

BECKS

By James Hartley

A photograph in a fishing magazine prompted me to tell the following true tale about a friend of mine. The picture showed an angler in low water conditions, standing in the middle of a river after having cast twelve yards or so straight upstream and the caption read "fishing the upstream wet fly". The only similarity with the real thing was the angler's drab clothing. At least he had that bit right but I'm almost certain he was fishing a dry fly. The time to fish the upstream wet fly is when the water is running off and preferably when there is a hatch.

Joe is a professional fly dresser, who ties a mean fly, and as such is usually ready, willing and able to accept an invitation to go fishing at the drop of a hat. David, being well aware of this telephoned him one afternoon in early August and off they went to the river Doe, a small stream near Ingleton that was dashing off the slopes of Ingleborough after recent rain.

On arriving, Joe realised that in his haste he had forgotten his fly reel - plus of course the line that was on it - and it was too late and too far to return for it. Fortunately, he had some woven terylene backing of twenty five or thirty pounds' breaking strain and had remembered to bring with him a soft actioned 101/2 foot rod.

The backing was tied to the keeper ring, threaded through the rod rings and cut off at a point where it came easily to the left hand. To the end of the backing was attached the leader and a team of three wet flies, which, during the course of the evening, varied between a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear, a Waterhen Bloa and a Snipe and Purple or a Snipe and Yellow. When the backing was thoroughly wet it probably weighed as much as a one weight fly line.

With his left hand, Joe held the line as it came from the keeper ring just as he would had it come from the reel. With this arrangement he could recover line with his left hand to bring a trout that had taken the point fly within reach of his net.

In this sort of fishing you do not strike but keep in contact with the flies, feel for the fish and tighten when they take the fly.

Fortunately, the wind, which usually comes down the valley, was upstream - so enabling him to approach the trout from behind. Due to the shortness of his casts little of his fishing was done from a standing position and most of it was done while sitting on the bank, rock or tree root.

The recent rain encouraged some olives and August Duns to hatch and brought the trout to the surface in their search for food. This activity continued until the final whistle went at half-past eight.

"And what would you have done if the wind had been downstream?" I asked when he told the story on the following day.



Alan Meyburgh of Pietermaritzburg using his Orvis One Ounce on the Rifle Spruit at Rhodes.



Tony Kietzman of Johannesburg using his two -weight Thomas & Thomas on the Boarman's Chase section of the Bell River above Rhodes.



Alan Meyburgh lands a two pound rainbow on the upper Sterkspruit at Barkly East.

"Kept even lower and fished downstream," he replied. "It's easy." And I've got to admit that it is. In fact, sometimes it is so easy that fishing a single dry fly upstream makes a pleasant change.

Should you be wondering how to cope with the same predicament on a river twenty yards wide, the answer is simple: pretend it is five yards wide and ignore the rest. All the trout are not in the middle or under the opposite bank.

Now I can hear voices saying "OK, I've got the message, but how many did he catch?" The answer is about fifty seven - one every five minutes - with the best weighing fifteen ounces. That's what I call upstream wet fly fishing, a style suited to all small streams.

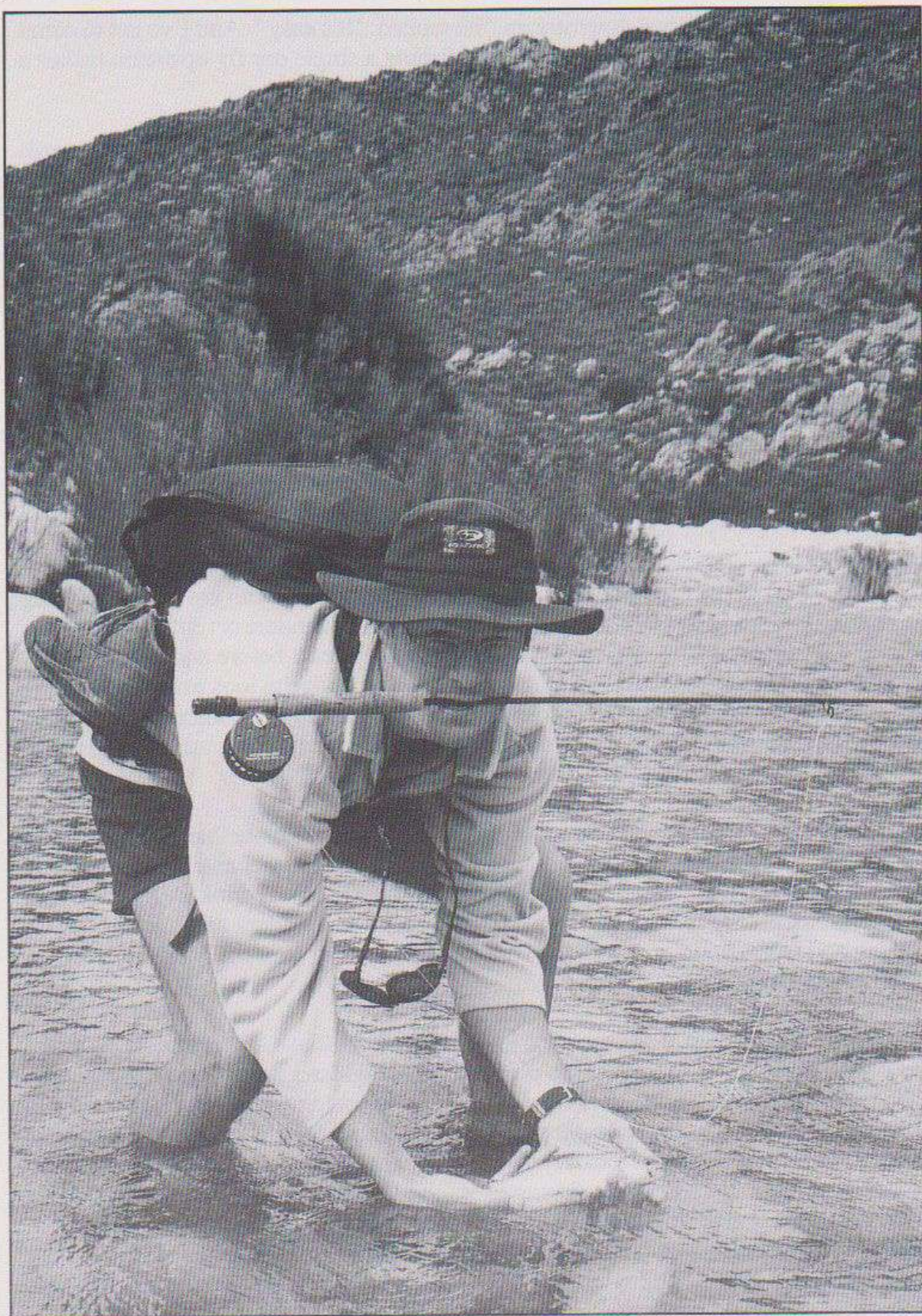
Many readers will be familiar with Mr Hewitt's description of the three stages of an angler's life: to catch as many fish as possible, as big a fish as possible and finally the most challenging fish. As is often the case with something put so neatly, it cannot cover all aspects of our sport and overlooks fishing for fun. This is the essence of fishing small streams, or becks, where a trout over a pound is a monster.

Beck fishing is getting away from the rush and strife of modern life. It is not having to get your money's worth by catching a limit bag. It is not competing with anyone or anything and nothing is at stake. It is all about making memories for the future or reliving them from the past. It is sitting on the same rock you sat on twenty years before and catching a six incher from the same swim. It is leaning over a familiar bridge to look at a view, picking watercress or mushrooms and remembering the long gone call of a corncrake in a certain meadow. It is fishing in Lilliput with small flies for small trout and yet it can still fulfil any of Mr Hewitt's three stages.

Any 10 or 11-foot rod that will cast a number five or six line is more than adequate and a waistcoat is ideal for carrying flies, scissors, nylon, floatant and sinkant. If you are young and have to cover a lot of ground to have a good day take food and drink with you or your fun is diminished. Becks can be fished in wellingtons but waders are much better for crossing and recrossing the stream to avoid obstructions or cover fish; and don't forget, stealth brings rewards.

Each stream has its own characteristics, just as individuals have, but generally speaking they can be divided into those that run off the fells, or highland waters, and those that run in the valleys below. A granite stream in Cornwall or one coming off a fell in the north will both rise and run off in a day and seldom be darker in colour than bitter beer, but those that run in valleys will probably be too dirty to fish on the first day of heavy rain. Temperatures too can determine when the best fishing times are likely to occur. The heat of the day quickly dissipates on the hills but is likely to be retained in the valleys and so fishing tends to end soon after tea on highland streams but may continue until midnight in lower areas. Just as days are shorter on higher ground so too are the seasons starting in May and ending in early September.

To catch a large number of trout without a great deal of effort and have considerable fun while doing so, depends on choosing a day after heavy rain and fishing a team of three wet flies. With any luck at all the sun will be shining, some sort of olives will be hatching and the



Peter Nel with a wily brown from that most challenging of becks, the upper Witte in Bain's Kloof.

choice of flies will not be crucial. Apart from those already mentioned, meaty flies with peacock herl bodies are usually acceptable, and I know of one occasion when olives were coming off and the trout only wanted a Treacle Parkin.

If, when fishing downstream, the trout are plucking at the flies without being hooked, then the chances are that the rod is being held at too low an angle to the water. Raising the tip of the rod so that there is a nice curve of slack line to the water gives the fish time to turn before feeling any resistance and helps to hook them. The more water there is, the closer to your own bank should the flies be cast. In fact there are times when the flies are best cast directly downstream no more than one yard from it and brought slowly back upstream with a figure of eight retrieve.

Leisurely progress up or downstream should produce enough trout to satisfy the soul, most of which can be returned carefully to the water. By the way, contrary to popular preaching, it isn't a mortal sin to keep the odd one for the pot.

In my experience fishing upstream produces a larger average size of fish than fishing down, but frequently the wind will determine the direction. One other point. It is usually easier to cover the larger fish correctly from below.

If no fish are rising put a weighted Pheasant Tail nymph or a leaded shrimp on the point, and if you have trouble knowing when trout has taken the wet fly put a red or black palmered dry fly on the top dropper and watch that. They are good indicators and trout like the taste of them!

Never neglect the bank from which you are fishing and ease your way upstream covering your own side first. Good fish often lie one foot from the bank. If the water is broken by a rock or a drop in the river bed, use the broken water as cover when fishing the quiet water upstream. Having said this, the streamy broken water will usually hold trout in summer and fishing these runs can be very entertaining. They are the easiest bits to fish.

Small black flies will serve you well beneath trees and bushes in summer, and at other times a dry Greenwell or Grey Duster is a good standby in the daytime, whilst a small sedge is a better bet later in the day.

Catching a large trout in becks by design, rather than accident, probably meets the requirements of Mr. Hewitt's third stage and a lot of experience of the water is needed to discover where such a fish lies. I well remember my first one many years ago. It weighed just over a pound and eventually fell for a dry sedge fished downstream and deliberately dragged over its lie in the fading light. Smaller trout too have given great satisfaction due to their inaccessibility.

And what does it matter if we lose a good fish? There are plenty of others to compensate for those lost and the disappointment is slight compared with losing a salmon or sea trout. One more reason why beck fishing is fun fishing and a solace for our busy lives.

Editor's note: This chapter is from an as yet unpublished book "Trout on Tuesday" by James Hartley of Burnley, England and is carried with permission.