

Middle Valley, Witels River, above Tenth Swim.



Eddie Shelton, with eel from Witels River.

(*Photos:* E. J. Skelton)

BROWN TROUT AND EELS IN THE WITELS RIVER

By E. J. SHELTON

MY cousin, Ernest Shelton, accompanied me, as he was keen to see this kloof for the first time. On Thursday, March 16, 1972, we left the car in Michell's Pass at 7.30 a.m., and made our way steadily upstream; and finally, after negotiating the Third Swim, we covered the remaining half-mile to Camp Site 9, which was to be our headquarters for two nights. With a few daylight hours to spare, we collected driftwood for the camp fire and sat down at long last to rest our weary limbs and aching backs, since both our packs weighed about 45 lb., with provisions for four days.

Duly refreshed and after some noggins, I went to try for a few supper trout, whilst Ernie remained in camp to organise things. This camp site is one of my favourites; set in a particularly lovely part of the Kloof with towering cliffs above and its lush streamside vegetation in abundance. Here the fishing is excellent, and in the half-hour or so on the water I had good sport with the dry fly and landed four brown trout of about 11½ inches, and missed a few more. They were very energetic when caught in the runs. As the bats were starting to swoop down at dusk, I brought back two brace of trout, and soon we were savouring the most delicately flavoured fish I had tasted hitherto, fried in butter over a slow fire to a golden brown.

On the morrow I had planned to navigate all the swims upstream from the camp as far as Middle Valley. The first light found us boulder-hopping towards the Fourth Swim, travelling as light as possible, with lilos, sling bags and tackle, and camera in a plastic bag. Dry-fly fishing was good and before the Swim was reached we had each landed and released quite a few trout. For my part, I had lost the biggest fish of the trip.

Once through the Fourth Swim, the fish seemed to have gone down, and also in the channels between the other swims as far up as the Eighth, where I took a lively brown female of 11½ inches on a dry Ginger fly.

The Goddess Pool waterfall had ceased to flow, and I was disappointed as I much wanted a photograph of the remarkable sight as the tributary cascades over the cliff face into this lovely, green circular pool. The main stream, however, had a good flow of cool, crystal water, and the swims were looked forward to eagerly—most refreshing



Head of the First Swim.



Happy Valley, Witels River.

in the heat of that perfect day. Using the lilos merely to ferry our kit, we would swim behind them, giving them a nudge forward with the head every now and then. What a magnificent spectacle it was, when looking up while swimming through, to view drifting by, the cliffs draped with purple heath and green fern, and here and there a red April Fool blooming in vivid contrast to the grey rock—and way above the narrow gorge a long ribbon of blue sky!

Of the trees I identified between the swims were the Red Alder (Rooi Els), then in bloom with their candlestick-like flowers (similar to a baby's bottle brush), visible at a long distance in the subdued light of the gorge. The Cape Holly was in fruit, with clusters of red berries, attracting many little birds. At one stage I was sidetracked a bit from fishing and climbed up the side of the gorge to admire a delightful fern-covered grotto, the floor of which was a hollow basin of crystal clear water.

Do not go alone!

Approaching the Ninth Swim, I took a heavy tumble as a smooth ledge was traversed some eight feet above the water, when suddenly my feet slid from under me. I crashlanded with full weight on my left elbow. The momentum pitched me sideways, causing me to roll down the incline into the water where I came to a halt with a resounding splash on a submerged ledge. Much the worse for wear, I writhed in agony, clutching my arm as an anxious Ernie hovered over me. The pain subsided, but my arm was completely lame and limp by my side, remaining like this for quite a while before I slowly regained the use of the hand and realised that no breakage had occurred.

Such a mishap in the Kloof could easily place one in a dire predicament, especially when incapacitated three or four miles up with the prospect of coming back through the swims. This incident is given to emphasise the need of extreme caution here, since one's attention should never be distracted or diverted to the water when negotiating tricky catwalks. As it was, I had a companion. After a stiff shot of the hard stuff, which Ernie had so thoughtfully included in his tackle bag, I was fit enough to continue through the last two swims to the Middle Valley.

There we had a brief lunch, sausages roasted on a trident of a green stick, cheese, nuts and dried fruit, and felt fortified to sample the fishing in that lovely, sunlit, open valley. Ernie took good trout on the dry fly in the first three pools; while I picked up a few more on the next stretch on my dry Ginger. The fish here took with intent and determination, every run harbouring a few averaging a good 11 inches long. All were released, as we did not want to carry extra weight, and by 4 p.m., when we reached our turning point, we had both caught our fair share and were satisfied with the fun that these beautifully-coloured brownies provided. Ernie shouted to draw my attention when he flushed a pair of blue bush pigeons, displaying their yellow legs and beaks as they headed downstream.

As there were three hours left before sunset, we made haste to cover the two miles and seven swims separating us from our base camp. The tributary at the tail of the Fourth Swim was reached 1½ hours later. Incidentally, this was the tributary where Archie Coetzee and I made a brief survey during our Easter 1971 weekend, having fished up it and turned back about a mile from the main river. For want of a better name I had recorded it in my diary as "April Fool's Stream" after the blooms found there in profusion at that time of the year. I had not caught anything there, but a good 12 inch brown was seen about a hundred yards up from its junction.

This side stream comes down a very narrow gorge, with high, sheer rock walls on both sides; and is very gloomy except in the morning when sunshine penetrates. Alders and Cape Holly trees abound here and have attained heights up to 60 feet. Growing side by side, often with their roots entwined, they compete for light in their confined surroundings. Pools here are not deep, not much more than a yard at most. Waterfalls of three to six feet high are numerous along the length of the stream, which call for a good deal of clambering, and below each fall is a circular pool of six to ten feet in diameter, and occasional fast channels linking them together. The flow was exceptionally good after a long, hot summer, and the water clear and cool. I fished the lower 300 yards with no result and returned to the junction with the main river in failing light.

I changed to a wet Invicta fly and fished the white water in runs on the way back to camp, taking three nice trout of 11½, 11½ and 12 inches long, and losing a couple in the growing darkness.

Those Eels!

With two candles placed within our overhanging rock shelter we refreshed ourselves with a tot of our best South African wine and chatted over our experiences of the day. Then I went down to the river to clean my trout and Ernie accompanied me with a torch. I dipped a fish into the channel and was gutting it when all of a sudden there was a tug at the fish, almost wrenching it from my grasp! Down in the water the torch beam picked out two shining eyes set in an ugly, gaping head. Recognition dawned as I withdrew my dangling bare feet from the water and jumped with a startled shout of "Eel!", almost unseating Ernie from his perch in the process. The torchlight revealed its shape, which seemed to emit an eerie glow. Having no past experience with eels, I steered clear of the creature since it resembled a snake; but, nothing daunted, young Ernest made a valiant grab at its neck and attempted to lift it, but backed away when he felt the slimy writhing mass.

After this brief encounter I decided to pit my skill against the eel population. The night was as black as pitch and I used a small torch to find the way to the nearest deep pool. Baiting with a bit of trout stomach on a large wet fly, I tossed it into a deep part of the pool and secured the rod in an upright position to look after itself.

We were dog tired after a belated supper, and the oppressive heat kept us tossing and turning on top of our sleeping bags, and sleep would not come. Whilst gazing at the stars and enjoying the prevailing atmosphere of serenity, the peace was shattered by a sudden rumble and the thud of a heavy rock falling from the heights above and coming to rest not more than 10 feet from where we lay. Wide awake now, I went to inspect my flimsy eel tackle and found it "broken up". I could only imagine the attitude that my small glass-fibre trout rod must have taken! I tied on another hook and bit of trout to the remains of the cast and left it as before. An hour later an eel had broken it off again, so that was enough for that night.

On the following day, Saturday, we made an early start fishing downstream—back through the Third, Second and First Swims, taking alternative pools. At Dapping Pool we peered over an overhanging ledge into clear water, noting the activities of at least a dozen good brown trout, the biggest about 3 lb. and the average of the others about 1 lb. Now and then one would flash up to the surface to take some invisible insect. The fish could not be approached except by dapping from the ledge, a back cast being blocked by a fringe of bush. Ernie tried a big, busy grey dry fly lowered to the surface. A trout rose and rejected it. Lightning rejection of an artificial fly is typical of Witels browns.

Before negotiating the Third Swim, Ernie fished a narrow channel against a fern-covered rock wall, with a vivid turquoise Jap Invicta fly. At the third offer a golden brownie surfaced and took it: a fat fish of 12 oz., which he returned after admiring its red-spotted markings.

Lilos were blown up and clothes stripped, and having secured our rucksacks we jumped into the head of the Swim, which was rather cold swimming in the morning air. A change in the weather had affected the trout, and only occasionally one could be tempted to take a very small, greyish, dry fly.

We called a halt near "Lunch Pool" and counted our combined catch of a mere six trout. We reclined against a sloping slab under an immense Cape Holly Tree, scanning the crags above us. A loud bark heralded the arrival of a troop of baboons, providing amusing entertainment by their antics as many little ones cavorted about on the ledges opposite to us. A lone sentinel of immense proportions sat away from the others on a jutting ledge over a sheer drop. He surveyed his domain with a breeze ruffling his long, shaggy mane, majestic as a silhouette against the skyline. This was certainly the largest male baboon I had seen in our Kloofs. Many black-and-white Pied Kingfishers kept up a constant two-way traffic over the river, flying low down; and on one occasion when my fly line was in the air on a long cast, two of the kingfishers were very much alarmed, shrieking wildly as they flew off in opposite directions. Eagles and hawks could be seen whirling around the towering cliffs, and the Cape Yellowbill ducks alighted on the quiet, still pools. We came across the wet pawprints of the Water Mongoose and had occasional glimpses of one slinking away.

By mid-afternoon we emerged from the First Swim into the Second Gorge, and made camp without deflating the lilos, overlooking a good holding pool and a pleasant site under the outspread branches of a Milkwood tree. The Second Gorge, within the horseshoe of the Schurfteberg Corner, is very much boxed in, and soon becomes dark as not much of the sky is visible. A large flat slab had been placed across a few boulders by some ingenious person, forming an excellent table for utensils and food. We prepared an enormous spread that evening, to ensure carrying out as little as possible on our last day, including a large pot of packet soup and our remaining bread and cheese, keeping only dried fruit and nuts for the next day.

After that we went to the river and by sheer luck I caught a 10 inch brownie on a wet nymph in a pocket above a waterfall before it became pitch dark. This enabled us to pursue our newly-found pastime of night fishing for eels.



Sixth Swim, Witels River.



Lunch Pool, Witels River.

What again, those eels?

We waded out to a flat rock island in the pool opposite our camp, rather tricky going, picking out submerged rocks to step on by torchlight, at the risk of a headlong plunge into six feet of icy water! We made it eventually and baited up and chummed the water a little to attract the eels, and got the knack of flicking out the bait with a catapult action of the fly rod wih some coils of line in hand for shooting. All was quiet but the acoustic effects from the cliff face caused the chuckling of the stream to reverberate and strike the ears from all angles.

After about 15 minutes the line tightened in my hand, followed by two tugs, and I got to my feet and struck. At first there was a solid resistance and then juddering vibrations and the rod bent dangerously, compelling me to let out line which melted from the reel with a screaming ratchet as the eel headed for the depths. Straining our eyes in the dark, we made out the ghostly shape of a long white eel, threshing about wildly and making for the far side of the pool with the line tracing a wake behind it.

I applied as much tension as I dared and turned its head so that it came around in a wide arc, and as if attracted by the torchlight, made straight for us as I reeled in furiously. As it suddenly took fright and streaked off to our left we had a good look at it. It was a large one and seemed to be all of six feet long and as thick as a log. There was no stopping it, it was too strong to turn on light tackle. It went into a submerged crevice and the 10 lb. cast was severed.

Fired with enthusiasm after this episode, Ernie cast out his line which he had removed while I played the eel. I tied the hook to the 15 lb. section of my tapered cast and resumed fishing. Ten minutes later I felt a tug, but struck too soon and the hook came away. Then Ernie had a bite and was fast into another one. This was really a powerful brute, creating much commotion on the surface, and which with a flourish streaked off with serpentine movements. I tried to spotlight the fast disappearing eel; his rod took the heavy strain but his tackle was broken up.

Much later, as we were about to pack up for the night, my line tautened with a steady pull, and allowing the bait to be swallowed properly I waited for a sudden jerk and struck hard. Without the display of brute strength of the others this one gave a good account of itself, and some 15 minutes elapsed before I managed to glide it

towards our rock island. Then it was a problem to retrace our steps through the water on the stones to dry land. Finally we got the floundering creature into a shallow side pool and dispatched it with a makeshift "priest". It was fully a yard long and weighed 4½ lb. After this interesting interlude with these denizens of the deep Witels pools we found ourselves speculating on the proportions of the monsters that must frequent the Swims. Ouch!!

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We slept soundly and woke refreshed to face the long trek out of the Kloof to Michell's Pass. We fished here and there in a likely pool, but the trout were just not feeding and we saw none as we boulder-hopped downstream. A heavy rucksack is not conducive to comfortable fishing and I was glad to discard mine at Boulder Pool for a most refreshing dip.

Here we finished our remaining food supply before climbing over the Buchu Pass and on into the heat of the exposed valley below. The dehydrating heat brought on a perpetual thirst, but cold, clear water was available. Wending our way through a thick stand of bush near "Manhandle Rocks" I was startled by a five-foot cobra slithering across the path. Angling had long since lost its appeal, and we concentrated on covering as much ground as possible, and soon the distant drone of road traffic could be heard. And then we reached the outskirts of civilization—the trippers, sunbathers and picknickers near Michell's Pass.