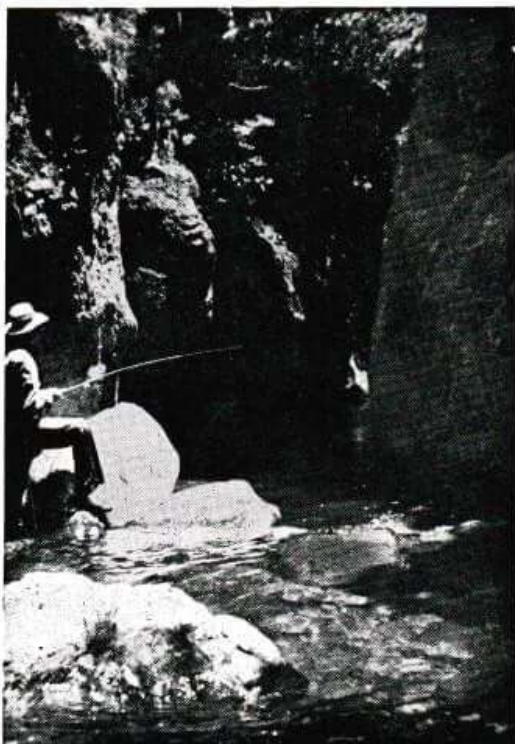




THE SMALBLAAR "CHASM"

By ALAN YATES

The author fishing the "Chasm" from the top end. By mutual agreement, the name "the Bend Pool" proposed by Mr. S. A. M. Atkinson in his article in No. 23 is changed to the "Chasm".

(Photographs: A. Yates and W. McNaught.)

UNSUSPECTED by the majority of motorists passing down Du Toits Kloof, and unknown to the majority of anglers because of its inaccessibility, one of the finest trout pools in the Cape—the Chasm—lies parallel with the Du Toits Kloof tunnel. Mr. "Bill" McNaught and I made an expedition to this pool the highlight of a four-day trip to the Smalblaar in the middle of this season.

The spur of the mountain through which the road tunnel has been pierced lies like a natural dam across the bed of the river. Over the centuries the Smalblaar has cut its way through this obstruction and for some 40 or 50 yards flows in a narrow, deep, curved defile. For practically the whole of this length the water is extremely deep and the sheer walls, glistening with moisture at all times of the year, rise straight up for 50 or 60 feet. The curve of the Chasm is just sufficient to make either end invisible from the other, and two paces at either end are sufficient to take an angler right out of his depth.

This interesting spot is well guarded. Downstream, the next pool is only wadeable in the middle of a dry summer (and then it is chin deep) and upstream lies an extremely deep circular pool into which the upper Smalblaar flows via a 15-foot waterfall. The waterfall end of this pool has sheer rock walls, and these rapidly gain in height towards the tail of the pool. Access to the Chasm, therefore, is virtually impossible from the top as far as a normally equipped angler is concerned; from the bottom end it is hard going, and there is the first swim of the lower pool to be negotiated.

The only special items of equipment we took for the expedition were a motor-car inner tube, a square of fish net and a length of cord. These are required for transporting rods, bags and clothing across the first swim and through the Chasm itself.

We started up the kloof about nine in the morning and had quite a lot of fun with the small but lively rainbows which abound in this section of the river. Fishing one pool from a high rocky ledge on the left bank, I rose a nice fish just as my fly was being swirled under the tree which spreads over the far bank; but I must have been visible to him and he turned short just below the fly. Later in the day I came to slightly closer grips with him—but more of that anon.



The "swim" which guards the lower end of the Chasm Pool, the entrance to which is the dark hole (centre). In the middle of summer, this pool is just wadeable on the right bank.

At the first swim, we rigged up the tackle on the tyre tube for practice and to establish the "drill" for the rather tricky business of landing it at the top end of the Chasm. The procedure is as follows:—

First of all the tyre must be blown up good and hard and the fish net laid across it. This is followed by the two landing nets, opened, with their forks lying across the tube at opposite ends. Next come the rods, with reels close to the tube and—most important of all—with the tips facing backwards. On top of these go the bags and creels, and finally the clothing.

Provided all this is done with the tube afloat, the load can be adjusted so that it lies all shipshape. The net is then brought over everything and tied down, and the cargo is finally secured with a cord from corner to corner. As a safety precaution this cord should pass through important items of tackle with a view to keeping everything tied together in the event of the raft capsizing, or the tube suddenly losing its air.

To go through the pool, one member of the party must swim ahead in order to receive the load at the other end. The second pushes the tube and it is a good thing to let the disturbance caused by the first swimmer subside before starting. "Slow but sure" is the rule.

When we arrived at the lower end of the Chasm, we fished as much of it as we could cover. By this time the sun was reaching a small section of the water, and although the pool looks alarmingly deep it is crystal clear. It was fascinating to see a glint of gold far down in the depths just before a trout was hooked.

The author assembling the raft at the lower end of the Chasm Pool.





One of the pools on the way up to the Chasm and the Waterfall Pools, just below the Du Toit's Kloof road tunnel.



Bill McNaught landing a fish in the "first swim". The entrance to the Chasm is a narrow gap between the rocks.

After we had each taken a fish and we had lost, as I recall it, a third, we decided to press on. We loaded the tyre again and Bill McNaught swam ahead. I followed with the load of gear, swimming as slowly as possible to keep the delicate rod tips from swinging and scraping the cliffs.

At this point I feel we should emphasize that this is not a swim which should be undertaken by anyone who is not absolutely confident of his ability. Except at one point where there is a very steep ledge there is nothing in the way of handholds on either side. The water is exceedingly deep and the sun never reaches more than a small portion of it at any one time. The narrowness, moreover, makes it impossible to allow the tube carrying the rods to float free for more than a moment or two without risk of serious damage to the tips. A companion who suddenly lost his nerve in the middle, and made a grab at the laden tube, would be a menace of no mean order.

At the top end of the Chasm there is a small waterfall and the depth of water is maintained almost to the very end. There is, however, a large boulder some three feet under the surface and Bill McNaught was standing on this when I arrived with the tube. He steadied it while I clambered up alongside and we jointly lifted everything clear and on to the next level.

At this point it is my recollection that we proceeded to knock back two very welcome bottles of beer!

Having just swum through, it is, of course, necessary to allow the water to settle down again. Provided that one has swum carefully, however, this does not take long, and on one previous occasion I actually caught a trout in this water about 30 minutes after going through. Meanwhile there is the Waterfall Pool to fish, some 20 yards or so further up.

Some idea of the grandeur of this may be gained from the photograph. The main body of the pool is circular in shape, extremely deep, and the sides facing the waterfall itself are deeply undercut. There is a nice "tail" and this is the first place to fish.

The Waterfall Pool.

McNaught, on the right, is fishing the tail. The ledge from which the author fished is just illuminated by sunlight on the left of the picture.



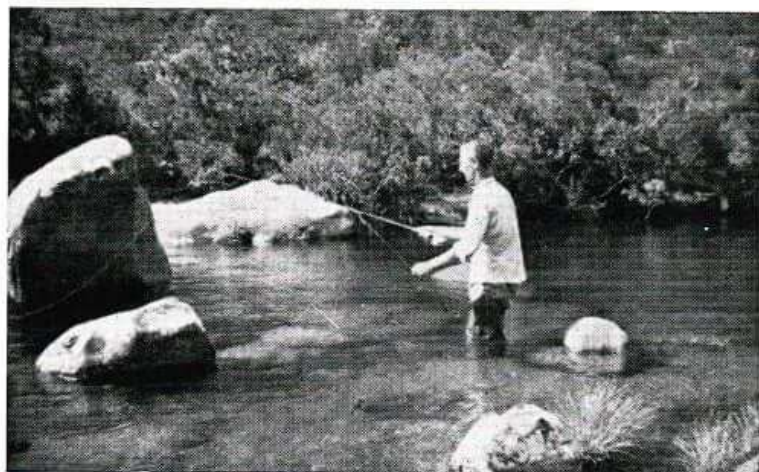
If there are two in the party, one takes the tail and the other scrambles along the left cliff to a little ledge on a shoulder of rock. I took the ledge and Bill took the tail and we spent the next hour very happily, catching three fish each.

Here again one has the thrill of seeing a glint of gold as a trout turns deep down in the water and takes the fly. I was fishing a medium-sized wet fly, casting it into the waterfall and retrieving in short, fast jerks after the rush of water had beaten it deep down. I also had the novel experience of catching a fish literally under my feet.

This happened as follows. The ledge from which I was fishing was about 5 feet above the water. To my left the cliff sloped slightly backwards and there were one or two footholds leading to another little ledge. I manoeuvred out to this latter and was standing directly above a point in the pool at which centuries of winter floods had deeply undercut the rock. Leaning forward as far as I dared I could not even see the extent to which this had reached directly underneath where I was standing.

I cast in my fly and let the current swirl it into the undercut. More by instinct than anything else, and with my rod tip pointing downwards at an angle of about 45 degrees, I struck outwards and away from myself. The next moment I was fighting a pound rainbow while perched two yards above the pool on the overhang, and with three or four highly precarious steps to retrace before I could even begin to think of reaching down with a landing net extended by a stout stick lashed to the handle.

It was quite exciting. The trout—possibly because I was so high above him—did a lot of “walloping” on the surface, and with the jerking rod held in one hand I cautiously made my way back to the ledge on the corner. Eventually I persuaded the fish to come into the tail of the pool, and Bill netted him for me some 25 feet away.



McNaught fishing the forestry water lower down the kloof.

The author lands a trout
in a pool on the lower
water.



Returning through the Chasm is, of course, merely the loading and swimming procedure in reverse. The launching of the tube is a bit tricky, because the steep-to end of the pool prevents loading it while floating. We accomplished the launching without mishap, however, although the tube was now floating slightly deeper as a result of having half a dozen extra trout to carry!

On the way back I had another go at the first trout I had risen earlier in the morning. He came to the first cast and I had an exciting few minutes before he broke loose. Still, good luck to him—and may he be a good half-pound heavier next year!

The remainder of our four days on the river had been spent lower down, on the Forest Reserve section described by Mr. S. A. M. Atkinson in PISCATOR No. 23. There was quite a lot of west in the wind for most of the time, which always seems to slow down fishing on the Smalblaar, but we had a very fair measure of sport.

To complete the trip we made one expedition to the Holsloot River, but found the fishing very dead. Bill McNaught took a rather lean rainbow of just over a pound and a half from a big, deep pool about two miles below the dam site, and we netted three or four smallmouth bass.
