

TROUTING IN THE DRAKENSBERG

BY GARRETT EVANS

The season's nearly over, there have been good rains and the grass is long. It would seem likely that there are going to be spectacular veld fires this winter. There's already that thin winter sunshine, heavy dew and hundreds of doves calling up along the mountain. The light and shadow in the kloofs early and late in the day really makes this area what it is — without it Harrismith would only be another small town. And without mountains, there wouldn't be the mountain streams.

The trouting people here have needed the streams this season with the Sterkfontein Dam having finally 'gone phut'. But we may still have the odd good season despite the efforts and infinite wisdom of the Nature Conservation people in Bloemfontein. It was one of the finest trout waters in Southern Africa. Meanwhile, the streams have run well, and fished well, for the same reason that the grass has grown well. Hopefully the Gods will continue to send the rains next season.

Mountain streams are better than dams. They're a more living thing, and like a fire or the sea, their movement keeps one's attention. The sound of water on stone, like the sound of wind in pines, is an utterly marvellous sound. The Greeks were wise by general acknowledgement, they were particularly wise to call water the substance of the soul.

This season we fished a number of the Berg streams. The fine little stream trout are far prettier than the dam dwellers, and tastier too. The deep clear pools, often with waterfalls, are wonderful places for a swim. It's a fine sensation lying under the rushing water with the sound of the stream and small waterfalls in one's ears. It can be hot work following the streams high into the mountains. Such trips are important but there are those that can see no importance in such trips at all. Some indeed regard such things as a waste of time, and as an escape from 'reality'. These are the people who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. They often strive for 'success', not realising that those who achieve world applause almost invariably leave the world stage with a bitter taste in their mouths.

The little Rainbows and Browns are breakfast-size rather than dinner-size, fine firm little creatures in beautiful condition. How pretty the brightly coloured little fish look lying on some pieces of fern with a flybox and rod among the stones. They are mostly under half a pound. The larger ones, the half and three-quarter pounders, one sometimes puts in the creel, would have been considered giants in my old student days. Many of those far off days were spent on Exmoor or Dartmoor in the West Country. On the River Barle one could catch 75 trout in one go. They were four or five to the pound, noble little fish. We'd cook them by the stream in a shovel, a dozen at a time, and eat them greedily with proletarian baked beans.

Autumn does make one reflect; it seems there have been so many seasons, on so many different waters in so many different places. But the Berg streams must obviously be some of the most beautiful anywhere. There is great beauty there among the stone and shadow with the sunlight striking down through the gin-clear water to the many-coloured stones on the bottom. But perhaps most of all there's the song of the stream. One often imagines hearing the sound of words, of voices, there. The stream's sound would seem closely in accord with the soul.

This past season was best in February, March and early April. Often then we'd do a few trout on the coals of a small fire among the streamside stones and take another brace or two along with us, packed in ferns. Coming back down the streams in the mellow light of early evening is a splendid sensation.

May my memory always keep me in such places. There with the soothing sound of the stream and the calls of hawks and eagles high overhead among the towering, sunlit kloofs.