

# An unprepossessing little trickle...

by Ed Herbst

Every small stream fanatic dreams of finding his or her own water. Ideally the stream will be heavily bushed because such conditions intimidate and discourage all but the most committed. It will not be home to giant trout because such fish attract undue attention. One's hopes are premised on such realities because the chances of finding a small, rarely fished trout stream in more favourable surroundings and conditions are negligible.

My angling partner, Tom Sutcliffe, and I have clung tenaciously to such dreams despite almost routine disappointment. We subjected a 4WD vehicle to fairly severe punishment trying to find the source of the Slanghoek stream between the towns of Paarl and Worcester about an hour and a half out of Cape Town. Where it made its way between the vineyards in the valley it was severely canalised but it had a good flow and, we reasoned, its headwaters must hold promise. The headwaters turned out to be a marsh.

We then turned our attentions to a tiny stream hallowed in the annals of the Cape Piscatorial Society, the Dwars in the Banhoek Valley between the towns of Stellenbosh and Franschoek. Thirty years ago, Society members gained access through the good offices of a farmer. Good fishing was to be had and Tony Biggs's encounter with a leopard on the Dwars became the stuff of legend. Then the farm was sold and access was denied by the new owner. Tom and Dean Impson of Cape Nature Conservation got permission to visit the stream from the Forestry Department. They found the stream virtually dry thanks to a diversion weir and water pipe built by the Department of Water Affairs.

Our next attempt at finding a "new" small stream was to revisit a stream that Tom had fished about twenty years ago. On the basis of a single slide, the Amandel stream had acquired almost mythical status - in my mind at least.

On maps the Amandel is shown as a tributary of a stream once famous for its trout fishing - the Hex. The Hex rises near the small country town of Worcester in the hinterland of Cape Town. It is wine country and the early Dutch and French settlers gave these streams their evocative names, the Almond and the Witch or Hex.

Today the Hex is prey to excessive water abstraction by farmers to irrigate the vineyards and by alien invasive trees such as the Australian black wattle which infests the banks. This, in turn, has led to rising water temperatures and to black bass supplanting the trout and the indigenous witvis.

The slide I mentioned showed trout hovering in water as thin and clear as air, the fish almost as transparent as their surroundings. After many enquiries we found out which farmers to approach for access and set off on a clear Spring morning. We found that the Amandel no longer existed. It was just a dry water course, surrounded by vineyards. What horrified Tom the most was recognising a boulder the size of a house as the one from which he had taken the slide. Where, beneath it, trout had once sheltered, there was now only sun - bleached stone.





*The spectacular gorge that is home to the Swith Stream, headwaters of the Luzi River in Maclear.*





*The Editor contemplates the Swith Stream from the bridge on the Naude's Nek pass....*



*... and ties into a good fish a kilometre downstream.*



Constant disappointment inures one against hope, which is why Tom and I failed to recognise the potential of a tiny brook that we routinely crossed during our annual visits to the Drakensberg mountain range in the north-Eastern Cape Province.

Early European settlers in South Africa called this range the "Drakensberg", the Dragon Mountains, because the jagged peaks of this long mountain range reminded them of the serrated back of a dragon. Fly fishers and, in particular, small stream fanatics find in them no connotation of evil, for the streams cascading from their commanding heights contain rainbow and brown trout.

The streams were stocked a century ago with eggs brought from Britain aboard the steamships of the era and their progeny populate a dozen or more delightful small streams in the districts of Barkly East, Rhodes and Maclear.

The Naude's Nek pass which links Rhodes and Maclear was pegged in 1896 and constructed several years later by the intrepid forbears of Donie Naude and, whenever we are in the area, we stay with Donie and his wife, Juan-Marie, on their farm, Vrederus. In the past decade a host of fly fishers have used their farm as a base not only to fish its excellent dams but also to explore the streams in the area. After leaving their farm, Vrederus - Afrikaans for peace and rest - one drives over a bridge that spans an unprepossessing little trickle to which, for several years, we paid no attention, probably because trees and undergrowth on both sides of the bridge prevented one from seeing the water.

Then, two years ago, we stopped and actually walked into this grove of trees. Trout ghosted away as we approached a stream with a surprisingly promising flow of water. In great excitement we walked downstream for half a mile to a section hidden by a bend in the stream and a hill. We found a succession of promising runs and pools, ideal Lilliput water that would provide rewarding fishing on whisper rods, tiny flies and delicate tip-pets.

A perusal of topographic maps revealed it to be the Swith Stream, the headwaters of the Luzi, a stream which had given us some excellent and enjoyable fishing. Not even Fred Steynberg, the professional guide based at the nearby village of Rhodes, had fished it.

E-mails and phone calls were the prelude to our return in early November. Donie had obtained the necessary permission from the farmer on the Swith Stream and Hannes Basson kindly showed us some of the outstanding Bushman rock art in the canyon, relic evidence, centuries old, of the now almost extinct people to whom this canyon was once home.

We were only able to spend a single morning in the Swith Stream gorge, catching trout that, in all probability, had never seen a fly before and enjoying spectacular scenery. A pending storm and a tight schedule prevented us from exploring any more than a fraction of its seven or so kilometres but it was sufficient to convince us that we had found something special.

What made the morning all the more special was the first example of Sage's new SLT to be imported into South Africa. Five years ago, Sage rod designer Jerry Siem drew a new





*Hannes Basson, through whose farm the Swith Stream runs, pores over a map of the upper Swith Stream with his son Pieter, Tom Sutcliffe and Ed Herbst.*



*The Swith Stream is home to some exceptional examples of San art.*





*The delicacy of the new Sage SLT was perfectly in harmony with the Lilliput water of the Swith Stream.*

line in the sand with the Sage "Ought - Weight" SPL and it was a hell of a lot further down the beach than anyone had thought possible. It was a radical design specifically created to protect 7 - 10 x tippetts and some fly fishers, accustomed to super fast casting cannons, struggled initially to come to terms with its gentle nature. It rewarded subtlety and was not forgiving of those inclined to strive for distance by thumping the forward cast.

Siem has, however, somehow managed to take the new SLT closer to the mainstream without losing the qualities which have set its predecessor apart from its super light-line opposition. It is now crisper yet loses nothing of its original soft-hued appeal. And, talking of hue, the colour of the blank and the quality of the fittings are, as always with Sage, something special. I called it "chameleon-bronze" because it seemed to change as the light changed.

It was as one with the day, a new rod on a newly discovered small stream. My grateful thanks to Thalia Thane of the The Flyshop in Bryanston, Johannesburg, who lent me her rod, the first in the country, in anticipation of the arrival of my own SLT Ought Weight.

Contact Juan Marie Naude at 045 9321572 or through their website:  
[www.linecasters.co.za/vrederus](http://www.linecasters.co.za/vrederus)

