

# The pitter-patter of ants

by Pieter 'Seun' Taljaard

*"There is no use in your walking five miles when you can depend on being just as unsuccessful near home." Mark Twain*

As a certified Jo'burger there is no doubt in my mind that I chose to study down here in Stellenbosch because of the fishing. For several years it was my life's mission to get down to the western Cape and fish its crystal clear, dry fly streams. Well, I also needed to get a degree, so it was simply a case of killing two birds with one stone.

It is actually amazing to note how many of the other aspects of our lives are affected by our obsession with fly fishing; social lives are shattered, eating and sleeping patterns are completely altered and we start talking in a derivative of some sort of language. In some instances I guess fly fishing is and does to us what alcohol does to an alcoholic. In my own life my fly fishing gets heavily affected by my studies (no, not vice versa) and the continuing battle between going to class or shooting over the mountains to Du Toit's kloof is a never-ending saga. Of all the fly fishers in our country, and we are a highly diversified group, it is my personal opinion that the western Cape students should receive the most sympathy. For, within 30 minutes, they can be at a good fishing spot, be it fresh or saltwater, and the urge to give in to its calling is intensified even more by the presence of looming tests/exams/project etc.

As a means of subduing these urges I started, from the day I arrived, to search for the nearest fishing spot I could find. It had to be close enough for me to utilise its therapeutic effects during my off periods and study breaks. I remember reading in Rapture of the River about the Eerste River that flows through Stellenbosch, as a top-notch fishery. Well, the Eerste River is still there but the years haven't been so kind to it and, in town, it is not much to look at. Unfortunately, as it makes its way from Jonker's Hoek into town, there are a lot of farms that pump water from this previously magical trout stream. Furthermore, the Klein Plasie dam, that receives its water supply from Theewaterskloof Dam and supports a trout hatchery, at the top of the valley, causes the water quantity and quality to constantly fluctuate. During the drier seasons, the buildup of sediment and algae-growth is exceptionally high and the Eerste looks very uninviting during this time.

At the beginning of my first year (2003), the water levels were still adequate and I managed to pick up the odd trout as I fished from Paul Roos up to 'Die Hangbrug' just outside town. But as I managed to break away quite a few times during this time, I could see the trout population deteriorate day-by-day. At the end '03 I began doubting whether there were still any trout left in the river. Last year (2004) I didn't fish the Eerste much as I used the little off time I had to fish more promising streams. Every time I drove across the river on my way to the gym, I gave it a despondent gaze and shook my head thinking about what could have been.

Then, one afternoon, sitting at the res tying up some flies for the weekend, I noticed a whole army of ants spewing out of a crack in the wall. My thoughts went buzzing and I



*The higher the ratio of stream-side vegetation to water surface area, the more important terrestrial insects such as ants, beetles and trout become in trout diet.*



*A typical stretch of the Eerste stream where it flows through Stellenbosch.*

grabbed the latest Flyfishing magazine, remembering an article by Ed Herbst on ant patterns. I gave the tying sequence a quick glance and slapped together a few of these #20 honeys. Not even bothering to put on a decent pair of shoes, I grabbed my rod, reel, and a spool of 6X tippet material and popped the flies into my shirt-pocket.

I drove to a section of the Eerste that I knew had some nice looking undercut banks and a couple of deeper slots in between the riffles. I strolled down the bank searching for any sign that would indicate a trout. I came to a section with some deep water running



*The town water section of the Eerste where a sunken ant pattern has proved extremely effective. Photos by Leonard Flemming.*

against a high, artificial, bank. The bank was made up of wire mesh that kept huge boulders at bay and at its base it formed a nice undercut through which the water flowed. Suddenly, there it was. The promising flash of a trout. It seemed surreal and so unlikely that I waited another few minutes. Then, out of nowhere, there were at least four to five flashes in close succession. I got onto the high bank, slowly stuck my head over the edge and peered into the water below. From underneath the bank the trout would come, flash as they intercepted some unknown morsel and return back to their watery lairs. As I watched them in utter amazement, something crawled onto my hand. I looked down, my hands were covered in tiny black ants and, just there, two ideas came together and I started rigging up my rod.

Confidently I tied on one of Ed's ant patterns to my 6X tippet below a tiny, black, yarn-indicator and made the first cast. I spent two hours taking fish at will from underneath the banks, ranging in size from 12 – 18 inches. Yip, I have to gloat a bit, an 18-inch rainbow is a trophy from any stream but, on the Eerste, it is a miracle.

The ants were definitely the missing link on the Eerste and though the fish are sometimes few and far between, I am overjoyed to find that they still manage to survive all the damage we do to their habitat. As for my third year, well, the ants are still here and I still answer the call of the Eerste on the odd occasion. Fishing the Elandspad last week, conditions were exceptionally low and the temperatures right up there. The fish I did manage to spot were all just hanging lethargically in the current, looking as if they were about to flop over any minute, and they dismissed every offering made in their direction. I eventually switched to a heavily weighted ant pattern and started to search for fish in the deeper pools. They readily came to my fly and I ended up catching nine, well-conditioned fish. It is flabbergasting the potential this type of fly has to determine the outcome of a day's fishing. The biggest mistake you could make is underestimating the effectiveness of these ant patterns due to their size. I have tied them from #16 to #22 and, invariably, it is always the smaller offering that tempt the trout into taking.

O, behold the mighty ant, follow its scribbly black line and you will find the answer to those fishless days spent on a stream. For, in these mountain streams, it is more often than not the terrestrial insects that serve as the main food supply.