one particular food item and the trout become fixated on that food item and feed exclusively on it. During such times, the fish will usually ignore all other offerings and to be successful, you have to match the preferred food item with your fly. In my experience, trout usually feed opportunistically and periods of selective feeding are relatively rare.

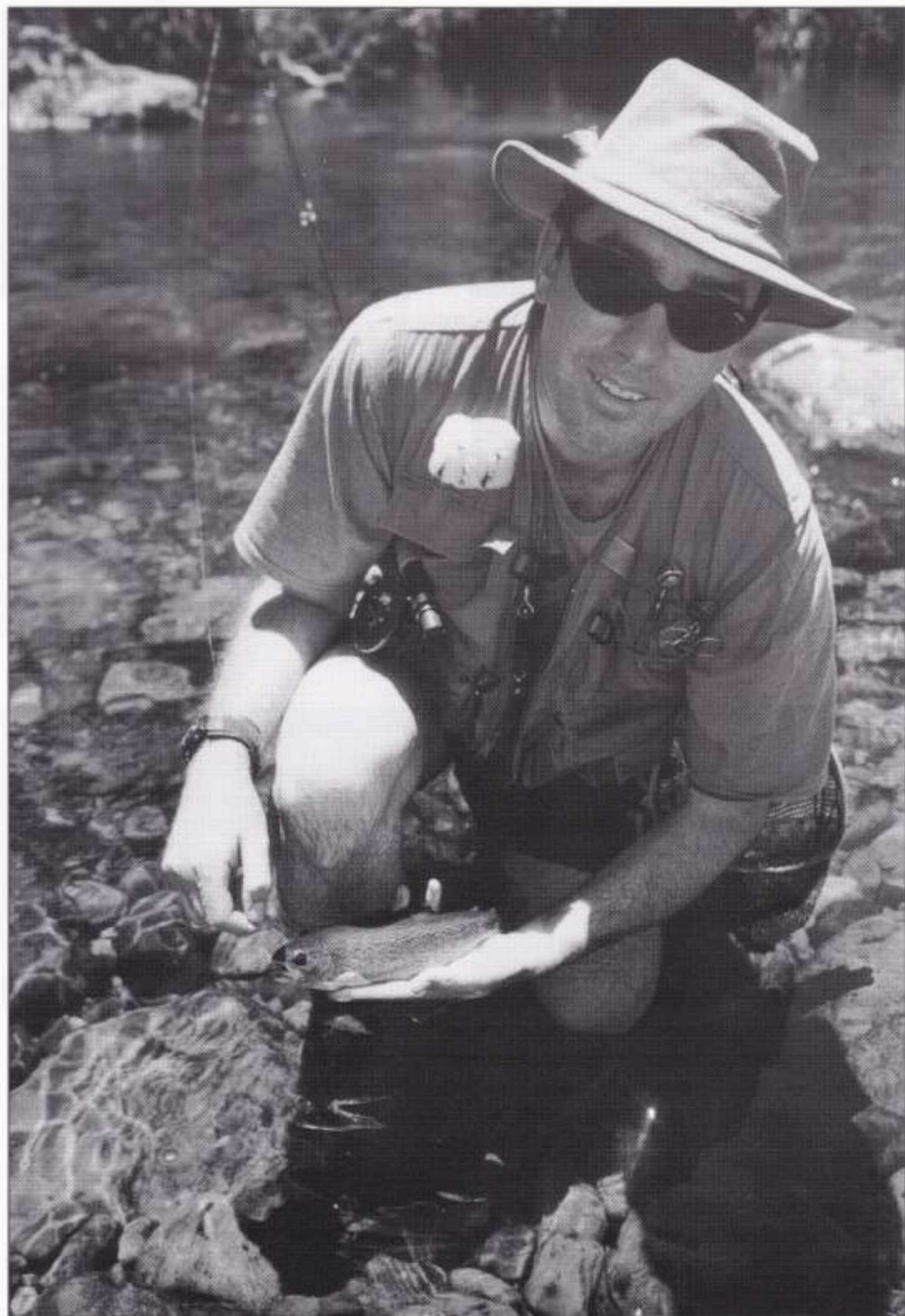
Fly fishing literature, I believe, often overemphasizes the importance of selective feeding. The result of this is that we often read somebody's account of a particular day when the trout wanted to take only one almost-impossible-to-match insect. Then we go right ahead and convince ourselves how incredibly selective the fish are and we think that that is the norm. As a consequence of this mistaken belief, we then spend an inordinate amount of time and effort on selecting precisely the right fly, almost to the exclusion of observing or thinking about anything else. If we are not successful in catching fish, we first and foremost blame it on the fly and we keep changing flies like crazy to try to find just the right one. We will ignore a whole range of other factors that might have brought success and concentrate on the fly alone, as if that is the only important key to catching fish. I want to tell you about doing exactly the opposite - and in doing so, show how opportunistic trout can be and how to take advantage of this.

A few years ago, my friend John told me about a little game that he occasionally plays to amuse himself and to make his fishing more interesting. Now, John is a really skilled fly fisher and I suppose he sometimes feels like making things a little more difficult and challenging for himself. Before long, I found his approach to be totally fascinating and now occasionally play the game myself.

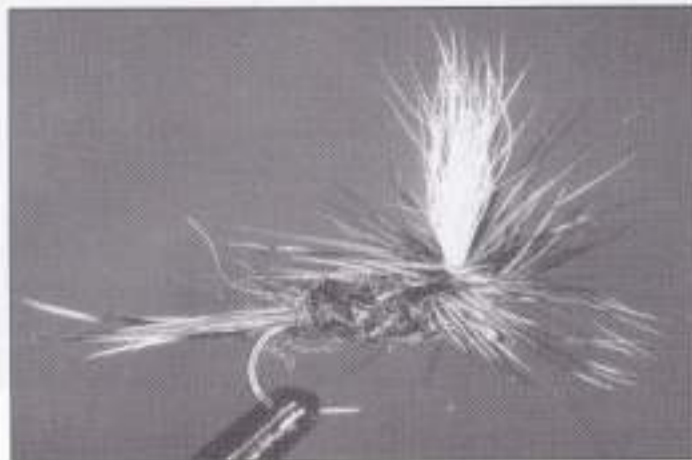
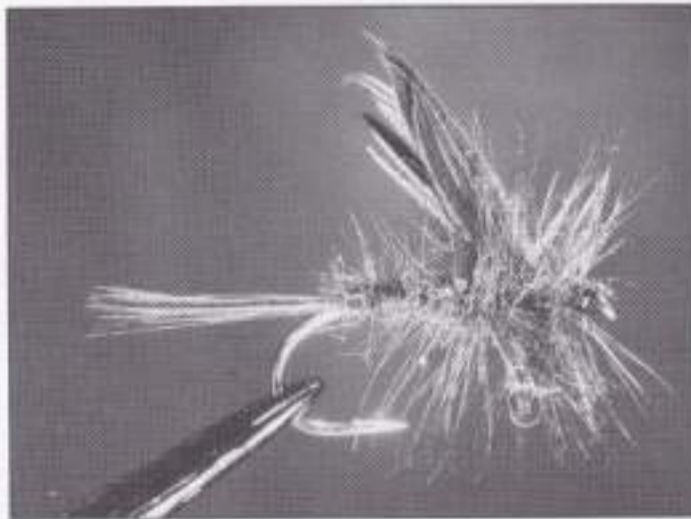
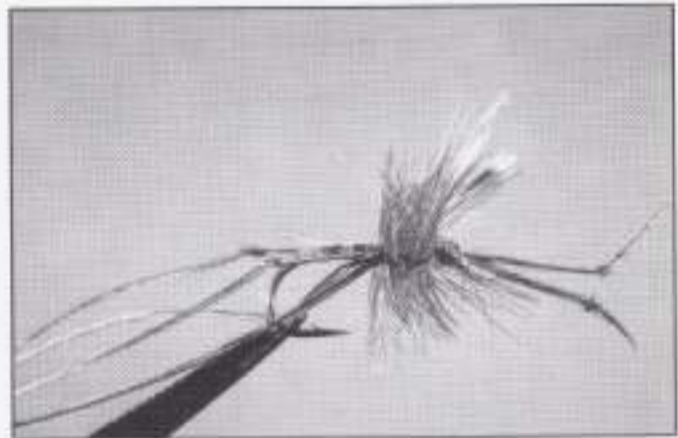
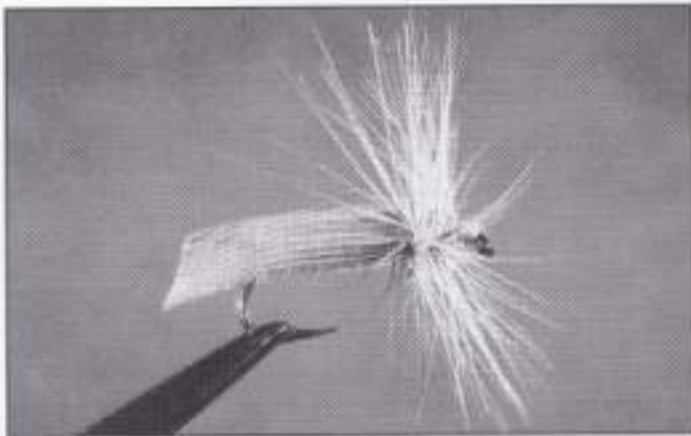
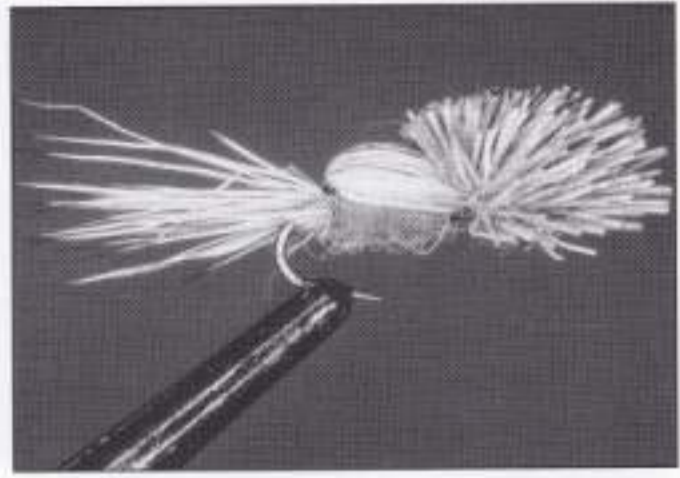
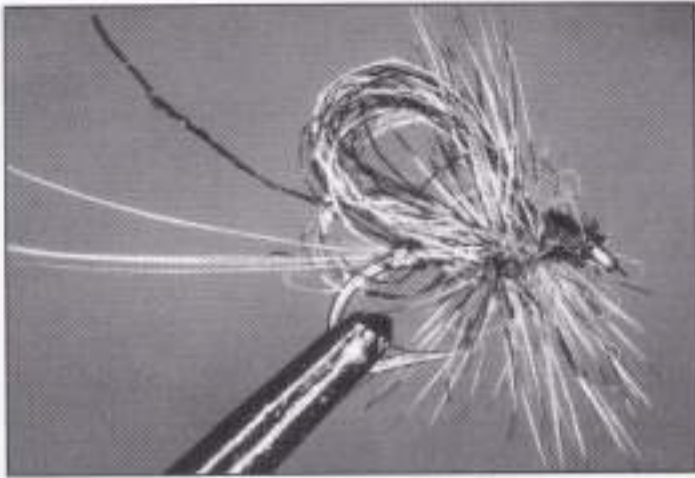
The one and only rule of the game is very simple: Once you have caught a fish on a particular fly, you have to remove it from your tippet and try a different one. (You can make it even more difficult by not changing a fly until you have caught something on it, but maybe that is taking it a bit far for everyday fishing.)

Before, I had an almost boring addiction to using the same four or five flies all the time. They were the ones that I believed the fish wanted and, because they worked, that was what I fished with. Very soon I realised that it was possible to catch trout on almost any fly. All you had to do was to present it correctly. I started using all the flies that had accumulated in my fly-boxes but rarely got a chance at the end of a tippet. Before I knew it, I had become adventurous at using new flies and at tying new patterns and trying them out. I discovered wonderfully interesting and effective flies and started using alternative materials in my flies and tying variations on the standard patterns.

When I played the difficult version of John's game, it had another unexpected effect. If you are not allowed to try another fly until you have caught a fish on it, you are forced to do



Dawid Rossouw - a game of change brings success.



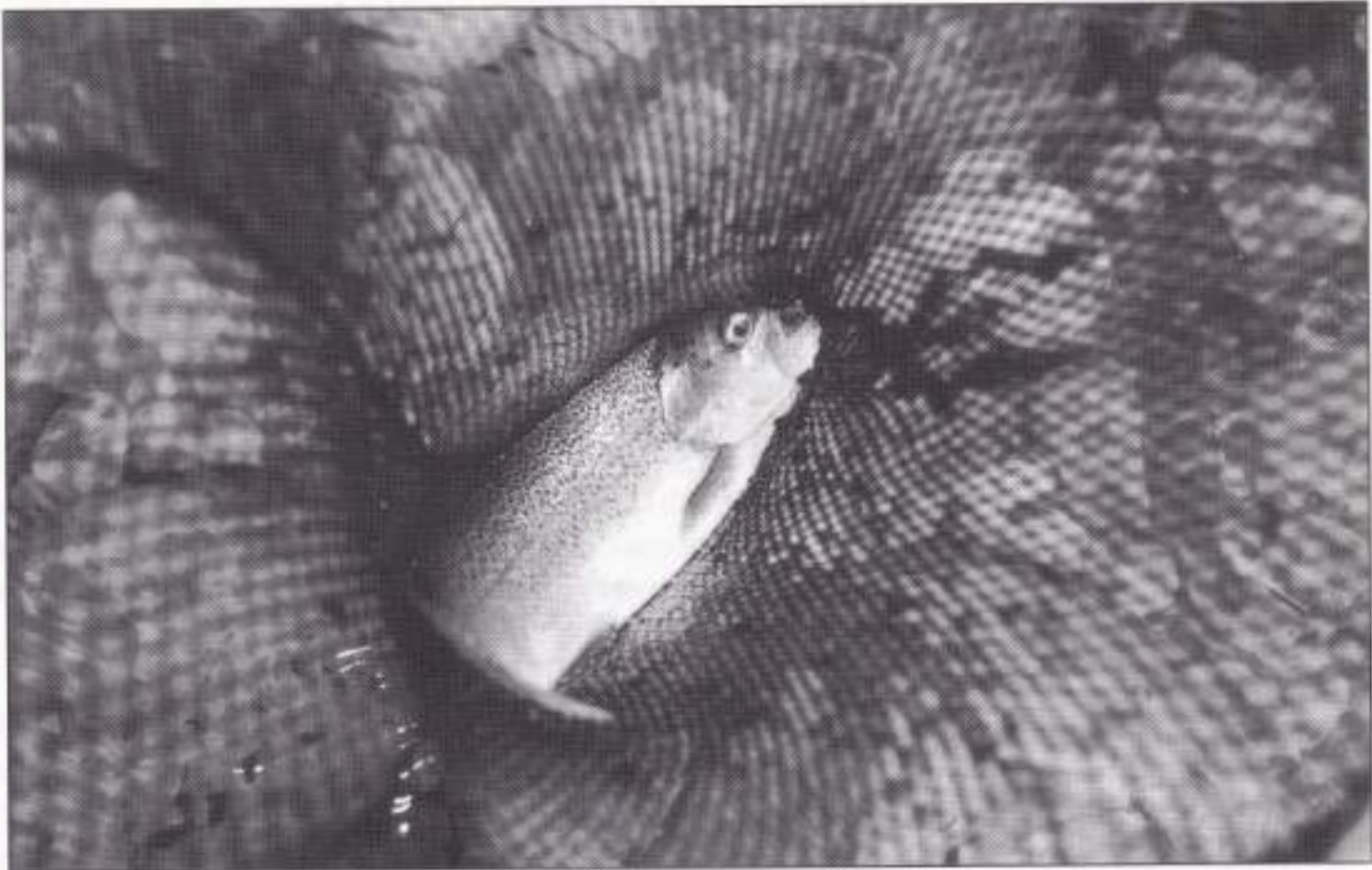
Seven flies, seven trout. Clockwise from bottom left: Parachute Adams; mayfly imitation with rock pigeon feather wings; caddis; Loop Wing Dun; G & B Low Floater, crane fly, and Humpy. Photos by Neil Hodges.

several things. Firstly, you think very carefully before you decide what fly to use. You really look at the water and try to figure out what the fish are up to and you base your decision on your observations. Are the trout rising or not, are there hatching insects on the water, where are the fish holding? Secondly, you have to change things other than the fly until something works. You start to change the length and diameter of the tippet, the presentation, the depth that you fish at, the distance between your nymph and strike indicator and any of a handful of variables. Often these things are more critical than the fly itself and getting them right can bring great rewards. It should be clear that the game is not about tying on just any old fly and having a go with it. It forces you to think about your fishing and how and where you want to present the fly. In short, it managed to pull me out of the rut that my fishing was in. No longer could I simply fish the same old fly using the same old technique all the time and catch the same fish under the same conditions. Suddenly I was forced to adapt and soon I started having success on parts of the river that never worked for me before and I started catching more and bigger fish. Not only did it add a little spice, it improved my fishing.

I remember one specific day on the Holsloot when John's game worked so well that it resulted in one of the most memorable mornings that I have ever had on the river. It was late November and we were staying at the Ernst and Anchen Stofberg's Dwarsberg cottage for the weekend with some of our friends who were not at all interested in fishing. Often this can be a problem because non-anglers tend to think that you are anti-social and very rude if you leave them alone to go fishing on your own. Inviting them along is even worse as they get bored in no time at all and then you are made to feel guilty for not entertaining them.

That Saturday morning I got up early and quietly sneaked off to the river to get a bit of fishing in while everybody else was still sleeping off the previous night's festivities. I was on the water shortly after sunrise and as I arrived at a fairly long and deep pool, I could see a few rises. It was a perfect day for dry fly fishing, with no wind to speak of. I checked the water temperature (16 C) while I waited and watched the pool carefully, trying to spot the pattern of rises. I approached the pool slowly from downstream while keeping as low as possible so as not to disturb the obviously relaxed and feeding trout. On closer inspection, I detected several fish in the tail end of the pool as well as the occasional rise at the head. I tied a size 18 Parachute Adams to a 6X tippet and cast to the closest fish. The water was shallow and crystal clear with no ripples from wind. The fish would easily spook if I put a sloppy cast over it and drag was likely to be a problem because I was standing in the fast water below the pool and would be casting into a slow part of the pool. Because it was so shallow, I knew that the fish's window would be limited and I could sneak up a little closer without being detected. This would also make casting and controlling drag a bit easier. It also meant that I had to get the fly to float right over the fish or it would not see it at all. I moved to the left as much as the trees allowed so that I could cast slightly from the side and across. That way the fly and leader would land well upstream of the fish without disturbing it and then drift into view. After a few tries, I got it right. The fish lazily swam closer and, with a leisurely rise, took the fly. I moved quickly to fight it downstream in the hope of keeping it away from the other fish so as not to disturb the rest of the pool. Once I had released it, I checked the pool again and found to my delight that the other fish were still rising and obviously unaware of my activities at the tail of the pool.

I changed to a small, dark mayfly imitation, the wings of which were made from the black



The pattern does not matter - presentation does. A Holsloot trout comes to the net.

terminal ends of a rock pigeon's tail feathers. Within a few casts from the same spot, I took a second fish out of the tail end of the pool. I then moved a little upstream as carefully as possible to avoid the ripples that would alert the fish. I took the third one, that was rising under some overhanging branches, on a size 16 caddis imitation I then climbed onto the bank, carefully re-entering the water a little distance below the rises in the upper part of the pool. The middle part was too deep to wade comfortably and although I could not see any fish there, I was afraid that I might spook the whole lot if I disturbed an unexpected fish by wading through the entire pool.

I could still see rises every now and then in the slower water just off the inflow and I floated a sparkle-organza loop-wing fly (Ed Herbst's pattern) over it. That brought me the fourth and biggest rainbow of the day. It was 15 inches long and in perfect shape and it fought quite hard but I managed to land and release it downstream. I was now within casting distance of the faster water at the inflow of the pool and, as I watched, I saw a fish splash right in the bubbly white water. I tied on a size 14 G&B low floater made of klipspringer hair and after floating it over that spot about half a dozen times a lovely 12 inch rainbow grabbed it in a flash and so became number five to be landed and released. The very top end of the pool looked so promising that I tried a Daddy Longlegs (actually a crane fly imitation) in exactly the same place and on the very next cast I had the sixth fish on. That one took the fly with such aggression that there really was no need to strike at all. It jumped all over the place and while I was releasing it after a short fight, I was sure that all the remaining fish in that pool were spooked.

I tried on a really bushy size 14 Humpy with a red belly and decided to give the fast water one more try before moving on. To my great surprise number seven grabbed it and promptly sprinted for some overhanging reeds. I knew that I had to turn it before it got to cover so I

put as much pressure on as I dared and, of course, the 6X tippet that I had not changed since fish number one snapped and that was the end of it. Just when you get too big for your boots, you are really ready to be cut to size. I had learnt another lesson in flyfishing.

After having caught six lovely rainbows, all on different dry flies and from the same pool, I was totally surprised when I checked my watch, to see that I had only been fishing for an hour. Sometimes I just know when I have had enough of a good thing and then I pack it in, not wanting to spoil it by carrying on and overdoing it. I arrived back at the cottage just in time to sit down to a magnificent smoked salmon omelette. As punishment for my perfect timing, my wife afterwards made me do the dishes, but despite that, my great mood lasted for almost a week.

