

Bushmans beats

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An introduction to the Bushmans River as a Trout River

Source:

The Bushmans, or Mtshezi, as it is known to the Zulus, rises in the neck of the Giant's Castle pass at an altitude of 3,000 metres above sea level .

Trout Water:

Not unlike the Mooi, the Bushmans first becomes fishable as a Trout stream at an altitude of about 1,800metres ASL, which is about 3kms above the Giants Castle rest camp, although most anglers don't venture above a boulder blocked area just 1 km above the camp. From the camp down, there is a further 7kms within the greater Drakensberg park, followed by 5kms in a private farm. From there there is approx another 17kms of water in the tribal area which can be considered viable Trout water. Below this point the river produces only occasional trout at certain times of the year, and is more populated with yellowfish, but big Browns are reported all the way down to the Wagondrift dam. In years gone by Trout existed even below the dam but reports of such fish have largely faded from memory.

Tributaries:

Major tributaries include the Twee Dassies stream at the very head of the river a kilometre above the camp, the Mtshezana which joins just above the park gate, and the Ushiyake which joins the main river just before it enters the tribal land. Lower down is the Ncibidwane which joins at the clinic where the road crosses both this tributary and the main river (the road to Estcourt). Another notable tributary also called the Mtshezana joins towards the lower end of the 17kms of tribal water described above. All these tributaries have trout in them, most for limited distances up the tributary. The Ncibidwane is the exception, being a sizable stream, and trout have been caught 15 kilometres up this tributary.

Accessibility:

From the 1800m contour down to the park gate, some 11 kms away (as the river flows) is all accessible with a day permit bought at Giants Castle. Below that, the public can book Snowflake cottage by contacting the management of the Trout hatchery just below the park gate, to get access to that stretch of river (some 5kms) Below the cattle grid, in the tribal area, fishing is possible with permission of the local tribespeople. Moves are afoot in 2018 to set up a functioning day ticket system for the benefit of the Amahlube people, in which members of the public will be able to buy day tickets, park in designated areas, and pay a regulated car guard fee to local youths to guard vehicles.

Fish:

The Bushmans is best known as a Brown Trout stream, but the hatchery has had various spills of Rainbos, and in some years Rainbows are plentiful, especially within a few kms of the hatchery. Trout are typically 10 inches in length, but fish of up to 24 inches are reported in very good years. 16 to 18 inch fish are not at all uncommon.

Water Quality:

The water quality of the Bushmans above the cattle grid is excellent, since the river flows through pristine mountain grasslands. From the cattle grid down, erosion and siltation due to wattle infestation and over grazing starts to set in. However habitation has been kept away from the river, so other pollutants are not present, although in places the locals do wash clothes and taxis in the river. The water is more inclined to dirty and stay off colour, the lower one goes in the river. Down below where the Estcourt road crosses (below the junction of the Ncibidwana), the water is often soiled for weeks at a time in the height of summer, and generally fishing is done here in spring or autumn when clear water is more likely to be encountered. The Ncibidwana has a natural tendency to run dirty in high flow, but all the more so in its lower reaches, and so it is often the culprit dirtying the river below the junction.

Wattle, bramble, gum, bugweed:

The upper reaches of the river in the park as well as in the private water immediately below, is in pristine condition, and largely free from any alien encroachment. In the tribal area, the immediate river banks are surprisingly clear too, being kept clean by both livestock and flood waters. However the hillsides in the valley of both the Bushmans and the Ncibidwana are thick with alien wattle trees in the tribal areas above the confluence. Below the confluence, bank-side wattle infestation occurs on the Rockmount section.

Aquatic Insect populations:

The upper Bushmans has a good diversity of aquatic life.

History

Trout were stocked in the Bushmans river in 1890. In October of 1915 the Estcourt Trout Acclimatisation society and Estcourt Fly Fishers was formed and a further 10,000 fry were made available for distribution along the river. The book 'Trout fishing in South Africa' published by the railways in 1916 makes mention of the fact that visiting fisherman will need to set out from Estcourt in a "Cape Cart" with full camping gear, as no accommodation is available, adding that milk and eggs can be bought from the "natives" and that there is a store at Ntabamhlope. The scenery is described as 'grand and rugged', and fish were described as "running up to 3 and 4 lbs". fishing story by B Benion in his book "The Trout are rising in England and South Africa" set

in about 1920, describes the river and terrain similarly but with little fact added to the record. Numerous black and white photos are contained in the 1936 book "Fishing the inland waters of Natal" in which the Bushmans is depicted. The banks of the river appear to be uninhabited, even in the tribal waters, and grass grows thickly. There is also much evidence in the farm names that suggest the Trout fishing was good all the way down to the town of Estcourt. In the 1925 book "Trout Fishing in South Africa" there is a picture of a woman fishing the Bushmans, as well as a woman fishing the "Nbidtwana River" at a spot which is recognisable as a spot about 10kms up the Ncididwana. The Brown Trout season was from 1 September to 30th April, and permits were obtainable in the town of Estcourt, where the Plough Hotel was recommended for accomodation. The Ncididwana in its entirety as well as the "Umtshezana" repeated, indicating both tributaries by that name, and the "Ushayiake" from the "falls at Eland park" downstream, are all mentioned as Trout water and the river conservancy inspector was one mr QE Carter who lived on the farm bergvliet at Ennersdale right down near Estcourt.

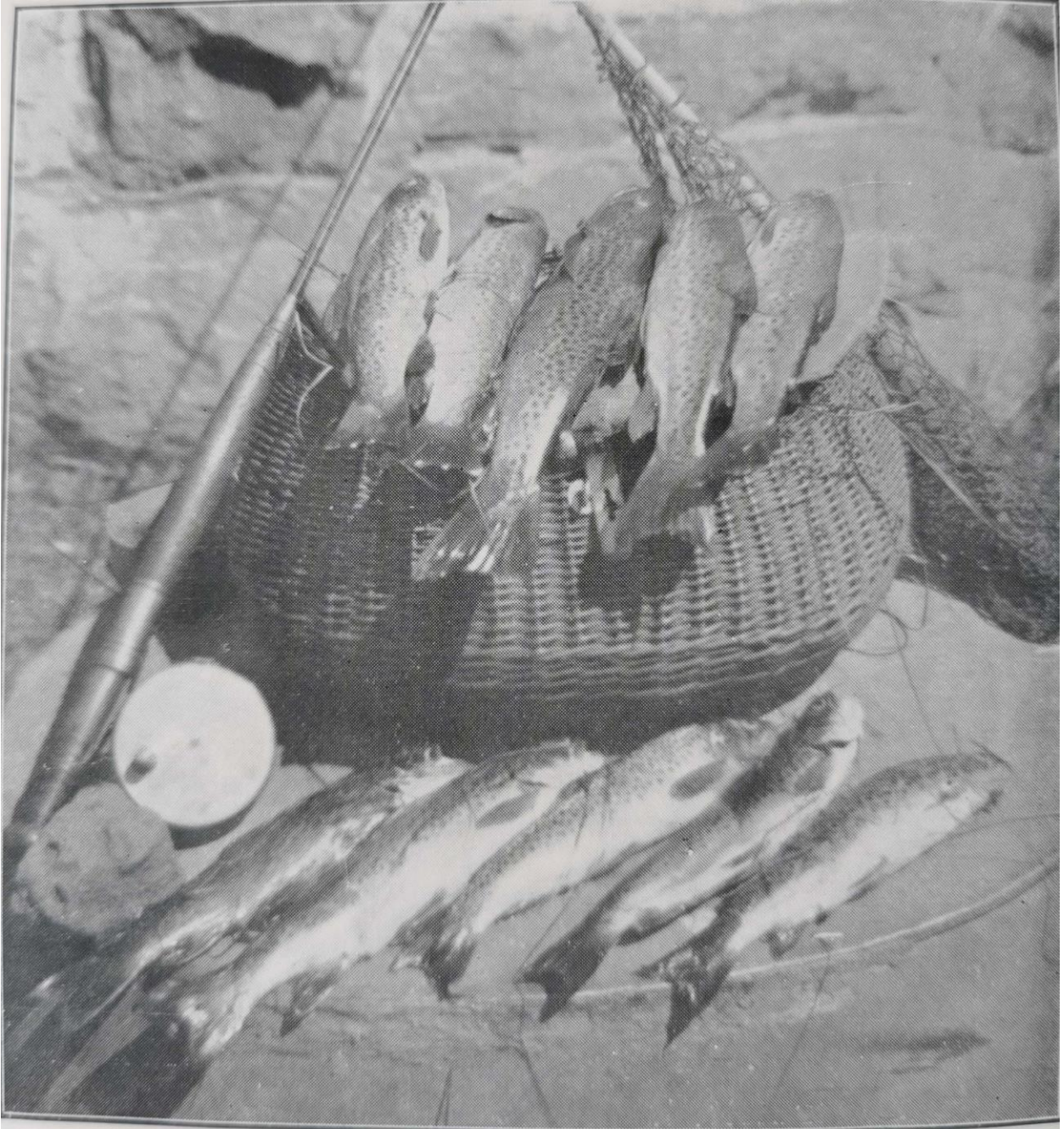
Here is a feast of images taken around the 1920's and 1930's :



Bushman's
River ;
near
Giant's Castle
Game
Reserve



BUSHMAN'S RIVER, NATAL.



Estcourt.

(148 miles from Durban, 337 miles from Johannesburg ; altitude, 3,833 feet.)

The Bushman's River is one of the best trout streams in Natal, having been stocked in 1890, and very good sport has been realized. Fish run up to a scale of 3 lb. to 4 lb., and there have been some heavy baskets made recently. Intending sportsmen should make arrangements beforehand in regard to transport between Estcourt and the river, as the fishing grounds are some twenty-five to thirty miles distant, according to the locality chosen. It is necessary for a complete camp equipment to be provided, as there are no houses for hire in the neighbourhood. Stores and provisions can be obtained from Messrs De Bathe & Couch, Tabamhlope, whose store is in line of route to the Bushman's River. Milk and eggs can be bought from the natives in the district. There is a post office run in connection with the store. All fishing tackle and necessary requisities must be brought, as they cannot be obtained locally. A good assortment of flies is a *sine qua non* to good sport.

Every year the sport develops, and parties arriving from the Free State and the Transvaal praise the success of angling there. The scenery in the neighbourhood is grand in the extreme—rugged hill and dale—and the visitor will notice the great resemblance to the beautiful scenery of the Scottish Highlands, while to the sportsman it is an ideal place for an enjoyable holiday, good catches being assured. The best time for angling is during September, when the water is clear and conditions favourable for the angler. Transport can be hired from Estcourt. The charge is about £3 to take a party from Estcourt to the fishing grounds. Permission to fish on preserved waters, namely, that section which runs through Crown Native Trust Lands, may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Natal Anglers' Association, Pietermaritzburg (licence, £1 1s.). Information regarding fishing riparian waters can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Estcourt Fly Fishing and Trout Acclimatization Society.

October, 1915.—The Estcourt Trout Acclimatization Society have established, by the aid of the Municipality, their hatchery and feeding ponds at the local waterworks. The chief object of this Society is not only to make distributions of trout fry to the riparian owners, but to stock the waters adjacent to the town. This season 10,000 fry will be ready for distribution. Sportsmen desirous of fishing these waters, which run through private lands, should make application to the Hon. Secretary, "Estcourt Fly Fishers' and Trout Acclimatization Society," Estcourt, from whom all information regarding fishing rights, accommodation and transport can be obtained.

The Bushman's River has 50 miles of fishable water, and is fed by a number of rivulets from the Drakensberg, which serve as natural nurseries for young trout. Some of the best fish haunt the pools below Dalton Bridge, about 12 miles distant from Estcourt. Given a ripple on the pools, a westerly breeze, and a hatch of flies, he must be an indifferent fisherman indeed who cannot make a basket of trout. The months of September and October at the beginning of the season, as well as March, are the best months for fly fishing.

The tyings of flies which have been found the most successful in the Bushman's River are the Zulu, Teal and Red Butcher, Coch-y-Boudda, Teal and Green Mallard and Claret, Black Gheunel, March Brown, Woodcock and Yellow. Day's Wonder has also done great execution. There are standard patterns of flies which have a long trail on the water, and one or another of these is fairly certain to kill. For the early part of the season, smaller flies are more successful, especially in light breezes, but during the latter part of the season, when the weather is keener, big flies may be used with good results.

For the fisherman the Bushman's River not only provides very excellent sport, but the nature-lover will recognise at once the attractions of this corner of Natal. And now that the residents of Estcourt have realised the value of this fine trout stream, which can be placed amongst the best in South Africa, the establishment of the Fly Fishers' and Trout Acclimatization Society will do much to make their town the centre of enthusiastic anglers.



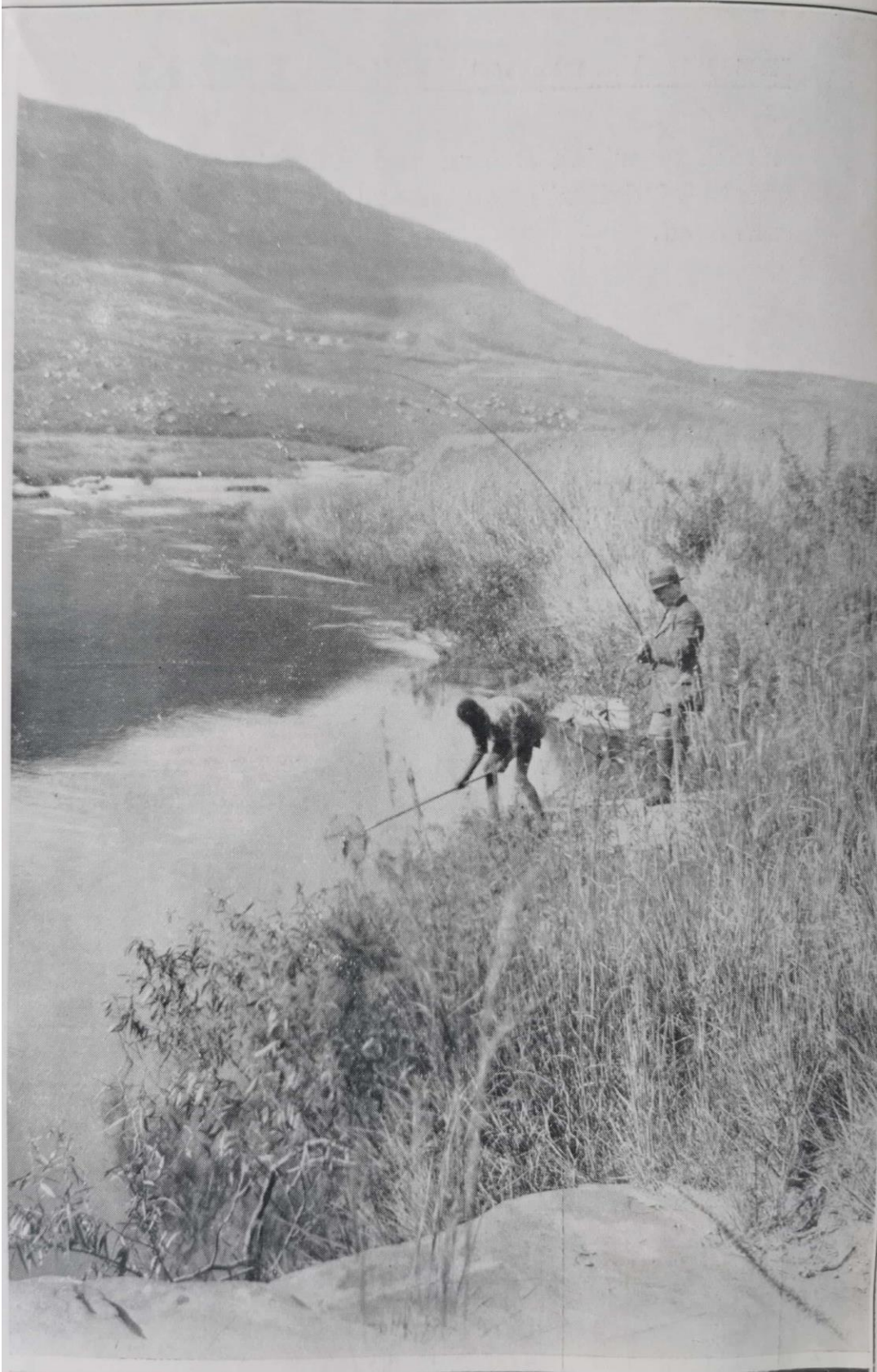
FISHING PARTY AT THE BUSHMAN'S RIVER, NEAR ESTCOURT.



BUSHMAN'S RIVER, ESTCOURT.



SOURCE OF THE BUSHMAN'S RIVER.



Maps:

Where does the Bushmans run?



The Trout water



Books of relevance & Interest

- Call of the Stream ...by Peter Brigg
- Trout fishing in Natal ...by Bob Crass
- My Way with a Trout ...by Tom Sutcliffe
- Life in the Country ...by Neville Nuttall
- Stippled Beauties ...by Andrew Fowler
- Fishing the inland waters of Natal (1936)...Natal Provincial Administration
- Trout Fishing In South Africa 1916...South African Railways.
- The Trout are Rising...1920... B Bennion

Wildlife

Some animal species you can expect to encounter on the Bushmans:

- Leopard
- Baboons
- Bushbuck
- Reedbuck
- Oribi
- Eland
- Mountain Reedbuck
- Vaal Rhebuck
- Duiker
- Cape Clawless Otter
- Slender Mongoose
- Vervet monkey
- Bushpig
- Porcupine
- Black backed Jackal
- Aardvark

Overleaf: Writings about the Bushmans by various authors:

THE BUSHMANS

A RIVER goes about its business and makes no claims to anything. The Bushmans River does not, therefore, lay claim to being South Africa's premier brown trout stream. Anglers who have succeeded in catching its wary trout are proud to make the claim on the river's behalf.

Trout have lived in the Bushmans for 80 years. The only other river in Africa south of the Sahara that has been stocked for as long is the Umgeni, also in Natal. Both these streams received their trout from the ova imported by the late John C. Parker from Howietoun, Scotland. The trout eggs arrived on Saturday, March 8, 1890, and 500 of the resulting fry were liberated in the Bushmans on May 7 of the same year. Since that time a few other batches of trout have been introduced but probably without much effect on the progeny of the original stock that became established and bred freely in their new environment. Rainbow trout have also been put into the river; but they have never become established. It is as a producer of large brown trout that the Bushmans has achieved fame.

To anyone travelling on the National Road from the Transvaal towards Durban, there is nothing very impressive about the Bushmans River where it flows through Estcourt. It is rather a sullen-looking watercourse deprived of its spontaneity by the towering wall of Wagendrift Dam a few miles upstream. High in the Drakensberg the river looks very different, where headstreams leap and sparkle as they rush down steep hillsides to meet and form pools large enough to hold fish.

The highest point where trout are found is about 6,000 feet above sea level, and probably no indigenous fish penetrated as far upstream, except perhaps the *Amphilius natalensis*.

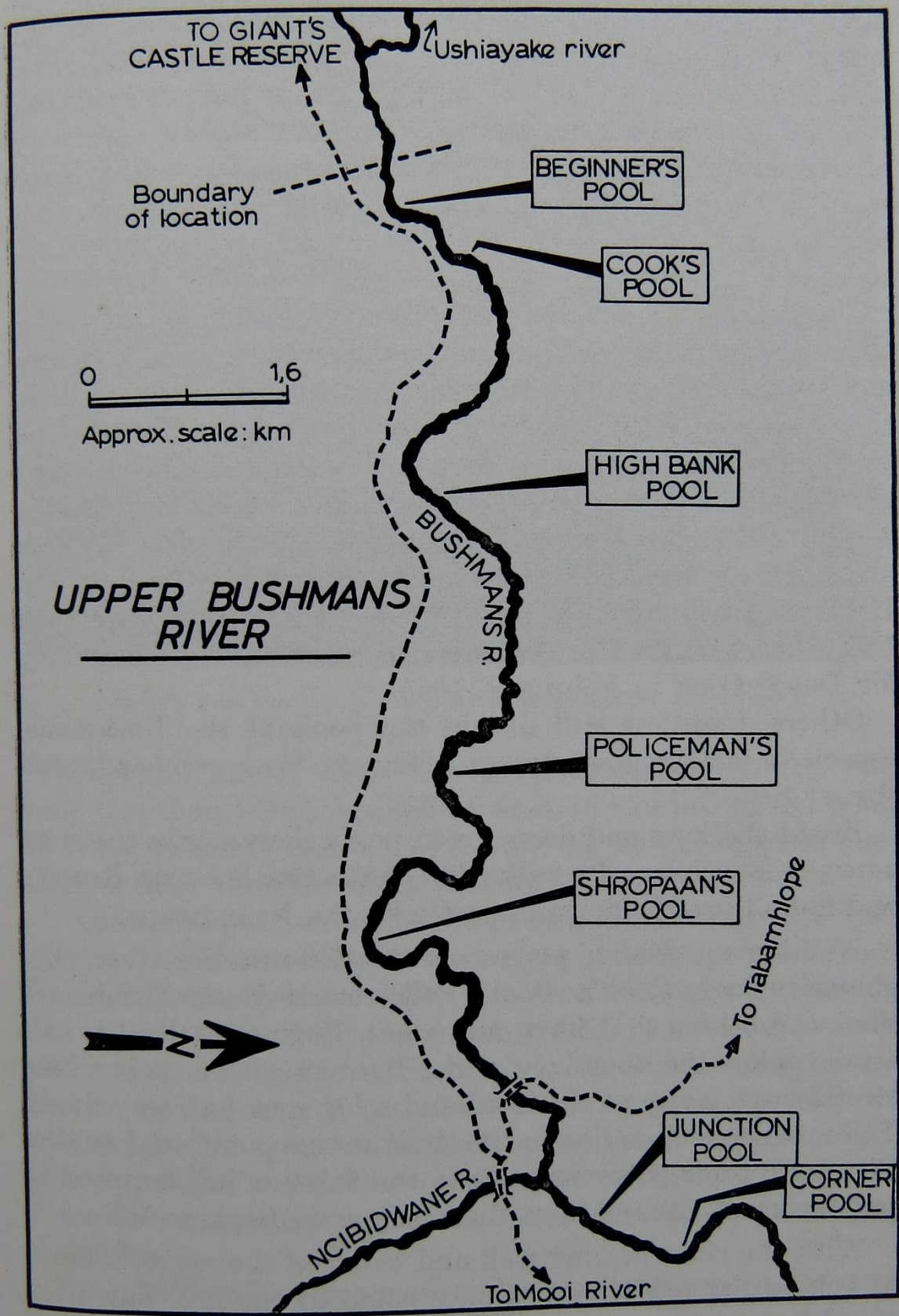
This small rock-loving catfish was joined lower down by *Barbus natalensis*, the well-known scaly or Natal yellowfish, and by the minnow-sized *Barbus anoplus*. Except for a few eels, these were the only fish that inhabited those parts of the river now colonised by trout.

The upper catchment extends across ten miles of the high Drakensberg in Giant's Castle Game Reserve, and the river remains within the Reserve until its three main sources have joined at an altitude of slightly less than 5,000 feet. Below the Rest Camp, where visitors stay in the Reserve, the Bushmans flows rapidly through a narrow valley, the water course averaging about 20 feet in width. Pools are infrequent, with long stretches of shallow running water that give little harbourage for fish. Trout do well in years of abundant rainfall, but in years of drought their numbers shrink and anglers, who go hopefully down to try their luck, return panting up the hillside with an empty creel.

The section near the camp seldom yields a trout of more than 12oz., but in a good season sport may be lively. The stream is usually crystal clear, except after heavy rain, and the fish, with the usual shyness of brown trout, are quick to take alarm. A careful approach is needed and accurate casting is a premier requirement. An unskilled angler will find the overhanging Nchichi bushes awkward obstacles to avoid, while, underfoot, rounded stones make walking difficult. Where the valley deepens and the river flows through a confusion of great sandstone boulders, the athletic demands upon a fisherman become even greater. To catch trout in Giant's Castle Game Reserve is a challenge that makes one appreciate the capture of even a modest bag of breakfast trout. Freshly caught and fried in butter, they are certainly a treat worth working for.

Below Giant's Castle Game Reserve, the river flows through two private farms, Snowflake and Eland's Park, before entering Bantu Reserve. A tributary, the Ushiyake, joins the main stream from the north. On the shoulder of the hill above the confluence of Bushmans and Ushiyake stands an old stone cottage in which a remittance man lived years ago. Remittance men were, I suppose, in a way predecessors to the hippies of today. They were dropouts from society, but instead of making a nuisance of themselves by drug-taking, and generally obnoxious behaviour, they went off to some far corner of the Empire and lived harmlessly on the remittance sent them by their family. One such was Hugh Beavan, captain in a famous cavalry regiment, until he was cashiered for running away with his colonel's lady.

In 1914, Beavan went to live at Eland's Park and for the next 16 years he kept a record of his fishing. In scholarly hand-



writing, he wrote down the catches which he made, leaving proof that the trout of half a century ago were much the same as they are in our time.

So many tales are told about the great days of the past, that one might think the Bushmans River should have yielded an abundance of two and three-pound trout when Beavan fished it. In fact, however, the average weight of those he caught was generally about half a pound, or slightly less, with few fish of over 1lb. One can take trout of the same size today and recent fishing records show a striking similarity in average weight. The main difference was that he was able to catch four to six trout in two or three hours' fishing, pretty consistently.

Today, conditions have to be very favourable for an angler to catch two trout per hour on the upper Bushmans. So many more people are on the water now than in Beavan's time, that there are bound to be fewer fish for each angler. Some of the trout nevertheless survive to reach a large size. One early morning, in 1965, Mr K. M. Pennington, of Balgowan, caught a beautiful 4lb. 7oz. male brown trout. It was only $4\frac{1}{2}$ years old and may have come down into the main river from the Ushiyake tributary. A more typical large upper Bushmans River trout was a 3lb. 10oz. female, $6\frac{1}{2}$ years old, caught by Mr David Cook in February, 1965.

Others doubtless still live in the pools of the Bushmans, especially farther downstream where the river reaches its full size.

Broad shallows and deep, green pools characterise the river where it leaves a rocky valley in Giant's Castle Game Reserve and flows towards its confluence with the Ncibidwane.

Well-known fishing places occur all down the river: Beginner's Pool, Cook's Pool, Policeman's Pool, Shropan's Pool and others that have no names. Beginner's Pool is half a mile below the boundary of the Bantu location. It is a long stretch with a run at the head and a big rock half way down. The road runs close beside the river at this point, and anglers who have their entry permits to the location are tempted to put their rods up and start their fishing on Beginner's Pool.

With the river flowing well and trout on the move, a brace of golden flanked brownies may come to the net, but often the fish prove too cunning even for the expert, let alone the beginner. No matter, a couple of delightful runs and a long shallowish pool take one down to the rapids leading into



Shallow run leading to a big pool on the Lower Bushman's

Cook's Pool, named after David Cook who caught the big trout just mentioned, hooked at dusk in the tail of the pool. No net was handy and a friend went off by car to fetch one. An hour later the fish was landed by torchlight.

Often the pool seems devoid of fish, but they are there all right and sometimes a well-sunk fly will bring one out from behind a submerged boulder. The next pool downstream is also a likely spot, from the run-in to the broad shallow tail, where trout feed after dark or early in the morning. I remember taking a half pounder that was rising steadily at sunrise in water no more than 12 inches deep. In a flat calm, careful stalking and delicate casting were required. The thrill of success under such conditions is not measured by the weight of the fish.

Pools become less frequent in the next couple of miles, and the shallows contain mostly yearling trout. Where a rock or hollow bank gives cover, older trout may take up residence and quite often the biggest fish of the day may be caught

unexpectedly in a shallow stretch. One pool that is always deep enough to give harbourage for fish even in time of drought is Policeman's Pool. When the river is in flood, a great whirlpool is formed where the current strikes the high southern bank, and years ago a policeman was carried into this whirlpool when his horse lost its footing in the swollen river. The horse swam to safety, but the man was drowned.

Below that again is Shrophaan's Pool, nearly two hundred yards long from head to reed-fringed tail. My father once hooked a heavy trout at the top end and played it all the way down the pool. It weighed $3\frac{1}{2}$ lb. and put up an exceptionally strong fight because it was foul-hooked in the adipose fin, leaving its head free.

Another mile and a half brings us to the Ncibidwane confluence, where the road from Estcourt and Mooi River runs next to the Bushmans, giving easy access from that point all the way up to Beginner's Pool, and above, on the farms Snowflake and Elands Park, to the eastern boundary of Giant's Castle Game Reserve. These nine miles of river, upstream from the Ncibidwane confluence, are the most heavily fished part of the Bushmans, and also the most productive. In an average season, anglers make a total of about 250 to 300 fishing trips to this stretch of water. Records submitted by successful anglers over the past 20 years indicate that an average catch of six fish is made per trip, with an average weight of $6\frac{1}{2}$ oz. per fish. Blank days go unrecorded more often than successful days, so probably the overall average catch is less than six.

Some anglers have had excellent bags from time to time, one of the most consistently successful being Dr Romyn Every of Estcourt. His best results were in the 1965-66 season when he was catching at a rate of more than one trout per hour, the average weight running about $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. with a number of fish going up to $2\frac{1}{2}$ lb or more. In recent years drought has caused a decline in catches on the Bushmans, although not to the same extent as on some of the smaller streams. Nevertheless when the flow is reduced to less than 30 cusecs, instead of the normal 60 or 80 cusecs in spring, much of the area normally occupied by trout becomes too shallow and the fish have to concentrate in the deep pools.

Since insect larvae, crabs, tadpoles and other trout food are produced mainly in the shallows, a shrinking river means less nourishment and an all-round falling off in the fish stock.

Ever since the trout first became established, sport has fluctuated from season to season, with an improvement after a period of steady rainfall and a decline when the rains have failed.

The upper waters are naturally more affected by drought than those lower down. Indeed, below the Ncibidwane confluence pools are large enough to give living space for the fish population whether or not the river is flowing well. In this area, silt is the main factor that acts against the trout. When storms break over the catchment vast quantities of earth are washed from overgrazed hillsides and for weeks in summer the Bushmans remains turbid. Nevertheless some splendid fishing spots remain between the Ncibidwane confluence and Wagen-drift Dam.

Long, deep pools characterise the river below this confluence with the Ncibidwane. Shallow stretches and swirling runs provide variety as the river sweeps onwards through a narrow valley, accessible by road at only a few points, down to Dalton Bridge. These 18 miles of river provide some of the most challenging trout water in Natal.

The challenge lies partly in the sheer effort of fishing. High, steeply sloping banks make progress difficult, especially in autumn when growths of grass and herbage are heavy; while silver wattle trees obstruct the fisherman in many places. Mr Q. E. Carter of Ennersdale, at one time a regular visitor to the Bushmans, has described to me in humorous terms how he wore his legs "short as a duck's" in scrambling up and down the banks of the river.

Apart from the challenge of negotiating physical obstacles, there is also the challenge of persuading the trout to take one's fly. Brown trout are seldom easy to catch and those of the middle and lower Bushmans can be quite infuriatingly unco-operative. I have known them in a mood in which they seemed deliberately to tease the angler. On one particular occasion fish could be seen rising to natural insects and they would follow an artificial fly, but would not take it. Finally, one rose almost at my feet, as I brought in the cast, tempting me to strike with the rod at an awkward angle. The Hardy split-cane snapped in two and as the broken tip slid down the line, I almost believe the trout put tail to nose in a gesture of derision!

Perhaps the fish deserve to score off the fisherman sometimes, because at other times they are hooked and taken out



The Ushiyake, a tributary of the upper Bushman's

one after the other. Some of the best bags of trout recorded anywhere in South Africa have been caught in the middle and lower Bushmans River, especially in the more inaccessible reaches where little fishing is done.

In the spring of 1955, for instance, three anglers from Estcourt took 19 trout in two days' fishing, with a total weight of nearly 40lb. One of the trout weighed $3\frac{1}{2}$ lb. and another $4\frac{1}{4}$ lb. In 1967, Mr R. R. Drummond landed 31 fish weighing 27lb. in two days. The same season Mr Q. E. Carter had 10 fish weighing 7lb. in three hours.

Between the Ncibidwane confluence and Dalton Bridge, all the north bank of the river is in Bantu Location, with only a single point of access by road. This is at the confluence of a tributary, the Umtshezana, where anyone in possession of the necessary entry permit may park his car and walk as far as his legs will carry him up or down stream.

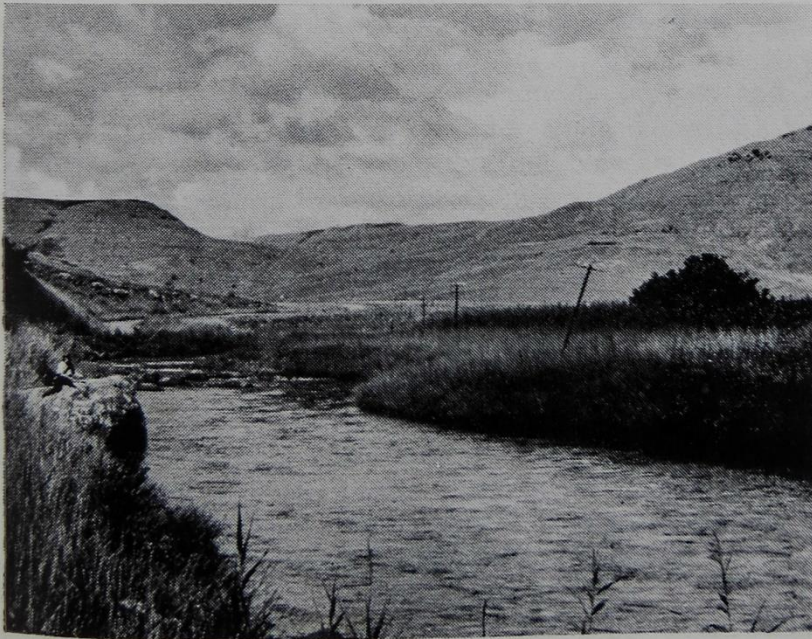
Opposite the Umtshezana confluence, on the south bank of the Bushmans, is the farm Rockmount. Below that is Runnymede, The Heights and Dalton, all in private ownership. Some four miles below Dalton Bridge is a low fall where the river plunges into a deep pool and enters a two-mile section in Moor Park Nature Reserve. From the eastern boundary of the Nature Reserve is the five-mile stretch of

water impounded by Wagendrift Dam. Below that, the river flows through the municipal area of Estcourt, where large trout have been taken in the past.

This section is now rather disappointing. There was hope that the dam might act as a silt trap and allow clear water to flow through Estcourt. Regrettably, there seems to be enough silt collected in the dam, although it is only a few years old, to keep the river below turbid. It is unlikely therefore to give good fishing, and the best sport can be expected well upstream, towards the Drakensberg foothills.

Anyone in search of an outsize brown trout need go only as far as the big pools up and downstream from Dalton Bridge. At least a dozen fish of 4lb. and over have been taken in that part of the river since 1950. Three five pounders are recorded, one of 6lb. 9oz. and one of 7lb. 8oz. This last was caught in November, 1965, and is the biggest river-caught trout to be taken in Natal for many years.

The Bushmans has always given its best sport in spring, except in the uppermost reaches where conditions improve after the onset of the rainy season. From the Neibidwane confluence downstream, there is always sufficient depth and



Beginner's pool on the Bushmans

volume, even in a dry spring, and most of the heaviest bags of trout have been taken in August or September. The upper river does not open until September 1, but downstream from the eastern boundary of the farm Runnymede, the river is open throughout the year.

55 Heavy flies on fast waters

"The prime lies in fast water are just off the current lanes on the river bottom, where the fish avoid the force of the water."

I think it's safe to say that rivers hold the real challenges in flyfishing, simply because they add the dimension of movement, which either creates a problem for you or works to your advantage, depending how you manage to master it.

Last week I sneaked in two days on the Bushman's River, a brown trout stream that rises in the Giant's Castle area, apple-green and clear, and then flows lazily down to the Wagondrift dam near Estcourt. I fish it up to Bill Barnes's hatchery from the bottom of Peter Brown's section, where it's one of the loveliest trout waters in Natal.

Hugh Huntley and I found it full and going like an express train, but it was clear – and as far as I'm concerned that's all that matters. After all the summer rains it was heavier and faster than I'd ever known it, and the problem to solve was how to get the fly down and keep it there.

I've always believed that in strong or deep water, trout will be reluctant to come up to fetch the fly. They want it down there looking at them on an eyeball-to-eyeball basis before they will take it. You can't blame them either, because once they move into the main body of the current they are going to need plenty of energy to swim out of it again, and for just one morsel of food, that's not worth it.

The prime lies in fast water are just off the current lanes on the river bottom, where the fish avoid the force of the water. If there is a big submerged rock to hide behind, so much the better, but because the water flowing over the rocky bed slows up considerably just above the stones, the trout can sit in this boundary layer without using up too much energy.

There's another reason why trout are happiest out of the main current and it's what they call insect spill. Much of the food floating downstream spins off, out of the current and into the slack water on the edges, where the trout can easily pick it up.

The first problem to solve is getting your imitation down. I do this



The cosmos were out and a brown trout took the fly in a deep run. – Photo Tom Sutcliffe..

by adding lead to the fly when I tie it. Many American authors believe that this spoils the action, but in fast water I don't believe it does.

If the water is deep and strong enough, I bring out an express sinking line like a lead-core and use a short steeply tapered tippet and a fly with enough lead on it to drown you. Opportunities for using this sort of tackle are pretty scarce in South Africa.

All this helps to keep the fly on the bottom, but alone it's not enough. What's needed is a long drift, during which no drag gets hold of the line to pull the fly up off the bottom.

Let me illustrate this for you. Suppose you stand upstream on a rock and cast down a strong, heavy current of water. As you retrieve the fly, on a sinking or floating line, it will come up to anywhere between mid-water and the surface, which is not good enough.

Conversely, suppose you stood at the same spot and dropped a fly into the water at your feet with no line or leader attached to it. The fly would drift downstream, sinking all the time, until it was on the bottom.

So, by a process of simple deduction, what keeps the fly off the bottom is a lack of *free drift* for long enough and the presence of a fly-line.

To correct all this, try casting upstream of the holding water you want to fish and then let the fly drift down over it. To get a longer run and buy more 'sink-time', cast up-current, let the fly drift past you, then start a slow retrieve or a gentle lift as the fly swings out its arc below you.

We started with W F 6 floaters, longish leaders and very heavy nymphs.

The trick was to search for the off-current lies, using long drifts, before we began working the flies – and in this way we began to pick up the odd brown trout, but the fish were never really on and we battled for what we got until, just below the hatchery where the river flattens off and slows up, we picked off small rainbows at will on the dry fly.

Next day we made an early start, fishing up from the junction of a small feeder stream called the Ushiyake.

This time I opted to use the lead-core line and short leader to see how it would go against Hugh's floater.

The cosmos were out and the veld was sprinkled white and crimson with flowers. I began working a long run, drifting the black nymph along the bottom as best I could, letting the fly swing out and up at the end of its drift. A brown trout of about a kilogram took it eventually, with a solid take which suggested the fish might be on. And at the same time Hugh, who was fishing the pool above me, hooked and landed a large brown on the same nymph.

By mid-afternoon we'd had a good day on the browns of the Bushman's and when the cold east wind blew up we decided to call a truce and head home for tea.

Interesting to me was the comparison in yield between the floater and the sinker in water as deep as you will get. I'd say the scores were pretty much even except that my fishing was less comfortable than was Hugh's. There's not much you can't get away with on a floater in this country, when you come to think of it.



Excerpts from the book “Stippled Beauties” by Andrew Fowler

III The Bushmans and Ncibidwana

The Bushmans is undoubtedly one of our most famous Brown Trout streams. It being just a little further afield for me than the Umgeni and the Mooi, has perhaps contributed to the fact that I have listed it in third place. Perhaps more significantly, it is popular, particularly in more recent years. In case you haven't picked up by now, that means I am less inclined to go to a place. The Bushmans is one place where I have bumped into other fishermen on the river. I have also come back from a day's fishing to hear that so and so fished it the day before I did or after. As soon as it is possible to compare notes with another fisherman about a particular piece of water, my interest wanes just a little. Call me spoilt.

That said, the Bushmans is a remarkable piece of water. Its quality is linked to the fact that it flows for a good long way in the berg nature reserve, and thereafter on the Brown's superb farm, which to all intents and purposes is also a nature reserve. In other words there is no cultivation for a good long stretch of its headwaters. Of course below Chris Brown's lower boundary, and Henderson's cottage, the river flows through rural settlements, where great Trout fishing is to be had, but where it is necessary to make security arrangements for your car, and where you are likely to compete with the ladies doing their washing, and have a participative audience of small kids.

Rainbows at Henderson's

In recent years, I have met blokes who, despite apparently having fished the Bushmans regularly, act surprised on hearing that it is a Brown Trout stream. This tells me immediately that their fishing has been concentrated on the beats below the hatchery, from whence these Rainbows come. That stretch, on Chris Brown's farm, is a somewhat unique stretch of river to my mind. The channel in which it runs seems too narrow when the river is full in summer. From below the Ezemvelo area, the river surprisingly makes little use of the relatively open valley, rather confining itself to deep pathways through large pieces of rock, and the odd oversized boulder. In mid-summer, those chutes and runs flow strongly against your legs and wading is best undertaken with a mix of bravery and skill.

It is in that fast deep water, with a heavily beaded fly, complete with at least some fly flash, that the Rainbows come to the net. It is however hard to believe that anyone could fish it and not catch a Brown. I have managed that only twice. The first time was back in the early nineties. I was visiting the farm on which the famous “Henderson's Cottage” is situated, for some or other business reason, but I was invited to bring along a fly-rod. I accepted, but being a business visit, I was limited to about an hour's fishing before I needed to be on the road again.

It was in that hour that a feisty Rainbow obliged, and surprised me. The next time was when I took two visiting Australians up to Chris Brown's piece. Of course I told them on the way out, that it was a Brown Trout stream, not bothering to mention the hatchery escapees, and in almost the same spot, within sight of the cattle grid, with the Henderson's old vine bound cottage up on the hill above us, I got one Rainbow. A good strong fish a little over a pound.

That was to be it for the day for me, the balance of my time was spent trying to teach some river craft to the younger of my two guests. It was quite a task, as he had not yet mastered fly casting, let alone retrieving line that incessantly floats back down at you, and threatens to sew you up in knots if you are not nimble enough to get it off the water quickly. He later hooked a Brown, and got it close enough to see that it was a Brown, but never got a hand to it. In hindsight, it might have been better to take them

down into the tribal water below the cattle grid, which while it still has deep pools, seems to have more wide gravel bars, fewer of those challenging Port Jackson willows, and just as many Trout.

I can't fish this stretch of water without marvelling at the life of the remittance man who once lived at Henderson's and must have fished these waters daily. His tenure there is recorded in Bob Crass' book (*Trout fishing in Natal, RS Crass, 1971*), and is one of few records that exist of the early fishing on the Bushmans and our other rivers. A visit to Henderson's with its overgrown garden, and heavy stone walls and deeply recessed windows sets one's mind wandering back to what can only have been glory years in this untouched country. Mind you, looking up this river valley, it is still undeveloped, and the veld is in excellent condition, such that the river runs clean most of the time and clears quickly when a big enough storm does discolour the water.

In search of rest and cool water

It was early December, and my journal records that I was at PD's house to collect him at four forty five am. As a schoolmaster he had been up to some or other end of term revelry the night before, and let's just say that his was a slow start, albeit such an early one.

We parked just above Snowflake Cottage on Chris Brown's section, and started in at six am. At that time, despite the bright hot days of December, it is cool. Twelve degrees in fact, and my photos remind me that we started with jerseys on.

I remember the water cool about our legs. This is especially so when your warm dry boots must first plunge into the crisp water. I often start out finding a lie approachable from the bank, in an attempt to delay the inevitable plunge into the invigorating water. But on these bluebell summer days it is hot by eight am, and this day was no exception.

Jerseys were quickly discarded, and wet longs became an asset. It was a day in which the Browns were very much on the prod. The water was startlingly clean, and the fish were out and about, so we startled a lot more than we ever landed. By ten thirty we were up at the hatchery already, having fished quite quickly, and skipped water as soon as it became evident that we had put down fish. Of course that is the way to do it. If you have blundered upon a fish, and it has darted off up the pool, common sense needs to prevail, and you can either do this by resting the pool, or by simply moving on. Our river fishing is such that we are never crammed onto short beats, or between other fishermen, so in our case one had might as well move on up, rather than sit and watch the pool for half an hour or more.

So it was this approach that saw us at the top end of the beat early enough to double back and give it all a try again. That is exactly what we did, and in the later part of the morning, although we didn't quite double our catch, I landed a twelve inch fish, and PD got one of fifteen inches, making the additional walking all worthwhile. By midday we were in bright unforgiving sunshine, and the fishing had slowed down, which I suppose one should expect in the case of Browns. We stopped at the vehicle and fetched our sandwiches. Back at the river we found an open white rock, and we sat there, with the sound of the rushing stream convincing us that it was cooler than it really was. The previous evening was catching up on us. After some refreshments we both sat there staring at a spot where the rock had worn into a smooth chute, and a clear stream of water rushed through, its white wake pushing rhythmically backwards and forwards, up the water plume and back down.

There was a long silence, and then one of us remarked “This water is strange stuff isn’t it”. That can happen if you look at something too long. Especially after a night out. We packed it in and went home for a well-earned siesta.

On a clearing river

Mike and I cut down from the potholed tar road, through a gully and over a headland, marked by a Church. We paused there, and I muttered something about the colour of the water. I had been oscillating between comments like “It’s dirty, but definitely fishable”, and “Hell, I don’t know, it’s looking pretty damned murky!”, uttered in a grumbling manner. From our high vantage point I was on the latter comment. We pushed on anyway, striding a little further downriver, where we paused to tackle up.

Mike and I both started out with tungsten bead rigs. This arrangement involves a heavy bead on the point, and a light fly on the dropper above. I began with a small bright caddis, with a garish, shiny belly. I figured they might see it. Later I changed to a size twelve Woolly Bugger with some crystal flash, figuring they would see that a little easier.

One fish did see it, and its capture after more than an hour on the water lifted our spirits a little. Then as I glanced upriver I saw Mike trying to get a hand to a small fish, but it wriggled free. From the same spot, he hooked a second one, and this time he brought it in. We celebrated the small victory across the rushing milky water with a raised thumb, and one in reply. Back up near the Church I waded into a spot where in drier times the locals park their taxis in the river to wash them. There I flicked and swung the Woolly Bugger repeatedly. The water was looking a tiny bit better. It was still milky and half grey, half brown. You could see your boots when waded in just above the knee, but not when you got waist deep. It was not as dirty as the Ncibidwana which we had crossed on the way in, and which was pure milky coffee and pushing big volumes into the lower Bushmans, but it was a lot higher than the Little Mooi, which we would cross later, and which was clean after its recent flood had abated.

The heavy bead takes some flinging. I was using a four millimetre one, and Mike had on a three. Either one is a lobbing load on a delicate three weight, and detracts from the lightness of the venture. The weight was necessary in the fast water. Even with the bead, one’s placement had to be right to get the fly dragged down. Once it was down you could almost feel the bead bumping the bottom. Maybe it was more imagination, I don’t know, but I fished with confidence in the sure knowledge that the fly was getting down deep to where the fish would surely be hugging the bottom. I would let the line straighten out below me, and stretch the rod out, pointing it as far downstream as I could. Then in a single sweeping movement, letting the current load the rod well, I would bring it forward in a single movement, letting the fly travel upstream, or up and across slightly, without any false casting over the water. One can do this in clear water to avoid lining fish, to great effect, but I was doing it here to avoid having to false cast all that tungsten on my little river wand. The water colour would have ensured that overhead false casting was less of an issue on this occasion. My mind was a little numbed in the routine of this. I was on a good-looking stretch, and my focus was forward. The drift out behind me was not time

spent fishing, and I became a little impatient at that repeated wait. I was jolted from my deep thoughts by a fish that slashed at the fly as it swung below me. That got my concentration back!

Further up, Mike had drifted his fly through a few excellent runs without luck. Then we saw a fish move. "That's it" I told Mike. "I am changing to a hopper". I figured that they still needed to see the fly, but that with a few slower stretches coming up, maybe they would come up and get it off the surface.

My hopper went undisturbed, but at the next pool, in some much slower water a small fish was rising. I changed to a delicate Klinkhamer and had a few careful throws. I put the fish down.

At a spot higher up, Mike was at the head of a wonderful pool. I asked if he had fished the tail. He hadn't. He had left it for me. And as we were talking, a fish rose, and then another. I returned to the Klinkhamer. It is a little size eighteen with a dull dun look to it, but a bright white post. Positioned on the bank just above where the fish were rising, allowed me to perform a quartering down and across delivery. In a pool where an upstream cast would have the lip current pulling your line and dragging the fly away, this is a better approach. As long as one throws enough slack into the cast, you can get a long downstream drift before the line pulls around and you retrieve the fly up against the near bank. This approach saw a number of attacks on the fly. While several of them failed, the pool remained largely undisturbed, allowing me to eventually hook and land two fish of around ten inches in length. It is always good to get them on a dry.

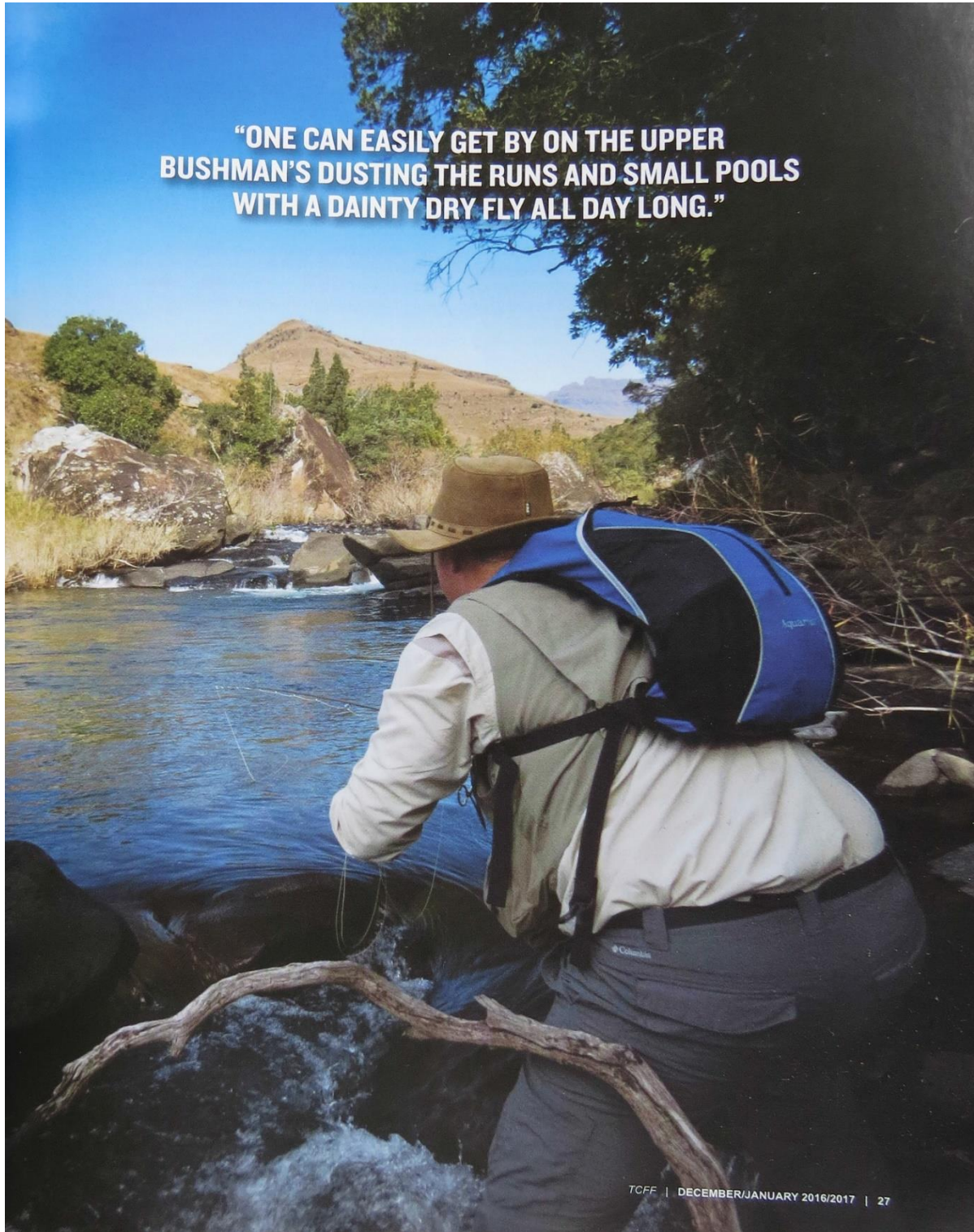
At the bend near the road, I hooked a strong twelve inch fish in the deep dark current. It was a current that I suddenly realised had a deep green look to it. Not brown. The river had cleared, and I had scarcely noticed until now. Deep green means clean!

A storm was building over the Berg at an alarming rate. It had been hot and bright and humid earlier, but a deep purple mass had accumulated suddenly over the mountains, and we started receiving the odd drop of rain down where we were on the fringes of it. But it wasn't raining yet, and the lightning was still a long way off. I suggested that we skip the piece near the road, where there was a string of locals with assorted fishing gear and an unabashed inquisitiveness that had me wanting to move on. Fishing to a gawping audience who occasionally bug you for hooks, was not in my game plan.

We cut out a stretch, leaving ourselves just enough river to fish before we came up to Henderson's bridge at the top of our beat. We timed that well. As we strode to the parked car forty minutes later, a few heavier raindrops began to find us, but we were two Trout richer by then. Quickly changing and stowing our wet longs and boots, we were in the dry comfort of the cab before it really came down. We had been on the river for something like eight hours. Mike reminded me of that the following day, but it hadn't seemed like that. It was just a quick and fleeting visit. One that started out with us feeling a little bleak at the water conditions, and ended up feeling like a blessing. A treat. An interlude spent in a rushing river, with a sprinkling of pretty Brown Trout thrown in for good measure.

From a magazine article by Andrew Fowler in "The Complete Flyfisherman" December 2016

**"ONE CAN EASILY GET BY ON THE UPPER
BUSHMAN'S DUSTING THE RUNS AND SMALL POOLS
WITH A DAINTY DRY FLY ALL DAY LONG."**



Many more fly fishermen will have enjoyed the fishing in the vicinity of the camp. It is a lovely stretch, and in most years, barring a drought, the small, feisty browns are relatively plentiful but very seldom so obliging as to make it a sure thing. The trout there are, however, more receptive to a dry fly than they are down below in the more sluggish and nutrient-rich waters. One can easily get by on the upper Bushman's dusting the runs and small pools with a dainty dry fly all day long. The scenery is superb, and days on the stream always seem to be memorable ones.

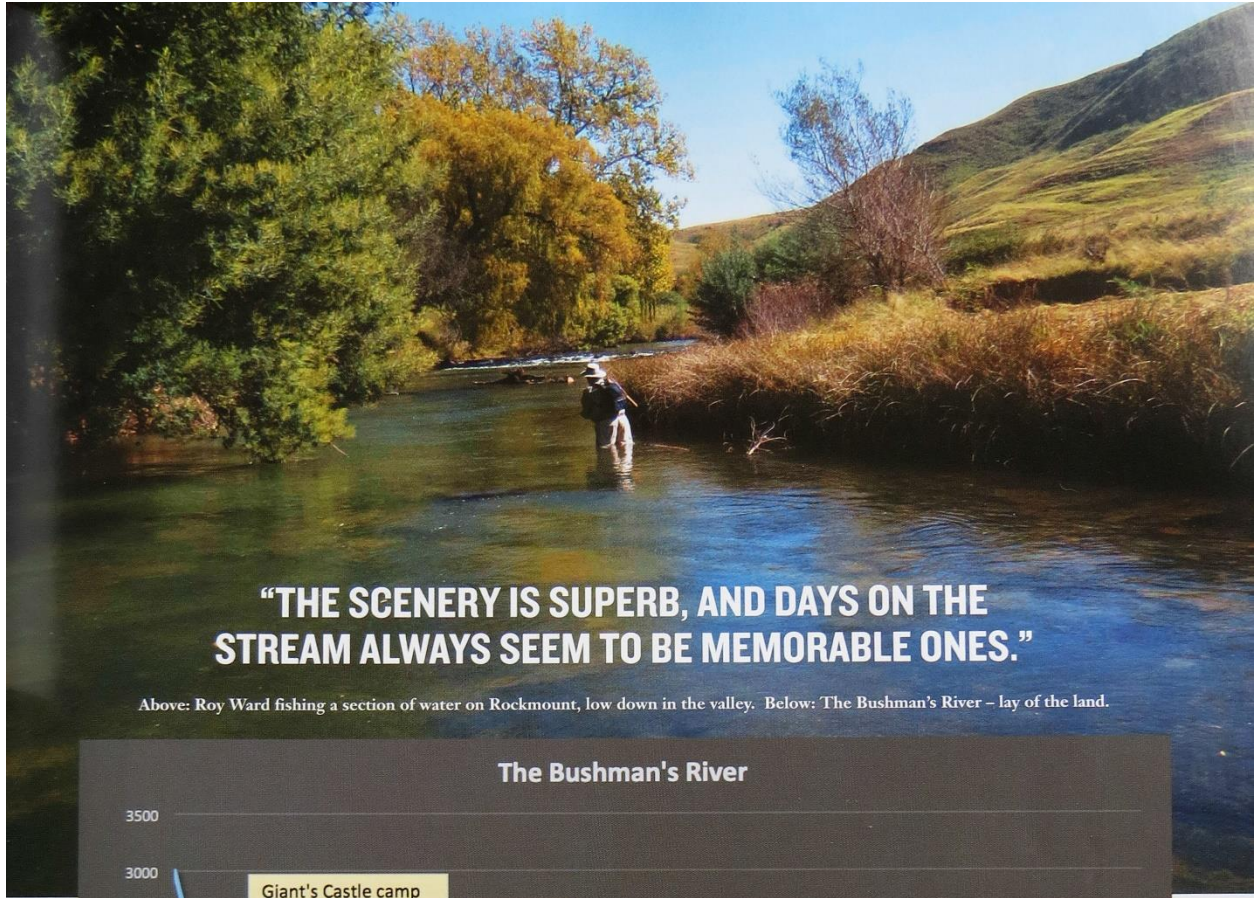
Downstream from the camp, the river enters a rocky section, with tumbles of oversized boulders and a lot of bedrock. Peter Brigg once told me it harboured fewer fish, and in Crass's book he says of it that "the athletic demands upon a fisherman become even greater". I confess that I have allowed those comments to keep me away from this good, long stretch of some 4km of water between the park gate and the camp, and there has to be some worthwhile and never-fished water in there begging to be discovered.

For me, a better-known stretch is that just inside the park gate and extending up to the junction with the Mtshezana stream and a little further up than that, to where the river flows through some picture-perfect pools among beautiful indigenous trees. Below the park gate is the Bushman's trout hatchery, which occupies a short stretch, and below that is the magnificent Snowflake section belonging to the Brown family. This is water that many of us love deeply and which is accessible to the occupants of Snowflake Cottage, which can be booked through the management of the neighbouring hatchery. It is water that flows through pristine mountain countryside (despite being outside the park). The channel is deep in places and, in high water flow, I would even say that it should be waded with caution, as should most of these seemingly small mountain streams, as should most of these seemingly small mountain streams, as should most of these seemingly small mountain streams. Fish here will sometimes take a dry fly readily, but a heavily weighted nymph is often the only thing that will tempt them from their lairs. Fish of 8 to 14 inches are the norm, but Ian Lax related to me how just two years ago, a four-and-a-half pounder took his drowned bi-visible pattern just a few hundred yards below the cottage. What a fish that must have been!

Below: Changing a fly on a pretty stretch just inside the reserve gate.

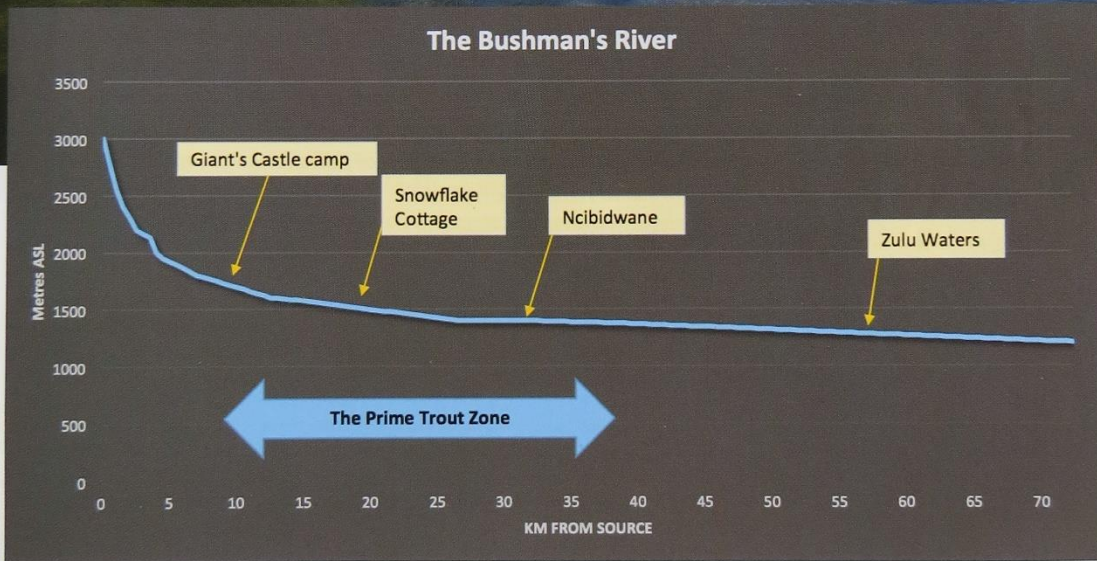
*In the chapter entitled "Beneath the Sleeping Giant" in Peter Brigg's superb 2008 book **Call of the Stream**, he describes his first visit to the Bushman's in 2000, and his fishing both in the vicinity of the Giant's Castle camp and the confluence with the Mtshezana, where he and Mark Pardey did battle with the small browns. Peter has since fished the river extensively, including forays into the very upper reaches. He and his good friend Jan Korrubel are both frequent visitors to and devotees of the Giant's Castle section of the river.*





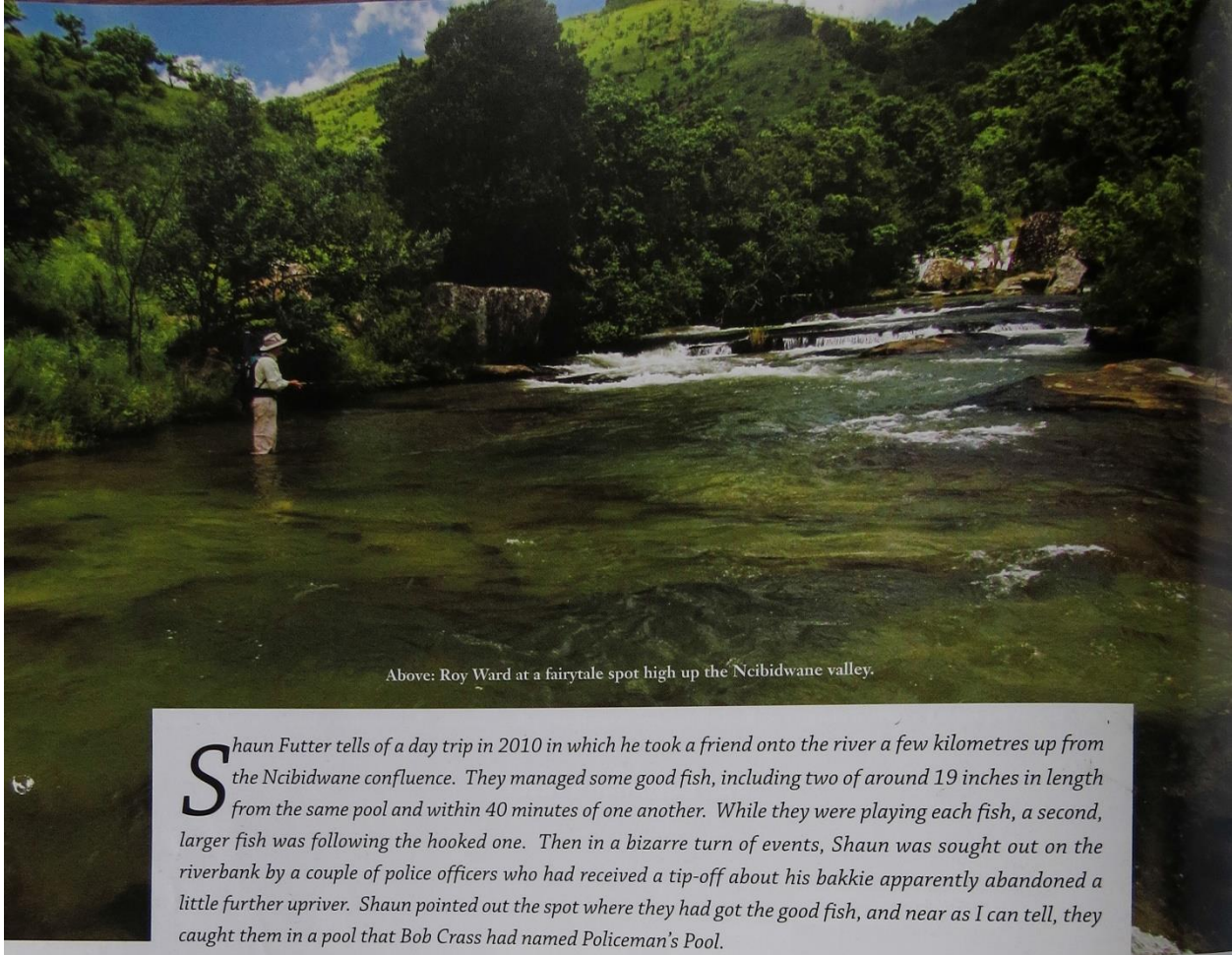
“THE SCENERY IS SUPERB, AND DAYS ON THE STREAM ALWAYS SEEM TO BE MEMORABLE ONES.”

Above: Roy Ward fishing a section of water on Rockmount, low down in the valley. Below: The Bushman's River – lay of the land.



At the lower end of Snowflake, there is a small section on the Henderson's farm, Elands Park. The old stone cottage there burnt down in a fire a few seasons back. This is the cottage that was occupied by Hugh Beavan, the remittance man who fished the river almost daily between 1914 and 1930. And it is the same cottage that Ilan Lax and his wife Louise occupied by mistake many years back. "I must tell you my story about Henderson's," said Ilan, his face lighting up with delight at the memory. It was their honeymoon, and despite Ilan having received good directions from the Browns to get them to Snowflake cottage, he

was wise enough not to argue with his bride, who directed him to Henderson's instead. On arrival, they were shocked to learn that the caretaker, Duma, had died the week before. Peter Brown had not mentioned that to Ilan. He had also not mentioned that only one of the keys worked, and that the caretaker's widow would provide a hacksaw for the other lock. Ilan said he thought it didn't add up and, after a few days in the cottage, they went by Bill Barnes at the hatchery to clarify a few things. Apparently the Hendersons were as amused as the Barnes were when it turned out that the wrong cottage had been occupied!



Above: Roy Ward at a fairytale spot high up the Ncibidwane valley.

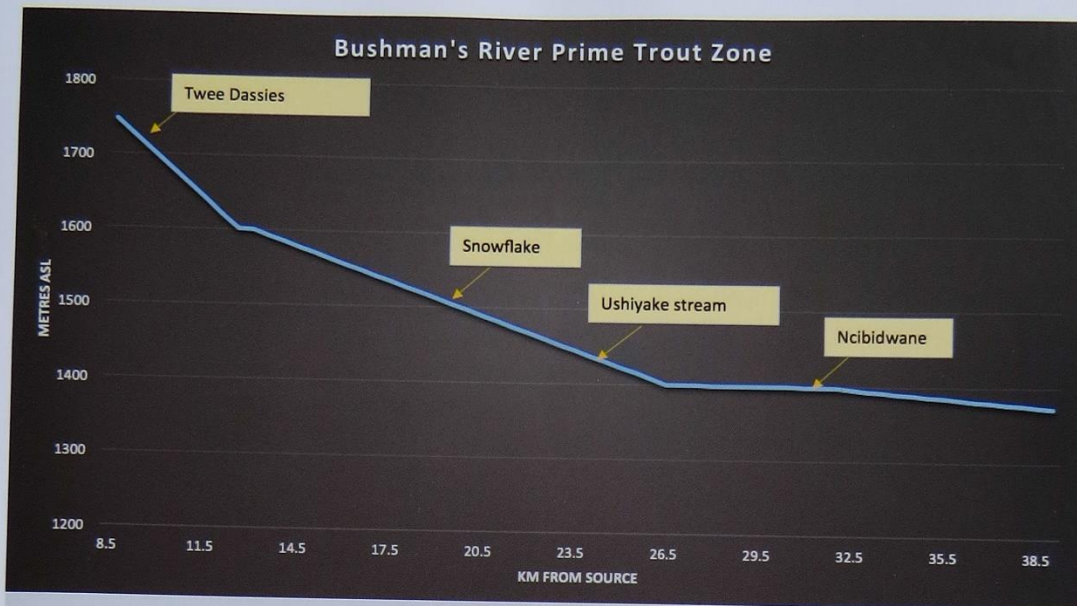
Shaun Futter tells of a day trip in 2010 in which he took a friend onto the river a few kilometres up from the Ncibidwane confluence. They managed some good fish, including two of around 19 inches in length from the same pool and within 40 minutes of one another. While they were playing each fish, a second, larger fish was following the hooked one. Then in a bizarre turn of events, Shaun was sought out on the riverbank by a couple of police officers who had received a tip-off about his bakkie apparently abandoned a little further upriver. Shaun pointed out the spot where they had got the good fish, and near as I can tell, they caught them in a pool that Bob Crass had named Policeman's Pool.

Another tributary running down into the main river on the farm Elands Park, in the vicinity of the old burnt-down cottage, is the Ushiyake. Ilan tells me that he caught his first "big river fish" in that tiny stream. It weighed 1.5kg! Tom Sutcliffe, in his 1990 book *Reflections on Flyfishing*, describes how he and the late Hugh Huntley, fishing just below Henderson's, battled for a caddis imitation small enough to match the hatch, settling on a #18 that won them a brown "a shade under 2kg". For us mere mortals, as was the case for Beavan back in the early 20th century, we expect fish of 8 to 15 inches, averaging around half a pound in weight. Below the cattle grid opposite the ruin, the river flows onto tribal land. Many anglers have enjoyed this long stretch over the years, from the grid all the way down to the clinic (approximately 8km of river). Writing in 1971, Crass estimates that this stretch saw between 250 and 300 rods a year. We have no way of recording the fishing pressure now, but I can assure you that it is considerably less than that, albeit growing in current times.

Until around the turn of this century, there was a Bushman's River Fly Fishing Club, an offshoot of the now defunct Midlands Club based in Estcourt. Ilan tells me that the likes of Sherman Ripley, Eddie Brokensha and Mervyn Gans had clubbed in, paid

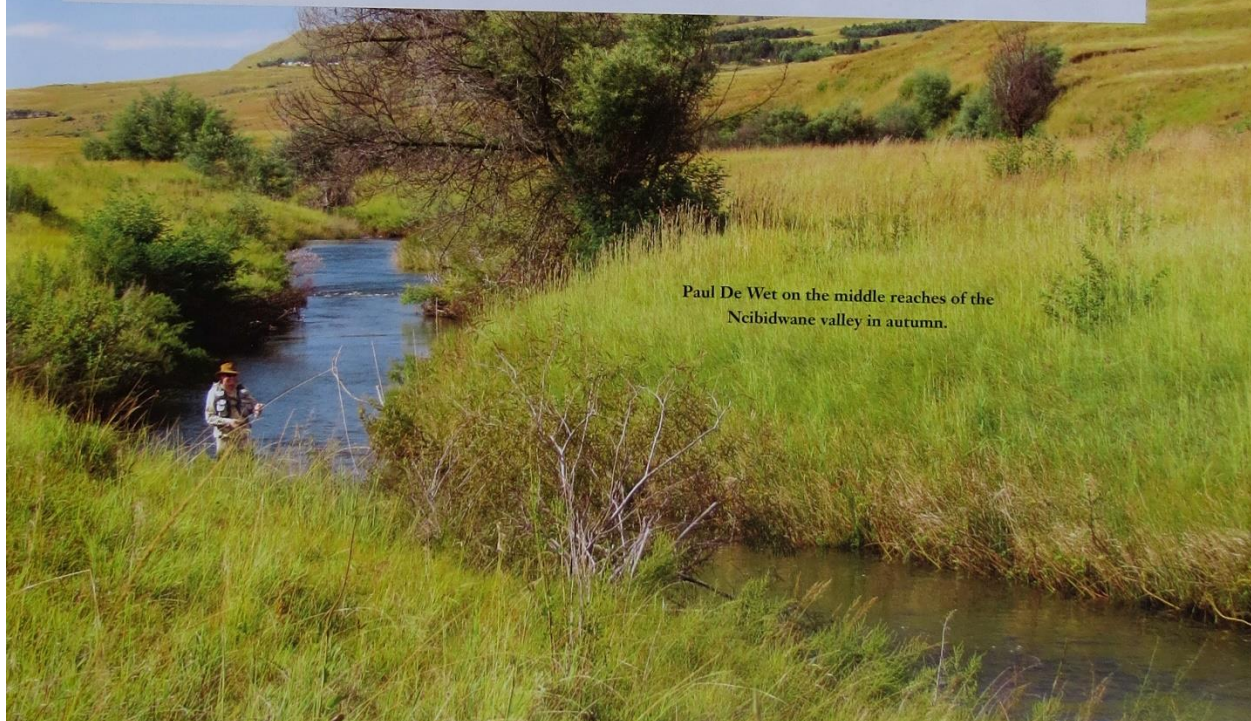
their dues to the local authorities and arranged both a water bailiff and access to this water on a rather more formal basis than those of us who nowadays just arrive here to fish. The river here cuts back and forth across the floodplain, alternating between long pools with slow, wide tail-outs, to wide riffles, and then some deep chutes where the water flows strong and full of promise. It really is classy trout water. Lately there has been talk of initiating a community scheme in which anglers part with some cash for a guarded car and a litter-free river. This seems like a smart move if it in any way helps preserve the fly fishing on this 8km stretch that many perceive to be the sweetest stretch of them all.

Mervyn Gans told me of his early forays on the river, when he would set out from the house on Lolamdazo, where Bill Barnes (his late father-in-law) ran the hatchery for many years, swinging the fly downstream, using a sinking line and a wet fly, him to go forth on what he called "debil debil days", a reference to what is essentially the Aboriginal version of the tokoloshe – a mystical beast that emerges from deep, dark pools on miserable days, those same misty, drizzly days that many of us know signal the best brown trout weather.



DISCREPANCY IN THE NAMES OF SOME TRIBUTARIES

There is some discrepancy in the maps and other records when it comes to the names of various tributaries of the Bushman's River. Many of these streams are small and perhaps it is of little consequence what they are called, but to some readers the fact that their names are uncertain adds to the sense that this is not a fully tamed landscape. It is one in which beat markers, pool names and other landmarks are vague, and secret fishing spots can still be kept that way. Starting up in the reserve, there is no disagreement about **Twee Dassies stream** and the next major tributary, which joins in at Elands Park, is spelt **Shayake** on an old map I own, but a more modern digital map refers to the next tributary as the **Lafula**, whereas elsewhere it is the **eMpophomeni**. The stream entering opposite Rockmount in the lower reaches is called the **Mtshezana** in Crass's book, making for potential confusion with the tributary just above the park gate, but it shows on modern maps either nameless or as the **nDaba**.



Paul De Wet on the middle reaches of the Ncibidwane valley in autumn.

At the clinic is a junction of roads, a weir, denser human population and, perhaps most interesting, a tributary flowing in from the south. This is the Ncibidwane. At the road bridge, it often looks brown and slow and sullen. It has rather too much litter for my liking, and has a nasty habit of dirtying the main river downstream of the junction. However, forays up that valley have revealed a stream that is worthy of further exploration. Surprisingly, the Ncibidwane is barely mentioned in Bob Crass's 1971 book. I can't help thinking that he knew more than he let on, and that just perhaps he was keeping a secret. In its lower stretches, which I have not explored, the Ncibidwane is a meandering, willow-lined stream. From the road crossing up, and for many kilometres up into the park, it is a delightful piece of water from which we have taken a few fish of up to 12 inches and from which we plan to take many more as our explorations continue and our familiarity with the stream grows. I am inclined to not say a lot more than Bob Crass did. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

Tom Sutcliffe wrote in his 1985 book *My Way with a Trout* about "A morning on the Bushman's" during which he landed an 18-inch brown and lost another, both around 2lb in weight and "as strong as any rainbow I've hooked, and just as fast".

Right: A silver brown from the lower Bushman's.
Below: Mike Smith working a nymph on a swollen river – the Bushman's in the tribal area above the clinic.

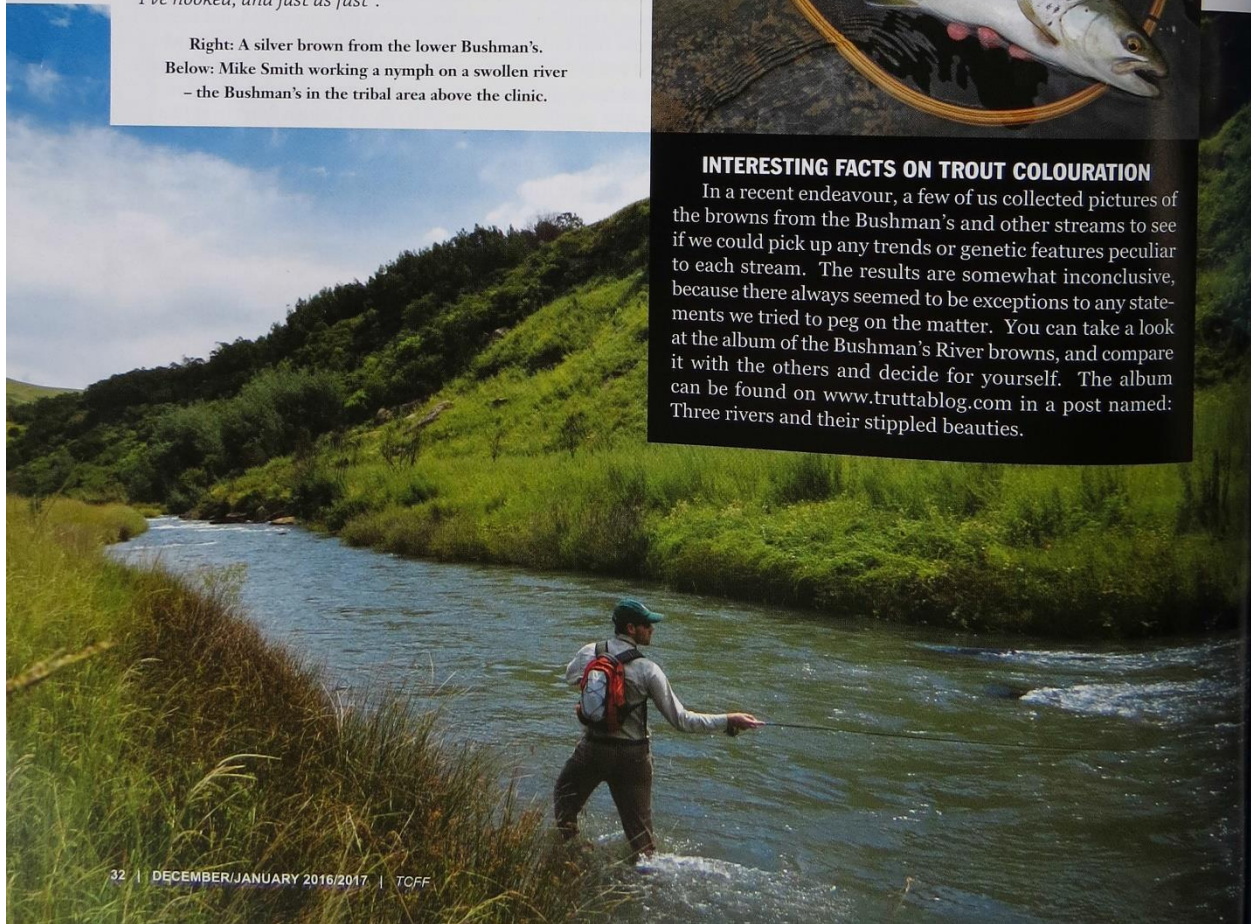
Back to the main river and below the clinic, one can see the river receding into the distance in a dead straight line, bounded by mielie lands. Down here the water is more inclined to be dirty in summer as the cumulative occupancy of the main stream and the Ncibidwane, with the grazing and roads and drainage that go with that, all starts to take its effect. That said, the water beyond that straight piece that you can see from the farm below that, are home to trout. Mervyn Gans confirmed that this is early-spring water, to be fished before the big rains come. My friends Graeme Steart, Roy Ward, Shaun Futter and Jac Aldous have all gone down there with me. We have caught and lost a few trout, tempted a few yellows and had some blank days too.



Photo: Mavingona Flyfishing

INTERESTING FACTS ON TROUT COLOURATION

In a recent endeavour, a few of us collected pictures of the browns from the Bushman's and other streams to see if we could pick up any trends or genetic features peculiar to each stream. The results are somewhat inconclusive, because there always seemed to be exceptions to any statements we tried to peg on the matter. You can take a look at the album of the Bushman's River browns, and compare it with the others and decide for yourself. The album can be found on www.truttablog.com in a post named: Three rivers and their stippled beauties.



Bob Crass writes about this stretch at some length. In his day, Rockmount was an operating commercial farm, with tribal land bounding the north bank only. He mentions the road running close to the river on the north bank at this point, and about being able to fish upstream and downstream from this point as far as your legs will carry you. He also touches on the problem of silt in these lower reaches, but goes on to list "a dozen fish of 4lb, three five-pounders, one of 6lb 9oz and one of 7lb 8oz". Mervyn Gans is no stranger to these waters either, reporting productive pools both above and below Rockmount. Crass, in his 1986 book *Trout in South Africa*, writes about the practice in the 1930s and 1940s in which small fish caught in the upper reaches of the Bushman's were translocated to this lower section of river to compensate for the fact that fish were less plentiful down there because of relatively unsuccessful breeding. The pools in late autumn or early spring are large, deep and crystal clear, and the water is most inviting.

Jonathan Boulton of Mavungana Flyfishing is a fan of the fleeting annual fly fishing window of opportunity down on Zulu Waters in the spring, where he and Anton Martyn pursue monster browns, each in their own way. Jonathan concedes that his tidy upstream dropper/dry combo is no match for Anton's big streamers flung downstream on a sinking line in those big pools. That event is one sandwiched between cold water in the winter and full, cloudy or even muddy flow in the summer, but stories and pictures of great big fish from Zulu Waters are enough to keep one going back to hunt for those big, fierce, migratory browns. The theory is that big browns go down into Wagendrift Dam below to sulk in the depths in summer, or perhaps they overwinter there when the water is lean. Either way, they seem to move past Zulu Waters in the spring. One day, I tell you. One day!

Above right: A sizeable brown from Zulu Waters. Below: Hiking out of the Ncibidwane River valley on a stifling January day.

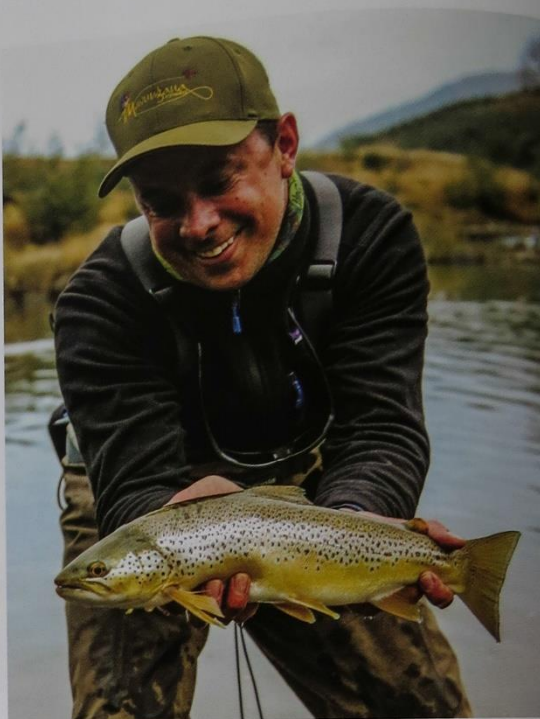


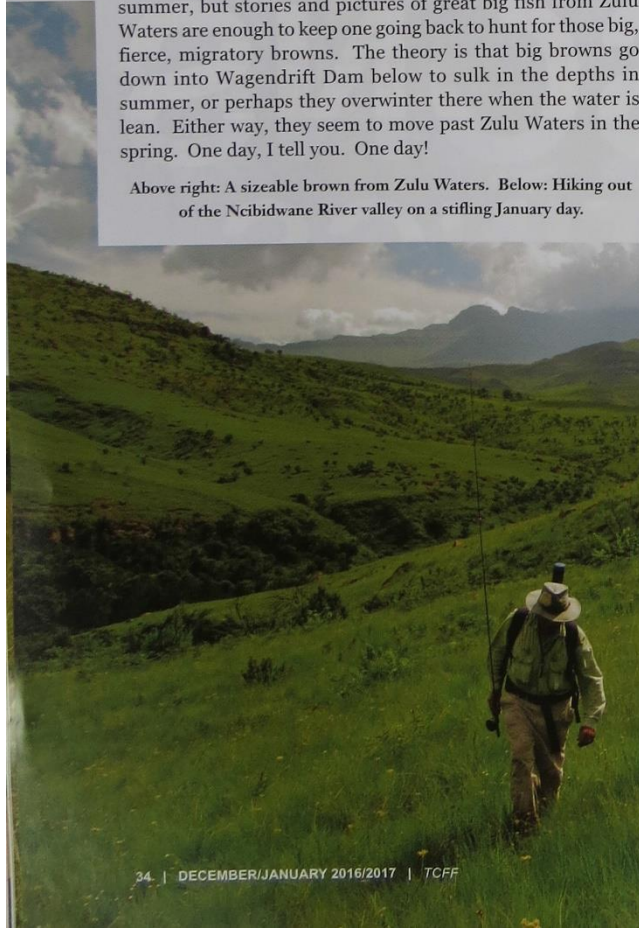
Photo: Mavungana Flyfishing

NOTES ON CONSERVATION

The Bushman's is in very good shape in its upper reaches, where it flows through the greater Drakensberg Transfrontier Park area and then on down through the farm belonging to the Brown family. Likewise, the Ncibidwane starts off in pristine mountain habitat, but wattle trees have crept surprisingly far up the watercourse, and in that hidden and seldom traversed valley, who knows if they will be kept in check by Ezemvelo? Where both streams enter the tribal areas, thick stands of wattles appear on the hillsides, providing much-needed firewood for the residents of the valley, but, along with the inevitable overgrazing, they contribute to summer silt loads. The Ncibidwane seems to be worse affected, and is often the culprit, dirtying the river below the clinic. Above the clinic on the main river, the stream is in relatively good nick in terms of both silt and litter, but as one progresses down onto Kwa-Mankanjane and Rockmount and below, the cumulate litter and silt are cause for some concern.

Next issue: Part II – The Mooi River.

“... THERE HAS TO BE SOME WORTHWHILE AND NEVER-FISHED WATER IN THERE BEGGING TO BE DISCOVERED.”



Bad day on the Bushman's

18 Bad day on the Bushman's

"... the Bushman's, when the sun is riding high in a cloudless sky and the wind refuses to ripple the low, clean water, is always testy fishing."

Hugh Huntley and I opened the season on a very troublesome trout.

We found it hard on the feed in a shallow glide on the Bushman's River, rising regularly at the edge of the ripple, in water as clear as it ever gets in this happy stream.

We had fished up from the Willows, near the bridge to Henderson's cottage, without getting so much as a passing glance from the browns that live in this lively flow, so when we at last came on a trout that was obliging enough to put a few rings on the surface, we made up our minds there and then to catch him.

As it turned out, we found it anything but an easy fish.

Then again, September on the Bushman's, when the sun is riding high in a cloudless sky and the wind refuses to ripple the low, clean water, is always testy fishing.

The trout see you coming a farmer's mile away and only those with an insane disregard for the basics of self-protection will come out from the cover of bank or rock to go on the feed.

But this one was obliging, and as it was Hugh's turn (we usually fish a stream turn and turn about), he got to throw the first fly across it, which he did faultlessly – in my opinion, if not the trout's.

The fly drifted across the last of the spreading rings and was ignored – not even rejected, which would suggest that it had at least come up for a closer look and then decided not to risk it.

Even worse, on the fourth or fifth cast it fingered its nose at us and rose to take an insect right alongside our fly.

I moved downstream a short way and slipped into the water to have a closer look at what our friend was eating, but the findings were far from encouraging.

It was a minute grey caddis that was hatching with a pastel lemon belly and, at a rough guess, I'd say five or even ten of them would have fitted on to the nail of your little finger, with elbow room for all.

I called the news out to Hugh and we began a frantic search for a serviceable imitation. Hugh had left his valuable jar of microscopic dry flies in the car and all I came up with was a light brown caddis, size 18, which still dwarfed the natural.

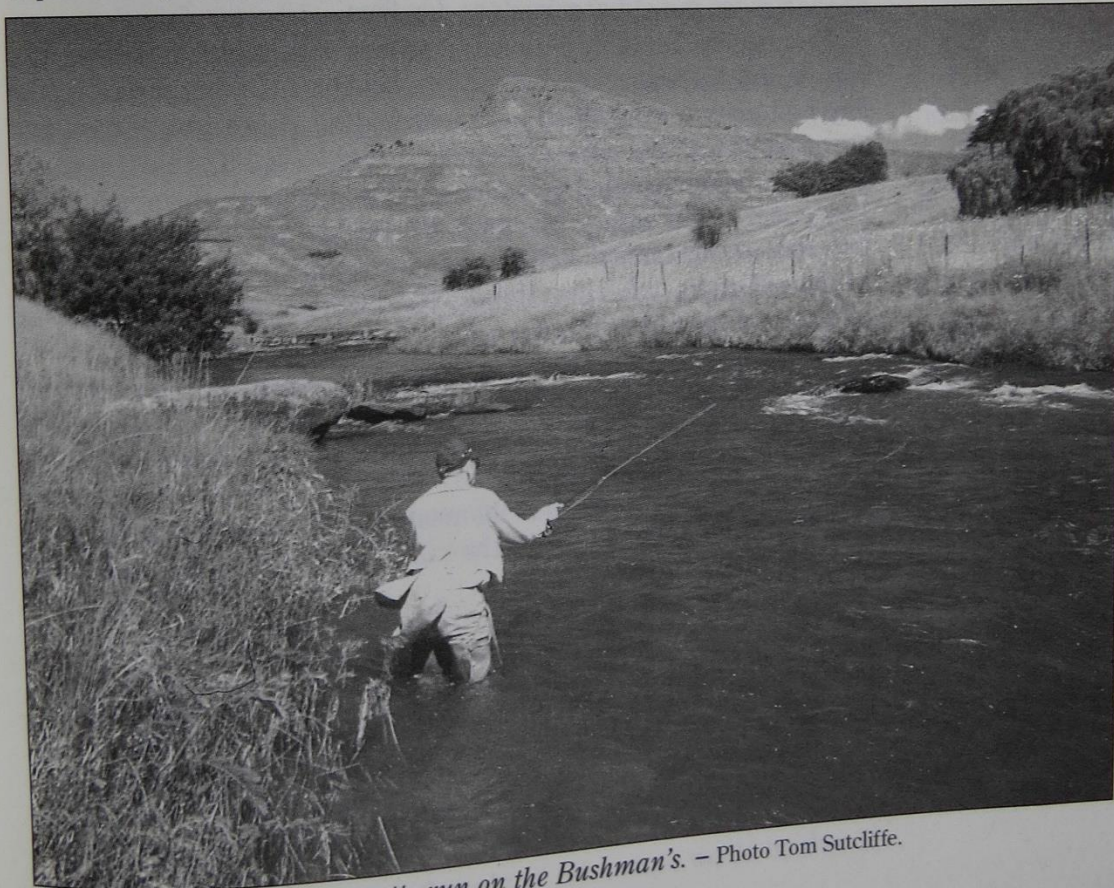
But it was the smallest caddis we owned right then, so we used it.

Hugh laid the first cast gently on the water and we watched the fly drift this way and that in the tug and pull of the broken current, but no trout rose to intercept it.

So he lengthened the line and cast a little higher up, to give it a longer drift. This time it looked just dead right, and in a bold sweep the trout had the fly and was at last firmly on.

Out came a bright yellow trout, a shade under 2 kg, with a stomach packed tight with little grey caddis flies.

That should have been the first of a good many fish, but by lunchtime Hugh had only one more and I just scraped in with a brace of pan-sized youngsters.



Hugh Huntley quarters a pretty run on the Bushman's. — Photo Tom Sutcliffe.

The answer to a good day was obvious. We needed a small - correction, minute - caddis fly imitation, and as the key to success was locked in the boot of my car, we slogged it back to the shade of the willows to eat a sandwich and augment our sad stock of trout flies.

The wind was up now and it would ripple the water enough to help the fishing we thought, as we ate our simple repast on the cool side of the trees.

"The answer to a good day was obvious. We needed a small - correction, minute - caddis fly imitation ..."

Hugh located his precious jar of tiny dries and opened it to stare in satisfaction at the contents. Nestled in the bottom was a pinch of the smallest winged wonders, dressed on hooks, from 20 to 28 - and just as we began to count all the chickens we knew must surely hatch for us that afternoon, Hugh dropped the bottle and the wind scattered them like dust in the veld around us.

We began fishing eventually with what flies we'd managed to retrieve from the grass on hands and knees and ran out of trout just as soon as we ran out of miniature dry flies.

Fortunately, I had time to settle scores with a plucky fellow who rose in the flat water just behind the bridge and who earlier in the day had shown himself to be uncatchable. Hugh got one or two more, all fat fish, but none of them very big.

All the while the wind got colder and in the south the sky became heavy and sullen with grey cloud. We knew that it wasn't only the low, clear water that was keeping us from a full creel.

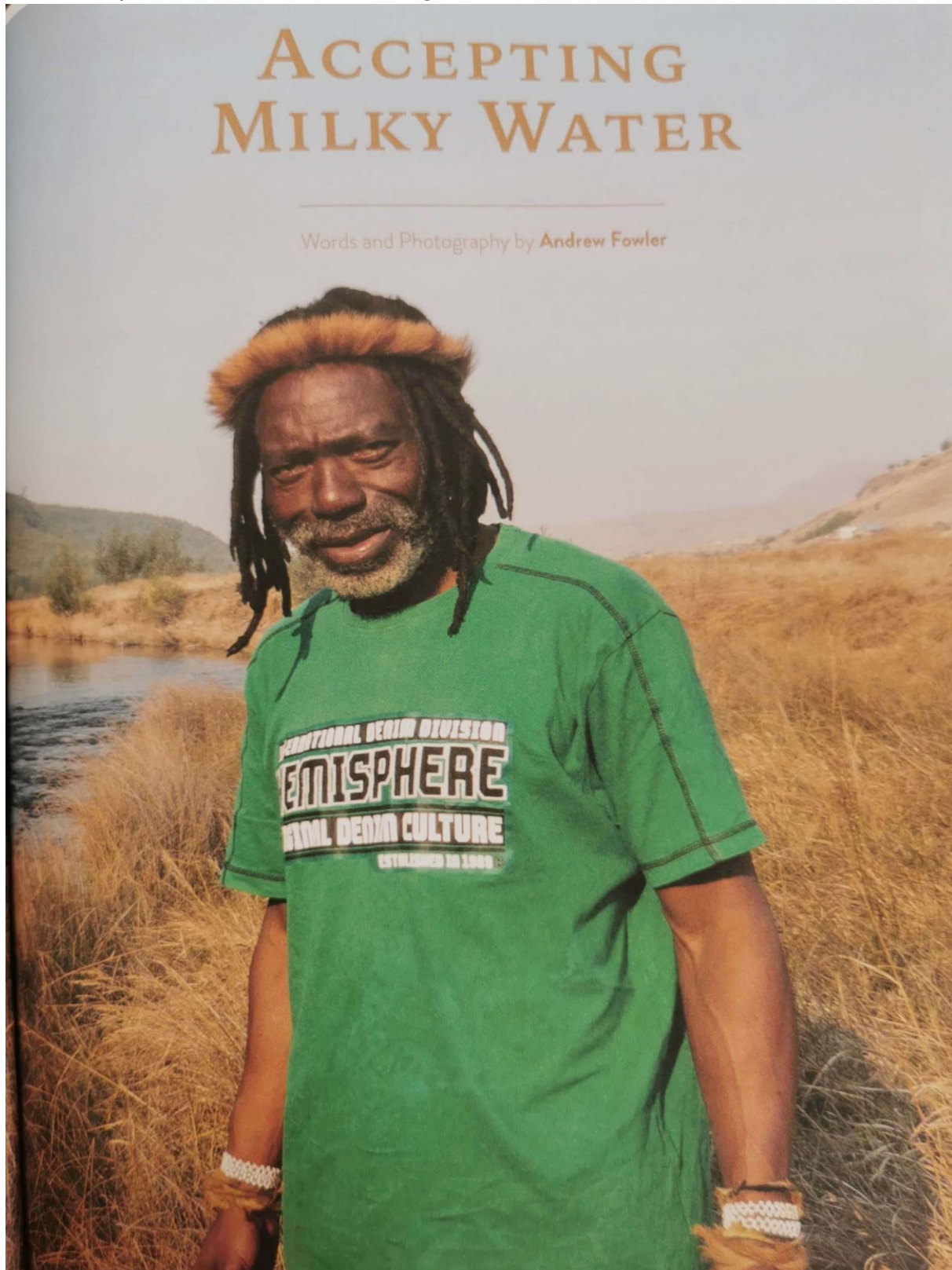
On reflection, it was one of those days when nothing comes easily, all the trout seemingly forewarned of our arrival.

It was exactly like fishing a beat when someone else has just fished up ahead of you, and once or twice I caught myself looking upstream to see if I could catch a glimpse of our phantom angler, which, of course, I never did.

This was the Bushman's at its meanest, but we had a grand day's fishing nevertheless, and after the rains come we will be back there to settle a few scores.



An Article by Andrew Fowler in a British magazine in 2020:



It is a sweaty afternoon. Mtshali and I rattle along the Ncibidwana Road towards the last settlement before the mountains, where I will drop him off after our meeting with the Nkosi. We chat about the state of the school buildings near his house, the state of the grazing lands, and the best way to erect theft-proof beat markers to replace the ones that were stolen or vandalized.

"Eish, these young ones!" says Mtshali and he shakes his head, causing the iziyendane to jiggle about somewhat comically.

Mtshali is a senior councillor and during our meetings he is often seated beside the Nkosi. He is also quick to fill me in on the culture and history of his Hlubi people, and more pointedly the status and importance of the King. It is no coincidence that he wears his hair in the traditional dreadlock-style "iziyendane" that hang about him.

When I first started to have dealings with these Hlubi people, I thought that the reference to the Nkosi as a king was a quaint anglicism of the word 'chief', but later research and clarification from Mtshali revealed that I was indeed in the presence of royalty. The Nkosi is none other than Langelibalele the Second. Musiwenkosi. King of the Hlubi nation. By extension, I regard Mtshali with a certain degree of reverence, and as he climbs from the cab of my vehicle, we bid farewell with an air of aplomb and ceremony. I had told him that I was going this way anyway, which was a lie, but I didn't want to leave him to walk the several kilometres in the hot sun while I drove off in a cloud of dust. In any event, I reasoned that it would give me a chance to drive down to the Ncibidwana stream and 'check on conditions', which is indeed what I do.

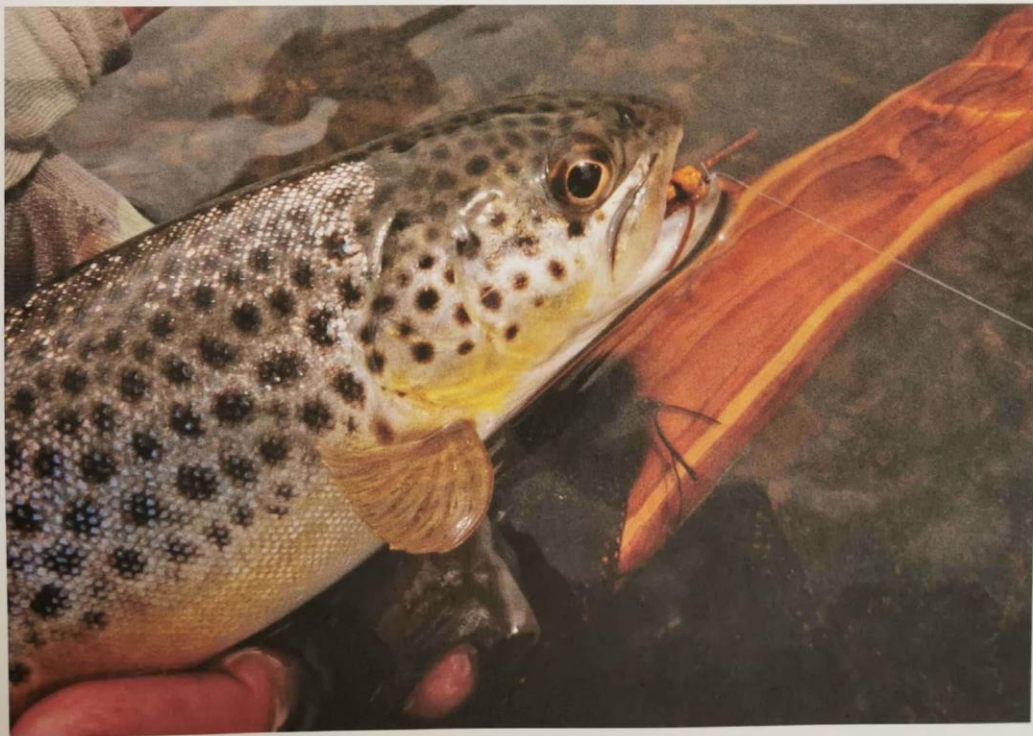
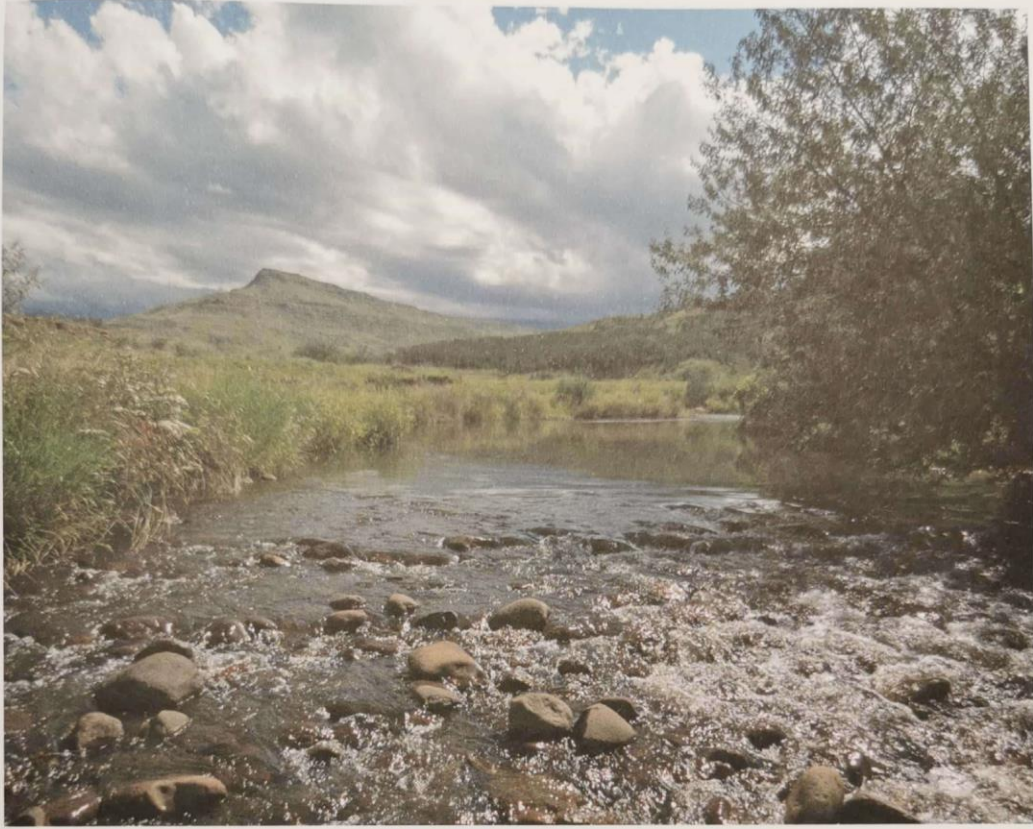
'Checking on conditions' is something I enjoy. It involves driving slowly onto the bridge and craning your neck in an attempt to see the water over the railing, when you know from your last visit that you can't see over the railing anyway. Then you park, far enough from the bridge that you have to walk back, kicking stones as you go. From the bridge I look upstream first, then I cross and look downstream to survey the same water with equal interest, as though the river above and that below are two separate entities. Then I return to the upstream view, stitching the two rivers in my mind with the thread of my steps. Next I take pictures with my phone to send to my mates back in town, so that I can boast of my mid-week freedoms, and receive their jealous grimace emoticons, delivered in return from their desks. I rub it in with a few words of description: "Ncibidwana full and slate grey, running high after last night's rain.

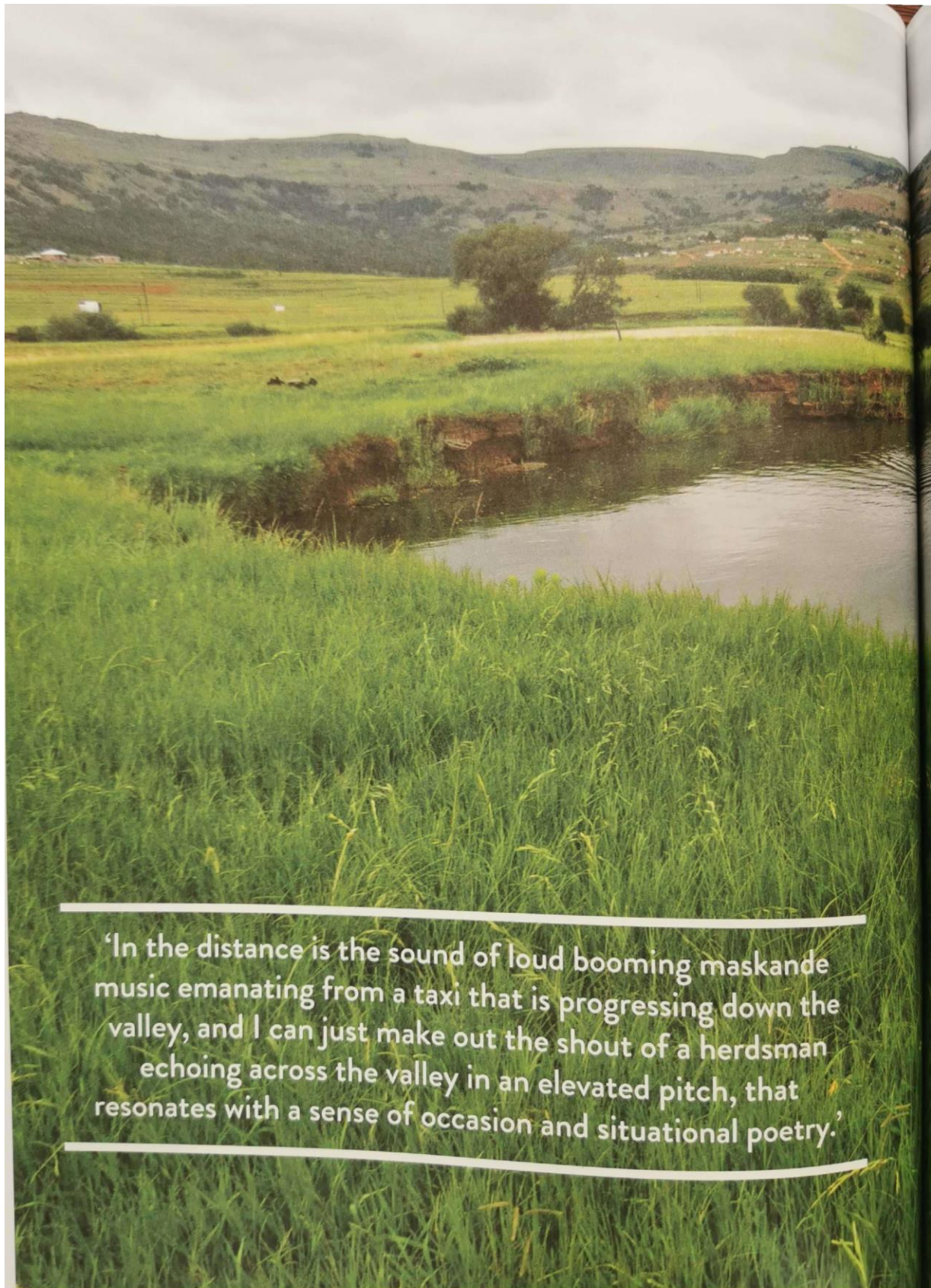
Bushman's better." I send them different pictures, to mix it up a bit. Then, in a moment of realization and appreciation of my freedoms, I gaze up at the mountain, and consider that this view of the sleeping giant is not the common one from the resort in the next valley. It is different. It is not a tourist's image. It belongs to Mtshali and I.

I swing back onto the road, and retrace my route up the main Mtshezi valley, thinking as I go, where exactly I should park and fish. It has been a morning of meetings and planning for the current trout season. There has been discussion about the rod fees, the vandalised beat markers, and the planned litter pick-up day with the school kids. Now, having driven two hours from my home, I plan to reward myself with a bit of fly fishing. There is no sense in driving all the way home now to sit at a PC. "I am going to fish!" I tell myself, trying to put out of my mind the heat and intense sunshine of an African afternoon.

'I nod to myself, as if to agree with my earlier self-talk that this water is, in fact, fishable.'

Presently, I park at the old road camp beside the abandoned bitumen tank and start to rig up. The usual band of kids who run down to the car to offer their car-guarding service are absent for some reason. It is quiet and peaceful. Not totally quiet mind you. In the distance is the sound of loud booming maskande music emanating from a taxi that is progressing down the valley, and I can just make out the shout of a herdsman echoing across the valley in an elevated pitch, that resonates with a sense of occasion and situational poetry. It is a peaceful and far-off tune that heralds the presence of a tribe. It is a rhythmic and parochial ode to the age of this rural settlement. I try to draw parallels with Neil Diamond's "it's the sound that I love" from a New York City street, but this is different.





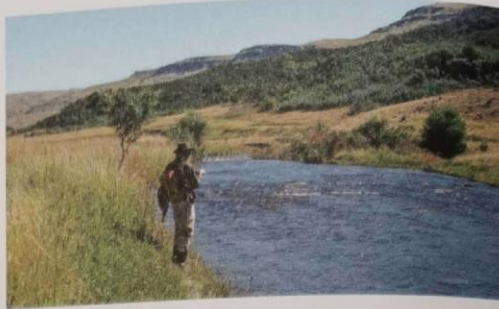
‘In the distance is the sound of loud booming maskande music emanating from a taxi that is progressing down the valley, and I can just make out the shout of a herdsman echoing across the valley in an elevated pitch, that resonates with a sense of occasion and situational poetry.’



Down at the river I take a look at the first run. The water is a pale slate grey, but it looks a little less opaque than it did on the tributary earlier. From the top of the high bank, I can see the boulders on the stream bed. I nod to myself, as if to agree with my earlier self-talk that this water is, in fact, fishable. So far this season, it has been horribly hot and dry. My one earlier visit here involved slithering around on algae-covered rocks, and the water was just too warm. It is barrelling along at a pace now, and despite the heat of the day, the temperature feels refreshingly cool when I sink my wet wading boot into the flow. I will take these conditions over last month's any day, even if it means slate grey water. I look at the immediate river banks and see flattened grass from much higher flows at some earlier time. I wonder if it was last night, or a day or two ago. My Zulu is never good enough, and my hosts, who are not fly fishers, are never articulate enough in these finer details for me to ever know the precise and important details. In recent months I have attempted to encode the water colour chart into: "lemonade, ginger beer or coffee?" But they reply with a smile and an alternative description that leaves me uncertain, and them in charge.

I'm working a four-weight, nine-foot rod, with a small streamer. There was a time when I was too fussy about water clarity to ever allow myself the excuse of throwing a streamer in a trout stream. Us South African fly fishers are an overly-refined lot, and throwing a streamer meets with as much disdain as killing trout and fishing downstream. But I have been coming down here, out of the mountain zone, for a while now, and with that comes the acceptance of occasional milky water, so I have embraced it with a streamer from time to time. I rub the others' faces in it by embellishing it beyond the truth: "It's a bloody great hairy thing, the size of your dog," I tell them. In fact, it is a size ten Woolly Bugger, but I enjoy being the rebel for a while.

I throw the fly up into the main current and work it down towards me, letting it swing past and straighten out below me. I keep my focus as it swings around. I have had decent-size browns smack it at that point often enough to know that



I mustn't allow my mind to drift. I use the downstream pull on the line to load the rod and lift off with a forward cast that exercises the power of the stick in a pleasing way. I only occasionally go as heavy as a four-weight on our streams, but I am enjoying the relative brute-force feeling of this rig.

On the second drift a brown chases the fly as I lift off. As one does, I allow instinct to take over and pull the fly out of its mouth, unable to help myself. I swear aloud.

The view upstream to the mountain is now obscured by thick cloud, and the humidity hangs heavily in air that occasionally reverberates thickly with the sound of distant thunder. Sweat trickles uncomfortably down under my shirt collar, but I am relieved that the severity of the sunshine has abated. It was those same cloud-covered high mountains that caused the Natal Carbineer Regiment to get hopelessly lost in November of 1873, when they attempted to cut off the escape of Langalibabele the First: The great grandfather of the Nkosi who I spent the morning with. The posse of British soldiers went off mistakenly to the Hlatimbe Valley, a staggering distance to the south, and crested the escarpment there, before doubling back along the top in an attempt to cut off the escaping Hlubi people who were headed for Lesotho. Arriving at the head of the pass a full day too late, exhausted and weakened by hunger, a chaotic skirmish followed a messy negotiation process. There are now five high points along the escarpment in the vicinity of the site named after the soldiers who were shot down in the rout that followed. Erskine, Bond, Potterill, Katana, and Khambule. Their leader, Durnford achieved a narrow escape on his loyal steed, Chieftan, but would bear the scar of a withered arm and badly-set collar bone to his death at the battle of Isandlwana in 1879.

Just up the valley, a large riverside boulder bears the number '75' carved by the regiment's cook while the soldiers were encamped there in the aftermath. The same aftermath that allegedly saw soldiers of my own British descent slaughter two hundred men, women and children of the remaining Hlubis, on the very soil on which I now stand, fly rod in hand. It is difficult not to be affected by all this.

‘I throw again, with equal care. Bang. A lovely 12-inch brown comes to the net, and on the very next cast, in the same spot, another.’

Langalibalele II currently fights a court battle to have the kingdom of the Hlubis recognized by the state, coming from a position of weakness and dispossession triggered by those same domination events of 1873.

The water that tumbles down from those high points, past the ‘75’ immortalised in the rock, to the houses of the disempowered Hlubi in the valley around me, is our trout water. I fish it with a sense of place, history, and veneration that enriches the experience.

At the next spot, the river divides and a small side stream comes down on the near side. In lower water it is dry, but now it flows. I take a look at the pace of the water, and a conviction develops in me that the trout will be harbouring here, out of the ferocity of the main flow. I stalk carefully forward, and throw the Buzzer in under an overhanging tree. Nothing. My conviction is undeterred. I throw again, with equal care. Bang. A lovely 12-inch brown comes to the net, and on the very next cast, in the same spot, another.

I wander upstream and have a few throws in the pool above. One fish chases the fly, but I am distracted by some cows interfering with my vehicle nearby and I miss it. In the run above I try throwing the fly straight across the current into a milky and unlikely-looking tributary that comes in from the far side. It doesn’t look pretty and my fly drags hopelessly, but I persist, because a season or two back I extracted a twenty-one inch brown doing exactly this. There is a roll of closer thunder, and the tactic is not bearing fruit. I decide to pack it in and get back to my wife and tell her of my day.

I pause to send a picture of one of the fish to my buddy, who is still sitting at his desk. I rub it in. He sneers. It was the reaction I was after. I am tired from the heat of the day. I climb into the vehicle, and suck my water bottle dry. In a moment of contemplation, with the empty water bottle in my lap I remember that ‘Langalibalele’ means ‘the sun is boiling hot.’ I start the engine and turn on the music. Neil Diamond is singing Beautiful Noise.

I wonder if Mtshali ever listens to this type of music.



Bushmans River conservation:

Probably the greatest need on the Busman's is for community engagement in the tribal area to ensure sustainable land use in the catchment. Community members have been engaged in various education and development initiatives over the years, but there is more that can be done.

Currently the amaHlubi people run a very successful community flyfishing project, in which members can buy a rod ticket from the king's secretary.



Half of the estimated annual tickets are paid for by the Natal Fly Fishers Club, in exchange for which their members are entitled to book for free, provided that they accept the “first come, first served” basis.

The community provides a uniformed car guard for an agreed daily fee.

Beat markers and parking signs are unfortunately vandalised at times, but the publicly available maps (<https://www.nffc.co.za/day-tickets>) go a long way in guiding anglers to the correct parking and beats. Moves are afoot to put more secure (albeit less visible) signage, by way of painted rocks.

