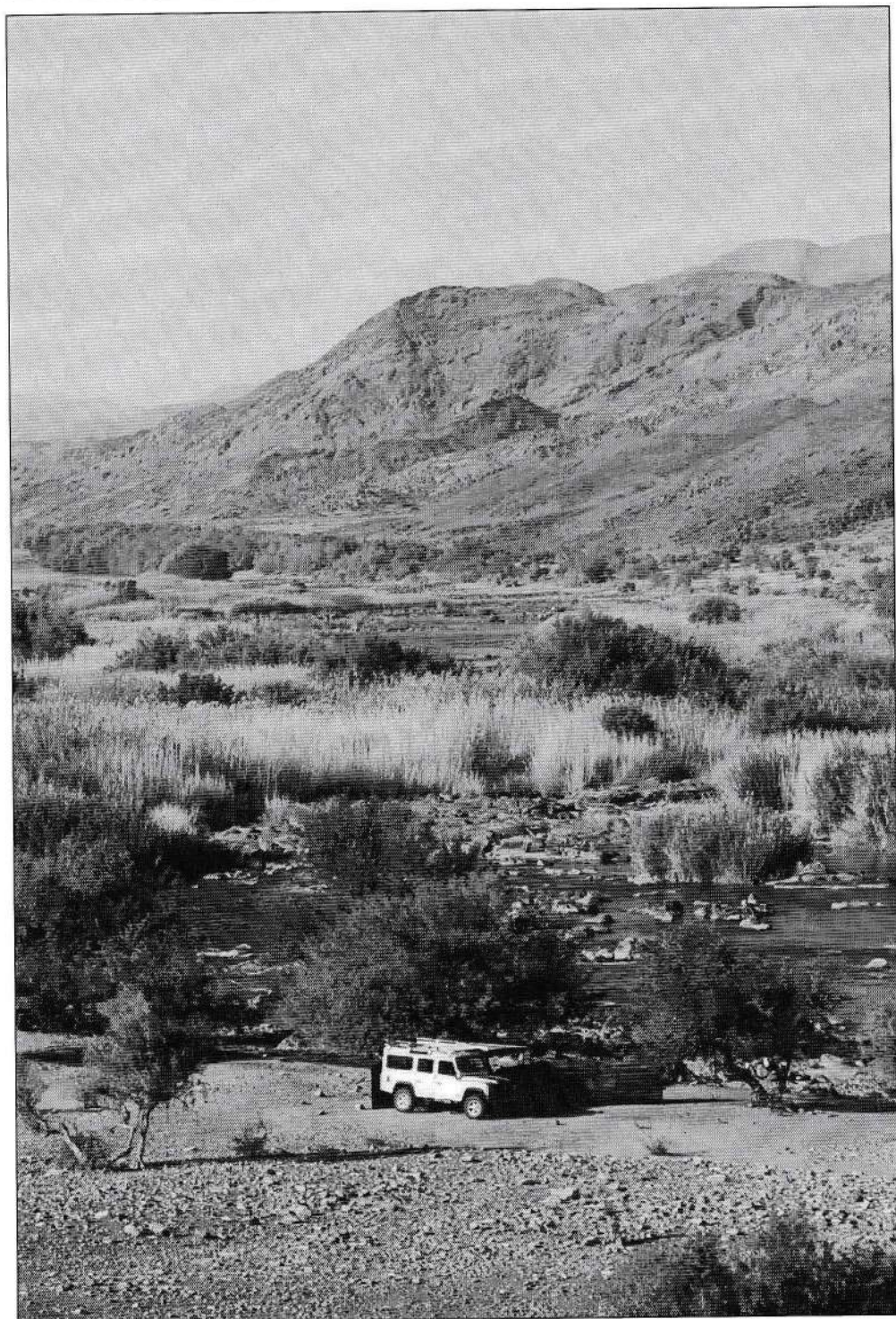


The gods of fishing do smile occasionally

by Dawid Rossouw

It was late afternoon and the sunset was orange and yellow, the river and sky the same Ivery bright blue and the magnificent, rough desert mountains towering above us a hundred shades of red and purple. Our camp was in the Richtersveld on the bank of the lower Orange River at a place called De Hoop. The setting was as remote, wild and beautiful as they come. We had a hard, hot and dusty day's travel behind us and everyone needed the peace and quiet of the place. Des, my wife, selected the spot very carefully with everything except fly fishing in mind. The river had to be slow, with a gradual drop-off and safe for our two boys. It had to be far from scorpion burrows and nowhere near cover for snakes. It was almost unbearably hot, despite it being late afternoon, so a shady tree was essential. Pitching camp was, as usual, a hot and argumentative job and when it was finally done, I poured us a well deserved gin and tonic each to soothe raw throats and nerves while we watched the boys play in the river. I got the evening campfire going, rigged up my five weight rod and walked down the bank to try my luck in the little rapid downstream from our camp. The only other people within a day's drive, were a group of Swiss tourists camping just out of earshot around the bend a little further downstream.

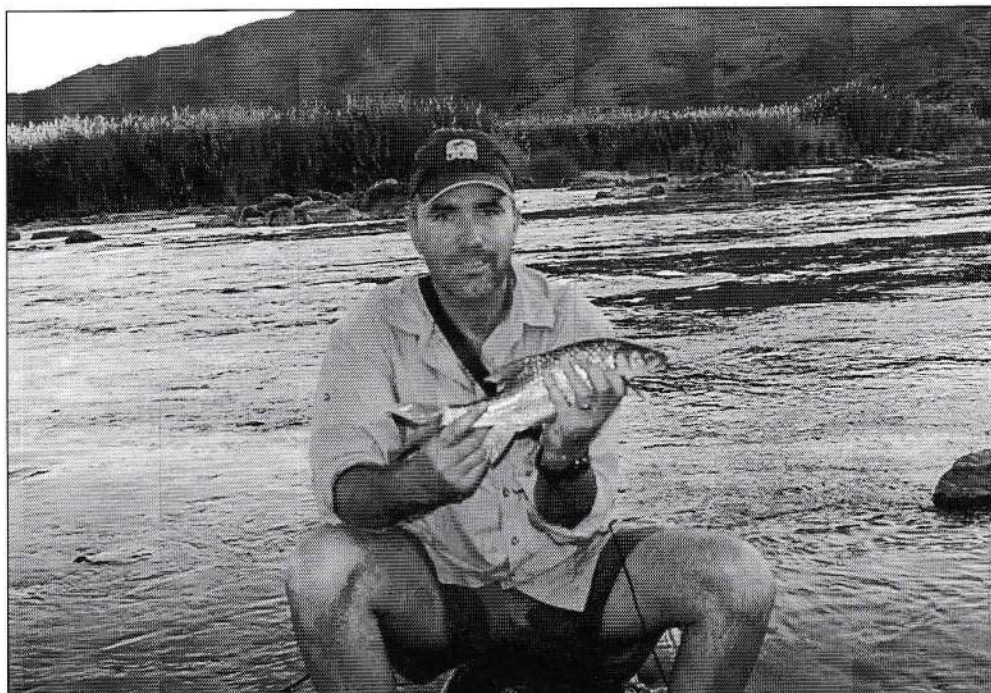
The river was quite clear but if you waded in over your knees, it was impossible to see the bottom, so I used my wading staff to great effect to position myself a little over knee-depth at the top end of the rapid. The bottom of the river was mostly round slippery boulders and with the staff you could wade deeper and much more confidently and securely. I fished a trio of heavily weighted flies on a short-line-nymphing leader. I had a heavy, green tungsten bead caddis larvae imitation on the top dropper with a lighter brown version in the middle and a bead head brassy on the point. The water was fairly fast, the flies drifted quickly and it was easy to feel them bump along the bottom. Within the first few casts, I felt the take, struck and had a sizeable fish on. First it went upstream into the quieter water, but as my luck would have it, suddenly it flashed past me, downstream and into the rapid. It was going at such a pace and my backing was disappearing into the white water so fast that I simply had to follow it downstream. With one hand on the rod and the other on the reel, there was no way to use my wading staff, so I tried to get back to shallower water while simultaneously skirting the rapid and moving downstream. I was trying to do the impossible ... fighting the fish and stumbling over invisible boulders at the same time. I should have known better but, with a good fish on one end, there was definitely an unusual shortage of common sense at the other. Before I had managed more than a few steps, I stepped into a deep hole, lost my footing and suddenly I was in the drink, still with my hat on and rod held high. The flow was far too strong to resist, so there was only one way out and that was to follow the fish down through the rapid, albeit considerably faster than I intended. I simply floated down on my back, feet first as river rafting had taught me, while I furiously tried to keep the rod out of harm's way. It wasn't too serious a rapid and very soon, before I took more than a mouthful of water, I was deposited in the quiet pool below and made my way to the bank, now using my wading



The Rossouw family campsite on the Orange River at De Hoop in the Richtersveld area in the Northern Cape.



One for the family album. The Rossouw family and their trusty Land Rover en route to the Richtersveld.



Dawid Rossouw with a typical Orange River yellowfish.

staff again and very relieved that my rod was still in one piece. When I reeled in, I discovered to my surprise that the fish I thought I had lost, was still firmly on. The fight continued uneventfully from this point onwards and soon I had a lovely smallmouth yellowfish of about three pounds in the net. We were both equally wet, only, I wasn't as slimy.

All this time I was totally oblivious to my surroundings and was somewhat startled when I realized that I had an audience of six Swiss adventurers who rushed closer to investigate, or perhaps they thought they would have to play life savers. I had ended up right in front of their camp where they were quietly having sundowners. They wanted to see the fish and wanted to know what it was, whether it was edible, how I caught it and a zillion more questions. After showing it to them, I released the fish and explained as well as their questionable comprehension of English allowed. Without too much difficulty they grasped that it was called a yellowfish because of its colour and that it was indigenous to the Orange River system. I explained that it ate insects and I showed them the brownish caddis fly that I removed from the mouth of the fish. One woman however, thought that it was some kind of bait. Now, that was a misunderstanding that I simply had to correct, language barrier or no language barrier. I explained that it was an artificial fly that I made myself to imitate a little insect that lives in the river and that the fish (hopefully) love to eat. She looked at me as if she thought it impossible to believe such a tall story, so I bent down, overturned one stone and there I found the perfect case-making caddis that my fly imitates. Under the very first stone, and a carbon copy too! Showing them the real thing and the fly together in the palm of my hand, was the most spectacular way I could have cleared up that little misunderstanding. They were amazed and so was I, and probably more so!

By that time our fire was burnt out and the coals almost ready for the evening braai, so I said goodbye and walked, dripping, back to our camp. Unbeknown to me, my family had watched my whole performance and once they saw that I wasn't drowning, went about their business again. Des wanted to know what I discussed with our neighbours and I told her the entire story of the caddis. She and the boys immediately wanted to see it too, so I walked down to the water again and started looking for another one, fully expecting to find it under the first rock. I simply could not find the same insect again! Anywhere! I searched all over and overturned just about every pebble, rock and boulder within sight but with a spectacular lack of success. Meanwhile my wife started looking at me with exactly the same expression of utter doubt that the Swiss woman displayed at first!

We stayed at De Hoop for two more days and although I caught several more fish on that fly, I never found another casemaking-caddis that looked anything like it. Other sizes, other shapes, other types, other colours, but nothing resembling that little brown fly!



"Flies have a strong, marvellous power, and each is meaningful as a point of contact with nature. Embodied in the fly is a message that reflects the tyer's point of view about nature. By creating an enduring fly, you convey your message to future fly fishers." Nori Tashiro.