

A FAMILY VISIT TO HAPPY VALLEY IN THE WITELS KLOOF

by Michael Corrigan

I have been extremely fond of fishing the Witels River since the end of my student days at UCT about 25 years ago, and have undertaken numerous expeditions up and down the kloof. At present I am a Capetonian in exile, having been resident in the Transvaal for business reasons for the past five years.

Much has been written about the dangers of the Witels Kloof (see *Piscator* No 124, July 1992) due to bad weather and the recent tragic death in the river valley. It is clear that kloofing in the Witels is a summer activity and should not be embarked upon without the necessary precautions (adequate composition of party, equipment, safety supplies etc). Such a hike can nevertheless be a great adventure!

A Witels trip was planned for the December 1991 school vacation together with my brother John and my sons Stuart, Neil and Anthony (aged 16, 15 and 12 respectively), with my wife electing to miss the strenuous hike and offering her services as a driver to drop and collect the party. The original intention was to enter over Waaihoek and exit at Mitchell's Pass Junction Pool. Application together with motivation to enter Zuurberg (Witels Kloof) was submitted to the UCT Mountain and Ski Club (which controls the land from just above the second swim) at the beginning of September when booking opened. A reply from their Witels Chairman virtually by return of post informed us that the Witels Kloof was fully booked for the period of our intended visit. In order to preserve the unique environment and prevent overcrowding they limit the total numbers as well as the party size to a maximum of eight (minimum of three). Entry is forbidden from May to October due to dangers imposed by adverse weather conditions. In addition the months of November and February are reserved for UCT students and staff and for members of the Mountain Club of South Africa (Cape Town Section). Perhaps some priority for members could be arranged by the CPS. It was thus decided to get the necessary permits from the Club Secretary to traverse the Ceres allocated area and enter via Mitchell's Pass.

Much preparation work was needed for the hike. Our old packs required upgrading in preference for the new internal frame design ie Backpacker. In comparison with the old design of external frames, internal frames are less rigid, more comfortable, easier to balance and fit closer to your body, thereby bringing the centre of gravity closer to you for easier load carrying. Their slim profile also makes them easier to handle in tight places. In the dense Witels bush, during boulder-hopping and in preventing slipping/falling in the river (a great risk in the Witels), they thus have clear advantages. New boots were needed, balanced meals and snacks were worked out (and weighed) for each day and lightweight inflatable equipment purchased to transport the packs through the swims. Tinned food was avoided and as drinking water is no problem in the Witels, we preferred dehydrated and freeze-dried food, although the latter was rather expensive. A checklist was used to ensure that we had adequate food, gear, fishing and first-aid equipment (including sun protection and snakebite outfit) without forgetting or duplicating anything. Limiting the load to a maximum of a third of body weight was regarded as essential and all packs were weighed before departure. Adequate planning, for example our food, safeguarded us not only against running out, but also prevented us from taking along too much.

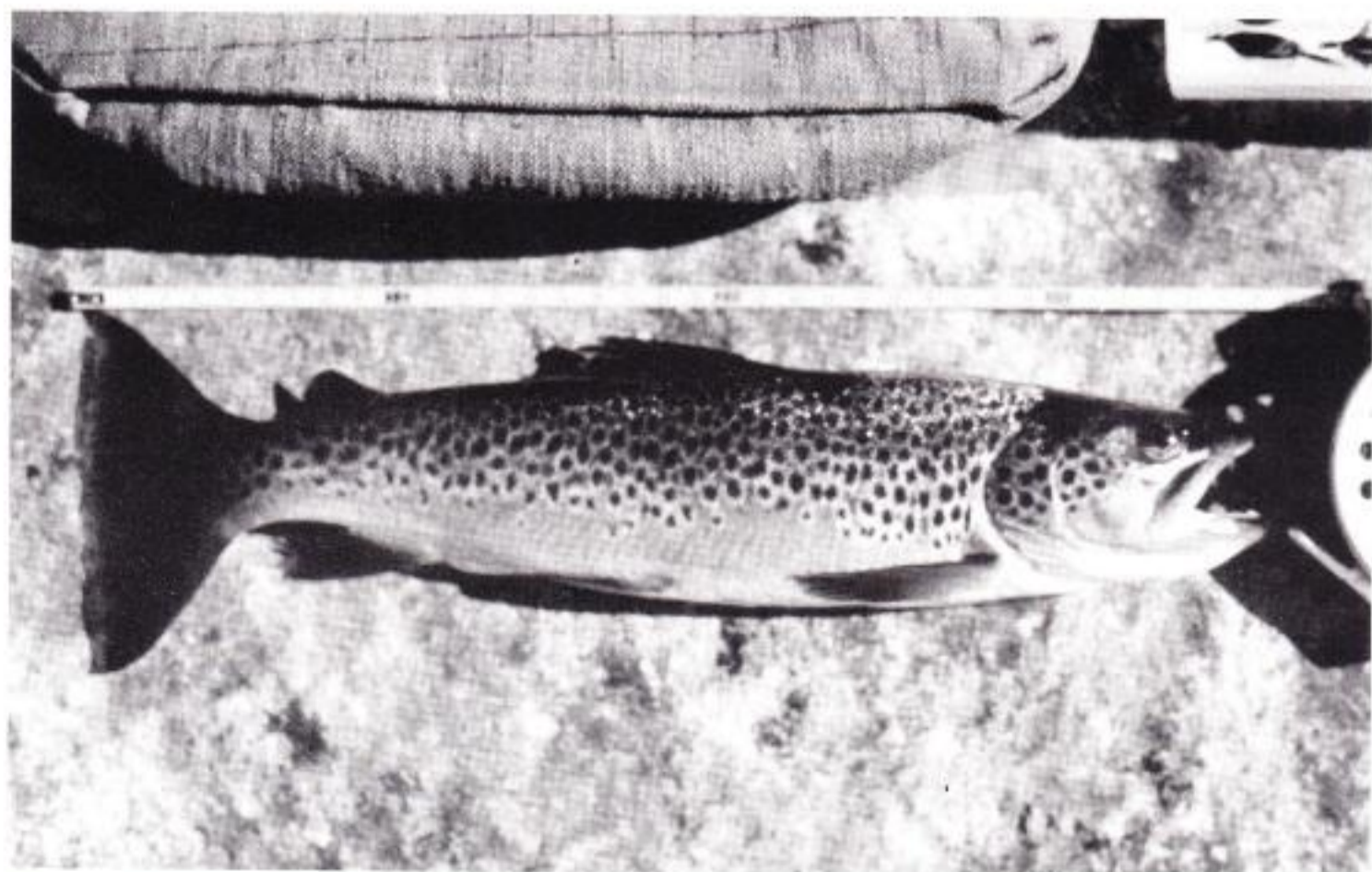
Arrangements had been made to spend some 6 nights in the kloof. Eventually the great day arrived and the party was dropped off at first light in Mitchell's Pass opposite Junction Pool. The widening of the road in Mitchell's Pass has regrettably resulted in many of the trees opposite Junction Pool being removed and the intersection of the Witels with the Dwars River is now clearly visible from the road (this was not the case many years ago).

A path bypassing the river bed now exists from Junction Pool virtually to Boulder Pool (for those who are able to locate the path). It crosses the river at many points and is easy to lose. Small cairns have been made at discrete points where direction changes. We made our first camp in the scenic First Gorge between Boulder Pool and the first swim. A feature of the map obtained from the CPS is that many of the better campsites are not marked on it. It is useful to know where the good stopover points are during a hike.

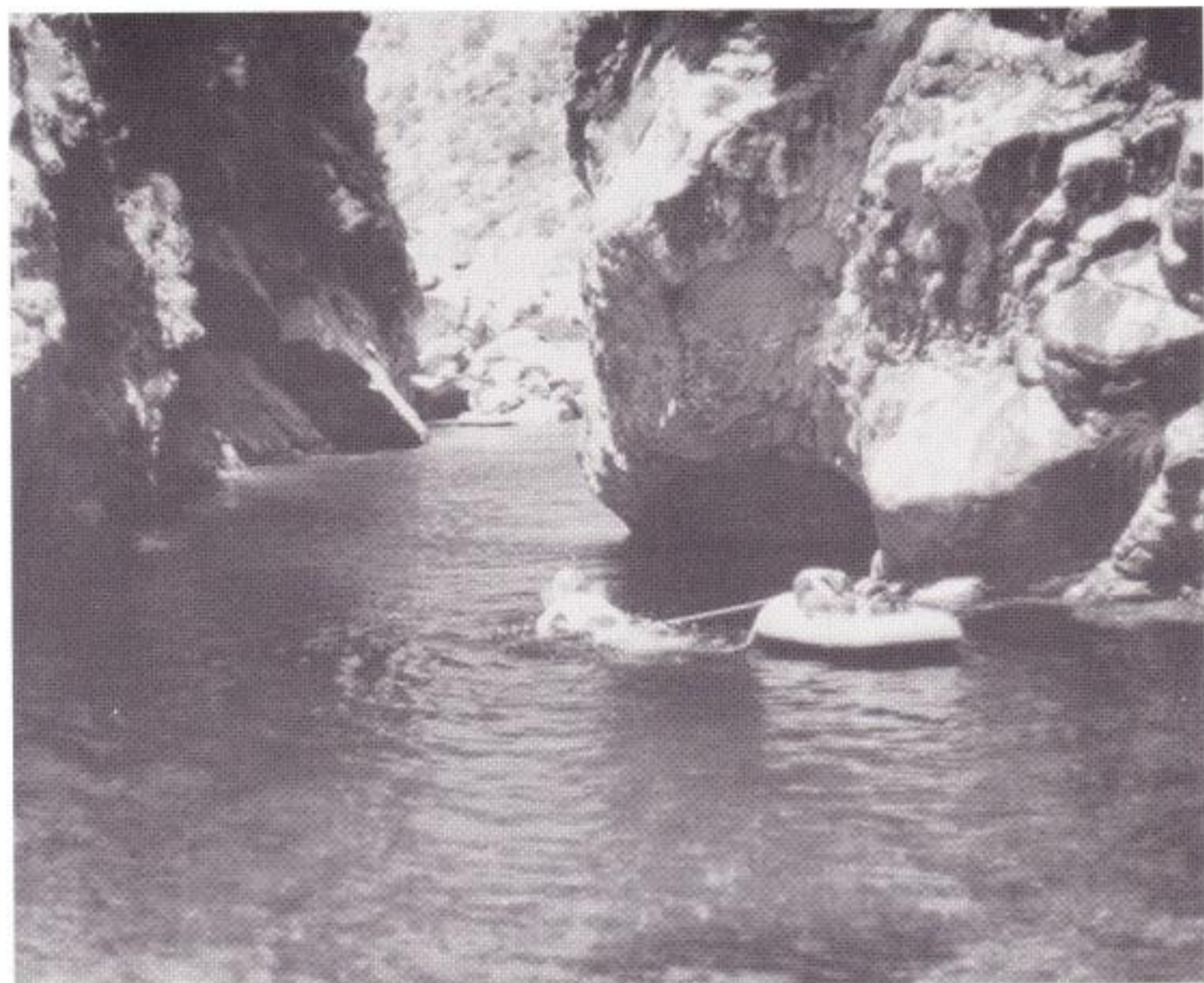
Our first contact with piscatorial brethren was at Boulder Pool. Unfortunately, they were spinnermen, a saddening sight to the ardent fly fisherman. We had a similar experience on our last



The Corrigan party in Witels Kloof - John, Stuart, the Author, Neil and Anthony



Brown Trout (360mm) caught below First Swim



Anthony towing his rucksack through the Second Swim



Anthony using goggles and looking for eels in Happy Valley

day, where there were some using spinners somewhat closer to the road.

The area below Boulder Pool is mainly devoid of trout and is populated with bass. We started our fishing between Boulder Pool and the first swim where several fish were caught whilst fishing during the forward and return trip. On the return journey it was in this area that our largest fish was taken, a brown of 360mm, 425 gram, CF33.

On the second day we crossed the first and second swims and established a base camp in Happy Valley some ten minutes walk before the sign in the kloof that marks the start of the UCT controlled land the border being the straight line joining Mitchell's Peak and Skurweberg Peak.

This enabled us to spend a few days fishing, swimming and relaxing in Happy Valley with some eight fish being taken on wet (eg Walker's Killer, Invicta, Red Setter) and dry flies (eg DDD).

On one occasion we fished up to just below the third swim (triple ledge camp). At the top of Happy Valley lies the third gorge and at its entrance is a large, but not very deep, pool. It was here that we saw the first sign of small trout rising to take insects on the surface of the water - a pleasing sight. A small stream trickles over some rocks around this pool, making it very slippery to pass - I fell in twice much to Stuart's delight as I had warned him of the difficulty beforehand!

Fishing in Happy Valley is in my opinion not what it used to be 20 years ago, and is now probably equivalent to what the lower reaches below Boulder Pool were in those days. Many of the previously good pools showed no sign of trout. In fact fishing generally in the lower Witels has deteriorated. We had no success whatsoever in the larger pools, including swims. There is no longer an early morning rise at the base of the first swim.

The angling report in Appendix 1 shows the rather lean condition of the Witels trout (average CF was about 37, whereas ideal is 43). Stuart caught his first wild bred trout and was delighted, but regretted that this was to be his only success. He finds it much easier catching the hatchery bred specimens in the Transvaal waters! The one or two fish that John and I caught each day provided an excellent starter to our otherwise unexciting meals.

Eels abound in the Witels and we had several sightings. John was admiring one of his fish still in the net in the water when an eel appeared, and this happened more than once. Anthony saw one disappearing under a rock, one of the highlights of his trip. From that time on he spent much time floating in the pools in his inflatable boat, using a pair of goggles in an attempt to see more eels. Perhaps the abundance of eels in the larger pools could account for the lack of fish in those pools. Fishermen using spinners (seemingly in the lower reaches only) also help to depopulate the trout.

Personally, I feel it takes a lot to beat a Witels adventure, where one works hard to catch the wild

<i>Name</i>	<i>Details of Fish Caught</i>			CF
	Length mm	Mass oz	grams	
Michael Corrigall	360	15	425	33
	330	12	340	34
	325	11	312	33
	315	11	312	36
	300	11	312	42
	300	9	255	34
	2 returned			
John Corrigall	330	12	340	34
	300	10	284	38
	300	10	284	38
	280	9	255	42
	260	7	198	41
Stuart Corrigall	235	6	170	-
		Average	37	

bred trout. The wonderful mechanisms used by nature to ensure the survival of the fittest have created a trout population where the survivors are alert, cunning and opportunistic. Those trout which are too cautious perish, as do those that have no caution. I hope that the rugged terrain will ensure that this population lives on for many years to come and that the magic of trout fishing in the Witels may be experienced in the future by my children's children!

Appendix 1 - Angling Report

River Fished: Witels; *Angling Dates:* 16-19 December 1991; *Area Fished:* From Boulder Pool to Happy Valley; *Some Successful Flies Used:* Walker's Killer, Invicta, Red Setter, DDD;
Species Caught: Brown Trout