



CHAPTER 7

BARKLY EAST, SEPTEMBER 2011, AND FURTHER FLIRTATIONS WITH TENKARA

*Rivers, like women, have a personality all their own,
and on the whole they run true to form.*

*Of course, it takes time and intimacy to weigh this up,
and the process is both interesting and instructive.*

OLIVER KITE, *A FISHERMAN'S DIARY*



The drive up to Barkly East from Cape Town was characterised by a lot more than just the rote boredom of sitting behind a wheel as endless kilometres of highway belt by. This trip was punctuated by multiple stop-and-go hold-ups for ongoing roadworks between Laingsburg and Beaufort West, where the irritating delays inevitably exceeded the ten minutes the signboards optimistically announced. In fact, people got out of their cars, stretched, and generally looked

tired and irritable. At one stop, a lady stepped out of her car with a pair of binoculars and enthusiastically scanned the Karoo veld for birds. I took note. It beat sitting in the heat, staring into space.

It was spring, and the Karoo was alive with wildflowers. They decorated the roadsides in bursts of colour that compensated for the tedious processions of heavily laden trucks that rumbled past at each of the forced delays. I wondered what birds the lady had spotted; taking her cue, I slipped my binoculars out of the cubby hole just as the long row of cars I was stuck in got waved through. But the binoculars came in useful later.

I had a pleasant overnight stay with Mike and Candy Ferrar on *Mount Melsetter*. We had a customary glass or two of cold white wine on the veranda while a pair of White-throated Swallows watched us from the same nest they'd used the summer before, and then enjoyed a slow dinner of a perfectly done leg of lamb.

I was about to leave the next morning when Mike remarked that the roads were in bad shape and said I should drive carefully. He was right. Just beyond Steynsburg the R66 crumbled into a scattered mosaic of potholes. I saw an upmarket German sedan abandoned on the side of the road fifty kilometres out of Steynsburg, both its low-profile front tyres blown out. I'd come across potholes on this route before, but they had since multiplied to the point where they turned the road into a lottery. I stopped at a lay-by for a mug of coffee and, on a whim, stood an Orvis CFO fly reel upright in one of the potholes to get an idea of its scale. The hole was a ragged-edged cavity the size of a tea tray, and it dwarfed the CFO for height by a good few centimetres.

The potholes, scattered like confetti, continued all the way through to Lady Grey. And there were more than a few on the road from Lady Grey to Barkly East. So by way of a break from pothole-dodging, I took the long route to Rhodes, turning off the R58, taking the dirt road through the Wartrail and New England

Districts, crossing some lesser-known but beautiful trout streams such as the Diepkloof, the Vlooiakraalspruit and the Joggem.

After a comfortable evening at the Walkerbouts Inn, I crossed over Naude's Nek Pass early the next morning along with Tony Kietzman and Michelle Rogers, and we found sheets of ice on the hillsides at the summit. We were on our way to spend a few days in Ugie, where they were hosting the Ladies' Fly-Fishing Festival.

Michelle Rogers and her husband were at the time popular doctors living in Rhodes, practising in Barkly East and running the clinic in the district. They've since taken up jobs elsewhere, which was a sad loss for the community.

From the top of Naude's Nek Pass, the view out towards Maclear and Ugie was hazy but still spectacular, in that you are 2,500 metres above sea level on one of the highest road passes in South Africa, and at the lay-by, you look out over a 180-degree view. It seems like you're looking out over the whole world.

For a change, the gravel road down the pass was in good shape. Some years it's a nightmare. At the foot of the pass we stopped for coffee at the bridge over the Swith and found the stream running clear. The water was dark with shade, and there were no trout to be seen. Michelle opened a hamper of food and uncorked a bottle of Rosé, meaning the brief stop lingered on into a pleasant stay. Further on, in the rolling grassland countryside on the eastern slopes of the southern Drakensberg, we came across a few hundred Crowned Cranes in a cornfield that had recently been burned to stubble; a mile or two later we found a second flock, smaller but still impressive.

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The festival is a fun event that has been going for years, where the contestants are treated like royalty for two-and-a-half days. They get to fish some of the fine streams in this part of the world,

like the Mooi, the Pot and the Little Pot. The arrangements were immaculate, with plenty of volunteer guides and good food, and to top it off, the rivers were in good shape. Tony and I were put up in a vacant, fully furnished house belonging to a forestry company.

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The tree industry was a fairly recent arrival in this part of the world; when I had visited the area a few years back, it seemed every square inch of land was suddenly under pine. It was forestation on a massive scale and it came as a shock – like when you make a nostalgic return to a place of your roots and find the house you grew up in is now an ugly ten-storey office block. Mile after mile of once-familiar grassy hillsides were transformed into plantations of sapling pine trees, not quite overnight, but that's what it felt like. To the north of Ugie there's a massive timber mill employing hundreds of people. My first thought was that it wasn't good news for the fishing, but the fishing has stayed as good as ever. In defence of the forestry company, they saw to it that none of the wetlands were destroyed and that the trees were kept away from the banks of the many streams.

Somebody mentioned, though, that the rare and endangered Blue Swallow had been all but wiped out as a result of the tree planting, or rather due to the loss of the mistbelt grassland habitat these birds need for their survival. We said a solemn prayer for this rare intra-African migrant, of which there are less than a hundred breeding pairs left in South Africa, cursed forestation, then later discovered that the Blue Swallow had never been endemic to this area in the first place. Not that it changes my view that what happened to this lovely part of the country in the name of agricultural development wasn't far off large-scale environmental looting.

I mentioned this to one of those tree-hugging anti-trout lobbyists who came to my home to interview me about trout. I asked what he

thought about grasslands being wiped out by forests of alien pine, since he was clearly on a mission to rid the land of all alien species (especially trout) and was, you could say, following the siren call of environmental sanitation. He didn't know about the forestry situation around Ugie and Maclear – or if he did, he pretended not to – but he did get a little glassy-eyed. When they're on a mission, irksome questions make environmental zealots uncomfortable because they can't provide cogent answers without blowing their cover, or exposing a distinctly vulnerable underbelly in their argument.

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I guided a few ladies on the Mooi, the Pot and the Little Pot and, by some good fortune, those handed over to my doubtful care never blanked once. And there were a few interesting moments. Just before lunch on the first day I was walking back along a bank on the Pot when I saw a lady standing alone, knee-deep in the tail end of a perfect-looking run. She was reeling in and was obviously making to leave. I asked how she'd done. 'Nothing so far,' she replied in a disconsolate tone that suggested there was no justice in the world. I asked her to stay where she was, and studied the run for a few moments. It was around twenty metres long, with whitewater washing into the throat through a tight inlet. Then it widened slightly, and on the left a nice curl of current flowed around a suitcase-sized boulder with a nice patch of smooth, slack water behind it. To the right, the water sloped up gently to a shallow pebbled bank. And near the throat, just off to the left, was a green-tinted deeper pocket half the size of a bathtub. The water was a misty-green, so you couldn't bank on spotting trout, but it was the sort of run that you would back your last dollar held at least a couple of nice fish. I climbed down, waded in and joined her. The flow was colder and stronger than I thought, and the run seemed the more promising for it.

I added three feet of 7X tippet to her leader, and tied on a size 14 weighted Zak. She took the rod and with three or four false casts, sent the fly line right up the centre of the run, landing the nymph in the tumbling whitewater at the throat. She could cast beautifully. Then she lifted the rod tip and started a quick retrieve.

‘Okay,’ I said, when she had the fly in sight, ‘now try a short cast into that slack water behind the big boulder.’

‘Really?’ she asked. ‘Isn’t that too close?’

I assured her it wasn’t, and she dropped the fly into the patch behind the rock.

There is something about certain runs that makes them look way beyond just promising. In fact, on some runs, your anticipation of catching a fish almost borders on certainty. This was one of those runs, and its promise was fuelled by the fact that less than an hour earlier I’d seen trout being landed higher upstream from water not half as nice-looking as this.

She landed the fly in the right place with a neat cast, but she immediately started a quick retrieve. On the next cast I asked her to give the fly time to sink, to take up the slack in the fly line, to hold her rod tip high to keep the line off the water, and to fix her eyes on the indicator. She did it perfectly. Seconds later the indicator moved and I screamed, ‘Strike!’ She hooked and landed a ten-inch rainbow. I was a little embarrassed at yelling at her; I should have left her with that decision, but the shout is too ingrained in me.

Then she missed a second trout in the same spot through striking a fraction late, perhaps because this time I *did* manage to keep my mouth shut, then hooked a fat twelve-inch fish in that pocket of deeper, emerald-coloured water we’d both been eyeing near the inlet. She was delighted and generous in her appreciation, but she was reeling in, clearly making to move on. I suggested she try the deep pocket once more, and again she said, ‘Really?’ I nodded, and three or four casts later she hooked, but sadly lost, a fish that for

a few brief moments put a really deep bend into her rod as it tore off upstream. We finally waded out of the run with her bubbling on about the size of the fish she'd lost, and the number she'd hooked and landed – and all from the same run, she reminded me, shaking her head in disbelief. Her emotions were a nice combination of excitement and maybe a little enlightenment. She has since gone on to become a gifted fly fisher.

I left the river feeling there are days when I just can't get enough of fly fishing.

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One evening we were fishing on the lower reaches of the Pot. The light had turned honey-coloured; a local guide, Richard Viedge, told me that a hatch was about to come off and that I should switch to a dry fly. Richard is one of those gentle people who speaks no ill of anyone and who does all he can to help. No hatch came off, and finally the sun sank behind the hills and the air turned cool. It was all I could do to stop Richard from apologising for the absence of a hatch. I told him God decides these things, and that no matter how good they are, guides can't second-guess God. By then he'd uncorked a bottle of wine, and we drank a toast to absent hatches.

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There was a day on the Little Pot, a slip of a stream flowing below a surrounding bowl of pretty mountains, when we were gathered in the mid-afternoon on the bank of the stream where the organisers put on a braai. To join the party I'd had to cross the same stream higher up, and spotted a decent fish rising. After lunch I told one of the ladies that I'd found a fish rising earlier, and we went off to try for it. She hooked it first cast. Later we came to a long, shallow,

glass-clear run where another trout was rising in full view. Secretly I rated her chances of hooking that fish as scanty, but she got it with the gentlest presentation you could hope for, and then, as the afternoon unfolded, she took a few more trout besides.

I managed to take some interesting photographs with my charge that afternoon, a young lady from upcountry somewhere, including one of a leaping trout that the camera froze in a circle of droplets at the height of her waist. The other photograph worth pressing the shutter button for was of the same angler hooking a fish in a glassy run against an amphitheatre of surrounding mountains bathed in late-afternoon sunshine. Again the image was perfectly timed, the shutter opening precisely as the trout mouthed her dry fly, more a matter of chance and luck than good camera work. All that aside, though, I'm not sure who was guiding whom that afternoon. That lady could fish.

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I did get a chance to try the Wildebeest River briefly one evening with Tony Kietzman when the festival was done. A year or two back we had had some fun on this pretty little stream, fishing higher up where it weaves and tumbles between boulders, forming runs and pools the length of a kitchen table and pockets the size of a kitchen sink. One side of the stream is bordered by imposing mountains, with buttresses that seem to reach up to the ceiling of the sky.

You could have bet your house the fish would eat dry flies in this stream on this day. Mind you, when we arrived, there was a hatch of tiny, straw-coloured mayfly duns that bobbed like tiny sailboats on the stream, and the trout were after them. Tony handed me a pale, size 18 CDC dry fly pattern that looked buggy and the right colour and said, 'That'll fool 'em' – and it did. We caught fish with ease on his pattern, fishing it on long, limp 7X tippets, the trout no

more than nine to ten inches at most. In our hands they quivered as if an electric current had just run through them. All were rainbows, all were as colourful as a spring garden, and in the fading half-light of evening they seemed to sparkle as if scattered with jewels.

When the sky turned from rich a orange to a deep rouge, we trudged back to the truck not twenty minutes away. We swung the tailgate down and poured mugs of coffee. I told Tony you didn't need to be an Oxford don to work out a game plan to catch a mess of fish up here. He agreed that fishing doesn't get much easier or more pleasant for its relaxed rhythm of cast, drift, rise, strike. He said the only way to have gone wrong on this stream on an evening like this was to slip on a wet rock. It had been a brief and charming spell. And as I sipped my coffee, I thought, who could ask for anything more? I suppose we could have wanted more challenging fish, fair enough – but every now and again life is just perfect when it arrives in one of its simpler masks.

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After the Ugie festival, I dropped Michelle Rogers and Tony in Rhodes and headed for *Birkhall*, where I spent a week fishing the Sterkspruit, trying to really understand this lovely river. For the most part I was alone and fished it lazily, taking as many trout on dry flies as on nymphs. When the Sterkspruit is like this, it's fishing well.

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On my way to *Birkhall*, I had stopped at the bridge over the Kraai. The Bell and the Sterkspruit looked good, but I couldn't help noticing there was more flow in the Sterkspruit. It goes like that up here. You can get rain, good rain, but often it's patchy. It will sometimes fall well in one valley, but miss the next one completely.

Below the bridge, the Kraai was a picture of perfection. As I looked downstream into a long sweep of the river, I spotted a lone fisherman in the distance. He was busy landing a trout.

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The first morning at *Birkhall*, Basie took me to the site of a lake he was repairing in a valley above the farmhouse. The wall had broken twelve years back in a flash flood. The repairs were well under way, the new wall nearly complete. Huge trucks were loading earth scooped by bulldozers from the old lake bed. The trucks trundled back to the wall belching clouds of diesel fumes. Dust and smoke and the noise of heavy machinery filled the air. It was an impressive operation. Basie went off to chat to the contractor, so I took a hike up the tiny feeder stream to look for trout. I wasn't hopeful because the stream is no wider than a runner carpet and, in most places, no deeper than a bucket, and there was only the lightest flow.

But I eventually found a school of tiny fish not half a kilometre from the work going on downstream. I could see the spots on their semi-lucent bodies. They were trout fry; nervous fish that darted for cover at any hint of danger, the whole school vanishing swiftly in a mass so tightly packed it seemed they were a single living organism. The water was as clear as any mountain spring gets, and just above the spot where I saw the fry, I found two adult trout, both of them around ten inches. They were holding side by side, as still as fence posts. They were close to a bank, well camouflaged and half-hidden in fingers of dappled shade. As they breathed, the white of their mouths was momentarily visible and gave them away. Sitting side by side and so still made me guess they had spawned in this stream. I took a few photographs and then went back to photograph their fry. I wanted to convince Basie this stream was a gem and that he wouldn't have to stock his lake when it filled.

I decided to hike a little higher, and the further I went up the stream's narrow course, the more fry I discovered. It's a slip of a stream, sure, but at a push, I reckoned it would fish well enough with a 0-weight fly rod and size 20 dry flies, providing you did a lot of ducking and belly crawling. It was very closed in.

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My sortie up the feeder stream made for good discussion over lunch. Basie was intrigued at the prospect of not having to stock his repaired lake. Stocking comes with a heavy price tag and needs plenty of organising, not to mention the vexed question of deciding how many fish you should stock in the first place. And it will inevitably seem that you've only just stocked a lake when it needs to be stocked again, at least if you believe, like I do, that lakes should be stocked at least twice a year to maintain variety in the size of the fish.

So this little stream's trout were a blessing; even better, they were obviously a hardy strain of heat-resistant rainbows that had probably been in the stream for more than seventy-five years. I was surmising this simply because this little beck drains into the Sterkspruit, and this is probably the route the ancestors of these wild trout took to be here. Their new home would have offered few comforts, rather just hardships, like otters, flash floods, droughts, heat, low oxygen levels, challenges that would be prevalent more often than not, winter and summer. But when these trout eventually drop down into the lake, as must happen, they will quickly pack on weight and end up close to bulletproof.

You can have a day on some big-name Alaskan river catching super-sized rainbows, or a day fishing the flats on some atoll in a far-off ocean when giant-sized triggerfish or GTs tear line off your reel all day, or a day when you wade waist-deep in a famous steelhead river, like the Kispiox in British Columbia, when latching

onto a fall-run twenty-pound fish that would feel like hooking a passing train. All would be memorable experiences or memorable fish, or both, though the outcomes would probably have largely been expected, or at least not unexpected. But a day like I had up this tiny creek, swooning over the totally unexpected discovery of a brace of small trout, neither of them much longer than a pencil, felt as wonderful as any fishing experience I can remember, as though I'd just unlocked something deep and mysterious – some nascent treasure of the universe unexpectedly revealed.

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One dreamy day on the river followed another where, save for an afternoon when catching trout was like drawing teeth and I managed only two small ones, the fishing was the Sterkspruit as I like it best. Trout came happily to dry flies like RABs, Para-RABs or Mirages, among others, but only when the drift was right. And when the dry flies drifted well but went unnoticed, the fish took nymphs, like Zaks in various weights, PTNs, Brassies, sometimes suspended under a dry fly or a poly yarn indicator, sometimes just fished on a bare leader. All ordinary, all variably effective. I sometimes think about the seeming timelessness of some of the old familiar patterns, like the PTN, the Elk Hair Caddis, the RAB and the Para-RAB, and wonder whether their appeal will ever wane. I suspect we are too set in our ways and in some of our deeper beliefs for their demise to be anywhere near a foreseeable reality, at least in the near future.

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On the second day I parked the truck on the edge of the Sterkspruit under willow trees, where sunlight caught the branches and threw parcels of shade onto the grass below. There's a run here: a long,

straight, continuous hundred-metre run on a nice gradient, so the flow is quick and just right for the dry fly to come back to you at the perfect speed, not slow enough to invite any close inspections, not fast enough for the fish to occasionally miss the fly altogether or not bother to rise. It's a series of knee-deep riffles interspersed with the occasional slick-surfaced pockets and, in places, the banks are cool with shade and nicely undercut. I took a dozen or so trout, starting with a dry fly, but when the fishing slowed on the dry I switched to a small size 16 Zak with a brass bead. There wasn't any need for an indicator. The flow was too good and the fish too quick and strong in their takes to miss seeing the abrupt halt in the leader, or the sudden line-tip movement, or the tippet slipping away unnaturally as if the fly had just got heavier. It was the sort of fishing when you can use a nymph and rely entirely on leader and line-tip messages to signal takes. But for this to work best, you want to start by first dressing the fly line well with something like Mucilin so that it floats high – something I notice many of us, myself included, are lax about.

I landed the first trout using my new Deon Stamer net, tried to take a photograph of it and ended up briefly submerging the front of my camera's lens, but it survived after a night packed in dry rice.



I was near the top of the run and was just returning a fish when I heard the muffled sound of clapping. I turned to find two ladies sitting on a log not too far behind me, kitted in fly gear and with rods. They said they'd been there for some time, watching me. But I was lost to the world following leaders and trying to land casts tight against banks, and hadn't noticed them. I remembered meeting one of these ladies, Denise Hill, at the Ugie festival. I invited them to try the next few runs and stayed long enough to watch one of them take a nice trout on a dry fly from it. Then I crossed the river and hiked over a field to another run I know, leaving them enough good water to get on with.

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I was testing trout stomach contents almost every day and, as usual, it was a mixed soup of small mayfly nymphs, caddisfly and midge larvae, and the occasional beetle and ant. Among the mayfly nymphs, a dark *Baetis* species, around size 18, seemed more prolific than the others. Absent were stoneflies that at one time were fairly common around here (but never prolific), and it was probably too early for inchworms or sawflies. They tend to appear around mid- to late October and hang around until the end of March. During this time there are four breeding cycles, the adult sawflies laying their eggs on willow leaves. Eggs hatch into pupae or, as we know them, inchworms, with a lifespan of around fourteen days. There was a time when they would fall off the crack willow trees into the rivers in their hundreds, providing a continuous meal for waiting trout.

The species of inchworm that fed off crack willows (*Salix fragilis*) was imported from the USA in 1993, apparently into Lesotho, and then spread south into the Eastern Cape Highlands. They thrived on the crack willows until the willows were eventually eradicated; then that particular inchworm disappeared.

There is another species of inchworm around this area that lives on the weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*), a larger insect though less abundant than the inchworms that once fed on the crack willows. The weeping willow is also alien, by the way, and despite its name, originally came from China.

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I left the river late enough each day to sometimes get a decent hatch. What interested me, and still does, is how rarely these hatches bring on a rise when they first appear. Mainly you need to wait until the sun is slipping behind the mountains, or until the river is set alight by the colourful glows of sunset, before the fish really get down to throwing circles on the surface.

One morning I crossed the Bokspruit River on my way to visit Dave Walker in Rhodes and, as usual, I parked on the far side of the bridge under the shade of a willow tree and strolled back to scan the water. Upstream I saw more trout than I could count, many holding in exposed positions over open bedrock in bright sunlight, others milling in equally exposed positions over a sandy stretch of riverbed. They were all around ten to twelve inches, and although they were sitting ducks for any passing kingfisher or cormorant, they didn't look nervous; rather they were restless, judging by their constant and seemingly aimless shifting and swapping of positions. I have often seen schools of trout in the Bokspruit, sometimes up to ten or twenty fish, but I had never seen this many, particularly not trout well beyond fingerling stage. Downstream of the bridge I didn't spot a single fish. What accounted for the huge gathering above the bridge I don't know, but the scene certainly made for some interesting can-you-count-all-the-shadows photographs.

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I spent an afternoon with Tony Kietzman and his friend Stephanus Klopper, a young man I hadn't met before. As we drew up at the entrance to the gorge section of the Sterkspruit on *Birkball*, a juvenile Jackal Buzzard stared down at us from its perch on a road sign just long enough for me to drop my window and photograph him with a long lens. Then the big bird opened its wings, lifted gracefully, swooped low over the river and was gone on the wind. Nice way to start a spot of fishing.

Tony was using my Tenkara rod, and Stephanus and I were sharing my Winston 2-weight. He was new to fly fishing, and we began the day on the sort of run your mind would drift to if you were hemmed in by four walls in some city office block, bored to the marrow and looking for an escape. The run was at least fifty metres long, not too deep but deep enough, the water tinged a glassy green, with nicely undercut banks on both sides and a backdrop of high, grass-covered hillsides with rocky crevices near the top.

Stephanus took a couple of tidy and spirited trout from this run, fishing a nymph suspended under a large indicator that every now and again would dart upstream when a trout took the fly. The water was a beginner's heaven, and I couldn't help thinking that if he didn't become a convert to fly fishing after a day like this, he never would. A convert, too, to the general joys of this part of the country, its rivers, its landscapes and, of course, the village of Rhodes.

But to get back to the mouth-watering run I mentioned, it was possibly the best on this section of the river that season, and always worth the extra ten-minute walk downstream along a pretty rough riverbank to get to below it. What makes it even better is there's a easily wadeable gravel spine running up the centre, so it's easy to fish both the left and right undercuts standing in knee-deep water in the middle of the run.

Actually we had started out with a dry fly, but when it went untouched through the length of the run we climbed out at the head,

took our time retracing our steps back to the tail, changed to a nymph, eased back into the water and immediately had some action.

It was interesting that in runs that produced a number of fish on conventional fly gear, Tony winkled out one or two more on the Tenkara outfit, even when we thought a run had been thoroughly fished. He was also on a nymph by then, but it was suspended under a dry fly that didn't get any attention. And again we were attracted to the sheer simplicity of Tenkara fly fishing, and at the top of the gorge where the river slides along sheer, lichen-patterned dolerite walls, I tried the Tenkara rod myself. I couldn't interest a fish until I got near the head of the run where the flow was swifter and as bubbly as soda water. Here I took two nice trout in quick succession.

We were back at the truck by late afternoon, having landed and released more than a dozen trout on each rod, and I don't think we saw a rise all day. The Sterkspruit can be like that. It can fish well even when you haven't seen any bugs hatching, never mind so much as a hint of any surface-feeding trout. Even the swallows and martins weren't showing, and the fish we got were holding deep. Isn't that so often a pattern to a day? The fish are flatly uninterested in a surface fly but they're active on deep-sunk nymphs. And, of course, the reverse can hold true.

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I have a special affection for the Sterkspruit on *Birkhall*, given my close friendship with the Vosloo family. I know it as well as you can know a river, even taking into account how rivers change, not only from season to season but week by week, day by day, even hour by hour. Over seasons, rivers change in form: a bend smooths out here, a run deepens there – though, barring catastrophic events, the essential character remains constant. By day, rivers may change slightly in level, dropping on hot, windswept days or lifting as

a result of upstream storms, even colouring as you watch. By the day, even by the hour, rivers can change in mood, from being generous and forgiving to stubborn. These are subtle changes where, as often as not, the edges are that blurred that unless you keep fishing you are never certain how the fish in a river will respond at any given hour, even from cast to cast, no matter what's gone before.

My opinion of the Sterkspruit is probably biased in its favour, but based on empirical evidence gained over years of fishing in this part of the world, I have found it to be more constant, and its trout more eager, fatter and stronger than in neighbouring rivers and streams. I've also been lucky to see the Sterkspruit in all its guises: in its times of abundance and in its times of dearth. If there are occasions when the fishing isn't that good, believe me, there are enough times when it is. And other than seasonal nuances in colour and texture, its immediate landscapes remain attractive and distinctive in their own special ways. With the deepening familiarity that comes over time, I now think of the Sterkspruit, as you should think of all the good trout streams you get to know really well, with a combination of affection, respect and forgiveness.

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I set aside an afternoon to pack my truck so I could leave early enough the next day to drive through the sunrise on the road back home. Heading south from *Birkhall*, the morning sun is behind you and it lights up the landscapes in ways you don't want to miss.

In the morning I had driven down the slope of the hill that hides the wall of the *Birkhall* lake where I set up a rod, then strolled to the lower section of the Sterkspruit on *Birkhall* where willows crowd the banks. It was a final fling before facing the inevitable departure.

I find it best to get straight into this lower section and wade up the centre so you can cast to both banks. The bank water is deeper

here than in many other sections of the Sterkspruit, and better fish aren't uncommon.

Sunlight filtered through the willow fronds, lighting the far bank. I focused on the deeper slots and on the shaded ones, fishing a weighted nymph with no indicator, getting the fly to drift into the runs from a metre or two upstream so that the nymph travelled through the best parts as deep as possible. At times I felt the light touch of structure through the fly, or felt the fly-tapping pebbles, and as the nymph drifted through a run, I left it to swing upwards as the line straightened in the pull of the current. That's when the first fish took the fly. My diary notes of that morning's fishing are scanty, but there's the number '12' with a circle around it and the words, 'None on dry. All deep. Snake crossed river way ahead. Wind NW. Strong at times.'

There's no mention of the exact size of the fish I caught, but I remember them being twelve to fourteen inches; put differently, I don't remember getting any twenty-inch fish so, by deduction, I figure I didn't get anything of size. But I do remember the fish were shaped like rain barrels.

The snake, by the way, was too far off to guess at, though from its length, easily over a metre. From its litheness, I took it for a cobra and carefully marked where it left the run to slither silently up the bank.

Just to dwell on diaries on fishing trips once again, they are invaluable, because on long trips, events have a way of running into one another in your mind. Even the important ones. You can end up not remembering much more than a conflated overall impression, and that can even distil down to no more or less than, 'Good trip' or 'Bad trip', which is of no use to anyone.

At times I carry a tiny wire-bound notepad that easily fits into one of the smaller pockets on the average fly vest, though the downside is that you eventually lose either the pencil or the diary itself, or forget to take both. This particular morning's fishing is

taken from just such a diary, a wire-bound, shirt-pocket-sized notebook with entries in pencil, that I discovered by chance some weeks later when I was tidying out the portable fly-tying kit I take with me on long trips. It's a beautiful, leather-bound case with multiple drawers that was once my medical bag when I was a GP.

More often I write up the events of a day last thing at night, when not only the fish I caught or the flies I used but also the impressions of the day are fresh in my mind, and when I'm less likely to suffer short-term memory loss than if I write them up even a day later. The sparse days, or the days when I fished clumsily, also need to be recorded with as much honest detail as the less frequent days when I was blessed with plenty of fish, when my casting worked and when I couldn't put a foot wrong. Recording the nuances operates on a sort of honour system, where if things get too favourably distorted or plainly dishonest, the only one to lose out is yourself.

Just one other observation on diaries: they keep better earlier in a trip and tend to fall off to brief and sloppy towards the end. It's understandable, because when you first arrive you are fired with enthusiasm, and everything that happens takes on an importance that outweighs its actual relevance. All quite logical, really.

But there is one final entry in the diary I was talking about, the one covering this last day on the Sterkspruit, and it simply says, 'Huge bulge under willow left bank. Threw everything. Zip.'

I don't always have the strength of character to quit on a good fish, even when I know it's high time I did, and in this particular case, my diary entry (if not my memory) still serves me well. The emphasis was on the word 'bulge'. This fish moved a bucket of water, and I felt it was a given that I'd hook it on a nymph. I changed to a 5X tippet, wiped it with a rag soaked in mud so it would sink, and tied on a weighted nymph. Twenty casts later, and after a considerable number of fly changes, I eventually gave up, reeled in, bit off the fly and hiked up the hill to my truck.

*

I reached Beaufort West safely after successfully dodging the potholes, and had a restful night in the Karoo National Park. I phoned Kathy to tell her where I was, then bought a few lamb chops to braai on the veranda of my rondavel. I did that under a black, star-scattered sky. Early the following morning, the Cape Robin-chats were on cue cleaning morsels of fat off the braai grid not a rod-length from where I sat.

*

It's been a long while since I bit that last fly off my tippet and trudged up the Sterkspruit's grassy banks to my truck parked in the paddock below the *Birkhall* lake. But still, back here in the hustle and rush of city life, the memories of the river's resinous runs, its slow-flowing, green-tinged pools, its riverbanks lined with willows and poplars, and its spirited trout are a daily comfort. My feet still feel the coldness of the water, my legs the drag of the currents, and in my mind I still see the long sweeps of brightly lit water, the pockets, the corrugated ripples, the still flows though jade-coloured pools. I am here, but I am partly still there.

The trip held no great surprises, no real high points. The fish were as bright and as wild as ever; the weather was, well, the weather; my friends were a blessing. It was enough, in its own peculiar way, to be carefree in that wide-horizoned, blue-skied part of the world.

