

# RANGER TO RHODES: THE WTA TROUT FESTIVAL

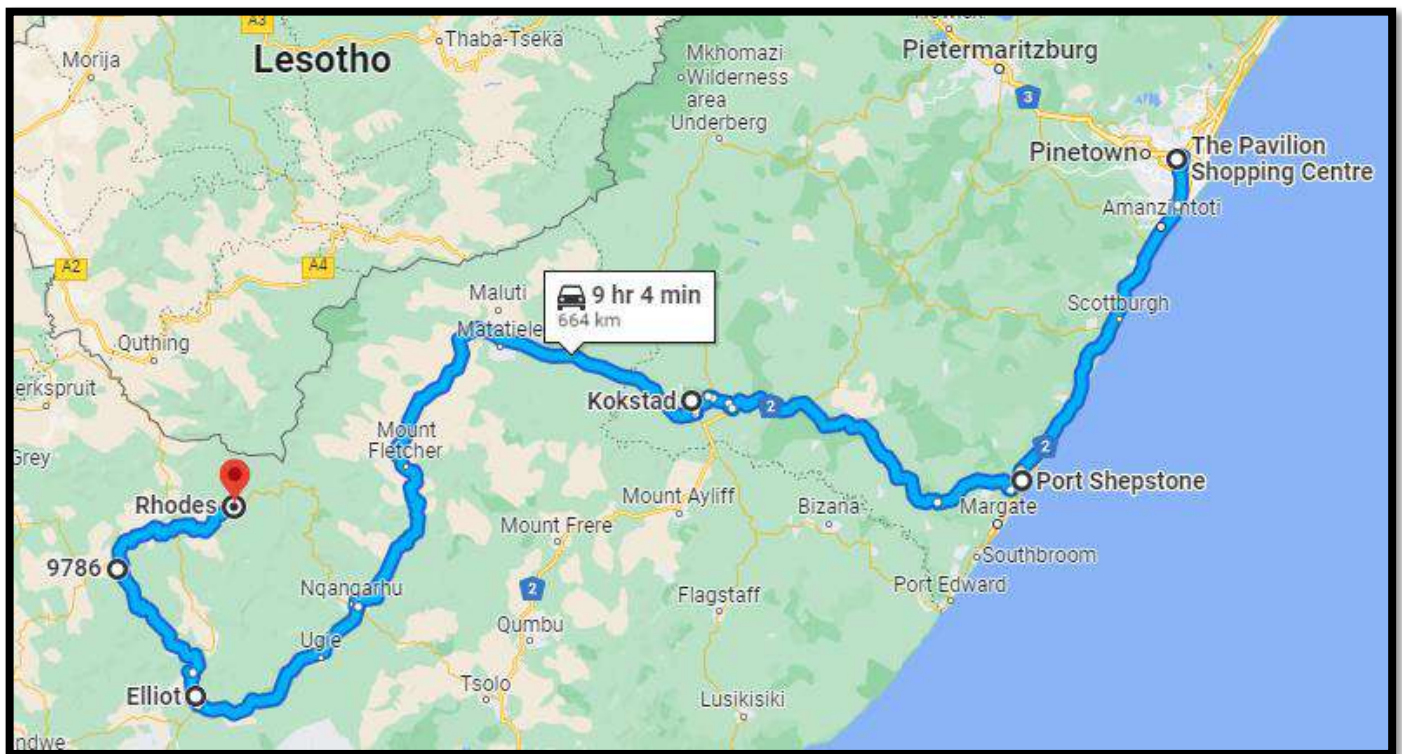
March 17-20 2023



**Mountain malachite** *Chlorolestes fasciatus*

*The Wild Trout Association Festival, now in its 32<sup>nd</sup> year, is a celebration of the humble trout and its Rhodian custodians – the riparian owners, guides and providers of accommodation. Each year fly fishermen and women flock to Rhodes to enjoy days of splendid river fishing and camaraderie that this event generates. 2023 marked a year of exceptionally high rainfall both before and during the Festival, resulting in muddy rivers and even muddier roads. This did not deter our happy band of “furry feather flingers” who managed to find fishable waters on each of the allocated days. Now read on...*

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*The route travelled, to and from Westville*

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS – 16 March 2023

Our merry band consisted of Peter, Grant and Andrew with me being the only festival neophyte and designated driver. We left the Engen garage near the Westville Pavilion at 5, hoping to make good time to relax before the evening's festivities.

The trips there and back were relatively trouble-free: the only delays were the stop-goes between Elliot (called Khowa since 2017, but not all signposts have been changed) and Maclear. We had hoped to travel across Naude's Nek, but all except the main through routes were made very dodgy due to damage to the roads from the rain. Discretion proved to be the better part of valour, and we opted for the less scenic, though still impressive, route going there and on the return journey.

From previous trips, it felt best to have a couple of breaks for food and fuel en route. First stop was Loafers in Kokstad for coffee and light breakfast, then on to Barkly East for fuel (we were warned that no fuel was available in Rhodes).



*Andrew at Barkly East*



***Barkly East, with its really wide road system – no traffic issues here***

We stopped a couple more times on the way to Rhodes, to admire the spectacular scenery...



***Just outside Barkly East...***



***The Kraai River...***



*The confluence of the Bell (on the left) and the Sterkspruit rivers, forming the Kraai River*



*Peter, Grant and Andrew crossing The bridge over the River Kraai (famous Alec Guinness war movie 😊)*



*Brown Dodger (Afrogegenes letterstedti); Table Mountain Beauty (Aeropetes tulbaghia)*

While Peter chose to stay in relative luxury (by Rhodes standards) of Walkerbouts Inn (run with efficiency by Dave Walker and his team), the rest of the Ranger crew joined Rob Hibbert and wife Tania at the self-catering, well-appointed 4-bed, 2-bath Firefly Cottage:



***Our accommodation – Firefly Cottage***



***View from the cottage towards the Bell River***



***The next-door plot, which is for sale***

The evening consisted of reading out the rules of the festival, which can be summarised in 2 phrases: fly only; catch & release. The venues to be fished were allocated depending on the weather (the higher up, the clearer the water) and were rotated so that all participants have their fair share of getting 'The Big One'. All rivers, no dams. You are obliged to fill in a catch return at the end of the day, with sizes and number of fish caught per size. No prizes – so less of a competitive atmosphere. To get to the venue, the system of What3Words was used\* – every 3-metre square of the world has been given a unique combination of 3 words. So we were allocated Thurlstone (imprint.milkshake.yodel), Glen Nesbitt (touches.reaquaint.blunder) and Bothwell (inflicts.fanatic.querying). Assurances were made that the words had NO SIGNIFICANCE! We had 2 stabs at Thurlstone, as we had to scamper away the first time due to lightning...

We collected our goodie bags which contained a wide range of fishing and foodie items, as well as our lunch packs for our first fishing day, and retired for nightcaps and a well-earned rest.

### THE FIRST DAY - 17 March 2023

Setting off after breakfast in 2 vehicles for safety's sake, we slip-slided some of the way to Thurlstone during ominous weather portents...which allowed us a mere 30 minutes of fishing time before the rain came down – not so serious but accompanied by lightning – which is no fisherman's friend...so we scurried back to base on the Bell.



\*(<https://what3words.com>)



**Not a happy face in sight...**



When the weather cleared a bit, we did have a good sighting of a **Jackal Buzzard** and appreciated the visit of a **Southern Meadow White** (*Pontia helice helice*), which is the dominant butterfly in the area. Although we were all a tad gloomy, our spirits were raised by fishing the Bell in the afternoon – resulting in numerous small fish caught mainly on nymph with a strike indicator (basically a float!)





The day dawned brighter and hence we were eager to have another go at Thurlstone, which hadn't been allocated to another group. The water levels had risen throughout, and visibility was poor. So we fished the top of the beat, where it joined Mount Mourne (berate.geeky.telegraphs). All of us caught fish, but it was tough going with the ambient conditions. I had fun with the dragons and damselfly in the adjacent wetland:



***Two-striped Skimmer* (*Orthetrum cafferum*)- male (left), and female (right)**



***Swamp Bluet* (*Africallagma glaucum*)**

We rounded off the afternoon with the famous ROADBLOCK, where passing participants were obliged to taste a variety of whiskies of their choice – 18 in all. We provided shooter glasses for this, but some of the folk brought their own tumblers to down more than their fair share...



***The roadblock willow...***



***Grant, Andrew and Rob in charge of proceedings...***

Then on home, where I managed some wildlife shots:



***Painted Lady (Vanessa cardui)***



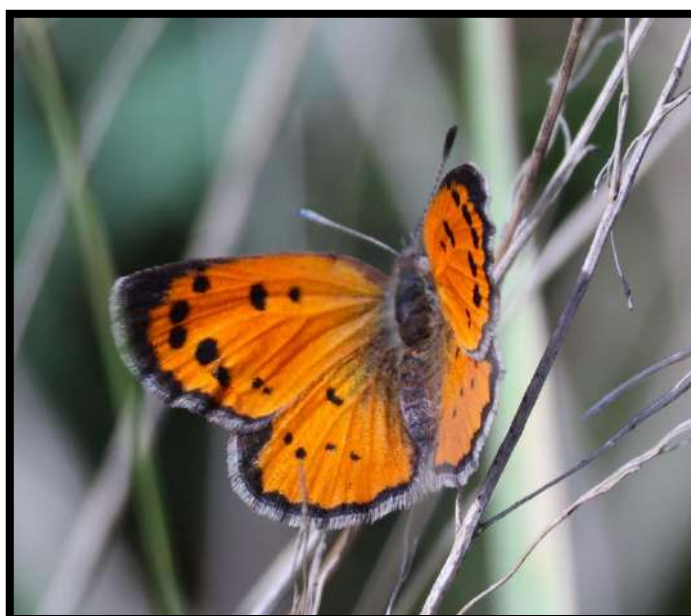
***African Plain Tiger (Danaus chrysippus orientis)***



***Hummingbird Hawk moths...Macroglossum species***



***Southern Fiscal with prey. By the neck, nogal!***



***Eastern Sorrel Copper*** (*Lycaena clarki*)

DAY 3 – 19 March 2023

This turned out to be our best day, as we were allocated a very popular beat when the rivers are running strongly – Glen Nesbitt (touches.reaquaint.blunder). We were concerned that dawn broke with a red sky and were well aware of the old adage – “red sky in the morning – a shepherds warning...”, but for once this did not prove true!

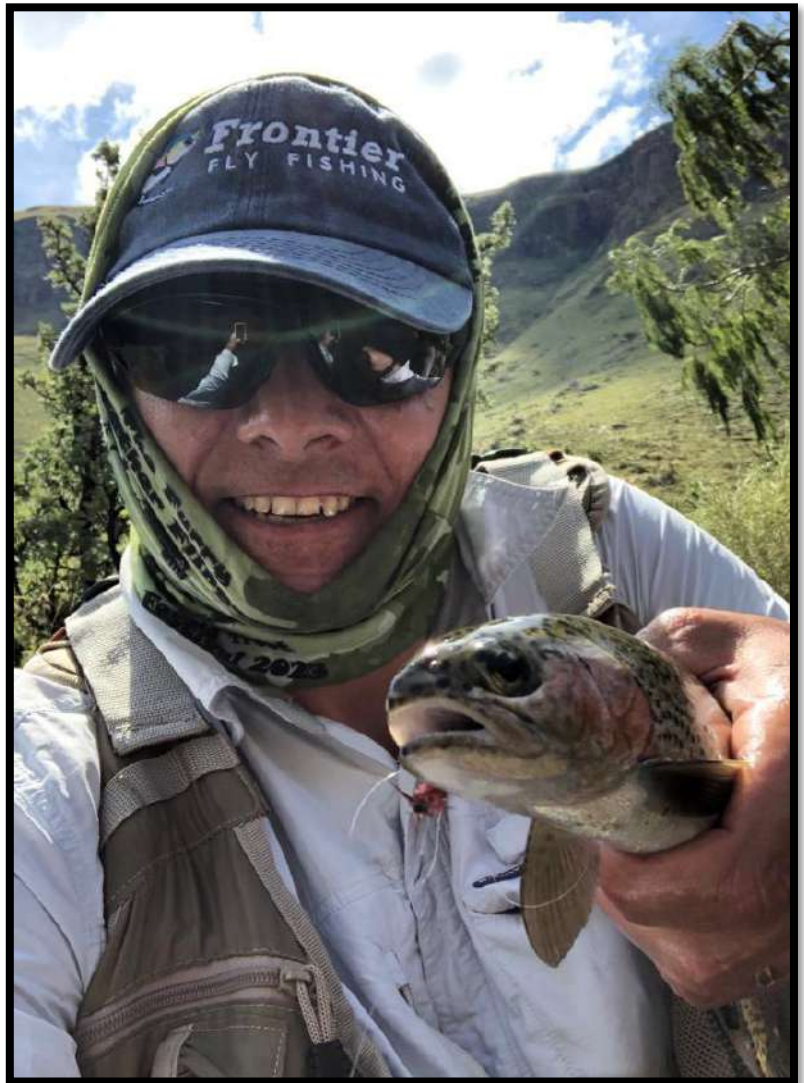


***A view from the cottage, Day 3...***

|                     |                                   |                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lovedale            | Miles, Ian, Andrew, Marlon        |                   |
| Bothwell            | Gary, Ritchie, Malcolm, Ken B     | Rudi              |
| Knockwarron         | Dick, Mark H, Neil S              |                   |
|                     | Russel, Woz                       |                   |
| Den Hagen           | Grevin, Tammy                     |                   |
| Lower Grateshead    | Lionel, Jason, Colin, Wayne       | Neil H            |
| Bruce dell          | Mike, Roberto, Anthony, Stephen   | Peter             |
| Glen Nesbit         | Rob, Andrew M, Grant, Mark L      |                   |
| Birnany/<br>Kilmore | Ken G, Rob, Frank, Nigel, Olivier | Heather<br>Duncan |
| Tenahead            | Roland, Graham M                  | Mark              |
| Newstead            | Andy, Matt                        |                   |
| Grateshead<br>Upper | Jan, Paulo                        |                   |

Beat allocations, decided by the experts the day before...at Glen Nesbitt, the water is fairly easy to access, but there were very few quiet pools to cast into – your fly was always on the move...





***The target species – Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*); Grant with a plump one (pic by Rob Hibbert)***



***Rob into a nice fish*** (pic by Grant Visser)



***Dirt trackin'*** (pic by Grant Visser)



***Rabbit in the sky – you're spoilt for choice of sky pics every day...***



***This little bird was near the Bokspuit – the very confiding Wailing Cisticola***

Another day, another roadblock – and then back to the cottage for supper and the annual auction. This is to raise funds for the Wild Trout Association as well as the local community. Items on offer were mainly fishing tackle and books, as well as clothing and locally produced blankets:



Some people got caught up in bidding wars, and a grand total of R39k was raised. It was a late night by the time we retired and needed to be refreshed for the final day's fishing.

#### DAY NO. 4 – March 20 2023

This was the day of the much-feared, EFF-backed national shutdown (which promised fireworks but turned out to be the dampest of squibs). Life and fishing were not interrupted, certainly not in Rhodes. We did see posters advertising the event all through our trip, so the EFF must have spent plenty of moolah arranging that countrywide!

So where to on our final day, after another night of intermittent rain? The answer: Bothwell, adjacent to Glen Nesbitt, on the Bokspuit. Conditions were tough, but all our group caught fish, be they on nymph or dry fly. Water that was pooling previously (prior to precipitation) now turned into fast-flowing freshets, with the extra hazard of losing your footing whilst wading, as the constant current created a different kind of "call of the stream". We also needed to head back early due to the threat of yet more rain...



***Our band of brothers (with token female 😊). Pic on left by Peter Brigg***

Back home it started to clear with intermittent sunshine, which brought out the “flying flowers”, some shown below:



***Red-clover Rayed Blue (Actizera stellata), the first time it's been recorded from Rhodes***



***African Hummingbird Hawk Moth (Macroglossum trochilus); African Clouded Yellow (Colias electo electo)***



***Two blues: Common Zebra Blue (Leptotes sp.); African Grass Blue (Zizeeria knysna knysna)***

Monday evening was quite a subdued affair with tales of fish caught and even bigger ones lost. An early start in the morning meant we turned in early, after a real treat of a supper at Walkerbouts Inn which included salmon starters.

The return journey was uneventful, except we had good sightings of crowned cranes on leaving Rhodes:



This trip was important for me, as I not only learnt how to fish the water using flies and techniques that were new to me, but also was exposed to the many and varied fishing folk bonded in friendship and respect to the art of the fly. All were generous in sharing their knowledge and even flies without prompting, and I did not feel “left out”, as is often the case when joining a group. Catching fish came secondary to the whole WTA experience.

Special thanks go to Peter Brigg for imparting his immense knowledge on all matters trout; fellow companions Andrew & Grant – always ready to advise; Rob Hibbert, for arranging the accommodation and finally to Dave Walker for providing such an enjoyable venue for breakfast and evening festivities at Walkerbouts Inn – not forgetting (as you are inclined to do) his lunch packs!

REFERENCE: A Guide to Fly Fishing in the Eastern Highlands, Wild Trout Association 2023 edition. Compiled and edited by Dave Walker.

