

# Yellowfish on the Orange River: a new flyfishing frontier

by Tim Rolston

Total tranquility, the call of a fish eagle, the rush of the water through the rapids, pitch dark night skies broken only by more stars than you ever thought existed. The feeling of personal insignificance compared to the grandeur of the natural world. A river literally teeming with fish, a large raging river, forcing its way through some of the most barren and spectacular landscapes in the country, if not the world.

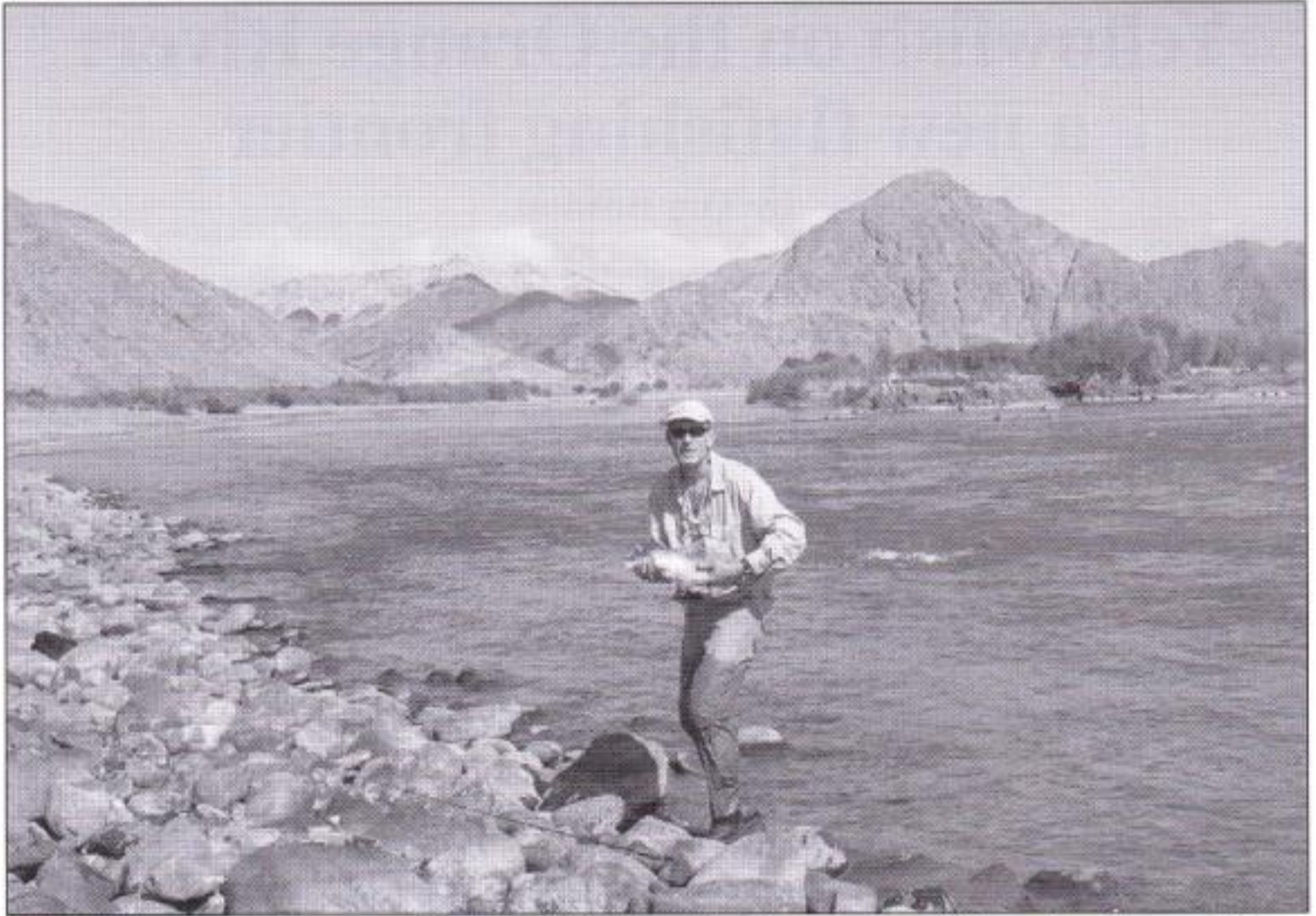
This is what fishing the lower Orange River is all about. Little in the way of facilities, no cell phones, little noise at all other than the natural sounds of the bush - the vervet monkeys and white eyes that are entirely dependant on the thin strip of vegetation that hugs the river on either side. Beyond this linear oasis lies nothing, no water, almost no vegetation, the occasional half man's or quiver tree, broken rock and sand.

The lower Orange River is spectacular in its barrenness. When we first visited it we wondered where the river was until we were upon it. There is little initial indication that any river exists and it seemed foolhardy to imagine that a desert landscape with an annual rainfall of around 15mm would sustain a river as large as the Orange. The truth is it doesn't sustain it at all. The river is born in the Lesotho highlands and it suffers the impact of man-made structures such as irrigation canals, hydro-electric schemes and water control dams throughout its length. Its body is sliced and separated with pieces being transferred to different catchments and others being delayed in their long haul to the Atlantic Ocean. The sun beats down on it and the land soaks up lots of it. Despite this, the Orange River just keeps pushing on, getting smaller in places and larger in others, the flow dependent more on the power and irrigation needs of the valley than any natural precipitation. The river survives despite this interference and it is full of fish. That is what first lured us there, some years ago now, to travel to the borders of South Africa to test its fishing potential.

We were by no means the first ever to fish the river or even fly fish it for that matter, but it was a new adventure for us and our first efforts were somewhat disappointing. The river for most of the summer months, as its name would suggest, is really orange. It is laden with silt, flows like a steam train and one's first impressions are that it is unfishable and probably not worth the effort of even trying.

On our first trip we caught a few fish, but, as with so many things, it wasn't the trip itself but the constant thought of the trip afterwards that led us to realise the fantastic potential of this huge fishery. Our thinking went along these lines: Why did we not catch more fish than we did when they were obviously there? Why, in a river with such prolific insect life is there little evidence of actively feeding fish?

Months after this first foray it became pretty obvious that the problem was with the methods we used. The nature of the river and the habits of its piscine inhabitants do not lend



*John Yelland provides proof that the SLMN method is as successful on the Orange River as it is on the Vaal.*



*The gentle light of an Orange River sunset belies the intense heat that can be experienced in the Richtersveld National Park during the day.*

themselves to the style of fishing one might use for brown trout on a spring creek. In fact they don't lend themselves to most conventional fly fishing methods. Simply put, the fish feed in fast (and I mean fast) and dirty (really dirty) water, hard on the bottom and no amount of mending line is going to get flies into their feeding zone. Yet we knew there were fish there, big, fast and hard-fighting fish and we wanted to catch some. We wanted to catch them badly. With the introduction of Czech style or shortline nymphing methods it became apparent, at least in theory, that this was the way to attack the brawling rapids of the Orange River and in our minds we were already hooking fish by the dozen.

The method we required would have to overcome the biggest obstacle to our experiments to date. We would have to present flies hard on the bottom to reach the fish that we knew were feeding there.

The first opportunity to test our theories came when John had to take a trip to Namibia. The one benefit of a road trip measured in days is that a two-hour detour is viewed as insignificant and it didn't take much to persuade John to make a stop in the Richtersveld to test our theories. In fact, the lure of lots of large fish made the idea more than appealing and John planned his travels to accommodate a two-day stopover on the Orange River.

We had already substantially perfected the short-line mono, Czech-nymphing techniques on carp in moving water and were confident that if the methods worked on the Orange, John would find out within the short time frame allowed. This was indeed not supposed to be a fishing trip anyway, it wasn't really even an experiment in the real sense. We viewed it more as an opportunity to confirm a long nurtured hypothesis about fishing this water. You will find that these SLMN, Czech-nymphing methods inspire supreme confidence and we were more than sure that they would work. It was just a case of dotting the "I's" and crossing the "T's" .

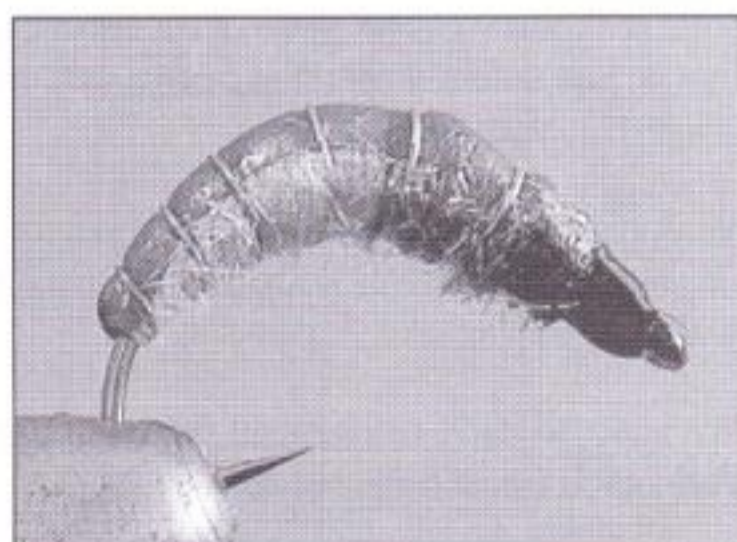
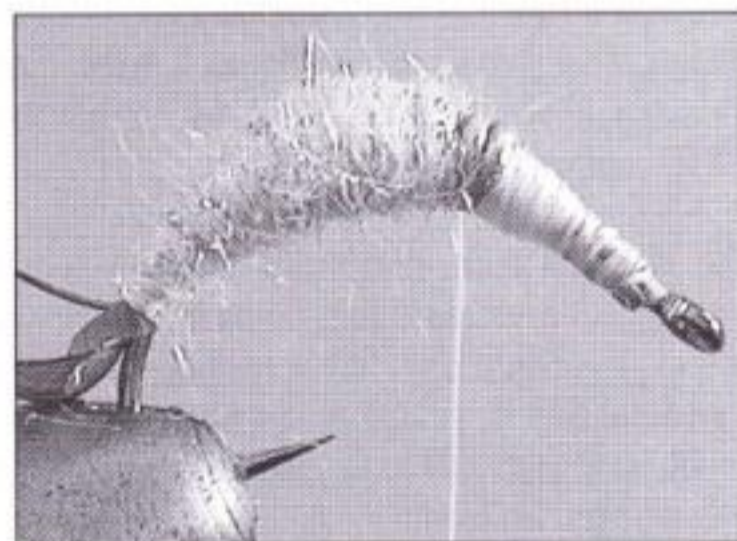
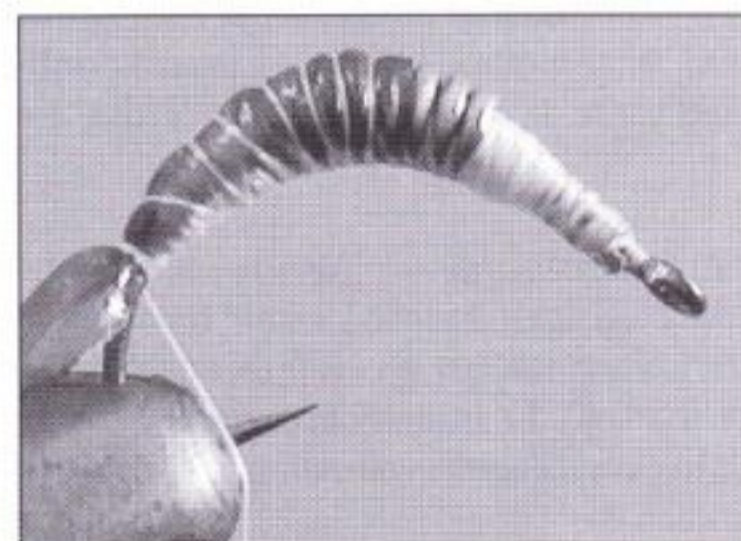
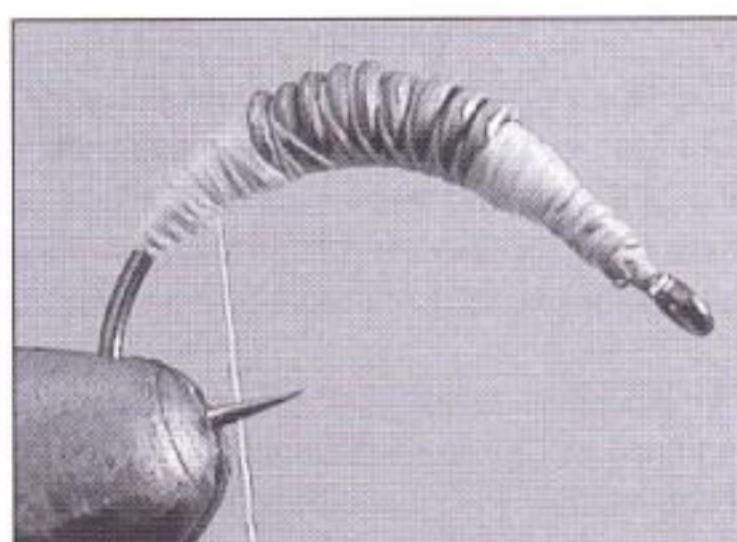
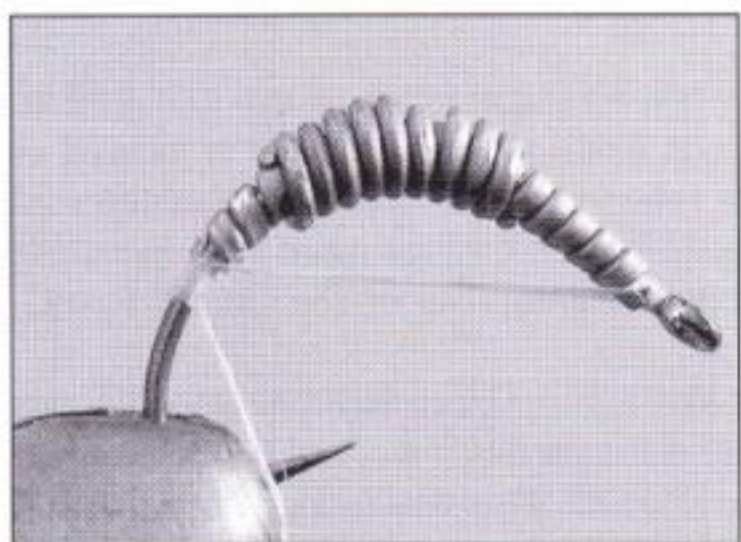
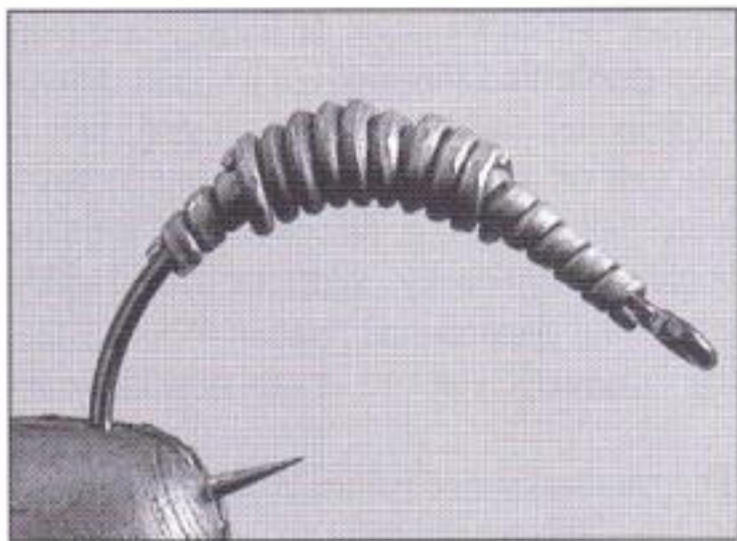
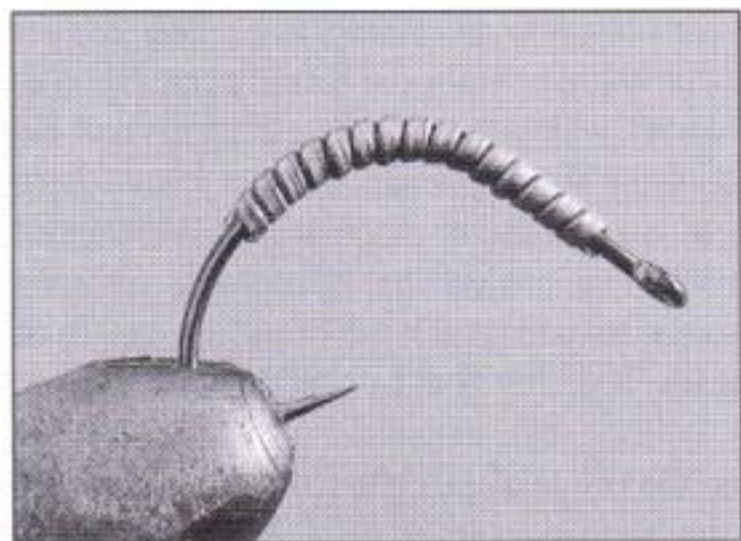
To say that John had some success would be an understatement. With no cell phone contact in the area, I had to wait until he was on the road again before I would receive any news. I sat in Cape Town feeling like NASA staff when their spacecraft disappears behind the moon, sitting and waiting for news from the void. Eventually I received a highly excited phone call to say that John had been catching smallmouth yellowfish at the rate of nine or ten an hour.

John reckoned it to be some of the most exciting fishing he had ever had in his life. Given that he had recently returned from a successful trip taking tiger fish on fly in the Okavango River, this was praise indeed.

In all probability John was the first person ever to use shortline nymphing techniques on this stretch of the river and on his return it was only a matter of time before we planned to make the trip again.

We have, to date, run several fishing camps on the Orange in the Richtersveld National Park, each one a huge success.

We have found that there are not only plenty of smallmouth yellows but also a good number of largemouths as well. These fish can grow huge as the largemouth yellowfish



*A typical caddis larva tied for the Orange River by Tim Rolston and John Yelland. The major constituent is lead.*

is South Africa's largest scaled freshwater fish and the current angling record is over 20 kilograms!!

We now run trips in the winter months as the summer temperatures make the whole exercise overly taxing in the extreme heat. The water flow is normally lower in these months and, as a result, clearer - although the flow of the river is more controlled than natural.

The first trip saw a group of eight anglers catch well over four hundred fish in a five-day stay. John and I, despite running the camp and fishing only about four hours a day, landed more than 150 between us.

The biggest to date are a largemouth of five plus kilos that fell to me and another largemouth taken by Jan Roussouw on his last morning that max'ed out his scale at 5Kg... the actual weight still a matter of conjecture.

From the last control dam to the sea, the Orange River flows some 1 500 kilometres and, above that, there are still miles and miles of it. The Vaal River flows into it near Douglas and the fishing continues upstream in both rivers.

The fishing opportunities on the Vaal-Orange river system are like the stars in the Richtersveld night sky - too many to comprehend. If this is a type of fishing unknown to you then it's about time you put the record straight. There are still hundreds of places, if not thousands, where you could be the first human ever to cast a fly. This is the new frontier of South African fly fishing, with large, indigenous fish that run like freight trains and are highly susceptible to fly fishing methods, albeit somewhat specialised ones.

The stark beauty of the area and the sense of adventure combine to provide fly fishing of the highest order. All good fishing has some things in common. Natural beauty, wild fish, the companionship of good friends and, in this modern and hectic world, no cell phone contact.

The Orange River offers all of these and more.

There are some things that we all do in our lives, that make us want to live forever. Fishing the Orange River for spectacular indigenous yellowfish is one of those things. After a twelve-hour trip home, the glow of the city lights seems to be a blot on, what for the past week has been, a perfect and natural landscape. All that remains is to live with one's memories, sort out the photos and plan that next trip.

*Tim Rolston and John Yelland of the Ultimate Angling fly fishing shop in Raapenberg Road, Mowbray, have developed effective fly fishing methods for yellowfish on the lower Orange River and recorded them on CD. They run regular winter camps for fly anglers on the river in the Richtersveld reserve and can be contacted on 021 6866877.*

***"Fly rods are like women; they won't play if they are maltreated!"  
Charles Ritz, A Fly Fisher's Life.***

