

THE NATAL FLY FISHERS CLUB

ITS HISTORY, PROGRESS AND MANAGEMENT

By TOM SUTCLIFFE



(Photos: Dr. Tom Sutcliffe)

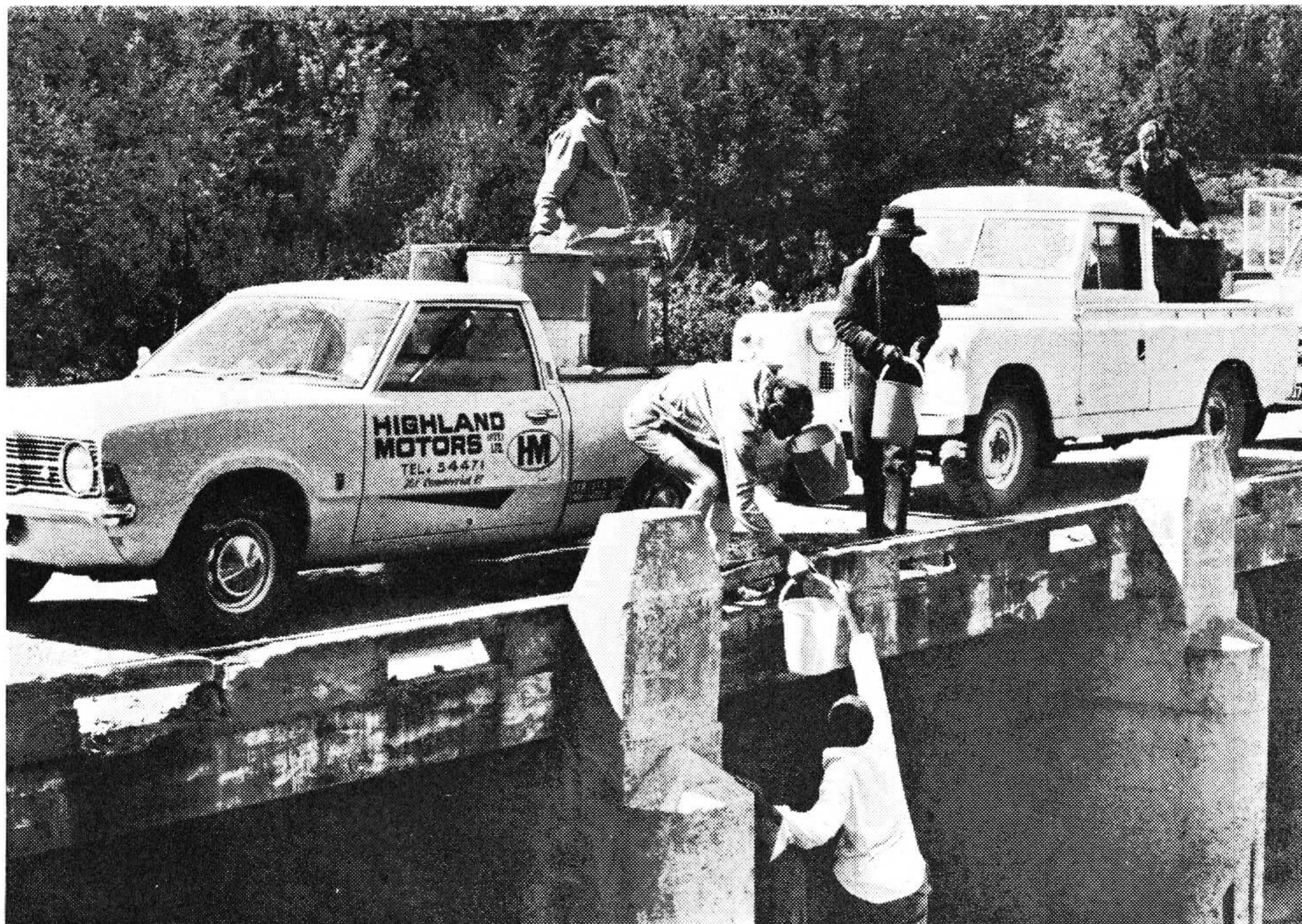
INTRODUCTION

Natal is well served by fly fishing clubs, which is as it should be in a Province providing as much fine angling as it does. In addition it is blessed by a far-sighted and co-operative body known as the Natal Parks Board, which has adequate orientation toward trout fishing and a willingness to meet the problems of the angler on a face-to-face basis. The majority of the water is controlled by private persons who, for the most part, are well disposed towards fly fishermen and provide fishing free, or in exchange for the price of a daily rod ticket. The response of the fishermen to this generosity has always been a responsible one, so that a satisfactory relationship has existed for many years. The actual syndication of fishing rights has not made the inroads in Natal to the degree that it has elsewhere in the Republic, due to a reluctance on the part of the riparian owners to tie up their water in this way. That this state of affairs must change in the future is undoubted and in the meantime much is being done to prevent syndication from taking place to any great degree.

The contribution which the N.P.B. has made to trout fishing in Natal has been through the hatching and rearing of trout, the provision of an extension service, research into trout ecology and the provision of fishing for the public on many rivers and a few dams. The accommodation provided at rest camps alongside fishing areas is of a high standard.

A considerable mileage, mostly of small streams, occurs in the Forestry Department areas, which also provide some of Natal's best lake fishing. Most noticeable is the popular High Moor Dam, situated at more than 7 500 feet in the Drakensberg in a most beautiful setting. Plans to build further dams in this area have been made, and the opening of these waters is eagerly anticipated by most anglers.

At present there are three active clubs in Natal, the Underberg Himeville Trout Fishing Club, the Midlands Fly Fishing Club and the Natal Fly Fishing Club. The Underberg Club is a unique co-operative association of anglers and riparian owners offering about 90 miles of river fishing as well as facilities on dams to some 350 members.



Trout fingerlings being irrigated with fresh water. Hugh Huntley, Senior Committee Member takes a bucket.

It has been in existence for 21 years, during which period of time it has played a valuable part in promoting and strengthening interests in angling. The Midlands Fly Fishing Club is the smallest, but is still very active in the Estcourt and Mooi River area, concentrating its activities on the Bushman's River, famed for its large brown trout.

Fortunately the riparian owners in Natal take a high level interest in the management and well-being of their waters. Perhaps most notable amongst the many is the Rainbow Lakes Complex, a very productive and exciting fishery in the Dargal Valley offering what is believed to be the most consistent catch of big trout in the Republic.

Seen against this background of abundant facilities it is not surprising that there was either room or justification for a third club. However, a considerable amount of water was known to be available in the Nottingham Road, Rosetta and Dargal Valley areas, within easy reach of Pietermaritzburg, and it was felt that this would be of considerable value to Maritzburg's anglers.

HISTORY OF THE N.F.F.C.

The idea to start a Fly Fishing Club received some attention during the years 1970 to 1971. It was not until January 1972 that sharp impetus was given to the concept by John Beams, later to become the club's first chairman. Under his guidance a meeting of interested parties was called to discuss the feasibility of such an undertaking.

**Mrs. Edith Combes—Secretary
of the Club since its inception.**



Present at this meeting were the most knowledgeable of Maritzburg's fishing elite, who backed the idea with enthusiasm. Thus reassured, an inaugural meeting was held at the Royal Hotel, Maritzburg, on March 1, 1972. The constitution which was read to the meeting showed a heavy bias towards conservation, anti-pollution activity and efforts towards resistance against the menace of syndication. Mr. Justice John Milne was elected president, and the club gained the services of the incomparable Mrs. Edith Combes as secretary, to whom a large measure of the club's success is undoubtedly due. Twenty-two foundation members were elected, and Mr. Bob Crass of Natal and Mr. A. C. Harrison of the Cape Province were both elected honorary members.

Problems at first were plenty and rewards few. Gaining water for its members was the club's primary task and here, due to the generosity of many riparian owners, the club made great headway. Within one year of its inception it had rights to large sections of four rivers including a choice piece of the famous Mooi River, seven miles of the Little Mooi River and the beautiful Chestnuts section of the Umgeni River. The first dam was donated by Mr. Philip Nel (the ex-rugby Springbok captain), a beautiful 15 acre stretch of water in the Greytown district which has provided many fine trout. Today, little more than four years later, fishing of an extremely high standard is available on 10 dams, and 48 beats are open on eight different rivers with the figure increasing all the time.

With the provision of good fishing it was not surprising to see the membership grow from 75 in May 1972, 214 in April 1974, to 283 in April 1975.

MANAGEMENT

The club has always attempted to serve the angler as well as the riparian owner. Whilst a considerable amount of water has been donated to the club, the majority is still held on lease, on the understanding that the owner is never compromised by the club and always retains the full right to dictate his wishes over those of the committee in regard to the well-being of his water. After the acquisition of a new piece of water, a water bailiff, usually a member of the existing committee, is appointed to the particular section. The area is visited by the chairman and various members of the committee and a detailed map of the area is drawn up and members are circularised with roneoed copies. These maps also include rules and regulations and any particular wishes that the farmer might have.

Prior to fishing a beat the member must first make a booking, the details of which are kept in a central register in the Royal Hotel, Maritzburg, and in some cases he must make his presence known to the farmer before fishing. To some, these details might seem a tedious intrusion into the fishermen's liberty, but they have served to make the N.F.F.C.'s association with the riparian owners a happy one.

The club is served by a twelve-man committee presently under the able chairmanship of Colonel C. H. Kelley-Patterson. Various sub-committees see to the smooth running of the club, the most important of which are the Water Management Sub-Committee and the Editorial Sub-Committee responsible for the *Journal*. These sub-committees are able to draw on a pool of volunteers from the ordinary members. In September 1974 a Trout Liaison Committee was formed by the Natal Parks Board consisting of members of the board and delegates from each of the fly fishing clubs. Mr. Bob Crass is concerned in creating a master plan for the future of trout fishing in Natal and through this liaison committee will be able to draw on the advice of the clubs who are now also able to criticise and offer alternate ideas, thus taking an active part in shaping their official destiny.

In addition to providing trout fishing, the club offers regular monthly entertainment evenings and has held frequent classes to help members with casting and in the tying of trout flies. Note should be made of the N.F.F.C. *Journal*, which first went into print in August 1973 and appears quarterly. Under the editorship of Dr. Malcolm MacKenzie, the club's vice-chairman, this has now become a well-accepted and mature publication.

WATER IMPROVEMENT

An active stocking programme has been under way for some years. Fish are purchased as fingerlings from the Natal Parks Board or from private hatcheries, such as that of Mr. R. A. Robinson in Underberg. For transportation the club has used the open drum technique without oxygen supplementation. The in-transit mortality has been exceedingly low, probably in the region of 0,1 per cent, but because of the poor yield ultimately given by hatchery-bred trout a new and bold scheme of stocking with wild river trout has recently been undertaken. With technical guidance from Mr. Bob Crass and Natal Parks Board's permission, fish have been taken from the upper reaches of the Yarrow River by stunning them with an electric shock and then transporting



N.F.F.C. members stock the nursery at Nel's dam. Clive Hatton, bailiff for this water, third from left.

them in drums to other waters. Recently it has been decided to use this method to remove trout from the overstocked head waters of many of Natal's streams to the less-populated middle reaches.

The actual improvement of many of the streams has been a high priority. On some stretches weirs have been constructed using the wire cage method, and the judicious removal of trees and brambles has improved many streams.

On Nel's Dam, in the Greytown district, a cage nursery was built and in it 2 500 fingerlings were reared to a point of release, being protected in the meanwhile from predators in this environment. On the same dam gravel beds are presently being laid in the inlet stream to encourage natural spawning.

SUMMARY

The existence of the N.F.F.C. has served to stress the value of fly fishing clubs as an institution both in providing anglers with readily accessible high class fishing and in making a contribution towards the well-being of the sport as a whole.