

A JUNIOR JAUNT TO THE WITELS

By IAN OVENSTONE

*Photographs by
Ian Ovenstone
(From Colour)*

**A typical stretch of the Witels
River.**

THERE were four of us, Peter Selfc, Pieter van Blommestein, whom we called "Blom" to avoid muddling, Jacques Retief and myself. I took one last look at the Land Rover squatting at the foot of the Skuurfteberg Saddle on the farm Vergenoeg. I was about to fulfil a dream—the Witels—on April 2, 1966.

With packs just under 40 lb. we thought the climb over the mountains and into the river would be child's play, but little did we know how our inexperience was going to handicap us. And we were unfit! I set off at a cracking pace but some two ridges later I realised my folly and we had to have our first rest. It was an extremely hot day and from then onwards our rests became more and more frequent.

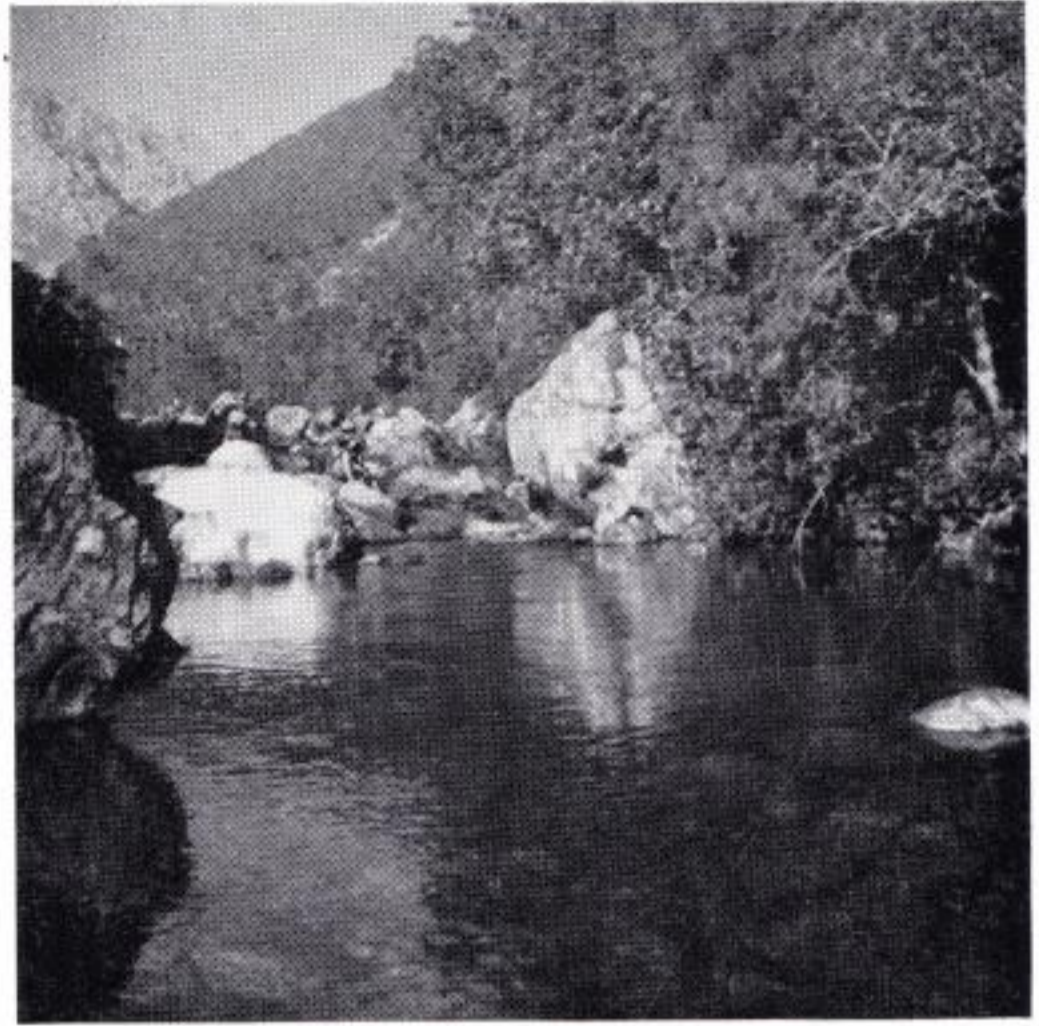
Only the devil could have invented a false crest and each one we reached made us curse him all the more. "Demoralising" and "frustrating" are adjectives which are too weak to express the feeling that welled within us. It was positively heart-rending to find ourselves at the top of yet another one of these devil-made delusions.

When our hearts had been rent to their fullest, we finally conquered the Saddle Cliff and by that stage death would have been blissful to say the least of it. From here we were rewarded with fairly even ground and made quite good time until we reached a ravine just this side of "Adderley Street".

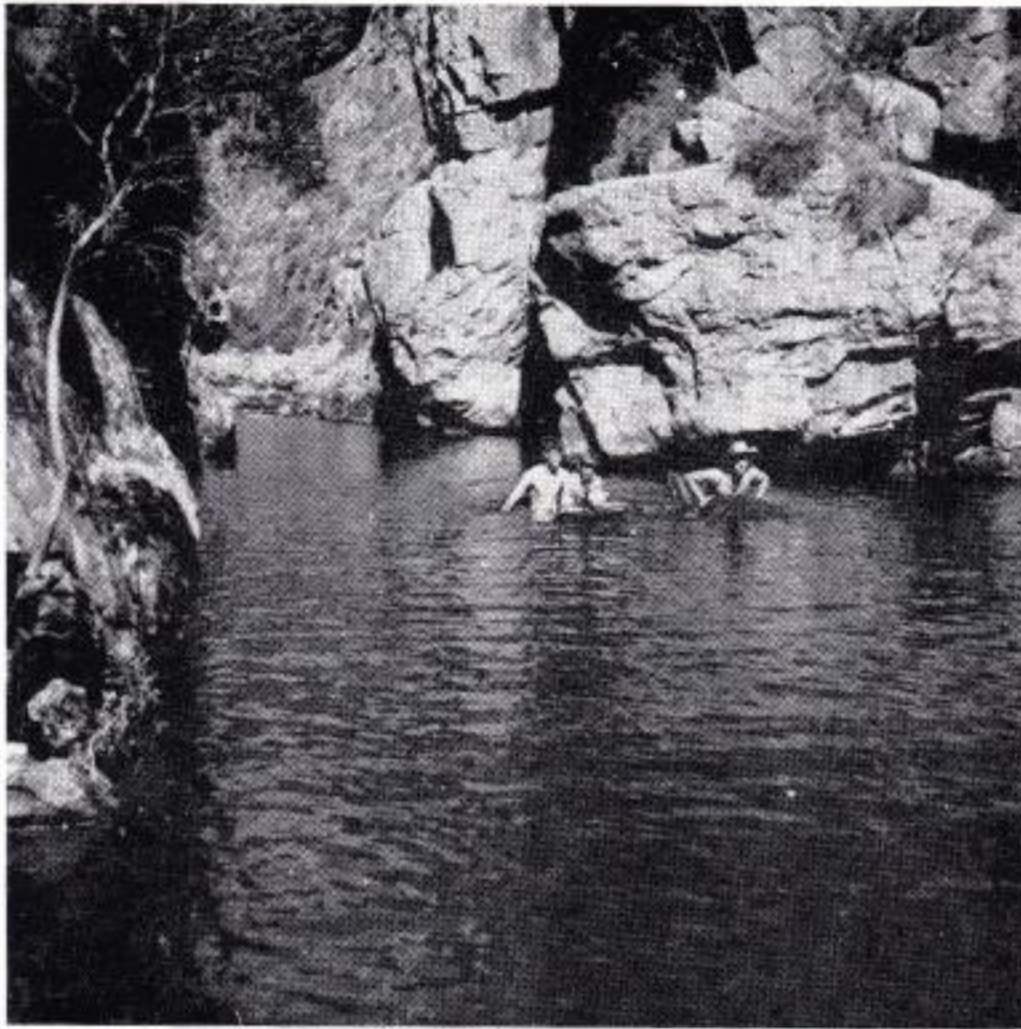
Here I might pause to thank and congratulate Mr. Yates and Mr. Kisch on their splendid research work and article, "Witels Consolidated". We took a copy of *Trout in the Kloofs* along with us which proved invaluable.

When we had lunched in this ravine, we climbed over its ridge and found ourselves surveying "Adderley Street". There were no cars, just stones and bushes and, of course, the Rooiwaterstroom which is "rooi" because of the algae which clings to its rocky bed.

**Pool above the 10th Swim.
Notice the clarity of the water.**



**The 10th Swim with the 9th
Swim in the background.**



The 8th Swim, with the anglers coming through on lilos.

We descended the valley and crossed the Rooiwaterstroom as instructed by *Trout in the Kloofs*. The dense reeds, of which Mr. Yates makes mention in his article, had been burnt away by a recent bushfire. We eventually reached a rock overlooking the Middle Valley. And what a sight! The Witels flowed in a series of gentle arcs beneath us, each arc being subdivided by a number of beautiful pools. Unfortunately no photograph can recapture its beauty.

But where was the climb in? We looked to our left but that side was too steep, and we looked to our right but that side was even steeper. Out came our trusty old friend, *Trout in the Kloofs*, and he told us it was to the left whether we liked it or not. I will not even attempt to describe the nerve-racking descent to the river bed. All I can say is that we had to do an awful lot of traversing before we reached the protea slope, and from there onwards it was just one straight slide on our backsides down to the banks of the river (I really do not know how Major-General Sir Percival Fergusson Forbes made it!). We had reckoned on taking four hours to reach the river. It had taken us eight.

Oorvergenoeg Camp was far better than I could ever have imagined it to be. There was enough room for the four of us plus a tent, and firewood was close at hand. As the main reason for our being there was to fish, it did not take us long to get our lines wet. I went upstream and Peter and "Blom" went downstream.

I raised a "ten-incher" in a pool right opposite our camp on my third cast. Our prospects looked good. As this was almost the first time I had fished with a dry fly (I tried it out unsuccessfully one afternoon on the Smalblaar), I lost quite a few fish through poor striking, and eventually, in despair, put on an *Invicta* jungle-cock and caught a "ten-incher" in a beautiful pool, the head of which is split by a large rock.



The mighty 7th Swim, with a lilo in use for navigation.

Here I turned back and reached camp without any further success. The others arrived a little after me empty handed.

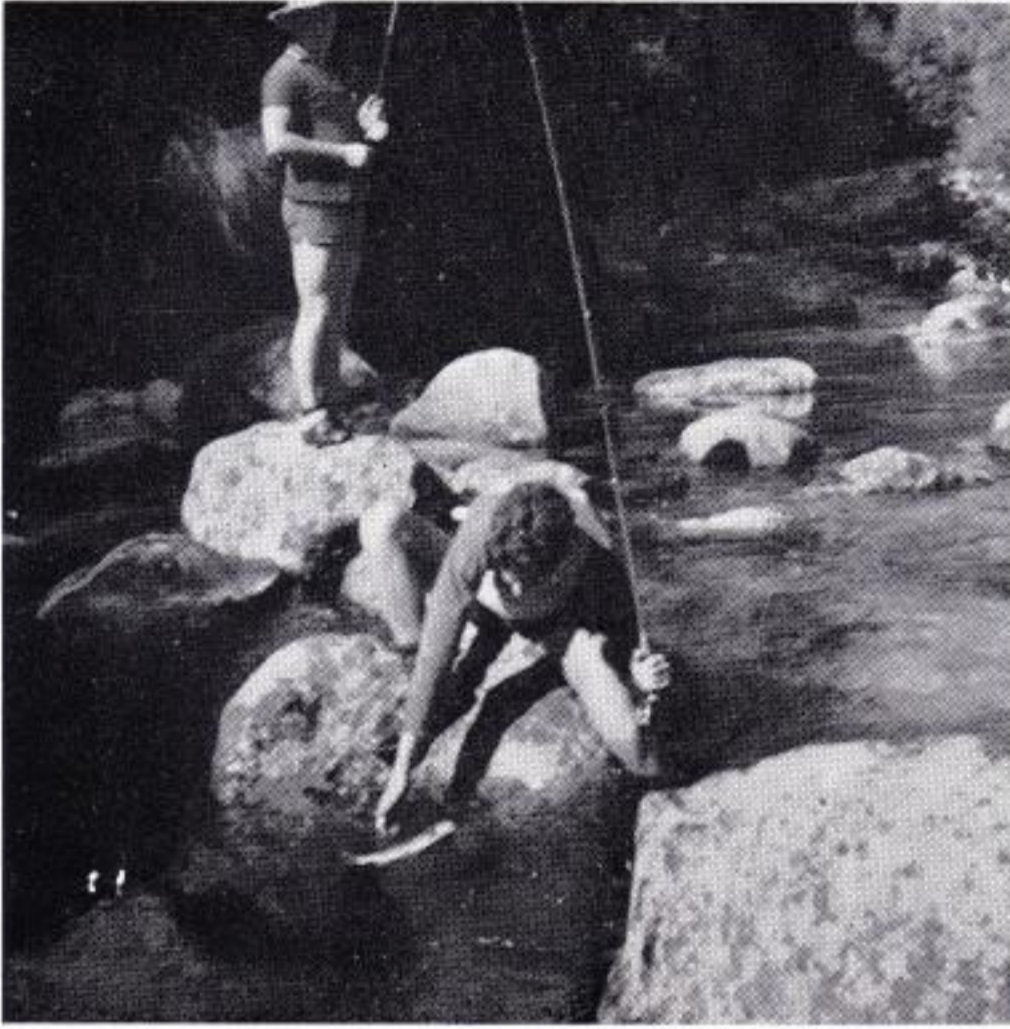
There is nothing more satisfying than a first night in camp and that particular night proved doubly satisfying with the thought that we were perhaps the 25th party, if that, to have camped at Oorvergenoeg. A nearly full moon, which paled out many of heaven's fireflies, danced joyously on the waters near us. With warm soup inside one, a mug of steaming coffee in one's hand and the prospect of an exciting few days' fishing ahead, what more could anyone want?

Our theme song for this trip was the Afrikaans version of "These Boots were Made for Walking", and at 8 o'clock the next morning the words rang out against the krantzies, "Is jy reg skoene?—Trap!" and we were off downstream on our first full day's fishing.

Bushwack Pool was magnificent, as indeed was this whole section of the kloof. And yet after the day's fishing I was somewhat disappointed.

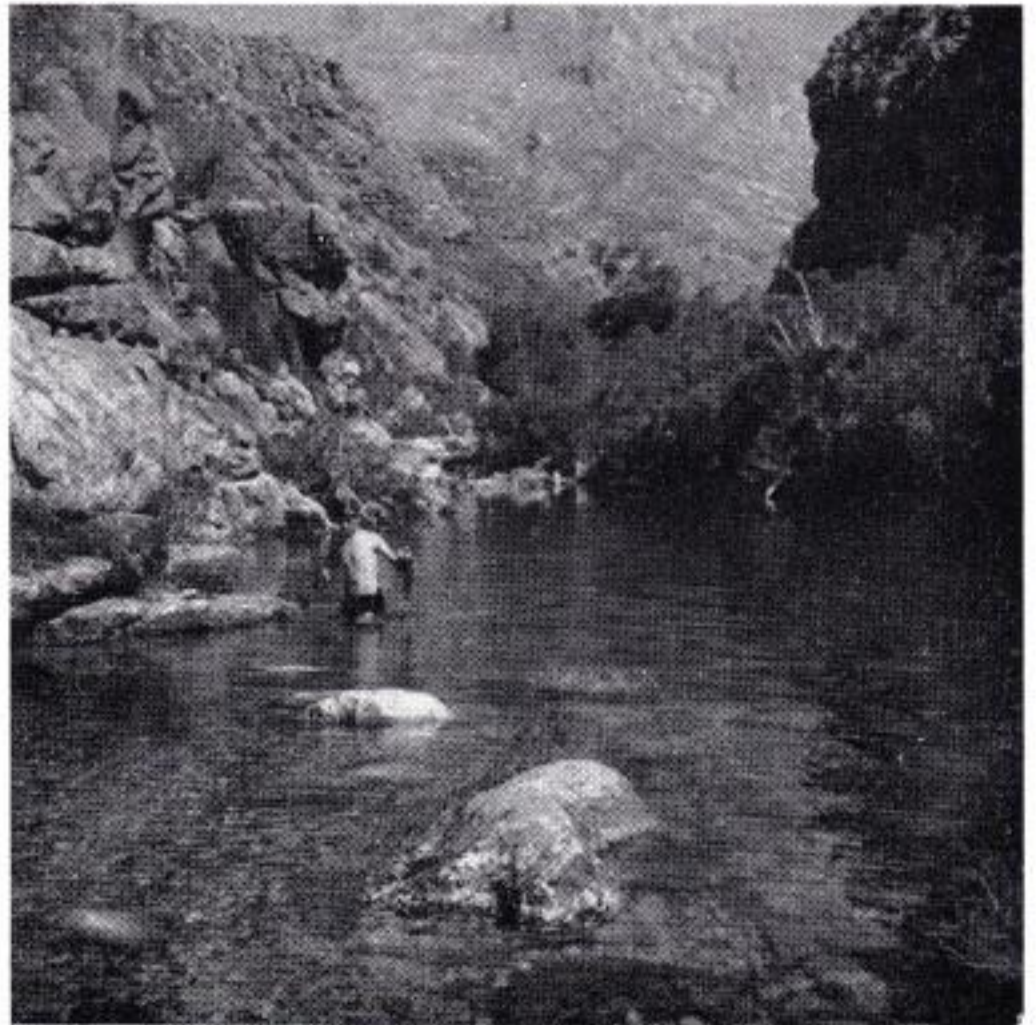
Mr. Yates has often said to me that he is convinced the largest trout in the kloof lie between the 7th and 10th swims. The largest fish we caught on that day was half-a pound, a mean-looking brute with a big head, and the largest we saw could not have been a pound.

We lunched between the 8th and 9th swims, cooking the four keepers we had caught. Done in tinfoil and smothered in butter, they were a real treat. Although no more fish were caught on that day, the climax of our trip downstream was undoubtedly the 7th swim. It is terrifyingly long, some 200 yards in all, it is terrifyingly deep and its sides are terrifyingly high. Alas, we did not see any terrifyingly large fish. (So exhilarated was Peter with the swim that he took a mighty plunge into it.)



Upstream of the Camp. The author landing a brown trout.

A pool some hundreds of yards below the 11th Swim.



The day's catch of brown trout.



The kloof was already deep in shadow and with shock we realised it was 4 o'clock. That gave us roughly two hours of daylight to get back to camp. We took down our rods then and there and moved back to Oorvergenoeg Camp in top gear. We arrived there just a little before 6 o'clock. It might be interesting to note that the water temperature in the morning was 58°F., rising to 62°F. in the afternoon.

Leopards breathing down our necks could not have awakened us that night.

The following morning we went upstream. About 200 yards from the Camp "Blom" saw a snake, which he thought was a cobra, disappearing into some bushes. Anyway it reminded us that we had left our snake-bite outfit in camp, so one of us dashed back to get it.

For about an hour and a half we fished without much success, catching a couple of small ones. Then just where the river's flow is divided the fish began to bite. The time was roughly 11 o'clock. Every pool and run held a fish that jumped at anything it was given. In a space of about an hour and a half, Peter caught six fish, three of them in the same small pool, and I caught five. We must have lost twice that amount, and again the largest was only 9 oz. So absorbed were we with our fishing that we did not have time to reach the 11th swim. The highest point to which we went was Sandy Camp Pool.

On our return to camp "Blom" was the only one to catch a keeper. And that concluded our fishing, for the following day we were making the climb out. And how we dreaded it! It turned out to be a piece of cake compared with the climb in, and we made it back to the land rover in four hours.

So my dream had become a reality, but the funny thing is that I still dream about the Witels.