

# The Cold side of the mountain: The Lotheni

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## **An introduction to the Lotheni River as a Trout River**

### **Name:**

This Zulu name for the River refers to black ash, and is reported to refer to the black shale that occurs in various places along the river's course. Another opinion of the name origin suggests that the resident tribes fled hastily when they received news that King Shaka's army was on the way, and that they left their camp fires smoldering such that Shaka's men found them still warm, and black.

### **Source:**

The Lotheni rises at the "back" of the Giant's Castle mountain (on the South facing side) at an altitude of 3,100 metres above sea level . Its source is within a few hundred metres of the other great trout stream that flows the other way off the Giant....The Bushmans.

### **Trout Water:**

The Lotheni first becomes fishable as a Trout stream at an altitude of about 1,600metres ASL, where there is a significant waterfall, with a gorge below. This spot is a 2.8km hike above Syme's Cottage at the Lotheni camp. From there it flows out into more open country and then back through a poort just below Symes and the Lotheni campsite, before opening out again and being joined from the north by the Elandshoek, a significant tributary that rises in a fan of streams that drain the cemicircular South Ridge (and which on the 'front end' give birth to the Ncibidwana and the Mooi). The Elandshoek itself is worth exploring too, and it has no waterfall like the main river, meaning that you can expect to find Trout far up. On the main river from the campsite down to the hutted camp is a fast rocky stretch, but there is a diminutive stream called the Ngodwini which joins from the south on that stretch, which has a head of Trout in it too. Below the campsite the river passes through another poort, where one can see the spectacular series of falls on a tributary, which is called "Jacobs Ladder", and where one finds a pool named "cool pools", which is a popular swimming spot. The next 3.6 kms, down to the park gate, is arguably the best Trout water, with lovely interesting pools, runs and features, and some of which runs right alongside the road. In the four kilometres from the park boundary to the Folly Bridge, the land is uninhabited, but is unfenced and easily accessible, and has some excellent water. From Folly bridge (1300 m ASL) down, the river passes a village, but the water looks good. Then it flows through one of the more intricate pieces of topography on a KZN Trout stream, being joined first by the Hlambamasoka from the North, and then, just before it goes through yet another poort, by the Nhlatimbe from the South.

Below this Poort is three and a half kilometers of water before one encounters the bridge on the main Lotheni road. Below that is another seven and a half kilometers before one reaches the 1200m contour. So, in the 14.2 kilometres from Folly Bridge to the 1200m contour, the

river falls 100m, in contrast to the 13,5kms from the falls to Folly bridge in which it falls 300metres! The lower river is far less explored by fly-fishers in recent times, and is a slower river, with bigger pools, and less of a mountain stream experience, but no doubt worthy of further exploration.

### **Tributaries:**

Most of the tributaries are mentioned above. One skipped there is the Bhola, which enters a little way below “cool pools”. The Lotheni is unique for its number of sizeable tributaries, most of which can hold a population of Trout in average and wet years.

### **Accessibility:**

From the 1600m contour down to the park gate, some 10 kms away (as the river flows) is all accessible with a day permit bought at Lotheni. The area below the park looks like a tribal (communal) area, but in fact, invisible to the visiting angler, there are actually multiple tenements belonging to various owners, but in an area where tribal authorities hold sway. Access and how to get permission is therefore uncertain.

### **Fish:**

The Lotheni is a Brown Trout stream. It was first stocked in 1907. Trout are typically 10 inches in length, and fish of 15 to 17 inches are far from uncommon, but bigger fish are undoubtedly present.

### **Water Quality:**

The water quality of the Lotheni above Folly bridge is superb. Below the bridge is undoubtedly affected by the human habitation, not least of which is the overgrazing. The Hlambamasoka valley and the Nhlatimbe are both known to come down dirty after rain, owing to overgrazing and wattle infestations in the catchment. Silt is particularly present in the river below the main road.

### **Wattle, bramble, gum, bugweed:**

The upper reaches of the river in the park, are in pristine condition, and free from any alien encroachment. The stretch below the gate, but above Folly Bridge has minor wattle encroachment, which is by no means problematic. The area below that, which is quite densely settled is free of tress, and then the poort below the confluence with the Nhlatimbe is quite heavily infested, but below the main road bridge is open. The Hlambamasoka and Nhlatimbe are sadly both affected by wattle infestation. Brambles are less present in this valley, as is bugweed.

### **Aquatic Insect populations:**

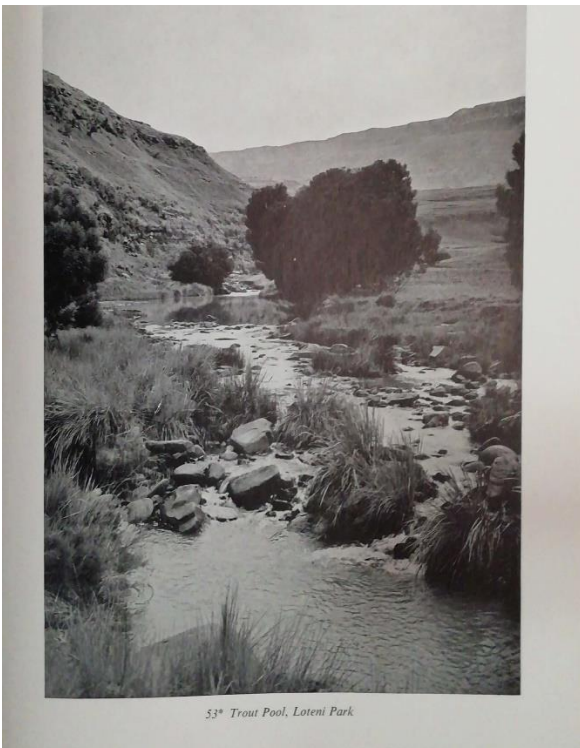
The Lotheni has a good diversity of aquatic life. Stoneflies are not uncommon.

### **History**

The river was first stocked by John Parker and Donald McKenzie in 1907. It was also used to seed fish over the mountain at Vergelegen in 1917. In the September 1916 Railways book "Trout Fishing in South Africa", there are a few sentences which divulge that there was once a fly fishing club at Lotheni, which gave members access to various waters which were then on private land. One such property was the farm "Painsacre", on which you will find Jacobs Ladder The Lotheni camp, and "Cool pools", and that farm name is used as the address for the angling club. Here is also talk of a Hotel at Lotheni, but it is not clear where that might have been. In Bennion's 1920 book "The Trout are rising in England and South Africa", he received a letter from a man named "John" in which he requests a rod from England, and promises to take Bennion to the Lotheni when he gets to South Africa, saying that it is "better than the Mooi". In Bob Crass' 1986 book 'Trout in South Arica', he mentions Willie Root, and his son Peter, who farmed on one of the farms now included in the reserve, and mentions that Peter knew where to find the Browns!. The 1936 book, "Fishing the inland waters of Natal", mentions a guest house at a farm called "The Bushes", owned by one JD Christie, where "10 miles" of fishing was available, but the other list in the book, that of fishing hotels, makes no mention of the Lotheni Hotel. "Christies" is shown on the map in that booklet, as being at the junction of the main road, and the road up to the present day resort. Christie, it would seem, was able to sell you a fishing license in those days. From all these references there is just one picture of the Lotheni...this one:



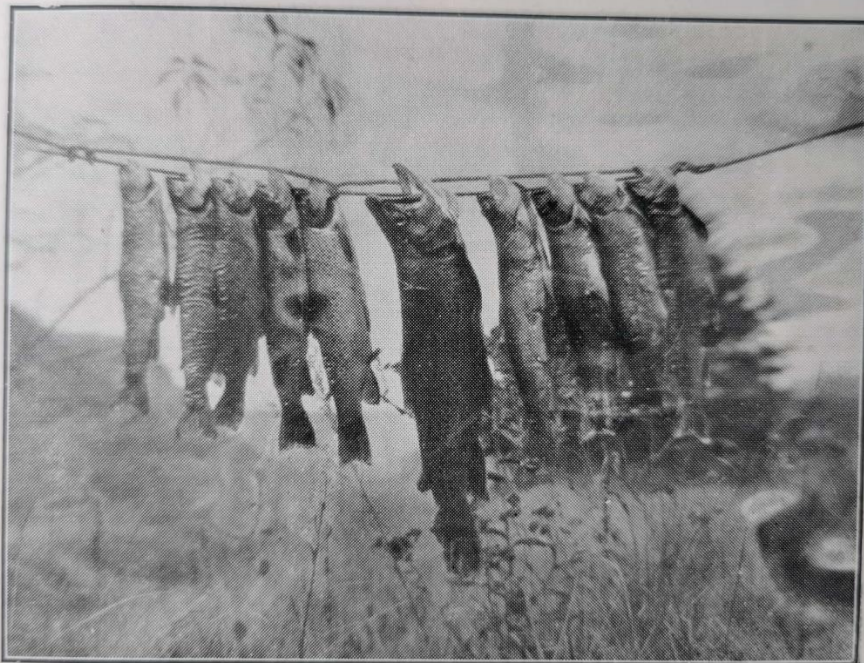
Reference is also made by Bob Crass to a flood in 1951, that changed the course of the river so as to cut off "Bush Pool". Crass writes extensively about the river in "Trout Fishing in Natal: (1971) and that chapter is copied in this document. Sydney Hey, in his famous 1957 book, Rapture of the River, makes no reference to the Lotheni in his chapters in which he surveys waters around SA, but oddly his book carries this photo:



53\* Trout Pool, Loteni Park

(The Compleat Angler)

A Basket of Brown Trout  
from the Loteni



Scanned with CamScanner

#### **Loteni.**

The distance from Nottingham Road Station is forty miles. There is no postcart nor other public conveyance plying between these two points, so visitors must arrange for a conveyance to meet them at Nottingham Road.

The Umzinga and Loteni Streams are both stocked with trout and are ready for fishing, the former from Impendhle, the latter from Brooks' Store. Another tributary—the Lavana—affords good fishing from Bulwer, which is reached from Donnybrook, on the Cape-Natal Railway. The waters of these streams are said to be owned by private individuals. The proprietors of the hotel at Loteni own a large stretch of water on their property, where visitors, doubtless, could be accommodated and obtain good trout fishing on making the necessary arrangements. An angling club exists at Loteni, the members of which have certain privileges to fish in private waters. All particulars can be obtained from the Secretary, Painsacre, Loteni.

Many thousands of trout have been placed in the upper reaches of the Elands River, but, so far, no fishing for trout is taking place. Smaller quantities of trout fry have been placed in the Sitingwana Stream within half a mile of the Magistracy at Impendhle, and also in a small tributary of the Insinga River, yet nothing can be stated as yet relating to their well-being.

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## Maps:

### Where does the Lotheni run?



## **Books of relevance & Interest**

- Call of the Stream ...by Peter Brigg
- Trout fishing in Natal ...by Bob Crass
- Trout In South Africa ...by Bob Crass
- 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**

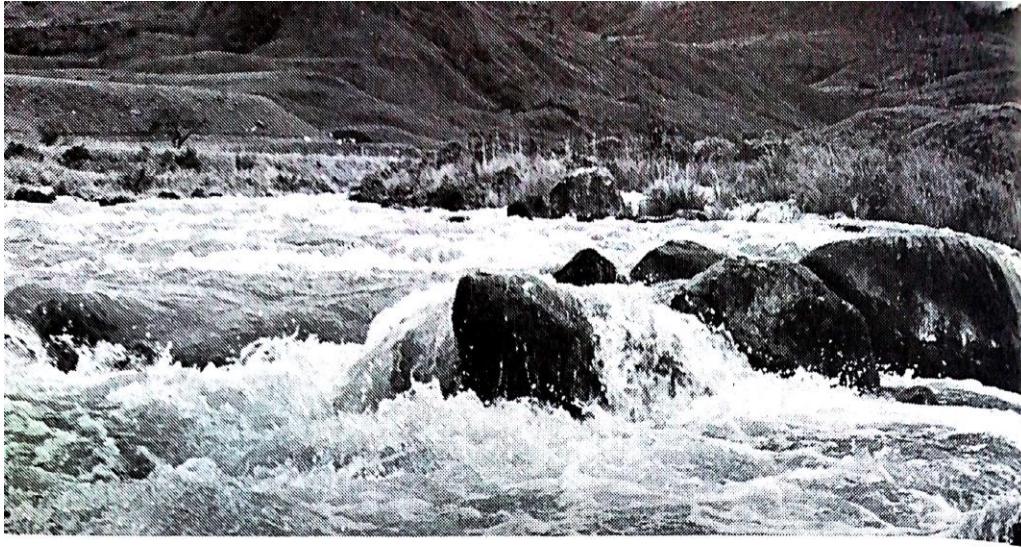
Some animal species you can expect to encounter on the Lotheni:

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

**Overleaf: Writings about the Lotheni by various authors:**



From "Trout fishing in Natal" by Bob Crass:



*The strong, fast-flowing Loteni in flood after heavy rain*

## THE LOTENI

ON THE SOUTHERN FACE of Giant's Castle a silvery cascade tumbles from the top of the escarpment. This is the source of the Loteni River, a neighbour of the upper Umkomaas which it joins in the foothills, above the confluence of Umkomaas and Umkomazana. From its source at more than 10,000 feet, the rivulet leaps downwards into a steep-sided valley to join forces at 5,000 feet with a feeder stream of almost equal size.

The main, or north fork has no fall to prevent fish moving upstream for a considerable distance above the confluence. The south fork, on the other hand, has a steep cascade within about a mile of the confluence. Above this cascade trout have failed to become established, but downstream brown trout have bred successfully for many years.

Although the Loteni hurries over its rocky bed, with few deep pools in its course, it produces trout of excellent quality. In time of drought they may find difficulty in keeping their dorsal fins under water, but brown trout are adept at making use of cover, even though the water is shallow. An angler may be surprised, therefore, to see a broad golden flank turn as his fly drifts past a sunken rock. If he is lucky he hooks the trout, but care is needed as the fish is likely to be heavy enough to break the finely tapered leader which is appropriate in the crystal clear water of the Loteni.

When Gilbert Symes lived on the upper part of what is now the Loteni Nature Reserve, he always knew the whereabouts of a few good trout. One day he had some guests from town and took them out to show them how to fish. Having demonstrated the art by catching a brace of trout, he handed over his tackle with the injunction to pay particular attention to a place where he knew a big trout lived. Gilbert left his guests to their own devices while he returned home to fry the fish he had already caught. The guests appeared at the house an hour or two later, empty-handed and somewhat crestfallen. When asked if they had not seen the big fish, they replied that they had indeed and that it "didn't half eat flies."

A brown trout seldom comes a second time if missed, especially if the angler strikes too hard and leaves his fly in its jaw. This I know only too well from personal experience, especially in earlier years when boyish enthusiasm often resulted in a broken leader and a heavy trout sulkily sinking back into its hiding place.

Fish, although of limited intelligence, do learn to some extent. A trout that has experienced the unappetising qualities of an artificial fly undoubtedly becomes more cautious in accepting the lures offered to it thereafter. Why the fish that Gilbert Symes's friends encountered should have gone on "eating flies", one cannot say.

Today most of the older trout have either been caught or become wary, since living in a nature reserve means that trout have to put up with the efforts of a good many aspiring anglers. There is still the possibility, however, of hooking a two or three-year-old fish that has grown to portly proportions. Even the smaller ones are splendid examples of how attractive a brown trout can look, when taken from a clear sparkling stream. A mature male Loteni trout, resplendent in its autumn nuptial dress, is as attractive as any fish that swims.

The most beautiful coloured trout are those that have been living against a background of pale sandstone rocks. Near the Loteni hutted camp, sandstone predominates in the stream bed and here the trout have pale olive-green backs, golden flanks and bright red spots.

A mile or two lower down, the river flows through gorges of dark dolerite where the fish are less colourful. A series of deep pools holds sizeable trout, however, and their sporting qualities are not diminished by their more sober colouring. One of the pools is a particularly good one for observing trout



from the hillside that rises steeply from the water's edge.

To watch trout quietly going about their business of finding food gives an insight into their ways. Each fish occupies a particular area, and they are not always where an angler would expect them to be. In this particular pool I was surprised to see, on one occasion, that the largest trout (it might have weighed 2lb.) was not in any of the best looking lies. It was feeding in a shallow backwater where the current was reversed and moved slowly over a sandbank. The trout was therefore facing towards the tail of the pool and was so placed that there is little doubt it would have seen any fisherman who tried to approach the pool. Even had an angler come within casting distance before frightening the fish, he would probably have directed his attention to the run at the head of the pool, inevitably putting to flight the fish feeding in the shallow backwater.

Because of their often unexpected behaviour, and because brown trout are by nature more wary and difficult to catch than rainbow, anglers will never denude a stream such as the Loteni of its fish. The available harvest may have to be shared among more people today than in the past, when few visitors penetrated this remote mountain valley, but so long as the river is fed by silvery cascades from the high tops, trout will continue to survive and grow in it.

The Loteni has a very different character from such rivers as the Polela or Mooi which meander across flat, open valleys with a comparatively gentle gradient. From the confluence of its two main sources in the Loteni Nature Reserve at an altitude of 5 000 feet, the river drops a thousand feet in ten miles. This gradient of nearly two per cent. means that the flow is rapid.

Waterfalls are not a feature of the river's course. There is only one fall and even that is not high enough to prevent the upstream migration of active fish. Indigenous scalies have been seen jumping the fall and trout could doubtless do the same. The fall is on the lower part of Painsacre, one of the farms that is now incorporated into Loteni Nature Reserve. Painsacre includes the site of the hutted camp, below which the river winds through a steep-sided valley. The waterfall is caused by a dolerite sill over which the stream pours into a deep pool. Three separate channels have been cut through the solid rock, with the main flow passing through a steep chute on the south side.

The waterfall pool holds a lot of trout, particularly in time of drought when its depth gives ample space for those forced to leave the shallow runs favoured when the river is full. The pool is not easy to fish since much of its perimeter is inaccessible. Apart from a ledge on the south side, the smooth black dolerite forms treacherous footholds for anyone approaching the pool at its head. It is possible to wade into the tail of the pool and by casting upstream several trout may be hooked without moving one's position when the fish are rising freely.

One of the biggest trout ever seen in the Loteni River was hooked there some years ago. It was lying in a channel in the sandstone rock near the tail of the pool, rising to mayflies that were drifting down with the current. It took an artificial fly with apparent willingness and settled back into its channel. At first the fish refused to budge, then suddenly it shot off upstream into the depths of the pool. With a shake of its head it dislodged the hook and vanished. Only the memory of a great, red-spotted trout remained to recall the excitement of that brief encounter.

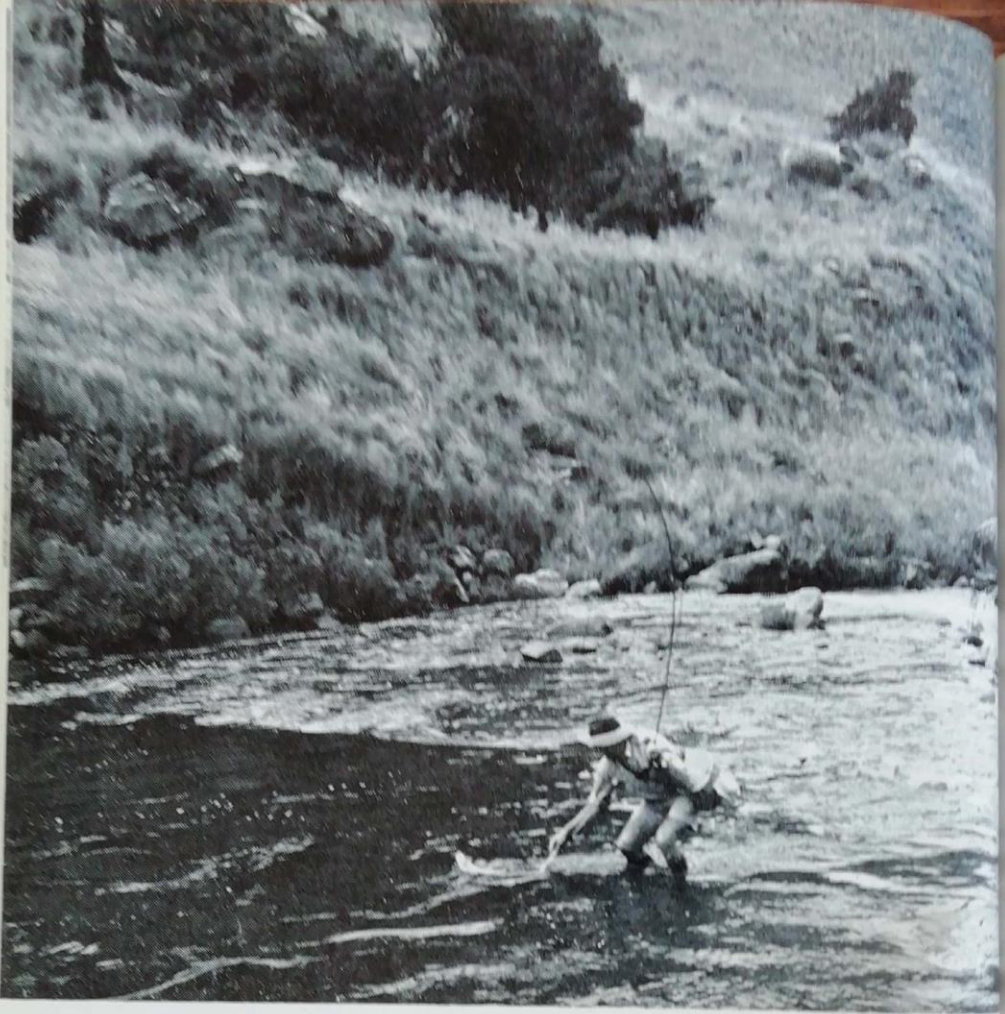
Near the top end of the Oorpoort section of the Nature Reserve, the Mbodla stream comes tumbling down a steep valley from the south. It is not so steep that trout cannot go upstream from the Loteni, and once I caught a plump fish of 14 ounces in the Mbodla when the main river was full after a storm. Small trout are always to be seen near the roadway a few yards above the confluence with the main river, which is itself shallow and gravelly at that point, forming an ideal breeding ground where young trout are numerous.

A quarter mile farther down is a long pool with projecting sandstone boulders among which one may find good trout. This was where Mr K. M. Pennington caught a fish of 4lb. 3oz. Other likely places succeed one another, although considerable stretches of shallow rapids occur between the pools. The rapids may hold trout when the river has been flowing strongly for a few weeks, but in low water periods they are not worth fishing. For the final mile or so of its course through the Nature Reserve, the Loteni has few permanent holding places.

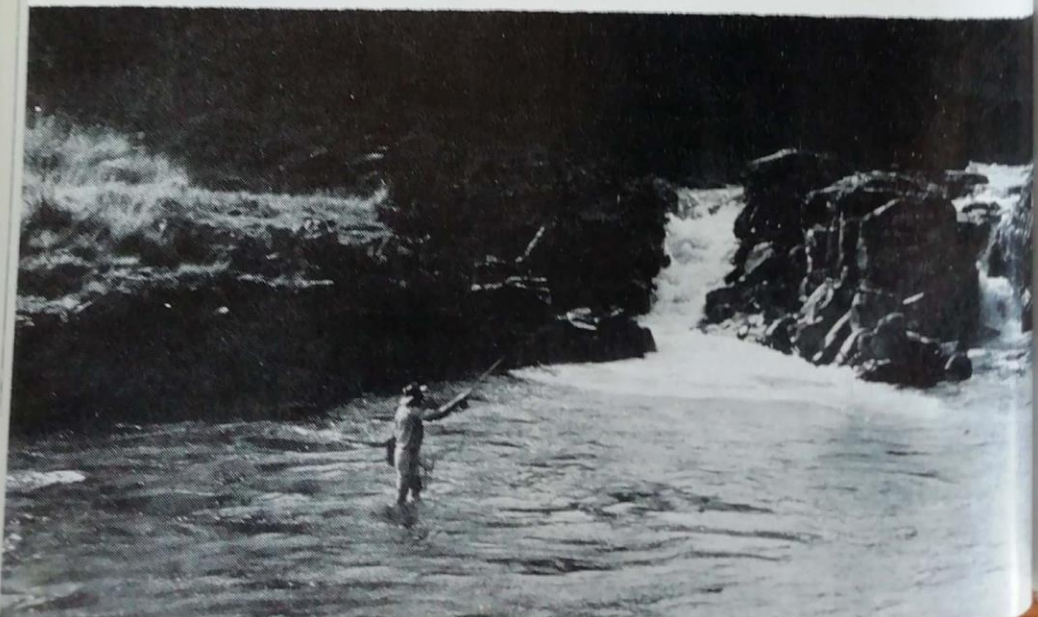
Below the Reserve boundary, a famous spot was the Bush Pool from which more than one five pounder was taken by Mr Peter Root some years ago. Regrettably, the course of the river changed in a flood and the pool has now disappeared.

A stretch of attractive broken water leads down to Mac-Gonigal's Drift, a shallow crossing place with a rocky pool





*Some of the pools are big and so are the fish in the Loteni*



above and a series of likely places below. For some reason the trout are often hard to catch in this part of the Loteni. This is particularly true on a bright, warm day, but even under unfavourable conditions the unexpected may happen. I was fishing without much hope one hot summer's day when a trout of 2½lb. took quite unexpectedly, a short distance below MacGonigal's Drift.

A couple of miles farther on, the river is crossed by the bridge carrying the road down the valley and a mile below that the Hhlambamasoka comes in from the north. This is quite a sizeable stream that holds trout for several miles of its course, although for much of the way the pools are too shallow in a dry season. Half a mile below the Hhlambamasoka confluence, the Loteni is joined by the Hlatimbe, its last major tributary. The river is now full size and it settles down to a more sedate pattern of flow compared to the boisterous rush of its higher reaches.

One falls under the spell of the Loteni River valley as soon as one heads towards the nature reserve from the main Nottingham Road-Himeville road. For the first mile, a towering hillside rises to the right while the river is visible far below on the left; then one swings round a sharp bend and the valley opens out to give a view up to the main escarpment of the Drakensberg.

The valley is at its best in autumn, when the river sings merrily over the rounded stones that it rolled downstream in the summer spates. These floods can be spectacular on occasion. On December 30, 1954, for instance, a particularly severe hailstorm struck the valley of the Loteni and its tributary Hlambasoka. The resulting flood caused extensive changes to the river bed, while thousands of fish (both trout and scabies) were washed out and left stranded on the banks.

Fish are normally able to take care of themselves in a spate, but a sudden rush of ice-cold water may be more than they can withstand. Violent temperature changes can paralyse even cold-water fish such as trout, and it is probably the chilling effect of a hailstorm rather than the mere force of flood waters that causes fish mortality such as occurred in 1954.

On a fine autumn day there is no thought of the destructive fury of a hailstorm. The river goes rippling over the gravel where trout will soon be spawning and the banks are bright with cosmos. This is not an indigenous flower, but few people would look askance at a plant that seems to do a useful job



of covering bare patches of soil and which at the same time adds a touch of gaiety to the landscape.

The angler who hooks a cosmos plant on his back cast may wish it wasn't there, but he is just as likely to get hung up on a tuft of indigenous tambookie grass. This is one of the hazards of autumn fishing.

It was on the Loteni that John Parker went fishing in his last autumn. His love of the sport had led him to become the pioneer of trout acclimatisation in Natal. He had indeed been the first to establish trout in Africa south of the Sahara. Now, his daughter took him to visit one of the rivers he had stocked, but the tambookie grass kept catching his fly and he gave up the attempt, saying he would be back in spring when the grass was down. The spring came, but John Parker was not among those who returned to the river.

When the Loteni is low in spring, the headwaters are not at their best and the trout tend to be somewhat lean and hungry. Pools with a depth of more than two or three feet are scarce right down to the Hlatimbe confluence, some eight miles below the Nature Reserve. Below that, however, the river has volume enough to offer good conditions for trout at low-flow periods. Down to the main road bridge, and below, excellent sport may be had in spring. In summer the water remains discoloured for long periods, unlike the upper reaches, which run clear in a matter of hours after a heavy rain.

I well remember as a boy riding over the hills to the Loteni valley and arriving at the river crossing where the bridge stands now on the road to the nature reserve. That day the river came above our horses' bellies, the brown flood giving no hope of fishing. Yet a few hours later we were catching trout on Oorpoort, in those days a privately-owned farm. The river was too full to wade across but it was clear enough for trout to see a fly and half a dozen fish were landed before dark. They were hooked in shallow backwaters and pieces of smooth water out of the main current. Several more were lost when they dashed off downstream with the weight of the flood in their tails. Under such conditions fishing is not easy.

The Loteni is seldom easy whatever the conditions and there are times when disgruntled anglers come to believe that nothing is to be found in the river. Yet the brown trout that have lived in the Loteni since John Parker put them in show remarkable adaptability to their environment. They may be untempted by a carefully presented fly, yet if one looks over

the bank of a pool quite a number of fish may be visible. Even better evidence of the actual stock is obtainable with an electric shocker. A stretch that yields only a couple of rises, when worked with an artificial fly, may be found to contain 40 or 50 trout concealed among the submerged rocks. Occasionally, it does become necessary to introduce more fish.

Even though it may be unproductive, the Loteni is never dull. Every part of it has a charm of its own, whether far up in the headwaters or below the main road bridge where it flows in wide sweeping curves across the alluvial floor of the valley. Here, pools alternate with shallow rapids and anyone who has the farmer's permission to fish may well catch a heavy trout. By far the majority are brown trout, but an occasional rainbow apparently swims up the Loteni, probably from the neighbouring Inzinga, which joins the Umkomaas not far below the Loteni confluence.

The last few miles of the Loteni flow through a Bantu Location, which is seldom entered by anglers. There are no roads to give access, but for those in possession of the necessary official permit a walk to the lowest stretches of the Loteni may prove worthwhile.

In spring good catches have been made. The biggest trout recorded from this water was caught by Mr W. H. J. Botha on November 3, 1963. It was a female,  $25\frac{1}{4}$  in. long weighing an estimated 6lb. Perhaps some day a still bigger trout will be caught.



And from "Trout in South Africa" by Bob Crass (1986):

The Loteni, on which the Roots owned one of the farms that now form part of Loteni Nature Reserve, had been stocked by John Parker and Donald McKenzie in 1907. It is similar to the upper Umkomaas, with its sources extending onto the southern flank of Giant's Castle. It has two main branches which unite at 1 500 m above sea-level not far above the nature reserve hutted camp. Trout have been caught for some distance above the confluence, but the streams are small, with a precipitous gradient of 45 m per kilometre.

Through the nature reserve the river flows merrily over a bed of sandstone rocks and gravel and through a short gorge section that includes several large, deep pools, before being joined by the Mbodhla Stream, which is itself large enough to hold trout. The gradient of the Loteni in this area is about 18 m per kilometre, which means it is still a rapidly flowing river.

When carrying a good volume of water, say two cubic metres a second, the Loteni is as delightful a stream to fish as one can find anywhere, with a vigorous stock of colourful brown trout. Its upper catchment is well conserved, so the water clears rapidly, even after heavy rain. The sparkling shallows and swirling pools are ideal for upstream nymph or dry-fly fishing. Peter Root, son of Willie, is an expert at the use of a dry fly in the rough water of his old home stretch of the Loteni.

Like any other quick-running shallow stream in South Africa, drought reduces the Loteni watercourse to a mass of exposed stones with no more than a trickle finding its way from one isolated pool to another. On the other hand, one can hear the rumble of rocks churning over one another when the river is in violent spate. Changes in course may occur in a flood, and the Bush Pool, which produced several five pounders in its time, was left completely isolated after a big storm in 1951.

Despite the extremes that its fish have to face, the Loteni offers good habitat and abundant feeding on insect larvae and crabs in years of bountiful rainfall. Indigenous scalies move upstream in early summer, as they do on the Mkomazana and Umkomaas, and there is always the chance that one will take a fly, although none

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of the yellowfish family is as keen on artificial lures as are trout. Underneath rocks, the little rock catlet, *Amphilius natalensis*, is occasionally to be found.

Below the nature reserve, two sizeable tributaries join the river which meanders through a narrow valley, its comparatively flat gradient of 8 m per kilometre allowing more silted conditions to develop. Earth off eroded hillsides keeps the water turbid in summer, but in spring and autumn good fishing has been enjoyed near the main road bridge and farther downstream, even as far as the confluence with the Umkomaas.

Rainbow trout have been introduced to the Loteni on several occasions, but have never become established. In the Inzinga (which occupies the next valley to the north), on the other hand, rainbows have at times been more numerous than browns.

## Excerpts from the book “Stippled Beauties” by Andrew Fowler, 2015

### Lotheni

The problem with Lotheni, is its location. It is remote, and you can't nip in there to fish for an hour or two. If you do, your driving time will exceed your fishing time by an unhealthy margin. Looking at it another way, that is what this river has going for it: it is remote.

When you study a map, you can reason that it is not all that remote. The river rises off the back of Giants Castle, and many of our other rivers rise on the front end. Furthermore, if you draw a straight line on the map from the Lotheni campsite to Highmoor, it measures under seventeen kilometres. But drive up to Lotheni from Nottingham Road, and you will see what I mean. It is not exactly a stroll to the corner café. For one thing you need to cross a significant ridge. That ridge of high ground effectively runs from the end of the Giant, all the way out to Inhlosane Mountain. It is not an obvious ridge as such, but perhaps rather a spine of high ground. When I say “high”, it is a shade over one thousand eight hundred metres where the road touches the sky at “Snowtop” on the way over into the greater Mkhomazi Valley in which one finds Lotheni.

It is uncanny how many of our Trout streams have their source either on the Giant itself, or on this spine. I for one set the weather application on my computer to Giant's Castle, to better get an idea of our stream flows throughout the season.

The Lotheni itself rises in a curve in the escarpment, bounded by the south facing slopes of the back of the Giant, as I mentioned, and sweeping away past “the Tent” and the Eagle to “Terateng” in the south west. In fact, according to my topo map, the source of the Lotheni lies within four hundred and fifty metres of the Bushmans, each of them draining in opposite directions.

The Elandshoek similarly rises just four hundred metres from the source of the Mooi, and drains a basin that feeds into the Lotheni just above the hutted camp. I still have to explore that stream.

The back of the Giant, where these two streams rise is better known as “Makaza” (*Zulu for “Cold”*). That would be because it faces south, and so in the winter barely receives any sun at all. For this reason it often remains iced up in winter, providing probably the only reliable ice climbing location in South Africa, for those to whom this is important. I can only imagine that this must contribute to colder winter water for the Trout. Maybe even cool water for longer in the season. I don't know. I don't get up there often enough to catalogue the water temperatures over the year. Either way, the spirited Browns of the Lotheni seem strong and wild in a way that befits their remote and lovely location.

As one approaches the Lotheni by road, you encounter a junction of rivers that is as rare as it is interesting. First you see the Nhlathimbe coming down a steep kloof and joining the main river just before it passes through a tight *poort*. Then as you proceed up the valley, through a rural setting of huts and cattle, you cross a stream known as the “Hlambamasoka”. Annie, who brings me my morning coffee at work, enjoyed my enquiry as to the meaning of this name. She said it meant “the perfect place to swim”, and that “masoka” refers to that perfection. I retorted that I didn't see the word “bhukuda”

(common Zulu for “swim”) anywhere in the word. Annie’s eyes glazed over and her mind left the room for a moment as though contemplating some mythical place. Then she returned to the conversation with a pointed enthusiasm and explained that this was DEEP Zulu. She was referring to what my father describes as “the King’s Zulu”, an older dialect which I do not understand at all. A dialect that I have heard Peter Little of Underberg speak so fluently as to leave an old Zulu woman’s heart aflutter with admiration and nostalgia. The Hlambamasoka is a delicate little stream, particularly in winter, but that thin blue line on the map calls desperately to me for further exploration.

What I have explored, albeit less frequently than I would like to have, is the Lotheni itself. From the crossing at “Folly Bridge”, it runs parallel to the road for about four kilometres before one enters the wilderness area. Just inside the gate of the reserve is a collection of old farm buildings with a picnic site and a museum. This is our favoured parking spot. From here you can venture downstream to fish back up, or work directly upstream, aimed for the well-known swimming spot at “Cool pools”, a further four kilometres up. Much of the river throughout this stretch is fast tumbling white water in summer, and a miserably thin thread in a wide open rock bed in winter.

In summer the fish spread out and occupy deceptively deep holes all along its length. In winter they must surely hole up in the one or two deep glides and pools. I think it is this that limits the population of fish. I have never caught small fish by the fistful at Lotheni, as I have done on the Ndawana and other berg streams. Instead, the Lotheni is for me a stream at the mercy of droughts, but with the blessing of altitude and temperature. Here you work steadily up the river probing every likely run with care and diligence. Your reward is the odd strong Brown, sometimes just a little larger than you expected.

Many years back I had a memorable day on the river with my eldest son, Luke, and his good friend Jethro, when they were just boys. We were dropped off at the museum, and spent the better part of the day working our way up to cool pools. We had a packed lunch of mussels and crackers and cheese in the backpack. The boys shared a rod and fished until they got bored. Thereafter they took to sliding down the river on their bums. I permitted this, provided that they did it downstream of me, and that they remember to pick up the rod and bring it along after each stop.

In two places the river runs tight against the road. In the lower of these spots the water is shaded by some stands of “*Ouhout*”. It was from under one of these bushes that I tempted a strong fish of some fifteen inches on a small Zak. As I cradled the beautiful butter Brown in my hand the boys came running over to see, and Jethro said “Man, If only I could catch a fish like that”.

The Lotheni is still there Jethro, and you probably won’t have to share a rod now.

## **Lobbing Locusts at Lotheni**

Anton said I should label this story so.

He had been flicking fine flies all day, and sitting back and having a quiet and contemplative smoke at all the best pools. He insistently waved me forward from across the river, gesticulating that the pool was mine, and that I was to enjoy those runs while he watched. I hand signalled back, "no really, you take this one", as best one's arms can convey that, but he was not having any of it. So in deference to him, I will describe my artful casts as "lobs" and my "Hopper Juan" as a locust.

We met two young Zulu men down in the rural lands where we started out on the river that day. One was ill equipped. The other had a bright red nineteen seventies fibreglass fly rod that glowed intensely in the patches of sunlight that filtered between drifting clouds. It had a proper fly reel on it, but the poor man was trying to throw plain nylon, (no fly-line!) and he was doing it downstream from his position high on a rock.

Unlike him we were throwing tight loops upstream, watching drag as best we could in the fast water, and watching eagle eyed for the sign of a flash beneath the water's rushing surface. We got ourselves upstream of the locals and moved up into the steep sided valley, where we rock hopped and waded and cast our flies into likely holds. I got one fish doing this in the textbook manner described above, but the second fish came to me as fish sometimes come to beginners. I was on a real peach of a pool that Anton had again insisted that I take. My line was drifting down at the tail-out at the end of an uninterrupted drift, and my eyes were cast forward to where I might make the next delivery. It hooked itself without help from me, and I landed it with limited style, having stumbled in my attempts to keep below it. PD later grumbled "Two good fish in as many weeks! I am green with envy." He had been tied up at work and unable to make it. One never wishes this on your fishing buddies, and I felt guilty at my good fortune in fly-fishing opportunities over the past few weeks.

Anton on the other hand is particularly skilled at his fishing/work life balance, and I reasoned that I could feel envious of him, and so I was in the middle of this guilt chain, and not dangling at either end. His river craft was well honed on the day. I suspect that might have been due to a bit of practice over his forty odd years of obsessive fly fishing for Trout. He was expertly brushing a tiny para dun across the likeliest glides, and sinking a tiny and delicate Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear deep into the best holding water. The Trout were a little less obliging to him than they were to me. There seemed to be no justice in that. He would fish a beautiful run expertly, and then after a few perfect drifts he would reel in and say "Go on, lob that locust of yours in there", in a resigned tone that suggested he knew that the Trout had rejected his finesse, but may, in their usual cruel way, very well grab my oversized hopper with unrefined gusto.

As we puffed up the hill for our lunch break we spoke of fathers and sons, and passing on of the fly-fishing addiction. Anton's dad had done that. He related his last fishing trip with his father. It was on the Umzimkulu. I asked if his father had caught fish on that important day, and he answered in the affirmative. My soul was satisfied with that answer. All was right with the world. The beer was ice cold and tasty, as it can be at these altitudes. The river was beautifully clean. The Trout were willing enough, even if we both missed a number of strikes, and the weather was interesting. By that I mean that it was not a flat blue unrelenting sky, as one is sometimes dealt. Instead it was brushed with clouds that were



“hung for a poet’s eye” as Neil Diamond once sang. We had encountered rain on the way in. There had been high pale cloud in the morning, and patches of bright sunshine by late morning. After lunch we were rained on just enough that I put the camera in a waterproof pouch, but not enough that I would condemn myself to the sweaty imposition of a rain jacket. You don’t want to do that in the first week of March.

At a pool beside the road, we took turns at the same run. A fleeting caddis hatch came off, and some fish were rising on the silvery, rain dappled surface. At one point a dorsal fin appeared over my tiny white posted Klinkhamer, and I lifted the rod above my head, feeling the tension of the fish for just a moment in time. It was a moment that a car passed, and I could see the eyes of the kids in the back seat light up at the scene of a fisherman into a Trout. But they had passed and weren’t to know that it was a short lived instant. I didn’t connect. I had my fair share of that. One fish even came up for a second look at the hopper after I had pricked it two casts earlier. That fellow had lived to a respectable ten inches though, and his survival skills were such that he eyed it suspiciously the second time and sank away safely to his hideout beneath the tumbling surface. As the rain cleared away the fish seemed to come on the prod, and I saw Anton land a few fish in the fast water. I saw a lot more fish come up under the fly and look at it too. Some tiny chaps had a go at it, but couldn’t manage that much meat.

We ended up on a lovely pool that Anton again implored me to fish. There I landed one, denied another of its dinner when I whipped the hopper from its jaws, and landed a last fish that might have gone twelve inches. Bathed in the glow of late afternoon sunshine we plodded back down to the car, content with the day, but in the knowledge that we were leaving at the best time. We spoke of the return trip, and how we should really hire Sime’s cottage and fish this river properly instead of this day-trip thing we were doing. Of course that is what we should do. I suspect Anton might get it right and that like PD, I will be hocked by some or other commitment. Those commitments keep one hovering on the edge: either you ignore them and go fishing, with a dose of guilt, or you stay and work and turn green with envy. If you do that, you will reason that you have earned the right to sneak away next time. Best you do that. Go fishing with your Dad or a buddy, lest you lose them without having made that last trip together. That would cause you guilt too. I think I will keep myself securely at the mid-point of that guilt chain. That probably means that next time I will be working or some such thing, while Anton gets to steal up here and lob locusts. I wonder if he will lower himself to that practice while no one is watching? Maybe he will just wait until these Trout are acting a bit more classy, and catch them the right way.

On the way back we ran out of beer, so we stopped at a shebeen to stock up. I thought that was pretty classy in its own kind of way. I didn’t feel guilty at all.

A Long and Winding Road: Call of the Stream by Peter Brigg, 2008.

An excerpt is not included here, as this superb book is still commercially available.

**Lotheni River conservation:**

Outside of the Drakensberg park, no conservation measures are known of.