

Buggering around on the Jan du Toits

by Darryl Lampert

In Oct. 2004, I was invited to join Andy Baxter and Geoff Ward on a fishing trip to the Jan du Toit's river. Having not hiked for about 20 years I was quite nervous at first but tales of the excellent fishing to be had quelled my fears somewhat. I borrowed a friend's rucksack and proceeded to kit myself out with all the things I thought I might need on the trip. Being used to camping and overlanding with my Land Rover as a base, I was having some problem finding space for all the things I wanted to take along. When I eventually weighed my rucksack, it came in at a hefty 26 kg and that was without any fishing tackle. The final pack weight, including fishing tackle and last minute extras, was around 30 kg.

We started walking into the kloof after dark on the Thursday evening. We must have walked for about 30 – 45 minutes but, with the weight of my pack, it felt like hours. We found a flattish spot next to the river and set up camp. The wind blew throughout the night and, not being used to sleeping without a tent, I battled to sleep. The wind was either blowing in my face or down my sleeping bag and, either way, I got very little rest that night.

The next morning we were up bright and early and headed for the overhang camp. Snails overtook me as I huffed and puffed my way along. My more experienced hiking partners were very patient with me and waited every couple of minutes for me to catch my breath. We eventually got to the campsite and, when I dropped my pack to the ground, I felt an earth tremor. Andy was keen to fish so he and I headed upstream while Geoff decided to head in the opposite direction and fish up towards the camp.

My legs were decidedly shaky as we made our way along the contour path towards the river. Once there we tackled up with some dries and started fishing. After a couple of hours we had had absolutely no success. We hadn't seen a fish and nothing was rising to the multitude of dries and nymphs we were throwing at the water. Knowing that Andy was a dry fly nut, I was a bit nervous to haul out my secret weapon but I hadn't hiked all the way up this river with that damn pack on my back only to go home having blanked. I nipped off my dry, added a length of 4x tippet to my leader and tied on a large olive Woolly Bugger! Andy nearly had heart failure when he saw it, but seeing as we weren't having any luck with the dries, he conceded to me fishing it after he had tried the dries first.

Only moments later I had my first JDT rainbow, a beautiful hen fish! A couple of hours more and I had another four to my name. I could see that Andy was slowly coming around to my way of thinking and, eventually, he gave in and asked for one. Soon thereafter, Andy was also taking fish on the Woolly Bugger. By late afternoon I was finished and decided to rest for a bit. Andy carried on and caught a couple more on the Woolly Bugger before returning to me.

We returned to the camp and started preparing our meal. I had brought a kilogram of fillet steak, some creamed mushrooms and brandy (now you know why my pack weighed so much). Andy had brought several different vegetables, all the pots, pans, stoves and a

bottle of good red wine. Geoff had brought dessert, which consisted of meringue bases with cherries and cream. We ate like absolute kings and I was happy to be ridding myself of as much weight as possible as my legs were already starting to dread the return journey the following day. That night a spotted genet came visiting and helped himself to all our leftovers.

The next morning I woke feeling like a double decker bus had hit me. I tried to convince Geoff to join Andy on his trip back up the river but he was having none of it. I pulled on my wet socks and boots and grudgingly followed Andy. We started with dries and had some success on large RAB's. On one pool I watched a large rainbow swim about four metres across the pool to intercept the RAB which had landed in his territory – very exciting to watch and Andy showed great restraint waiting for it as I would have probably struck before it took the fly. I switched to my olive Woolly Bugger and continued to take good fish including a beautiful cock fish, which was the largest of the trip.

At one stage Andy loitered in my Woolly Bugger box while I fished. An hour or so later we discovered that he had left it lying on a rock – you just can't trust these dry-fly-only guys. Many hours had gone into tying those buggers and I was not keen to leave them behind on the river. We decided to look for them on the way back down. A couple of hours later a group of hikers came walking upstream. After some greetings the leader pulled my box of buggers out of his pocket and asked if they were mine. I was very relieved to have them back and thanked him.

We finally turned around at about 17h00, made it back to the camp, packed up quickly and left on the long hike back. We got back to the car around 21h00 and my body felt like it did after my "vasbyt" march during my National Service. I vowed never to carry that much stuff again.

A couple of months later, I attended a talk put together by Andy at Cape Storm on packing light. I am sure he got the idea after watching me kill myself carrying all that weight up the JDT. The "Golite" pro's carry a pack weighing five kilograms excluding food and water. All non-necessities and "just in case" items are left behind which, for someone like me who carried three torches (amongst many other extra's) up the river, was a bit of an eye opener. I set myself a more realistic target of carrying a maximum of 15 kg's on my next trip up the JDT. Slowly but surely I started accumulating light camping gear like a rucksack, Titanium pots, ultra light mattress, ultra light tent, etc..

A year later Tom Sutcliffe, Peter Mills, Philip Hills and I planned another JDT trip. Tom had to withdraw at the last moment due to a viral infection and was replaced by Bron, a friend of mine who was an avid hiker.

The days leading up to the trip involved a lot of weighing of gear (according to the experts this is the only way to effectively reduce what you are carrying) and deciding what to take and what to leave behind. I ended up with a pack weighing 12 kg plus another kilo and a half in fly gear. I could lift my rucksack onto my back unaided and without my feet sinking a couple of inches into the ground.

Bron and I picked up Peter from the airport and headed for Worcester. Phillip was to join



Darryl Lampert with a Jan du Toits rainbow caught on a Woolly Bugger.

us the following morning. We arrived at the kloof at lunchtime which is not the best time of day to be hiking in hot weather, but we had little choice. We donned our rucksacks and set off. The hike in was not as bad as I had remembered it, I think a combination of lighter pack and improved fitness definitely helped. We didn't fish on the way up as I was unsure how long it would take us to get to the camp.

Upon arrival, we dropped the rucksacks, had a short rest and then set off up river to do a bit of exploring and fishing. We didn't have much success and finally headed back to setup camp and make dinner.

The next morning Philip joined us and after a short rest we headed upstream to fish. The fishing was slow and finally, at around 11h30, Peter caught his first JDT rainbow on an elkhair caddis. It was a small fish in good condition with a damaged dorsal fin, which was probably caused by a heron or kingfisher. After taking some photographs we released it and continued.

About an hour later, without success on dries or nymphs, we got to a good-sized pool and spotted several fish. It was Philip's turn and he put several expert drifts over them. They would swim casually up to the fly, have a good look and turn away. Philip changed fly several times, dropped down to 6x then 7x, tried inducing a take but each time the trout would either ignore his offering or, at the last minute, refuse it. He offered me a crack at them and, with dries and nymphs, I met with similar failure. Finally, before stoning them to death, I decided to try the secret weapon. I removed my 7x, tied on some 5x and a large (size 8, long-shank) black, beadhead Woolly Bugger. Putting finesse into my fly box along with the dry I had removed, I cast the Woolly Bugger into the head of the pool, gave it a second or so to sink and then stripped it back with a fast, erratic retrieve. It took a second or two before one of those leader-shy, fussy, selective, JDT rainbows latched onto my Woolly Bugger like it was the last meal it was likely to see for the day. After a good fight I landed, photographed and released a beautiful cock fish.

We found a shady spot on some rocks and stopped for lunch. Thereafter Philip and Peter would fish a section with dries and nymphs and occasionally catch one. Once they had finished, I would lob the Woolly Bugger into the same pool and often hook or catch another. What was interesting is that even after a trout had been caught, several more could be caught and landed from the same small pool using the Woolly Bugger. After stomach pumping one of the fish that I caught, I discovered a large, two-inch, olive-brown dobsonfly larva. Finally, the effectiveness of the Woolly Bugger was starting to make sense. The dobsonfly larva, or toebiter, is one of the largest aquatic insects found in our streams and, when disturbed, swims like a crayfish. This would also explain why the jerky/erratic retrieve works so well when fishing these patterns.

I have Sean Mills to thank for teaching me this technique and I know that he has caught numerous large fish using it. While I usually prefer the visual experience of fishing with dries and nymphs, I feel that fishing with streamers is an important and often underutilised technique when fishing the deeper sections of our rivers. In clear water, watching two or three very large rainbows - which have ignored all your other attempts - chase down an erratically-stripped Woolly Bugger makes for very exciting fishing!



Another rainbow seduced by a stripped Woolly Bugger comes to the net.



The superciliously selective trout on the Jan du Toits River could not resist the allure of the Woolly Bugger.



Andy Baxter nets a trout on the Jan du Toits river near Worcester.



A nocturnal visitor helps itself to yet another camper's victuals on the Jan du Toits River.