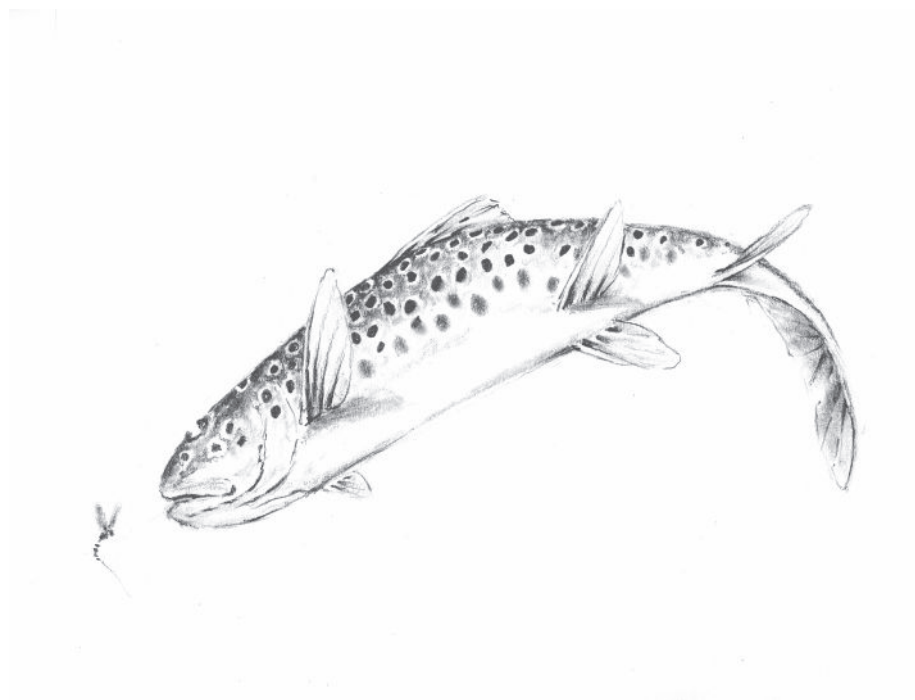




## CHAPTER 8

# DRY FLY ON RIVERS AND STREAMS

*In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others.*

*He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen, and that John, the favourite, was a dry fly fisherman.*

NORMAN MACLEAN, *A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*



Trout streams in this country fall roughly into two categories: clear and quick, or pastoral and slightly turbid. We have no chalkstreams. The upper reaches of most of our rivers fit into the clear and quick category, as do the trout streams of the Western Cape. Our slow-flowing, pastoral rivers are generally more fertile,

and the trout in them tend to rise only when hatches appear or when terrestrials land on the water. The quick streams, on the other hand, are generally less fertile and trout are freer about coming to the surface. So prospecting with a dry fly (meaning fishing the water, not a rise) is a useful tactic on them. This chapter leans more towards the assumption that you are fishing the dry fly on 'free-rising' rivers rather than on the pastoral ones, though I touch on fishing the dry fly in those as well and, anyway, much of the art and science of dry fly is pretty universal.

## BEGINNINGS

There was a time in the mid-sixties when I seemed to do little else with my spare time than fish, and then almost exclusively with a dry fly, simply because the rivers where I lived in the Western Cape were clear-cut, no fuss, dry fly streams.

I can't remember that I had any sophisticated notions about dry fly fishing or that we thought it grander than anything else. It was just that there were plenty of forgiving fish available in the luminously clear, quick-flowing streams, and dry fly fishing was an easy enough way to catch them, plus the visual dimension made it more exciting. It's pleasant enough just watching your fly ride lightly over glassy currents, but to see it suddenly vanish in a sweep, or draw under unexpectedly, or slip into the dimpled rise of a surface sipper was exquisite and, on reflection, I suppose more than mildly addictive.

Another reason for sticking mainly with dries was at the time I didn't know a whole lot about nymphing. I believed nymphing was a vaguely Zen sort of thing that you reserved for the rare occasions when your dry flies didn't work. Also, I naively thought nymphing didn't offer the challenge of requiring as precise a presentation, and certainly it lacked the spiritual dimension of actually seeing the fly

being taken, and that took the jolt out of it for me. (To be honest, I also wasn't entirely confident that I could reliably detect the take with submerged flies – in other words, I couldn't read the nymph as well as I could read the dry fly.)

I can't remember being that consumed with drag either – not like people are now, anyway – mainly, I suspect, because none of us understood that much about it. Nor did we agonise over ways to cope with selective fish (we didn't bump into them often enough, I suppose, to really force us to think of matching hatches, or mastering a wider selection of fancy presentations). So all in all we weren't advanced flyfishers – but we were pretty practical and we caught trout.

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I don't want to suggest I've mastered the dry fly. I haven't. But with a fair range of different rivers behind me, plus what I've learnt from keeping close company with buddies who are pretty sharp at it, and, oh yes, a few hundred thousand casts later, I at least can say I've improved technically, have got a little handier with a dry fly, though in the slick, roundabout sort of way that sometimes goes under the general heading of 'knowing the tricks of the trade' or, if you like, getting street-smart. And I've also since made a minor religion out of drag-free presentations and trying to understand hatches, because I've also come to appreciate that these two things, but especially the first, are the key to unlocking the whole dry fly mystery.

I can't say I catch *more* trout now on Western Cape streams than I did back then, which normally you'd expect if you'd fished them as long as I have, though I tell myself it's not because I haven't got smarter over the years as much as because the trout have. They see more anglers now, and trout learn quickly from first-

hand experience. There are also plenty of bigger, and consequently smarter, trout around in our local streams these days, maybe as a result of the Cape Piscatorial Society introducing a no-kill rule on our rivers (although it may be early days yet to say this because we've had a few years of good winter rain which helps). The big fish are tough to handle in rocky, fast-flowing streams, especially on ludicrously fine tippets, but the risk of easily getting snapped off adds a delightful tension and uncertainty to the fishing.

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It would be grand to say I started fishing when the only fly lines you got were silk because, let's admit it, there's a little romance – maybe even some mystique – attached to using silk lines, and there's not much in polyvinyl chloride. What's implicit in silk lines is that they're natural, carefully handcrafted products, which has an altogether nicer ring in a strongly traditional and outdoor pursuit like ours, than something mass-produced from chemicals by extrusion. Also, to be able to say you fished when nothing other than silk lines were available, suggests a bit about where you've come from and what you ought to be credited with knowing. But, in truth, I can't say silk was all we had.

When I started in the early sixties, plastic lines were definitely available (probably only just) but, for what we thought were good reasons, our bread-and-butter lines were still silk, and moving to plastic was seen more as a flirtation with fancy, high-end technology than a serious career move. Then, within a year or two of my starting, PVC lines swamped the market. I suppose because they turned over better, floated higher, were smoother, needed next to no care and, importantly, were easier to lift off the water and shoot in the Forward Cast. Suddenly, silk lines were a rare sight on our fly streams. Lately they've made something

of a comeback, even earning as much ‘cult’ status as bamboo fly rods, meaning there’s a sliver of devoted takers for a product that’s more deeply traditional than technically superior. But with recent improvements in production and better tapers, I’m not so sure the ‘cult’ label actually applies, especially if you look at the advantages of silk lines: (a) they’re thinner for the same weight, (b) they’re more pliable, (c) they have infinitely less memory and (d) they float as long you’re conscientious about dressing them. (Come to think of it, I’m not sure that you can safely say bamboo fly rods are more deeply traditional than technically superior, either.)

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The American magazine *Fly Fisherman* first made an appearance in South Africa in the mid-seventies, with Don Zahner (of *Anglish Spoken Here* fame) as editor. *Fly Rod And Reel*, under Silvio Calabi, and *The American Fly Tier* came a few years later. John Beams and I started getting the odd issue, and I still have a few originals around the house somewhere, quaintly dated when you look now at their acres of unused space, the black and white photographs (some slightly out of focus), the paucity of colour, and then not the super-saturated, glossy colour you see these days. The content was strong on technical dry fly fishing; more effective patterns, fancier techniques, tackle advances, selectivity and plenty of Latin. The articles were solid (some were even seminal, I suspect, looking back on them now) and articulated the giddy potential fly fishing has to get vastly technical. So, of course, we fell into line, and for us fly fishing’s great renaissance of the seventies was largely an American-driven thing, particularly in so far as dry fly went – though, when it came to nymphing, things were different.

I think *Fly Fisherman* likely had a bigger influence on us than the popular books of the time, already mainly American. For dry

fly we started with McClane, Vincent Marinaro, Schwiebert, Oliver Kite and Ritz, and learnt plenty from them. Then, over the years, Swisher and Richards, LaFontaine and Borger added polish and some finishing touches. But in keeping with what most people will tell you, we learnt more by getting out onto the rivers and actually fishing. Our growing libraries of books and mushrooming collections of magazines strongly supported the theory and application of modern dry fly fishing, but the rivers and lakes tested it in practice. One without the other would have been hopeless.

### ‘FREE-RISING’ TROUT

Thomas McGuane, in his elegant book *The Longest Silence*, describes the world of fast-water trout to a point. It goes like this: ‘The fast-water trout is an opportunist and his opportunities for observation are compressed by the turbulence of the conditions in which he lives.’

As a rule, any fast, freestone stream is harder on fish than slower, more pastoral streams. The reasons are obvious if you’ll accept one or two sweeping brushstrokes.

In fast water, trout use energy just maintaining their station in the current, food is harder to come by because there’s less of it, and what’s available usually comes past at speed or else clings tenaciously to the underside of stones. Finally, most pebbly, freestone streams hold less by way of dissolved nutrients – and, yes, fish do absorb nutrients from the water.

As a result, trout in rocky, clear, fast-flowing streams (a) are mainly smaller, (b) don’t agonise for ages over whether or not to eat something passing by and (c) consequently rise more freely. Which means that prospecting with floating flies in this sort of water is mostly productive and exciting.

As an extension of this hypothesis, trout in Western Cape streams, for example, are credited with the label *free-rising*, meaning that they can be induced to come to the surface even when there's no hatch. Or perhaps let's just say they come to the surface more readily than fish in any pastorally-nutritious setting. Nutrient-rich freestone streams tend to have better sub-surface food chains, and the trout in them tend to rise only when there's a hatch on. Or put differently, there's enough food under the surface for the trout not to bother too much about every little insect that floats past on it.

To sum up: if you like fishing floaters and can settle for trading size of trout for abundance of surface-fishing opportunity, then fast, pebbly, clear-water freestone streams make ideal places to get a dry fly fix, or to just sharpen up your technique.

## LIGHTNESS AND MOVEMENT

If the dry fly was something of a religion with us in the early Western Cape days, and it was, then the patron saint of our particular faith was Tony Biggs. The fly that embodied his two most sacred commandments – lightness and movement – was the RAB.

Americans would describe the RAB as a Variant, meaning any wide-hackle dry fly with a long tail, no wings and a scrap of a body that floats like cork, dances, skids, skates, you name it, in concert with the tease and tug of the surface currents. Dick Talleur described Variants perfectly in *The Dry Fly Handbook*, and I quote: 'Variants are dancers, saucy ballerinas, performing tiny arabesques and pirouettes on shimmering ripples and glides.' Amen.

But as with all good things in life, we overdid RABs in the early days. They happened to work that well in size 12 that we never bothered much about using anything else, like trying smaller patterns, say 16s, or something entirely different. We didn't see the need. The value of smaller flies on our streams is pretty obvious

now, sure, and imitations of specific hatches, like the tiny mayfly *Choroterpes nigrescens* (the Darkening Dun), or the Net-Winged Midges, *Blephariceridae*, or emerger imitations like Klinkhamers, all work just as well as RABs on our streams; in fact, they frequently work better. And these days it's not unusual to see fly boxes mainly filled with 16s and 18s, plus a few rows of 20s, and for those who still have the eyes for them, maybe even 24s.

### PERFECTING THE DRY FLY STRIKE

What we do a lot in this country with dry flies on fast water boils down to what Americans call 'hot spotting', where you pepper the runs, glides, pools or pocket water right ahead of you with short casts. It's not deeply cerebral stuff, but we're not looking for that, and it's fun. And since fish in quick-flowing water don't have all day to think things over before they decide to rise, when they do it tends to be sharply. So when you first try 'hot spotting', it's natural that you miss a few fish striking too late. Trout in pastoral, freestone streams are generally more lazy in the rise.

You need to strike the instant any of the following things happen in the vicinity of your fly: a rise (obviously), but also any sub-surface flash (meaning a moving fish), any unexplained splash, a bulge or, conversely, just a sudden flattening in the surface. Of course, your fly must be in sight to coordinate all this, which is one good reason never to take your eyes off it. In fact, we could call it *Rule One: Never take your eyes off your fly and the water around it.* (There are other reasons not to take your eyes off the fly, but I'll get to them later.)

*Rule Two: Don't strike too hard* – as in don't rear back like a stallion stung by a swarm of wasps, not only because you snap off more easily, or tear the fly out of the fish's mouth but, worse, and think about this, if you miss the trout the leader gets pulled back so fast it rips up a tiny sheet of water. That disturbance invariably

spooks the fish and ends any second chance at it. It could even spook the whole run. The truth is you don't need to slam trout. For a start, modern, chemically-sharpened hooks could be classified as dangerous weapons they're so sharp and, unlike a lot of other species of fish, the skin around a trout's mouth is easily penetrated.

To describe the power you need in a typical dry fly strike, think in terms of the force you'd use tugging someone's shirt to get his attention in a busy room. It's a brief tug, and above all it's *light* and *transitory*. A way to prepare for it on the river is to tell yourself beforehand to just *lift* into the fish until you *feel* it – no more than that. In practice, it's best to keep a stiff wrist, and elevate your rod arm evenly and smoothly until you feel solid resistance. That way you remove the risk of wrist action and, with it, excessive power. In time, most people get sharp and controlled at it, and it can even look pretty, in the way that a smoothly executed cast can look pretty. But – and it's a big but – I repeat: whatever you do, don't *whip* the rod into a fish. There's too much latent power in fly rods.

*Rule Three: Get the timing right.* The timing must be synchronous with the rise, but it must also mirror the nature of the rise, and the way a trout rises gives the cue. Generally, when trout float up lazily and slowly inhale the fly, you want to pitch your strike in the same way – lazily and slowly. Where fish rise in a flash, you want to strike in a flash. Lazy rise – lazy strike; sharp rise – sharp strike.

On freestone streams, the principal reason for missed strikes is connecting too late, either because there's too much slack fly line between angler and fly, or simply a lack of concentration, or both. The answer is simple. *Rule Four: Make a religion of watching your fly and gathering slack* as the fly drifts back towards you so that the slightest lift of the rod immediately transmits energy to the fly. The simplest way is to gather loops of line with your free hand as the fly rides back. Reach to the stripping guide with your spare hand, take hold of the line, extend your arm back fully keeping your hold on

the line, hook the line over your index finger on the rod and keep stripping. It amounts to retrieving large loops of line and storing them in your hand. The trick is to match the speed of your retrieve with the speed of the current – and to make certain that when your hand reaches up for the stripping guide you don't take your eyes off the water to look for the guide! You have to practise hitting that stripping guide blindfolded the moment your fly lands.

I have a rider to add: with short casts on really fast water, simultaneously follow your fly during the drift with the rod tip while at the same time slowly lifting the rod. This takes up a lot of slack very quickly. It's a matter of timing your lift to suit the current speed; not sweeping too fast or too slow, but totally in time with the speed of the water. That's the important bit.

## THE CRYPTIC LANGUAGE OF SURFACE WATER

The obvious sign of surface activity is the rise, and you don't need 60/60 vision to spot most of them. But I suspect we probably miss a lot of subtle and obscure takes on fast water, the better anglers included. I know because I guide a bit, and when you're guiding you see things you otherwise wouldn't see if you were fishing.

Rises in fast water (especially on broken surfaces) are not always that obvious, certainly not until you've had a year or two of fishing and learn more, and even then some rises are so understated and fleeting they're all but undetectable, especially the sip to spinners in broken water. I'd say it's not a bad thing for beginners to make up their minds to cast at anything near the surface they can't fully explain. It's tedious, sure, but you learn quickly doing it and it embroiders a bit on *Rule One* we talked about earlier. Among multiple false alarms you'll, of course, get the occasional pleasant surprise and learn from it, even eventually start recognising something of a pattern.

On broken water, the rise of strongly-feeding fish may appear as no more than a small splash, or an ephemeral wink of light at the surface. It'll hopefully register with you as something unusual, something worth casting at. In fact, if you err towards a high index of suspicion about all you see on the surface and under it, you can't go wrong.

Identifying subtle rises is useful not only to mark the odd co-operative trout, but also to jolt the concentration – maybe after a long spell of fruitless flailing – the point being if one fish has risen you can bet your sweetest fly reel others will follow. And catching a smart trout slyly sneaking surface bugs gives you a nice lift.

## FOLLOWING DRY FLIES

Most times you can follow a dry fly as it floats with the current, but it's never consistently easy and, as I said, you *must* follow the fly to pick up the less obvious takes so you can get the strike right. To help, I sometimes knot a small pinch of pale orange or chartreuse Poly Yarn an arm's length up the leader, especially when the sun's coming straight at me. The downside of this trick, though, is that I tend to rivet my attention on the indicator and not the dry fly, which is obviously risky.

(Just to digress for a moment, I was alone the other day fishing the Smalblaar, using a bright-orange indicator and a bead-head Zak. Things were slow until I got a solid take on the indicator – a really solid take; so solid, in fact, that I felt the gritty resistance of the fish's mouth. By chance I happened to have a bright orange hopper [one I'd stolen off Ed] stuck in my fly patch, a tiny fly, about size 18, and the only bright-orange fly I had. I took a few good fish with it against the run of play, including one around fifteen inches. The point to all this being that it helps to get a little prod in the ribs from an obliging trout.)

It's easier following flies on Cape streams – for that matter, any South African stream – in the morning because the light's softer. But by mid-afternoon the light's harsh and, with the sun overhead, seeing dry flies gets difficult, the same way trying to make out the under-wing pattern on an eagle soaring against the sun is difficult. Sometimes changing sides on the stream helps, or fishing down and across rather than up, but always by the end of the day the sun softens, the light turns to treacle and flies show up best of all – dark and softly backlit.

Then one final point about following flies. We know that drag shows as a thin wake either side of the fly that's easy enough to see, but the human eye is obviously not good enough to pick up the feathery wake left by micro-drag. It's too fine. One way to spot micro-drag is to take careful note of the *attitude* of the fly in the drift, the other important reason not to take your eyes off it. A fly riding without drag has a particular attitude, and it sits in a particular way, best described as properly *aligned*, or properly *angled* in relation to the flow. A dragging fly just looks different. It's slightly stiff, a little awkward and it looks at odds with the current. That's the best way I can describe it. To master the sign, make a small study of the attitude of dry flies on the water so you get to know how they ride when there is, or isn't, drag. Eventually you can read a lot into the attitude of dry flies. I can now tell, almost with certainty, when I can expect a hit on a drift, or conversely, when there's no chance of it and, as far as I can work it out, I'm mostly going on the attitude of the fly, maybe to some extent on the amount of slack leader around it. But I'll admit none of this is an exact science.

## DOWNSTREAM FLOATS

We don't fish downstream dry flies much in this country, partly because for most of us fishing upstream is just a gluey habit, but

also, I suspect, we're inherently cautious about breaking with dry fly traditions as we know and understand them – by which I mean we've taken the upstream bit so to heart as part of dry fly scripture that we don't easily think of turning around and fishing in the opposite direction. The fact is our rivers, especially the bigger ones, easily accommodate fishing in both directions, and some conditions demand downstream presentations.

Fishing downstream has its drawbacks, sure, and getting spotted more easily is not the least of them, but then if it's the only way to get a long enough drift over a tight fish, so be it.

To set up a long downstream drift you want to perfect the Parachute Cast where you draw the rod back just after the Forward Cast ends while the line is in the air over the water. This Reach Back Mend, for want of a better description, drops slack line at your feet, slack that's ready to follow smoothly after the drifting line and fly. Make the Forward Cast, tip the rod back behind your ear and then gently lower the rod tip. What you've done is to pull back line that otherwise would have straightened out ahead of you in a Forward Cast and instead dropped it as slack to feed into the drift. The secret is not to rush your movements, or make them overly elaborate.

## FEEDERS AND NON-FEEDERS

If you have any doubt that we mere mortals can actually 'read' the mood of trout, fish with Fred Steynberg in New Zealand. Trout are scarce in New Zealand's trophy waters, so when you find one you really take notice. Fred would study a trout for two or three seconds then make a judgment, either 'Nah – leave it' or, more excitedly, 'This one's eating!' and we'd take appropriate action. It was useful. But walking away from a fish as long as your leg just because someone says it's not feeding takes strength of character

and a little getting used to. And it was important to leave the non-feeders. They are invariably nervous, and the last thing you want them to do is to get spooked by a cast and bolt off up the river. So we gave them a wide berth. At times I'd stay back just to check if Fred wasn't maybe wrong, but no fish he said wasn't eating ever moved a fin. Later I got the feel of it. They told me with practice I'd spot non-feeders from a mile off but, to be honest, I was never as unshakably confident about my own judgment as I was about Fred's. He can sum up a trout in a split-second.

The general rules are: non-feeders lie dead-still and aren't in feeding lies. Conversely, feeders dance a little, are 'out' (meaning they've taken up a feeding station in a current lane, mostly in relatively exposed positions). Their heads are up, their dorsal fins are erect and their bodies are weaving. In New Zealand they attach more importance to carefully reading the trout than reading the stream, but then reading trout is a non-negotiable requirement for selective sight-fishing. It's a less useful science on our home waters (I'm not saying it's unimportant), and I suspect also that it's less reliable with our rainbows, especially small or average-sized rainbows, than it is with our brown trout.

## DRAG

Just as in golf, where putting is the great leveller, so in dry fly fishing is drag the great leveller. No doubt about it. Mind you, I don't play golf any more, so I'm not certain about the golf bit. I've just heard it said about the game. The last time I played, by the way, was at the Hermanus Club thirty-odd years ago when I nearly killed a caddy with my opening drive. By the time I eventually got around to hitting my ball off the first tee, the caddy was walking down the fairway with his back to me, somewhere off to the left where he no doubt thought he was safe. As I connected the ball,

my caddy's mate let out the sort of scream a cat makes when someone stands on its tail. My caddy spun around, wide-eyed, to find the ball coming straight at him, knee-high and climbing. He dived under it, but he went very pale and never took his eyes off me after that. I decided I wasn't entirely cut out for the game. Also, I had to listen to a range of similarly embarrassing experiences in golfing from my partners – when they had stopped laughing. There was the one about the fellow who hit a drive straight into the clubhouse. The ball apparently sliced off in a gracefully-curving arc, entered the packed members' lounge through a window, and caused quite a stir before it stopped bouncing off the walls. We don't get much of this sort of fun in fly fishing.

Any fish in clear water is sensitive as hell about drag, but strangely, it rarely spooks a fish feeding strongly. The other day I was alone on the Smalblaar when I came across a steady feeder in an awkward, knee-deep, glassy run. My first few casts didn't move the fish because of bad drag. But the fish kept on feeding, so I kept on casting. I must have put twenty casts through that run before I got a really loose leader and a dream float with the fly looking just right. I had him. I made a note to write about the event, not because the fish took the fly on a drag-free float, but because a heap of casts with heavy drag in them hadn't put the fish down. It had just warned the fish off taking on that particular cast.

Sometimes drag spooks fish for good. It's more likely to happen on chalkstreams and spring creeks, but it also happens on freestone streams when a trout, for some reason, is slightly nervous to start with. But if trout are more tolerant of drag on freestone streams, your best chance with any fish is still always on your *first* drift. After that, I'm convinced your chances drop incrementally with each successive cast.

In the chapter on Presentations, I describe drag and how to beat it in a little more detail.

## PRESENTING THE DRY FLY AND THROWING SLACK-LINE CASTS

The secret to avoiding drag is getting slack *into the leader and tippet*. Getting slack depends on throwing Slack-Line Casts or, conversely, avoiding straight casts, which is probably not the way you were taught to cast in the first place. In dry fly fishing, it's also essential to have a tippet long enough and soft enough not to straighten too easily in the first place.

The late Gary LaFontaine made an interesting observation in his book *The Dry Fly – New Angles*. What he says is that as anglers get more experienced, their casting, as you'd imagine, improves. Their casts get straighter and longer and faster and, correspondingly, and somewhat contrarily, their catch rates on the dry fly actually drop because all these elements encourage drag in fast water.

On difficult streams with strong surface currents, throwing neat, ruler-straight casts is inviting failure with dry flies. The way to go is to build slack into the line and leader, and a way to do that is to throw casts that do it for you.

The problem is, Slack-Line Casts don't look pretty; in fact, they look sloppy and they won't impress your friends much. But because Slack-Line Casts buy longer, drag-free drifts, they fool trout more often – and that, they tell me, is one of the main reasons we go fly fishing in the first place.

The Slack-Line Cast is actually a 'mend', not a cast. You simply stop the Forward Cast early then drop the rod, first vertically, as in straight down like a soldier presenting arms, then lower the rod tip onto the water. Dropping a flowing fly line onto water stalls the cast because the sudden resistance of the water slows the speed of the fly line. In turn, that throws small waves into the line and the waves offset drag.

An alternative to a standard Slack-Line Cast is the Pile Cast. It's ingenious. Throw a *firm* Forward Cast, check the rod abruptly,

follow through, and you find the leader ‘hinging’ upwards on the end of the fly line like a hovering cobra. The fly and leader then settle in a convenient heap on the water.

Common to all dry fly casts is what you could call a ‘high line’ approach. In other words, the fly line must lose speed well above the water so the fly settles to the surface as gently as a descending parachute. This means aiming at a point well above your target, then stopping the cast with the line in the air and parallel to the water. In fact, this was George La Branche’s<sup>1</sup> standard dry fly cast. You want the line to float onto the water, rather than suddenly arrive on it. You can build slack into the high-pitched line by deliberately checking the rod at the end of the Forward Cast, or you can even tip the rod backwards fractionally, creating ‘back bounce’ in the fly line, and that introduces waves into the line and leader. There are varying degrees of force possible here, but I prefer the sort of effort needed to wipe a cobweb out of the way, or a tear from your eye. Dry fly fishing should always be gentle, understated stuff.

The key essential with this – in fact, with all dry fly casts – is to *build in height*. This softens the presentation and drops the fly on the water like a falling leaf. The difference is subtle, I accept, but it counts. It’s like the difference between bought pastry and your mother’s.

To get really smart, you can measure the distance to the target and add slack all at the same time. As the fly line shoots out in the Forward Cast, let the line flow through the thumb and index finger of your free hand. Once the fly reaches the target, quickly trap the line by pinching your fingers closed. Your cast is now at the right height and *at the right distance*, and the sudden stop throws waves of slack into the leader.

Try to keep the cast short, say around twenty-five to thirty feet. Once you get beyond thirty feet, it’s difficult to inject your presentations with any great precision or control. Also, you see less

of the minute goings-on around your fly. It's even possible to miss the fact that you actually rose a fish in the first place.

### WHERE TO PLACE A DRY FLY TO A FEEDING FISH

Most trout want the fly to float directly over them, but they will generally move to intercept anything that floats by in an area around each eye the size of a dinner plate, and they like around an arm's-length of drift before it arrives. They seem to prefer a chance to inspect what's on offer, and they don't often buy impulsively at the checkout counter like we humans do – meaning they rarely take a dry fly that drops on their noses. The magic spot to aim for is as far ahead of the fish as the salt and pepper are from each guest at a well-set dinner table – in other words, within comfortable reach. That way the fish gets just enough time to look at what's on offer, but not too much time. If you make the lead-in too long, the risk of drag increases. Drag is least likely the moment the fly lands, but increases from that point with every second of float. On quick corrugated water, I'd guess that ninety percent of floats longer than two metres will attract some drag. You might not notice it, but a sharp fish will.

Accurate placements come more easily when a cast is not forced and when you cast within yourself. It helps to keep your eyes glued on the target area and nowhere else, and your head still. The right distance, as I said, is sometimes best arrived at by controlling the line flowing from the rod into the cast, using your fingers to stop the line just over the target.

Having said this, we all know about trout that suddenly spring up and belt a fly that has landed a rod's length off. When that happens, well, it's a bonus, I guess – but it's also rare enough not to rely on it.

## FISHING POCKET WATER

The art to pocket water is not to get overtaken by the apparent ease of it. For once, the fish are sitting in small, easily understood bowls, like family goldfish, close enough to prod with the rod tip if you like. Unmeasured approaches, though, fail, not because you don't take the odd fish (most people do) but because you miss the surprise-sized monster that's been sitting around unhooked for the last three seasons. In a way, your approach should be as studied as it is for any sort of water except that, in pocket water, holding lies are less easily read. We'll come to that later.

Most pocket waters are a series of small cascade pools through which the water moves at speed in twists and whorls. Mostly thin and unproductive runs and riffles link the pools.

Get yourself really close, take a good look at the water, cast short and pepper the spot with slowly expanding sequential casts. Keeping your casts short makes for shorter drifts, and in fast water shorter drifts are less likely to induce drag. I fish maybe three or four careful casts over each piece, and if I don't raise a fish I change direction and fish another part until I've covered the pool completely.

You'll understand that fishing pocket water isn't exactly the way you'd fish the Test in Hampshire, and you don't want to make this sort of fishing too fancy. Short (7- to 8-foot), light rods are fine and they don't have to be fast-action models either. I use, in no order of preference and depending on wind or whim, an 8-foot Sage 0-weight, a 7'9", five-piece 2-weight Winston, a medium-action 7'6" Orvis 3-weight Tippet, a fast action 4-weight 8-foot Orvis Western Midge, and occasionally my 8½-foot Orvis 3-weight HLS. But there are a hundred other rods you could use, and the one good thing is it doesn't make much difference in this kind of fishing. Pockets are very forgiving, and when you're fishing this close it makes little difference what rod you use, as long as it loads the fly line easily.

For a day on typical pocket water, drop your leader to 6 foot and add 24 inches of 5X tippet. Start with high-riding flies, like RABs or Humpies, and keep reminding yourself to think of using spinners or emergers if you see sippers – or micro-patterns if the trout stab at the fly or take short.

Most of the really lovely pocket water I fish is on tight streams, meaning there's no room for a conventional backcast. I abbreviate the backcast and chop the line forward purposefully early. Somehow over the years I've learnt to control the cast, even to get fair distance. Pick the line up smoothly and, as the leader leaves the water, accelerate it quickly, let part of the backcast form, then move straight into a wristy Forward Cast.

### FISHING CANAL WATER

A lot of water in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, and for that matter around Dullstroom and Barkly East, borders on what you'd call canal water – smooth, even-flowing, flat stretches running a gentle and often serpentine course between grassy banks that are often tree-lined. There's little gradient, so there's not much pace in the water, and flowing as they do in mainly flat, pastoral country, they're fertile streams. Generalising, this isn't ideal dry fly water – until there's a hatch on.

But without a hatch, flat streams with grassy banks are still good places to prospect with terrestrials, especially grasshoppers. When there is a hatch, usually early morning and late afternoon, it's the kind of water where trout can get a little fussy about what they're eating. So you'll need to identify the hatch, but you won't need to classify it down to the last level on the taxonomic scale. Often, a well-presented Parachute Adams in matching size is good enough. In fact, in this kind of water, a Parachute Adams is something of a panacea, the entomological wastepaper-basket answer to all hatches.

The fussiness of fish is more pronounced when the hatch is thin, and more carefree when it's dense. What you need to get right above all else in slow-water hatches is the presentation. The fly should fall close to the rise and plumb in line with the fish. And always when you cast to a riser you must give the trout a chance to realign itself – count to five, then cast half an arm's-length ahead of the centre of the rings. Finally, keep the fly line out of the fish's sight.

### KEEPING FAITH AGAINST THE RUN OF PLAY

Suppose you've been fishing a dry fly on this lovely river for the last half-hour and you haven't seen a fish. At first the water looked promising; clear and bright, comfortably cool. You conscientiously watched out every cast, checked for drag, religiously gathered slack so your strike would be sharp, mended line when you had to, searched for signs of subtle risers, fished the tail-water first, concentrated hard on the riffled bits – in fact did all the right things – but nothing has moved at your fly since you started.

Yet another half-hour goes by without a trout and your fishing loses some crispness – not much, but enough to count. Your casts get a little too straight, slack creeps into the drifting line and you take your eyes off the fly – even off the water – a little more often. Your spirits aren't exactly low, but you haven't had enough action to keep your mind focused. You sink into thinking a hundred unrelated thoughts – unrelated to the fishing, that is – and gradually your concentration ebbs below the minimum you'd need to put one over a sudden trout.

You stop fishing. You take off the dry fly, loop on a new tippet, add a Poly Yarn indicator a metre up the leader and tie on a nymph. You know you need a change, but you tell yourself even though you're on a nymph you'll keep an eye out for signs of fish coming to the surface so you can get back to the dry fly.

The indicator looks perky, even promising, and you enjoy tracking the nymph deep through vibrating slots of water. You know they hold trout. You've told yourself the fish are deep today and dry flies aren't working – well, for the moment they aren't – and that a nymph will dredge up a trout. You take a fish that was holding deep and a while later another, and by then you've forgotten about dry flies, let alone watching for the early signs that fish are at last throwing the odd upward glance at the surface.

The obvious signs of surface activity need little discussion – like the sudden appearance of airborne insects, rises, leaping trout, that sort of thing – but certain events hint that a change is imminent and they're important to watch for; for instance when swallows make a sudden appearance over the water, or there's a complete switch in wind direction, say, from the east to the south or west. Sometimes sudden cloud cover on a clear day, or the appearance of sunshine on a cold and overcast one, or a freshet of cool rain sprinkling a hot valley unexpectedly are cues. When you think about it, nearly all boil down to changes in conditions that favour insects hatching.

It's also not surprising that trout hold deep when the sun's bright, or get bolder when light intensity drops. It's a matter of cover, and cover in turn is what survival is about.

Another sign I like, especially for the dry fly, is to see cattle standing with their tails swishing back and forth (again suggesting flies are active). It sounds obscure I know, but then a lot of what happens in fly fishing is a bit obscure anyhow.

In summary, look for cryptic rises, the signs of a hatch you missed (swallows are a strong indicator), activity on the banks, especially from cattle, and sudden changes in weather or light that favour hatching. Above all, never believe in the constancy of contrary conditions for the dry fly.

But let's get back to the dry fly trip we were doing. Suddenly swallows sweep over the water, twisting with white-fanned tails,

hawking insects in acrobatic stall-turns. The change was quick and you know it may be fleeting. The swallows had been absent all morning, but suddenly a squadron of them is darting and threading the river. Then you notice the sprinkling of dull insects you'd completely missed, probably small mayflies, or micro-caddis, you think. You slap a couple with your hat, confirm, and tie on a size 18 Adams and, even though you haven't seen a fish rise yet, you cast crisply again because you know now you're back in with a chance.

## DRY FLY LEADERS FOR FREESTONE STREAMS

The essence here is to avoid a tippet that straightens like a ruler. To achieve this, make the butt of the leader *less stiff* by using a *narrower section* of a compound-tapered nylon leader and a longer tippet. Ignore the outdated decree that leader butts have to be stiff. That idea died a natural death years ago.

The essential part is to test the leader for turnover and slack. If the fly drops short, trim off tippet material until it turns over sweetly. If the leader straightens completely, add a few more inches to the tippet.

I use a 9-foot, 4X continuous taper nylon leader with twelve inches cut off the butt to reduce the diameter slightly, from the average of, say, 0.021 inches, down to around 0.017 inches. This gives the butt around sixty percent of the line-tip diameter. Attach a tippet of 3 to 6 feet of 4, 5, or 6X nylon, depending on conditions. A 6-foot, 3X Mulligan's furred leader might turn over better, but they're expensive.

If you make your own leaders, it's easier. Start with a butt section six feet long in 0.017 inch nylon (Maxima is fine) joined to 24 inches of 0.010 inch. This is in line with George Harvey's most recent approach to dry fly leaders. Then join 3 to 4 feet of tippet

(4 to 7X, depending on conditions) as limp as you can get, by loop-to-loop connection. This gives you a softer butt and a long belly, both reducing power transfer to the leader and creating the ‘S’ waves in the tippet that you want. The overall length of the leader is 11 to 12 foot, which is manageable in most conditions. In bright, clear water, lengthen the tippet by a foot or two.

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about dry fly leaders is that there’s no foolproof way of designing one on a drawing board. Each leader you make you have to test on the water for balance and presentation, and you must be prepared to adjust the length of the tippet if the leader straightens too much, or if it won’t turn over properly. It’s interesting, but the flies you use – as in, bushy and wind-resistant or not – have as big an effect on leader performance as tippet diameter or length.

Because dry fly fishing mostly demands tippets around 5 to 6X, even 7 or 8X at times, knot strength has real meaning. You probably use the Surgeon’s Knot, or a well-tied Blood Knot, in a tapered leader, and a Perfection loop-to-loop connection to join the leader to the tippet. They’re all reliable, providing they’re bedded in carefully. If you close any knot in fine nylon too quickly, or without a layer of lubricating saliva or, better still, lip balm, none of them is worth much. Someone once told me to close a knot like you’d stalk a buck – carefully and painfully slowly. The reason for the extravagant care is to prevent heat build-up from rearranging the molecules in the nylon, which ends up weakening it.

The same applies to the knot to the fly, where heat often causes the adjacent section of nylon to twist. Someone once told me if you hold the tippet a foot or more from the fly when you close the knot, it prevents twisting. Let’s just say you get less twisting, though ever since hearing the tip I’ve naturally made a habit of using it.

Another useful idea is to keep the tag ends on knots anywhere along the lower leader, and on the fly itself, longish, say at least two

millimetres. That way the stub isn't stiff enough to snag the leader, and the knot won't slip as easily. Besides, two tag ends of nylon projecting out of either side of a neatly segmented Blood Knot can look amazingly like the wings and body of a tiny spinner. That's maybe why fish so often rise to knots.

One more thing: the wide profile and exquisite lightness of wide-hackled dry flies causes them to spin the tippet. You can overcome this to some extent by using a Swivel Knot. The tippet is first threaded through the eye then knotted to a thicker piece of nylon – say 6X to a piece of 2X. The bulk stops the nylon sliding back through the eye, and with no knot holding the hook the fly spins freely. A Surgeon's Knot is ideal, though the nylon stub facing back towards the eye of the hook has to be trimmed plum against the knot, otherwise it stops the fly rotating freely. With Blood Knots, the stubs are well away from the eye and free rotation is guaranteed – well almost – but Blood Knots are more of a hassle to tie.

## FISHING THE DRY FLY ON THE SMALBLAAR WITH TONY BIGGS

The other day I fished the Smalblaar with my oldest living fishing buddy, Tony Biggs. It had been a while since we fished the river together; so long, in fact, that neither of us wanted to dwell on the subject, preferring to forget the passage of time and just do the Smalblaar again, like in the old days. We'd had a few light falls of rain late in April, and we thought things might at last be right after what had been a long, dry summer. Also, there were reports of good fish filtering in on the grapevine, even the odd fish over sixteen inches, and the Club had just got the rights to the Hotel Water, a section of river to the left as you come out of the Huguenot Tunnel on the road to Worcester – and we knew nobody had fished it for ages.

The tunnel was built in the early seventies after I'd left Cape Town to settle in Natal. When I came back on a visit in 1982, we did a trip to the Smalblaar and there it was, a gaping great hole in the side of the mountain leading into four kilometres of deeply subterranean highway. It's saves time on round trips to the Smalblaar, the Elandspad and the Holsloot, and a lot of hanging around impatiently on steep roads in the smoky slipstreams of the slow-moving trucks crossing the old mountain pass.

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The day was clear and, ever sentimentalists, we opted to miss the tunnel and take the pass. That way, we reminded ourselves, we could check the streams and springs coming off the hills and get a forewarning of conditions on the river, like we did before they built the tunnel. We used to be pretty good at telling what the flows would be like, which way the wind would be blowing and what the chances of a hatch were long before we got there. Tony reminded me about this as we crossed the top of the pass. It was a sort of meaningless ritual, though, because we would arrive at the Smalblaar five minutes later anyhow, and if predictions were bad, well, there wasn't much we could do about it. On the other hand, I suppose, when the signs were good, we enjoyed the lift we got out of knowing about it beforehand. We also enjoyed the sense that we were getting good at interpreting the finest nuances of the place and predicting events. So, as I said, it became something of a ritual.

Fly fishers are known for cultivating rituals, or at least for a fair amount of ritualistic behaviour. Some rituals add value, most don't, and I've learnt it's best not to question yourself too closely about any of them; like the ritual (or is it a superstition) of never saying 'Tight lines' to each other, ever. If someone says the TL words, it's as good as the kiss of death. Or the ritual we had of making a big

stew on the first evening of every trip to the Old Dam, adding a bit of everything we'd brought. Somehow, though, there's some comfort in rituals, in that they bring a little local tradition into things, create a sense of belonging, like the cosiness of belonging to some elite club, even make what we do together as a group of angling friends maybe not more important as much as just a little more distinctive. And while there's fly fishing out there, there'll always be ritual. It only needs the same group of anglers to fish a remote place, say, two or three times, and you can get yourself ready to print out the ritual list.

When we got to the top of the pass, Tony said the signs didn't look good to him and, as it happened, he wasn't wrong.

We called in at the roadhouse alongside the hotel, picked up juices and a couple of pepper-steak pies, then found ourselves a shady place near the river and set up. The water was high, almost too high to wade safely, and more than a little peat-stained, and a cold upstream wind blew my hat off. But Tony, who's a rock-steady optimist, took one look at the river and, like some fey piscatorial clairvoyant, said something about 'sensing' the place was full of trout.

The bucket water below the hotel was just fast enough to be dangerous, so we moved upstream to a section of wide flats where the river opens up and where we could wade safely if we went about it cautiously. We began dropping dry flies onto the smooth-surfaced runs and into the rough pockets that showed up clearly in the shallow spread of the reach. To cover bets, Tony fished a large fly, a feathery RAB, and I used a small hopper Ed had given me the night before. We lifted the odd fish. They came up lazily and hung under the fly for seconds as if puzzled, and just long enough to show us a flash of flank and a sprinkle of spots before tilting back. I briefly had a really good one under the hopper and I sucked in breath as it lifted and hesitated, but like the rest (all typical twelve-inch Smalblaar rainbows) it never actually mouthed the fly. 'Maybe

they're just cold,' I said, and we took a reading. The water was 12 degrees. I'd known the Smalblaar warmer.

Then Tony moved a good fish on a DDD but didn't prick it, and I hooked one on the hopper in the same run. Tony said it was three inches smaller than the fish he'd had under his fly. Whatever, mine was a good enough fish, about fourteen inches, and eventually it swam straight between Tony's legs and got off.

We split up for a while, fishing in sight of one another, still only getting fish that floated for seconds under the fly as if they were thinking seriously about taking it but couldn't quite make up their minds, again some of them quite big fish, say around fifteen, maybe even sixteen inches. I said to Tony they reminded me of a woman out buying shoes, taking a long, hard look at what's on offer, liking most of it, but liking nothing quite enough to actually commit to a purchase there and then. You know. You've probably been on the odd shoe-shopping outing yourself.

Around midday the wind dropped and the sun shone through scattering banks of cloud and warmed our backs. A hatch of black mayflies came off and fish started moving. We caught a couple, including one of sixteen inches that Tony got on a big DDD in a run as flat and as narrow as an ironing board. But by mid-afternoon the temperature of the water got through to us, my feet went numb with cold and my legs felt strangely like they belonged to somebody else. So we trudged back.

We bought a cup of coffee and a steak pie at the hotel cafe and kidded the waitress with the fifty-rand bill we offered her. Tony casually told her he'd made it at home in his garage. She fidgeted the note between her fingers, briefly held it up against the light, joined in the spirit of things and said with a straight face she'd be interested in buying fifty cents worth for herself. Just then a fishing pal of ours, Robert Voogt, strolled in. He'd been on the beat immediately above us, where he said he'd taken the odd good fish

until he put a foot near a puff adder as long as his arm. That put him off his fishing a bit, he said. I listened to the story and thanked him for the warning, at the same time realising that there's little point to being mindful about any resident puff adder somewhere on a mile or two of bushed-in fly stream. I thought, though, that it was maybe time to dig out the snake leggings I imported years back and never actually wear. I got them from a mail-order company that used a full-colour photograph of a striking rattlesnake, fangs unhinged and about to sink into someone's leg (convincingly protected by the advertiser's product, of course), which I don't mind admitting I found a pretty compelling advert at the time. They eventually arrived. I wore them once and decided I'd rather live with the risk of puff adders.

We left Robert drinking strong coffee, filled up with petrol outside the tearoom, and by the time I'd paid the attendant and climbed back into the car, Tony was dozing off. I felt a little tired myself and a few muscles were talking to me in the back of my legs.

'What's it going to be,' I asked, 'the tunnel or the pass?'

'What a question,' he said, and we took the mountain route. On balance we thought it had been a good day, despite the conditions and the tentativeness of the trout, and we drove home talking fondly, maybe a touch nostalgically, about the early days on the Smalblaar. But that's okay when you've fished a river together for – well, let me get it off my chest – thirty-eight years, come this Christmas.

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A week later we were back, this time on a perfect day, with an upstream breeze strong enough to roll out the cast and turn the leader, water levels down a few inches, and wading easy by comparison. We fished on the same beat, from the hotel up.

The trout were in the thin water, not in the runs; they were in shallow drifts that carried scarcely enough water to cover our ankles. The stones were crawling with nymphs, about size 14s, and on the rocks we found the parched, amber shucks of big mayflies that had hatched the previous night, maybe size 10s. There were small, dun-coloured caddisflies crawling around on exposed stones in midstream that took to hovering above the water in nervous clouds when we got close. Every so often fish leapt clear, and in a few runs there were three or four trout on the prod at the same time. For the hell of it we used RABs – large, ginger RABs with generous hackles, that landed like dandelions and danced daintily, though I suppose, technically, with so many caddis about we should have been on a small Goddard's, or a size 18 Henryville, but we weren't in any mood to be technical. We were just out to fish. The trout were in lovely condition and it's tempting to describe them as being about as deep as they were long, which, of course, they weren't, though describing them that way at least gives you an idea of how we felt about them. And we caught enough really long fish to later feel disappointed when a mere twelve-incher took the fly.

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I'm more at home on the Smalblaar, perhaps, than on any other river I know, and I like it more than any other river I know, save maybe for the Witte on a good day, when nothing on God's earth can touch it, anywhere in the world. The Smalblaar has changed little over the years, other than for the widening of the highway alongside it, which was always busy but is nowadays plain mega-busy. Before they widened the road you could pull off and park almost anywhere you wanted, hop in and fish. Now you take your life in your hands parking in most places, and as for the best spots, well, you just can't get a car near most of them any more.

But the river is much the same, and from my observation, especially over the last three years or so, the trout are better and just as plentiful as they were when there were fewer anglers around.

The secret of the Smalblaar's enduring appeal is, of course, its free-rising rainbows, miles of them sprinkled like raisins in a cake in water that's just tricky enough to be really interesting to fish. The two things to focus on are picking up a take and timing the strike. Smalblaar fish are fast risers – they can be like lightning some days – especially when the surface is quick and broken. I've got used to them, but then I cut my teeth on this river, so from early in my career fast trout held no surprises – still don't. In fact, for many years I thought that was the way all trout came to the fly. I still prefer trout to come up sharply, though I prefer them to go at the fly deliberately, rather than snatch at it, if you know what I mean. In cricket they say when the ball comes onto the bat it's a little easier to score off than when it doesn't, and fish in fast water are probably no different. Sometimes rises on the Smalblaar appear only as a wink of half-concealed light and you learn to lift the rod pretty smartly, and to fish short, keep slack off the water to connect quickly. If you're milliseconds out, the fish is gone. It's as simple as that. Mostly when rises are hard to pick up, if you keep the fly in sight you learn to strike the instant it dips in the drift.

But then there are times when Smalblaar trout rise slowly and deliberately, and timing the strike gets tricky, especially when you set up a drift near the bank in the smoothly-glassy shadow-water you get under sheltering branches. The fish seem first to inspect the fly, often float a long way under it in the drift. Other days they'll sip it gently, almost secretly. Often the smooth runs close to the bank hold better fish. I tend to snatch the fly away too early from these hanging trout, until I figure things out. Some days my timing's wrong and stays wrong all day, and other times I'm

all perfect timing from beginning to end and wonder if I'll ever miscue another trout in my life, but the feeling never lasts.

Rarely, when there's a consistent hatch, Smalblaar trout get ultra-selective. But if they do occasionally get ultra-selective, they don't seem to hold the pose for too long.

At times wind is a problem, but only when it blows hat-lifting hard; upstream wind because it straightens the leader too much, downstream wind because it stalls the cast, often blows the fly back behind the line, especially wide-hackle flies like RABs.

Upstream the Smalblaar runs into the Elandspad under the road-bridge, and the Elandspad fishes well for miles until it divides really high up (around what's known as Beat Six to give you some idea how high up), in spectacular mountain country. If you describe the Smalblaar as a brightly-pale and glassily-iridescent river, you'd described the Elandspad as a little sombre, more secretive, maybe even a little forbidding in some strange way I can't quite explain. Trout are plentiful, sure, a little easier to spot maybe than in the Smalblaar, and mostly fussy, but there are times when they relax enough to make the Elandspad feel like a dry fly river from heaven. It's a stream that lends itself well to tiny flies – spinners, micro-caddis, ants and beetles – and to short casts and careful observation.

Comparing the Smalblaar and the Elandspad to yet another famous Western Cape stream, the Holsloot, is difficult. The Holsloot is more reliable and forgiving (it's as close to a tail-water fishery as we get down here), clear enough still to be remarkable, but never quite as clear as the Smalblaar, not as incandescent, but a river with some of the best hatches I've seen in the Cape. Access is easy and, by and large, so is the going. So it's a convenient river, though it runs in a hot valley alongside a winding dirt road. Still, these three streams are so close to each other and so similar in structure and character that they form the sort of natural triad of

## DRY FLY ON RIVERS AND STREAMS

waters you could safely mention in one breath, fish with the same rod, use the same flies on, and expect much the same results.

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1 George La Branche wrote *The Dry Fly And Fast Water* in 1914, a book that became the bible for a generation of American anglers.

