

LAKENVLEI SKI-CABIN "CHRISTENED"

by John Taunton-Clark

Marine Biology and its allied disciplines are considered by many to be "glamour" professions and often conjure up what we call the "Cousteau syndrome". If I had R1,00 for each occasion that I've been asked at dinner parties, etc. for my occupation and upon admitting to being a student of matters oceanographic had the response of "Oh, that sounds so interesting", I'd be rich in place of merely corpulent! Obesity and glamour aside, however the "wet" sciences are not traditionally regarded as stressful or tedious, except by those in the know! When a conference looms near and papers or presentations need to be prepared hastily to meet the title spat out in 10 milliseconds when motivating to attend the conference some 12 months previously, it is remarkable how stressful and tedious these same wet sciences can become! Such was the scenario at our offices for the months of July and August last year as we prepared for the Benguela Ecology Programme Conference at UCT in September. During tea breaks, between meetings and at any other stolen moments, feverish plans were all this time being made for the big cure, the long-awaited trip to the healing spa of Lakenvlei! As the conference progressed, so the thoughts of these well-proportioned Bokkeveld rainbows became uppermost in our minds, or what was left of them after a week of daytime cranial callisthenics and nighttime braincell destruction!

At last Sunday, D-Day, arrived. The necessary phonecalls were made to check on the logistics and final departure plans were made, the troops all immigrating from the corners of the Peninsula's suburbs to a central location and thence to the hills. We've heard of Sunday, Bloody Sunday, but Sunday 15 September 1991 must have delivered the most aquatic weather I can remember. Leaving Cape Town we were all quite sure that we'd need our float-tubes long before reaching Lakenvlei! Much to the credit of the genius of German engineering we reached the vlei in good fiddle and in time to fish the evening showers! Tubes were inflated rods readied, terminal tackle discussed and the water invaded. Those trout did not have a chance! Here were four professional fisheries scientists covering technical, physical, chemical and biological expertise, all fresh from the biggest wet science brainstorm since last year! We had "Rubberdinghy" Roberts, renowned for his marine pollution work and rapidly making a name for himself as the equivalent to 20 water buffalo in the methane generation/Greenhouse effect stakes! "Coniston-water" Cooper was there with the largest pair of jet-fins yet to paddle under a float tube (The Book of Records is yet to confirm his world float tube speed record). "Capillary-action" Cockroft suffered rising damp the whole weekend and offered proof of the adage that leaking waders a wet crotch will make, no matter how much goop is applied to the holes! Completing the foursome was "Tightfisted T-C", equipped by the Ed Herbst Savings and Fishing Gear Loan Co. Ed is somewhat slimmer than I am and seemed to miss the fact that although a float tube without an innertube will support his weight adequately, my 70-something kilos required significant additional displacement! We managed to prevail however and the most motley armada to launch onto the waters of Lakies sailed forth.

We took to the water with about 20 minutes of daylight remaining and fished on into the darkness in cool, slightly wet conditions with no success until the lure of some sweet wine and warm food in the hut could be resisted no longer.

What the hut lacks in aesthetic qualities it more than adequately compensates in warmth and waterproofing. A gas cooker and a "skottelbraai" were soon chuckling merrily as were the imbiber's of the fine hanepoot that was so effectively restoring circulation to chilled fingers, toes, ears and other extremities. As the evening progressed and the tally of empties increased, so the frequency, colourfulness and fluidity of stories increased. Finally, Rubberdinghy's own personal contribution to the Global Warming crisis had reached such proportions that the hut was threatening to repeat the Hindenberg disaster and all flames were extinguished! Sleep, for some, followed. Forthcoming visitors should notice many additions to the furnishings of the hut, all products of "Coniston-water" Cooper's nocturnal carpentry efforts!

Monday morning first light showed some promise of better weather and three of us launched our tubes to tackle the early morning rise, while the fourth preferred to contemplate the day's potential from the comfort of his sleeping bag. Not much action was forthcoming by about 09h00 and the hut was revisited for a breakfast of eggs, bacon and tomatoes - and a revision of strategies for the



Rob Cooper landing a Rainbow with the Lakensvlei ski cabin in the background.



A Lakensvlei trout showing a typical cormorant-inflicted wound.



Float tubing at Lakensvlei

rest of the day.

By about 10h30 we were all back on the water and plying our various chosen methods of maintaining living fingers and toes while trying to catch a few fish. Action was relatively slow whilst the weather maintained its wet, blustery conditions, but about mid-afternoon the clouds opened a wee bit and the wind changed to the SW indicating perhaps a slight rise in the barometer. A frantic hatch of small mayfly-like insects then ensued, lasting for about 2 hours and the water fairly boiled with rising fish. Even during this period, though, the number of fish landed was not really impressive, but the activity kept spirits alive. All in all, the day saw about 7 fish from 11b to 21b landed on a variety of flies from dry to large Zonker-type streamers. While the rise was on I had little interest shown in the dry fly offerings which I made, but succeeded with a variety of patterns fished fast and just below the surface. All good things come to an end and as suddenly as the rise had started so it ended and little action was forthcoming later as the weather switched back to wet and wild. After several hours of dunking one's pins in water of ± 8 degrees C the thought of warming drinks in the hut again saw weary float tubers paddling back to the hut - a surprisingly long paddle from the Dead Tree bay!

Another warm and shiny night full of jokes, good food and nocturnal carpentry again separated Monday from Tuesday, which dawned bright and clear with nary a breath of wind. The weather conditions were too perfect for decent fishing and although the diverse methods of the previous day were repeated, only two fish were landed, one of about 11b and the other just over 21bs.

With arms and legs tiring anyway we reached that time when packing up was mandatory as two of us had to get back to town for a meeting.

The fun was not yet over, however, as after descending the pass the Kombi was overheating and we had to unpack the vehicle onto the side of the road so as to get at the engine. While Rob went off on a test-drive, we set up a temporary roadside tackle shop much to the amusement of local farm labour! Problems solved it was full steam for Cape Town and the end of another great trip to Lakens.

Closing comments

Several injured fish caught indicates the severity of the cormorant problem.

The hut is aesthetically very unpleasant. We suggest a deck around the front with a pergola - more can sleep outside in good weather.

Shoring up of the cabin is needed - cement rocks together?

Repainting and making the roof "green" or black would help.