

# THE FIRST USE OF ARTIFICIAL FLIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

By FRANK R. BRADLOW

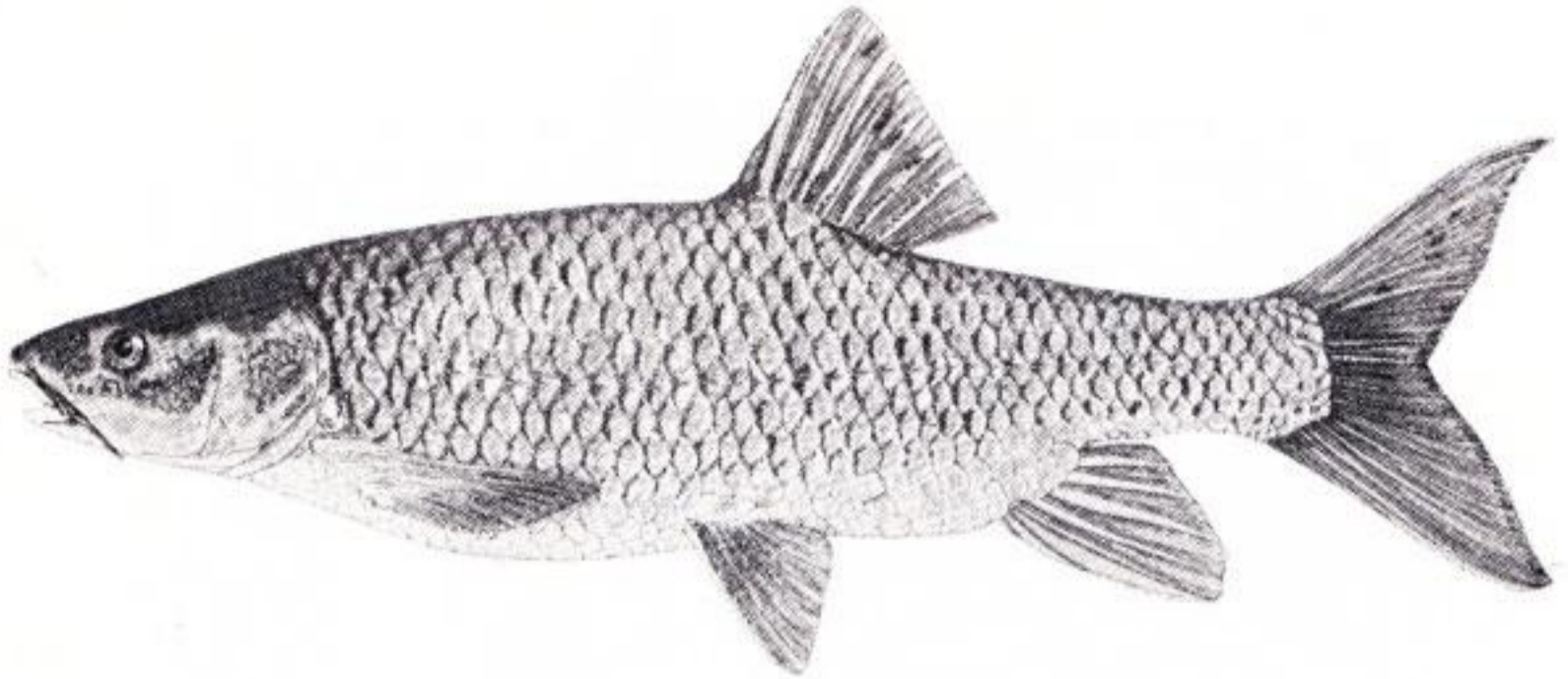
WHEN was the first artificial fly used in a South African river? Who was the fly-fisherman who used it, and into which river did he cast his artificial fly? Until comparatively recently I would have said unhesitatingly that the use of the artificial fly was first used in the Cape or Natal after the introduction of trout in the 1890's. I would also have thought that the angler would have been one of the pioneers of trout acclimatisation, such as Lachlan McLean in Cape Town, J. D. Ellis in King Williamstown, or J. C. Parker in Natal. Unfortunately history does not seem to have recorded the exact moment or the specific angler who first cast a fly for South African trout.

However, nothing could be further from the truth than that the first fly was cast for trout! The first person to use an artificial fly used it nearly 100 years prior to the introduction of trout, and it was with considerable surprise that I learned that in fact fly-fishing was tried in the North-West Cape as long ago as October 15, 1801. The fisherman was almost certainly Dr. William Somerville and the river was the Great Riet River. The fish he was trying to catch were almost equally certainly of two indigenous types, the smallmouth yellowfish (*Barbus holubi*), and Orange River labeo (*Labeo capensis*), as will be seen from a letter from Dr. R. A. Jubb which is quoted later in this article.

The manner in which I became aware of this very early example of fly-fishing requires some explanation. Looking for suitable material for a Van Riebeeck Society publication I found that the Bodleian Library in Oxford possessed a manuscript journal by Dr. William Somerville. This journal described a journey to the Tswana country north of the Orange River in the years 1801 and 1802. After I examined this interesting journal, my wife and I undertook to edit it for publication, and in the course of this editing I found the exciting and remarkable allusion to the use of an artificial fly.

The background to this historic event is that at the end of the eighteenth century, during the first British occupation, the government of the day, having difficulty in obtaining cattle from the Xhosa-speaking tribes on the Eastern Frontier, and wishing to explore the territory beyond the northern boundary of the colony, decided to send a commission to the far north—north of the Gariep or Orange River—to see if there were possibilities of trade with the Tswana-speaking tribes said to be living there. This commission was headed by Dr. William Somerville and P. J. Truter. Their journey, interesting as it is, is irrelevant to the subject of this article, but they traversed country which was new to white people.

In the course of their travels, which commenced on October 1, 1801, they found themselves on the banks of the Great Riet River on October 15, 1801. The Great Riet, to quote Somerville, "derives its source from the lofty range of mountains called Nieuw-Veldts Gebergten (NUWEVELDBERGE) from thence thro' a part of its course it is called the *Little Riet River*". This river is about 20 miles (32 km.) west of the present-day town of Sutherland on the way to Fraserburg, but Somerville and Truter probably followed the same path as the modern road, crossing it more to the northwest in the Onder-Rietrivier district.<sup>1</sup>



**Smallmouth Yellowfish** (*Barbus holubi*).

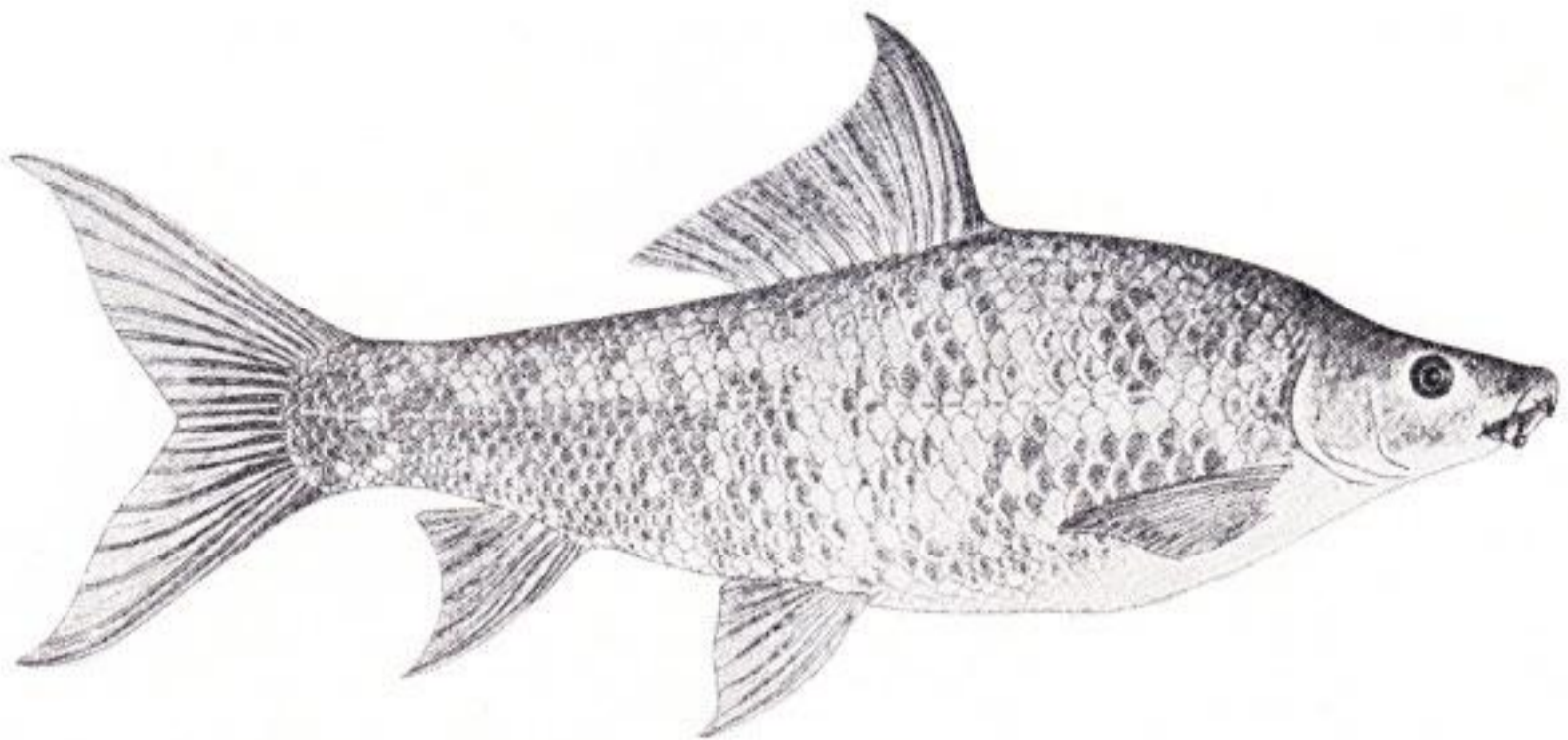
In his journal Somerville wrote:

"The weather again fine—the track of a young lion was seen at a short distance from the camp, but nothing more of him was seen. The morning was very pleasantly spent in fishing in the river—the *artificial fly* was tried but to no purpose, but a considerable number of fish of two sorts was caught by the hook baited with a bit of meat. The largest measured nineteen inches long. The river is at present very low, but from the abundance of fish it is probably constant. The water is very bitter and brackish to the taste, and therefore more fit to excite than allay thirst. There are many deep pools or Sea cow holes as they are called by the colonists, abounding with wild geese and wild duck."

It is sad that the fish didn't take the artificial fly. It is almost certain, as I said, that Somerville must have cast it. There was another born Englishman in the party, Samuel Daniell the artist, but it is unlikely he was the angler. Somerville after all belonged to the "establishment", whereas Daniell's father was a mere inn-keeper. It would have been interesting to know what pattern of fly or flies was used. One can imagine a nostalgic English traveller like Somerville carrying around artificial flies—perhaps of his own tying—hoping one day to find an indigenous South African fish that would succumb to it.

The next day, after travelling for seven hours, the expedition reached the banks of the Little Riet River. This would have meant that they covered a distance of approximately 20 miles (32 km.). They again fished in this river but apparently did not use artificial flies, judging from the following extract from the journal.

"In this river great plenty of fish were caught with the net, and hook, of two kinds as in the other Riet river but considerably larger in size. One is of a bright golden yellow and the other of a silvery white—both are very bad, foul muddy tasted, and pulpy—and so full of small forked bones that they are scarcely eatable with safety. Like the other Riet river there are in this many deep pools well stocked with fish, from their size exceeding a year in age, the streams may dry up but the pools must always hold water."



**Orange River Labeo** (*Labeo capensis*).

The official published account of the expedition's travels contains no mention of the use of the artificial fly.<sup>2</sup> After reading these extracts I wrote to Dr. R. A. Jubb at Port Alfred and sent him copies of these extracts. He replied as follows:

"Thank you for your interesting letter. It is pleasing to know that there were fish in the Riet River in those days.

"From the description and size I would say that the two fish species were *Barbus holubi* or smallmouth yellowfish, and *Labeo capensis* or Orange River labeo. The former is the golden-yellow one and the latter the silver one. In stagnant pools both species would be inclined to be muddy in taste, and if not cooked fresh the flesh would be pulpy. From the size mentioned both species would be extremely bony. Large *B.holubi* attain a weight of about 8 kg. and large *L.capensis* about 2.5 kg."

It is strange that Samuel Daniell, who accompanied the expedition as secretary-artist, left no pictures of these fish. He recorded the animals and people with great accuracy and gusto, but does not appear to have sketched any of the fish.

Lastly, it may be of interest to readers to know something of Dr. William Somerville (1771-1860). He was born in Scotland and he received his education in Edinburgh. No doubt he learnt to fish with the fly in Highland lochs and rivers. In 1795 he accompanied Major-General Sir James Craig as "hospital assistant" when the British occupied the Cape for the first time. At the Cape his abilities were recognised and he occupied the dual posts of "Inspector of Hospitals" and "Inspector of Government Lands and public buildings", a curious assortment of tasks!

When the resident commissioner of Graaff-Reinet, H. C. D. Maynier, took ill, Somerville was sent there as assistant resident commissioner in 1800. In this capacity he visited the Xhosa Chief Ngquika (Gaika) in April 1800. In 1801 he became a joint leader of the expedition to the southern Tswana tribes, as we have seen. When the British left the Cape he went to Canada where he became inspector of hospitals in 1806.

His next move in 1812 was to the United Kingdom where he held medical posts in Edinburgh and London, and in 1819 he became physician to the Chelsea Hospital. His wife, Mary Somerville, whom he married in 1812, was a woman of some importance. Somerville College in Oxford is named after her.

It will be seen that Somerville arrived at the Cape when he was 24 years old and was only 30 when he became one of the joint commissioners. He learnt to speak Dutch fluently and this must have been of considerable assistance to him in his activities at the Cape. He was, as can be seen from the description of the fish in the Riet rivers, a meticulous observer. Although other travellers, such as Burchell and before him Lichtenstein, also described the indigenous fish, and the great Andrew Smith left copious notes and illustrations of the fish he saw, Somerville's description must be one of the earliest and most important. It is, moreover, the only one that mentions the use of an *artificial* fly.

**Notes:**

1. This information was kindly supplied by Prof. Vernon Forbes, who identified the area from map 3220 (1 in 250,000), *Sutherland*, issued by the Government Printer in the topographical series.
2. Theal, G. M.: Records of the Cape Colony from May 1801 to February 1803. Vol. 4. pp 359-436. Cape Town 1899.