

Who is an April fool now?

Smalblaar (The Prince of Streams) Beat 1

As I stopped at the red traffic light (yes, some South Africans still do that) a beggar approached. Lately, I am easily irritated with them, but something made me look, perhaps the gap-toothed smile? The sign around his neck read: "I don't beg, I give away R5 coins!" What on earth? Has the world finally reversed its rotation? Then he flipped his sign around and suddenly it said: "April Fool". Indeed! I laughed out loud and gladly gave him a R5 coin. The light turned green and I was off, on my way to my optimistic date with the rainbow trout in the Smalblaar, less than an hour away.

I cannot recall when last I had a really great day out fishing, a day when everything came together just right, almost too good to be real. It felt like there was forever an invisible cold front looming, or someone fishing ahead of me, with fish just too smart and alert for me. I spooked too many fish, overlooked fish, missed strikes, lost sight of tiny near invisible flies, and lost too many of them to the trees. Creaky knees, cranky hip joints, rusty back and shoulders were constant companions. I also had too many stumbles, slips and slides on our rounded freestone streams and even a few unplanned swims. Perhaps I was a little bit off my game?

Sure, I caught a good few fish, but they were mostly the dumb youngsters. Here and there I strongly suspected that I caught them just through equally dumb luck, not skill. Every so often I even had to resort to fishing wet flies downstream just to not have a blank day. Yes, that's how bad it got for a devout dry-fly fisherman. And yes, I had a few blank days too.

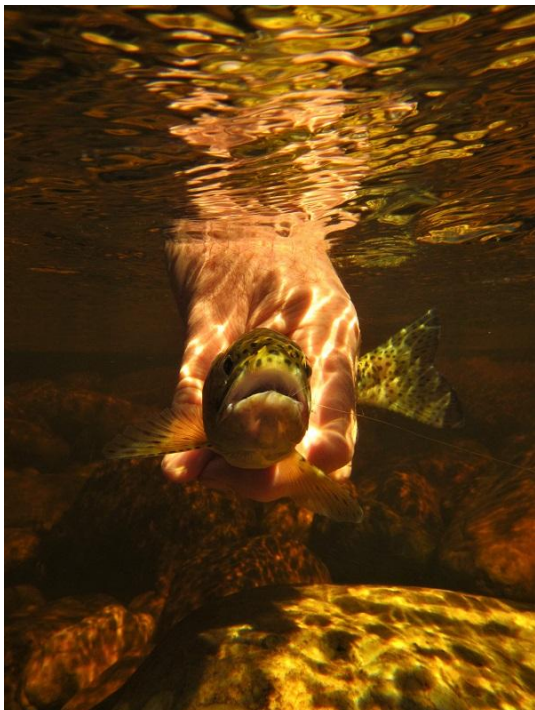
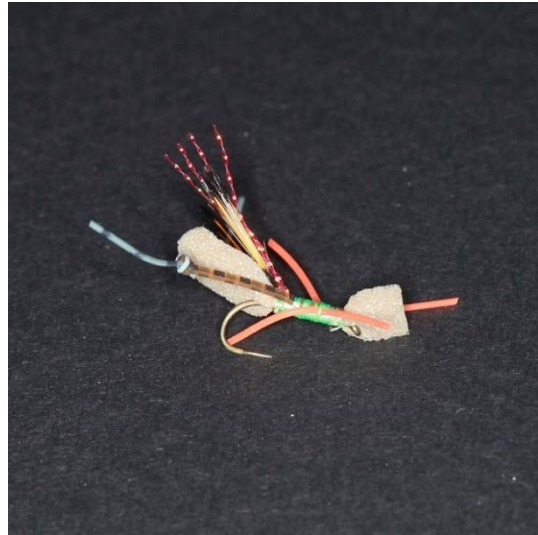
What was wrong?

Had age finally crept up on me? I now have to carry 2 pairs of glasses with me. (One to spot fish and one to tie knots, on a string around my neck like an old librarian.) The grey is now more salt than pepper and I certainly am no longer as agile as I used to be. I cannot hop from boulder to boulder like a young mountain goat any more. A day on our streams will leave my abused old knees sore, my half-titanium casting shoulder clicky-clacky for a few days. Have I lost my touch? My trout stream sixth sense? Even on my home-waters? Or has the fishing just deteriorated? Had the spinning-and-worm poachers fished the rainbows out? Climate change? Global warming? Pollution? Or had I finally become a grumpy old fart who only recalls how great the times were when I was younger?

I felt a bit of a fool!

Nobody was interested in joining me for a day on the streams, both David and Daniel, my two sons, had girlfriend commitments and Des said she's no longer fool enough to follow me up the mountain streams (after 39 years of being together). That is how I ended up all on my own, on beat 1 of the Smalblaar on Saturday 1 April 2023.

The stream was still flowing a very strong and dark Whiskey colour and was properly chilly after the recent rains. Last weekend, on my way to a blank day on the Holsloot,



I watched the white-water kayakers race down the same stream. (I made a mental note to bring my Orange River wading staff next time.) The early morning was cool with a bit of fog and a gentle upstream breeze. Perfect flyfishing weather, but I have seen enough days exactly like that, to know that it doesn't mean there will be rainbows and unicorns everywhere.

The amazing Du Toits Kloof mountains towered grey, purple and blue as the sun burnt off the night fog. It was an art and light show accompanied by the symphony of the prince dancing, a sparkling stream ballet. I told myself that the day must surely already be a success!

I rigged up my favourite 2 weight Thomas & Thomas and tied on one of Eds' flies, a parachute RAB variant. (I'll ask Ed, but I don't think it has a proper name. Best we call it a "CDC parachute RAB, Klinkhamer-style with rubber legs & tails, orange foam post, black dubbed body with flash ribbed abdomen".) I picked it because it is big, highly visible (old spectacled eyes, remember) and will float like a white-water kayak in the fast and rough water. I didn't count the casts, having got used to the fish-per-thousand-casts-syndrome, but it couldn't have been more than a half dozen or so tries, bam, strike, rainbow on, short fight, 25 centimetres, quick picture for my journal, and fish released.

Now the day was really-really already feeling like a success.

Let's try work through Eds' fly-box and see what works and what doesn't, a little voice told me. It's too boring to fish one fly all the time, said another. Variety is the spice of life, isn't it? You've caught something already, so now it doesn't matter anymore. The pressure is off, you can just relax, have fun and enjoy the day! Play the fool! Nobody is around to see!

Ed Herbst often gives me experimental flies to try and recently he dropped off a good number of new (and old) ones at my work. This time there were too many, so I grouped them all together in a spare box of their own. Eds' fly-box!

Next up was a spider (gray foam abdomen, dubbed brown body, orange foam post, rubber legs) and in the next run another rainbow came to it. Caught and released. I was starting to feel better and better, if not younger and more handsome!

I tied on a Caddis (orange foam head, cream dubbed CDC body, Elk hair wing with a bit of CDC in, green foam butt. As with many of Eds' flies, it has a strand or two of red flash in the wing to make it twinkle.) This time it took a lovely fish of around 35 cm, better than I have caught in quite a while. I relaxed enough to play around with the waterproof camera and took some underwater pictures. It is not so easy doing it all by yourself.

Since Ed has already contributed so much to my day, I thought it was time for the fly that was designed and tied by him: Eds' Hopper! (Yellow-brown foam, green thread thorax, orange and brown rubber legs, orange and black tail with a few red flash strands). It is a fly I would normally use on a hot summers day when nothing else works, when the terrestrials get blown into the stream by the Southeaster, but so what?



It was in Eds' fly-box and I was fishing Eds' flies, what better time to be bold and risk being a fool! A couple of casts later I was into another lovely rainbow. I played some more with the camera and tried to take a selfie with the fish, from the bottom of the stream looking upwards.

A CDC Caddis with Klipspringer (I think) wing followed with quick success. Another Caddis with CDC body, hair wing with a bit of flash and a foam head, worked equally well. A more traditional Klinkhamer type parachute Adams with a white post, grizzly hackle, peacock thorax, dubbed and ribbed abdomen, but with two long thin wiggly rubber tails, took fish number seven. Always a lucky fish, the number seven fish! The last fly in Eds' box was a gray-black foam ant pattern with a bright white CDC wing. I know how much Ed used to sing the praises of ants, this one didn't disappoint!

On this occasion at least, I caught rainbows like they were fools!

I had worked right through Eds' fly-box and the fish were still keen. Up to this point I had kept careful count: Eight fish, one for each fly! I kept on going, changed tippets, changed flies, but still only using flies from Eds' box. Everything worked and that is more or less when I started losing track of exactly how many fish I had caught. The smallest were around 25 centimetres, several were around 30 centimetres and the best one about 35 centimetres. Nothing major, but all lively and in beautiful condition. All were caught on dry flies, several to spotted and rising fish, but the bulk came from searching the fast riffles and the runs with most visible and very buoyant patterns. A few came out of the heads of the deeper pools.

What a lovely feeling it is when flyfishing becomes inexplicably easy! Another hour or two later, (I lose track of time when the fish are so obliging) somewhere North of a dozen and a half, it went a little mid-day quiet and I decided to call it a day. Quit while you are ahead, said the little voice that advised me about the flies, know when you have had enough of a great thing, said the rumble in my stomach!

Certainly I am not too old for this, not yet. The fishing is still as great as it has always been. The streams and the rainbows are in top form. Climate change, El Nino and dirty industry has not reached my home waters. My skills are still sharp enough. Yes, the old joints felt that they got some exercise, but nothing a good Scottish Whiskey, the exact colour of the Smalblaar, cannot cure.

What a great day! While clambering my way back to the Jeep I suddenly realised that the imaginary sign around my neck must have flipped from April Fool to April Genius! I know, I know, it will only be fleeting!

It certainly was not an April fools day! Not at all! Not for me! Not for Ed!

I wondered what rainbow trout know about calendars?