

Wrestling fat fish on the roof of the world

Greg Nelson

"The fish are so numerous, fat and unaccustomed to being caught by the locals that you can literally catch them by hand!" My hopes soared and I felt a surge of excitement on hearing these words from Dr Stephane Ostrowski. We had crossed paths in the small village of Faisalabad in NE Afghanistan. I was there working as a video cameraman on a cultural documentary, and Stephane, a conservationist working for the Wildlife Conservation Society, had just completed a month-long environmental survey of the Afghan Pamir - unique U-shaped, high elevation mountain valleys distinctive to Central Asia. For any inexperienced, enthusiastic fly fisher this was music to the ears. I needed easy pickings to regain my years of lost confidence.

I was first introduced to fly fishing on the Du Toitskloof River by a good school friend, Phil, who was a keen angler. He was a far better friend than teacher. Once while fishing with Phil on the Holsloot river near Rawsonville, I heard a big splash upstream. I thought Phil had finally hooked a big one. On rounding the riverine scrub, I found my unconventional friend submerged in a rock pool donning a mask and snorkel, arm extended above the surface holding his fishing rod and dangling the line in front of him. Phil's patience and curiosity about why the fish were not biting had got the better of him. I never did catch anything in that river and my first trout were caught in the tamer confines of a dam in Dullstroom where I received more conventional guidance in fly fishing techniques.

Fishing in stocked dams was great fun, good practice and certainly good for the confidence. However, I was keen to get back to the Cape's coca cola colored streams and catch a wild trout. Little did I know then, that my relatively limited experience was going to be exposed to even more testing conditions and circumstances.

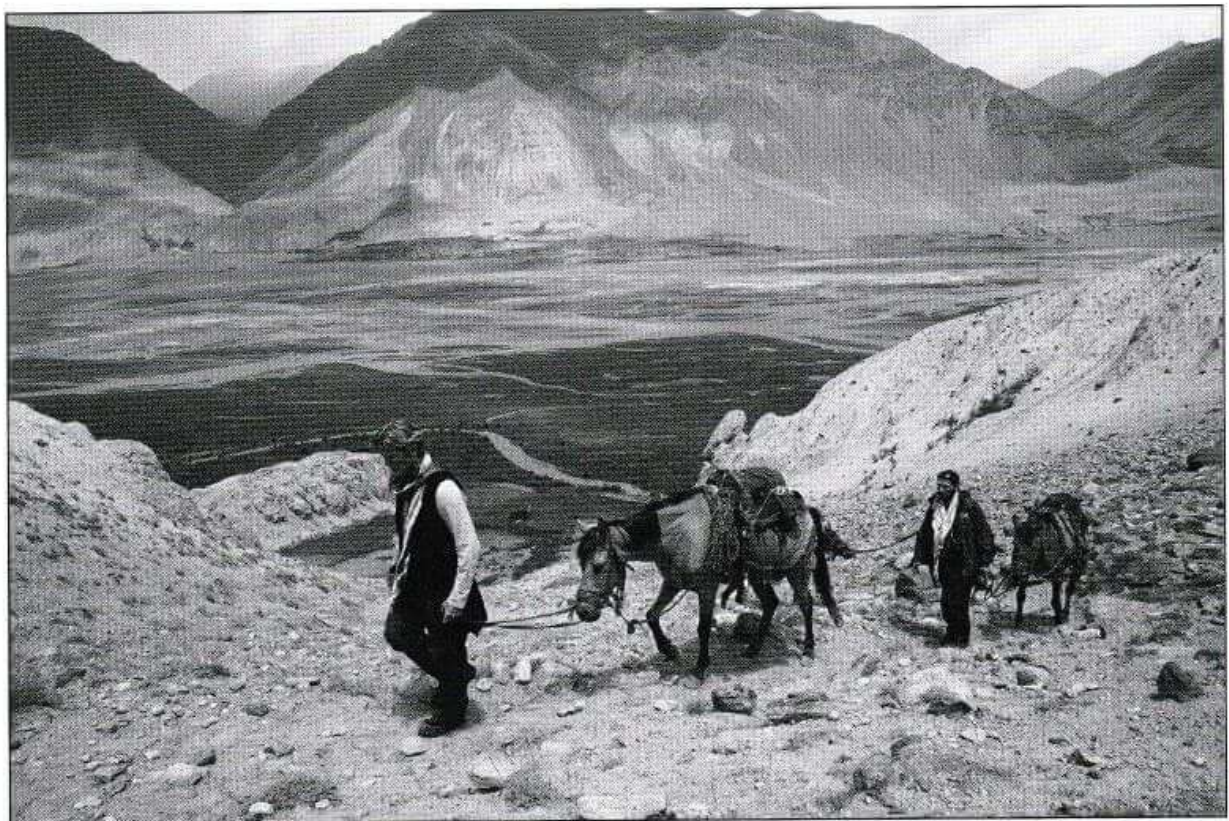
When an old friend and colleague, Ed Herbst, heard that I was to spend four months filming a documentary about the great Oxus river in central Asia from its source to end he asked me if I was taking a fishing rod. I did feel a bit ashamed saying no. "May be nice to eat your own fresh fish", said Ed. No doubt he was more than right. It was a very appealing thought and, before I knew it, Ed handed me a beautifully compact, six foot, four piece travel rod in a plastic tube. He said it was a rod 'of doubtful provenance' built by his friend, Steven Boshoff, from several broken Orvis, Scott and Stealth models and sprayed a matte green to conceal 'its dubious origins'. Included with the rod were a lightweight Stealth reel, a fly box, and tippet material. "Just write me a little article about it when you get back," said Ed.

The pressure was on. Success was imperative, otherwise I would have nothing to write about.

Together with my Australian colleague, TV producer/presenter Dave Adams, we were to spend our time documenting the people, cultures, and ancient history along this river, also known as the Amu Darya.



A child in the Afgan Pamir indicates that there are fish to be caught.



Dave Adams and Jamseed en route to the source of the Oxus/Amu Darya River.

On arrival in Afghanistan's capital Kabul, one of my first enquiries to our guide, Jamsheed, was about fishing on the Oxus. He looked at me intently, wrinkling up his sunburned forehead like a crumpled carpet and said, "No, no you can't fish!"

I felt shell-shocked and it must have shown because, before I could respond, Jamsheed moved closer to me and placing his hand on my shoulder said, "It's not allowed". "Why not?" I blurted. "Since the government took over from the Taliban six years ago they banned fishing with dynamite and generators," explained Jamsheed simply.

I felt dazed, contemplating a lifeless Oxus river. It occurred to me that perhaps Jamsheed thought I had other intentions for the generator that we brought to charge my camera batteries. "I did bring a fishing rod," I said rather hopelessly, while imagining a barren river. Jamsheed's forehead folds flattened as his face lit up, "No, no that's different, with a rod you can fish, no problem," he said with a broad smile. I was imagining the huge destructive force of dynamite in a country that has been at war for the last 40 years. "The problem is surely that there are no fish left," I said grimly.

Jamsheed quickly extended a straight arm with an open palm and, with the other hand, karate chopped the rigid arm at the shoulder. "No, no the fish are this big," he said, wide-eyed. As if to confuse me more, I had recently read the *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini who spoke about *laaf*. This is a *darri* word that Hosseini uses to describe the Afghan tendency to exaggerate.

"Really, really," said an even wider eyed Jamsheed. I forced a smile. I got the feeling that Jamsheed had all the best intentions of making me feel better.

A few days later my hopes soared while traveling alongside a fast flowing river through one of the villages scattered along its course. Two boys were carrying half a dozen 500 gram fish. Not very big, but encouraging. Instead of matches or a grenade pin they had a homemade fishing rod in hand. At this stage the late summer snow melts had made most of the rivers flowing down the Hindu Kush Mountains too murky to fly fish.

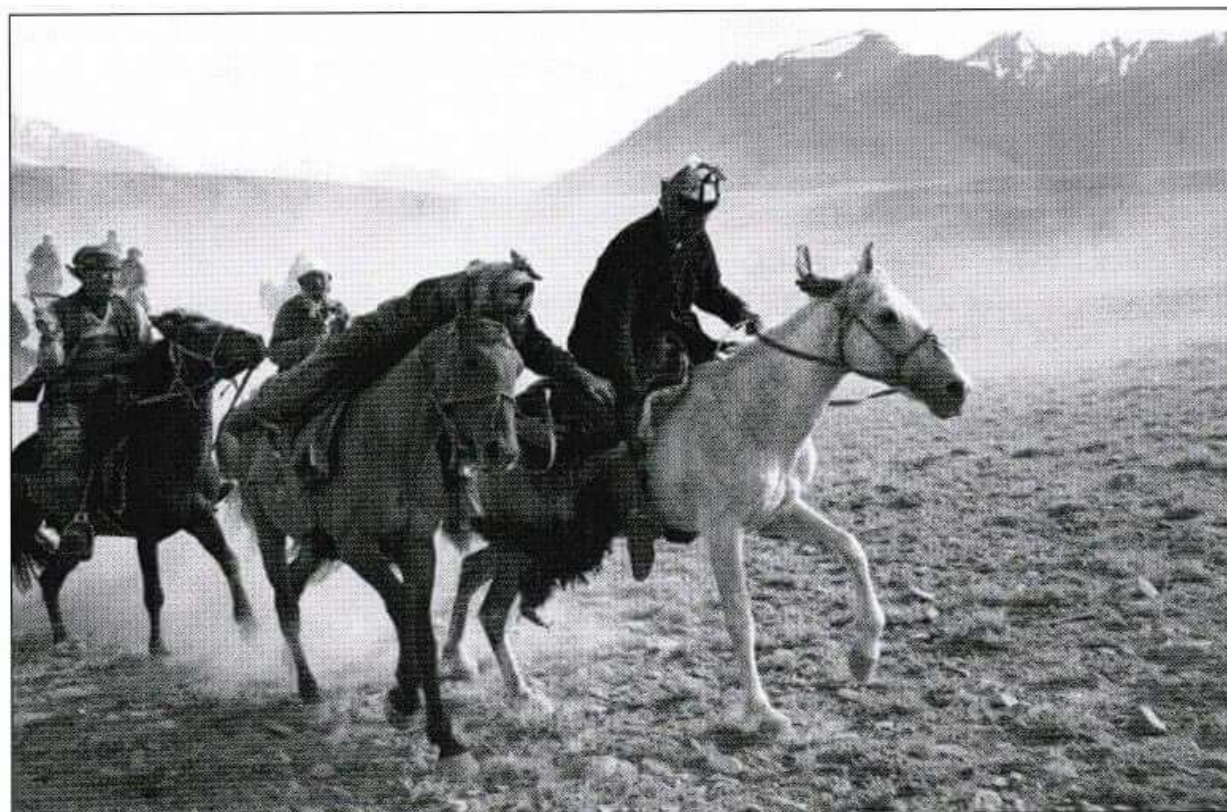
I would have to wait until we exchanged our 4 x 4 vehicle for horses and yaks once we headed into the Fagan Pamir. Jamsheed assured me that in the Pamir the rivers are crystal clear, the lakes dark blue, clean and pure as a mirror and sweet and soft to drink.

It seems there is a price for everything. It took three days of sweat and very heavy breathing to get there. We left Sarhard with a caravan of 18 horses and yaks together with a crew of 12 for the three-week trek. Dave and I walked, most of the time in a breathless state, in an attempt to get fit. On a few occasions Jamsheed and a local Wakhi companion would move into position on either side of me as I slogged along. They would unashamedly scrutinise every detail of my embattled face. Either they were positioning themselves to catch me when I collapsed or I simply enthralled them.

At 5000 m, when I started gulping for air like a fish in an oxygen-starved bowl, I would haul myself onto a horse. It was an opportunity not only to rest but to take in the vast splendour of pristine alpine landscapes extending as far as the eye could see. Majestic white peaks and glaciers descending precipitously to feed the raging river far below the



Above and below: The Kyrgyz nomadic pastoralists playing their favourite game, bushkazi.



narrow winding contour path my horse knew so well. We were on an ancient and vital branch of the grand Trans-Asian artery known as the Silk Road and linking China to the Mediterranean. The odd petroglyph bore silent witness to the continual use of these passes by pilgrims, traders, caravans and armies from 100 BC until the eighth century AD. As were these ancient travelers, we were warned that if a stream was too high and treacherous for us to cross, we had to wait out the chilly night until just before sunrise when the temperature is at its lowest. The glacial melt and the water level would then be at its lowest, making crossing safer.

I thought a few of our first river crossings were madness and imagined being swept away by an angry, swollen river. Confidence builds quickly, however, when you realise just how incredibly sure-footed the bulky, woolly yaks are. Compared to the local horses in our caravan, riding a yak was like riding a mechanical rodeo bull with the electricity off.

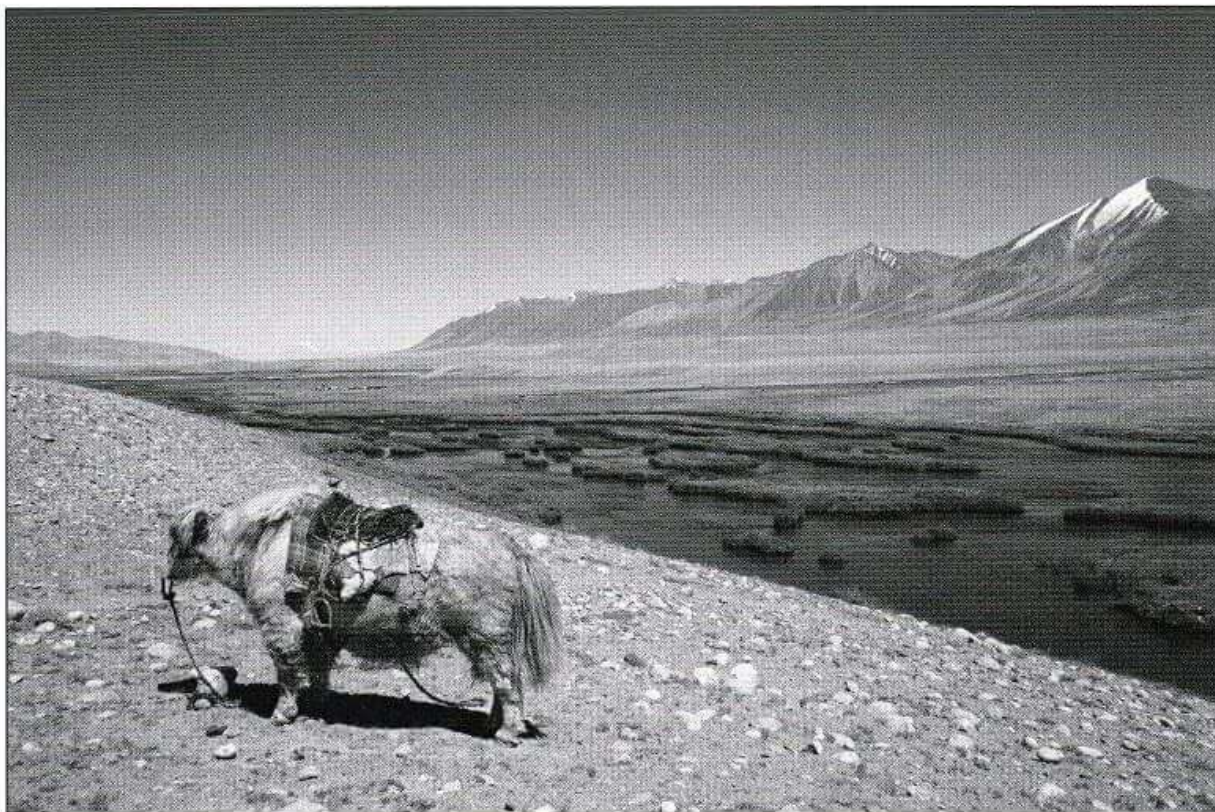
As we moved away from the gorge the valley gradually widened. With the gentler gradient in the wide grassland, the flow rate of its many streams was lessened. It was in this clean, sparkling water that I spotted my first school of fish darting away from the shadow of my trusty yak. They were all of a size I would be very proud to catch. Unfortunately it was the first of many occasions where I had to turn my back, keep moving and stick to our filming schedule. My time for fishing would come, but first we had work to do which also required a lot of trekking time.

We covered 300 km in three weeks and documented the source of the Oxus River, the first film team to do so. Being the first to successfully fly fish the source could put me right up into the upper echelons of the piscatorial world with the likes of Ed Herbst ... a shortcut to the top. The icy blue water flows from under a massive glacier and out of a huge ice cave with dripping icicles the size of the barrels on the old, abandoned Russian tanks that had littered the route from Kabul. There was no chance of instant glory however as there were no signs of any fish in the ice crystal clear water.

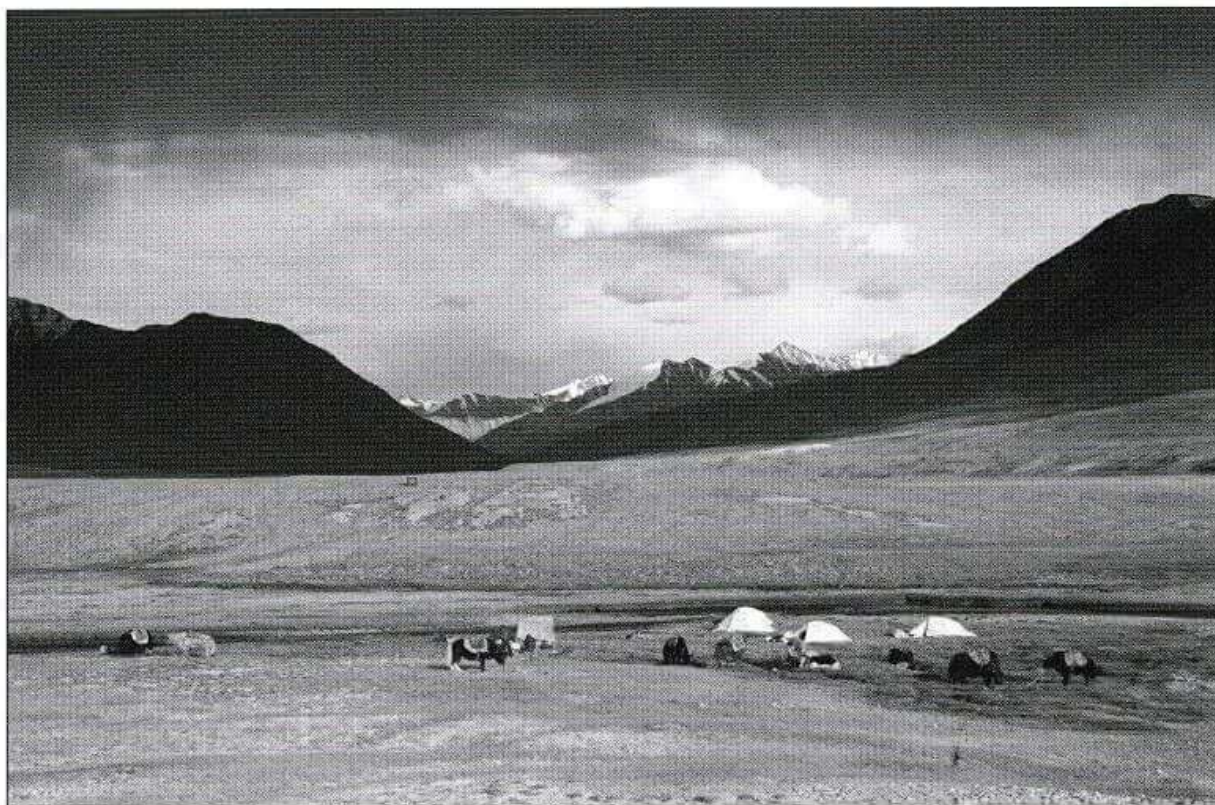
The chance to test my skills and Steve Boshoff's rod finally came when we returned to the grassy plains of the gently sloping valley. We were determined to have fish for dinner and Jamsheed and I started stalking the streams soon after sunrise.

Later, we were to host some of the Kyrgyz people, Turkic nomadic pastoralists whom we had been filming. Central to their lives are their horses with which they herd fat tailed sheep, goats and yaks. They are a hardy people who migrate seasonally within the closed frontier of the high altitude Afgan Pamir according to available sunlight, pastures and shelter from the wind. For five months of the year they are snowed in. Particularly impressive is the game they play from horseback called bushkazi. The object of the game is to see who can keep possession of a goat carcass the longest. It's a free for all, an incredible display of stamina and horsemanship. Just observing and filming this afternoon-long activity made me ravenous. We had eaten in their felt yurts, filmed a wedding ceremony and shared Yak milk, cheese and goat meat over and over while fat fish swam freely. It was simply not part of their diet and I was determined to offer it at dinner that night.

Stalking up a narrow stream, I spotted a fat fish that would hang over both ends of a frying



A yak on the bank of the upper reaches of the Oxus/Amu Darya River.



A Kyrgyz camp site on the banks of the river.

pan. The damp, short green grass was perfect for sliding on your belly. There was a good breeze so I slid upwind and upstream so I could float the carefully selected fly right in front of my dinner. I still had no idea which fly out of the box of more than 50 would interest my quarry. It was a kind of lucky dip and I tied on what I thought looked like one of the harmless creatures that buzzed around the yak dung. I was well out of sight of the target area and only had to cast a short distance so as to land the fly in the water to float downstream past my quarry.

After five or six successful drifts and zero interest from the fish, Jamsheed began to mumble. In a very polite way he told me that I was wasting my time and that we would do better if we tried fishing the Afghan way. I selected a different fly and wondered if he was joking about dynamite or whether he wanted to use our generator. Perhaps he was going to suggest using bait, but I did not want to question him. I quietly moved upstream in search of active fish. There were fish in almost every bend of the river, so I settled down once I was a little distance from Jamsheed.

After I had tried another pattern with no success, Jamsheed gave me a whistle, shrugged his shoulders, waved and moved off. Then an unbelievable thing happened. As I was staring at the open fly box contemplating my next choice, a mayfly landed on its edge and just sat there. I couldn't tell you which of the fifty flies he was looking at but I can tell you that the next fly that I floated down stream, an Adams, got me my first take in the Afghan Pamirs. The next cast produced my first fish, little more than a fingerling, but still my first, honestly-caught wild fish that looked a lot like a trout. Throughout this time, the live mayfly remained on the edge of the fly box.

While I had several takes from fish much bigger than my 20cm catch, I was unable to hook one. By mid afternoon I gave up on the bigger specimens but headed back to camp with five fish of similar size to the first one I had landed. At least there would be a sampling on the dinner table. As I approached our camp at Bozai Gumbaz, I noticed Jamsheed, his hunched back to me, sitting on the river bank. He was gutting a fish more than twice the size of mine - and there were eleven of them. The humming generator was still in the same place, in a depression away from our camp, charging my camera batteries. I knew Jamsheed had no fishing tackle and was certain he had no explosives. Besides, there had been no other abnormal sound. The last boom that I heard was in Faisalabad when a suicide bomber blew himself up just short of his ISAF German military target. All I could hear was the cool Alpine breeze singing quietly past my fly line and the occasional small splash in a gurgling stream.

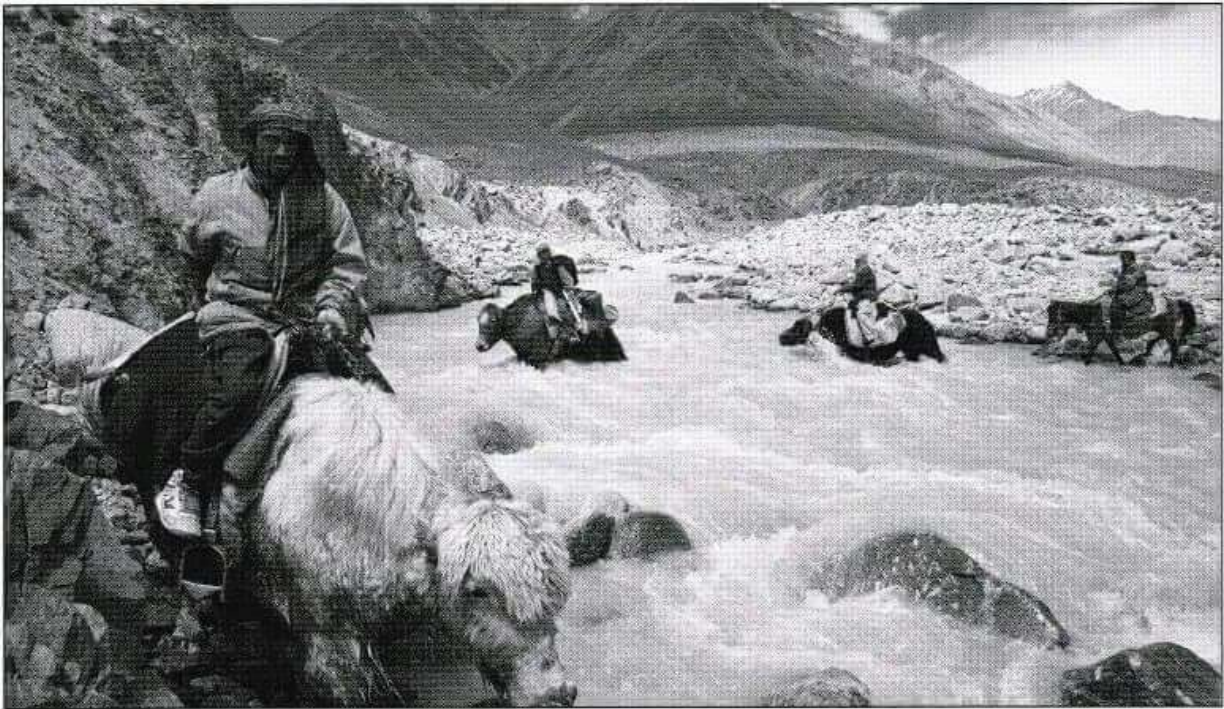
"How did you catch them?" I asked.

Jamsheed looked up at me with a big grin then while turning his attention to my catch said, "I told you to come with me..."

"Yes, thank you, but how did you catch?" I urged.

With a big Afghan grin he said, "By hand of course - but you should have seen the big one I wrestled with, it nearly swam away with me!" he added seriously.

I would never know if the one that got away was laaf or not. Either way, we still ate well



Crossing the river, swollen with snowmelt, by yak.



Fishing at last ... Greg Nelson using an Adams and Steve Boshoff's rod, fishes the picturesque upper reaches of the Amu Darya River.

that night. Under a crisp, dreamy, star-bright sky I ate a delicious fresh fish.

Our Kyrgyz guests stuck to eating the freshly slaughtered sheep.

I couldn't help thinking about my old friend Phil, who has left this earth. I wondered about his spirit and the mayfly on the box.

I thanked him.