

THE JAN DU TOITS RIVER

By D. BAROUTSOS

Situated about 150 km from Cape Town via Du Toits Kloof on Forestry land in the Hex River range, the Jan du Toits is one of the few rivers still in more or less its original form. The entry to the Kloof is rigidly controlled by both Forestry and Mr van Zyl, whose farm has to be crossed in order to reach the kloof. It is an arduous journey to get to the fishable stretches. In view of this I would recommend that anybody going up the kloof be reasonably fit. It is also extremely hazardous, and nobody should venture forth without someone who has been up the river at least once before. It is dangerous to both the unfit and the inexperienced.

The Jan du Toits is an extremely invigorating experience, matched perhaps only by the Witels, the scenery being magnificent with waterfalls and cliffs; and higher up the kloof

tremendous yellow-wood trees. In certain areas everything is covered with a moss, including the trees; and the river seemingly cuts its path right through the rock, forming rock sluices that look like winding drainpipes.

The fishing in the Jan du Toits is certainly above average. Fish were not as plentiful as in other streams, like the Smalblaar, but in the last season prolific breeding has taken place and there are a number of fingerlings in the river, which grab your fly at the earliest opportunity. The first time Casey, Douglas, James and I ventured up the Kloof, we were totally unaware of what was to happen. Douglas and James had been up earlier with Gavin Grapes and they had landed a number of good fish.

We arrived at the river late on a Friday night and decided to sleep at First Pool because of the dangers of hiking at night. After settling down and preparing our meals I decided to have a look at the head of the pool. Shining my torch into the water I nearly fell off the rock I was sitting on as before my eyes were half a dozen Rainbows, from 6 in. to 17 in. in length. Dashing back to camp, I grabbed my rod and set off to try my luck, with Douglas following to see what the excitement was all about. To cut a long story short I got nothing, but Doug got two; one 15 in. 1½ lb., the other 2 lb. We were totally amazed. If this was what the fishing was like down here, what would it be like further up?

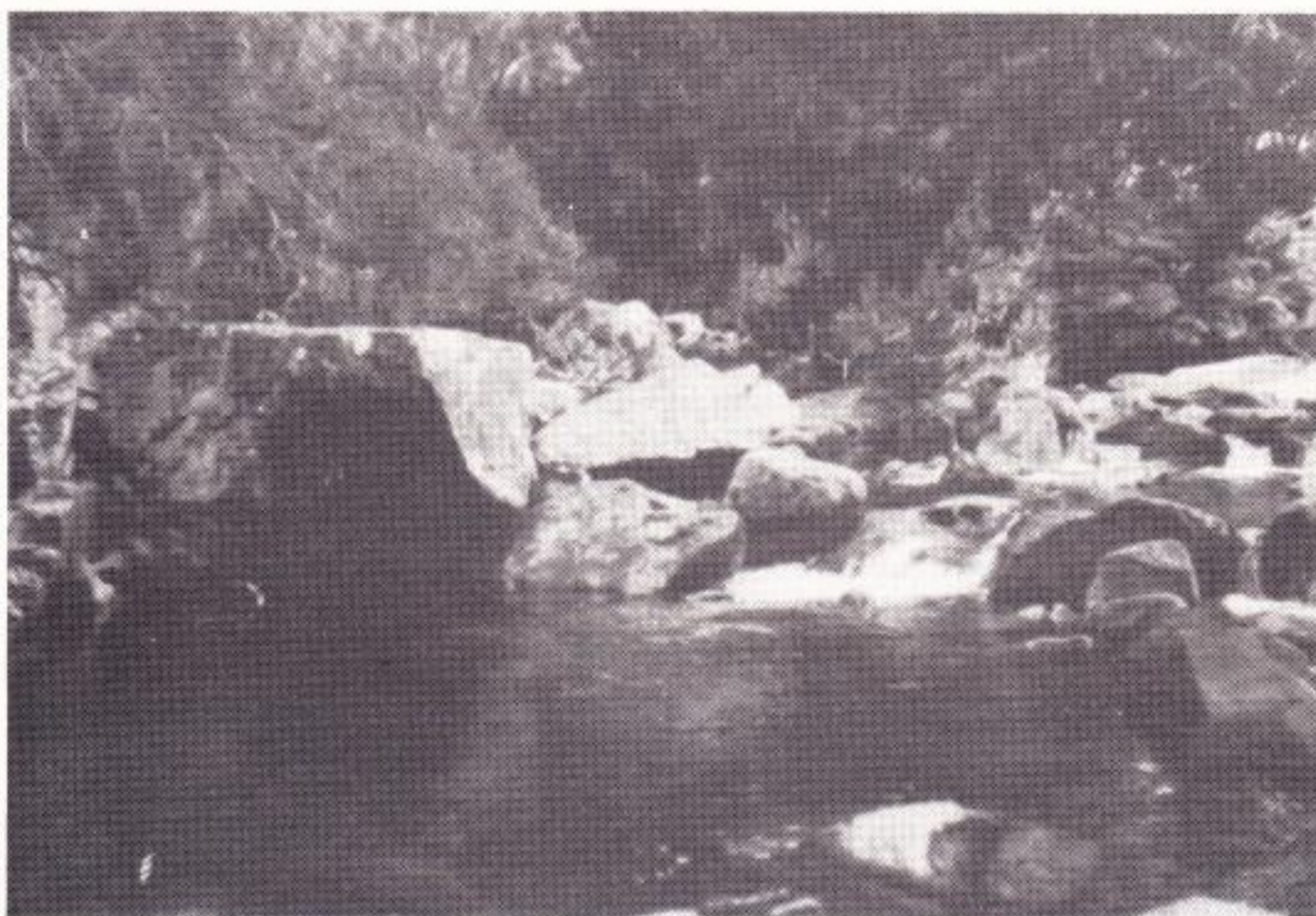


The fall at the so-called Ladder in the Jan du Toit's River.

Photograph per D. Baroutsos.

Next day James and Casey opted to fish the lower stretches while Doug and I went upstream. Starting a little below Overhang, Douglas caught the first fish of the day, a hen of 13 in. weighing a good pound and a bit. Fishing upstream, he got another one and afterwards I got two as well in rapid succession, all of 13 in. and 14 in. Coming up to a pool, I cast into it, with Douglas sitting and watching me from a rock next to me. As I turned round to say

Two attractive pools in the Jan du Toit's River.



Photograph per D. Baroutsos.



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something to him my rod nearly got taken out of my hand. Before I could recover myself the fish had smashed me. This happened a couple more times with me and Doug, each losing two to three fish, all of 2 lb. or over. We were in high spirits but rather disappointed that no fish had been brought to land.

Then the picture changed. Having negotiated Chute Pool, we came to a string of small pools. Casting first, a split-second before Doug, I had a fish take but spit the hook. Douglas's fly, which landed seconds later, was engulfed by a magnificent Rainbow which took off like a miniature submarine. After a number of minutes this magnificent hen was landed, 18 in., 3 lb. Doug was ecstatic, his largest fish out of a river having come to land. While he admired his catch I fished a bit higher up, and coming round a bend to a pool, I put my nymph right against the water fall. Suddenly a Rainbow drifted lazily out of a crevice, engulfed my fly, tilted its fins and broke me. Hearing my rather liberal usage of the French language, Doug came up to find out what had happened. I at first could not believe it myself. That fish could have been anywhere above 4 lb.

We returned after that to find most of the fish refusing. But I landed my biggest one of the trip so far, a hen of 1½ lb., and between the four of us we handled nine fish of size. The big fish that had broken me below the fall had apparently disappeared. Compounded by the fact that hikers were up before us, their great boot-marks all over the river, we were rather disappointed by our performance.

To make up for it we decided to go all the way to the Ladders. This is a magnificent area of the kloof, with a couple of really old Cape Yellow-wood trees and the Ladders themselves which are falling apart on the face of the cliff. On the way back we crept up to a pool and witnessed an incredible sight. Two Rainbows, a cock and hen in full spawning colours, were following each other around the pool. Both were the same size. Unbelievable though it may seem they were both 3½ to 4 lb. After a brief council of war Doug and I decided to leave them alone. This brings me to a matter of great importance. Last year was the first time trout had bred in reasonable numbers. Before that all fish in the river had been stocked by physically carrying them up. The fish above Chute Pool were mostly large, aged Rainbows, with no small fish. Most of these fish were taken from below Chute Pool and moved upstream by Jan du Toits regulars like Jonathan Rodgers.

The river is very intimate and yields its secrets in varying degrees. The big fish are there, but will not remain if everybody takes them out. I can only implore that everybody tries to adhere to the unwritten rule of Jan du Toits; return any and all fish, except maybe a trophy fish. The fish are not plentiful enough to go round, and in this way the fishing can be preserved for future seasons. Personally on successive trips we have caught and released the same fish time after time, and if handled carefully when released, they do not show any ill effects. Casey even caught one below Overhang with a No. 12 Irrestible stuck firmly in its jaw.

We, the fishermen, will benefit from a no-kill rule on the river. Nobody else. Why spoil somebody's chances of catching a 3 lb. Rainbow in a river just so that you can prove to family and friends what a good fisherman you are? Photos are sufficient evidence of piscatorial prowess. If we all pull our weight as far as this is concerned, we can possibly have a truly unique Cape stream.