

ONDERBOSKLOOF STREAM [a historical account]

By the late A. C. Harrison

Surveyed 5/6/7 February 1944

Onderboskloof is a mountain block bought by J D Jooste and Judge “Jackie” de Villiers as a private holiday resort. It is approached by a farm road turning off the main Koue Bokkeveld near De Keur Post Office on the farm “Krommefontein” (Du Toit) and down a private road constructed therefrom down to the bungalows.

Left at 8.45 a.m. from Kenilworth with G. D. Jooste by car, taking his son Charlie. We picked up Fred Bowker at his house in Mowbray. Went via Bain’s Kloof and arrived at Ceres about midday.

The weather was very hot throughout; a SE wind persisting. (It was evidently from a big trade-wind blow, as the Transvaal had a 50-year record rainfall). Very dry and warm (80 deg. F) [27°C] at nights even at an altitude of 2600 odd feet [790 m] above sea level. Gydo Pass and Cold Bokkeveld road very busy with motor transport taking peaches to Prince Alfred Hamlet.

We stayed at Jooste’s Bungalow – very comfortably fitted out. Judge De Villiers and “Garvie” Steyn had arrived earlier and were at the thatched house.

After a late lunch, Jooste took me up to the Waterfall Pool at the head of the gorge. As it was very hot, this climb was a real “workout” for a start.

The main Onderkloof stream rises in the De Keur district on the Cold Bokkeveld plain at about 3000 feet [910 m], with streams and springs from the De Keur-Tafelberg (6267 feet) [1910 m]. Pumping the water table on the Du Toits farm was said to abstract many thousands of gallons a day. The river, at dead low water at Krommefontein, was very sluggish and somewhat swampy with little flow at the private road drift.

The water takes a leap of about 300 feet [90 m] from the rocky escarpment into the top pothole pool of the ravine. Quite a small stream on February 5th.

The main stream flows fairly straight for about three miles from the Upper Waterfall Pool to the Olifants River, falling about 1000 feet [300 m] in this distance. It is characterised by a large number of waterfalls, rock glides and deep potholes which form permanent pools.

The water on February 5, 1944 was quite clear, entirely without peat stain (which is not present to any extent in the Olifants River system) and neutral – approximately pH7.0 to B.D.H. Universal indicator. The water is very well oxygenated by continual disturbance during its passage down the ravine.

The upper part of the ravine has a minor series of falls and potholes below the Upper Waterfall Pool. The passage for trout is probably hampered for several hundred yards below the Upper Waterfall Pool. There is then a moderate slope with rocky pools and runs for about a mile [1.60 km]

In the middle reaches there is a small plateau of alluvial deposits providing 10 to 12 acres [4.5 h] of cultivated lands and here the old farming homestead and the new bungalows are situated. For the few hundred yards across this plateau the river assumes more of the character of an upland trout stream, with few rock ledges, gravel and stony beds, boulder-strewn runs and some glides through emergent plants.

This is the “nursery section” stocked in November 1939 (initial stocking) with 500 trout fingerlings, mixed brown and rainbow, from Jonkershoek.

At Jooste’s bungalow (on the left bank) a large rock-ledge pool has been walled across to impound water and a swing-bridge put up to give access to the Judge’s house on the right bank. Thereafter, the ravine becomes precipitous again. A footpath has been scuffled out for one and a half miles down the Olifants River on the right bank. The climb down from the rock ledge pool or pothole to the next in this series is often fairly stiff going.

Another stream, known as Sterkwater, of very pure, clear water, joins the main Onderboskloof stream a few hundred yards below the bungalows, just above a point where the lower ravine assumes its precipitous character at the falls, plunging into a large pothole known as the “Lower Bathing Pool”. The Sterkwater stream rises in swampy ground at the northern end of the Schurftberg range and flows down another gorge of greater length than that of the Onderboskloof stream. At low water it had a volume equal to that of the main stream, but was said to carry less flood water. It has a sub-tributary of its own from a side-gorge. These tributary streams were not examined but are said to contain some large potholes and rock-ledge pools, but they appear to be more overgrown than the main stream. They were not stocked with trout at the time of the original planting in 1939.

After supper on the 5th, Jooste and I went downstream to the Lower Bathing Pool and the rock-ledge pool below. We tried for some of the originals without success and returned to the hill path by moonlight. I saw a rainbow trout about 11 inches long in the fore-bay pool above the falls plunging into the Lower Bathing Pool. This fore-bay pool is known as “Mary’s Pool” (after Mary de Villiers) because at this point a stream known as “Mary’s Stream enters the main stream by spreading over the rock wall on the right bank (Mary’s Stream comes from the south for about one and a half miles [2.4 km], parallel with the course of the Olifants River).

During the morning of the 6th, Jooste and I went down the ravine to the magnificent “Sinister Pool” which is set in a fine rocky amphitheatre with a side-entering fall. Just below this is a rock-ledge pool – so straight-edged that it appears to have been artificially constructed – known as the “Swimming Bath”. Here we bathed and lunched and rested for an hour or so, as the day was very hot. Just below, there is a rocky slide (known as “Keller’s Slide”, because Jooste’s famous fish-retrieving terrier once nearly came to grief there) leading into a large pool called the “Palmiet Pool” on account of a bank of palmiet reeds at the lower end.

Below this, progress down the ravine is difficult, as the fall becomes steeper but there are quite a number of fine pools which can be reached by a climb down from the path.

We took a path up from the “Swimming Bath” to the hill path, and went down the latter for about 600 feet [180 m] to the Olifants River to try for yellowish. The final descent of the Onderboskloof Stream is most spectacular. It descends the final 300 feet [90 m] by leaping in

a series of falls from pothole to pothole. Some of these potholes are quite large and can be reached only by a difficult traverse in each case. The pool below the final waterfall of about 40 feet [12 m] is very beautiful, about 50 yards [46 m] across and covering about an acre of deep water. It was about 32 feet [10 m] above the bed of the Olifants River but can be reached by flood water. It does not appear to contain any of the indigenous fishes of the Olifants system, but it is interesting that a trout was caught there in 1943. (Two trout, said to be small rainbows, were caught about half a mile [0.80 km] upstream in the Olifants in 1943, above the entry of the Onderboskloof Stream, and these may have been from the Cape Piscatorial Society's stocking of rainbows on the Witzenberg Vlakte in 1940).

Fished the head of this beautiful bottom pool under the spray of the waterfall for about an hour; sinking the fly well far out in the hope of picking up a good trout, but without a touch. Crossed the rocky bridge at the south of the Onderboskloof stream and joined Bowker at the fishing stand on the Olifants, from which one looks down the river for several hundreds of yards [metres] of water hemmed in by steep rocky walls. We each caught some small sawfins (*Barbus serra*) on flies and Bowker was broken by a yellow fish, taking a fly on gut, but we could not tempt any more of the 3-4 pounders which we could see below us.

On the 7th we surveyed the "nursery" part of the main stream, from the swing-bridge and drift up to the "Kraal". The gravels for trout spawning are ample, not only in the "nursery" part of the stream but particularly in the smaller potholes.

The rocks and stones are covered with *Simulium* midge larvae, probably suitable for young trout fry. Mayflies and caddis larvae were fairly well represented. Diving in the kraal rock-ledge pool, I lifted stones in 3-4 feet [1 m] of water revealing Autumn Dun mayfly nymphs feeding on good detritus deposits. (The main stream, coming as it does from farm lands, carries a fair amount of nutrient matter to be deposited in the pools). Dragonflies were very numerous, including the large red *Anax* and I found corydalid toe-biter larvae under stones. Crabs were present and tadpoles plentiful. Typical trout stream fauna at this part.

Quite a few rainbows were seen; none of the originals but several from 11-15 inches [28-38 cm] long, presumed to have been bred in the winter of 1941.

Rainbow trout sampled: 10½ inches [26.6 cm] - 7oz. [198 g], C.F. 37, bred 1941; 5" [12.7 cm]/1944 and; 9" [22.9 cm]/1943; 10 inches [25.4 cm], a younger fish, bred 1942 and; 6" [15 cm]/1943 winter.

Rainbows of 8-9 inches [20-23 cm] were seen, and a number of 5-6 inch [13-15 cm] fingerlings. As no smaller fingerlings were seen, the 5-6 inch [13-15 cm] fish evidently represented the 1943 winter breeding. It was difficult to get trout on the fly in such low water and warm weather. Bowker tried for some of the originals he had previously marked down without success.

(From Jooste's records 22/4/43 – Brown trout 18 ¾ inches [47.6 cm] 2 ¼ lb. C.F. 35 and 15 ½ inches [39.4 cm], 1 lb 6 oz C.F. 37 and; rainbow 14 inches [35.6 cm], 1 lb, C.F. 37).

Jooste reports seeing "transparent small fish", but I could find no galaxias or any other native fish. One white-breasted cormorant was seen at Sinister Pool.

The prospect for the future of this beautiful private trout fishery seems to be good. The brown trout do not seem to have bred.

I suggested that 50 marked Shasta rainbow yearlings be obtained from the hatchery and planted in the top Waterfall Pool, which could hardly be reached by fish from lower down. Probably the trout will become segregated in separate colonies, as upstream success will be debarred to those in many of the lower pothole pools, but localised breeding in the gravel in potholes is very possible.

(Note from Fred Bowker's diary: 29/11/39 – went to Onderbosh Kloof with G. D. Jooste and liberated 500 mixed brown and rainbow trout in “Waterfall Kloof”. Put in about 15 different places about a mile above drift. Lost three dead.

13/12/40 – saw three trout in stream between house and waterfall.

25/4/41 – caught brown trout at upper Bathing Pool, 18 inches [45.7 cm], 2lb and a rainbow of about 1 ½ lb - returned – in low Bathing Pool. Caught one rainbow of about 8 inches [20.3 cm] in Bridge Pool - returned.

15/9/44 – only one small fish but Bowker lost one old fish.

3/3/45 – took only small trout.

[Ed Herbst found this unpublished account in the CPS files. It is interesting for the record, although, sadly, no public fishing is allowed on this stream – Ed.]

Arthur Cecil Harrison ("A.C.") was Honorary Secretary of the CPS and Editor of Piscator over many years.

Dr Frank Bradlow, then President of the CPS, wrote of him “All our lives are richer in every way for having known him. Even those who did not know him well could say the same for he was a totally unjealous man, forever promoting the cause of angling and helping other people. From the first time we met I enjoyed his company and his complete honesty. There was never anything devious or shabby in his attitudes to other people and his extraordinary enthusiasm and unceasing work for the Society never clouded his judgement.”