

# A season's end

Stanton Hector

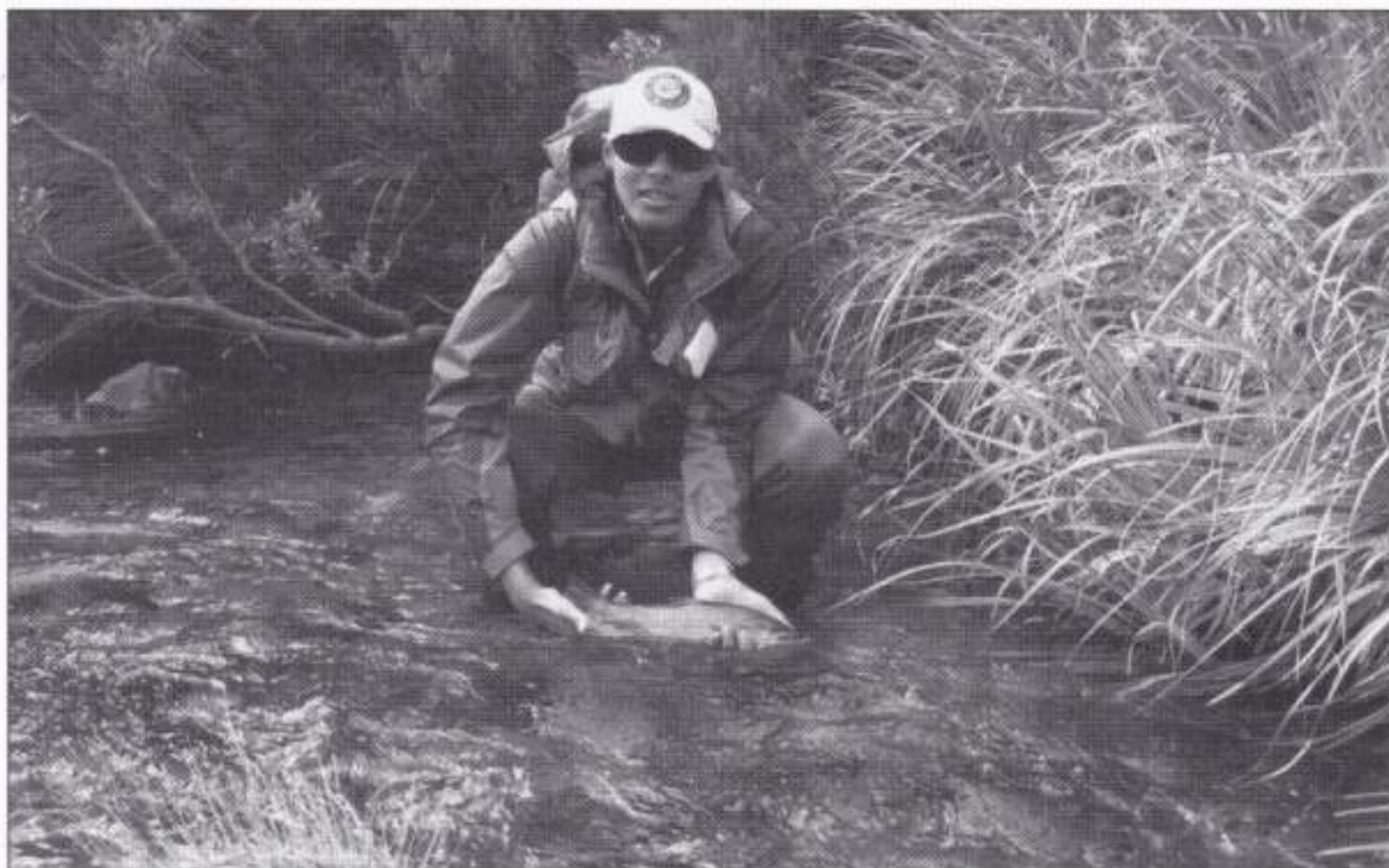
After an absence of two years I once again found myself hiking the trail to the upper Witte stream with my angling partner, Kyle Keefer. He and I had fished together on a few occasions, but this was our first joint visit to this spectacular valley.

In preparation I decided to replenish the stock of flies I had lost on an earlier trip to the Elandspad and I tied several of my favourites; Elk Hair Caddis (I tie them with two strands of crystal flash over the deer hair wing and this makes trout go nuts), foam beetles in bright yellow and black (don't get me started on these, irresistible to trout!), black CDC Mayflies, yellow Ed's Hoppers and a couple of my black parachute CDC Thingies. I call them Thingies (in the words of my five-year old nephew) due their miniscule proportions and a silhouette that could easily represent a variety of small-stream morsels. They are extremely easy to tie and I have now expanded my range to include several other colours as CDC is a breeze to tie with and is now available in a variety of hues.

We had met at our usual rendezvous while it was still dark. A pleasant drive and some good conversation saw us arriving at the Witte parking area in good time, but we were greeted by some rather peculiar weather. First of all a stiff breeze was blowing and ominous clouds would give way to rays of sunshine every now and again. This alternation caused an unusual ambience as the air was heavy and changed quickly from cold to hot and back again. Hiking into Beat 4 of the Witte is not that strenuous as, say, Beat 4 on the Elandspad, so it was done in happy spirits. While hiking, the thought crossed my mind that we were going to struggle because of the weather, but I told myself that experiencing the tranquil Witte valley is incentive enough. Upon arrival at the weir we found that water levels looked surprisingly good as the river had obviously benefitted from the recent rain.

Rigging up my rod, I tied on my size 18 Elk Hair Caddis. I decided to fish the channel to the right of a little island. Due to the poor light, the peat-stained water was quite dark and spotting fish was difficult. I accordingly drifted the fly through the likely holding water as I would have done had I been searching for rainbows, but to no avail. Kyle, in the meantime was cruising low behind the vegetation of the left bank while I was slowly making my way into the next run. As I was fidgeting with my leader for a brief moment, my eyes off the water, I heard Kyle shout: "Freeze, there's a fish swimming up from behind you!" "Is it spooked?", I asked. Kyle said that it didn't look like it. As I peered from the corner of my eye, I noticed a lovely 10 inch brown lazily swimming a rod's length away from me. I asked him if I should cast as my nerves got the better of me, to which he replied "Go for it. You've got nothing to lose!" With the fly in my hand, I was entertained by the brown actively picking nymphs from the rocks, every now and again chasing one down and inhaling it. On my first cast while executing an abrupt over the shoulder flick, my fly landed a bit short, roughly on the fish's back. The fish, enticed by the ripple, investigated and almost immediately turned away, "A direct result of drag on the fly", I imagined. I started gently retrieving the fly and it made a slight wake that luckily passed unnoticed. The second cast was right on the money. I watched the fish twitch its fins at the sight of the fly. It drifted beneath the caddis imitation for a few seconds and then engulfed it. I counted to two, set the hook and fought it for a few seconds. Then, dreadfully, the fly popped free. I





*The author cradles his Witte Stream brown trout which was landed after a tense battle.*

was terribly disappointed with myself and we reluctantly moved on. Scouting the bigger palmiet-fringed pools for signs of activity yielded nothing. This was, without question the effect of the passing cold front and fluctuations in barometric pressure. Fishing Beat 4 is physically taxing because the pools are so inaccessible. The absence of fish from the usually productive bigger pools added to our frustration. As we approached a shallow run, I noticed the slightest of surface movements. I drifted my fly over the spot and solicited a violent strike from a feisty 8-incher. A brightly spotted fellow he was, buttery yellow with purple parr markings. Cradling a Witte brown in the palm of one's hand is something really special, it's as if the universe and all the forces of nature came together at exactly the right moment when your hook was set in fish's jaw. For a few moments time it felt like time was standing still. I handed Kyle my rod and offered him a shot at the head of the run. Seconds later he was into spirited little 6-incher that quickly came to hand. With both of us off the mark, we were pretty happy that we would not blank, given the less than ideal conditions.

Conditions then worsened and not a single fish was observed for the better part of two hours. Wading chest deep in icy water without catching fish is definitely not the fun part of the job. When we were well into Beat 4, we decided to break for lunch, warm up a little and gather our thoughts. By the time that we started fishing again, the weather had changed. It was still a bit patchy, but at least we had a little more sun on the water. It was about then that we started spooking the occasional fish. They were not actively feeding, as most of them could not be spotted and were spooked from beneath the palmiet or undercuts.

While approaching a section where the stream had split, I decided to stay in the water while Kyle opted to cross the island. All of a sudden I heard Kyle saying "Dude, stop. I see a big fish feeding directly in front of you!" My immediate response was "Where, where?", as that section of the pocket was obscured from view around a bend in the stream. I took two cautious steps forward and what I saw was a beautiful Witte specimen leisurely ingesting



nymphs and intercepting the occasional insect from the surface. It was only a couple of metres in front of us, but the overcast weather concealed us pretty well. Kyle and I watched the fish for a few minutes to plan strategy. I asked him if he wanted to have a go, but he refused, arguing that I had the better vantage point. I was already a nervous wreck when a gust of wind tangled my tippet and fly around a branch close to my leg. Moving as slowly as I could, I managed to untangle it. I could feel the crispness of the bleached elk hair under my nervous finger tips as I firmly grasped the fly between my thumb and forefinger. Once again my cast landed short and went unnoticed. I settled down and let the current return the fly to me. I then canted my rod slightly to the right to facilitate a more conventional cast, the fly swirling as soft as a snow flake as it landed about a foot above the feeding fish. I gritted my teeth as I watched it dance into the fish's feeding lane. It drifted under the fly for a split second then its nose broke the surface and I struck. At first the fish headed downstream straight towards me and swam around my ankles as if to tangle the tippet around them. I countered this movement by doing a tippy-toe dance in an anti-clockwise direction, a move that any ballerina would be envious of. I grasped the tippet, and as I inched its head toward me, all hell broke loose. It sped away, made a wide circle, headed straight for a submerged twig and twisted the tippet around it. By this time my hopes were all but dashed as Kyle, the knight in shining armour, came to the rescue of the ballerina. He jumped into the water and headed straight for the tangled fish which, by some miracle, was still attached to the fly. I felt a cathartic sense of relief and, as the adrenaline raced through my veins, I took several deep breaths while Kyle was cradling the fish. He took photographs but, with a damaged screen on his digital camera, we had no idea how the pictures would turn out, but I was happy to pose anyway. I held the fish slightly submerged, admiring the light reflecting from its scales. It was a 15 inch, cock fish, a beautiful Witte specimen with a myriad of red spots, including one on its adipose fin. We delicately removed the hook and, at the moment of release, I felt a calmness come over me that I haven't experienced in a long time. It was a feeling of deep satisfaction, not in my own abilities, but a satisfaction that one gets from achieving something spectacular. "Thanks, once again Kyle!"

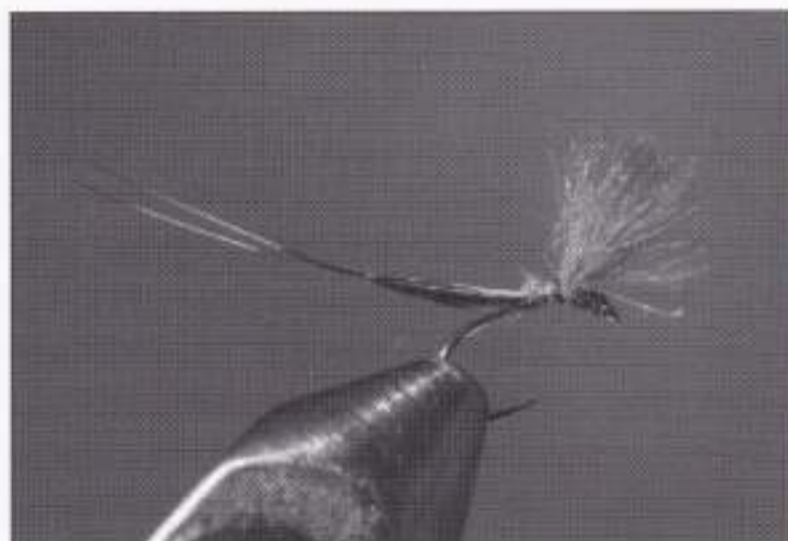
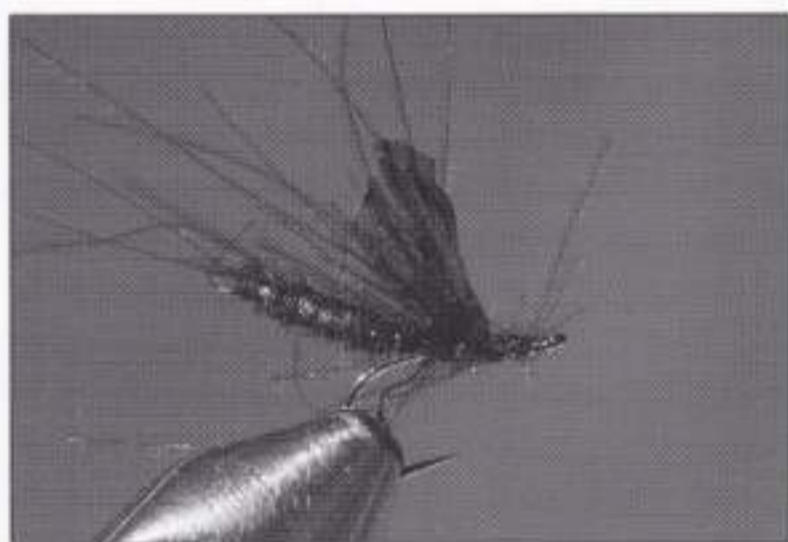
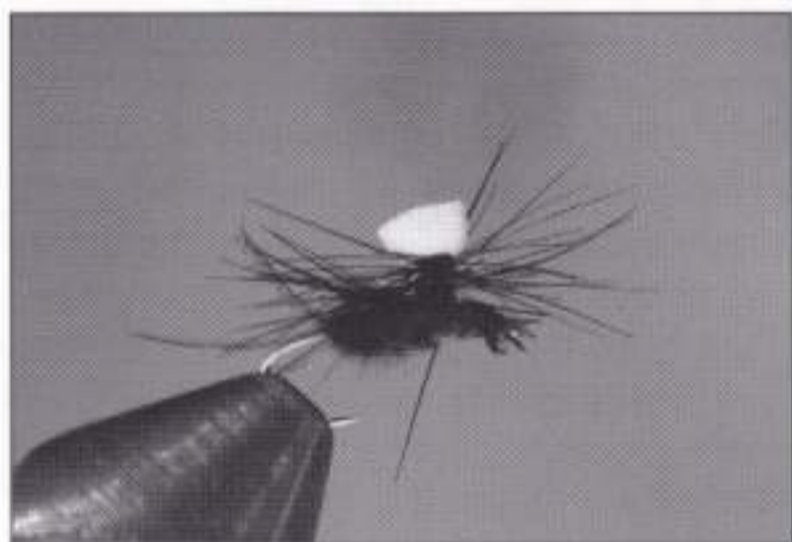
I fished the rest of the day in a euphoric haze. This was the last fish of the day and the last fish of my season. Not even the 23 inch submarine we spotted later could cure me of my euphoria, well only partially! It struck me then that the Witte does well concealing her secrets, only giving them up to those with the persistence and desire to succeed and who return to her from time to time just to get a reality check. As we drove back to Cape Town with the red glimmer of the sun setting behind Table Mountain, I was still feeling mildly euphoric. I reflected upon the season that had been, the fish that were caught, the conversations that were enjoyed, frustrations, tactics and advice shared and the new friendships forged along the stream, all in one season.

**The CDC Thingy:** Hook: Grip 14723BL size 20;  
Thread: Gordon Griffith Sheer Black 14/0;  
Body: Black CDC feather tied in at the tip;  
Parachutepost: White high density foam; and  
Hackle: Black.

**The tying sequence for The CDC Thingie:** Trap your thread behind the hook eye at which point the post can be tied in (White, high-density foam works best). When the post



is secure a hackle feather can be tied in. Once this is completed, take the thread back to the hook bend. Select a CDC feather and stroke the barbs forward toward the tip, trapping it between thumb and forefinger. Tie in the feather where all the barbs are tightly trapped with the tip pointing towards the hook eye. Once the CDC is secured with thread, the feather can either be wrapped around the shank or just stroked forward depending on what you want the silhouette the fly to look like. Wrapping the CDC forward, gives it more of a buggy appeal. Wrap the parachute hackle. tie off and whip finish.



*The author's flies, clockwise from top left: CDC Thingie, two extended body mayfly imitations and a CDC and Elk with an underwing of Gold Pheasant tippets.*

*"Cal Bird was quite strict with his Bird's Nest recipes and would scold me for using rabbit, mink, or worse yet, synthetic Antron when tying his pattern. Cal insisted the bug be tied with a blend of Australian opossum and coyote dyed with his own secret formulas which usually consisted of onion skins, coffee grounds, and some sort of explosive like gunpowder or picric acid. The one aspect we both agreed upon was that a proper Bird's Nest should be tied with wood-duck flank rather than the soft and limp feathers of mallard or teal." Ralph Cutter, Fish Food, A Fly Fisher's Guide to Bugs and Bait, Stackpole Books, 2005.*