

## BROWNS FROM THE RAIN FOREST

BY A. RECH

The back-pack grated on my hips as I swung my way around a boulder blocking the steep path. I was approximately 2 000 metres above sea-level, on the eastern slopes of the Transvaal Drakensberg, near Tzaneen. Below me the lowveld stretched as far as the eye could see, shimmering in the scorching heat haze; to my right the Ararat mountain thrust weathered granite domes from its forest-clad base, and to the left the giant bulk of the Mamatzeeri peak was partially obscured by a soft-pink cumulus cloud. The path I was following wound through a patch of rain forest, the foliage still dripping from an early morning shower of rain, then skirted the contour of the mountain and emerged on to a small open plateau. Before me, stretching as far as the eye could see, lay a hidden valley of indescribable beauty and winding through it, just discernible, in the early afternoon light, was the Thabina river. To the left, far below me, the valley culminated in a sharp spur, where the Thabina plunged in a series of spectacular waterfalls into the humid lowveld. Copses of Kippersol and Tree-ferns dotted open slopes, which were covered in

alternate shades of mauve and fawn grass. In the kloofs and ravines bright green rain forest sprouted in lush profusion.

The path descended steeply now, and after an hour's walk down a steep ridge, during which we put up the largest covey of Shelley's Francolin I have ever seen, we found ourselves at the edge of the river; and having selected a suitable camping spot, we pitched the tent. We then assembled our rods and turned our attention to the main purpose of our visit, the Brown Trout inhabiting this delightful river. The Thabina river was stocked only once, in 1949. It contains Brown Trout as opposed to the Mathlapetsi, its sister river, which has a good head of Rainbows. (See *Rainbows and Leopards—The Transvaal Mathlapetsi*, by Garret Evans — PISCATOR No. 106.) Apart from the trout there is a large eel population and I have seen several approaching five pounds.

The river itself winds like a snake, flowing through open grassland, then cutting back into the rain forest proper, where gigantic moss-coated lianas and ferns overhang dark, limpid pools. The water is extremely clear, but in the forest it assumes a dark emerald colour due to the light being filtered through the green canopy above. There are deep krantz-pools, long shallow stretches and some good rapids. The only way to fish this river in most parts is to wade upstream, as the undergrowth on both sides is often impenetrable. A short rod and a floating line are indispensable.

I saw my first trout in the "hing" of a long swiftly-flowing pool and watched anxiously as he intercepted my Coch-y-bundhu. I tightened and the trout tore upstream, flinging himself out of the water twice. He measured 11 inches, with sides of burnished gold, speckled with crimson rosettes — one of the most exquisitely coloured Browns I have ever seen. My companion persevered with the dry-fly, but had little luck until we reached one of the numerous krantz-pools, where he took a plump thirteen-incher on an Adams.

Dusk found us on the edge of a very large oval pool of great depth, which simply spelt big fish. We both fished the pool carefully with dry-fly and nymph, but with no result. Undaunted, my companion mounted a Muddler Minnow on a greased leader and flicked it into the eddy created where the main body of water flowed through the pool. He then started a slow jerky retrieve and the fly had scarcely moved a foot, when it disappeared in a huge swirl. The rod bent almost double and the reel screamed. In the depths a thick golden shape shuddered and the cast gave. Size? Your guess is as good as mine, but it was a big fish, make no mistake.

On our return to camp, we decided to cut across the valley slopes instead of retracing our steps in the river. The sun had set and in the kloofs the rain forests were now dark and menacing. A flock of parrots flew by, their harsh screeching echoing in the valley. It had been a wonderful afternoon's fishing. The Thabina is so secluded and access is so difficult, that I personally doubt if it is fished more than five times a year. Between my companion and myself we had landed 16 sizeable trout, from 9 to 14½ inches, and had returned all but three, which we kept for supper.

That evening, with the delicate aroma of fried trout in our nostrils, we reclined, wrapped in our down sleeping-bags against the evening chill. An east wind stirred the foliage of a grove of ancient Yellowwoods and the surrounding forest pressed closely around the firelit circle of our small camp. A pale moon was rising over the Ararat mountain and galagos were shrieking in the thickets. Almost imperceptibly a silver mist bank stole down the valley and enveloped the camp in its creeping tentacles. It was with a feeling of great contentment that we slept.

The "hing": the ultimate tail of the pool, where the flow is strongest as it merges into the beginning of the pool below. Tam Tain in his *Tam Tain's Trout Book*.

(How fortunate are these people up there in being able to camp along their river banks. With their fear of the effects of possible fire in our fynbos and among our farm houses (not to mention the commercial forests) our Forestry people here, through whose territories most of our streams flow, cannot allow this.—Ed.)