

Last round

by Dawid Rossouw

Every once in a while we are blessed with a day of fishing when absolutely everything comes together in such a poetically perfect way, that it wipes clean entire months of mindless, rat-race induced frustration and stress. The gods of fishing blessed me with such a day recently.

It was midweek and the last day of the trout season. Everybody else had concluded their season the previous weekend and badly, because it rained a little too much and the streams were flowing too strongly for them to fish well. I prefer the solitude of fishing alone, so I avoided the weekend and I took the 31st of May off from work for some "hydrotherapy" on my favourite stream. That is actually what I wrote in my diary when I blocked the day off and my staff all thought that I was going to the hydro for some kind of health treatment. They were unsure about the nature of my ailment, so they very politely asked no questions. Only my partner, who is also a keen fly fisher, understood. He, however, thought that I would be wasting my time because the river would be unfishably high and that all I was likely to catch was pneumonia.

I left my car in the tunnel parking lot at first light. I don't like to climb the lower part of the Elandspad trail in the dark. It is too steep and dangerous, even if you know it well. I prefer to start early, always afraid that the best fishing will be over before I arrive. It was a bitterly cold morning but the recent cold front was moving north and it was already clearing up with a little south-easterly breeze. I regretted not bringing my gloves. Already at the tunnel bridge, I could see that the river was flowing more strongly than usual but, while it was a little brown, like a really stiff whisky, it was not muddy at all.

It took about 45 minutes of climbing and walking to reach the cave where my beat started. On the uphill I huffed and puffed a bit more than I would have preferred to, but I still noticed the proteas that were in flower as well as the hundreds of other less spectacular fynbos species. I marvelled at how quickly the vegetation had recovered from the devastating fire of the year before last and I made a mental note to get a book about fynbos and learn a little more about it. The long-tailed Cape sugarbirds and the smaller but more brilliantly coloured sunbirds were busy collecting nectar, especially from the proteas. At the cave I poured myself a steaming cup of real coffee from my little flask, sat down to watch the pool directly below and started to think up a plan.

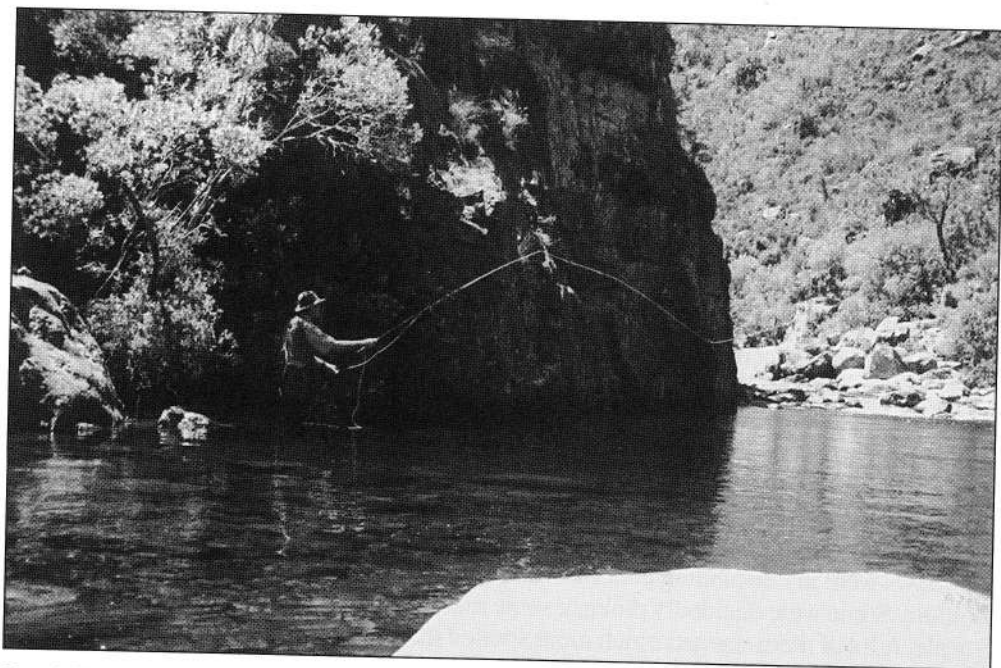
There were very few insects on the water and I could see no rises but I knew the trout would be there. The Elandspad winds through a very deep kloof with spectacular cliffs and at that time of the year the sun, in some parts, only shines down into the river at midday when it is high overhead. I find it difficult to follow really small dark flies, and they are what usually works here, in deep shadows.

Also, it was really cold and the water temperature was only 9,5 °C. Even though I was still dry I was already shivering and I knew there was no way to avoid wading.

I decided to work my way upstream, fishing only those stretches of river that were in



A long walk home. Looking towards the national road from the upper section of the Elandspad.



Dawid Rossouw drops a fly alongside a rock face on the upper Elandspad.

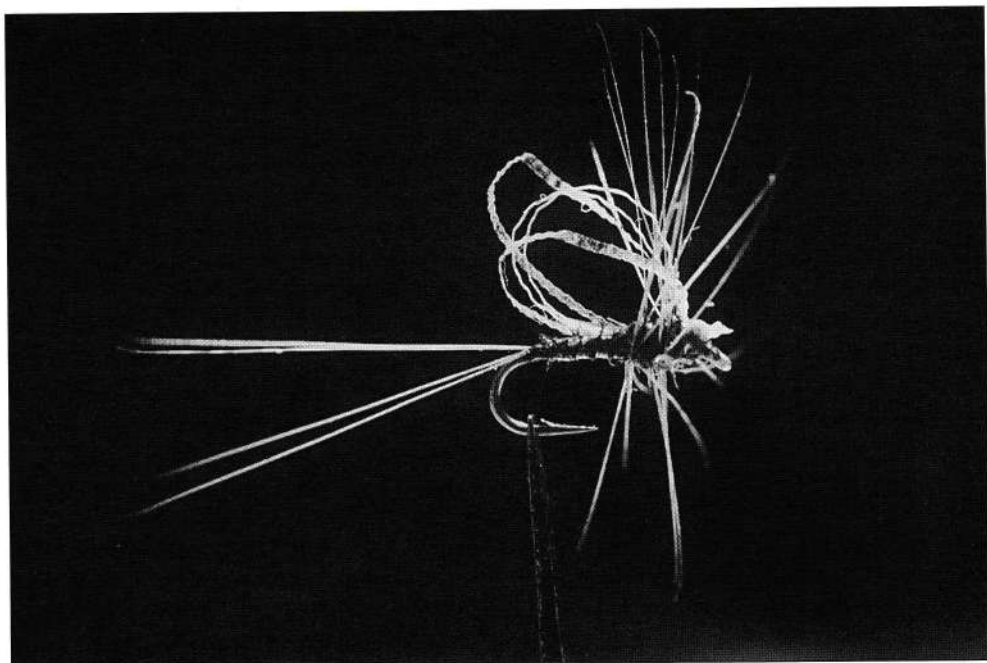
sunlight. I would avoid the shadowy stretches as much as possible, saving them for my return, hoping that, by that time, they would be in sunlight. There was no wind and no cloud cover. I prefer dry fly fishing, so I always try that first if conditions allow, even if I see no surface activity. I decided to first try a G&B Low Floater with a red belly and tied from Klipspringer hair. It is a great searching pattern as it floats low in the water but stays nicely on top in rough water. It also looks like a nice big juicy piece of food to a trout and it tends to lure them to the surface even when they are in an opportunistic feeding mode but holding deep.

I worked the fast water with the G&B and the slower pools with a small sparkle organza loop-wing fly that was one of Ed Herbst's recommendations. The loop-wing has a very lifelike appearance and depending on how you tie the wings, the trout take it for a mayfly or a caddis - very versatile indeed. The fact that it has a bit of sparkle in it gives the illusion of movement that the fish find very attractive and makes it easier to follow on the water. At first the fishing was slow but I still managed to land a few fish.

Suddenly at about 10h30 the fish became extremely active. I could see lots of rises and there were flying insects everywhere. I mostly fished the G&B because I really could fish it any way I wanted and still the trout kept taking the fly. I fished it upstream with a dead drift, letting it float all the way to directly downstream before retrieving it slowly back upstream for one or two metres. It often dived under the surface when I did this and swam like a nymph. I got takes in all parts of the cycle. I fished it across-stream and downstream with a parachute cast and I made it skitter on the surface. It mattered not one little bit what I did with it, I still caught fish. This did not mean that I could be sloppy or fish carelessly. It simply meant that the trout were not very particular and that they were willing, for those few short hours, to eat anything that came their way and looked a little bit like an insect. I mostly found them closer to the tail of the pools than I would normally expect, probably because of the stronger than usual flow.

Around lunchtime I was so totally focused on the water and the fishing that I got a huge fright when a Giant Kingfisher flew past and made its loud kahk-kah-kahk call right overhead. I ducked, slipped and took a waist-deep dive in the icy water. It was the first time ever that I did not appreciate this wonderful fellow fisher's company. By now I was so cold that it was difficult to tie on new tippets and flies so I simply sat in the sun for a while to get my numb fingers to work again. The cigar I carried for exactly this kind of occasion got wet when I fell in and since the trout were still active I decided to turn back and fish those stretches of river that I had bypassed on my way up.

I fished the top of each pool downstream with a dry fly and a floppy parachute cast that gave plenty of drag-free drift and, when the fly started to drag, I wiggled the rod tip a little to make it skitter across the surface. I then skirted the pool and fished it upstream from the tail. The fish continued to take the fly as eagerly as they had before midday. All the rainbows were in outstanding condition and at their most magnificent in bright spawning colours. Some were decidedly pinkish, some more red and the occasional one was almost purple. A lot of them seemed much more spotted than earlier in the year and they were all a lot more lively. They fought harder than in midsummer, a good number jumped repeatedly and in the most spectacular fashion. I also saw the strangest behaviour when I had one fish on and I was playing it. A second one kept following it, almost nose-to-tail,



The editor's version of the Loop Wing Dun developed from the similar designs of Andy Puyans and Gary Borger in the USA.

totally oblivious of its surroundings. It came right up to me and I almost managed to scoop them both up in the net. Later somebody told me that it was typical spawning behaviour, and I suppose it makes sense - humans act in much the same way.

By the time I got back to the cave at about 14h00 I had caught 37 very beautiful rainbows and all of them on dry flies - if you allow the one I caught on a half-sunken G&B low floater. At least half of these were caught after I had spotted the fish rising or holding in its lie. Very few were under 12 inches and one measured 16 inches. At least a dozen were large enough to have kept for the pan - but I released them all.

The trout were still active and I suppose I could have carried on fishing, but sometimes one simply knows when one has had enough of a good thing and that more would be overdoing it.

And so I started the walk back to the car. I cannot recall anything of the return journey. I suppose that in my head I was still busy fishing. While driving back, I phoned to book the same beat for the 1st of September when the season opens again - and I just knew that it was going to be a very, very long three months.



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