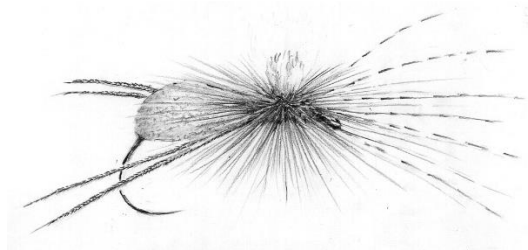


CHAPTER 8

SMALL STREAMS, THEIR TROUT, AND THE NOTION OF INNOCENCE.

But the skills I learned on those little high mountain streams have worked for me pretty much everywhere I've fished, while skills I learned on classic waters don't transplant into the mountains worth a dip of snuff.

JAMES R BABB – CROSSCURRENTS – A FLY FISHERS PROGRESS



Straight off, let's settle what we're talking about here. By small streams I mean really small streams, that are mostly, but not always, in mountain country, and by really small, I mean streams that in places you could just about straddle, or lay the butt of your rod on one bank and have the tip resting on the other.

As a rule, they tend to be close by, or in, mountain country and so flow quickly due to the gradient mountain slopes provide, though obviously that's variable, and, equally, the degree of gradient ultimately shapes the nature and the character of any small stream. Not that small streams are limited to mountain country; you will find more than a few in low lying areas when they often meander slowly and sinuously through grassland plains. And for the purposes of this chapter I want to deal with both typically quick-flowing mountain streams and the meandering, pastoral rivulets.

In steep gradients small streams are often a series of tiny waterfalls that, more romantically, some would call liquid staircases. These waterfalls mostly run into

small cascade pools where there's a lovely combination of slick and churn and bubble and sparkle. Near the throats of these pools, the churn and the bubbles often extend from the streambed right to the surface, offering cover for the trout, but the cover quickly dissipates when the flow slows down as it enters the body of the pool and where riverbed stones and pebbles become clearly visible. Some anglers call a series of small cascade pools *pocket water*, rather than just small pools, and there's really no right or wrong answer to that, except that where a small stream runs in longer, flatter sections that go well beyond just being a small confined pool and rather a run, you can also find pockets. These are discrete, irregularly-shaped depressions that are deeper than the surrounding water. Their depth is given away by two important signs: they have a smoother surface and there's a hint of colour to them, anything from a pale-green, to an amber or a misty-grey, depending on the overall colour of the stream you happen to be fishing.

You might well ask, so what's in a name? Why the fuss over what is, or isn't pocket water? Well, small pools are obvious targets for anglers, but many fly fishers, even experienced ones, miss spotting the pockets in the shallower, flatter water. The most important part of this is that these pockets are prime holding lies in small streams, and because the flow is averagely less turbulent in them than it is in cascade pools, they often hold better fish.

When the gradient flattens out in the middle reaches, small streams start to look more like any river, just smaller, downsized versions of the real thing. So you'll have pools, runs and riffles, and, of course, pockets, but there will be a little less swiftness, swirl and unevenness, and maybe fewer contrary currents. Some runs will be smooth, relatively shallow and glassy-clear, and these will be notably trickier to fish. This is where it pays hands down to first spot your trout so you can size up just the right cast.

When small streams run in pastoral settings they typically meander as I said, but they are also invariably deeper, and often have undercut banks that are typically overhung with grass or scrub. Depending on the size of the stream, you can feel more comfortable calling small pastoral streams like this brooks, or maybe becks, or burns, but none of these terms gets much traction anymore, at least not in modern writing. The term 'creek', though, is a lovely one, but its more in use in America and Canada where it applies to any small stream no matter whether it's bouncing down through high-country or twisting lazily through flat, pastured farmlands.

Whatever, these streams are tiny, so they're the kind of waters you sneak up on rather than wade; where you drop a fly onto a target rather than lay out a line, where a long drift is more like one metre than two. And they're often *tight*, not only in the sense that they're maybe bushed in, but tight also in the sense that the sweet spots are anything from the size of a hat box to not much bigger than the back seat in a small family saloon.

So the charm of small streams is not locked in their grandness of scale, but rather in their diminutiveness; not in any celebration of the size of their trout, because these are mainly small, but with the caveat that small trout are every bit as beautiful and often just as difficult to fool. I suspect what draws us anglers to small streams is the chance to introduce minimalism, delicacy, and even a kind of poetry into the usual subterfuges that make up fly fishing. So it's no surprise that small-stream addicts are often caught up in a few predictable and parallel passions; like bamboo fly rods, custom-made landing nets, silk fly lines. In fact with some small-stream addicts I'm never quite sure whether we're dealing with a narrow, bona fide subset of fly fishers, as much as a fanatically minimalist, ritualistic and tradition-seeking cult. Which is to say that while bamboo fly rods, custom landing nets, silk fly lines and so on, aren't absolutely necessary to the authentic small-stream experience, they do add a lustre to it and they feed into

its aura. To some small stream anglers these trappings *are* essentials, to others they aren't, and there's no exact point that you can define as the unshakable middle ground in small stream fanaticism. We just accept that all anglers are different, small stream anglers more so, and if some of us do tend to get overly quirky and a little romantic about the gear we use, well, it's become such an accepted part of the small stream scene that we just let it ride.

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Look, you either love small streams or you don't, and those of us who do can get a little carried away by their charm, can get obsessive about light tackle and delicate casting, and then very defensive and importantly, very guarded about the location of the better ones we know. The *perfect* ones can become sacred, and most small-stream addicts have at least one or two special places, holy places if you like, that we keep quiet about; places we'd rather fall on our swords for rather than spill the beans on. Secret places. Hidden honey-holes. You've heard it all before. They are still out there, but there're fewer of them now, thanks to the growing number of fly fishers, and the inherent inclination among most anglers to share. Google Earth, one of the most powerful instruments of the modern fly fishing era, hasn't helped, and keeping a secret in this digitally connected world is a lot riskier. You need added help to keep things under the radar.

For example, a friend and I share a small stream flowing from the mountains between two tiny villages in the Western Cape. It's well hidden and it's protected in that to get to it you need to turn off a minor tar road onto an even more minor side road that travels through an established, well-tended fruit orchard – never mind what kind of fruit – an orchard that runs the entire length of the stream almost to its banks. So workers are often around, and the farmer himself is often there, meaning any poacher is likely to have a limited shelf-life and it's a known fact that this guy doesn't do poachers.

But let me name a few small stream gems that I *am* happy to share with you.

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First off, the upper sections of most of the Western Cape's trout streams fall into this category, but there are some gems among those, like the Jan du Toit's near Worcester, the Kraalstroom, a tributary of the uppermost reaches of the Elandspad, the beat of the Lourens River near Somerset West where it runs in a steep gorge, the head waters of the Witte River in Bainskloof, and the Kaaimansgat, a tributary of the Holsloot River. And there are many others besides.

In the Eastern Cape Highlands you have streams like the Coldbrook, the upper section of the Willow Stream, the Kloppershoekspuit, the Bokspuit from Gateshead right the way up to this stream's source on summit the Drakensberg, the Koffiehoekspuit, the Swith, the Wildebeest, the Hawerspuit, the Bradgate, the upper Luzie and the Tsitsa. I could go on. And KwaZulu-Natal is full of them too, again often in the upper reaches, or as tributaries of trout streams like the Bushman's, the Umzimkulu, the Mooi and the Tugela, to name a few.

But, as I said, there're some that we keep to ourselves, for no other reason than they couldn't handle much traffic without showing signs of damage, or they're private, or they're that tiny most people couldn't be bothered hearing about them anyway. As you'd expect, these are among the most prized and the most jealously guarded. So there are some small streams I'm sworn to secrecy on, and that, of course, raises questions about the morality of secrecy when it comes to trout streams that don't belong to us in the first place, but that we want to keep hidden. We argue that in these places we acquire an unwritten *right* to non-disclosure, equivalent to the laws that apply to things like intellectual property rights, for the very reason that *we 'discovered'* them – by whatever roundabout route – and therefore assume that by some sort of plebeian common law we

have earned the sole rights to their use, even if we know that our case wouldn't stand scrutiny in the lowest courts in the land.

And it's not a matter of selfishness. It's just that we don't want these places swamped with throngs of anglers who might not visit the same care and concern on them, or their trout, as we do, and written down like this it actually doesn't sound like an unreasonable position to hold.

Then there's often plenty of bush clearing to be done to get a route into a stream in the first place, and this, along with the ongoing streamside clearing and pruning that's often needed, heightens the sense of deserved sole-ownership. We've even been to the lengths of cryptically disguising the paths into streams, and, at convenient points upstream, marking equally cryptic and carefully disguised routes out, all of which is not only hard work but adds fuel to the belief of 'ownership'.

But anglers, I have discovered, are as good as sniffer dogs at finding out most of our secrets and, as I said, we are prone to sharing hidden gems with buddies we can trust, always, of course, under the strict mantle of sworn secrecy. But even then the message somehow spreads, slowly and incrementally, like the ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond. Just the other day I was sharing a cup of coffee with a new acquaintance who, leaning over the table and looking around to check who might be listening, whispered the delights of a new-found stream while swearing me to the sort of secrecy you'd expect from a national intelligence operative. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd been fishing the place for years, nor that his estimates of the number and size of the fish in it were exaggerated to the point where I wondered if we were actually talking of the same place. And I also didn't tell him that the last time I fished it with a friend I *can* trust, we variously found the clear imprints of size 10 wading shoes, along with a few discarded pieces of fluorescent-red poly yarn indicator material.

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Why us devotees like small streams so much is a fascinating question. Is their diminutive charm the same sort of charm that draws us to small villages more than to big cities, to tiny cobbled lanes rather than tarred highways? Or is it that they offer particular challenges, or particular opportunities; like fishing really light, or really tight, or fishing so close in that the delight of searching for, and occasionally finding, trout in tiny, crystal clear pools becomes a sort of pleasant form of angling voyeurism?

Speaking for myself, because you will certainly have your own views, the joy of small streams is in their intimacy, a sort of tight-knit intimacy where the fly fishing is under a microscope rather than splashed on a big screen. That said, I admit to being no less happy fishing a river; I just have a preference for small streams, though it's not an exclusive, all-or-nothing issue for me. With some anglers it does get pretty close to that; it's as if their default setting is for small streams and everything that encompasses them. Small streams predominate their thinking, eclipse all else, and I have little argument with it. After all, some of my best friends...Okay, let's just leave it there.

Another obvious joy of most small streams is their beauty. They are invariably prettier than rivers; well certainly than those really large rivers that motor past you like great, big, wet freeways, where if you wade just one metre too far out you risk drowning yourself. But that's a long way from saying there aren't pretty rivers out there, and maybe there's even an argument for saying no trout water is anything less than pretty; just that each is pretty in its own particular way.

But back to that 'intimate' story again. Many of the small streams I fish somehow give the impression of being framed, like a painting, either by mountain folds, or maybe by bushes or trees or scrub or rock faces. And the fact that they are often on steeper gradients adds a swiftness to them, flowing as if

hurried, often dancing, or slipping silver over stepped cascades, or swirling around rocks, or sweeping into snug, leafy, often mysterious-looking spots. But again, it's a manageable swiftness, not something that can drown you. And their prettiness doesn't border on anything like an inspiring grandeur, but rather just on a sort of welcoming cosiness. And, anyway, most small streams are invariably packed with the best features of a river, only in miniature, and we happen to like that.

Just one last point: I cut my teeth fishing a small stream, caught my very first trout from one, a tiny, very pretty brown trout, so my love of small streams is maybe partly a throwback to youth, or a sort of epigenetic evolution, not that I fully understand the concept.

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On the point of the charm of small streams, there was a day, not too long ago, when Billy de Jong and I fished a mountain stream small enough to step over. We were showing two Danish guests the place, and it took us half an hour to walk in. Much of the time they could see the stream from the path we were hiking along, but they were polite enough not to say too much about it being bushed-in and small and an unlikely place to be hunting trout. But they did ask about snakes, in fact a number of times, and, naturally, we reassured them that while there might be a few snakes around, we couldn't think when we last saw one, which was only partly true.

Eventually, we cut off the path and dropped into the stream where it is so overgrown with indigenous trees that you can't even get a bow cast in. Our guests fell into silence. Thirty metres later the verdant canopy opened, as we knew it would, to reveal the most delightful stretch of high mountain trout water. It's not the longest section, but it is clear and pretty, and our guests caught fish on tiny dry flies, one or two of them quite decent fourteen-inch trout, and near the end of this section where the stream gets unfishable again,

they remarked on the exquisite beauty of the place; how brightly-coloured the trout were, how the walk in was worth it, and they added that even if this was the tiniest stream they'd ever fished, it was also one of the nicest fishing experiences they'd had in a long time.

This is about when Billy and I spotted the puff adder, all of a metre long and as thick as your arm, drifting down the run we were standing in, heading straight for us. The snake maybe sensed the presence of humans because a rod's length away its autumn-leaf-patterned body slithered in sinuous folds up the far bank, and in a moment it disappeared. That's when I noticed that one of our guests had literally climbed up Billy like he was a stepladder. He was sitting on Billy's shoulders.

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With notable exceptions, small streams get less fished and the normal conclusion that derives from this is that they're probably too easy to offer any real challenge. Some small streams are an easy touch and very productive, maybe because they hold a lot of naive, little-disturbed and perpetually hungry trout. If you stop off at one of the bridges crossing the uppermost reaches of, say, the Bokspruit River on a sunny day with a gentle breeze and a reasonable flow of clear water, you'll likely spot a few trout. They'll mainly be small, but you know that's only because the bigger fish are not on show. They'll be under the banks – or maybe under the bridge you're standing on. I mentioned the gentle breeze, as you guessed, because riffled surfaces often make trout bold enough to come out on show.

But the general notion that all wild, small-stream trout are a soft touch is shaky – even in streams that aren't fished that often. Small-stream trout can be ridiculously easy to catch, but it's not a rule you want to bank on.

The telling thing is that no matter how easy the fishing on any particular small stream is, experience has shown me that there are always a few anglers who

regularly catch more trout in small streams than others. This points to the fact that small streams, and their trout, have a lot to teach us, as do those gurus who consistently do better than most at figuring them out.

The small-stream-soft-touch bit goes around the obvious fact that small-stream trout do live in more confined spaces; meaning you can cover the water more completely with short casts that show little or no fly line. Add to that the wobbly assertion that the holding water is often more turbulent, meaning the fish won't spot you quite as easily. All this holds good as far as it goes, but as one of my friends, Fred Steynberg, once said, 'Some small stream trout are an easy touch, sure, but in the same stream on the same day I'll find you half-a-dozen trout that are geniuses at not getting caught.' The linear logic in this suggests that you always know plenty about the fish you hooked and landed, and next to nothing about all those you missed, spooked, couldn't interest, or otherwise didn't even know were there.

Selectivity, turbulence, smartness and gradient

It doesn't take rocket science to figure out some of the challenges small-stream trout face.

To start with, food is less abundant and insects mainly pass by at speed, certainly in the small streams with gradient. So these fish are more often hungry opportunists than fussy gourmets.

Finding trout feeding selectively on the sort of small streams that fit the definition for inclusion in this chapter is relatively uncommon, outside of the occasional hatch of mayflies, or hatches of net-veined midges or micro-caddis that are sporadic and invariably short-lived. Having said that, selectivity is not uncommon on somewhat bigger streams, like the Smalblaar and Holsloot in the Western Cape, or the Sterkspruit and Bokspruit in the Eastern Cape Highlands,

and in KwaZulu-Natal, the Mooi, the Little Mooi and the Bushman's, to name a few. It's obviously also common on the chalkstreams no matter their size.

Then if trout happen to live in turbulent water, the view they get of the outside world is like looking through the rippled glass of a shower booth, so obviously they won't be alerted to an angler's presence as easily as a fish holding in a smooth-flowing, limpid stream, say like a carrier of the upper Itchen. The flip side of that coin is that in turbulent water *you won't spot them that easily* either.

I've also heard anglers say that wild trout in swift-flowing mountain streams don't averagely live as long as trout in rivers, so they don't end up *as street smart* as any highly experienced five-year-old veteran you might find, say, in a famous spring creek or chalkstream. But that's also shaky. Wild trout are *born smart*. It's part of the contract of being 'wild'. And if they live out a year, they'll be *ultra-smart*. In any stream that isn't fished a lot, or where the fishing pressure is comparatively low, the only thing they might lack is the basic experience of the high levels of subterfuge we anglers are growingly capable of. And to me this is a major point in this particular debate, together with just one other – the level of the gradient the stream flows in.

Here the basic rule is the steeper the gradient, the faster the flow; and the more the stream is a necklace of small, contained cascade pools and pockets, *the easier the fish are to catch*. The most you can say about this rule is that it applies most days, but not all.

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Talking about wildness, I remember years back visiting the Kamberg trout hatchery when the late Rob Karssing was running the place. He had fingerling brown trout in two small, vinyl-sided pools, and he invited us to walk up to one of them. At the first pool, the fish were mildly alarmed at our presence but soon settled. In the second pool, the fingerlings vanished before we got within a short cast of them, and they stayed hugging the bottom all the while we were nearby.

The difference was incredible. Rob explained that in the first pond he had brown trout fingerlings bred from his usual brood-stock taken over years from the upper Mooi River, so maybe there was a little inbreeding at play. In the special pond he had fingerlings that were from the eggs of two totally different strains of brown trout that he had collected separately after hiking to the source of two tiny, little-known Drakensberg trout streams. Talk about street smart!

Fishing small streams

From the angler's point of view, casting into small pockets of running water requires no deep understanding of rivercraft, and if you add the fact that most mountain streams are less often fished than grander, big-name rivers, you start to piece together a scenario where anglers are going to find fishing them easier, as long as they stay out of sight and don't slap the water. Okay, I know there are exceptions to the stereotype, easy to fish, high-mountain trout stream. The Boarman's Chase section of the Bell on the Naude's Nek Pass is one that comes to mind. But that's because a lot of anglers fish that stretch, and it has as many runs that are smooth and glassy and tricky, as runs that are tumbling with the gradient and easy.

On the other hand, relatively few people fish streams like the Bokspruit where it runs right up on the summit of the southern Drakensberg, or the upper Luzie near Vrederus, or the upper Tsitsa, or the Swith, or the upper Riflespruit high in the mountains between Rhodes and Barkly East. In streams like these, you could well say the trout will likely be naive and not be wrong. But these are also places where the only footprints you see will be your own, and where catching trout can get as easy as picking apples off a tree. What's more, we have plenty of them in this country. But even on these 'easy' streams, I can name a raft of anglers who on any given day would quickly out-fish most others. The point I'm making is that some level of naivety in trout will serve you up to a point;

thereafter a heap of other skills need to come into play if you really want to get to the front of the pack.

In the end, a lot boils down to how you approach wild trout in small streams, and the best is not to rely on them being overly forgiving or naive just because they live in a less prestigious address than say the upper Itchen or a crystalline spring creek in the South Island of New Zealand.

Finally, if trout happen to live in turbulent water, and most high-gradient small stream water is turbulent, the view they get of the outside world is like looking through the rippled glass of a shower booth, so obviously they won't be alerted to an angler's presence as easily as a fish holding in a smooth-flowing, limpid stream, say like a carrier of the upper Itchen. The flip side of that coin is that in turbulent water *you won't spot them that easily* either.

On this point, a few years back Leonard Flemming and I were on a tiny Cape stream that never gets fished – which sounds Irish I know; it's just that I can't exactly explain this without blowing our cover. Where we climbed in the runs were quick, broken and threaded with white water and the fishing was easy. As soon as we got to sections where the runs were smooth and long and glassy, and slower, all the usual demons kicked in; we got spotted, the fish picked up micro-drag and they had time to inspect our flies. But we still took a few startled trout. They'd been willing risers as long as our flies landed gently, rode without hindrance, and as long as we stayed hidden. We caught enough fish that day to feel we'd done well, but I'm willing to bet that if we fished this stream regularly for a season or two, we'd get better and these trout would get smarter.

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There was an occasion when I got to fish a stream that last saw an angler sometime around World War II, and I'm not making that up. My friend Donie Naude introduced Ed Herbst and me to one such stream, the upper Bradgate, on a day when there was a slight breeze, the sky was blue and the birds were

singing. But with the water as thin as cellophane, that little stream was every bit as challenging as any tough place you know about. We got a few fish from the tumble-water, but the glassy runs were testing, even though we were fishing long leaders and 7X tippetts, lying in the grass as flat as snakes, and generally being as cautious as accountants.

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Then there was the first sortie Billy de Jong and I ever made to the Lourens River near Somerset West, where the stream cascades down a tightly-hemmed kloof high above Lourensford farm, and where Gerhard Compion, the fishery's manager, told us very few people get to fish. We caught trout, but I've never known more discerning small-stream fish, particularly as far as micro-drag is concerned. We've since been back a few times and it's always the same. You can take fish with ease where the water is boiling, quite often from holes or pockets no bigger than a prayer rug. But as soon as you get to the middle section where the valley flattens a little and the stream slows down, opens up and is crystalline and smooth as satin, all the usual curses immediately creep in – drag and micro-drag, rod flash, even selectivity once or twice.

Fly rods for small streams

One of the curses of some little mountain streams is they are often bushed in, which no doubt started the myth that you mainly need short rods to fish them. Perhaps this is a good point to start talking about the rod you use to tackle these tiny places.

I don't like a really short rod, say 6' to 6'6", on a small stream, for three reasons; I lose the added leverage I use to avoid drag; most really short rods don't load as easily close in; most of the small streams I fish are open in many places when I feel thankful for the extra length I have above the cork handle. Take the Kraalstroom, a tributary of the Elandspad in the Western Cape, a really small

stream I have occasionally fished with my friend Ryan Weaver. Much of the riverbank has dense growth, and standing in some places it wouldn't be difficult to sell an angler a 6' fly rod. But then there are places where the stream suddenly opens up and casting a 7' or 8' rod is a breeze. Also, if you are averagely tall, by simply dropping to your knee to cast, you lose three feet of rod length. You lose even more by simply dropping your elbow while casting in a kneeling position, or by tilting the rod into a flatter casting plane.

(By the way, Peter Hayes, the ace Tasmanian caster, showed me a neat trick for casting in tight, bushed-in places. You simply hold *the end of the fly line and leader* in your hand while you make the back cast, and then release the line and leader in the forward cast. The principle is that *a closed loop of fly line* hitting vegetation behind you won't get hung up like a leader and fly will. It was so simple it made me wonder why I hadn't thought of it a decade back.)

But 'short' and 'long' are relative terms with fly rods. I consider a short rod to be anything under 7', and on small streams, especially bushed-in streams, the outer limit is probably 8'. But in modern fly fishing, rods up to 10' or even 11' are getting more popular on streams that aren't bushed in. In fact, this is the way many stream anglers are going. Fishing Tenkara rods of 11' and over happened to point me in that direction, but the modern trend anyway was towards longer rods on small streams, wherever this is practical. It's the one – and only – downside to fishing bamboo. Split cane – or so a few serious makers have told me – has an outer range of 8'6" for 3-weight rods, after which they just get too heavy, or skate too close to the edge of the specification limits of bamboo, or both.

But bamboo makers might differ. Steve Boshoff, who is one very serious rod maker, has some interesting thoughts on the subject. But before I get to them, here's an interesting point he makes on the term 'rod maker' as opposed to a 'rod builder'. Steve says 'makers' make from scratch – in any material.

'Builders' assemble, again from any material. 'That issue,' he says, 'appears to have been settled, at least among the rod makers.'

Steve's points of view have to be seen in the context of him being a bamboo-rod maker in the first instance, and a small-stream fanatic as a secondary, but important personal persuasion. Reading what he says on this subject makes you realise – well, it did me – that there's more to rod length choice than meets the eye. I quote from him:

'Offhand, I wouldn't say that 7'6" is short. For tiny streams that would be long. The original Sage "Ought", at 8', was certainly long for a 0-weight rod.

'So, for small streams I would say that short is below 7', say 6' and-a-bit, or six-foot-something. That certainly has a short, small-stream ring to it. The problem is that if you go to 9' (in graphite) in say a 1- or 2-weight, you could say they aren't really 1- or 2-weights, but more like 3- or 4-weights.

'Great small, freestone stream rods in bamboo were generally below 7'. Vincent Marinaro worked in 6' and 6'6". The Paul Young Midge is 6'3". Garrison's small stream rod was 6'9", and Payne's 95 and 96 were respectively 6' and 6'6". Lew Stoner's small stream 3-weight ranged between 5'6" and 7'. I have never agreed with the 7'6" for a 3-weight theory. I think that the ideal is closer to a 7' for a 3-weight.

'So, for bamboo and glass, short and 'midge-like' is certainly below 7'. In graphite, it is perhaps 7'6". The Sage 000-weight to 3-weight rods for small streams were all 7'10", but they've since been replaced with the Sage One. It has to do with the nature of the material. Different materials have different possibilities, although some push the possibilities in one direction or another – through hollowing (in the case of bamboo), stiffer butts (in the case of graphite), and so on.

'The length of Tenkara rods has to do with the fact that there is no 'shooting' of additional line. One cannot handle a reasonable length of line continuously with a short rod without a reel.'

See what I mean? Nothing is written in stone. And we haven't even spoken much about the crucial aspect of line weight. Here we open another can of worms. I only use 0- to 3-weight rods on mountain streams, but other scribes differ. I do have a Steve Dugmore 000-weight bamboo rod; it's on loan to Tony Kietzman in Rhodes at the moment, because the joy he got out of using the stick was that infectious I simply had to hand it over to him before I headed home after my last trip up there. I had no choice. I just said, 'Look after it, and when either of us drops off the perch, it goes to my son, Robert.' He agreed. Maybe too readily.

I said other scribes differ about small-stream rod weights. Tom Rosenbauer in *The Orvis Guide to Small Stream Fly Fishing*, maintains it's difficult to cast a size 10 dry fly with a 2- to 3-weight fly line. I had to read that sentence a few times to make sure I wasn't suffering from some sinister cognitive disorder. He goes on to talk about 4-weights being good on small streams and 5-weights being *maybe* too heavy. I think the issue at stake here is in what we and the Americans interpret as small streams. Their definition of a small stream is obviously a lot bigger than ours.

I just believe that you shouldn't approach small streams in ways that lose sight of the poetry there is in just fishing them. To my way of thinking, 0-weight to 2-weights, even 3-weights, will do pretty well anything I ever want on small streams, and, at the same time, serve the more poetic need for lightness. Not that lightness in small-stream fly rods is all about poetry. It's not. There's a practical side to it as well. Lighter fly lines land on the water more gently, full stop. But above a 3-weight I feel I'm missing the point and getting decidedly over-gunned. My favourite small-stream rod for years, before the truck door ate it,

was my five-piece Winston, 7'9" 2-weight. It's been a while, but I don't like to trouble Steve Boshoff who has an eye to repairing it because, like so many of his ilk, he is up to his eyes in bamboo dust and smeared in glue most days. My Sage 8' SPL 0-weight, my Sage Circa 2-weight and my bamboo rods – Boshoffs and Dugmores, all 3-weights in 7' and 7'6" and built more or less on original Paul Young tapers are all I need for small streams at present, bar a wish list a mile long of rods I can't afford and don't really need. Yet one of the sweetest rods I ever cast on a small stream was a 9' 1-weight that Steve Boshoff built from a Scott graphite blank about five years ago.

But here's an interesting point. After many years, I discovered I take more fish from small streams with my 8', medium action Sage SPL 0-weight and Sage Circa 2-weight, and that I *lost more* with my medium-fast action Winston 2-weight, as lovely as it was. It had to do, I now realise, with a simple truth. If I am fishing for trout of less than twelve inches, the extra weight and stiffness in the butt of the Winston *lifted* them in the strike and, as they fell back, this often allowed the *barbless* hook to drop out. My slower-action Sages and my bamboo rods, all '*give*' with the fish in the strike; they don't lift the fish as you strike, and so they stay hooked! I hope you read this carefully. It took me some time to figure it out, though there was a moment of revelation when I did. The first three times I fished the upper Lourens I used my Winston 2-weight and, each trip, I lost as many fish as I caught. On the fourth trip, I happened to use my Sage 0-weight and never lost a fish. And it's been pretty much the pattern ever since. That, in a nutshell, is the advantage of a slower rod in small mountain streams with six- to twelve-inch fish in them. When the fish in a stream average fourteen inches my 2-weight Winston was right on the money.

Leonard Flemming arrived for a cup of coffee one day and told me he had experienced exactly the same thing. Does this benefit improve as you drop from 0- to 000-weight? I don't think so. I like to think Sage's SPL 0-weight was the

point of ultimate perfection in small-stream fly rods – at least as far as graphite is concerned. It's a pity Sage sort of lost the plot a bit after that, but I think they worked that out themselves, pretty well doing a full circle and arriving back at where they had begun with their lighter range of rods. As Sage put it, '...in search of *advanced* slowness...' (their words, not mine). Ian Douglas was kind enough to build my Circa, a 7'9" 2-weight, and it's as close to the perfect small-stream fly rod as you'll find, unless you're cluttered by a few unreasonable prejudices.

Fishing the Avon and the Itchen one year in England, I noticed my friends William Daniel and Bill Latham were using 4- and 5-weight, medium-to-fast-action rods, not neat little 2- to 3-weights as I imagined. They said they hook and hold the bigger browns in these streams far better on a quicker, heavier rod. More importantly, they can check the first run, or quickly turn a fish's head before it ends up buried in a weed bed on the opposite bank. But then we're talking of big river browns and rainbows here, say sixteen inches plus, and deep, robust fish. And the Avon, for example, you would describe as a river, anyway, and not as a stream, let alone a small, tumbling mountain stream. We've been talking about light, quick-flowing, minimalist streams with modest-sized, but honest fish in them, that you can catch with gentle casts, and, if that's the largest part of the charm of streams like this, it's probably why 000- to 2-weight rods were invented in the first place. On this kind of water, a 0- to 2-weight rod feels like you slipped your hand straight into a neat-fitting glove. The ideal state of balance, the philosophical point you can call perfection if you like, is when you're on a tiny stream and unaware there's a fly rod in your hand. You're just aware that you're looking at sweet spots in the stream, doing something with your wrist, and mostly landing the fly right where you want it to be.

You need to keep trying different rods, different makes of line, and different line weights, until you reach this state I guess, but you don't want to get too glued up in science trying to get there either.

But here's a last thought on rods. Since small stream fly fishing is also a percentage game, where every little nuance has a place, when I fish with a good pal we'll often only take one rod along. Apart from the appealing economy in this, it cuts the risk of rod flash in half, frees up one of you to really concentrate on watching the water, or in my case, to do some camera work, for which I'm gaining a growing reputation as a pain in the arse on trout streams.

The food chain

I base my findings on the food chain in small streams on the hundreds of stones I have lifted from riverbeds right around the country and from the stomach contents of the occasional trout I have checked.

On the stones there's a predominance of tiny *Baetis* mayfly nymphs, varying in colour from dark to light straw-coloured, followed, in no order of importance, by cased- and free-living caddis larvae, and mountain midge and black fly (*Simulid*) larvae. Occasionally I find a dragonfly- or damselfly nymph, but stonefly nymphs are rare.

The incidence in stomach contents is much the same, though ants and beetles make an appearance. Here and there I've found dragonfly nymphs 3 to 4 centimetres long, and damselfly nymphs around 2 centimetres long, but they're uncommon.

In a nutshell, if there is no real abundance of food in most fast-flowing mountain streams, there is also no real shortage either, even though it's true enough to say that the higher you are in a stream, the faster the flow, the less is the density of aquatic insects per square metre of riverbed compared to the

wider, slower-flowing pastoral reaches. And the vast majority of the insects are small, as in size 18 to 22.

So what affects the average size of small stream trout is not so much the relatively low density of insects in small streams, but the *relative difficulty trout have in retrieving them*. That, coupled with averagely higher fish populations, and the constant, energy-sapping flow of the currents these trout have to contend with, collectively accounts for their averagely smaller size.

Three almost immutable facts so far

Three almost immutable facts emerge from all of this so far.

First off, small-stream trout are more eclectic and opportunistic feeders than are their downstream cousins. And that goes for surface, surface-film and sub-surface feeding. As far as dry flies go, some people like the term 'free-rising' to describe trout in certain streams, but personally I think it says too much, or, at least, it's only partially reliable.

Secondly, these trout are smaller because they live life against currents, and the insects they feed on are averagely less abundant and smaller and more difficult to harvest. Look, that small-stream trout are small is not the law of the Meads and the Persians, but it is something you will mostly be right about. I have taken sixteen- and even seventeen-inch fish from little brooks, but it's not something I'd go around betting will happen that often, or with any great certainty, in South African waters. That's why a big fish from a small stream is such a cause for celebration. And as an aside, if you can call, say the Smalblaar River, a small stream, though it doesn't really fit the description we've given for this kind of water here, then fish up to twenty inches plus are not rare.

Thirdly, far from being easy to spot, small-stream trout can be notoriously difficult to find. Part of this stems from the often broken surface they often live under, but also it's because being in shallow and relatively exposed

environments they become masters at remaining well concealed in the deepest slot they can find. And they are mostly perfectly camouflaged against the mosaic of tiny, multi-coloured pebbles you find in small streams, especially in the Western Cape. This applies, of course, to both browns and rainbows. They seem to slot almost invisibly into whatever surroundings they live in.

Small stream holding lies, mistakes, waiting and watching and your approach

There are exceptions to finding small-stream trout that are very important to note, but let me say that these principles hold good for both rivers and streams. Primary lies are easy. They are the deep slots anywhere in a stream, but especially where boulders or overhanging vegetation offer additional cover. But the secondary, or feeding lies, are often where you'd *least expect* to find a trout, such as right at the very back end of runs or pools, even where the water is ridiculously shallow; or in the slips of current right up against the banks, especially where there's a little overhanging vegetation. When the water is low and conditions are warm, shade is important, and I always look carefully into shaded areas. In fact, trout often migrate during the day from sunny to shady spots in a stream as the sun changes position.

Finally, one other spot I've noticed trout love, not necessarily only as a feeding lie but also a holding lie, is immediately *ahead* of a waterfall, but, again, this applies to rivers as much as to small streams. The fact is trout, and often the better trout, frequently hold just below the lip of waterfalls, especially ones that have some depth, because there's a *push-back effect* here that *slows the current just before it cascades* over the waterfall. The push-back effect creates a comfortable *cushion* ahead of the rocks forming the waterfall, where not only the current slows down, but, also, drifting bugs *arrive more slowly and become more accessible*.

Two mistakes people make fishing small streams stem from trout holding in unusual positions. The first is that people don't take enough time, or enough care, approaching a run, to scan, search if you like, the run properly before fishing it. Instead, they walk right up to the back of a run or a pool, fly rod in the air, standing upright. If I've seen this once, I've seen it a thousand times, but I've yet to find a way of cursing the people who do it without losing the few remaining fishing friends I still have.

You *must stalk* up to the back end of runs, not only on small streams but approaching any holding water, rod down, crouched, moving slowly with *no rapid movements*, eyes scanning all the time. It's just doubly important on small streams because if you spook a fish it's likely to blow your chances on the whole of that run or pool. Bigger waters provide more room for error after you've spooked a fish simply because there is more space and therefore less chance that the trout you spooked will spook others.

Having arrived at the back of the run, a lot of anglers don't *stay* crouched to wait and watch. Remember the old idiom, 'Given time, nature will reveal herself.' It never counted more than when you're fishing small, clear-flowing streams.

I may have written before about the particular experience I want to relate to you now, but it's worth repeating. I was on a typical, gin-clear Western Cape mountain stream with a friend of mine, Gerhard Laubscher, when around midday we got to a really nice section, a pool of braided water with two separate waterfalls at the head, a section that I'd fished often before and knew held a good fish or two. But a quick scan revealed nothing more than that it was indeed an interesting and likely-looking piece of water. So we parked off and had a bite to eat.

After five minutes of idle chat, we spotted a nice fish. A few minutes later we spotted a second even nicer fish, and maybe a full 10 minutes into our break we

saw a third, a honey, in a really unlikely and, as it turned out, awkward spot. Gerhard caught the first fish with a single cast, missed the second and rose the one in the tricky spot at least four times before it got wise to us. I walked over to the lie and found it was a narrow, pebble-bottomed depression with a thread of current coming into it from a tiny bushed-over and cool tributary. In all the years I'd fished this stream I'd never noticed the little tributary. The trouble with this fish was micro-drag caused by a thin thread of cross-current. Later, with the wisdom of hindsight, we decided we should have added another three feet of 8X mono to the leader, but that's another story.

The whole point of telling you this, is to illustrate how much we saw that we would have missed if we hadn't spent time really studying that pool and the various current tongues in it.

We've handled one obvious error you can make on small streams and here's another.

People won't fish the tail-out of pools and runs, the *very lips of them*; that's where the water leaves the run or the pool, often over a small waterfall. For some reason many anglers prefer to put the first cast straight into what looks like the best spot; the plump, deep, belly of the run, the heart of the run, call it what you will. That's normally around the centre in a small stream run, or two thirds of the way up it, where they imagine the best holding water is, which is mostly right, but it misses the point, in that any trout holding in the back end run for cover and often aren't even seen.

So you have to fish the back end first, by high-sticking it to avoid drag, first covering the centre, then both right and left sides, with short casts that show only the leader, or at most, very little fly line. And in doing this, let me say again, you want to be low, crouched, creeping, whatever, not standing on your toes like you're trying to peep over a garden wall.

By the way, this is where the modern drive to use longer rods comes in. They provide extra reach, as in Tenkara fishing, or a kind of quasi-Czech nymphing in miniature, or even fishing in the style of Jeremy Lucas' hand-to-leader methods with no fly line at all. This is also where the new minimalist fly lines, like Snowbee's Thistledown, or Rio's Euro line, and ultra-long and soft-action rods found their origins. But I am not going into all these techniques. They are mainly methods for bigger streams, although I read more and more these days of leader-only fly fishing on all kinds of waters, including small streams, and also of the joys of Tenkara.

But just on the subject of these ultra-thin fly lines, the Thistledown and Euro line are rated rather contrarily for those of us who believed the old AFTMA scale was sacrosanct. They market an AFTMA 2 to 5 in one fly line!

Apparently, the idea is that when the rod is held high the line is so thin that it doesn't come running back down the rod guides. Food for thought. I haven't tried these lines, and I am no expert on these methods.

The curse of the tell-tale crease

There's another mistake in small stream fly fishing I see often, and surprisingly from anglers who really ought to know better. Because small stream trout live in relatively tiny, almost encapsulated environments, they don't miss much. So you never want to give your presence away, and I don't mean by wearing bright clothes, or wading like a buffalo. I take it for granted you won't do that. I mean something as innocuous as creasing the water surface when you lift your fly line off to cast again. It's a seemingly minor fault, but most often it's the kiss of death; more so on any flat-calm, clear surface when you might just as well throw a rock into the run. When you lift a fly off, it should be so gentle it leaves *no trace*. In fact, as gentle as a feather dropping on a windless day.

And for this very reason, leader-to-line connections should preferably be super-glued needle knots – never loop-to-loop connections that are stiff, induce drag, and increase the chance you will crease the surface as you lift the fly off the water to cast again.

Further thoughts on rivercraft in small streams

I often pick up technical books that describe a section of a typical trout stream with its banks, runs and boulders, either in the form of a diagram or photograph that has the likely location of trout superimposed on it diagrammatically, as if the distribution of trout in a stream was close to some law of physics, or the product of a mathematical formula. Look, it's helpful in as far as it goes, except that a formulaic approach ignores one important reality – *in a small stream, trout can be anywhere* – and, of course, in a large stream or river as well. That's a truth that dawns on you after years of spooking trout from ridiculous places, or catching a fish where no trout had the right to be, at least not the way you've been taught to understand things. And when that's happened often enough, you start to fish a stream differently. You take more time to cover the water and you don't rely completely on what the books tell you about likely lies – but, at the same time, you don't totally ignore it either.

I was fishing the upper section of a small stream with Billy de Jong when at first we weren't catching much, but not yet wondering if we had the right flies on, or if the fish had maybe moved off to spawn. We were using a dry fly that covered most bases (probably an Elk Hair Caddis), and lazily fishing mainly the sweet spots – the throats of the runs and the undercut banks – and we took the occasional fish. Then by chance we hooked two trout in quick succession from water so shallow it only just covered our wading boots, and that pretty well remained the pattern of things for the rest of the day.

The question was why? In the end we put it down to maybe a hatch of mountain midges that prefer hatching in shallow water when the temperature is, say, exactly x degrees, and the water level is just exactly *so* high, or at least some argument along the lines of, 'Fish will be where the bugs are at any given time.' In fact, we weren't even half-sure why the trout were in such shallow water on the day, except that the presence of bugs is often the answer.

But the reason is not as important as knowing that you can *never really tell where trout will hang out in a small stream, other than they're not always only in the sweet spots*. The difference between small streams and bigger waters is that the feeding lies in small streams often end up being in ultra shallow water. In that sense, the science of rivercraft often loses its relevance on them. In fact, an interesting exercise to try on a stream is to spend an hour fishing all the 'wrong' spots. I do it occasionally if only to remind myself that our linear thinking on how to approach trout streams, especially smaller ones, is never a watertight science. The number of fish that show up in unusual places shouldn't be surprising me anymore, but somehow it still does.

Last word on books on small streams. In my experience they're good for seeing people right on the basics. But fishing small streams is pretty much the same as fishing bigger ones, only you have to do a lot more creeping, crawling and crouching, short casting and fetching flies off branches. But, in most other ways they're actually as easy, or as difficult, to fish as rivers, and their trout are every bit as forgiving, or as unpredictable, only on average smaller. But something that small streams do teach you, and something you won't need a book to find out, is that catching big fish isn't the only way to have fun fly fishing. Naturally, we all want to catch big trout, and most of us agree that a real hog from a small stream is somehow more momentous than one that came from a river with a pedigree. But having said that, small trout have never disappointed me.

A few Coldbrook lessons

There was a day up on the Coldbrook Stream a few years ago when Billy and I took trout after trout in one pretty run after another, all on dry flies. The fish were everywhere, often coming up to the fly from darkly-hidden corners, sometimes taking them as they landed in *ankle-deep water*. We got as far as a fenced cattle camp when the sun was settling behind the hills. Bugs began appearing, lit in shafts of sunlight like sparks from a campfire, and then the fish went crazy. This was not a day on a stretch of stream to write a learned treatise on rivercraft, other than to say you could have left all the textbooks at home. It reinforced my growing view that book knowledge is not the only way to understand reality.

And this was the same stretch where some months later Tony Kietzman and I couldn't buy a trout in a whole morning, but that's a contrary enough story that maybe goes a long way towards explaining why we go fishing in the first place. It's also the stream where Ed Herbst and I had a good day just before he got ill, fishing a stretch further downstream of the top sections we normally make for, where in many places the water is flat and the runs are as smooth as satin. The stream was low and clear, and being a bright day, most of the fish we caught we'd sighted. We didn't get that many, or, put differently, we didn't get as many as we could have, but then we weren't fishing as if our lives depended on it either. We were just taking our time. A friend I have would say we were fishing 'properly'. But then he's also been known to describe some rocks in rivers as 'ideal beer perches'.

When you spot more than one trout

Most trout sort out a pecking order, even in pocket water, but in pocket water my impression is the pecking order positions are not as obvious. Just the other day, my friend Stanton Hector and I were on a really delicate stream in the Western Cape when we came to a tiny, glass-clear hole that was a clearly super-

sweet piece of holding water. There was a little undercut on the right bank, and one or two big rocks on the left to add cover and to slow the currents, but the whole of it was not much bigger than the rug in your den. Three fish were holding in this spot, and they were as easy to see as a red traffic light. The best spot in our estimation held the smallest fish, and the biggest fish was sitting on an exposed gravel bar with only a thread of current flowing over its dorsal fin. That's not unusual in small streams, and we've seen it often enough in this particular stream to always check a run very carefully before pounding away at the first fish we happen to see.

The next event wasn't unusual either, and it's interesting. Naturally you want to hook the best fish first, because, for sure, you are only going to hook one of them before a little spot like this gets shaken up. The trick is to hook the bigger fish and then take careful note of where it runs. It'll usually head straight for where it lives when it's not in a feeding lie. In this case, I hooked the better fish first and it made a straight line to the undercut bank, and, a moment later, when we released him, he shot off to the exact same place. That's where he lives when he's not out shopping for bugs, and we made a note of it.

We watched for a while, more in hope than out of any real conviction, in case the other two fish came back, but they stayed under the rocks. Sometimes they return, even moments later, even start feeding again, even get caught, but it's rare with fish that are visible in a stream this small and this clear.

Having said that, on small streams with depth, cover and a nice surface twirl, you can take a raft of fish just starting at the back and delicately working your way up a run. Some days it feels as easy as walking down an aisle in a supermarket picking goods off the shelves. But it depends on the stream and the run, the weather, what mood the fish are in, and maybe how much wine you left in the bottle the night before.

Some streams are made for serial trout picking, others are not. In one small stream we fish, occasionally even just missing a take puts the rest of the fish on high alert. Then there are streams where even if you've spooked a pod of fish, you can still tease them to take a weighted nymph fished deep and with movement. I don't know what the reasons for these differences are, but they are there, and, eventually, this is how you get to know a stream. But it's not something they cover much in books, maybe because it's awkward writing about things that have no real answer.

The three four-letter words in small-stream fly fishing

Wind, drag and false-casting.

Wind makes ultra-light rods frustrating instruments to use, no matter in what direction it's blowing, but when it's downstream straight into your face, casting with ultra-light rods becomes a lottery. Then you're better off with a quicker 3-weight rod.

But a bigger problem in strong wind is you easily lose control of leader and tippet placement. In rivers it's less of a problem because there are generally fewer limitations to putting in a good cast than on tight streams where wind, especially gusting wind, can get embarrassing. You aim at a sweet spot, miss the water completely and suddenly your fly lands two metres up the opposite bank. It's like driving a car with a loose steering wheel. In gusty conditions the obvious trick is to wait for a lull before you cast, and the strange part of that is how few anglers do.

The problem with drag on small streams is that you have less time to do what you have to do to avoid it because the drifts are mostly shorter and swifter. But you should study not to *over-correct* your mends. Correcting drag, no matter how quick or ruffled the water surface, should be done as *gently* as you stroke a sleeping cat, and as *accurately* as you flick a speck of ash off the sleeve of your jacket. I occasionally see anglers wildly over-mending a line, creasing the water

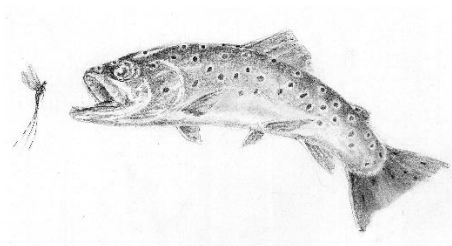
and alarming every fish, even *long before drag had actually set in*. The art of drag correction, in its highest, Zen-like form, is to study a run before you cast, to anticipate where and when drag will happen, and then, having cast, to mend the fly line with light but precise movements introduced at the very last second. It should be pretty to watch. And for heaven's sake, drape your fly line over any convenient rock. It can help eliminate drag naturally. Dry-fly purists will tell you that's why God put them there.

Micro-drag is hard to detect, is a real curse and deserves a hot place in hell. False casting? Don't. Not on small streams.

Final thoughts on small streams

I love them. Their smallness adds a sense of intimacy and charm. Hills or vales, or remoteness, often keep them secreted and conveniently less known, and their lack of trophy trout doesn't disturb me and anyhow helps to keep them less fished. The relative absence of the signs of recent human passage is a bonus, and if there's a sense that a little stream has freed you from the rigours of the world, even briefly, well, that's just added cause for celebration.

But underlying this all is a minor mystery. And the mystery is the opiate-like hold that small streams and their trout have on so many anglers, despite their trout being naive, easier to catch and averagely not much longer than a size-8 shoe. But their hold is real. And the fact that it is a minor mystery, or at least that it can't be fully explained, not even by us fanatical fans, is not a matter we lose any sleep over.



*A chapter extract from Tom Sutcliffe's book *Yet More Sweet Days* which can be purchased from Tom through his email address: sutcliffe@mweb.co.za.*