

Wet Wading

by Tim Rolston

"Trout are not to be caught with dry breeches." Spanish proverb.

There has been a small but dedicated band of us who have ventured forth on the first and last weekends of the river-fishing season for the past few years. In fact it seems to be more than a few since it started and, although the mix changes slightly, the same faces show up year after year and as one leaves another takes their place.

These outings have developed a bit of a reputation and as it offers an opportunity to fish together with some very good anglers it is becoming "quite a thing" to crack an invitation. That's probably why, for the most part, people don't give up their spot too willingly and short of a family funeral, they will be there. The downside of these events is that although designed to offer a "first crack or last blast" at the season the truth is that often there is lots of rain, maybe snow and the waters are rarely perfect for fishing.

That seems not to deter anyone particularly and in a way seems to add some sort of rite of passage to the whole event. Something along the lines of "I proved I can hack it" macho statement, although this is mostly an illusion these days. We used to stay in a run down cottage with beds and mattresses everywhere, fish like maniacs and eat late, after having drunk sufficient Scotch so that, even if sleep wasn't assured, at least the snoring bothered one less and the food tasted good.

Now it is worth explaining that the rivers here in the Western Cape are "open for fishing" from spring to autumn. However it has become quite apparent that although these seasons may have "official" starting dates, nature often takes little notice.

Given the fact that we normally fish in good weather, the remoteness of the streams, the bush around them and the general structure of the waters make the wearing of waders problematic, few of us have any. In fact it's sort of frowned upon to give in to such niceties as being dry and warm even when the mountain peaks are dusted in snow.

Over the years we have moved operations to a pleasant guest house where we would still cater for ourselves and that has become even more cozy with bed and breakfast accommodation as time has passed. Nobody really seems to have made a decision to change -it's just evolved as fishing time has shortened, money has grown to be less (not much less) of an issue and, once started, these little comforts are tricky to give up. So now we will set out on a Friday evening, enjoy a cooked meal that will be waiting for us and a good night's sleep before again enjoying catering in the form of eggs and bacon breakfasts and a leisurely start for the river. In fact it is not unheard of these days for wives and or girlfriends to accompany some, a development moving close to heresy compared to the old hardcore trips.

No matter how much all this has made things more civilized and comfortable and despite the evidence of fluffy duvets, female companions and cooked breakfasts, the option of

wearing waders is not open to discussion. Waders are not practical in these little bouldery and wooded streams and you are as like to tear holes in them as not, but still it's one standard that has remained. Pure cussedness or practicality, it is hard to tell which, but waders are out.

Take the trip we did at the end of the last season. The rain had been tipping down for a few days, so much so that the roads were near flooded and most of the cars on the main route out of town were carrying whitewater canoes.

We arrive at different times of the evening and unpack clothes, fishing gear and fly tying outfits. I am not sure why the vises, tools and materials accompany us as I have never seen anyone tie a fly on one of these trips. Either it's good enough to be out fishing or the fishing is so poor that there is little point in tying flies. Still we all sort of feel naked without the kit, so it goes along for the ride, twice a year, just in case.

A few of the crew had fished the afternoon on the way out and reports were that the river had risen a foot or two since lunchtime. It had apparently been too high to fish before that and the canoeists were getting in the way on some of the pools anyway. Still we all sat around the bar, drank and talked fishing until, somewhere after midnight, we had convinced ourselves that the fishing would be OK in the morning. We were fishing a tailwater fishery, less affected by the rain and anyway it was the last chance of the season. The crew drifted off to bed, those with female company a little earlier than the others and we all promised to meet early at breakfast.

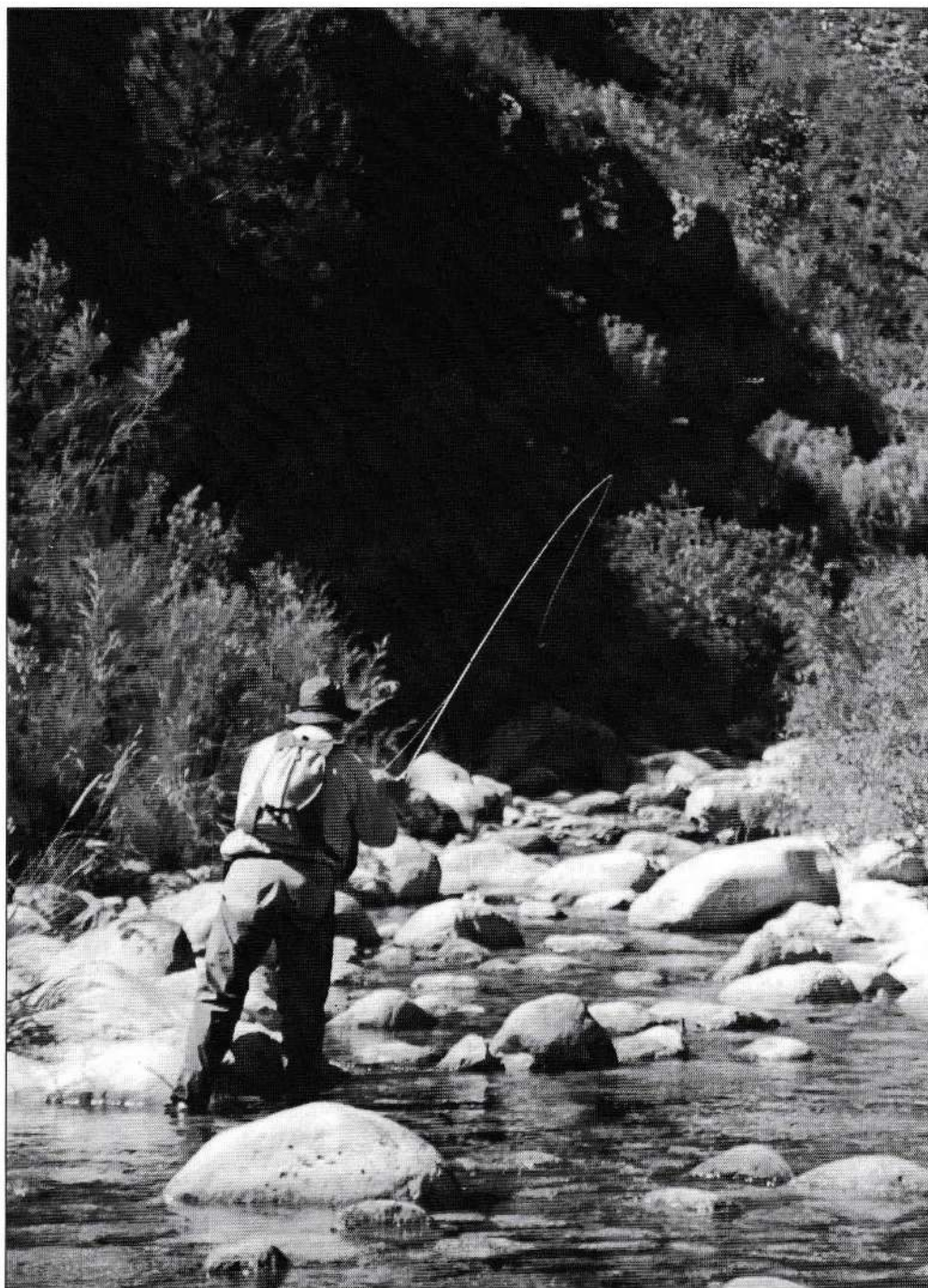
Come breakfast the guys slowly sauntered into the lounge, those with wives and girlfriends a little later than the others and it was already apparent that the rain had not let up, the wind was cold, North Westerly and howling. We slowed down a little but no one actually contemplated not going fishing. Perhaps a few thought they wouldn't stay on the river all day but to actually not set out would never do.

There is a short drive to the stream along a treacherous dirt road, tens of metres above the river in places and the water looked a little high, even from up there, but, still, there had to be some spots worth casting to.

We divided into our pairs. We always fish like this and it is both practical and safe and adds a nice social spin to what is normally a rather solitary pursuit.

The changing of clothes and preparation are normally achieved with speed but with the bitter wind and driving rain things were even more hasty than usual. Almost as if, if we didn't get fishing pretty quickly we would lose our nerve and head back to the fire and the bar in the hotel.

One look at the stream told us two things, it was fishable, just, and it was cold - bloody cold. Water takes on an indescribable look when it's cold. It's difficult to define but it has a sort of sterile appearance, like nothing would live in it and if, by some quirk of fate some primitive organism should have avoided freezing to death in the cold depths of the current, it sure as hell wouldn't be moving.



Contemporary breathable waders can be comfortable even on the hottest days. Stephen Boshoff fishing the Keimansgat tributary of the Holsloot and wearing Hodgman Hipper thigh-high waders.

Werner (my partner for the day) took one look and commented the river looked as lively as battery acid, a sentiment with which I agreed. The first run was flowing out of two stands of parallel trees that meant wading was far from optional and a fairly committed plunge into waist deep water was required to even get a cast in. This was another warning. It does not occur often that one fights to let the other guy fish first, but it was so cold and looked so dead it took some time for one of us to volunteer to take the first go. Werner was into the river and instead of following, as I normally would to spot fish and lies for one's fishing partner, I hung back. I could hear Werner's breath hiss involuntarily from his lungs out of pure shock as he hit the water and I knew this was going to be a harsh day.

Dressed in nothing other than felt-soled wading boots and shorts (believe it or not, shorts are warmer in these conditions) it was evident that once we reached waist depth the presence of ladies back at the hotel would be of academic import for several hours.

As the day progressed and lower limbs were numbed by the anaesthetising water temperature, the cloud lifted a little to reveal snow on the mountains around us. We caught some fish, although not a lot and most of them on little midges that were hard to see and even harder to tie to the tippet with frozen fingers.

We lasted until about three in the afternoon and headed back to the hotel, the promise of fires and warm showers beckoning. The heater in the car had just enough time to warm the interior on the short journey. We congratulated ourselves on having comfortable accommodation to look forward to and what tremendous foresight we had shown in this regard and yet we never considered bringing waders. I think that although I do own some neoprene, stocking foot waders that could be used and would fit inside my wading boots I will never take them on these trips. Wet wading is part of the package. Cooked breakfasts, hot showers and taking female companions were evidence enough that we were letting our standards slip and wearing waders even once might be the final straw. Some lines should never be crossed and perhaps this is one of them.

So rain or shine, practical or otherwise, we always wade wet. For the most part it makes sense and in the middle of the season it is more than comfortable to take a swim to cool off a little. But in the early and late season one needs to harden one's soul, try where possible for dry spots from which to cast and, if all else fails, pray for numbness to set in quickly to avoid undue pain.

It sometimes seems a little silly but then fly fishing seems a little silly most of the time and I have no intention of letting anyone think I could be sane ... there is no telling what they might expect of me were that the case.