

Small Streams of the Drakensberg

By Peter Brigg

uKhahlamba, the majestic Drakensberg mountain range of KwaZulu Natal now listed as a World Heritage Site, from the renowned Amphitheatre in the north to the Underberg region in the south, is the cradle of many streams as bright and clear as the mountain air.

These waterways range in diversity from diminutive brooks like the Nkosasana, Delmhlwazini and Ifidi to streams like the Mhlwazini, the Polela, the Injisuthi and larger more classical rivers the Umzimkhulu, the Umkomas, the Bushmans and the Mooi, to name just a few of the 20 I know. Most of these streams and rivers hold a head of trout in their higher reaches, some recognised as rainbow waters, others home to the wily browns and even a few with populations of both. Many fly fishers will have fished or at least heard of the more popular waters but there are others tucked away in secret places. In the folds of the earth hard up against the basalt buttresses of the main escarpment, they are seldom talked of and infrequently, if ever, visited by fly fishers.

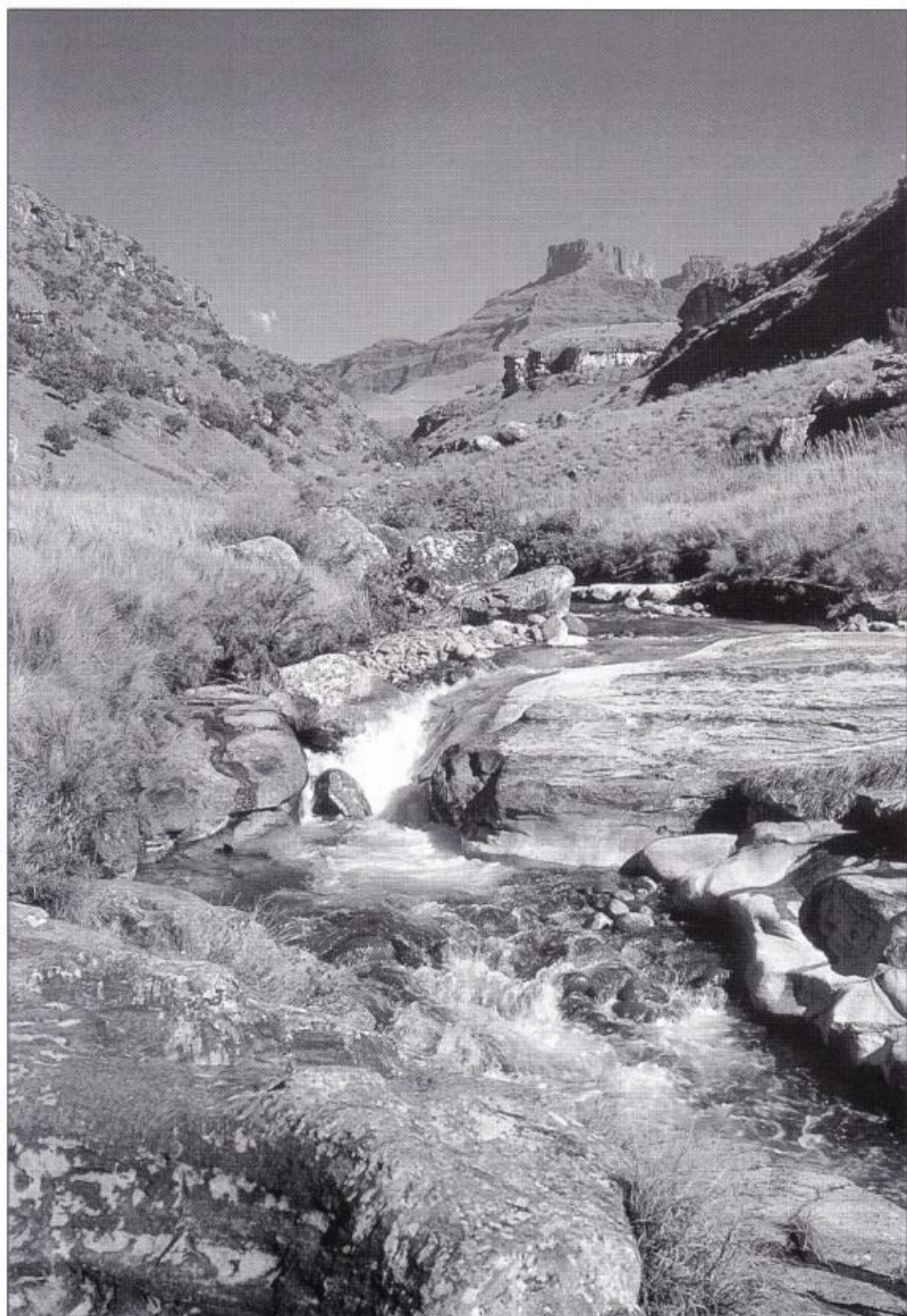
One of the reasons is that many of the headwaters of these small streams are relatively inaccessible unless one is prepared to strap on a backpack with all one needs for three to four days, shed some sweat and give up all home comforts for the duration. I consider myself fortunate in that I enjoy the thrills and spills of roughing it and privileged because I have been able to fly fish in this pristine mountain environment - in fact, it is my passion.

To take a step back, had it not been for the efforts of men like John Clarke Parker who pioneered the introduction of trout into these streams it would not be possible for us to enjoy the pursuit of the speckled inhabitants that exist today. Parker was a Yorkshireman who settled in this country to farm in KZN in the 1800s and who, despite many early failures, with dogged persistence and the encouragement and support of certain individuals in his home country and grants from the Natal Government, eventually, successfully seeded many of the Drakensberg streams with fry during the 1890s.

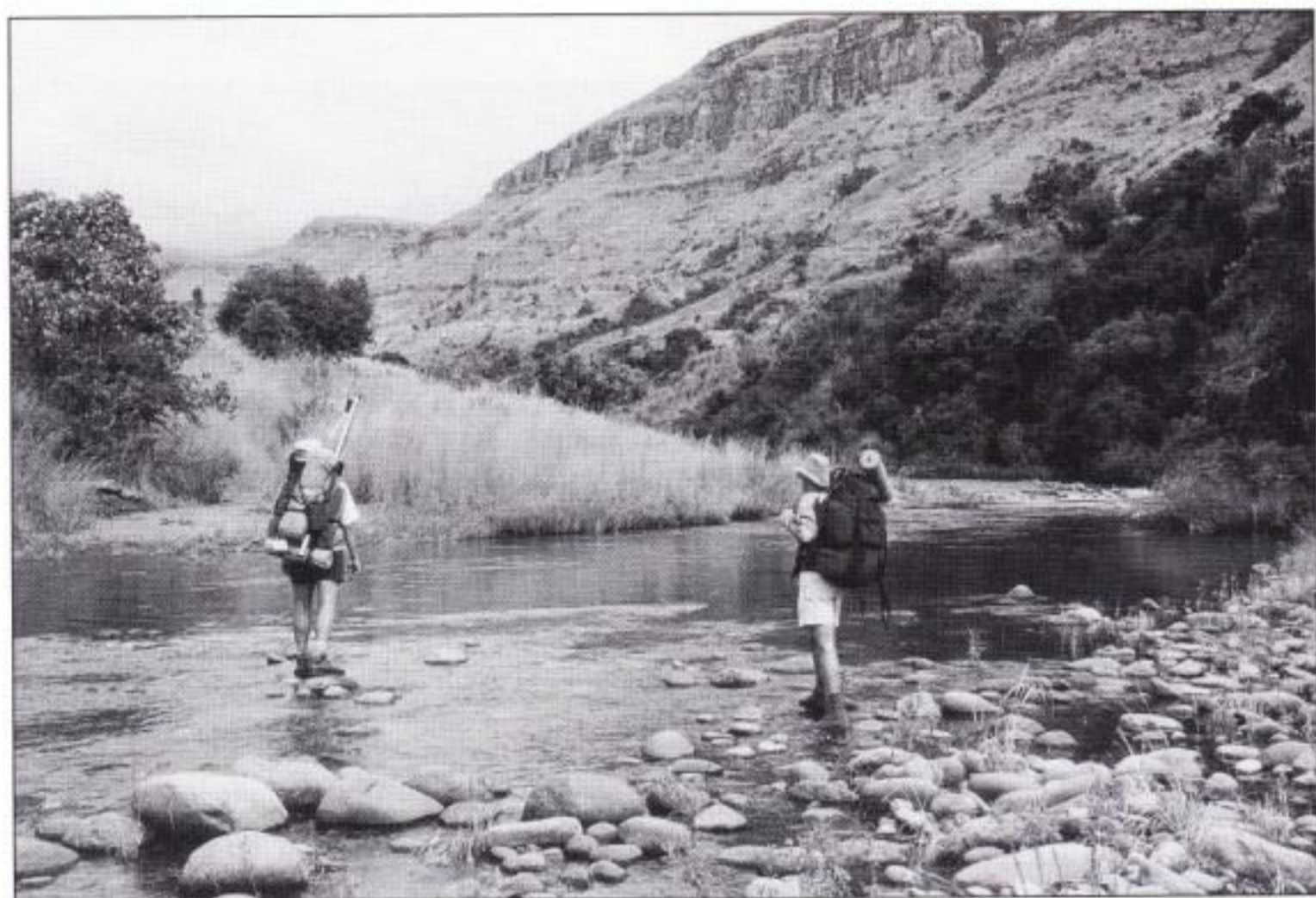
These streams, some 1500 to 1800m above sea level, are set in arguably the most spectacular mountain scenery this country has to offer. They have steep gradients with fast, cold, clear water cascading down boulder strewn runs, through deep emerald green glides hewn out of the bedrock over millions of years. The valley floors are cluttered with massive fallen blocks of sandstone from the rock-bands high above, the banks are protected in places by precipitous cliffs, indigenous forests, grasses and woody vegetation - sometimes making your passage along the stream difficult and casting an innovative art.

Like most South African streams, water levels can be inconsistent at times, either very thin or raging torrents. Other than divine intervention, there is little one can do about low water but, fortunately at these altitudes, the spates experienced after heavy rainfall usually fine off as quickly as they rise. The best months in my experience are during spring, from late September through to mid-December depending on winter snowfalls and early summer rains, and then my preferred time, autumn from mid-March to the end of May.

The streams support a rich aquatic life, consisting mainly of small mayfly nymphs, some



The Mhlwazini at an altitude of 1750m above sea level.



Crossing the river on the way to the campsite.



A camp site on the bank of the Mhlwazini at an altitude of 1500 m.

stoneflies, caddis larva and small crabs. Terrestrials like beetles and hoppers make up a fair percentage of the trout's diet, especially during the summer months. Hatches are erratic but usually occur around midday and at last light. I have noticed that they seem to be more prolific during overcast conditions. Dry flies that have been particularly productive for me, even during the day when there has been little or no sign of surface feeding, are the quill-bodied spent-wing mayfly spinner, a Griffiths Gnat variation, Klinkhamer special, hopper and foam beetle, none larger than a size #14.

I have been amazed at times how confidently these trout will rise out of their lies to take a carefully drifted fly off the surface.

Sparsely tied flies do, in my experience, attract more attention. My favourites nymphs are ZAK, GRHE, dark brown and olive green nymphs in a variety of sizes no larger than #12 and that is pushing it, some weighted and some with beadheads, all barbless. It has been my practice in the deeper, faster water to fish with a tandem rig consisting of a weighted size #12 nymph and tied about 15 to 18 inches off the bend, a small (# 14 down to #18) imitative pattern as the point fly.

Although I have hiked along and fished many similar remote streams in the Drakensberg, my favourite remains the Mhlwazini and its two feeder streams of lilliput dimensions, the Didima and the Nkosasana. It has become a pilgrimage in May each year to hike into this valley with a few companions and to fish these sparkling waters for the selective browns found only in the lower reaches and the beautiful rainbows higher up.

If you get to make the trip into these mountains sometime 'be prepared' as they say in scouting terms and, take it from me, treat the mountains with respect. This sometimes harsh yet fragile environment is deceptively uncompromising and combined with unpredictable weather, can be dangerous. If needed, and I sincerely hope you don't, help could be the best part of a day's hike away.

The hike at the end of May last year into the upper section of the valley was seven hours of tough going, with packs weighing between 24 and 26kg, energy-sapping heat and at one stage, little water. During the day we treated blisters and cramps, strapped wonky knees and endured a few falls along the way. The point I make is that this is not your average stroll in the park. This is rugged terrain and being at the mercy of the elements can exact a heavy toll on body and mind.

One of my companions remarked at the end of the expedition "One day of hell, two days in paradise". I agreed.

Despite the relative comfort of thin foam mattresses and sleeping bags, the first night, cramped in two three-man tents, was a sudden reminder that summer was a thing of the past and that winter was taking its hold - winter in this high country is hard and those making excursions into the uplands of the Drakensberg need to have the right equipment and clothing - I am quite serious when I say that your survival could depend on it.

I guess by now you are wondering, why on earth go there in the first place? Well the truth is, it has for me been as much about the magic of fly fishing pristine streams as it is about

friendships and refreshing one's soul. The sweat I have shed and the hardships endured in the mountains have been worth it. I will keep doing it until the dreaded day arrives when this frame of mine can no longer make the journey - God willing, however, there are hopefully, many more years left in these bones.

Challenging fishing it is. These wild trout are as wary and alert as you will find anywhere. Ultra-light tackle 0 to 3 wt lines, soft actioned 6ft 6 to 8ft rods, 9 to 12 ft leaders with fine 5x to 7x tippets and tiny flies are suited perfectly to the testing conditions of these upland streams. The downside to ultra-light tackle is the problems you will encounter with casting and presentation when the wind gets up as it is inclined to do at times in these deep valleys, and when using a weighted tandem rig. This is why I frequently opt for my 7 1/2ft, 4wt, 4 piece - a rod for all seasons especially on a trip like this, when carrying a range of rods is not an option because of space and weight. It was built for me by Durban's master rod builder, Mark Meyer, on a medium action VPS Sage blank - superb workmanship and a gem of a rod.

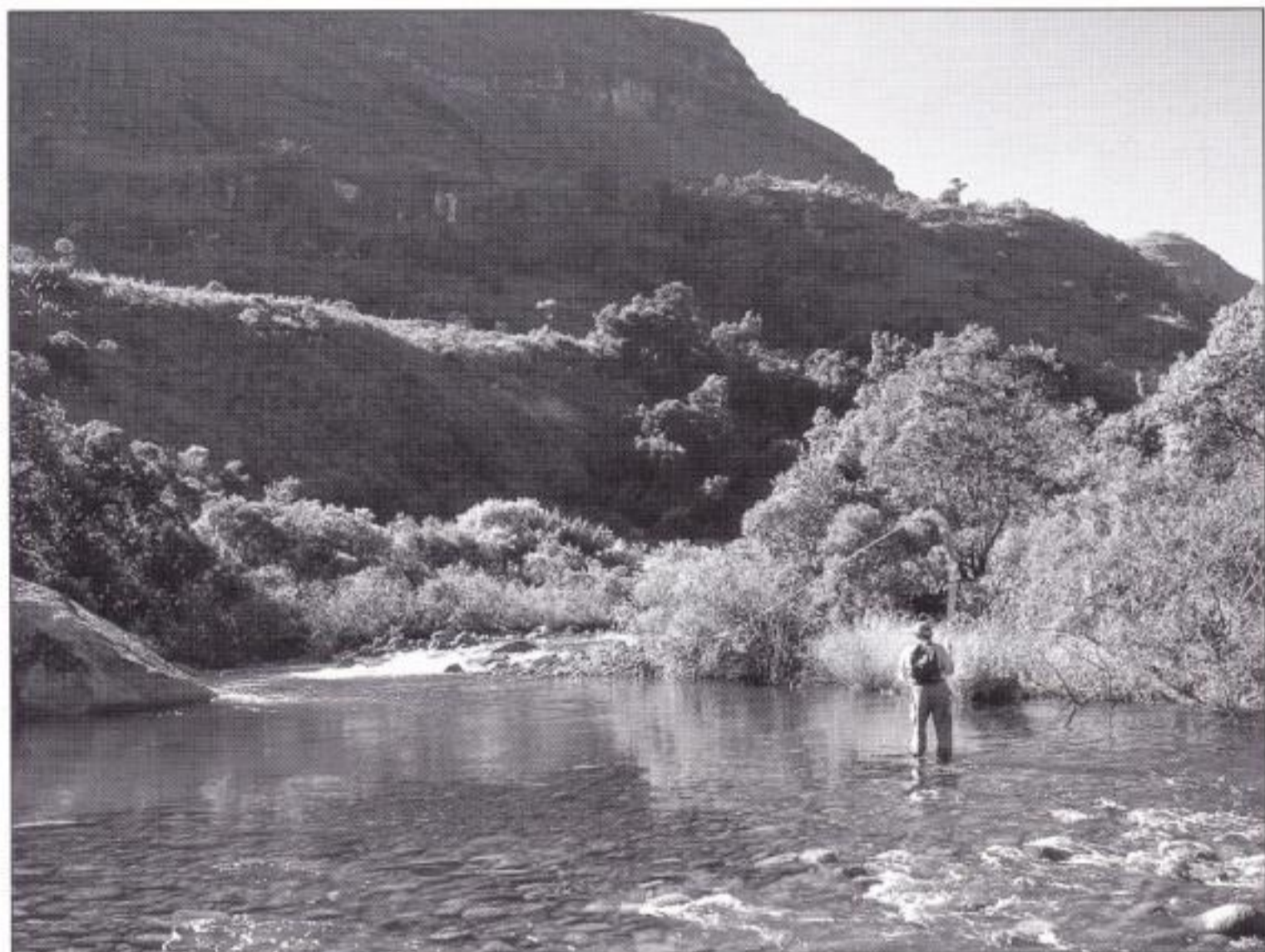
The emphasis is on careful presentation rather than distance. Up close and fine, short, drag-free drifts are important just as are strike indicators when nymphing. To describe the testing conditions let me relate an incident that happened on the trip this year.

As I slowly made my way upstream of our camp, I spotted a couple of trout in a shallow run, holding position behind a submerged rock. I stood in what I believed to be a concealed position for no less than five minutes until I was satisfied they were at ease and unaware of my presence - or so I thought. I used the down stream drag on my extended line to create the energy for a single cast. Despite, for once, landing the size 18 dry fly as gently as thistle-down on the water and as perfectly positioned upstream of their lie as I could have wished for, in a blink they were gone! It was almost as if I had been fooled by an optical illusion. I was left reflecting on what I had done wrong, perhaps it had been the flash of my rod, line shadow, the glint of light off my wrist watch or just their sixth sense alerting them to danger - whatever it was I was beaten by a mile.

In contradiction to this and I have, especially in autumn, experienced it often enough to conclude that it is the rule rather than the exception, - a mayfly hatch comes off occasionally accompanied by minute black midges, just as the last light of the day begins to fade, it is then that the water literally boils with feeding fish. It is difficult to believe that all these hungry little fish have been tucked away in their watery world all this time! During these periods of intense activity almost every drift results in a take provided of course, your fly choice is close to matching the hatch.

The Mhlwazini trout, other than the odd surprise, don't often exceed 12 inches - feisty little fish, well conditioned and beautifully marked. They are 'river wise' street fighters who, once hooked, use the turbulence, currents and underwater structure to their best advantage in their dash for freedom - worthy opponents and worthy of release to swim free again.

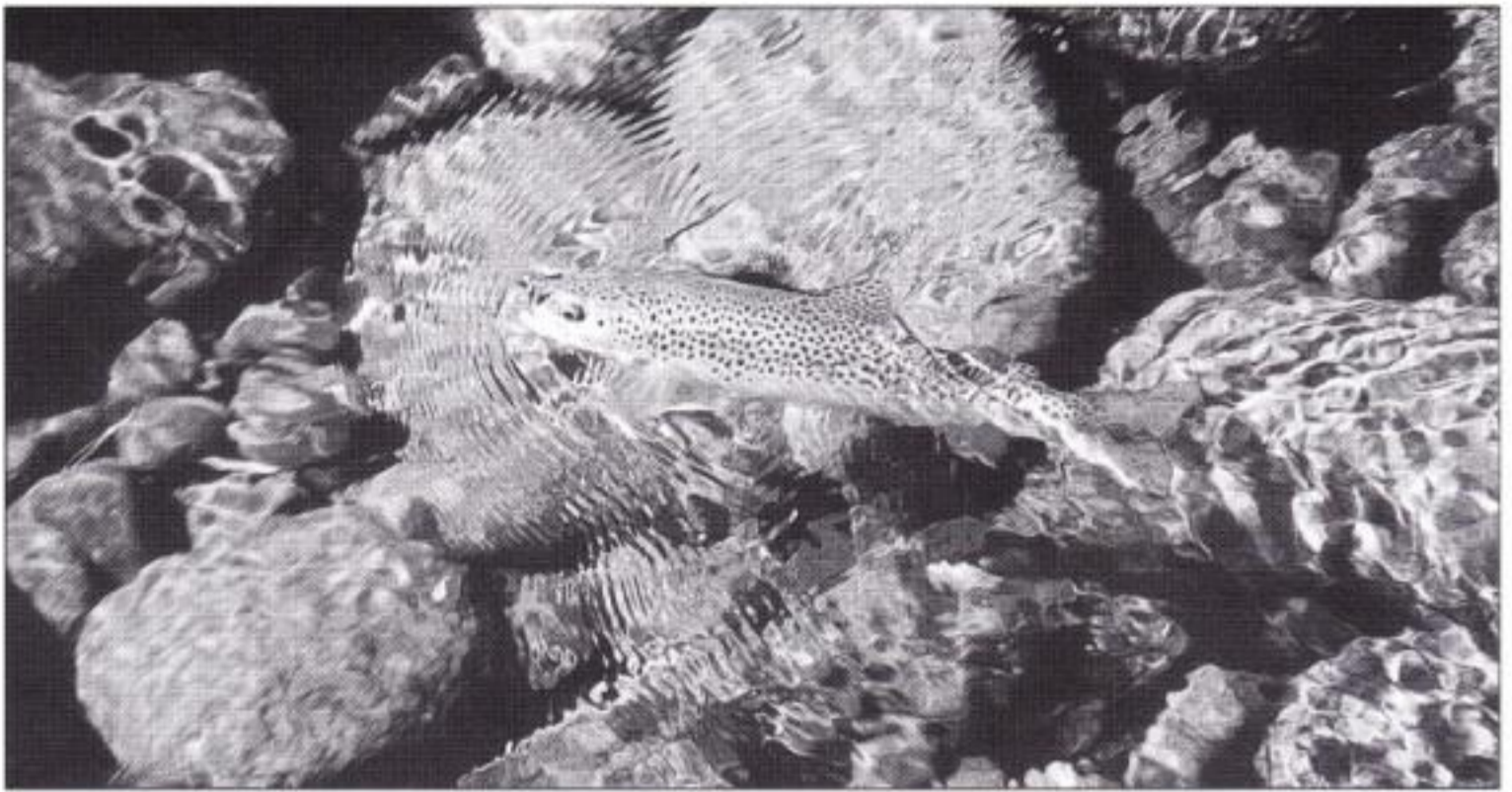
Fishing these upland streams is not always easy and it is often necessary to scramble over and around boulders or through woody vegetation to get into position - take it from me you are unlikely to return home without a few cuts and scrapes to show for the effort. But then that is how I prefer it, it is the adventure, the physical effort, the excitement and eventually



Peter Brigg fishing a pool on the lower Mhlwazini.



Steve Hughes keeps a low profile while upstream nymphing.



A ten inch brown from the Mhlwazini

the satisfaction of deceiving a few trout that sends the blood coursing through my veins. It is being in secret places seldom fished before, the challenges presented by the crystal clear mountain water and shy wild trout that is the draw. It is also the unselfish sharing of this water with like-minded companions, its speckled inhabitants and the whole wilderness experience that is the magic.

To add to this I must say that another of the alluring aspects of these waters, is the quality of the dry fly fishing. There have been days when I have used nothing else - I must ask the question, what more could one wish for in the pursuit of the fine art of fly fishing?

Making the most of the last of the day, I cast to a rising trout in the tail of Crossing Pool - the reward, a beautiful energetic 10 inch brown, a descendant of the Loch Leven variety Parker had introduced into these waters over 100 years ago. I shared the pool with a young local from the rural settlement lower in the valley, who had perfected the 'sidearm whirling slingshot' cast of his hand-line, upstream and across, dead-drifting the worm threaded onto a size #2 hook past the undercuts below us. His reward was a 3lb brown cock fish obviously caught earlier in the day for it resembled more a stick of biltong than the magnificent *Salmo trutta* it must have once been !

With thoughts of this incident humorously playing around my mind and with a wide farewell smile from the 'poacher' as he threaded a fresh worm onto his hook, we set out with the sun hard against the western horizon to cover the last hour or so of hiking to our vehicles. It had been another memorable few days hiking and fishing the delightful Mhlwazini. It's a fine place, an utterly unbeatable slice of paradise.

I am reminded of the words of Tom Sutcliffe : "I share these places with you in the certain knowledge that if, by chance, you happen to go there, you will treat them as sacred, as a venue that will need all our efforts, all our finest ethics, to keep it as unspoiled..."
(The Complete Flyfisherman, August 1996)

