



VIRGIN WATERS AND WIDE-OPEN SPACES

An experience to make time stand still

“YOU can make the first cast,” were not the words I wanted to hear. I was, after all, fishing with Tom Sutcliffe on water that I would previously have bypassed — his speciality.

He gestured towards a little pool slightly larger than a bathtub, urging me to make a cast. So this is it, I thought as I crept into position, the chance of a lifetime and I have to make the first cast! I let out some line from my Stealth 2-wt with a size 18 GRHE nymph tied to 7X tippet, casting about three metres in front of me to a fish that I still didn't believe was there.

With my heart in my throat, I watched in utter amazement and relief as the poly-yarn strike indicator twitched slightly to the right, tightening the line and resulting in a fine 10-inch wild rainbow trout. After a brief but hectic fight I released the little fish back to the stream, only to be directed by Tom to the next, even smaller pool!

This was “far and fine” fly-fishing at its very best on almost virgin water, making for a day that would be ingrained in memory forever.

Marli and I could not have wished for better news when Juan-Marie Naude of Vrederus Wild Trout told us that Tom Sutcliffe and Ed Herbst would also be

staying over whilst we were there. From their most recent writings it is clear that they have evolved into small-stream masters, a skill that we had only recently started to explore.

Their eventual arrival and unpacking resembled something akin to an explosion in a well-stocked tackle shop, with a specific preponderance towards ultra-light tackle. The main aim of their visit was to fish the nearby Swith Stream, a tributary of the Luzi and to that day virgin trout water, never before fished with the fly. This was almost more than we could handle — two well-known trout masters combined with virgin trout waters does not come



An aerial view over the Swith.

your way often in life, if ever.

Not wanting to spoil their mission, we only joined them on the second day, fishing the Swith downstream of their previous day's activities.

Fishing alongside us, they unselfishly shared their vast knowledge of small streams, revealing a treasure trove of tactics and skill second to none.

The Swith, as previously mentioned, is a tributary of the Luzi River, which eventually runs into the Tsitsa system. It is a typical high altitude, freestone stream with prolific aquatic insect life. Although never officially stocked with rainbow trout, the Swith was gradually populated with trout originating from the Luzi, which was stocked in 1917 and 1920 with trout fingerlings taken from the Little Pot River.

One of the first flyfishing expeditions to the Luzi on what was then "virgin waters" is vividly described in Sydney Hey's book, *The Rapture of the River*, one of the all-time South African literary angling classics.

En route to the Luzi one can follow part of the well laid out hiking trail, leading through some awesome rock formations with numerous San rock art sites and outcrops ablaze with orange paintbrush flowers (*Scadoxus puniceus*).

These rocky caves and crevices moreover recall a historical tale of local Mpondo tribesmen and English soldiers involved in battle in 1881, with the farm Bosworth eventually being named after one of the heroes, a certain Lieutenant Boswell. The path leads right past the entrance of one of the caves where the British guarded a Mpondo rebel group, hoping to starve them into submission, only to find out that they had escaped following natural tunnels created underneath the rocks.

The way to the Luzi winds down approximately 700m from the plateau, a rather strenuous walk for the unfit, though easily completed by three-year-old Neline Naude.

Although Sydney Hey fished the Luzi extensively in the early part of the last century, it's still something of a mystery why the Swith remained unfished with the fly. The relative inaccessibility of the Swith in those days could have played a role in maintaining its status as virgin trout water.

Today the Swith is still not one of the easiest streams to reach — an arduous 4x4 route has to be negotiated with most parts travelled in low range due to steep declines, making for some exciting driving. The last part of the journey can only be negotiated on foot as the path descends into a steep valley, the bottom of which has been carved out by the Swith over millennia.

Imposing sandstone walls tower above the gorge, hiding quite a few

overhangs decorated with ancient rock art. The Swith runs shallow and marble-bright over a freestone streambed, with relatively small pools scattered along its path, resembling a pearl necklace in bright sunlight.

Aquatic insects abound, with rather large mayfly and stonefly larvae finding refuge between the rocky substrate of the streambed. As described by Darrel Martin in his book *Micropatterns*, the larvae in headwaters tend to be larger than their brethren downstream, where bottom substrate tends to be finer, leaving little hiding place from the ever-hungry trout. These larvae are best imitated by nymphs such as the Zak, Sawyer's Pheasant Tail and the GRHE in sizes 18 and smaller.

Due to the shallowness of the water, weighting of these nymphs is unnecessary. Fishing tandem nymphs New Zealand-style, however, helps to get the fly down to the fish in the odd deep hole. We prefer to tie in a heavier fly such as the Zak first, followed by a lighter nymph such as the GRHE or Pheasant Tail. The smaller fly tends to flutter behind the Zak, tantalising the trout into striking. This works especially well when combined with a slow Leisenring lift technique.

This way of fishing paid off with quite a few trout lured from their hiding places underneath rocks into solid hook-ups. Most fish were, however, taken on the second, smaller fly used in the New Zealand rig. A strike indicator made from almost weightless poly-yarn should be situated at a distance from the point fly, approximately twice the depth of the water fished. A simple sliding knot in the tippet allows one to adjust the strike indicator without the knot weakening the line, as it can never completely close on itself.

If your passion for the dry fly needs to be satisfied, fear not, as the Swith has some prime dry fly areas where a fly can flutter, dance and tiptoe over sparkling short runs and small pools. We fished the ever-popular RAB high and dry with short, accurate overhead casts and, in some instances, high-sticking some small pools and lip channels with electrifying results.

Watching as the fly commences its dance over the sunlit water can bring a stillness to the heart with almost tenable anticipation, only to be relieved by the lightning fast take of a wild rainbow trout.

Casting on water like this should be kept to an absolute minimum with a preference for the "one cast only" technique comprised of a short, well executed overhead cast, making the need for false casting obsolete. At the end of the dry fly's run, a slow but persistent take-off can be gradually accelerated into a back cast, letting out more line in



Gerhard battling a rainbow from the Swith with Tom Sutcliffe looking on.



Marli with a wild Vrederus rainbow trout prior to release.

the process. A swift forward cast completes the procedure, putting the fly back in the strike zone.

Tight casting conditions exist on the Swith, making the roll cast indispensable as a method of reaching otherwise unfishable areas. A lightweight, eight-foot rod in the two-weight and smaller class is preferable on water such as the Swith as it not only gives one added reach over rocks and boulders, but also protects light tippets from the blisteringly fast takes of the wild trout. Choice of rod should, however, be guided by budget and personal taste, bearing in mind that wielding an expensive stick does not necessarily make a better angler.

The Swith is one of those almost sacred areas; holy ground to the small stream aficionado, and it certainly left a profound mark on our development as flyfishers.

In addition to Tom Sutcliffe and Ed Herbst, we were accompanied on the Swith by Donie Naude of Vrederus Wild Trout, and thoroughly enjoyed his vast knowledge of local weather conditions, off-roading expertise and general sunny disposition.

Conveniently situated, Vrederus was also our base for excursions onto other local streams such as the Luzi, Harvard Spruit and upper Bell River at Board-

man's Chase. As most of these streams can only be reached either on foot or by four-wheel drive, 4x4 enthusiasts will have ample opportunity to put their vehicles to the test. For those who prefer easier access to their fishing grounds, the farm's stillwaters will provide more than ample fishing opportunities.

The Naude family has a rich, long-standing history in the area, including some truly inspiring accomplishments such as the layout and construction of the rugged pass that bears the family name. Vrederus originally functioned as a working farm with mainly sheep and cattle, and still does so successfully. However, trout made their appearance in the early 'nineties and the accompanying overnight facilities have turned the farm into a flyfisher's delight.

We opted to stay in the larger of the two stone-under-thatch cottages, aptly named Stonefly Lodge, with the smaller Boatman's Cottage within walking distance. Both cottages provide ample space, are fully equipped for self-catering purposes, and sleep nine and five persons respectively.

After a refreshing night's sleep in the loft at Stonefly Lodge, one wakes up with a view to die for, with endangered birds such as southern crowned cranes (*Balearica regulorum*) within plain

sight of the cottage, going about their daily business seemingly without a care. Magnificent mountain vistas greet you as you step out the front door, into wide-open spaces that seems to go on forever.

Close to both cottages lies the main attraction on Vrederus, the 18-hectare dam that holds a healthy population of some really large rainbow and brown trout.

All fish are stocked as fry or fingerlings, originating mainly from healthy stocks at the Kamberg hatchery, and left to fend for themselves, turning them into wild trout of trophy proportions. The dam boasts extensive shallows, and the bottom is carpeted with spear-leaved plants (*Aponogeton spp.*), providing a never-ending supply of aquatic larvae to the hungry trout. It is therefore no surprise that yearling trout regularly surpass the two-pound mark and give a very good account of themselves on fly-tackle.

Due to recent alterations in the dam overflow that has increased the surface area, the water encloses a stand of willow trees with some excellent brown trout fishing to be had. Fishing a large (size 2 - 6) bead head olive or brown Woolly Bugger deep between the trees led to some large fish being taken, the best weighing in at seven pounds. The current brown trout record from this water, taken by a lady angler, weighed in at a whopping nine-and-a-half pounds, a fish of truly gigantic proportions.

Float-tubing is absolutely essential for success on this water, as one really needs to get in between the willows without too much fuss. Wading can be safely accomplished in the southern shallows of this water, as the base substrate tends to be firm. The rest of the dam should preferably not be waded as the bottom consists of unstable clay deposits underfoot.

Deep-water channels are located in the southern and western parts of the impoundment. Large trout frequent these areas and should be actively prospected for. Again, large Woolly Buggers, Zonkers, various dragonfly imitations and other lure-type flies should be fished deep from a float-tube or boat over these channels for best results.

In the late afternoons the Vrederus dam really comes alive with action when various mayfly species hatch. The flats seem to be boiling with head-and-tail rises and successful anglers will most definitely be fishing an emerger pattern of some sort.

We found the Floating Buzzer, Claret Buzzer and Shipman's Buzzer in sizes 12 to 20 to be enormously effective, especially when the specific swimming motion of an emerger is imitated. Due to savage takes on emerger patterns and the large average size of feeding

CAPE TOWNS' Largest Fly Fishing Specialist ...

**Suburban Tackle has
great pleasure in
announcing its latest
Member of Staff.**



**Sean Mills the author of
Freshwater Fishing in
South Africa and writer of many
articles in both local and
international magazines, has
joined our knowledgeable team.
He is a Western Province fly
fisher and was part of the team
that came second in the National
Championships held this year
in Lydenburg.
He has guided clients around the
waters of the Western Cape for
over 5 years and has intimate
knowledge of the area and it's
Fish Species.**

**Stop in
at our Store
and Speak to the
Expert about Fly
Fishing.**

*Expert Advice.....
and the Right Price....*

**Cnr. Plantation & Bamboesvlei
Roads, Ottery
Tel: (021) 704-3458
Fax: (021) 704-0164
Email: tackle@suburban.co.za**

System²

STEALTH

RC

XPLORER
Quality Fly Fishing Equipment

Scott

fennick

AIRFLO

STCROIX

**Scientific
Anglers**



Hazy views over tortuous Naude's Neck Pass — great fun for the 4x4 enthusiasts.

trout, we opted to use heavier tippet material, with the occasional switch to 2X tippet in order to minimise break-offs.

Dusk and dawn fishing with a rather outsized (size 8 - 12) DDD on a floating line from the dam wall will generally result in some huge trout being caught. A DDD, tied with a hair collar rather than the original hackled pattern, seems to be very effective when fished almost like a bass plug, with a twitching-wriggling motion figure-of-eight retrieve.

Beneath the dam wall lies a smaller body of water formed by the overflow from the main dam. Shallow and smooth surfaced, this can be a dry fly heaven in the early morning and at dusk, but do take note of the marshy terrain when approaching.

Situated just to the east of the main dam is "Rob's Dam", approximately 1,5 hectares in size and just over three years old, this dam is intended as brown trout only water. It differs remarkably from the main dam both in structure and angling characteristics, with the brown trout being tricky to take on fly.

Being a young dam with mainly a smooth, featureless bottom, it is slowly going through the maturing process, gradually being colonised with various aquatic plants and willow trees, showing great promise as a future premier brown trout water. The best fish recently taken from this water weighed in at five pounds.

During our stay Donie was busy constructing a new dam, hoping to have it filled by the imminent summer rains. This dam will probably be stocked with triploid rainbow trout, adding a whole new dimension to the Vrederus experience.

In addition the area is also an ornithologists' dream, with in excess of 172 listed species of birds to be seen on and around the water. We were endlessly entertained by the antics of a gymnogene (*Polyboroides typus*), raiding the nests of herons and other waterfowl while we were float-tubing only metres away.

During springtime one can observe

from close quarters the nesting habits of waterfowl in the willow trees and floating grass islands. Once again, a float-tube comes in very handy to approach these nesting birds without disturbing them. They seem to accept the "humanised duck" without too much apprehension. It should be well emphasised, however, that no photograph or observation is ever worth an abandoned nest.

Around the water and on the rest of the farm one can observe some of South Africa's rare and endangered bird species including the bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), booted eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*), black harrier (*Circus maurus*), mountain pipit (*Anthus boeschi*), black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) and yellow-breasted pipit (*Anthus chloris*).

For the photographer, Vrederus is a seemingly endless tableau of scenery, with quaint pastoral scenes intermingled with ominous thunderstorms and calm, almost docile sunsets. Old farm buildings and implements make very willing subjects for abstract scenes, while the local bird life will keep the wildlife photographer busy.

We left Vrederus unwillingly, but knowing that we could return again one day made the parting with peace and tranquillity more bearable.

As we drove away enveloped in the early morning mist, we recalled Tom Sutcliffe's words written on his first visit to Vrederus: "I share these places with you in the certain knowledge that if, by chance you happen to go there, you will treat them as sacred, as venues that will need all our efforts, all our finest ethics, to keep as is and unspoiled." We could not agree more.

Persons interested in visiting Vrederus Wild Trout can contact Juan-Marie Naude on (045) 932-1572 or via e-mail: juan@vrederus.co.za.

For tips and tactics on fishing the waters mentioned, contact the authors at the following e-mail: weldhagen@mweb.co.za.