

AN EXPLORATION GROUP REPORT

THE MIDDLE ELANDSPAD



The Camelhead Pool, looking downstream. This photograph brings us closer to the country outlined in the 1958 stocking expedition, and underlines the challenge of the terrain of the upper end of the Middle Elandspad.

Photographs: F. S. Simpson and A. J. Nel

THE report by Alan Yates in PISCATOR No. 38, describing the Lower Elandspad up to the Barrier Falls, was a very detailed and informative piece of work. With this as our starting point a group of us decided to explore and report on the middle section.

The trip was made during a weekend in May, 1961, when the river was low. This is an important pre-requisite to a traverse of the Elandspad kloof, for the river winds through very steep and mountainous country. Had the level been a few feet higher it would have been impossible to keep to the river bed for any distance at all and we would have been forced to negotiate most of the journey on the steep and rocky sides of the gorge itself. This factor, coupled with the great "drop" of the river as it wends its way to the lower section, makes the Middle Elandspad a strenuous proposition!

Six of us started from the main road on a Friday morning and reached the upper Elandspad after five hours' walking along the overland route through Phesantekraal and over the Arrowhead, which is very well marked by cairns of stones.

We reached the Elandspad via Grassy Basin by following a very small tributary, and proceeded to pass two small and very dark-looking pools as we moved upstream along the right-hand bank. On reaching Dew Camp at the foot of Camp Pool—fifty feet long—we decided to "brew up". Camp Pool, which is in shade for most of the day, was very dark indeed, due no doubt to the presence of palmiet.

Dew Camp, just about level with the water, is immediately below Camelhead Pool. To pass this 200 ft.-long stretch of water it is necessary to climb high up on the right-hand bank as the ravine here narrows to sheer rock on both sides. Just past Camelhead Pool are the two Pot Pools and Kremlin Falls—the latter named because of the rock formation on the left-hand bank!

Pofadder Pool is further up the river after one has passed above a bushed reach on the right-hand side. This pool (60 ft. long by 40 ft. wide) has a comfortable camping place on the right-hand bank, which we hope will now be quite safe for human habitation since its guardian has been dispatched. This was as far upstream as we went.

Next morning we set off early and moved downstream from Camp Pool. The river quickly became impassable, due to the abundance of bush and reeds through which it ran. We climbed up on the south bank as high as possible, but even on the slopes there were bushed reaches. Kevin's Dilemma was an especially thick growth! Here the bush and reeds were growing well over six feet high. After this we moved gradually down to the river, which was still wending through bush, and reached the water just



One of the Pot Pools, at the upper extremity of the Middle Elandspad. The Pot Falls can be seen in the middle right of the photograph. The geological similarity to the Pothole Pools in the Lower Elandspad will be noticeable to all readers familiar with this river system.

past Kingfisher Pool. Here the Elandspad is remarkably like the Witels. It runs quickly through steep kloof walls and was at last beginning to clear. The long reach from this point to Boulder Pool—where we had an early lunch—was easy going. Along this stretch (as also above Dew Camp) we saw no sign of piscatorial life, although the kingfisher we saw at the pool named for it suggested the presence of fish, assuming that the bird is a better fisherman than we!

One thing we did notice, however, was that the going was getting progressively worse. The mountains were becoming steeper at the side of the river, which itself was beginning to lose altitude perceptibly, and we had to be more careful in negotiating our way from stone to stone. Notwithstanding this we had to press on as quickly as we could, since Junction Pool (below Barrier Falls) seemed an alarming distance away considering the few hours of daylight left to us. And it was as well that we did!

From Boulder Pool onwards the rocks became larger, the sides steeper and rockier, and the river stronger. Just before Chimney Pool the river diverged into two streams inside a huge basin which converged again to present a difficult and dangerous section until we reached Wade Pool. Here we kept to the north bank and at the confluence saw the river fall ten feet into Chimney Pool. The route was on the right-hand bank and we found a ledge leading through a chimney. After passing our packs through this—and following them—we carried along another ledge, slowly descending to the level of the river.

At this point we came to Helshoogte Pass. Here the river runs through a canyon with 15 ft. high boulders sticking out of it a few feet apart. The water was flowing strongly and we chose the lesser of the two evils and stayed on the right-hand bank. This pass is 50 ft. above the water and is reached by climbing up a boulder, dropping 8 ft. to a thin earth ledge and then walking along a path of bush and fern.

There are a considerable number of pools and swims in this delightful but difficult section of the Elandspad.

After traversing Helshoogte there is a steep rock face, and we climbed up this as high as possible. At the end of this traverse we moved down towards the river again and came across a 15 ft. waterfall. In a dry winter this may present a barrier to fish, but there is evidence that in the wet season the river rises much higher than its summer level. A tributary joins the Elandspad, just after these falls.

This photograph, looking upstream to the 1958 stocking area (and the common watershed of the Elandspad and the Holsloot) was taken just before the 1961 expedition reached "Kevin's Dilemma".



After the tributary we came to a narrow pool which was obviously a swim. This was impossible to navigate as there was no place to blow up our Lilos and launch them into the river. Once again we climbed up the right-hand bank and circumnavigated a corner in the rock to reach Crevice Crawl, above Crevice Pool. This is a niche in the rock, going into it for about 6 ft. with less than 2 ft. headroom, and the whole is 80 ft. in length. It descends slowly to about 8 ft. above the river. Crevice Pool is about 25 ft. deep at the head, but shallows at the tail.

Here we came to the river level again and walked along the bank until we came to Wade Pool. From Wade Pool to Barrier Falls the going was easier and we made quick time to the upper limit of the 1956 expedition. By this time it was getting dark and we had to start looking for a camp site. Fortunately we found a dry ledge just before Cascade Pool. The next day we set off early once more and reached the main road just as a thick mist was coming down.

To compare the Middle Elandspad with the Witels leaves the Elandspad second best. It is infinitely more dangerous and difficult, and this is especially true of that part of the river between Chimney Pool and Wade Pool. At that point to keep to the river would be worse going than even Cascade Ravine and we certainly do not recommend it to anyone moving upstream. The north bank is the lesser of the two evils, even if one is walking on brush and fern fifty feet above the river. So far as fishing is concerned, I should say that it would be extremely difficult in this sector to approach the water. There is also a dearth of camp sites from Kingfisher Pool to Junction Pool. This can be especially annoying if the end of the day comes too soon, as it did with us!



[I have studied the above report with extreme interest, and congratulate Fraser Simpson and Anton Nel and their friends on a very well done piece of exploration work. They originally suggested to me that the sector they have described should be called the "Upper" Elandspad, but I have decided that a more correct description would be "Middle". On their short venture upstream from the point at which they struck the river (the same point of entry as that chosen by the December 1958 stocking party—see *PISCATOR* No. 44) they turned back before they reached the Upper Barrier Falls. There is a considerable stretch of water *above* the top falls, and I think that it is this that must await the appellation "Upper".

In charting the route through the middle of the kloof, however, Simpson and Nel have done a valuable piece of research work. We are a long way from being finished with the Middle and Upper Elandspad, and much present thought is being given to the advisability of restocking it with "browns" (in terms of the acidity of the higher sections of the kloof). This means that many more parties will visit this fascinating piece of country in the future.



A member of the 1961 expedition, Mr. M. Wilson, is seen here at the head of a pool reached immediately after traversing "Helshoogte Pass". The party moved on by climbing over the rocks on the right side of the pool.

When Colin Kisch and I found the Lower Barrier Falls in November 1956, we reported our trip with a general warning that the Middle Elandspad Kloof was no place for the novice! Simpson and Nel have endorsed this warning and have, at the same time, given us a useful indication of some of the difficulties which have to be overcome, and the routes by which the 1961 expedition overcame them.

It was a pity that they did not have more time for fishing in the general area of the 1958 stock planting, but I have been on far too many of these *ab initio* trips to blame them for this. With an unknown stretch of dangerous country to traverse the prime instinct is—rightly!—to press on, and I am quite sure that the work done by F. and J. Simpson, A. J. Nel, K. Gill and M. Wilson in the Middle Elandspad in May 1961 will be the foundation of many hours of pleasure for others who will follow in their footsteps.—A.Y.]