

Lightness and small stream fever

by Tom Sutcliffe

I think a big part of going ultra-light is just the fun of pushing the boundaries - as we understand them - as far as we can for the sake of it. Ed Herbst is a case in point with the cable ties he uses to attach the reel to the rod. The weight he saves using plastic cable ties as opposed to plain sliding ring seats is minute, but that misses the point. They do weigh less and if you carry that principle through every element of the tackle you take onto a small stream it is going to end up appreciable in the end. But the real challenge, and I guess the fun, is getting ultra-light for ultra-lightness sake, full stop.

So what can we say the big move to ultra-lightness is all about? Well, as I said, its part science, but the scientific postulations hang on very light threads. Then its part fashion, part obsession and maybe even part cult. Of course, there's a big slice of individual preference in it, bordering on a sort of mild flirtation in some, to calm devotion or even messianic dedication in others. Some people are just crazy about light and diminutive tackle. But while lightness just for lightness sake seems a good enough reason for most of us to hit the minimalist road, there are few real advantages to actually carrying less weight on a fly stream. But if your average 3-weight outfit is anyhow already light enough for you never to consider its physical weight even on a long day's fishing, I guess we need to look in other places for answers.

One specific advantage to using ultra-light fly tackle on very exacting and fine water is improved delicacy in presentation. But you're going to get no help with accuracy and a big headache if the wind's blowing.

Stream fly fishing has always been a light pursuit compared to other branches of angling. Casting a near weightless fly line is the main difference between us and the plug throwers and bait casters, the sort of difference we believe lends an intrinsic grace, delicacy and artistry to fly fishing generally, but to stream fly fishing in particular. (I think fly fishing is more poetic for all those reasons, though it's the sort of sentiment that's largely lost on the friends I fish with. They tend to see fly fishing as just great fun and nothing you need get too romantic about.) So it's not surprising then that lightness, the very element that makes fly fishing on streams so unique - so poetic - should have been exploited to make it even more so. Question is, have we reached the edge of the universe with all of this? I think we can say that if we haven't reached it, we're certainly well into the country of diminishing returns.

To do the technical detail of minimalist fly fishing any justice needs a book and perhaps someday I'd like to get around to writing it - it's been on the cards with me since the last time Halley's Comet passed by earth. But a couple of things stand out. The central theme in this debate somehow always turns around the choice of fly rod, which is maybe common to all fly fishing and is no less heated when it comes to rods for small streams.

There is a joy to using light and ultra-light rods - small streams don't so much demand ultra-light rods as deserve them - but there is the trap of wanting too short a rod. Around



Ed Herbst applies a dab of floatant to his dry fly on the Coldbrook tributary of the Sterkspruit. Photo by Tom Sutcliffe.



The editor's small stream outfit. A Sage 000 custom-built by Derek Smith of Johannesburg, and a 25-year old Orvis CFO 2 fly reel fitted with half a double taper 000 silk line made by Terenzio Zandri of Italy (www.terenziosilklines.com).

7 to 8 foot is just fine for the smallest water. Below when a rod's vertically challenged I avoid it. I can already hear the clamour of outrage from the throngs of anglers who own 6 foot gems and love them, but fly fishing is a personal thing and if you're happy with an ultra-short rod, it's maybe most of what counts.

The truth is a lot of really tiny streams fish more comfortably when you have enough rod length to give the leverage you need to mend the fly line, which often means keeping the fly line off the water altogether.

But small streams do need the sort of rods that weigh little enough not to intrude on the charm of the experience, but even more, rods that slide a 2- or 1-weight fly line, lighter if you like, onto the water with precision and with the lightness of a ballerina landing on her toes. The Sage 0-weight SPL does it for me, but slightly heavier and less expensive rods than Sages do just fine, much, I guess, as Yehudi Menuhin would sound as good to the likes of us ordinary mortals on an average violin as he would on a Stradivarius.

I was lucky enough to be given the 0-weight I own, and I understand that plenty of average income, big bond, school-fees-every-quarter kind of people can't afford a big name American fly rod these days, especially with the exchange rate standing on its head. The good news is that many Eastern made fly rods are only a sliver of graphite off perfect. Still, a Sage 0-weight, or 000 to be more up to date, is perhaps worth bearing in mind for the day your horse comes in and your partner happens to be looking the other way.

Not that many years back we rated a trout rod as light when it was under a 5-weight and spoke of 2-and 3-weight gear in reverently hushed tones as ultra-light tackle. But Orvis finally crossed a threshold many of us were secretly doubtful would really work and brought out the 1-weight and even the most ardent disciples of lightness were a little stunned - and sceptical.

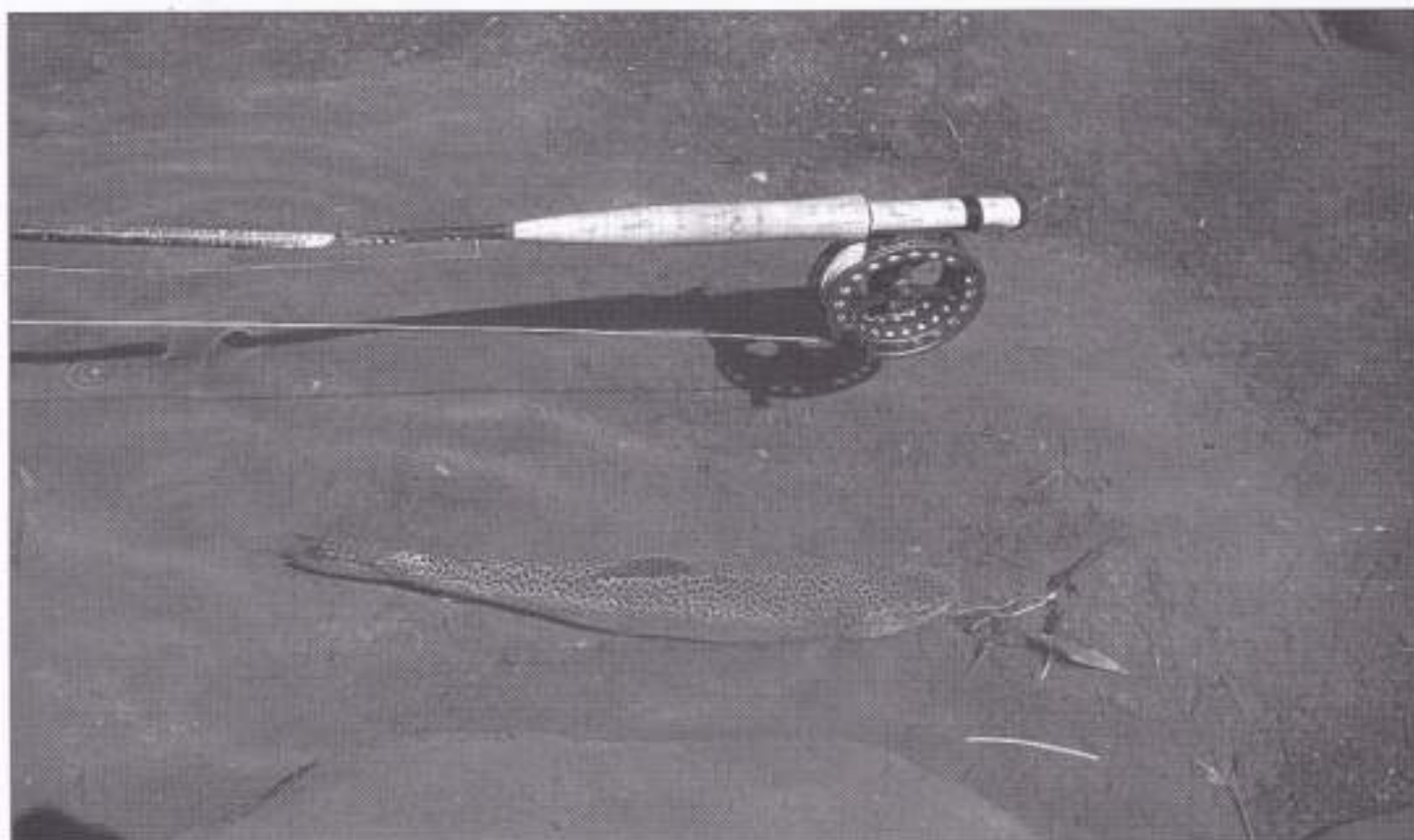
Then in answer, Sage bravely went weightless, at least in name, with their 0-weight, leaving all the rest of the of the fine-name rod makers with no real alternative but to follow suit, or go one better and bring us the first anti-gravity fly rod. None of them did and Sage just went on getting steadily lighter, introducing a rod that seemed as close to a gimmick as you can contrive without getting found out - the Sage 000. But when I cast one I realised the Sage designers were not only onto a good marketing stunt even if they were getting close to it. They were actually mildly serious.

In fact, a lot of people think they may have made the ultimate small stream fly rod in the 000, not only the lightest lined ultra-light, but for the time being, in the view of their many disciples, the best. My personal preference, having tried the 0 and 000' is for the 0-weight SPL, but for reasons I can't easily define other than to say the 0 *feels* better to me, loads more easily, is more positive with the line in the air, to say nothing about it being a whole lot better in colour. Why Sage took the 0-weight SPL off the market is a mystery.

It probably has a lot more to do with the complex machinations that go under the broad headings of marketing, and market share, than with fly fishing outcomes at all.



The Sage Click 1 fly reel has replaced the Orvis CFO2 as the small stream aficionado's reel of choice as it is bigger and lighter. Photo: Craig Thom.



It is shown on the editor's Sage 000 (above) and a Scott 1 weight belonging to Barkly East farmer, Basie Vosloo (www.gatesheadlodges.co.za). Both rods were built by Derek Smith of Johannesburg (smithdd@mweb.co.za/ 083 3073163)

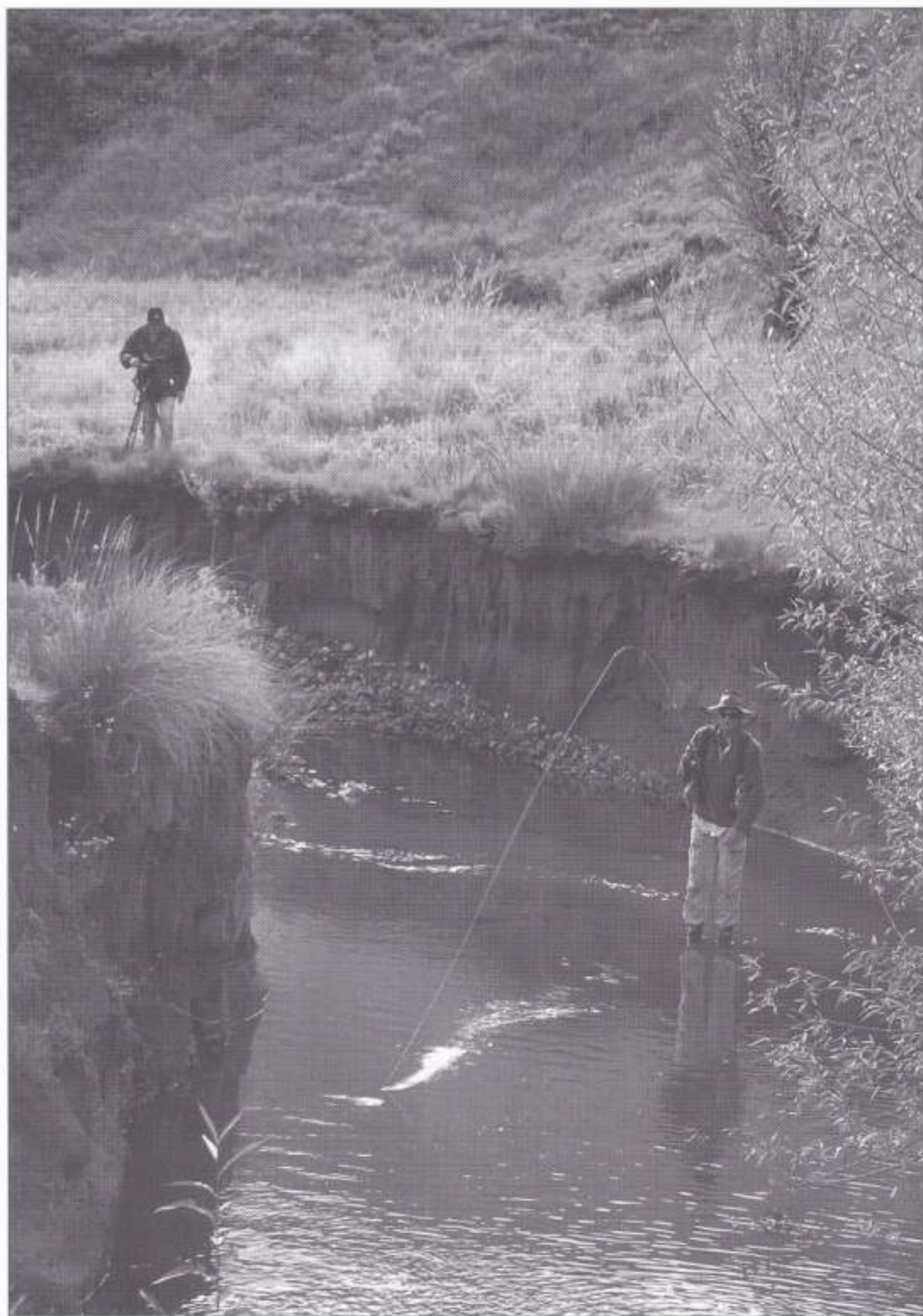
Question is, does all this lightness matter? I suppose if you leave fashion, and preference and cult out of it, it doesn't much matter in the end in that, as we said, less weight brings very little material advantage under 2- or 3-weight. For one, casting should not be like painting ceilings. Your wrist and arm should not actually be above your head, but carried all day at most just above waist level. That requires little effort and if what you are carrying is an ounce or two lighter, the advantages aren't obvious. It's not strange that many fly reel manufacturers have designed reels light enough to match the new generation of ultra-light fly rods. That's what you'd expect. They're playing to the same audience that own 1-weight, 0 and 000-weight sticks. And there are enough of us around. I own three Orvis CFOs and they're perfection.

But I picked up a tiny Abel the other day that was certainly beautiful to look at and will probably outlast your grandson, but it was way too heavy for its size. It was over-engineered, given its task in life is to catch small fish, and it didn't fit my minimalist obsession at all. Put that reel on the end of your new 1-weight and the bubble of ultra-lightness bursts.

Lighter fly rods throw lighter fly lines which, theory and practice has it, makes for more delicate presentations. Up to a point that's true, though it's as well to remember that delicacy in presentation comes as much from the timing in the cast and *where* you deliver the fly - it should be an arm's length at least *above* the target - more than from the weight of the fly line. I've watched plenty of anglers handle a 5-or even a 6-weight lines on touchy rivers as sensitively and as free of commotion as the best will do with a 1-weight. So I guess what I'm saying is that ultra-lights don't have a monopoly on gentle presentations, and neither do they guarantee it. Much has to do with the skill of the angler. But they are a specialist commodity, they are that little bit rare, they do weigh less, they are going to more forgiving on your presentations, they are sweet and smooth to use, they are as unaccountably sought after as Harleys to serious bikers, but, sadly, no they aren't going to spare light tippets from snapping or guarantee perfect presentations. Let's get that myth out of the window. Tippets snap because you handle the strike, or that first blistering run, too roughly.

And ultra-lights have a few severe limitations. They are not meant for mainstream fly fishing, nor for heavy wind and probably not for big fish, though some would disagree with me on this. Also they don't get on well with heavily weighted flies, not only because weighted flies ruin any delicacy a light line might otherwise bring to the presentation, but because fast moving weighted flies can easily snap the needle-thin tip of an ultra-light if the two happen to collide.

Essentially, the ultra-lights are for small rivers and streams, for clear water and maybe testy conditions, for trout that sit tight in clear pocket water and need a stroke of the wrist rather than a full blown cast and for the obsessive fringe element in fly fishing that I happen to belong to. All trout prefer a presentation to be soft and delicate and are spooked easily when it's not, so ultra-lights don't have a monopoly in this area. In South Africa, ultra-lights are in harmony with fishing high altitude headwater streams on windless days, though I've used my Sage 0-weight on nearly every trout stream we have in the Western Cape and most in the Eastern Cape. But if the wind's howling I want my 2-weight, or 3-weight. I enjoy my 0-weight on the streams of the New England district near Barkly East, streams like the Willow and the Diepspruit, on some of the streams around Rhodes,



Rhodes guide Tony Keitzman hooks a fish on his Sage 0 weight while fishing the Coldbrook stream in Barkly East. In the background John Wassenaar films the action.

like the upper reaches of the Bell anywhere from *Dunley* to *Ben Lawers*, and on the Bokspruit from *Brucedell* through to *Gateshead* and on up to the source on the summit of the Southern Drakensberg. All the rivers I fished inland of Maclear and around the Pitseng valley are perfect 0-weight waters, like the Hawerspruit, the Tentkop, the Swith, the Upper Luzie and the Tsitsa. I'd be edgy with a 000 on the Sterkspruit, or the Karringmelkspruit for that matter, but, look, it'd be fun.

For the average beginner, it's a hell of a step to move from a middle of the road 4-weight graphite built in the East, to an ultra-light, high technology product made in the USA with a price tag big enough to fund a holiday for two on the Wild Coast. If you are relatively new to fly fishing you have to be asking yourself some serious questions before you leap into bed with one of these rods – along, of course, with the reel and the line and maybe a few matching leaders that need to go with it. It's a choice I can't make for you, other than to say that you should get to know your way around an averagely light fly rod, say a 2 or a 3-weight, before you buy anything ultra-light. If you are already something of an expert and sense the value and the added dimension, not to mention the sort of curious prestige an ultra-light rod will bring, then the only question is affordability.

The value of the ultra-light might also take a while to become apparent. Generalising, these rods are less easy to cast, presumably because most of us graduate up - or is it down? - to ultra-lights. We start with a five or a six, then as we bump more people fishing with lighter tackle, get more experience and more exposure to tougher trout in tighter streams, thoughts of lightness come just as naturally as breathing in and out. But driving a 5-weight is an infinitely more accommodating and forgiving experience to driving a 1-weight, and a little time and practice is needed before you get as good with both. I'd say settle for a 2- or 3-weight, get the complete measure of it and only then go ultra-light.

I think the trick with ultra-light rods is not to force them, thinking that because they're frail and apparently less powerful, they need greater effort on your part. Think of them as simple casting instruments, with a specialised function maybe, but at the end of the day, accepted casting principles hold good for all fly rods. Never pick up an ultra-light and begin by trying to see how far it will cast. That's going to disappoint you. Rather see how *close* you can fish, how *gently* you can present a fly line. Forget about the trout at the head of the run and, for once, concentrate on the trout we all overlook, the ones right under your nose at the tail. After all, that's why you bought the rod in the first place, right?

One way and another I have had a few light and ultra-light rods through my hands the past few years; Orvis's 1-, 2- and 3-weights, all honest, forgiving rods, all slightly slow to medium in action; a 2-weight Loomis that's out of this world; a 9' Scott 1-weight that's very easy to cast, a 3-weight Scott that's equally good to throw, a Sage 3-weight XP that was so quick I gave it to Fred Steynberg to catch yellows on the lower Kraai and the Sage 0-weight SPL, maybe the best ultra-light rod of all time.

The nice thing about the 0-weight, to my way of thinking anyway, is it behaves like a mid-weight fly rod in the cast, at least more so than other ultra-lights I've tried. At the same time, I'd have to apply in writing for permission to throw a clumsy cast with it and when I want a few more yards the rod responds with ease, losing none of its softness in presentation. Nice rod, probably the best small stream fly rod I ever used, certainly very close to a

classic split cane action. Would I get one if I didn't already own one? You bet, but I really wouldn't say that's because I needed it, or just because to a disciple of minimalism in fly fishing the term 0-weight has a nice ring to it. Maybe it's not as light as the 000, or as technologically advanced as some of the big name rod makers' new models, but my 0-weight SPL is heaven and on a mild and dreamy day the damn thing nearly talks to me. Like I said, fly rods and their joys are not easily explained in scientific terms, especially not to non-believers.

This excerpt is taken from Chapter 5, Lightness and Small Stream Fever, featured in Tom Sutcliffe's latest book, Shadows on the Stream Bed, published by Platanna Press. Autographed and personalised copies, with a pen and ink sketch of a chosen fly are available from the author at R250, with packaging and postage included. A limited edition, leather bound copy with a slip case (100 only) is also available, as are limited edition Ciclee prints of the original watercolour painting Tom did for the cover. These are full size prints done on 100% cotton rag archival paper and only 50 were made. Contact Tom on email at sutcliffe@mweb.co.za or by phone on 082 804 1352 or 021 6712614.

