



A pool in the crystal-clear Kerringsmelk River, Lady Grey.

EXCITING PROSPECTS AT LADY GREY

By GEOFFREY KNIPE

IN April this year I was a member of a party of Johannesburg anglers who visited Lady Grey in the North-east Cape, and discovered some of the best trout water any of us had ever been privileged to fish.

Our party consisted of Alf Fulford, Dennis McCorkill (the pro. cricket coach), Barry Kent of fly-tying fame (see John Vienard's book, *Modern Fly Tying Techniques*), Dr. Frank Berry, myself and family. Our task was to fish and have a look at something like 57 miles of trout water in three and a half days.

We lost the best part of the first day collecting fishing licences, having breakfast and talking too much! It was decided that Alf and I would fish a section of the Kerringsmelk that "very few people had fished"—we were to find out why! Barry and Dennis would fish water some 20 miles upstream from us.

Mike Stone, the manager of the Mountain View Hotel at Lady Grey, is a great friend of trout fishermen, and it was he who briefed us and dropped us off at our respective starting points, the idea being to fish our way back to where our own cars were parked.

Alf and I started off at eleven in the morning on an adventure that both of us will talk about for the rest of our lives. Alf elected to fish a Hares Ear Nymph and I celebrated my return to Cape waters by fishing dry fly. I chose a Biggs R.A.B. Variant, and I spared a thought for my old fishing friend Tony, who was no doubt at that moment in time slogging away in his steamy Durban office. I must admit it was a slightly unkind thought to have when I was about to start fishing a scenically beautiful kloof with the most magnificent cold and crystal clear Kerringsmelk tumbling down runs into deep, interesting pools. Poor old Tony, I thought, I must get him organised for our next trip.

I will not go into the details of our adventure in this Karroo kloof as I believe most readers will be more interested in the fishing of this area. Sufficient to say that, due to a miscalculation of the distance we had to walk coupled with some very difficult terrain, resulted in our having to spend the night in the kloof unprepared for this eventuality.

In fact we were saved from major trouble or worse by my basic survival kit—a box of matches—which is always kept in my fishing waistcoat. Believe me, the full story of our time in the kloof from when we started till we met up with the rest of the party at eleven next morning is quite something.

We spent over 12 hours in the kloof but only about an hour in serious fishing. The rest of the time we spent walking the 12 miles of the kloof or trying to sleep, without jerseys, on that freezing cold night. I feel I must stress that it is foolhardy not to be prepared for this type of eventuality when fishing any kloof, even the most innocent looking.

In the morning session we walked fast and only fished now and again as we had been told the first pools were “uninteresting”. I must admit that many of the lower pools had been spoiled by soil erosion but at the same time it did not take me long to have two good fish, one of 1½ lb. and the other of 1 lb. Both Alf and I returned several fish in the 10 to 12 in. class.

Late in the afternoon we stopped our hike to fish a string of pools that we simply could not pass without fishing. On my second cast into the first of these pools I hooked a big fish. The pool was large and round in shape. The water was so deep that I could only see the rocky bottom with difficulty. The water entered the pool over a small waterfall of about two feet. I had changed to my favourite nymph (Geoff's nymph to my fishing friends). On my second cast I placed the fly right in the head of the pool and let it sink away. I started to retrieve and almost immediately I saw a flash deep in the water. I tightened my line and felt the weight of the fish as it shook its head trying to rid itself of the hook as it drifted toward me on the current. The next moment it shot straight from the river bed high into the air, causing an impressive eruption of the water. Its next dash straight up the middle of the pool was too much for my 4 lb. tippet and it broke, sending my line flying back at me. This performance took the fish about 20 seconds to complete and has left a lasting impression on me. So much so that wild horses will not keep me away from having another crack at that beauty.

Alf fished the next pool while I repaired my tackle and tried to calm my shattered nerves. In no time at all I saw Alf's rod give the impression of a long piece of love grass trying to stand upright in a south-west gale. Never in the history of angling was a leader repaired and a nymph tied on so quickly. Alf landed a fine 2 lb. fish, only to have it slip from his hand and break off as he picked it up to show it to me.

By the time I reached Alf he was fishing the third pool in the chain and had two good fish at his feet. Alf's excitement was such that I decided to have a cast into his pool. Alf's fly hit the water and immediately a fish of over a pound emerged from the spot, Alf's line protruding from its mouth. I have never witnessed anything like the fishing in this pool and the one above it. The nearest I have seen was a school of mackerel on the feed. Alf and I kept 14 fish between ¾ lb. and 1¼ lb., which we took out of these two pools. The average weight must have been close to 1¼ lb. I can only conclude that these fish had never seen a nymph on the end of a line and thought Christmas was early this year, or they were suffering from the effects of feeding on joy juice berries. Whatever the explanation, they went mad. This experience ended our fishing for that day, and the next we had other problems to contend with.

Barry and Dennis fished a smaller section of water than that fished by Alf and myself. The terrain was far more open with the result that the water was shallower. Shallow runs connected by small pools, very rocky and rough, but the going was more tiring than difficult. These conditions called for expert fishing as the fish could be clearly seen lying in the runs, and any mistake sent them running for cover. Small trout proved to be a nuisance in this section and, as is their habit, always seemed to get into the fly ahead of the bigger fish.

Both Barry and Dennis had full bags, which is testimony to good casting and placement of their flies. Unfortunately their biggest fish was only about 1½ lb with the average being less than 1 lb. The next day was ruined by the search the boys had to make for Alf and myself. Frank Berry had joined the party during the night and he managed to do some fishing with Dennis and Barry. Between the three they landed about 10 fish with some very good ones amongst them.

Our third day was spent at Barkley East as we wanted to have a look at some of the dams and rivers in the area. We finished the day with a dozen fish, the heaviest being about 1½ lb. Frank Berry accounted for six fish and gave us all a lesson on the art of catching trout.

On the fourth and last morning of our visit we fished another section of water before starting our nine-hour drive back to Johannesburg, and what a morning's fishing this proved to be. Mike Stone got up with us at 5 a.m. and cooked a hearty breakfast for us. He then guided us to our new section of water to be fished, over a rough, hair-raising mountain pass.

After a short, easy walk we arrived at a waterfall that marked the beginning of the water to be fished. Alf and I took the first pool while Barry and Dennis moved to the next at the bottom of the waterfall. (Frank had unfortunately had to return to his practice.) Alf and I fished hard for 20 minutes without any result of note, and decided to move below our friends. As we moved to the top of the second waterfall we saw a sight to gladden our hearts. Next to a jubilant Barry lay a beautifully conditioned 3½ lb. rainbow. We moved quickly to the next pool some distance from Barry and Dennis. We fished for some minutes before I had a take, but lost the fish a few seconds later as the hook pulled out. Try as we did we had no further success in this pool, so we moved off once more. On my second cast I was into my second good fish of the day and, like my first, I lost it after a short, hard fight. This was a most interesting pool and we again tried all the tricks in the book to induce a fish to strike, but with no success. By this time our two hours' fishing was nearing its end, and neither Alf nor I had a fish to show for our troubles. We started to move back towards the cars and I had a closer look at the runs we had disregarded on our way down river. I suddenly realised that this attitude had been a mistake as many of the runs had good holding water.

I put a long line out and dropped my nymph into the head of a likely looking run, letting it drift on the current. I gathered in three feet of line when it suddenly stopped dead. As I raised my rod the water exploded as 2½ lb. of fighting mad rainbow took to the air. Five minutes of tough battling and he was in my pocket. Now that I had discovered the secret it was easy, and I soon had my second fish of over 2 lb. for the morning. Unfortunately for us our fishing time was up and we had to leave. On our return to the cars we discovered Dennis smiling from ear to ear as he produced a magnificent fish of just under 4 lb.

We had not succeeded in covering the amount of water we intended, and in fact missed most of the recognised really good water in the district. However, with a total bag of 60 fine rainbows between us this was river fishing with capital letters. Our visit was a great success and everyone enjoyed themselves to the full. In fact so much so that we are already busy planning a second visit in October and some of us a third visit in December.

The prospects pictorially are excellent, but above all the atmosphere, the climate, the scenery, the unspoilt purity of nature and river make a man glad to be alive and well. The Lady Grey district is definitely an experience no fly fisherman keen on river fishing should ever miss.