

The Magic Mooi

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An introduction to the Mooi River as a Trout River

Name:

The Zulu name for the River , and its surrounding district is “Mpofana”, meaning ‘Eland’

Source:

The Mooi River rises in two tributaries of roughly equal size, that emanate from a high altitude ridge (approx 2,300m ASL) off the point of “The Giant” at Giants Castle. These streams are in very close proximity to the source of the Lotheni, its tributary the Elandshoek and the Bushmans river with its tributary the Ncibidwana. The two arms flow down in a pattern resembling the outline of an antelopes horns, both skirting a high butress before joining at Game Pass. On both arms there are significant cascades at the 1,800metre contour, and the stream is only fishable, or likely to have fish in them, below those respective cascades.

Trout Water:

The Trout water starts on “Game Pass”, which is the name of the farm which was previously surrounded by Ezimvelo reserve, but which was expropriated in the early 1990’s. In other words the highest trout water falls within the Kamberg reserve. The Trout water continues on down for no less than 58kms, ending at Spring Grove dam, where Trout share the water with various species. Populations of Trout below the dam no doubt exist, but with their breeding run cut off by the dam, they are likely to dwindle.

Tributaries:

Major tributaries include the Reekie Lyn Stream, that come down off the same ridge on which the main river rises, and joining the flow just below Stillerus. Few others are of significance though, owing to the particular topography, such the only one of size joining after Reekie Lyn is the Little Mooi, a Trout river in its own right, which joins below the Spring Grove dam, just above the Means Weir (in other words between the village of Rosetta and the town of Mooi River.

Accessibility:

From the 1800m contour , down to the top boundary of The Trout Bungalow, measures some 23kms, and all of this water is accessible to the public, one way or another. Firstly in the Kamberg Nature reserve as well as its annex, Stillerus, one can buy a day permit from Ezimvelo to fish. Then, between Kamberg and Stillerus is Tendela, which operates a community initiative in which you can buy a day ticket. Below Tendela is Riverside Farm, which you can fish by joining or accompanying a member of, The Natal Fly Fisher’s Club. Then below Stillerus, and below the Reekie Lyn falls, is the NFFC stretch of Reekie Lyn, which can similarly be accessed via the club. Below this the water is privately held. There are however opportunities for guests of the various lodges and BnB’s that operate from time to time. For example, at time of writing,

Wildfly offers accomodation at Invermooi, which entites guests to fish Glenfern and Invermooi. Similarly, landowners and their guests at “The Bend” housing estate can fish the section not far above the fish barrier.

Fish:

The Mooi is best known as a Brown Trout stream. In its upper reaches, and in normal seasons, small Browns are plentiful, and often average as small as 8 to 10 inches. Following years of drought, the surviving fish grown biggeer. At the time of writing this, the average size Brown in the stretches above the Reekie Lyn falls is a staggering 13 inches, with fish of up to 20 inches having been caught. Below the Reekie Lyn falls, fish of 15 inches are generally more common, in all years, and the chance of a 20 inch plus fish is always there. Sadly the fish barrier built above the Spring Grove dam., which was meant to emulate the waterfall barrier properties of the Inchbrakie Falls, covered by the dam, has been a failure, and bass have invaded once hallowed trout water from the fish barrier up. It remains to be seen how far they will venture, but there is nothong stopping them being caught right up to the base of the Reekie Lyn falls. Above the falls, will hopefully remain trout waters for many years to come.

Water Quality:

The water quality of the Mooi is generally very good. There are realitively minor sources of silt and cow manure at Tendele up the Reekie Lyn stream (where substantial wattle clearing was undertaken in about 2013/2014) and Riverside farm, but considerable bankside cultivation is only really possible from below the gorge at Trout Bungalow and below that. This ensures that the river is slow to dirty and quick to clear after rainy weather. This is certainly true of the top 23kms, and even more so the 19 or so kilometers above the Reekie Lyn falls. The middle Mooi down at Invermooi and below will dirty more readily and take longer to clear, but in general there are few contaminants other than silt.

Wattle, bramble, gum, bugweed:

The “Game Pass” area of the Kamberg Nature Reserve was once riddled with Wattle trees. The authoritoes have done a superb job of eradicating them, and re-grasing the landscape. There is however an ongoing need for follow up work on both wattle sapplings and bramble which is evident there too. Down at Tendele, wattle and bramble are both fairly scarce, and the same is truw of Riverside farm, where the owners have done much to keep the river banks in good condition. At Reekie Lyn wattle and bramble become more evident. The Natal Fly Fishers program sees to remedy this in 2018. In the warmer valleys below Reekie Lyn the propensity fpr wattle and bramble to proliferate is greater, and the banks become more choked in some areas.

History:

Trout were stocked in the Mooi River in 1890. Here is a host of pictures from 1910 through 1940:



A VAST EXPANSE OF LIKELY SURFACE.



"TIDLER'S STRETCH," BUNGALOW WATERS, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

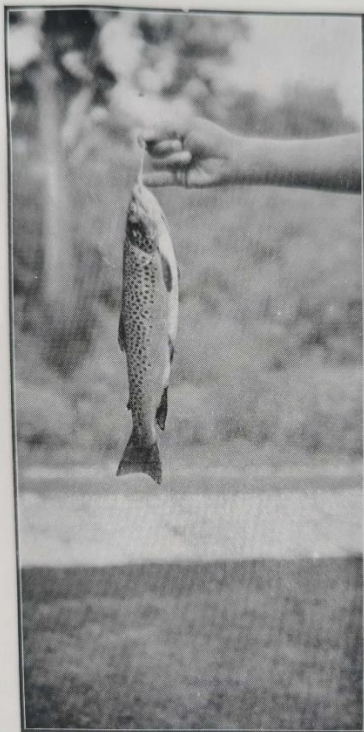


ON THE BUNGALOW WATERS AT NOTTINGHAM ROAD.



BUNGALOW WATERS ON THE MOOI RIVER.

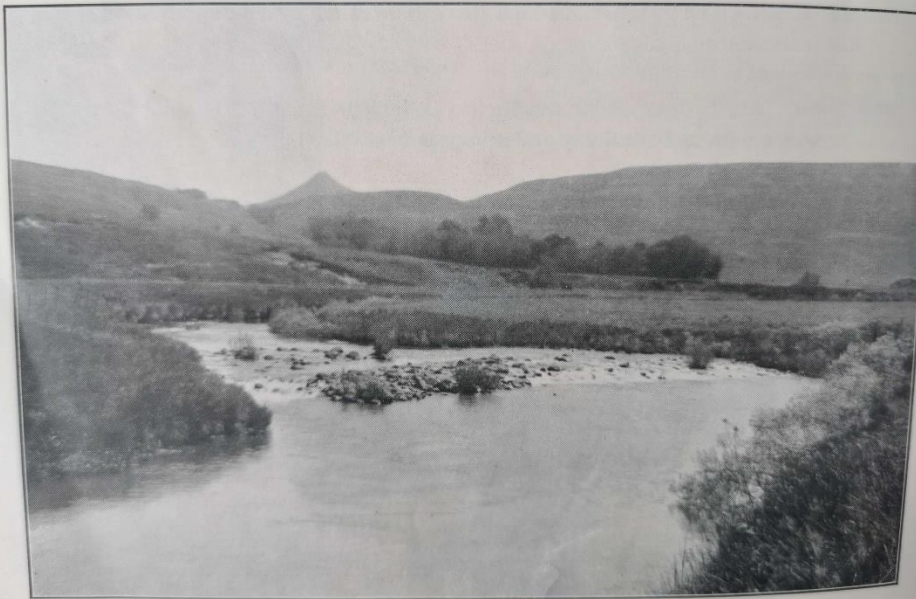
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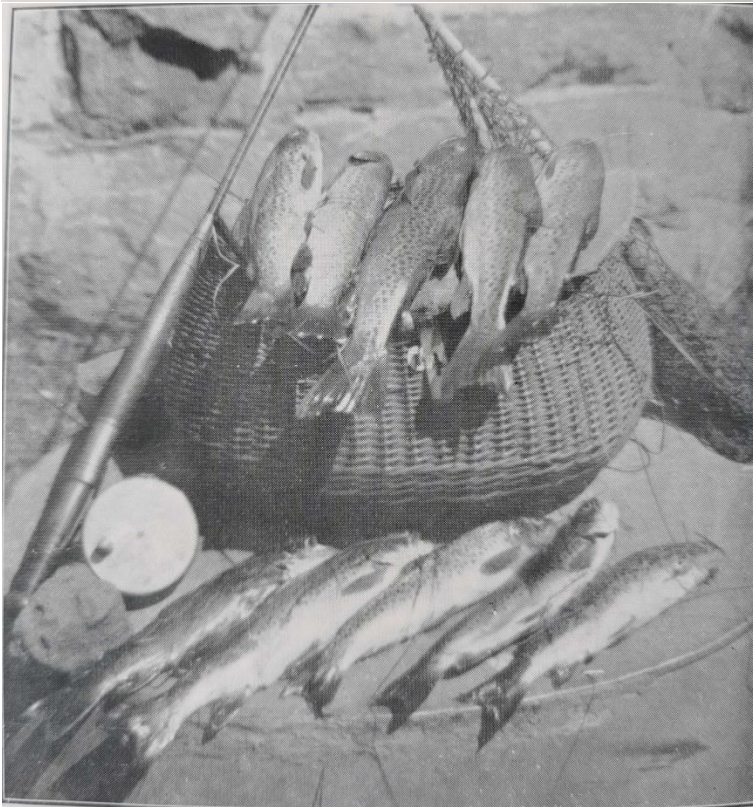
Brown Trout from the
Bungalow Waters,
Mooi River

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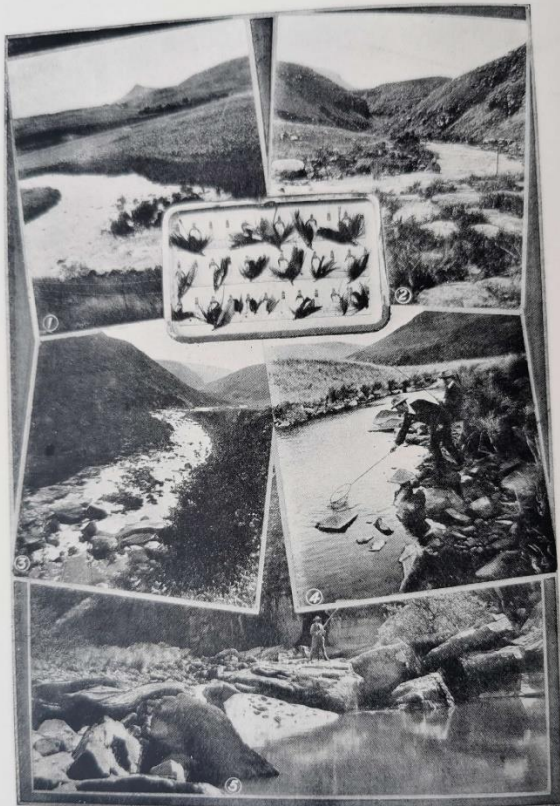
Bungalow Waters, Mooi River



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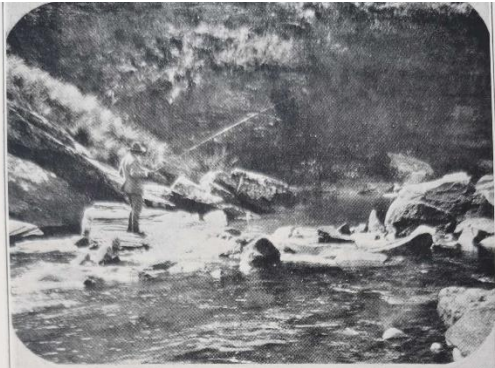
MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

1 & 2. Upper Reaches. 3. The Gorge. 4. Netted. 5. Giant's Pool.



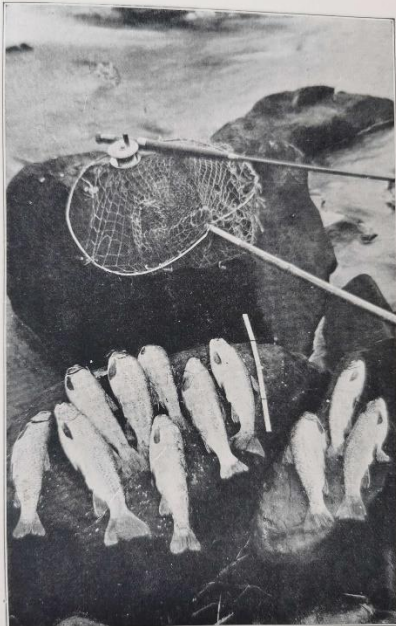
ANGLING ON THE MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

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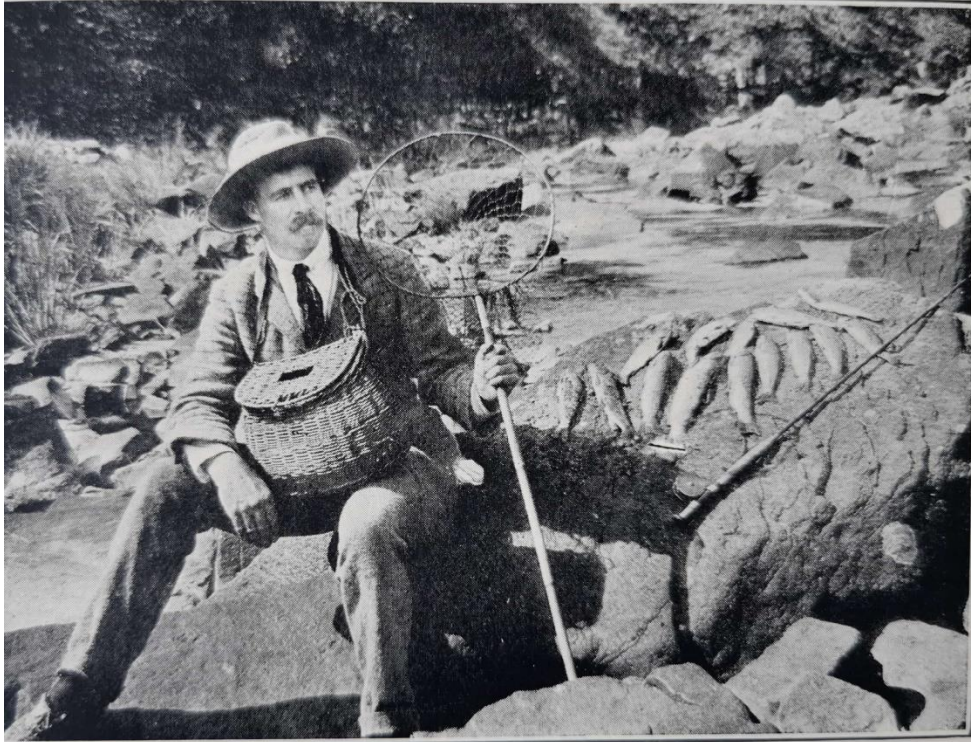
MOOI RIVER AT NOTTINGHAM ROAD.
1. Giant's Pool. 2. A Difficult Stalk.

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A GOOD CATCH OF BROWN TROUT, MOOI RIVER,
NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

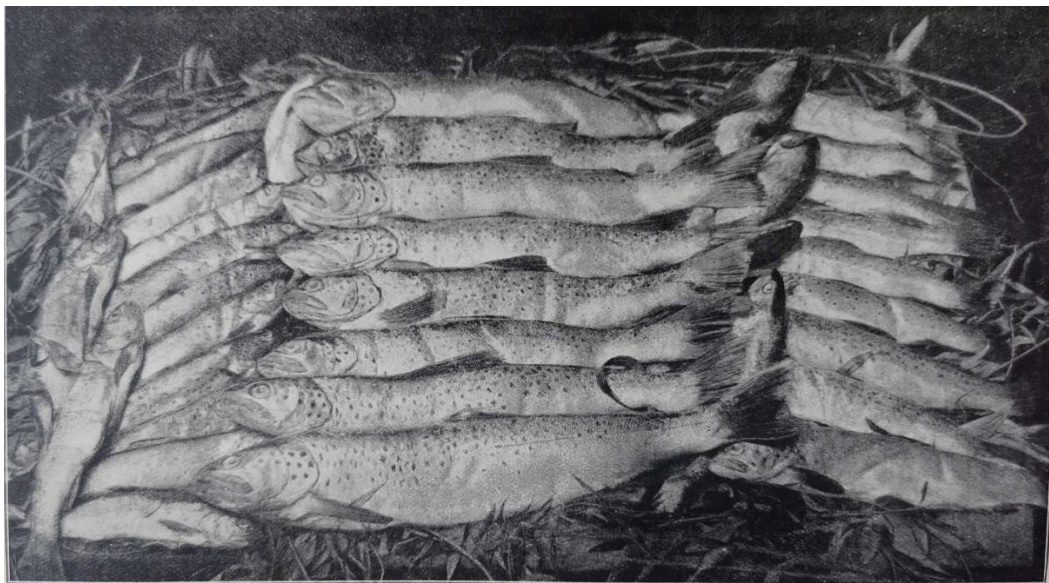
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THE ANGLER'S TRIUMPH, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

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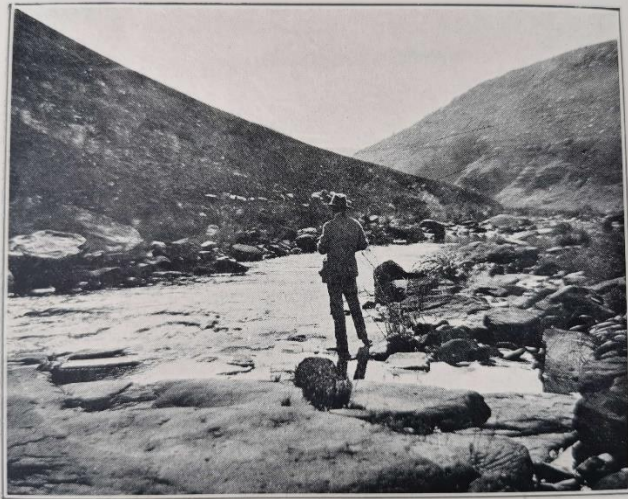
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HEAVY BASKETS AND BIG FISH, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

Taken from the Bungalow waters, one rod, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 45 trout from 10 oz. upwards, including 6 fish $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 lb., one fish 4 lb. 1 oz.

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THE GORGE, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

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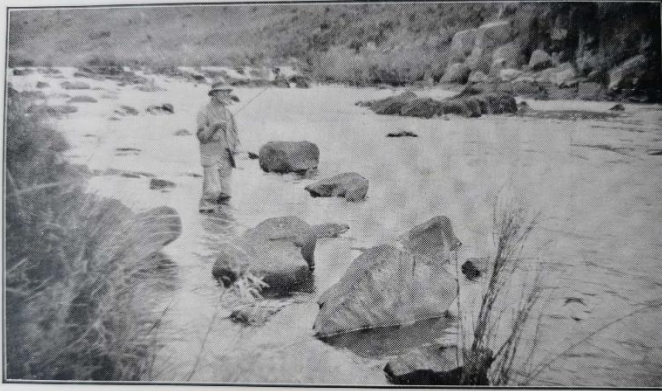


BUNGALOW RAPIDS, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.



THE GORGE, MOOI RIVER, NOTTINGHAM ROAD.

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Fishing
Sussex
Farm
Waters,
Mool River

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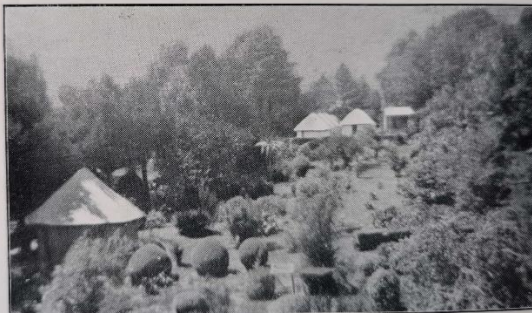


The
Trout
Bungalow,
Nottingham
Road

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FISHERMEN'S RONDAVELS, GLADSTONE'S NOSE, KAMBERG

The fascination and romance of the Berg is enhanced by individual rondavels. You will love your thatched hut and the view from its doorway—the lofty mountains, the river running by, the glorious sunsets, and the cool of the dawn of a summer's day. To spend a week or a month at a South African homestead under the shade of a sweet-scented wattle or towering gum is an unforgettable joy.



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Aquatic Insect populations:

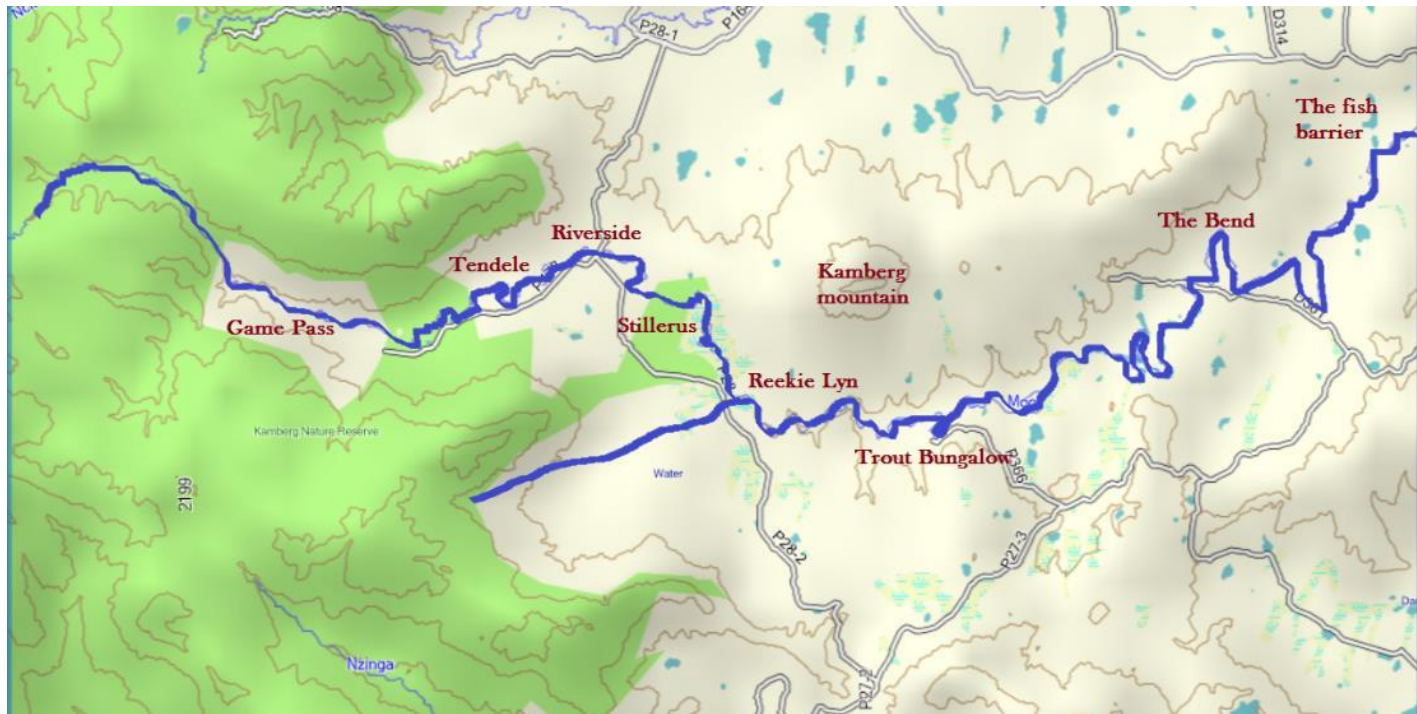
The upper Mooi has a good diversity of aquatic life, which includes Stoneflies. This is notable because Stoneflies are smaller and less prevalent in South Africa than in North America for example, and are seen as an indicator of good water quality.

Maps:

Where does the Mooi 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
- From the Bungalow to the Berg ...by Andrew Fowler
- The Creel.... Natal Fly Fisher's Club

Wildlife

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

- 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 Mooi by various authors:

V

The Upper Reaches

Kamberg in October

IT rained last night, but the sun is breaking through the clouds this morning, giving that interplay of shadow and light that every angler loves. A light breeze makes a gentle ripple on the water and Giant's Castle stands out in soft outline at the head of the Valley. A perfect fishing day! A fine cast, tied with Red Palmer and Connemara Black, fished upstream — and there'll be a full creel of Brown Trout for supper.

There is a calm delight in trout fishing that is given by nothing else I know, and there is a magic about this glorious Kamberg Valley that is as rare as a five-pounder in a long-stocked river. That is why, with three months' leave to make use of, we came up here a week ago.

The rains are late this year and one misses the brilliant green hillsides and the silver song of tumbling water. The river is very low and the little spruit, so bonny in midsummer, is a poor trickling thing smothered in green slime. But for all that, the fishing has been good this week. I have had more than a hundred trout, ranging from small fish running three to the pound to a beauty of a pound and a quarter. No record breakers as yet, and jolly hard work to raise anything at all in the gin-clear water when the breeze dies down; but the kind of thing that delights a fisherman's heart: keeping well down the bank, or standing in the water, making a long-light cast with never a flop — or you put them all down and spoil the pool.

When the storms come and the spruit springs into life and the river tumbles and sings, the fishing will be different and the big fellows will be on the move. That is something to look forward to in the weeks ahead when the summer is lush and the valley is rain-washed and full of pleasant sounds. But these days of low water have their own charm too and the man who wants to learn the craft could scarcely find a better time or place than this. Here is infinite variety: miles of water; pools and rapids on the Upper Mooi; slow moving canal water on the Little Mooi in the next valley. And there's always the chance of a big one!

These valleys are rich in the tradition of trout fishing in Natal.



"There was a time," says Auntie Potts, "when we put back anything under a pound; we couldn't be bothered with tiddlers of fourteen ounces."

"Of course you won't believe it" says Mr Kitson, "nobody ever does now; but when I was fishing in these waters twenty-five years ago, I lost three flies in a fish. I caught him on the fourth — Cock-y-bondhu it was. Two of the other flies were in his mouth and the third we found in his stomach when we cut him up. A tough old fish that was."

And then, of course, I told the story of the Oxford man I knew who caught a Rainbow trout and brought it home for supper. When they put it on the dining-room table under the bright light, a snake wriggled out of its mouth. The Oxford man has that snake still, in spirits, in an aspirin bottle.

And then there was the cannibal fish; and the six-pounder we called Uncle George who gave his name to the famous pool on "Gladstone's Nose"; and the big fellow who broke up three anglers last year, preferring to live another season or two so that he might be assured of immortality by winning an Angling Competition. Between ourselves, he is partial to a large Teal and Red, but the cast must be stronger than the one I used last time he was on the move.

Kamberg in October! Kamberg in November when the Mayfly is up! Kamberg in midsummer Three months of it, once every ten years, and life is worth living!

Here comes the mist, creeping down over the krantzes on the high hills. I must put on a Red Ant and fish that bend under the willows.

THE MOOI

ALMOST any river may look beautiful in a drought-stricken landscape and "Mooirivier" is a name that appears several times on the map of South Africa. Some of these streams scarcely deserve to be called "Mooi" but one that certainly does is the river that flows from Giant's Castle, through Kamberg Nature Reserve, past the townships of Rosetta and Mooi River, to join the Tugela below its confluence with the Bushmans.

Fishermen know the Mooi River as one of the two most productive brown trout streams in Southern Africa. The other is the Bushmans, which has produced more big fish than the Mooi but probably not such large numbers of small ones. The main point against the Mooi is indeed that it is apt to have too many trout. There are good breeding grounds for miles of the river's course and in favourable seasons the young fish survive by the thousand. Competition for food inevitably reduces the growth rate in heavily stocked sections. But sizeable fish are always to be found among the small ones, and the skilful angler will seek out the spots favoured by those of worth-while size.

The Mooi does not rise on the Drakensberg escarpment itself, but on an out-jutting spur of Giant's Castle about 8,000ft. above sea level. It cuts across a 7,000ft. high plateau in Highmoor Forest Reserve and goes through a spectacular gorge where it enters the farm Game Pass. Another stream of almost equal size joins the Mooi River at slightly below the 6,000-foot contour. For the next forty miles it is inhabited by trout.

Trout occur for half a mile or so above the confluence and sometimes these headwaters contain fish that run to a pound or more. Generally they are smaller, and after a severe flood or drought they may be scarce. In a season of steady rainfall the trout work upstream from farther down, since there are no impassable falls on this section, although the stream bed drops steeply until the valley flattens and opens out near the western boundary of Kamberg Nature Reserve.

A good-sized tributary joins the main stream at this point

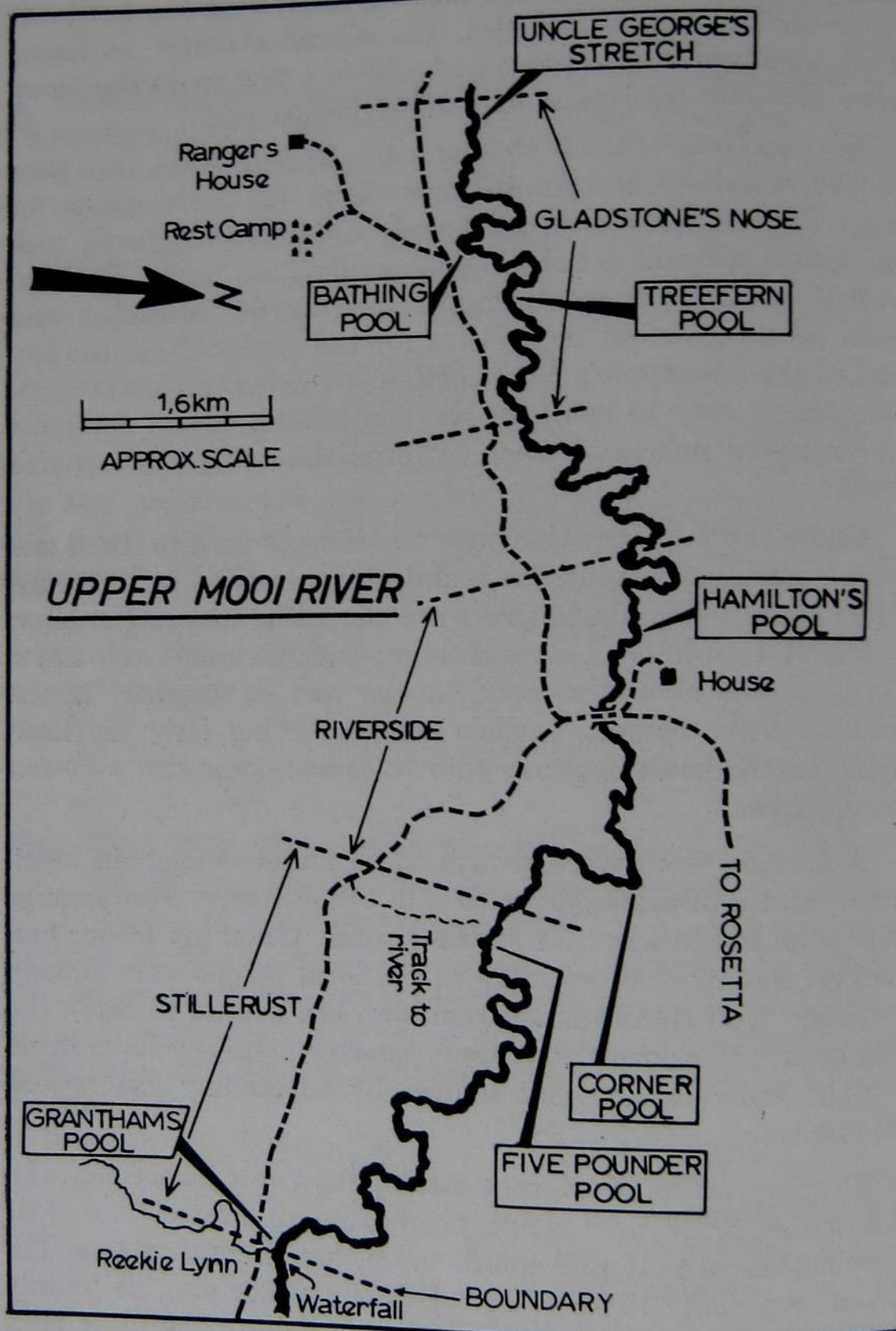
and it was here that the first successful introduction of trout took place in 1899. Nine years before, some of John Parker's original stock had been liberated in the Mooi River, but whereas the 1890 stock became established in the Bushmans and Umgeni rivers those put into the Mooi were too far down the river and did not succeed. The second attempt, at Game Pass, achieved its objective and within a few years the trout were breeding freely and spreading downstream.

Next to Game Pass is the farm Gladstone's Nose, now part of the Kamberg Nature Reserve. Here the river winds for some three miles over a bed largely composed of gravel, with numerous indigenous nchichi bushes along the banks. Shallow, swiftly-flowing water alternates with deeper stretches and each bend opens out new vistas for the angler. Near the top end of the Gladstone's Nose section is Uncle George's stretch, temptingly easy to fish from the south bank except for some overhanging nchichi bushes towards the tail, on the north bank.

Under these bushes Uncle George himself used to dwell and occasionally he would take a skilfully presented artificial fly. More often he would ignore whatever fishermen might offer, but he did get hooked several times. Such mistakes were never fatal and he always escaped in one way or another. In the end an otter caught Uncle George, leaving only his head lying on the bank to prove that tales about his size were not exaggerated.

A few big trout were always to be found among the small ones, and doubtless odd ones still occur today. The average size soon fell to less than half a pound. When my father first visited the upper Mooi in 1906, the local people were already saying, "You should have been here last season to catch the big ones". Ever since that time, quarter pounders have made up the bulk of the trout landed by succeeding generations of anglers.

Despite the small average size of the trout, fishermen who know the upper Mooi return there time after time. One of its fascinations is that skill counts more than in most waters. The trout, especially those of better-than-average size, lie mainly under the protection of overhanging bushes. The river runs crystal clear except after heavy rain, so accurate casting and a careful approach are essential for success. For those who set higher store on artistry than on the weight of the bag, the



pleasure of fishing the upper Mooi is enough to bring them back season after season.

To follow another fisherman along a stretch of river does not generally appeal to a trout angler. Yet it can be fun to allow one's companion to go on ahead and then come up with a better bag of trout than his at the end of the day.

Only a good fisherman can do this, of course, and only on the right water. On an open stream where it is easy to cover all the likely lies, an unskilled angler will not be at so great a disadvantage as he will be where trees and bushes interfere with casting. The novice always prefers accessible places and even though he may not catch very much, he scares the fish. For the skilful angler, a disturbed stretch offers little chance of success. If he is following behind another rod, what he wants are places that have been bypassed as too difficult.

It is on a difficult river that opportunities arise for the angling master to wipe the eye of the tyro. Such a river is the upper Mooi, in Kamberg Nature Reserve.

The Nature Reserve consists of two farms, Gladstone's Nose and Stillerust, with a total length of some six miles of river. It is not a continuous stretch since the Mooi River flows through two other farms after leaving Gladstone's Nose before entering Stillerust. Part of this intervening water is available to visitors through an arrangement with the riparian owner.

Some years ago, Gladstone's Nose was a well-known guest farm to which fishermen came to test their skill against the river and its wary brown trout. Today, a Natal Parks Board rest camp stands on the site of the old farm house, and fishermen still make their way to Uncle George's Stretch, the Bathing Pool, the Treefern Pool, or one of the many other holding places for trout.

Nchichi bushes line the banks, giving shady lies for trout on hot bright days and placing a premium on accurate casting.

Shallow reaches may be fished by wading downstream, switch-casting under the bushes on either side. Deeper pools have to be approached from the bank, with a long cast often needed to reach a rising fish in a protected eddy.

Considering that this is public water, it is probably as well that the bushes provide sanctuary for some of the larger trout to live in places where they are not easily caught. Farther down, on the farm Riverside, accessible places are more frequent, but the open water seldom holds as many sizeable trout as that which is better protected by overhanging shrubs.

The lower part of Riverside and upper Stillerust have some delightful rocky pools with good, deep runs when the river is flowing strongly.

If the river is low, only the pools are deep enough to hold trout if more than fingerling size, but in periods of steady rainfall large fish may leave their normal sanctuaries and take up temporary quarters behind a boulder or piece of broken bank. Jack Fitzsimons, who used to live at Stillerust, went down to catch a trout for supper one afternoon and cast his fly into a shallow run. To his surprise he hooked a three pounder, instead of the small one he had expected.

The main part of the Stillerust water consists of long steadily flowing reaches with a gravelly bed interspersed with deep pools and short sections of shallow broken water. The river is some 30 feet in average width, with high banks. Long grass and bushes make casting a fly far from easy over the greater part of the distance. Near the eastern boundary, an attractively open stretch offers less difficult fishing conditions. Although often poorer in their yield than the overgrown water farther upstream, these open pools hold some good trout, especially Grantham's Pool, where a tributary, the Reekie Lynn joins the main river.

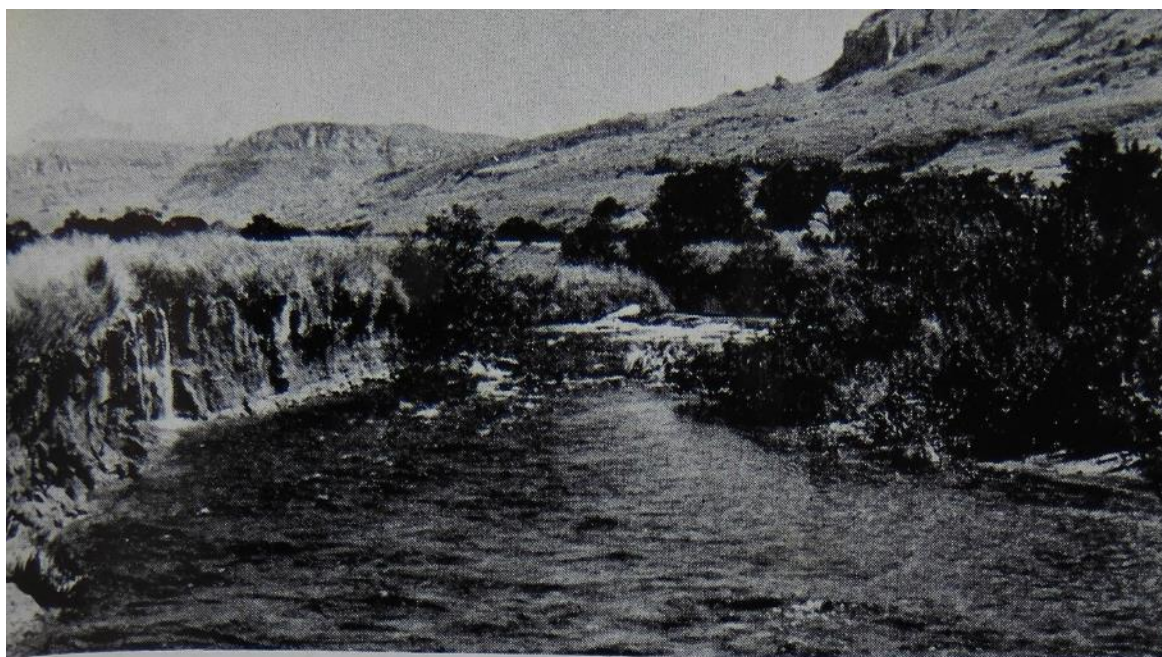
The late Mr E. J. V. Grantham caught a brown trout of 3lb. 14oz. there, on March 7, 1959. This fish, which was nearly eight years old, proved that brown trout can survive to a ripe old age in a well fished stream.

Brown trout are, indeed, well known for their ability to avoid capture and, although many fall victim to the anglers' lures, some always survive. Most of the fish which one catches on the upper Mooi are less than two years old, with an average weight of between 3oz and 6oz., but a bigger one may come out at any time from beneath an overhanging bush or from the depths of a secluded pool.

The expert fisherman will catch trout at Kamberg Nature Reserve, whether or not other people are on the river. There are never enough anglers to spoil the peace of this beautiful stretch of river, watched over by the peaks of Giant's Castle.

After a sedately meandering course across the lower Stillerust portion of Kamberg Nature Reserve, the Mooi River pours over a 30ft. waterfall. For the next three miles a rugged gorge shuts in the river as it twists and turns through a succession of runs and pools.

Where the valley opens out again, lies the historic Trout



Near Uncle George's Stretch, Gladstone's Nose

Bungalow water. For some years now, the Bungalow has been in private ownership, but the old building still remains. It is a rambling wood and iron structure that formed the officers' mess at Harrismith during the South African War. In 1902 the whole thing was knocked down, transported to the banks of the Mooi River, 18 miles from Nottingham Road, and rebuilt. For the next 30 years or so the Bungalow was run, first by Harry Singleton and then by Harold Vickers, as a hostelry for fishermen.

In the grounds of the Bungalow stands a sundial, erected as a memorial to John C. Parker, whose pioneering efforts were responsible for establishing trout in Natal. Also of historic interest is the angling record book maintained up to the present day by the syndicate which now owns the old building.

Some of the early fishing results were spectacular compared with present-day catches, but within ten years of the establishment of trout, their size had fallen to an average similar to that found farther upstream. There is no record of stocking in the Bungalow waters, so the fish must have worked their way down after the original introduction at Game Pass in 1899. By 1906, excellent sport was enjoyed in the gorge below the falls and downstream to the Bungalow home waters. Two, three, and four pounders were quite common at that time but, later on, Singleton's advertisements indicated that anglers could expect to catch plenty of trout averaging three to the pound.

For the last sixty years the splendid breeding grounds of the Bungalow water have produced more than ample trout, except in time of flood or drought. Generally, each year's crop of young fish finds everything needed for survival; everything except enough space and food for each one to grow out to a size that is attractive to fishermen.

Because those who habitually fished at the Bungalow wanted bigger trout than they were catching, much discussion took place on ways and means of improving matters. Finally it was decided that the most effective remedy would be to thin out the population drastically. This was done in September, 1963. A dose of rotenone fish toxicant was allowed to travel downstream from the Stile Pool, not far below the mouth of the gorge, for $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

A particularly interesting result of this experiment was that no big trout appeared at all. People thought that in the deep pools at least a few large fish must be lurking, even though none had been caught for some time. Yet the largest recovered and weighed was no more than 11oz. Another that seemed slightly larger was found a couple of days later when its size could no longer be accurately assessed.

Some of the trout were four or five years old, but the great majority of those examined were yearlings. Thousands of fry, only a few weeks old, were also killed by the rotenone, but they sank away out of sight and merely formed food for the crabs.

The proportion of fish of different age groups in the population was almost identical to what one would have expected from anglers' catches, indicating that fishermen catch a representative sample of what is actually living in the river. When fly fishing produces no good-sized fish, that is a fair indication that not many are present.

Again, in 1968, the rotenone treatment was repeated when the average size and condition of the trout had reverted to what they had been five years earlier. And again, no large trout turned up. This time there was one of 11lb. 1oz. in the Stile Pool, but all down the beautiful open pools and rocky runs to the Bungalow and below, most of the fish were poorly-grown yearlings averaging barely an ounce in weight, with some two and three-year-olds going up to half a pound.

After both the 1963 and the 1968 treatments, the natural vigour of the brown trout was soon apparent in the response of those that moved into the depopulated areas. With little

competition for space or food, they put on weight rapidly, thus discounting any suggestion of deterioration in the quality of the stock.

When fishermen complain about an excess of undersized trout, the answer is not that something is wrong. Probably conditions are so ideal that natural mortality of eggs, alevins and fry is low, resulting in the presence of large numbers of yearlings. Certainly this is true of the Bungalow waters of the Mooi River.

Apart from Kamberg Nature Reserve, at the head of the river, no trout fishing water on the Mooi is available to the public. The stretch that flows through the municipal area of Mooi township is accessible to anglers, but few trout are to be found as far downstream as that. From below the Nature Reserve, past Kamberg mountain and for miles below, privately owned farms border the river.

Few riparian owners, however, fail to appreciate the value of fly fishing on their property and they see that good use is made of what the river provides. From the old trout Bungalow, a very productive stretch extends down to the Inchbrakie Falls, a few miles above Rosetta. The river averages about 50ft. in width, with broader pools every here and there, interspersed with shallow, rippling stretches. The latter often carry good trout where a broken shelf of rock or undercut bank gives cover. One will not, of course, catch big fish so often as one might have done sixty years ago. At that time the owner of Glenfern, the late Peter John Mitchell, was disgusted when a guest of his caught nothing larger than a one and a half pounder, in an afternoon's fishing. "That's no good," he said, "you must stay over and catch a decent trout tomorrow." And sure enough, Mr Mitchell and his guest each caught a fish of between $3\frac{1}{2}$ and 4lb. the next morning.

Occasional three-pounders are still caught in the Mooi, but the present-day angler is generally well pleased with anything over a pound in weight. Most of the fish do not exceed the average, so common on South African rivers, of three to the pound.

Brown trout are the traditional fish of the Mooi, and there are anglers whose blood pressure rises at the thought of pollution of their favourite stream by rainbows. Apart from three experimental introductions, no rainbows have been deliber-

ately put into the Mooi. Some must have escaped from a dam, however, because rainbows have been breeding of recent years in some parts of the river between the Trout Bungalow and Silverdale, some six miles farther downstream. These fish did not, apparently, originate from any of the deliberate introductions, of which the first was in 1958, when 750 rainbow fry were introduced to the headwaters of the river on Highmoor Forest Reserve. A few of the stocked fish were caught later, several miles downstream on Game Pass and Gladstone's Nose, but the rainbows did not become established.

A second introduction was made a couple of years later on Ballina, a short distance above the Inchbrakie Falls, but these also, after yielding a few of their number to anglers, vanished from the Mooi. The third stocking was of a hundred fingerlings at the Bungalow in November, 1968. One of these was caught 10 months later, weighing 1½ lb., and a few others have probably been accounted for. The yearlings that were abundant in that part of the river in the autumn of 1970 could not have been descendants of the 1968 fish, which would only be old enough to breed for the first time that winter.

The future progress of rainbows in the Mooi will be interesting to watch, but it is probable that they will disappear, as they have done from the Bushmans and from other Natal streams that they have temporarily shared with established populations of brown trout. For a time, rainbow and brown seem to live together amicably, where both have been introduced. As soon as one species gains the upper hand, however, the other fades out of the picture. Rainbows are more vigorous than browns and would probably predominate once they have achieved equality in numbers, but they have a long way to go to reach parity. There are so many browns in the Mooi that they are likely to retain their dominant position.

Below the Inchbrakie Falls, where the river tumbles over a steep cataract ending in a vertical drop of more than 20ft., the trout have to compete with indigenous scalies, which are absent above the falls. Trout feed on young scalies, as well as having to compete with the bigger ones. The presence of scalies is not entirely against the interests of trout so the occurrence of these fish is not by any means the only reason, or even the main one, for the gradual disappearance of trout below the Inchbrakie Falls.

What prevents trout from breeding in the lower Mooi is an increasing silt load and an absence of suitable gravel beds. Some good brown trout have nevertheless been caught below the limit of scheduled trout water at the Rosetta bridge. Farther downstream, numerous smallmouth bass are established, as well as scalies, but anyone in search of trout should make for the headwaters, at Kamberg Nature Reserve, or on the private farms in the valley below.

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Magic of the Mooi

LIKE ANY great trout stream the Mooi has its moods. Some days it fishes like a dream, on others it's as bloody-minded as an old lady with a sore tooth, but always it's good just fishing the Mooi and that's the hallmark of top-class fly water. Frankly, I'd rate it as the best river water in South Africa but I know a few fellows who'd like to argue that one. Put another way, I can't think of a river I'd rather be on when it's fishing well than the Mooi. It's sheer magic at these times, producing fish after fish from half a kilo up to around one and a half, usually in superb condition.

The fishing's not often easy, especially when the water is low and clear. Then I'd rate it as some of the most testing angling I've done and that's when I enjoy it most.

Around April is the time to get on the river when there is still a good flow of crystal water and you've got the chance of a hatch coming on. We fished the top section recently and found it in perfect condition even though the trout had their minds on things other than eating.

We started on Peter Moller's water, which the NFFC has the use of, and fished up for 2 km to just below the road bridge. In this section the water is a little faster than you'll find on the lower Mooi and shallower as well. But it's very productive nevertheless.

Here and there the river digs itself a long, deep pool on its course, but mainly the water glides, ripples and runs, with smaller fish overall than you'll get downstream on Hemyock or Glenfern, two of the bottom pieces I know best.

More accurately we should speak about the upper, middle and lower Mooi. The upper water comes down from Game Pass in the Berg, through Kamberg to the gorge below Stillerust. From there the pick of the Mooi flows down the Inchbrackie falls where the lower water starts, the best of that being Steven Gawith's piece on Rosetta Farm. But this is strictly winter water, fishing best from late July through August and

producing browns of 1,5 kg more than just frequently. This is where John Beams got a fish that I think made the 5 lb mark (which I'm not going to convert to kilograms because it will lose a bit of its value in the translating. In fact I'm more and more of the opinion that trout and metrics don't mix at all).

The Mooi was clean and I thought we'd make out very well especially because the glass was high. As it turned out we had a battle and the reason for this was that insect hatches were non-existent all day. For brown trout to come on you need to have fly on the water and this we never had so any fish we got we had to tempt out from under the cover of the grassy banks where they lay in a deep sulk for most of the day.

At about 10 o'clock the blue damsel fly started to show and the fish perked up for an hour or two, taking them off the top with a sharp flashing rise. Hugh spotted one under the branches of a tree and he dropped his fly, a small Black Woolly Worm, upstream and let it drift down under the boughs, which earned him a brown of a kilo or so packed with damsel fly.

On the strength of this I took off my nymph and fished dryfly for half an hour with no luck at all. It seemed in the end that what they wanted was a free drifting nymph, carefully presented alongside the opposite bank with many more takes coming in the faster water than ever we got in the slow sections.

I spent part of our quiet lunch-hour under the willows above the road bridge, adjusting my leader. Somehow the formula was wrong and I had a bad time all morning trying to get my fly to turn over properly. I prefer a short leader, about 7 to 8 foot, in low clean conditions because it's easier to handle than a long leader and makes presentation more accurate.

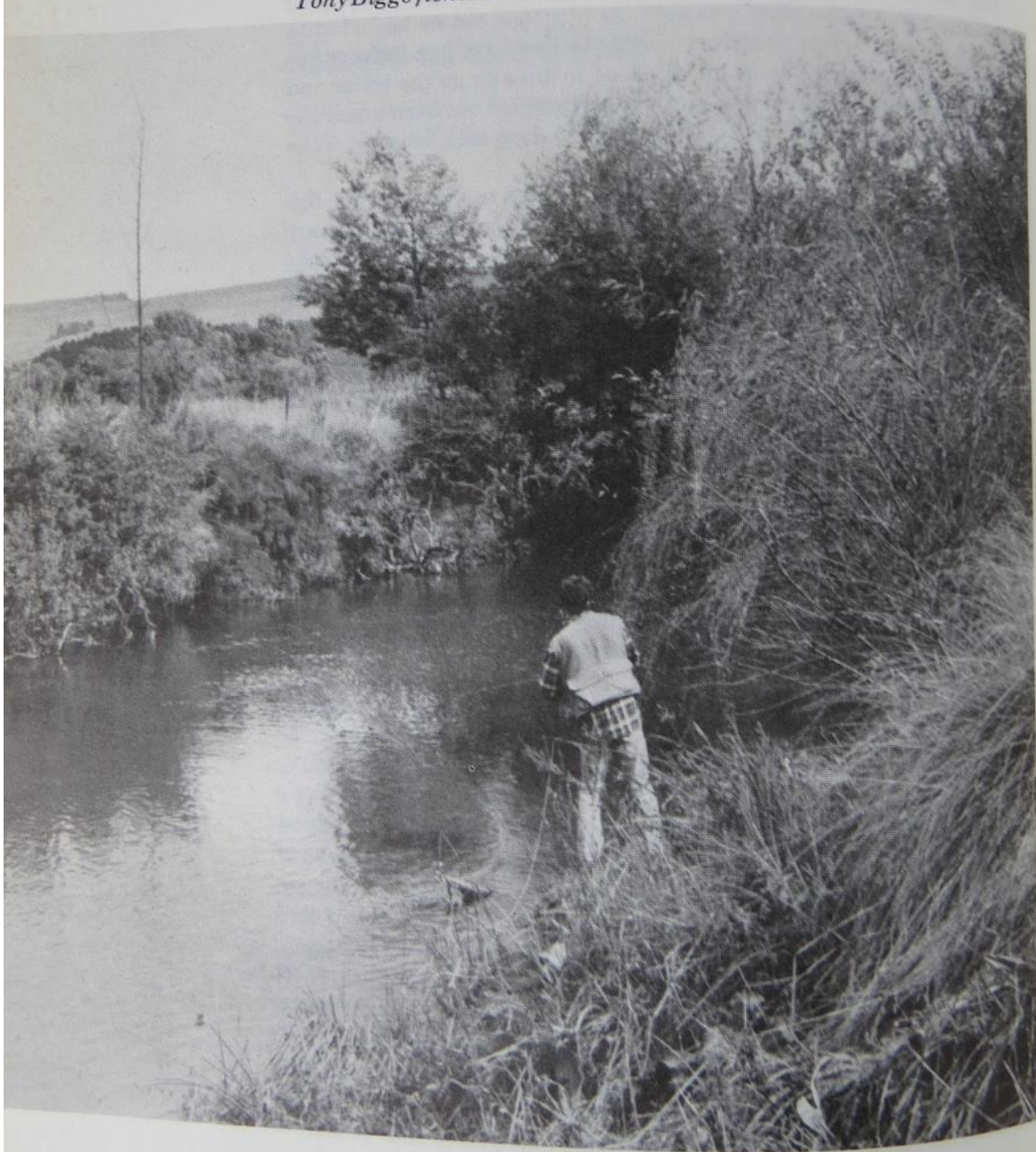
I know the use of short leaders in low clean waters is a contentious subject but I stick to my guns on this one. The trout's window in these conditions is so small that a long leader is simply an unnecessary burden, and, because fly pattern is subordinate to presentation, that's what I go for. Virtually any fly *well presented* will fish well on the Mooi and I'm not going to let a long leader, a doubtful privilege at the best of times in these conditions, spoil my chances.

With Hugh's help I made up a good leader to the tried and tested 60/40 Ritz formula and prepared myself for a memorable evening rise.

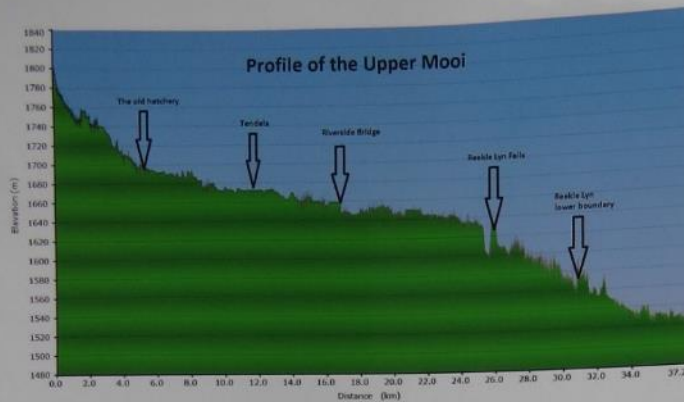
I had on a small John Betts mayfly and Hugh and I sat down to wait for the trout to show. We should have gone home as it turned out because only one fish began rising and that was well after 6.30. He refused the mayfly but took a size 16 Black Gnat and shook himself free inside 10 seconds. In fact I don't think he even knew he was hooked because he went straight back to the same spot and started rising

again, refusing everything we offered him from then on. But that's the way of trout. Still, we had half a dozen browns apiece and a nice relaxing day, so we can't complain.

Tony Biggs fishes the Mooi.



From an article in "The Complete Flyfisherman," 2017 by Andrew Fowler:



The Mooi River could well be South Africa's longest and most varied brown trout river. Bob Crass, in his book "Trout in South Africa", states that the Mooi is "the best known brown trout stream in South Africa". That is quite a claim to make, but I simply don't know of another brown trout stream that is fishable over nearly 60km of water.

The Mooi can be divided into a few well-defined and exceptional stretches, the first of which is the 'Berg stream above the Kamberg hatchery, where the sandstone-derived bedrock is pale yellow in many places, making it unique in KZN. Then, from the hatchery down, it is slow meadow water, often meandering so much that it achieves double the mileage that a road down the valley would do. And from the beautiful Reekie Lyn Falls, it is all gorge water with steps down the valley from pool to pool. Exiting the gorge just above the Trout Bungalow, it becomes a mature river, with long stretches of slow, wide water flowing through farmland and capable of holding some big trout, all the way down to the fish barrier.

If you were to work upstream from the fish barrier above Spring Grove Dam, your experience might be something like this. You would first need to be well connected to get onto all of the lower water. This is true now, and was true back in 1986 and 1971 as mentioned by Bob Crass in two of his books. The landscape is subdivided into smallholdings down at the barrier and for several kilometres up to Avon farm. Those are all privately held, as is Avon, and at The Bend is a housing development that adds to the patchwork of closely held riverbanks. This water is in a state of change.

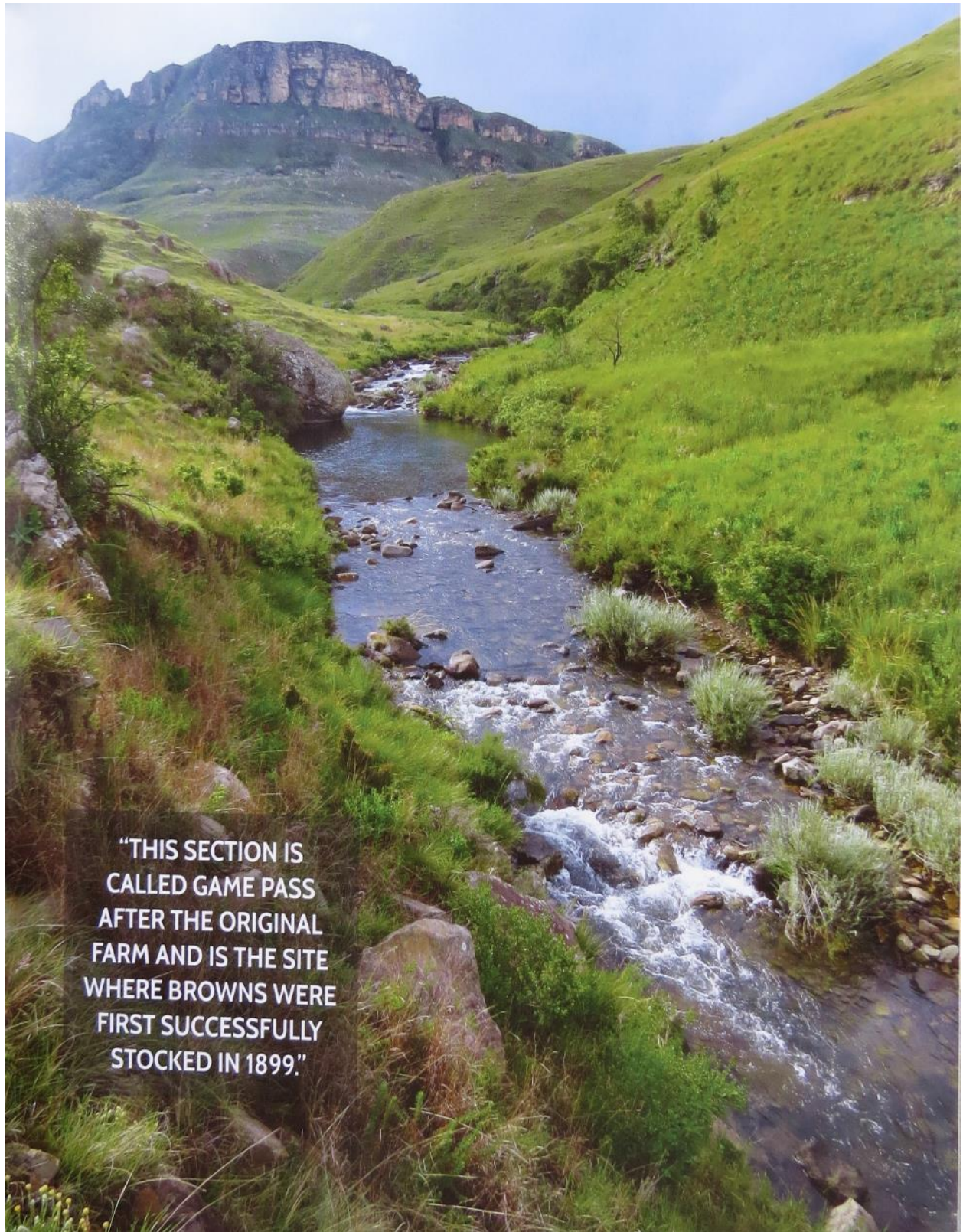
The Spring Grove Dam was built in the last few years, with one of the conditions for its approval being that the fish barrier was to be constructed to replicate the barrier properties of the Inchbrakie Falls, which were flooded. In a bungled and expensive exercise, the barrier was built arguably with insufficient public awareness and, some would say, in just the wrong place to have achieved its goal of preventing the upstream movement of bass. Within 18 months of construction, bass (both largemouth and smallmouth)

were found above the barrier, rendering its construction a devastating waste of effort. People are holding their breath to see how far up the bass will move and just how prevalent they will be. For now, we can only hope that they will be less successful than the trout in the cold, running water of the beautiful Mooi River. While the Inchbrakie Falls were always considered the lower boundary of the official trout water, there are definitely browns below this, many now trapped in Spring Grove Dam and below, all of which is considered "unscheduled water", meaning it was traditionally available to be fished all year round.

I've had wonderful fly fishing for trout on Avon and upstream of The Bend on Silverdale and then on Roslyn. These are all private farms that you as a fly fisherman in the KZN Midlands might get random access to in your lifetime. Up above Roslyn, on Invermooi, you are now assured of some fishing, as WildFly has recently gained access to that stretch, which it makes available to its guests hiring the cottage on Invermooi. This incorporates the farm Glenfern, which Tom Sutcliffe wrote about so fondly in his first book. The water here often has willow-lined banks, and to fish it involves finding a way in, committing to a waded stretch, and then climbing out when it gets too deep, to move on up and look for the next access point. It is no stroll in the park, but then its waters are capable of holding reasonable numbers of 2lb fish, so a little effort is part of the deal.

Below: A perfect Mooi River brown. Page right: The Mooi on Game Pass in midsummer.





**"THIS SECTION IS
CALLED GAME PASS
AFTER THE ORIGINAL
FARM AND IS THE SITE
WHERE BROWNS WERE
FIRST SUCCESSFULLY
STOCKED IN 1899."**



Below: Graeme Steart on upper Riverside.

**"MY BEST RIVER TROUT, A 21-INCH HEN, CAME TO A CDC
AND ELK ON UPPER RIVERSIDE IN 2013."**

Above Invermooi, the river is again privately controlled through the beautiful Trout Bungalow stretch. In his book *Call of the Stream*, Peter Brigg wrote extensively about this stretch and about the considerable history surrounding the Trout Bungalow, naming famous people who have fished it, and some of the more remarkable catches. Neville Nuttall described the Mooi River valley in these parts as being "rich in the tradition of trout fishing in Natal", and one needs to consider that the Trout Bungalow was so named in 1902, indicating just how long brown trout have been part of this valley's history. On the upper reaches of the Trout Bungalow water, you get up into the gorge. Unfortunately, the first part of the gorge is infested with wattle, but the current landowners have proved themselves to be remarkable custodians of the landscape and have cleared enormous areas of wattle in recent years, so hope holds that the gorge too will benefit from their efforts. Natal Fly Fishers Club (NFFC) has access to the southern banks of the river for several kilometres up the gorge to the waterfall on the farm Reekie Lyn.

Members have been heard to say that they belong to the club for this stretch of river alone! It really is wonderful water. You can walk down to the lower boundary from the fence stile and lose yourself on the river all day in complete solitude. The pools and rapids are varied and interesting,

and the regular size of fish is between nine and 15 inches. Blank days are more than a remote possibility, and many an angler returns to the stile with tired muscles, aching feet and nothing to show for it. But when the fish are on the prod, then the going can be really good.



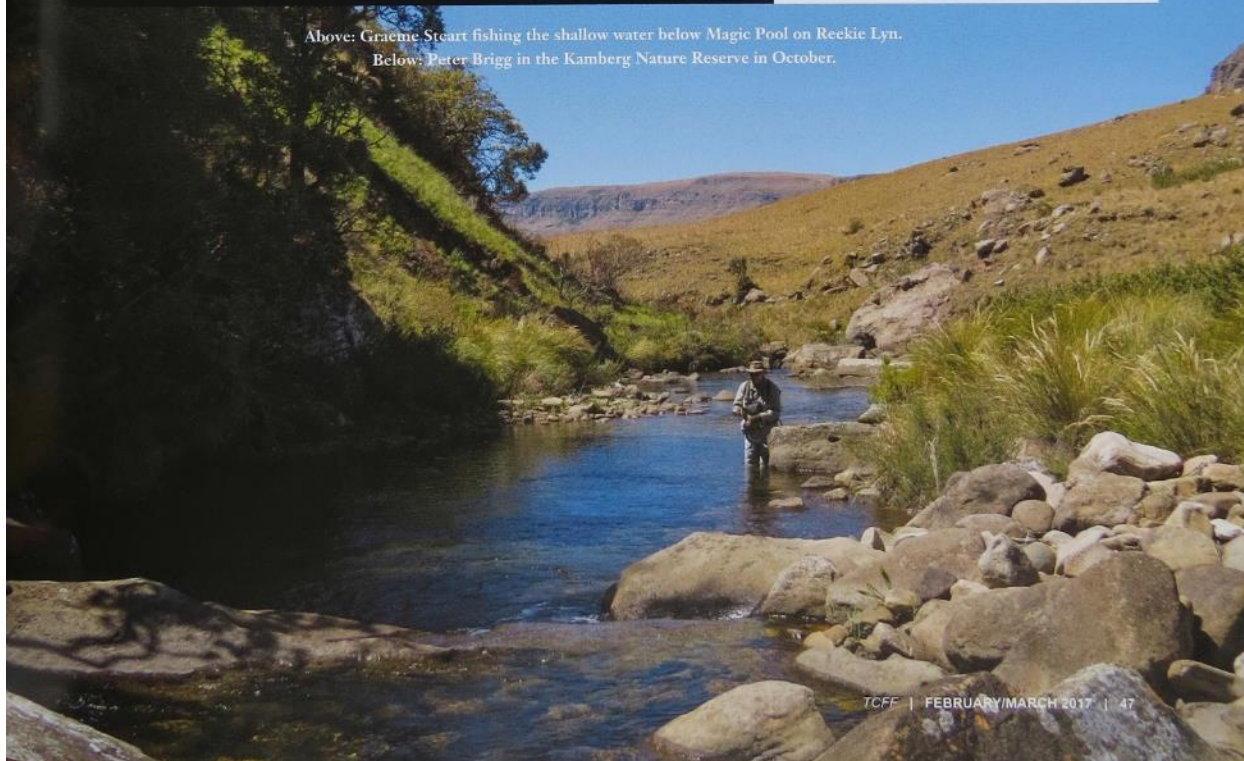


When brown trout are on the prod, you can find them in the most silly places. In his book *Reflections on Flyfishing*, Tom Sutcliffe describes how first he and then John Beams caught the same trout from a shallow spot that "had no earthly chance of holding even the most deranged fish". I was once fishing the Mooi at Reekie Lyn when a small brown swam downstream towards me and then went straight into a little bowl of water in the flat bedrock beside my feet that was no bigger than your handbasin at home. On suddenly seeing me, it shot back up the trickle of water entering the bowl, with its back out of the water. When you start seeing fish doing strange things like this, and start spooking and spotting fish, you can be sure that the browns are on the prod, and you should be ready with your A game.

Jan Korrubel and I were recently fishing a pool down there that I didn't have a name for. Several of the pools have names, and there is a sketch with these names in my book *Stippled Beauties*. Jan helped me out with a name for this particular one: Walter's Pool. It was so named by Pieter Taljaard and Jan, after a fish that could only have been called Walter careered off down the pool as Pieter's tippet went ping.

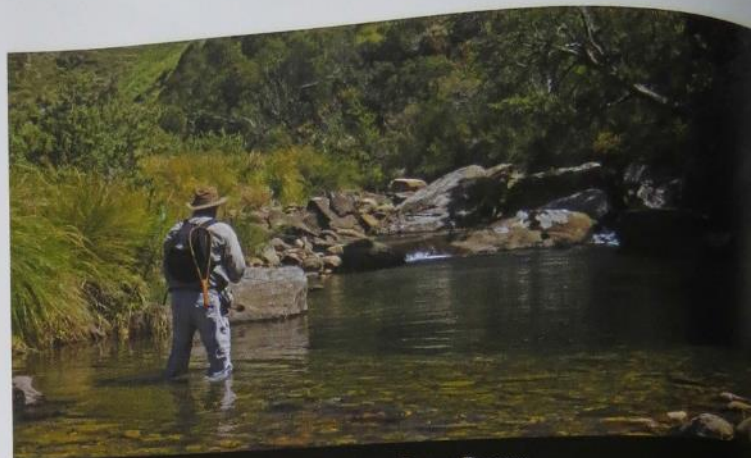
There is one productive piece of water in the gorge that we have named Scissors Run. The name stems from a ridiculous incident in which I was busy trimming my strike indicator while wading deep in fast water beside Paul de Wet, and I dropped my yarn scissors. As luck would have it, they dropped onto the toe of my boot and stayed there. They were (and still are) rather handy folding scissors that I had stolen from some unsuspecting child's Christmas cracker, and I had no intention of losing them in the swift current. We were wading waist-deep, and any movement would have seen them swept away, so I stripped off all my gear – hat, camera, fly vest and the like – and handed them to Paul who stood there holding them like a butler. Then I bent at the waist, plunged my torso into the cold water, and plucked the scissors from the boot with my hand.

Above: Graeme Steart fishing the shallow water below Magic Pool on Reekie Lyn.
Below: Peter Brigg in the Kamberg Nature Reserve in October.



You can get away with anything from a 4-wt to a 2-wt down there in the gorge, depending largely on the wind and flow, and while you do best fishing a nymph most days, a dry comes into its own as soon as you see any surface activity. Above the waterfall, the river is a little less affected by cloudbursts, which so often seem to occur on the Reekie Lyn stream, which joins the main river just above the falls. This stream collects the runoff from a large basin of hills to the south. Working for Water (WfW) has recently cleared large areas of wattle in that catchment, and it is hoped that with a re-grassed landscape, the dirty runoff which that produced will be significantly reduced. But if ever you arrange fishing below this tributary and find the river off colour, you can always explore above.

Immediately above is the Stillerus section of Kamberg Nature Reserve, which is open to the public. This water was once manicured, in the sense that a mown path followed the riverbank, and signs denoted the beats that could be booked through Parks Board as it was then known.

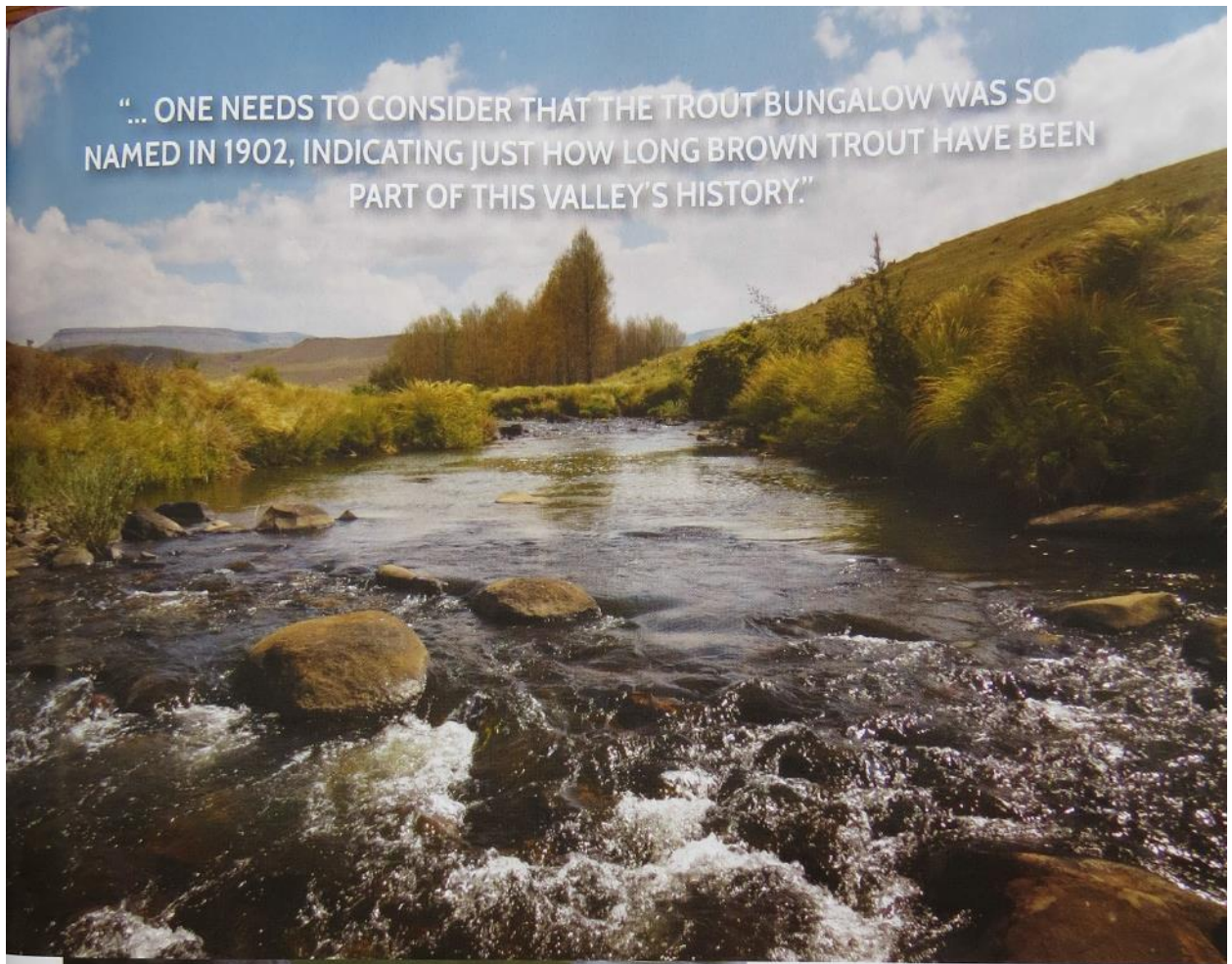


Above: Kamberg Nature Reserve.

Nchi chi (Zulu for *Leucosidea sericea*) is also known as ouhout due to its gnarled and aged appearance. This is an often scraggly shrub that can grow to the size of a small tree. While it is sometimes cursed by fly fishermen for seemingly grabbing at wayward flies, it gives valuable shade and is said to provide the aquatic environment with particularly good leaf matter with a high nutritive value for microbes, which in turn support diverse insect populations and fish.



“... ONE NEEDS TO CONSIDER THAT THE TROUT BUNGALOW WAS SO NAMED IN 1902, INDICATING JUST HOW LONG BROWN TROUT HAVE BEEN PART OF THIS VALLEY’S HISTORY.”



Above: A beautifully speckled Mooi River brown.
Top and previous page bottom: The water at Trout Bungalow.

With trout, fly fishing and guest services apparently less of a priority now, the Stillerus experience is a more wild one. Some might argue that this is better. Either way, this 4.7km length of river meanders through thickets of nchi chi bush, often heavily shrouding both banks. The banks are also high, so the only way to fish it effectively is to slide down into the water, wade up slowly and climb out when it gets too deep to carry on. Typically you can expect to catch small fish here. Even though there are some large, deep pools that do hold bigger fish, these are far from common. I have seen a 3½lb fish come out of there, and the pool near the upper boundary is called Five-Pounder Pool, presumably not without reason. But even as far back as 1937, Neville Nuttall records having spent his long leave at Stillerus in a dry spring and catching over a thousand trout that went mostly three to the pound.

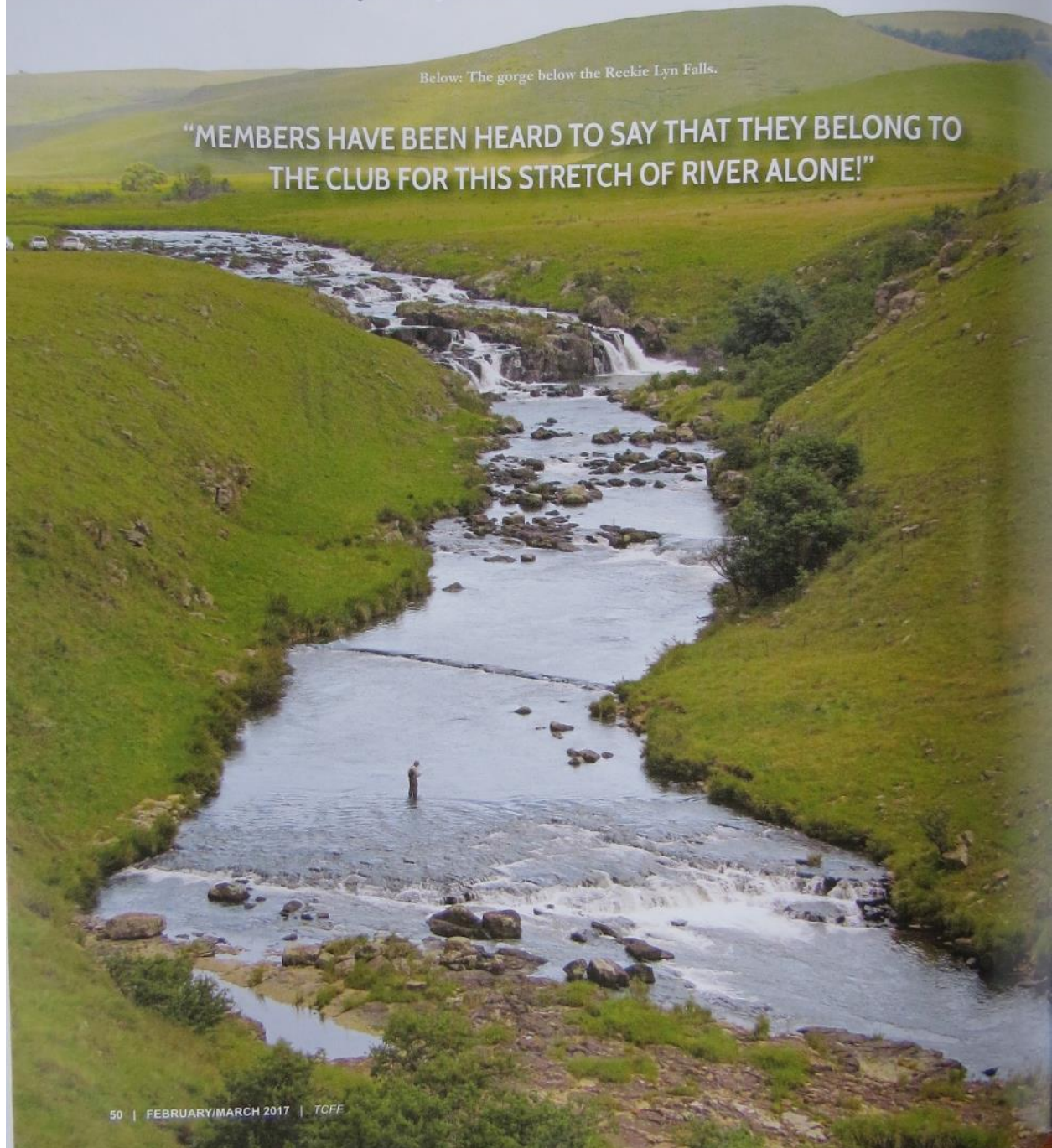
Kamberg Nature Reserve touches the river in two different places, so as you move upstream you re-enter private farmland. Fortunately, this farm (Riverside) is also NFFC water, which is divided into two distinct sections that are booked separately: 2.9km below and 1.9km above the road bridge. On recent trips there, and even following the severe drought of

2015, we have found plenty of fish, but only on the right day. I fished these stretches in the autumn of 2016 and came back empty-handed and convinced that the drought had decimated the fish population, but I was back in the spring, and suddenly there were fish again. Unlike the Stillerus section, there is less bankside vegetation, and with pretty dairy pastures

on the banks, it is easy fishing. My best river trout, a 21-inch hen, came to a CDC and Elk on upper Riverside in 2013. Above Riverside, the river flows through a small tribal area known as Tendela. Thanks to the efforts of the KZN Fly Fishing Association, this water is now a public fishery, which means you can purchase a rod ticket and even have a guide provided.

Below: The gorge below the Reckie Lyn Falls.

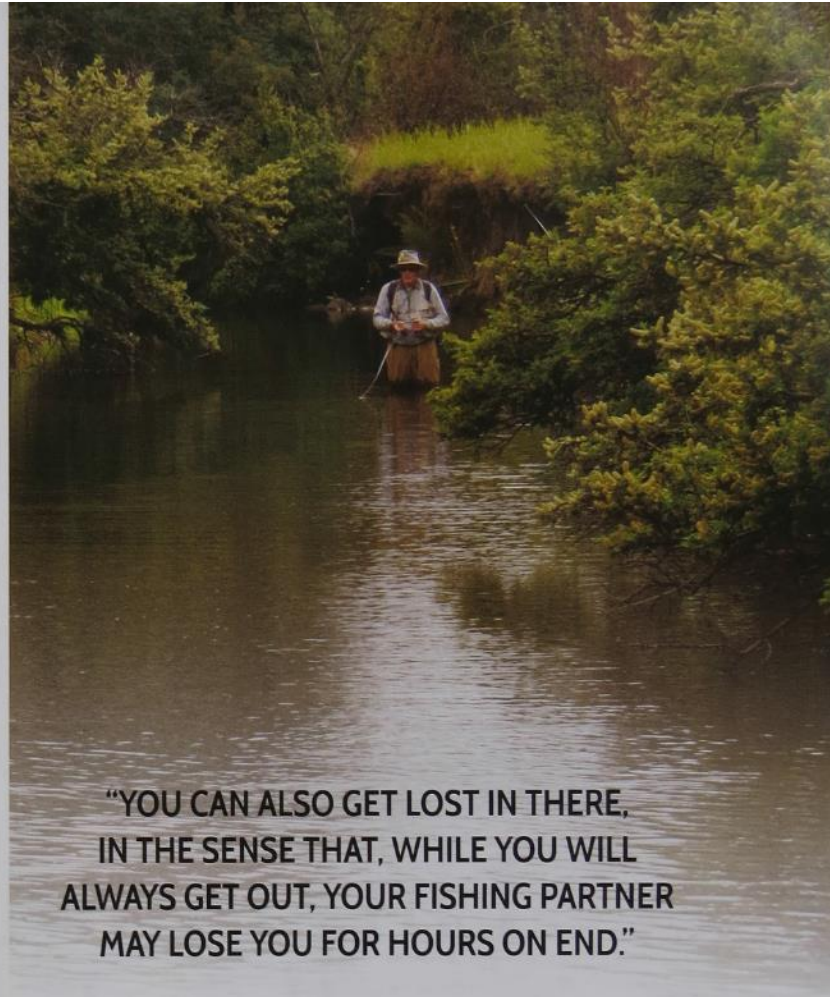
**"MEMBERS HAVE BEEN HEARD TO SAY THAT THEY BELONG TO
THE CLUB FOR THIS STRETCH OF RIVER ALONE!"**



If you strike it lucky, that guide may just be Trevor Sithole, a man who knows this river like the back of his hand and has put his clients onto some very large trout, as well as landing some himself. Like Riverside, the banks are not as thickly wooded on Tendela, but there are enough nchi chi to make it interesting and provide cover for fish. As soon as you cross up into Kamberg Nature Reserve, however, you again encounter thickly wooded banks, and the river continues its sharp twists and turns such that you can break through the undergrowth to find it apparently flowing the wrong way! In this thickly wooded section of Kamberg, which was previously a farm called Gladstone's Nose after the mountain to the south, you are likely to find spotted eagle owls. These magnificent birds favour nchi chi thickets to roost in during the day; when making your way through this vegetation you often disturb them, causing them to alight close enough for you to get a good look at them. You can also get lost in there, in the sense that, while you will always get out, your fishing partner may lose you for hours on end. This section is where you can search, probably in vain, for the pool that Neville Nuttall refers to in his book *Life in the Country* as Uncle George's Pool, after the 6lb brown that lived in it.

Passing by the now fairly run-down dams at Kamberg, you suddenly come out into more open countryside, and from the old weir opposite the hatchery building you are on a different river. Dark, shaded, slow water makes way for light-coloured pebbles, more frequently lit by sunshine, and the runs are faster as the gradient picks up. As you go up through a landscape restored from wattle thicket to grassland, you will find the fish become plentiful, quick and eager.

Game Pass was expropriated by the State in the late 1980s. The Green family would have been devastated to lose such a wonderful family treasure, and the old farmhouse ruin stands as a reminder of different times. It is encouraging though that the authorities have persisted, albeit waveringly at times, and have removed the wattle and gum thickets that invariably grew up around farmsteads. Ezemvelo is to be congratulated in that right up until the present day there is evidence of ongoing wattle sapling removal and brambles spraying. Let us hope



"YOU CAN ALSO GET LOST IN THERE, IN THE SENSE THAT, WHILE YOU WILL ALWAYS GET OUT, YOUR FISHING PARTNER MAY LOSE YOU FOR HOURS ON END."

Above: Roy Ward fishing the lower section of Kamberg Nature Reserve where encroaching nchi chi bushes make wading essential.

that they can keep it up, because wattle seed continues to germinate for up to 50 years after it has fallen to the ground. If each one of us fly fishermen who passes that way could destroy five wattle saplings for each day fished, the river god may just smile upon us.

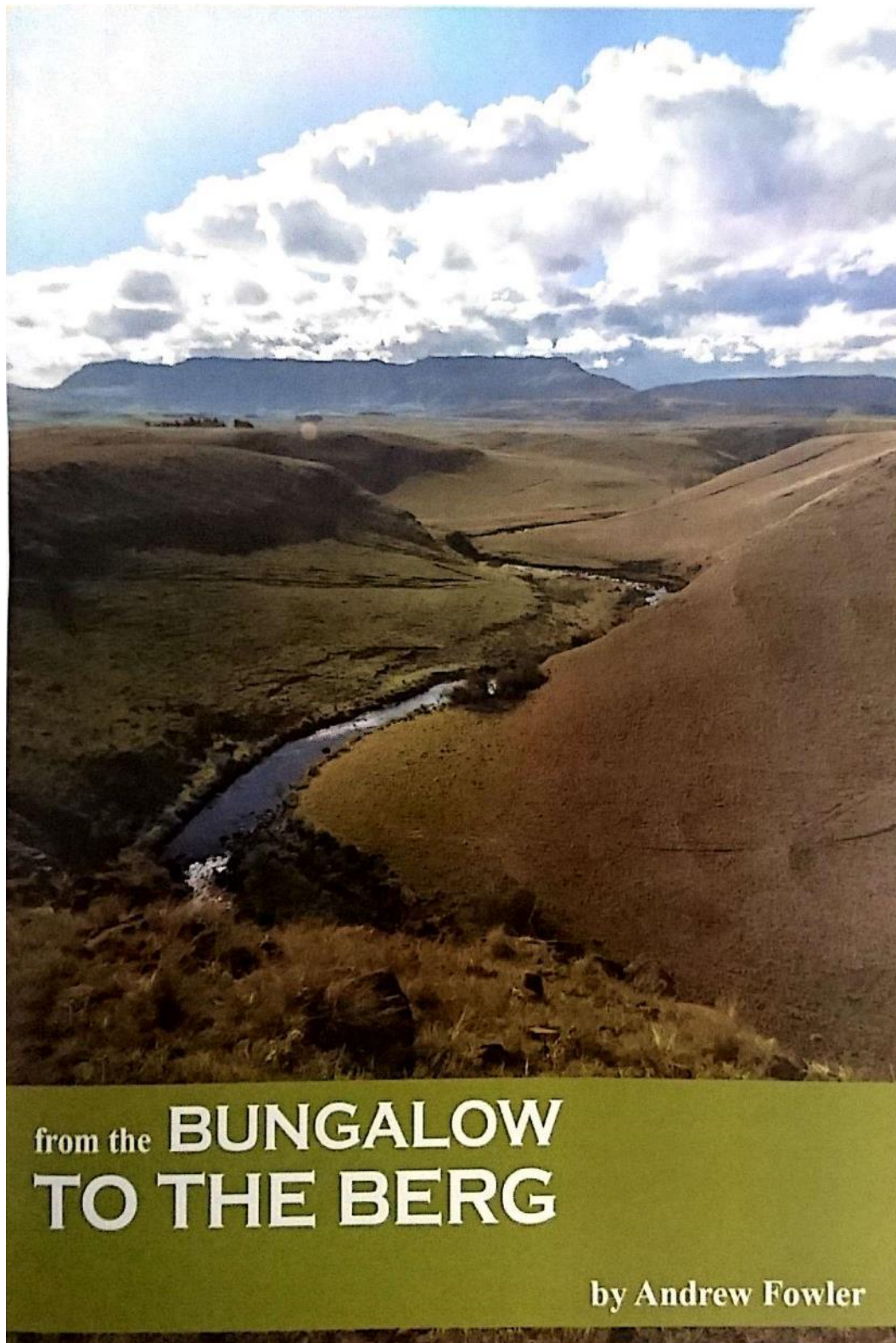
It is in parts like these that you won't be frowned upon for sticking with a dry fly all day, and you won't necessarily catch any fewer fish than your colleague with a nymph might do. My friend Roy Ward and I were up there recently and had a lot of fun fooling fish as innocent and gullible as they were beautiful. This section is called Game Pass after the original farm and is the site where browns were first successfully stocked in 1899. The 1890 stocking had been done too far down the river and was not successful.

For the athletic and the energetic who are prepared for a day hike of around 12km, you can venture far above the hatchery and start fishing the upper reaches several kilometres up. The stream is exceptionally beautiful up here, but the fishing gets a little more challenging, and there is no shelter from storms. The river up here is a delicate thing; blank days are more common, and fishing pressure would do it no good. It is a special place revered by those who know to appreciate it more for its natural beauty than its trout fishing. The river runs out on you at around the 1800m contour line where large boulders and plunge pools mark the upper limit of trout.

So, there you have it, nearly 60km of beautiful trout river. "Mooi" indeed!



"From the Bungalow to the Berg" By Andrew Fowler 2017:



From the Bungalow to the Berg

A flyfisher's sabbatical

(In October of 2016 the Author took an eight day break from "civilization", stayed in a cottage largely on his own , and did nothing other than fish his way up the Mooi River)

There was an hour or two on the Bungalow water, when my stick catch rate was at an all time high. In fact it was exceeded only by the number of times I caught brambles. At one stage a wayward bramble bush stuck to the back of my legs, and tangled in my net at the same time, such that each time I took a step it ripped at my flesh. I also lost more flies than I think I ever have before. I lost an entire tippet, fly and indicator about a minute after I had tied them all on, in a mad hatters tangle of gum tree sticks, brambles and fury, during which, I confess, I may just have sworn. A little.

OK, a lot.

But then there was a golden moment.

It came after I had to skip and skirt around about five pools to get ahead of the duck family that kept scooting ahead of me.

It came after I got sweaty and had no space in my pack for my jacket, so had to walk back to the pickup to deposit it.

It came before I ventured far upstream and found the worst riverbank wattle infestation I have ever laid eyes on .

It came before lunch, and before it turned cold.

It came, as golden moments are wont to do, completely without warning.

It wasn't the first fish I had seen. I walked just about on top of a small fish earlier. Then around mid morning, I was splashing through ankle deep water, when lo and behold, there was a bow wave that proceeded all the way up into the great big pool that I didn't know lay ahead. This one gave credence to my recent theory that big fish often live in a big safe pool in which they just sulk, and that they then go on hunting trips up and down from that safe haven, and thus are most often caught in surprisingly thin water in close proximity to such a safe pool.

Walking onto Trout

When I have fished the eastern cape highlands, or the western cape, trout have been relatively plentiful, and their holding or feeding positions largely predictable, with just a few surprises thrown in. This allows you to avoid stepping on unexpected fish and spooking them for a reasonable portion of your fishing day. On our KZN Brown Trout streams, and this was particularly so following the drought that preceded my trip, Trout are few and far between. At least that is true for the middle and lower sections of our streams: The mountain streams generally have more fish in them. Add to this the fact that our Browns are often in less than perfect clarity water, and as a result are not easy to spot. So the difficulty then is that you need to move on upstream past all the empty water, but you don't know which sections are devoid of fish. So you walk, at a medium pace, trying, against all hope to

spot fish and then you spook one, and that opportunity is gone. So what is the answer? There isn't one. Crane your neck. Peer into likely spots. Fish the spots that instinct tells you must have fish in them. Spook a lot of fish, and build up a mental database of where they were. Over time this will aid you in deciding which spots are worthy of a careful cast. But accept that you will never perfect it. Ever.

And then a half hour later was my moment. I was standing fishing a promising pool. Do you call it a pool? I don't know. It was deep, but the water was gliding through it at a discernable pace. It was one of those perfect spots, with a run at the top end, a few boulders scattered about the bottom, causing the water to channel in a way more interesting than in a big bland pool. Then it had some fallen trees on the far side. There I stood, drifting a deep nymph, trying to combat an obscure side current and a sneaky eddy, and all the while trying to peer into the depths of the water, that was made difficult by the strong upstream wind that ruffled the water, not to mention the passing clouds that rendered everything grey and silver. When suddenly I was staring at a great big Brown Trout. A cock fish. The wind had briefly abated, and the sun broke through, and like an actor appearing on stage, my fish was there. He was uncomfortably close to me...right there almost at my feet. The sun shone into the water, and presented him to me, like manna from heaven. He opened his white mouth and took something. At about that moment....that long moment, I realized that he was very close to where my fly was. Very close. In fact I will never know if what he mouthed was my fly or something next to it. I just know that I did a slow motion slip strike that amounted to nothing, and like sand running away through my fingers he descended back into the depths just as the wind resumed and obscured him from my view forever.

"So how big was he really?" you ask.

Well he was beautiful, and he was a golden yellow fish, with overly big spotty flanks, that glowed in the sunshine in that moment. He was deep and broad, and proportioned more like a Stillwater fish than a skinny river fish. And his jaw: It was big and sweeping, and even though it was October already, he clearly hadn't yet lost his winter kype entirely. And he was suspended there almost motionless...his head held in one spot while his tail and pectoral fins worked almost imperceptibly to hold him where he wanted to be.

That is how big he was.

So when I moved upriver and lost a small fish, and took photos, and tried a deep spot, and arrived at those horrible wattles, and stopped to make coffee and all those other things; all I could do was think about that haunting moment and that haunting fish. I traipsed back across the bare mealie fields in the rain just before dark, and waded in below the same spot and worked a Zak through there with more care and skill and determination than you can imagine. And before that: Just after I had seen him, I sunk back into the grass on my haunches, and rested him, and then tried him with an Ed's hopper, and a Troglodyte, and a GRHE, and every other pattern you can imagine.

And as I made my way back to the pickup, and drove back up to the cottage on Reekie Lyn, and showered and changed and sat there alone drinking hot soup, with the rain drumming on the tin roof; all I could do was think about that haunting moment and that haunting fish.

And that was day one of my flyfishing meander from the Bungalow waters, to the Berg. That would be the Trout Bungalow stretch on the Mooi River, which, by my reckoning, would be twenty seven kilometers downstream from the point where I estimated that any self respecting flyfisherman would declare that he had run out of river.

I made that estimate while pouring over maps in the lounge at home. Scanning back and forth and measuring up and plotting and scheming. And I calculated that if you could fish three kilometers of Trout river in a day, then this here stretch, all of which I had access to, would only take me nine days to fish from bottom up. Nine days. "Imagine that!" I declared to my wife. And she said "Don't imagine it, do it!" So I did.

Bless her soul.

As I walked from the restaurant I looked up at the mountain, and thought to myself that if Gladstone had a nose like that, he could probably smoke in the shower! Gladstone's Nose dominates over Reekielyn cottage, and was to be my friend for a good few days.

Reekie Lyn cottage looks straight onto Gladstones Nose, which borders the south side of the river, and reaches an altitude of 2,200m ASL. On the north bank is the long line of cliffs extending out to the Riverside farmhouse, known as Mount Erskine, and reaching an altitude of 2,181m. To the south of the cottage is a rim of hills with their feet in the valley bowl of the Reekie Lyn stream. Those hills rise to an altitude of 2,083m. Straight ahead up the valley is of course Giant's Castle itself, at an impressive altitude of 3,314m ASL. Then standing alone far downstream opposite lower Reekie Lyn and the Trout Bungalow is Kamberg mountain itself, at an altitude of 2000m. The section of river that I fished started at an altitude of 1,800m ASL on Game Pass, and falls over the 26kms to an altitude of 1,530m at the lower boundary of the Trout Bungalow.

It is funny how if you stare at a thing like that long enough it starts to morph into a grotesque form, a bit like a word does when repeated too much. The secret is not to think about them too much. Words and mountains that is. So it is with flyfishing in awful weather. If you think about it too much you just won't go out at all. My planned companion for the day, the second day that is, had not arrived. Who could blame him! Sunday had dawned cold, and with a howling gale. I really do mean a howling gale. The small pond in front of the cottage even had whitecaps on it, and I had awoken to what I thought was a vehicle, but was actually the wind tugging at the building as though it wanted it. Wanted it like Kentucky fried chicken to go...a takeaway. I was a bit slow in getting going myself. It is not that I contemplated not going out, although, I confess that I did do that, but it was just that it was Sunday and it was cold, and I had walked over ten kilometers the day before, so I allowed myself the luxury of a slow start. Like I say, I had thought of staying in. The notion of a day wrapped up warm in a mountain cabin on my own, with just my thoughts, and blank pages upon which to write, did hold some appeal. But in the final analysis I recalled some lines from a Bob Segar song in which he sang "I could go east, I could go west. It was all up to me to decide", and I was smitten with the idea of my absolute freedom, and that I had a rare opportunity to adventure at will, and make memories. After all, I could sit in front of a keyboard any time, but now I had a windswept landscape at my feet, and best I get out there and get me some of that.

I did allow myself to drive down to the roadside stile, and in so doing cut about 2 kilometres of walking off the day. I figured that it would have just been walking along a road, and who wants to do that!

So I set off towards the restaurant, and on across the tops of the hills, aiming for roughly the end-point of my previous day's walking and fishing.

From the hilltops, with the relentless wind rushing in my ears and the grass buckling in great waves like those upon the ocean, I could see that the river from the previous day's turn around point, remained a thread obscured by an impenetrable jungle of wattles. I wanted none of that! I figured that apart from

my indulgences of a late start as well as driving to my start point, I would skip about a kilometer of wattle choked river and start in where it is pleasantly clear.

That is what I did in the end, walking down beyond the seldom seen fishing club sign on the Reekielyn bottom boundary fence (few flyfishers venture all the way down here), and starting in at a good looking glide.

Seldom seen signs.

After I published my first book, a number of people asked me to take them fishing, to show them how to fish a river. That was very flattering, and of course my natural inclination is to say "yes of course". The problem is that we are all busy people, and the chances of my free day lining up with Joe soap's free day are slim. Coupled with that, on that day, I will probably have an old friend who I haven't fished with in months, and I will be foregoing that other opportunity. But quite aside from my feeling guilty at not having put aside time to fish with Joe Soap, I have to ask: Why doesn't Joe go off and give it a bash. Why is he waiting for me? I am really not a hot-shot fisherman, but anything I did pick up was from years of giving it a bash. Now people want to share in the end result. I don't blame them for that, or hold it against them, but what happened to giving it a go, and then coming back with the questions you need help figuring out. Someone once asked me to take them to Reekie Lyn to show them where the bottom boundary is. Um.....there is a sign on the fence....you walk downstream until you see it. Yes, you walked a long way. Did you come across the sign? No? Then you probably didn't go far enough. No, sorry, I won't show you.

When setting up at the car I had made a few carefully thought out decisions. One was to bring enough ingredients to make more than just one cup of coffee. Another was to ditch my fleece, and instead to wear just a tee shirt under my fishing shirt, and use my rain fly over the top as a windbreaker. I know that despite it being cold, when I start hiking a few kilometers I always seem to sweat, and then I find myself shedding clothing which I have no place to stow. My other decision was to fish my 9ft 4 weight Stillwater rod. I just figured that battling in a gale with a 3 weight all day made no sense, and I have thrown flies with the bigger rod, as delicately as I think I will ever need to.

Brown trout that rise to dry flies on lower river water in these parts as rare as tablecloths in vulture restaurants. But with all this wind, and thoughts of terrestrials being blown onto the water, I just couldn't help myself, so I did what my friend Graeme would have done, and tied on a dry anyway. Graeme will stick with a dry fly all day and blank, just because he is so enjoying throwing it, and watching it ride the current, even when the rest of us are catching Trout on nymphs. I like that. So I selected one of my favourites: Ed's hopper. October is not hopper season. But like Graeme and his dry flies, I just can't resist that gangly, springy fly sometimes, and I rather hoped that the browns might see it my way too.

They didn't.

Why I like Ed's hopper: I didn't get it at first. I thought it looked unlike a hopper, and my mind was fixed on a Dave's Hopper. But the thing about Ed's hopper is that it is sparse, and athletic and minimalistic. It has barely any air resistant for casting in wind. It floats low, but never gets waterlogged. When you pull it, it kicks and wriggles. I tie it on an ultralight terrestrial hook with a massive gape and a whisker barb. When I hold it between my fingers on the stream bank, I fill with confidence, and when it lands on the water I actually tense up in anticipation of a take. You want that in a fly.

The wind also just got stronger, and it got colder. When I switched to nymphs the Trout still didn't see it my way. But fortunately I had coffee. I stopped and made coffee twice: Once just above the sign on the boundary fence, and then again up at Magic pool. Somewhere in between, I stopped and put on my emergency layer. My emergency layer is a very clever little wind cheater type garment that my wife bought me. It is made for cyclists, and it fits in a tiny bag about the size of your cellphone. When she bought it for me, I told her it was the wrong thing, because it is not waterproof. It has saved my bacon many a time, as it did this day. It just tipped the scales, and I was warm enough to carry on.

Bless her soul.

The other thing that happened at magic pool, was that I lost a small Brown. It just came off, as these things sometimes do. Or should I say "as they *often* do". Far too often.

What doesn't happen often is witnessing trees breaking in a gale. That happened at Magic pool. The wind had either intensified, or the valley was somehow channeling it more at this spot. I had rock hopped across the stream to a point which I had been making myself towards all along. A spot where the rocks bask in the early afternoon sun, and where you have a cliff at your back, as well as a *Nanna berry* and an *Nchi Shi* bush as a wind shield. These allowed me to actually light a match to get the stove going for that much needed coffee. And while I sat there basking like a dassie, the trees across the other side were bucking and every now and then I would hear a cracking as one succumbed.

Wattle trees succumb to snow and wind, cracking and splitting and falling over and trying to grow sideways. Encountering severe wattle infestations the day before had piqued my awareness of them on Reekieliyn. They have got worse! I was trying not to be my usual wattle warrior self on this trip. Trying to relax and just do Trout and coffee and enjoyment. It wasn't working. I was scanning and evaluating and planning and estimating the number of man days required to get rid of all these young invaders and prevent one of my very favourite places from becoming like the kilometer of river I had just chosen to pass by. Earlier I had spotted a cave above me, and I clambered up through a thick stand of the invaders. It turned out that the cave was very small, and didn't contain any bushman paintings. I rather thought I may make some amazing discovery in this seldom visited valley, but alas, it was not to be. What I did notice, is that the bare ground, as well as the pull of several downed wattles was creating an impending landslide. At the base of the small cliff, there was a gap of about a centimetre between the rock and the soil. Looking around me, I could identify the sheer line. I was standing on the unstable bit. I got off quick. Someday soon about twenty tons or more of soil is going to slide down the slope into the river. I banked the wattle count exercise and put it out of my mind for later. Well. I tried to anyway.

When I got to Krantz pool, the wind was alternatively blowing upstream and downstream. The pool lay in just the right direction to form a strange sort of wind trap, and occasionally a wind gust would drive water up into what looked like a wake of a hippo, and the entire pool would then wallow and suck and lap, like some scary monster. Further up, sheets of water were being driven from the surface and spraying out over the rocks and the veld. My casting was getting decidedly less accurate too. On occasion the wind would die, and then my misjudged cast would slam the fly into the pool with a complete absence of grace. My hat kept blowing off too. It was getting ridiculous. I headed out of the valley, via the restaurant. No. I did not stop to eat.

That restaurant that I have referred to already, is of course a vulture restaurant. Of course. There are no other restaurants out there on the upper Mooi. Farmers have cattle that die. They need somewhere to dump them. So they tow the carcass out onto a rocky promontory and leave them there in case a vulture is in need. I have never witnessed a vulture feeding at the restaurant at Reekilyn, but that is probably just a sign that I don't spend enough time there. Many of the carcasses I see there are picked clean. There is a restaurant on Reekie Lyn above "Cow Drop Pool" and another on Riverside on the south side near the lower boundary. There is a colony of cape vultures on the cliffs above Game Pass. If you are lucky you may also see a bearded vulture (Lammergeier)

Later the cloud would lift momentarily, revealing a healthy dusting of snow on the mountains. I chased a bull out of the garden, brought the wet socks in off the porch railing, and put on some long johns. Tomorrow, I thought, I could go east, or I could go west. It was all up to me to decide.

When it comes to fishing cottages, Reekielyn is hard to beat. For me it is a river fishing cottage. Yes sure it has a small dam right in front of the porch, and it is stocked with Trout, and there is a jetty and a boat. But for me the water in front is just for the foreground to the pictures of the mountains that lie in the distance. The real water is just off to the North. If you open a window on that side of the cottage, you can actually hear the waterfall on the Mooi River. Now that is something special! The cottage has everything I needed: A warm bed, a fridge, a stove, microwave, kettle, and a hot shower. It is a wooden plank structure, and I will confess that when the wind got up, it had airconditioning all of its own. Warm clothing, hot showers and cups of soup sorted that issue out, and besides, with my fishing gear and books and fly tying stuff spread all over the lounge, it looked downright cosy: a sort of man cave away from home. The sabbatical allowed me to mess it up just the way I wanted to. I could put my wet wading boots in the middle of the lounge and hang my longs to dry near the oven, or behind the fridge, or wear them on my head if I so cared. No. I didn't. By the end of the trip I was finding little coloured pieces of strike indicator yarn stuck in carpets and linen and chairs. The cottage comes complete with a couple of ducks, some reedbuck that graze just off to the side at sunset, and traffic that passes seldom enough that a passing car has you looking out to watch it. While I was there I think I saw 6 cars pass. In eight days.

One car that passed me while I was tackling up at the roadside gave me a fright. I wasn't expecting it, and suddenly it was there. I got to thinking about that while I was slamming hoppers down on the stream in the wind. Somehow it felt OK, and I was quietly confident that I was not spooking fish when I did that. Why? Well because lots of things were falling in the water with a splat. So why not my hopper? The Trout would have been expecting things that go splat in the wind.

Why a sabbatical?

From the first time I learned of the concept of a sabbatical, I liked the idea. Some people get their relaxation from lumping in front of a TV, or going sightseeing, or going to stay at a resort where they sleep a lot. There is nothing wrong with that, but I can't sit still. I am not an adventure junkie (I once threatened to throw myself off a cliff tied to one of those elastic bands, but thankfully I came to my senses), I just need to be doing something. The idea of

leaving normal life for a while, I mean leaving it completely, and doing something else, always held appeal. Even our usual escapes often include an element of domesticity. I mean, hell, while typing this a "tune" just came on the stereo, and what was it....the sound of a lawnmower! I needed to not hear a lawnmower for a while. I needed to be in a place where I could forget to check the phone or Facebook for messages. Of course fly-fishing was it....something I can immerse myself in completely and forget about whatever else is out there. The first question most people asked me, was how did I get this past my wife? I don't think I "got it past her". She suggested it. I like to think I am always genuinely encouraging when she and her friends want to go off for a few days to some art festival, or when she needs to be away for a week on a training course she has elected to go on. Everyone needs a break, to stop them picking at the skin on their arm, or tapping their foot furiously. Hopefully I returned with my compass re-set, a little more grounded, and with my creative side refreshed. My wife sees value in me being that person, so she invests in it. I am very appreciative of that, and of course of her.

I did no training whatsoever for my sabattical. That is to say I simply arrived, straight from my office desk, and expected my body to carry me up and down the river every day, without complaint, pain, or discomfort. That seems reasonable for someone in his early thirties, right?

Jan Korrubel, on the other hand, was training for an upcoming New Zealand trip, where his host had warned him, he would be hiked silly. Jan's training run, together with the fact that it was Monday, complete with forgotten camera and the like, conspired against his early start. His delay was welcome for me. I had woken to an ice cold cottage, more snow on the berg overnight, and a wind still pushing through at around thirty kilometers an hour. A delay meant that when my guest arrived I had had bacon and eggs and had sorted my tackle out and brushed my teeth and washed the dishes. Isn't it amazing how that stuff takes a little longer when you get just that bit older!

Jan and I got talking tackle over tea. That's what you do with a guy who is in the flyfishing tackle industry. It is also the kind of thing that gets you to the river at eleven am! But this was a holiday, and not a race, and the time spent catching up and comparing varying accounts of the same flyfishing history were a great deal of fun. Besides, the first hour on the river were bright and windy, and without Trout.

At Walter's pool, a small fish rose, and then another. Cow drop pool produced nothing, but at the head of Tekwaan Pool Jan got a very pretty Brown that must have been twelve inches long. After a quick photo session we stopped on the riverbank just below Picnic Pool and had a late lunch, and discussed strike indicators. I happened to mention to Jan that the pocket water in front of our lunch spot is probably my most productive piece of water on this river beat. (I didn't mention it to Jan, but the piece just below Krantz pool is right up there too). Jan replied that he had never taken a fish there! As we moved up, Jan pointed out some of his better spots, and several of them were ones I had never given a second thought to. Such is the value in sharing a day on a river with an experienced flyfisherman.

The other thing I got to share with Jan, was watching a respectable sized Brown come up and take my strike indicator in a leisurely and confident rise, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. We both stood there on the river bank and watched that unfold in one of those long, slow-motion moments. Shortly thereafter, in the same run, I pricked a fish, and just above that I briefly had on a rather solid fish from a deep chute. And while this fishing action was hotting up, it was becoming overcast. It was also getting colder. Not that it had ever been warm. That morning I had seriously considered wearing waders. I don't normally wear waders on a river....there are just too many fences and brambles, and in any event, it normally warms up to the point where you question whether the damned things are in fact breathable, and you wish you had left them behind. But on this day, and in my defence, it had started out at two degrees C. and the prospect of wet wading had seemed a little

daunting. But in the end I kept on a body warmer and rain jacket all day and it kept me reasonably warm. Until the fishing action started to improve, then I really got cold. I still had my emergency layer (bless her soul!), but the fishing was all happening, so I was not going to stop to add a layer. In the next big pool I pricked a fish that turned in the depths, just enough that Jan and I both saw its belly. Jan then went on ahead, and I persisted, hoping for another fish in there. Persistence paid off, and this time the hook held firm, and I landed a beautiful sixteen and a half inch fish. My repeated whistles to Jan, to draw his attention to my success and to request a camera only paid off when it dawned on Jan that the persistent bird call he was hearing, was not in fact emanating from a bird!

Jan was having his own action...fish seen, risen, missed and the like, but like me, he was finding it hard to actually get a fish in his hand. At the next run a fish was rising, and I fooled it on a para RAB, but my tippet parted, and it was gone. Around then the now heavily pregnant clouds started to produce a drizzle that may have been a sleet. I was struggling to change fly, with the fading light, and frozen digits. A few more pools, and we arrived at the waterfall, where we climbed out and walked back to the cottage in the rain.

Despite just one fish landed for each of us, we both felt elated and blessed to have had such an eventful day out. It really doesn't take much to please a simple fisherman, does it!

That night it rained a bit harder, and the temperature plummeted again, and I sat eating a TV dinner and writing with a beanie on and with cold hands, realising that the only warm place was in fact in my bed.

The thermometer on the south wall of the cottage indicated a minimum temperature of minus 8 degrees C, and a maximum of plus 38 degrees! I do not know when the magnet was last pressed, so I don't know what period this range represents. While I was there the temperature fell to freezing and reached a brief maximum of 25 degrees C. On the whole it was cool.

I awoke earlier than I had the previous few mornings, and having mustered the resolve to leave my warm bed, to switch on the kettle, I pulled back a curtain to check on the world. The world was white. Well, the mountainous part of my world: All the hills surrounding the cottage were blanketed in snow, and the early morning sun was just touching the tips of clouds and snowy hills. It was astoundingly, beautiful!

Energised by the beauty of all around me I was dressed and sorting out the cottage and my lunch and my tackle in no time. When Terry Andrews arrived, the clouds had descended onto the hills again, but he did get a peak of some of the snow, while we had tea and got tackled up.

The Stillerus section of the Mooi, is distinctly different from Reekie Lyn. Above the Reekie Lyn falls, the stream is held back by that dolorite obstruction, and so it snakes its way across a flat and swampy area, turning this way and that. Meadow water I call it. This is typically water where you expect an evening rise, where the wake from your wading is an issue, and where glassy water has you wanting to sink the tippet ahead of your dry fly, if that is your school of thought on that particular matter. With the relatively low water levels, much of the water I remember fishing as a student was bit on the thin side. That is to say you could see the streambed with some ease, particularly when walking atop the high banks. Every now and then a very deep section would present itself. Or should I say, Terry and I would pronounce it deep, on account of us not being able to see the streambed. Then one of us would do the perilous descent down the steep bank into the crisp water below, and proceed up in the deep streambed, casting between the Nchi Chi bushes that line the tops of the banks. At one point I managed

to not only perform a tailing loop, but to wrap the loop in the top of one of these bushes, in a messy and complicated affair that involved a lot of destruction of the flora, and which Terry aptly named a “tailing fuck-up”. I did not disagree.

Half the time, my eye was drawn *away* from the river to the fresh snow on Giants Castle off to the west. The air was crystal clear, and the sun was out, and the sight of the high white peak dominating the open vleiland in the foreground was spectacularly beautiful.

In a “pearler” of a pool, with a fast run entering some seriously deep water, I connected with a small Brown which succeeded in shooting my indicator a full 8 inches upstream, leaving no doubt that it had eaten my fly. Terry fooled a similar size fish just a little further upstream, and we had some fun photographing it, taking care to include Terry’s special rod, reel, and net.

Later my wife would send me a message about the fish I had caught, and I hadn’t even told her about it! But then if Terry witnessed you coughing on a mountain top, the chopper might just arrive to take you to the pneumonia unit, before you even knew you were sick. Such is the power of Facebook, and the valley is in line of sight of the cellphone tower up on Riverside!

As we progressed we found ourselves passing by a lot of water that we probably should have fished. The stream would disappear into a thicket of Nchi Chi, or bramble, and we would try to estimate where the river entered the obstruction, and cut off a whole loop to rejoin above. I suppose that with more time on our hands, and a bit of persistence and determination we should have stayed in the river and followed every inch of its course, but I had said to Terry that I wanted us to cover the whole 4.7Kms of Stillerus, and it later emerged that he needed to be somewhere by late afternoon, so we cut our cloth accordingly.

Stillerus section of Kamberg Nature Reserve has a resident population of Reedbuck, Blesbok, and Wildebees. Lone Wildebees have been known to be aggressive, and as I write this two members of a family were gored to death by a lone Wildebees while on a hike in the North Eastern Cape last year. As far as I know this is extremely rare. I have only ever seen a big group of Wildebees off in the distance on Stillerus. The only time I ever felt threatened by a wildebeest was the time I was carrying a candle across the lawn at night on the way to the kids rondavel at Stillerus cottage in the late seventies, and one snorted behind me in the dark, causing me to drop the candle. But that turned out to be my father pulling a prank on me. Oh yes: There was that time we were charged by a lone bull in the berg. I was young. I climbed my Dad’s leg. That seemed to work.

At some point we stopped beside a pretty run, where a willow grew, for a cup of coffee and some eats. Sitting in the grass, beside the hissing stove, I happened to look up to the North, and in a brief moment a lammergeyer swooped low. I beckoned to Terry, who was on the phone at the time, but he missed it.

It was a pleasant morning out, with a gentle giant on a man who shares with me a soft spot for flyfishing, including all its “gear, tackle and trim”.

On our walk back in the warm afternoon sun, the subject of conversation turned to the politics in flyfishing circles. I said to Terry that I find it best to let ten or twenty years pass after you have met an apparently obnoxious fly-fisherman, before you declare him an arsehole.

That evening I capitalized on the warmer weather, lit up a small fire and had a braai for one as the sun set behind the Giant, and the dabchicks chattered across the water to one another behind me.

When cooking my lamb chops on the fire, I again found myself wanting the salt and pepper that I had forgotten to pack, and which would have been good with my fried eggs too. I then went digging, because I knew I had an emergency plan for this occurrence, like many others. Sure enough I found a miniature vial of "Steers chip flavouring". I had stored it in a bead container, and it was with my coffee making kit, for use on boiled eggs when having a streamside breakfast up some forgotten valley. I believe that all those little preparations, which include things like spare matches in watertight containers, extra superglue and spare laces, are all in fact part of a dream. It is a dream in which you, the outdoorsman, is out there, alone, on some mountain, or in a far flung cabin, and you are presented with a breakage or a problem. And being the Mc Guyver cross Bear Grylls that you are, you save the day with your miniature kit, stashed especially for such occasions. And if that miniature "save the day kit" remains buried in your fishing or hiking kit in the garage, then you are suppressing a part of your soul. If you never have need of that special kit, then you are not living your dream. My sabbatical was in some very small way, an attempt to live my sub conscious dream. Having solved the problem of the forgotten salt, and having had a spare pair of long-johns, and a beanie stashed for unexpected snow, I sensed that I was living out the dream to some degree. That night my face and hands were as dry and chafed as sandpaper. I had not thought to bring moisturizing cream. I thought of rubbing the grease from the lamb chops all over my extremities, but decided I would be taking it too far. Bear Grylls could do that one. I checked my extra torch, made sure it too had spare batteries, and then I went to bed.

I have become a bit of a habitual poacher. But this only happens when I fish lower Riverside. It's that club sign on the lower boundary fence you see: It is blue, but it is like a red rag to a bull. The water below is rather good too. The river there flows through a rocky section and then through a dolorite poort (there is no decent English name for a poort). Just below that is a big pool that I had been eyeing when Terry and I fished up the Stillerus piece. Bob Crass has this labelled temptingly as "Five Pounder Pool" in his 1971 book, "Trout fishing in Natal". We had taken a look through the nchi shi, and I had decided it should be fished from the opposite bank, and then we veered off and walked up the track back to the road, so in fact we had missed this last piece, and I suppose you could say I had unfinished business.

So Roy and I walked down a bit, and while Roy sat in the veld and sorted out a new leader and fly, I waded across and went down to try that same big pool. Unfortunately there was a yellow billed duck there with her tiny ducklings. When she saw me coming she sent them off under an overhanging bush and then proceeded with one of those broken wing acts, right down the length of the pool.

Birds seen during my stay.

Wattled Crane

Crowned Crane

Grey Heron

Giant Kingfisher

Yellow Billed Duck

Black Duck

Coot

Dabchick

Spurwing Geese

Egyptian Geese

Cape Vulture

Bearded Vulture

Orange throated Longclaw

Hadedas (of course)

Cape Wagtail

Turtie Doves

Black crow

European Plover

Blacksmith Plover

Giant Eagle Owl

Yes: I know these are the old names. I promise.....the birds won't mind.

I sat it out beside the pool, giving things a chance to settle, while she circled nervously on the pool below. I started off with a deep nymph about ten minutes after her act. Surprisingly the trout had settled down, because after a few minutes I had one follow the fly up from the depths, and I saw it turn in the deep green water. Then as I worked up the pool I had a take, and up near the top, when I was right opposite the hiding ducklings, a pretty ten inch fish took the deep fly, and then I lost another.

I joined Roy at the pool above. He had had a few casts in there, but said I should go right ahead. On the first cast a fish took. It is all a bit of a blur now, as to which ones I landed and when. All I can say is that it turned into a "champagne day". Tom Sutcliffe once wrote about "Champagne days on the Mooi". This was one of those!

After taking and losing several good Trout in the poort pool, we walked up over a shallow rocky section. I said to Roy that this water was best skipped, and that we should head on up to some of the deeper water, but as we walked I saw this little run. It was calling me, and there was a flat stone leading from the short green spring veld, straight into the water, like a red carpet. So I stepped in and threw the nymph into the sweet spot in the neck of the run. The indicator darted forward within about a second of my delivery and an eleven inch Trout was to hand.

As we walked on I spooked one or two, caught another in the tail of a pool that I had decided I would leave for Roy, but was idly chucking a fly into while I waited for him to catch up. Just below the drift on Riverside, I spooked a fish of about fourteen inches, from a very shallow slow section, but it shot out from under the grass at my feet. Isn't that typical of a Brown!

By the time we stopped for lunch under a couple of large gnarled Nchishi trees on the north bank, I was in a carefree, satiated, and fulfilled state of mind. I lay there in the soft green grass on one elbow, digging out hunks of bully beef and balancing them on a salticrax before dispatching each of them hungrily in a shower of crumbs, and I got to thinking that PD would have loved this. PD and I have had a handful of such "champagne days" (As Tom Sutcliffe called them in his first boo) on rivers together, and I wished he were there with Roy and I. PD has a deep appreciation for these things, and as he and I leapfrog up the river, with each passing he will give me a commentary on the fish he caught, or saw, or spooked. That commentary will include details of the strange place the Trout was lying, or how it hunted for his fly after he had whipped it out in front of the fish, or how close to the bank it was holding, or maybe just a detailed description of the hesitancy of its take. PD and I have done rivers together for enough years that we fall into an easy pattern and pace. Our dialogue on the day will encompass an assessment of the outing as it unfolds, and I knew that had PD been there that day, he would have been

brimming over in appreciation of the fact that these Browns were very much “on the prod”, a state of affairs as special as it is rare.

After lunch things slowed down a bit, as they often do, but the stamp of good flyfishing was already upon the day, so it didn’t matter a bit.

As I walked up the river, I saw Brett, the farmer, approaching on the opposite bank in his landcruiser with Biscuit and Benji, the two dogs. He was driving, and I was walking, in open ryegrass fields on our respective sides of the river. He was working....checking out a new fence, and looking to collect leftover materials, so he wasn’t looking my way. As we drew up opposite one another, I stepped forward into the shade of a willow, and waited for his attention, to greet him. He didn’t look my way, so I called his name. Instantly I saw him swing his head around in surprise and his eyes scanned the riverbank looking for me. It turns out that he hadn’t seen me at all. After we had chatted and gone our separate ways, I instinctively waded back into the shade of the same willow, and commenced casting up the next run, figuring that Benji and Biscuit hadn’t disturbed it any more than that clever duck act earlier. And then I got to thinking how much sense it makes to use shade, and drab clothing when flyfishing. Brett had not been able to spot me at all, and yet I was actually in plain view. So when other anglers mock the idea of choosing your clothing colour, as they are sometimes inclined to do, just give them a smug look, and then ignore them. You and I know! Oh, and if you don’t already do so...position yourself in the shade or against a steep bank or beside a bush too. You will be amazed at how effective that can be.

From where we had had lunch, all the way up to the pump station where we ended up, I saw evidence of the good work that Brett Moller has done in clearing the river of wattle. What remains are all young trees (regrowth) that can be easily felled and dragged out by hand. Much of the upper Mooi is like this when it comes to wattle. From Reekie Lyn right up to Game Pass, there are wattles, but largely young ones. Of course the passage of time alone will change that, unless someone is routinely taking out trees to stem the tide. There is currently no incentive, encouragement, or financial merit in doing that. An entire Trout fishery is in the hands of the goodwill of a few landowners, who have no guidelines, laws, support group, hand-outs, or gripping reason, to keep the place clear. When the landowners are in a good economic cycle, and if they know enough of how much we flyfishers treasure this asset, then they might do something about wattle. If they fall on hard times, or if flyfishers don’t overtly display their appreciation of this asset, then they probably won’t do anything. Tasmanian flyfishing author Greg French is an ardent conservationist with whom I can identify. He writes extensively about “advocacy”: the state of affairs in which flyfishers use, enjoy, and uphold the integrity of their fisheries. By advocating the enjoyment of our rivers by flyfishers, we are contributing to the conservation of those same rivers in a very powerful way.

As Roy and I approached the final stretch of our beat we encountered rising fish in a pretty pool. A few mayflies were coming off, but there were more caddis. Roy gave them a try with a generic dry, but he was struggling to get his cast to straighten out. At some point he insisted on stepping aside and allowing me to have a go with my CDC and Elk. I had been watching Roy’s cast to try to work out what the problem was. Firstly, and in his defence, when I stepped forward I found that there was a sneaky headwind coming down the pool, that we were not encountering where we stood. That said I was explaining to Roy that I thought his backcast was lower than his forward cast. In other words he was not casting at the fish, but at a point 6 foot above their heads. His cast to that position was as good as you need, but of course a wispy tippet descending six, or even four foot in a headwind, has as much chance as a dandelion at making its target. “Shoot it in there Roy” was what I was thinking to myself as he battled that headwind. “Punch it!”. But of course as often happens in the great leveler that is flyfishing,

I made a few such deliveries when the headwind stopped abruptly , or I had the angle too fine, and the result was a fly slammed onto the surface.

I had much of my success, both on this, and other days, on a fly called the "Troglodyte". This is a simple nymph, tied on a jig (upside down) hook. The hook is one made of a fine wire, is very sharp, and is barbless. The tail is a few strands of black squirrel tail, which is particularly durable. The body is dark or black "V-rib" , which retains no air and sinks quickly. Under the thorax is a small tungsten bead. Over this bead is a wrap or two of peacock herl, to largely hide the bead. A second, larger and visible bead sits up front on the up-turned part of the jig hook, and just behind the bead is a half or one turn of very sparse black cdc. The fly's main features are its dark colour and fast sink rate. I fish it in a #16, 14 or 12 to represent baetis and heptagenidae nymphs. It really is a killer!

As we moved up, we found ourselves shading our eyes with an outstretched hand, because the sun was setting directly upriver. This made our tiny dries invisible to us. When you don't know where your fly is, you are at a serious disadvantage. You don't know when to mend, or strike, or even when to lift off to cast. Added to that the wind would pick up, and the rise would end in about as much time as it takes to photograph and release a Trout. Then the wind would die, and we would be back to throwing white dots at sheets of silver. I read into Roy's trudging pace along the river bank and I asked him "Are you tired?" to which he nodded, with a little smile that said he had been found out. Then the sun set, and it got cold, and it was all over. What a special day, with a special friend!

Later that evening Roy made a comment that had me thinking. Roy has lead his fare share of berg hiking trips in his time. He mentioned that as troupe leader he always liked to hike at the back to make sure everyone was OK, and nobody got left behind. That struck me both as the epitome of servant leadership, and as the mark of the man. For whatever reason I had found myself ahead of Roy for much of the day. Sometimes we don't recognize that someone is in fact quietly leading us.

As the trip progressed I realized that I was running out of days. When looking at the map and measuring up, I realized I would have to skip some river. I reckoned it made sense to miss some stretches that I fish often anyway. With this in mind, I made no attempt to fish Upper Riverside. I had however planned to fish the Tendela section with Trevor Sithole. As luck would have it, that morning dawned cold, with a light drizzle, carried almost horizontally on a strong wind. Trevor had been up early at work, and would only have the morning with me anyway. I very reluctantly called it off. Sometimes you just have to admit defeat at the hands of nature.

When I was a child, families would visit the Kamberg nature reserve to fish, and for family picnics. There was a smartly dressed guard at the gate, with boots that shone like a soldier's. He saluted you on arrival, as if to complete the military parallel, and then he would politely sell you an entry ticket. He might also be able to answer a question about whether there had been any Eland about, or had they had a lot of rain last week. The picnic areas were clean, with rubbish bins emptied regularly, and the grass was mowed fairly regularly. You could buy a fishing permit, and you could go up to the hatchery and visit Rob Karssings and buy a packet of pellets for the kids to feed the Trout. (Ok, you got me. For me to feed the Trout). If you fished the river, you booked a beat, and you were limited to that beat, because another guy had booked the one above. If he had not, the manager would tell you it was not booked and invite you to fish above the beat marker, an invitation which you accepted graciously.

In a perverse turn of tides, South Africa now has conservation authorities that can no longer run a resort, or manage its basic upkeep. I recently visited the headquarters building, and as confirmation that it is not just Kamberg Nature reserve that is in trouble, that building too was derelict beyond description. At the same time we have had authorities hell bent on eradicating a stable and long prevalent population of Trout from South Africa, and enormously willing to pour money into the controversy surrounding that debacle, while the wattle trees and brambles quietly overrun the mountain treasures we entrust to them. At Kamberg Nature Reserve there is evidence of some hap hazard and incomplete alien control work, but there is also domestic waste dumped in the stream on Stillerus that has clearly been left there for years. The Stillerus cottage is no longer available to paying guests, as it has been taken over to house rangers, because no one seems able to re-build the recently burnt ranger accommodation. At the time of writing this it would appear that the objection to the river poisoning will win the day, but there is a perturbing silence about the ineptitude of the KZN conservation authorities in all the matters that really count.

Roy and I passed through the rusty and unattended gate, and parked in what used to be the picnic area: a derelict spot with a non functioning ablution block with a broken door. It was overgrown, and trees had been left to lie where they had fallen. A sign directs you to the reception, but we long since abandoned attempting that: it always seems to be locked. We strung up rods at the lower picnic spot near the gate and walked back down the road. A staff truck passed us, and the occupants waved happily at us poachers. And as one does in Africa, we waved back happily and carried on anyway. I really miss the days when I would have dived into the bushes with my heart pounding in my throat.

The lower water is often broad, and only sometimes deep. We saw a pair of eagle owls, no litter, and enough small Trout to keep us interested as we fished back up to the bakkie. Later we would drive up to the hatchery ruin, to continue our poaching. That top section seemed to have more fish, but they were the same size and equally beautiful.

In Bob Crass' book he writes extensively about this stretch of river, and repeatedly mentions the banks being heavily lined in NchChi bushes, which is still the case today. In his day Kamberg Nature reserve seemed to be the only water available to the public, which seemed to thwart his comment on the other sections. He also writes of how, after a few glory years following the successful stocking at Game Pas in 1899, the fish went "three to the pound" and hardly every better. In the late fifties and early sixties they actually treated the river with Rotenone, in order to reduce the population and improve the average size. This trip occurred after the worst drought in 125 years, and fish seemed a lot less plentiful than they had done in earlier years. In any event, My experience on Riverside and Reekie Lyn over the years is that fish of a pound, two pounds and even three pounds, are not at all rare.

Through late morning and lunchtime a small dark mayfly started hatching and the fish were taking these, as well as anything else that looked edible and was cast delicately enough, and close enough to them. One fish per run or pool, was the order of the day, because the disturbance of a fish fighting the taught line was more than enough to put the rest down.

Earlier in the morning I had donned every layer of clothing I had. After lunch I put on my ridiculous looking ski mask. None of it seemed to help. I had lost my core temperature. I don't know if Roy could have carried on, but I simply couldn't. Or perhaps I should say I simply didn't want to. Fortunately Roy was easily persuaded with the promise of a cup of hot tea when we got back to the cottage, and we beat a retreat to the comfort of the bakkie's heated cab.

If you wanted to explore a high mountain stream, there is probably no one you would want to accompany you more than Peter Brigg. I was very pleased that Peter had accepted my invitation to explore the upper Mooi, and the north branch in particular. PD and I had gone up the south branch, only to find that it ended at a series of spectacular cascades just a few hundred metres up from the confluence. I had had a few vague references to the north branch that made me believe there may be a secret hiding up there. With this in mind, I had suggested to Peter that we not get bogged down on the main river between the oak tree and the landslide, despite how pretty that water is. So we hiked along the jeep track all the way to a spot just above the landslide and the forest.

The day was a lot warmer than the frosty morning that had greeted me from the cabin window at sunrise, and by the time we reached the stream, Peter was lifting his oil treated Filson hat, to let the breeze caress his sweaty sweed, and I stripped down to ditch Terry's "Trout talk" T shirt that I had donned as a vest.

The stream was as clear as it gets, and Peter made a remark that I have made before, about the yellow stoned streambed being as close as you can get to that in the Western Cape. The crisp clear air, with deep shadows on the north bank, and a gem of a stream at our feet made for some good photography. I was reaching for my camera almost as often as I reached for my fly from the top of the streamside vegetation! Peter, on the other hand, with measured care and very evident experience, was dusting the runs and pools with a dry as faultlessly as you would expect from the doyen of small streams.

We fished to the junction quite quickly, landing a few small fish, and then we set off expectantly up the tiny north branch. Being half the river of that which we had just left, it was pretty thin. In fact the lower, and slower section had quite a lot of unsightly algae coating the streambed, and we agreed that it needed a good flush of summer rain. But as we moved up we encountered some deeper, and some faster water, enough of which looked like it could hold a trout. We raised a few in the better spots. They were all small, and all as pretty as mountain trout get. Then quite quickly the stream steepened, and not much further up this branch than the other, we encountered a very similar sight. Boulders the size of apartment blocks appeared tossed in the way of the stream, in a steep gorge, and the water rushed through gullies and over high falls.

We did hike above the impasse, because I said to Peter that if we didn't we might later sit at our respective desks in town and wonder what we may have missed above. But the pools up there were all pretty bedrock with rushing white water, as sterile as they were beautiful, and we decided that unless someone had planted fish above (and we don't know about that), there probably were none. We had run out of river. Looking at a map later I was to see that both the south and north branch become impassable to Trout at almost precisely 1800m ASL.

We had some lunch up there in the gorge and then, with more day left than stream, we returned to the oak tree and fished a few hundred yards of the stream we know, catching a few Trout as we went.

Later we sipped some of Peter's "Cameron Brig" whiskey in celebration of a pleasant day exploring a remote stream. We had walked twelve kilometres, and Peter predicted that he would feel the tightness in his legs when he stepped out of his car back home. I smiled. I had felt more than just a bit of tightness already, but that was a few days back. If I kept going like this, I might actually get fit!

But I couldn't keep going like this. I mean I feel like I could: Day in day out, just hiking and fishing. I wanted to.eight days was not long enough for it to feel like anything but heaven. But I have a salary to earn, and a bond to pay, and a wonderful wife, who for reasons known only to her, likes having me around. Bless her soul.

As my trip drew to a close, I was in a reflective mood. The cottage at Reekie Lyn had quickly become like a home. My bedroom was a mess of mostly dirty washing, such that every morning I found myself sniffing clothes to find the freshest ones. (But then I ended wearing the ones that seemed to suit that day's river beat, regardless of the state of the items). My wet boots had a fixed spot on the veranda, and the line of wet socks was part pf the view from the front window. Staring at the surface of the small dam in front of the cottage for rising Trout had become a strange morning and evening ritual, because I had to do it on bended knee to see out of the low windows, and because I never would actually fish the dam anyway (this was a river trip). I had enjoyed the solitude immensely, and didn't get "the shack nasties" at all, but perhaps I would have done if I stayed out there on my own long enough. It wasn't like I had been totally alone. Roy had stayed two nights, and I had had someone to join me fishing most days. I had taken a fly tying kit, bit not opened it at all. I did edit my photos and save my GPS tracks every night, and I took a laptop, purely for the purpose of writing, which I did every night. For some strange reason I took one business call, to place insurance cover on a project in Ghana. I suspect if I hadn't taken that call it all would have worked out anyway. I got wind of one flyfisherman who was apparently offended at not having been invited to join me. I don't know him all that well, but more importantly I don't quite understand why he would want to spend time with me. Catering was remarkably simple: Just TV dinners, some braai meat and various things raided from the grocery cupboard back home. Things I really should have brought: Some nivea cream. Things I should really have left at home: My wallet (I didn't use it).

The trip in numbers. I had measured 27kms of river on my GPS map software. In the end I over-estimated how far up the north branch we could fish, so it was in fact more like 26kms. I had also factored in 9 days to make it 3 kms per day. I shortened it to 8 days because I figured it would be difficult and unreasonable to get back on Sunday night and go to work on Monday morning. I wanted to spend a de-brief day with my wife. Then I had a rained out day, so in the end it was seven days of fishing. With the distance to fish per day slightly up, I was counting on walking past a bit of water. Overall I think I failed at that. Mostly I think I couldn't bring myself to walk past good trout water, but in some cases my fishing companions had clearly come to fish, not walk, and I bowed to that happily. So I skipped a few stretches. I chose to skip the stretches that I have fished regularly and recently anyway. I also chose to skip a 1.3km stretch below Reekie Lyn on account of the severe and depressing wattle infestation. Parts totally new to me: a section of lower Riverside, Tendela, and the top of the north branch. Unfortunately I didn't get to fish Tendela on this trip. I had not bet on a fairly severe frontal system, complete with high winds and then snow. I think this accounts for my poor catch rate on the first few days of the trip, but maybe it was just the fisherman! I have written this account as though I fished sequentially from the lower water up. In fact it got mixed up a bit.

Day: Water	Kms walked	Of which: river fished	Trout landed	Other Trout spotted or lost or caught by others (+/-)
1:Trout Bungalow	9.5 kms	5.2kms	0	4
2: Reekie Lyn lower	5.8 kms	2.1 kms	0	1
3:Reekie Lyn Upper	4.0 kms	2.8 kms	2	10
4: Stillerus	10.3 kms	4.9 kms	1	3

5: Game Pass Upper	11.9 kms	2 kms	4	25
6:Riverside Lower	6.0 kms	3.8kms	7	25
7: Kamberg Nature Reserve	6.0 kms	2.7 kms	9	30
Total	53.5	23.5	23	98

Tackle :

I used a 9ft 4 weight for Trout Bungalow and Reekie Lyn. I wouldn't normally go this heavy, but I chose the outfit due to the high winds, and it felt like the right call, each of those 3 days. I fished an 8ft 3 weight on Stillerus, and Riverside. Up in the Kamberg nature reserve, including Game pass, I fished a 2 weight 7 foot 10. Leaders throughout were Verivas flat butt leaders of 12 to 16 ft, with a 6X tippet. I waded wet, and with no wading staff, and I wore my brand new Umpqua Swiftwater packvest, which was very comfortable.

You can fish this water:

With the exception of Trout Bungalow, all the water I fished is publically accessible as follows:

Reekie Lyn: Just join the Natal Fly Fishers Club (NFFC), and you can fish it as often as you want

Stillerus: Ezimvelo ("Parks Board"): apparently you can buy a daily rod ticket. I have never seen the office open. I pay my dues by killing wattle trees and picking up litter as I go.

Riverside: NFFC...see above (Or you can stay at Riverside cottages...Google that)

Thendela: a community project: phone ahead and arrange a day ticket with Richard Khumalo

Kamberg Nature Reserve: Ezimvelo...see above

Game Pass: I use this name but it is in fact an old family farm that existed inside of the reserve but it was expropriated in the late 1980's and is part of Kamberg Nature reserve: see above.

Excerpts from “Stippled Beauties” by Andrew Fowler 2015

// The Mooi

I started fishing the Mooi in 1983 as a schoolboy. We went up to what was the Greene’s private farm, Game Pass, above the Kamberg nature reserve. There was a follow up trip there in 1984. I did other trips in 1984 and 1985 to Hemyock farm (the opposite bank to Trout Bungalow and Reekie Lyn) I also fished on Trout Bungalow with my friend Guy Robertson, and on Spring Grove, long before the farm was flooded by the dam. But if the truth be told, I only really started to fish the Mooi regularly around 1998. At that time I started making repeated visits to Reekie Lyn and Riverside, the two Natal Fly Fishers Club sections.

Reekie Lyn is a particularly special place to me. I can lose myself down in that river valley for hours on end, content to move slowly upstream, brushing each familiar pool and riffle with a nymph. As I round each bend in the river, it is almost as though I greet and inspect each run as it comes into sight. I survey them to see if anything has changed since last I was there. Perhaps a shrub has grown taller, or a tree has fallen in, or its branches have hung lower over the water. I look for marks on rocks, and my mind scrolls through its catalogues, and guides my eyes over the spots where I have taken fish before.

My familiarity with this river is deep rooted. It is an old friend, and it is difficult to convey that in these pages.

Suffice to say that I proposed to my wife at a special spot along the Mooi. Here are just a few stories penned about this river:

A day with Mick

On 29th September, Mick and I headed out to what was then Natal Fly Fishers Club water: Silverdale on the Mooi River.

We parked at the bridge, where we tackled up, and headed upstream on the south bank, crossing the river here and there. We started in a few hundred metres up the valley. Mick was just below me, on a large flat pool. I crossed the river and moved ahead to a set of rapids above.

It was a warm spring day. The veld was still brown from winter, but with the green shoots of spring coming through everywhere. The Italian ryegrass pastures were a verdant green, and the irrigation sprinklers were misting in a strong north wind that was roaring above us, catching the tops of the gum trees near where we parked, and making them hiss and rustle in a way that signals difficult casting. But down there in the river valley we were somehow sheltered, and although the water was brushed by gusts that rippled the surface and drove flotsam across the water, casting was not in fact difficult.

Within minutes of us starting out, Mick hollered. He was into a good fish.

In the next half hour, every time I turned around, I saw Mick, either with a bent rod, or on his haunches down at the water's edge landing another fish from the very same spot.

It was a remarkable day.

I landed six fish myself, and according to my logbook, lost sixteen, due to a hook with a bad point. You would have thought I would have checked the point! That was back in the day, when we were using a bad batch of hooks. They seemed to be made of a material containing a lot of lead, because you could bend them any way you liked.

Back then we were doing a few things differently. For one we were keeping more fish (I kept four of the six I got that day, and I think Mick kept all of his). We were also using flies a lot larger than I would now.....up to a size six on the river, together with 3X tippet. The "Black Woolly Worm" was very much in evidence back then too.

But we caught plenty of fish that day, so one could conclude that our refinements in tackle, fly size and the like, could have a lot more to do with our own needs than those of the fish. Or you could argue that we would have caught twice as many fish with our two weights and size twenty flies. I suspect the former idea would be a closer match to reality. Either way, we had fun.

What I do clearly recall, is that at the day's end, I was fishing the corner pool just above where we parked. I put the fly in under a layer of surface scum that had accumulated there under the gum trees from the morning's berg wind (which had died down by then). A very strong fish grabbed it, and took me to the cleaners. I never even got to see the fish. It just hurtled off on a dog's leg course until the resistance of the arcing line in the water snapped the 3X tippet like cotton. I don't forget fish like that easily.

It was 1988. I was a Varsity student, and my fishing companion that day was Mick Huntley.

Storm

"Mighty winds are very evocative of the whirling mysteries of God, I think; so too are the summits of mountains where the imagination can liberate us from our puny forms"
Tom Davies.

I stood at Tekwaan pool, and surveyed the huge storm cloud above my head. It was a bugger, as threatening and unexpected as a wild beast, burst out of the undergrowth and bearing down on me. Its size and potential ferocity were enormous. Having said that, it was a surprisingly quiet beast, for there was no thunder at all. It just suddenly existed there above me. It came from nowhere. A sort of silent, ominous beast I would have to call it then.

I was a tad sleepy owing to the severe heat in the river valley that bright January morning. As I cast my fly, beef cows shuffled about in the veld on the hillside behind me. The river gurgled, and the scene before me shimmered in a humid haze that had me sighing and requiring great effort to move.

I had done well on the river that morning, landing and releasing five happy little Brownies.

They had been young enthusiastic fish who had all grinned at me briefly before darting mischievously back into the current. Their capture and release had transported me into a content state of mind. A mind which was perhaps a little numb to the possibilities wrapped within the cumulonimbus which towered thirty thousand feet above my right ear.

Shortly a few icy cold drops visited from above. I greeted them heartily.

There were not many, and most of them made their way graciously into the water at my feet. I then awakened enough to consider that if they persisted, I might be close enough to picnic rock, to shelter there. At picnic rock there is a small hole behind a bush, covered by an overhanging rock. At that spot the dry dusty floor hints at the degree of shelter afforded the *dassies* who frequent it. When placing my lunch in there, I have always banked this piece of survival information.

As the rain started to come down a little harder, I reeled in and started making my way upstream towards the shelter. When I had gone thirty metres, all hell broke loose.

The first bolt of lightning hit the opposite bank of the river in front of my eyes, and the second hit the ground just back from the crest of the hill behind me. The third one was somewhere overhead. I didn't care to look just where, as the rain was now coming down at a stinging pace. I started sprinting upstream, and reached the bend where the flat ground ended. Clambering up the steep slope I could hear only the beating of my own heart in my ears, and the raucous and unhappy bellowing of cows.

I was making good progress along the treacherous slope, and was within casting distance of picnic rock when another lightning bolt struck somewhere close. To skirt the boulders along the crumbling scree

and descend towards my haven would have taken perhaps another two minutes at the most. My nerves were not up to another two minutes.

I surveyed the slope around me and spotted what looked like an overhang about twenty metres above me. Almost vertically above me! I dropped my rod on a rock and clambered up to the tiny shelter. It turned out to be an overhang which afforded about the same area of cover that my wide brimmed hat does. The markings on the rock face had fooled me into believing it was in the category of a small cave. It was not. In fact it was the size of a rat's larder. I shoved my shoulder against the crumbling shale at the back, and tucked my legs in. As I got in there the rain really came down. My boots were in the line of fire, but then they had been in the river all morning anyway.

As the rain poured down, I held my hat over my knees to divert a drip that was coming from the lip of the overhang, and I surveyed the river pool far below me.

It puckered up its lips and kissed each incoming raindrop without a care, and its flow mooched on, oblivious to the general hiss and bang of the storm. The hillside opposite me bore the brunt of it all, fast losing its dry heat of a few moments before. The grass swayed obediently, and was drenched unceremoniously.

I was rather smug in my tiny shelter. There I perched, drier than anything about me, watching as the rain was thrown from behind and tumbled down and away from me. Two martins flew back and forth before me. I apologised silently to them for stealing their home, and assured them I would not be much longer.

At that point I glanced off to my left, just in time to see a swath of wind and rain approaching from the west. This wave of immense power was an awe inspiring event, until it hit me. Then it was just plain unreasonable. When the rain had started in earnest I had thought it rather fierce, but this was something else altogether. The wind cut straight in from the front, and within seconds it had stolen all my warmth and comfort, and replaced it with stinging hail and cold. The wrathful storm beat the river valley mercilessly in every way it knew how! Hail, wind, rain, lightning and immeasurable roaring fury!

I complained loudly as the cows had done earlier, but we were equally ineffective.

What a leveller a storm is when one is caught in it! It makes no difference where you believe yourself to be on the food-chain, the storm is in charge. So there I crouched, and was humbled by the might of it all.

After forty minutes I emerged, and stretched my cramped legs in the sunshine, that had quickly broken through, and reclaimed its rightful place. The rocks glistened. The red brown river roared, and everything else just dripped. All was forgotten and forgiven. Washed clean and restored to a dewy refreshed state.

I was re-united with my fly rod, which had been spared from any violent electric calamity, and the martins reclaimed their humble abode. Their generous hospitality had spared my *pip* from an icy thrashing, and despite my bedraggled state I was thankful for that small mercy.

The river was of course beyond fishing. I had watched as thousands of litres of water had washed down a donga on the hillside facing me, depositing rich earth into the main channel. My poor Trout were having their gills rammed full of mud!

I shook that image from my head, and continued my way along the slope, down onto the flat ground and on up the valley.

I suspect I will forget the fish I caught that day, but that the storm will live with me forever.

A day on the river.

“You will hear the silence of the folded hillside brushed by the wind in its grasses..”

(Neville Nuttall)

The other day I grasped an opportunity to go out on the river alone. From time to time I have this urge for the utter solitude and peace of being alone on the water for a full day. In fact I have that urge most weekends, and don't always get to fulfil the dream. So when this particular late September day dawned, I woke with my soul upon the lip of the precipice, ready to soar. I was happy. I left my bed with a sense of freedom and liberation. I had awoken early. The kids were baby-sat, and all was planned for my pilgrimage.

All was well until I reached the bedroom window and drew back the curtain a few inches to inspect the conditions. It had been raining. In fact my memory was suddenly jogged that in the half sleep of the bewitching hour, I had heard a thunderstorm and the chattering of the gutters. It was now cold and miserable. I stepped back and pondered the situation briefly, and then looked again.

In an attempt not to allow my day to be derailed I took note of the fact that it was no longer actually raining, although it looked heavy and foreboding. The ground was partially dry, and the cloud quite high. The weather could hold off. All I needed was to be well prepared.

As I went about my early morning plans I packed everything I might need. I stacked ample food and hot coffee into the cooler. I packed both my still water and river fishing tackle I took a waterproof and a heavy jacket, and off I went.

In life we often come upon rough weather, and I think there are two ways of approaching such adversity. The positive approach and the negative approach, but more of this later.

As I progressed up the freeway, I encountered first light rain, and then a steady drizzle, which worsened into a downpour of impressive proportions.

I kept on driving. I put my outlook for the day on hold and kept on going, deeper into the storm. At Nottingham Road I stopped to fill my float tube with air. While I had planned to fish a river, there is something miserable about being on a river in the rain, and a still water in these conditions is more tolerable. I completed the inflation task all the while hoping that it would be unnecessary and only a token preparation, but it was still raining when I was done.

I decided to call my good friend PD who lived just down the road at the time. He was most gracious in welcoming me into his home for a cup of coffee, lest my drive should be totally in vain. I invaded his house at an hour so early that he greeted me in his pyjamas. We sat in his kitchen, devoured his wife's rusks, and engaged in the conversation that belongs to old friends.

In my hectic work life I have a great deal of time at the office with work associates, and the balance of my time is grabbed with both hands by my family who like to have me around for some odd reason. Then there is my need for solitude that takes me away from all that at times, and scarce little is left for the development of friendships. When I do look up a pal, often as not, he has his own commitments. So it is that I greatly value opportunities to enjoy the friendships that I have with fishing buddies.

By about half past nine the rain had stopped and the cloud appeared to be lifting. I bade my good friend farewell, and headed out, up the Kamberg valley.

The cloud seemed high and I regained further enthusiasm as I headed west. I crossed the river at Riverside farm, and it was sparkling. I drove down the southern side of the valley crossing several more tributaries as I progressed. All were beautifully clean.

I parked the bakkie at the appointed spot and set up my tackle. This was going to be good! I strode out across the veld, heading for the lower boundary. Starting at that point would give me several kilometres of river to fish up before I came level with the vehicle again by late afternoon. I cut across the fields, using the Kamberg Mountain as my beacon, and heading for its eastern end. This would take me straight to the cairn I built above the river on a previous trip, and from there I would navigate by sight of the river to the bottom boundary. I arrived at the cairn and looked down at the river.

It was dirty.

At this point I could have wept, or gone home to beat the dog. (The negative approach) Or I could convince myself that it was not dirty. It was in fact cloudy. Still fishable perhaps. I was too far from the water to be sure. I could press on. (The positive approach). There is one individual I know very well who would have chosen the former, guaranteed. I chose the latter. I pressed on.

I wonder what it is that makes one person proceed with a positive outlook when faced with adversity, and another to give in and complain. I don't claim any accolade for my own disposition, for it was probably not me who achieved it, but rather something that was included in my make-up. Furthermore, I do not always choose the positive route, even if it may appear so outwardly. I often find myself struggling to keep positive about the outlook of a fishing day, and inclined to give up and lie in the grass watching clouds. There are days on the water when I get hot or cold, and I come in for shelter, while friends stay out there and out-fish me as a result. So perhaps I am essentially positive, but my staying power is limited and needs work.

This day I worked on that staying power, and consciously so. I think if you are blessed with the positive outlook you can work on your staying power. What on earth you do to get the positive attitude is beyond me.

Arriving at the water's edge I stepped straight in and worked the first run with a weighted nymph. The fly was going out smoothly. The water was off colour but certainly not too murky for the fish to see my fly. I could see the strike indicator clearly, and I watched it with anticipation as it passed the spot where I caught a fish once before. The water was an almost perfect fifteen degrees Celsius. The air was a lot colder, but if I could just catch a fish then the day would be swung in the direction of success. Right now the jury was out. It could go either way.

Then it started to rain. Just a few drips at first. I stopped fishing and put my waterproofs on. By the third pool, the heavens opened. There I was standing in three feet of cold water, with more of it running down my neck, and no fish to show for it. Lightning struck. The strike indicator sunk from the bombardment of raindrops and thunder sounded. I assessed the situation. There was no shelter out there. The bakkie was several kilometres away, and the fish that I had come so far to catch, were still in the river. I plucked up all the strength in me and fished on in the pouring rain.

So then He threw hail at me. They were small stones, I will acknowledge, but it was hail nonetheless. I have caught fish in these conditions before. I pressed on.

The hail was short-lived, but it had the effect of cooling everything down a little further. By the time I reached the next stretch I was freezing cold. I paused beneath a tree and took off my outer layers to put on an extra pullover, which I had packed in plastic in my fly vest. This must all have looked a bit silly. There I was wading wet up to my waist, and putting extra clothing on the top half in order to warm up. What we don't do for our fish!

The fish were most un-co-operative that first hour and a half. I fished all the old runs and pools that had produced fish for me before, without success. Then I threw bigger, heavier flies at them. Somehow this has always been my instinctive strategy when the going gets tough. A sort of policy of resorting to the mean and nasties in my fly box.

Then finally in what I call "magic pool" at a spot directly below the cairn, I hooked and landed a feisty Brown Trout. Its capture was accompanied by the unlikely emotion of relief. It was almost as though the capture of this fish meant that my trip had not been in vain. My decision to stay on and fish had been vindicated.

I fished on up, wading and crossing the river as I went, and shivering all the while. The next good piece of water was approaching, and as it was the last water before my planned lunch stop, I resolved to fish it thoroughly and well. The rain had stopped by now, and I suspect the air had warmed a degree or two, although I was simply too cold to feel it. I found some confidence deep within me, and I hoarded it for the approaching pool. I had caught a good fish there on the previous trip.

As I rounded the bend, there was another rod.

I was dismayed.

I had been convinced that I was the only one with the resolve and dedication to walk so far down this valley on a cold and rainy day. I was suffering in the cold, but confident that in re telling of this day, I would stand out as the one and only who had braved these elements with such determination. And here in front of me was another. He was on my water. He was fishing my lunch pool. Is it not intriguing how when we have suffered for something in whatever way, we become so defensive of it? Our pride and selfishness comes to the fore with such ease.

I could have said to myself "This is a bum cold day on the river and he can have it". But at that moment it was my day of solitude. They were my hours alone on the water, and his presence was a theft. Perhaps I am a narcissistic individual, but that was how I felt. I buried the hatchet though, and greeted the man, who turned out to be a wholesome fellow, who could fish my beat any day.

Following the loss of that particular pool (and yes, I still felt I had suffered a loss), I made my way up the hill and located the small crevice in which I had hid my lunch earlier in the day. I found a rock shaped like a seat on a steep section of hillside. There I sat down, with my feet dangling over the edge, and consumed hot coffee, and plenty of it. That was one of the better cups of coffee I have ever had. It was the cheap instant kind, but you must remember that the temperature had not yet risen above ten degrees Celsius, and I had been shivering uncontrollably for the last hour. The coffee was interspersed with dark chocolate, cold couscous salad and chopped Russian sausage. An unusual meal perhaps, but memorable nonetheless.

From my perch I watched as Joe Bloggs disappeared downstream. I lingered a while longer with a view to restoring the ambience of solitude, and when I felt it had been re-set, I descended. On the way down I noticed a fish rise in 'scissors run', and my enthusiasm for the fishing returned. Upon my arrival at the water's edge I noticed that there was a hatch of small grey mayflies. This hatch intensified over the hour that followed, and the fish began rising regularly.

Some interesting fishing ensued. The fish became very selective, and gorged themselves on these flies to the exclusion of all else. They chose to ignore my small 'Adams', which was a remarkably close match to the naturals. They did however respond to a 'Woolly Bugger' stripped right through the rise, and I landed four fish in this short stretch. Far from a satisfying exercise in finesse, but hey, it worked!

I moved on up from there in high spirits. It was no warmer than it had been and it was windy, but the rain had stopped, and I had caught fish. My legs were still wet and I continued to shiver, but my outlook was so completely altered by just one or two changes in circumstance. Is it not surprising how this is often so in life? Two individuals experience marginally different fates at some juncture, and they respond in slightly different ways and before you know it their paths are leading in opposite directions for the rest of their existence. This phenomenon deserves much riverside contemplation.

Some distance further upstream I came out at Tekwaan pool. The fish in this pool are often bored, and they rise and splash about most of the time to break the tedium. You can't bet on it being this way, but it happens often enough and this day was no exception.

At the foot of this long pool there were three fish moving. It always surprises me how, when the water is clean, in a pool like this, one can see the river bed as clear as daylight, and at the same time you can see rises on the surface, but the Browns are nowhere to be seen. They are just so incredibly camouflaged, and only sometimes, if the light is right can you spot them. On this day too, I could not spot these fish, but my chances were less than even on account of the murky water. On the first cast I had a take, but missed the fish. After that only one fish continued to rise, and two casts later he too was spooked. Lesson learnt, I moved up towards the head of the pool with more guile. Here I found a spot where I could stand close to the water's edge, with the steep bank rising behind me, and thus with the absence of a silhouette to the fish, I tricked several of them to take my size fourteen DDD. I landed two of them.

What surprised me was how I could fool a fish just inches from where his colleague had just fallen prey to my same antics. Of course he was close to the top and the size of his window through the surface was reduced, but it was nonetheless surprising.

Perhaps it is a little like us humans who repeat failures made so recently by our peers. In particular we seem to repeat the mistakes of the previous generation. In this fast and frenetic world we seem to have forgotten the wisdom of our fathers, in the mistaken belief that their BC existence lacks relevance today. (BC meaning 'before computers') And yet as I grow in maturity the clarity of their often stoic and considered ways begins to shine through in gleaming pockets. I still of course am frustrated by the guy, who cannot (read 'will not'), learn how to use his smart phone or adopt e-mail as a friend. And yet if us youngsters can learn to look through those things, perhaps we would not throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water.

A mistake that I too often repeat, is to avoid fishing the fast pocket water in a river. On that day I had walked past countless metres of such prime water. Now as I approached the run below picnic rock, I chose to remedy that by covering this stretch of water with more care. I had recently begun to adopt the concept that if I can just get my fly, or in the case of a nymph my strike indicator, to drift drag free to a quick count to ten, then I am in with a chance. So on this day I found myself throwing the fly into the odd smooth patch which appeared to have some depth, and counting to ten. Even in very fast water a tuck cast, or the stop and drop technique can give you this much free drift before the fly is swept away. Occasionally you fail and don't get beyond five, but I just pluck the fly out and toss it back sharply. You will find that with such a low requirement of your skills you can use simple mend technique to cast a floating line clean across the river, and across multiple currents at a likely looking spot under the opposite bank, and still narrowly meet the 'rule of ten'. I did exactly this on that raw afternoon. I threw the fly into a smooth dark glide with a "Trouty look", hard against the opposite bank. On cast number three and still not having made it past a count of nine I finally got a better drift, and a strong little Brown.

A few metres further up I fooled another right under my nose, and casting only the leader, but he came off.

At this point I had reached picnic rock, and my most obvious spot to climb out of the valley. I reeled in, collected my flask and lunch box, and headed out of there.

It was a content man who drove down the valley in the swirling mist that afternoon. A change of clothes, the warmth of my heater, and the sounds of a good rock band over the stereo seemed to crown the event.

Of course had it not been for an over optimistic outlook on the weather that morning, none of it would have happened. And had I not worked on that staying power, I might have driven a long round trip, having only gotten wet and cold and little else.

My day could so easily have developed along a different route. I could well have been sitting at my desk on Monday morning bemoaning the weekend spent loafing around at home, and a sense of under achievement.

Instead I had a spectacular day, which will be etched on my memory forever. I saw an Oribi, two reedbuck, a Jackal buzzard attacking an Egyptian goose, a giant kingfisher, and only one person. In addition I saw life, and my life, more clearly. When I returned, those who stayed at home were unchanged. They look at me and ponder (very briefly), what it is that makes me so fanatical about this silly fishing thing.

The nature of rivers

I fished the Trout Bungalow section of the Mooi River with a good friend of mine several times. On this particular visit it was a magical April day. We arrived late morning, perhaps a little too late, as I like to be on the water by about ten am at the very latest, even if there is a long drive involved. We tackled up quickly and headed upstream to do battle.

I carried a particular air about me that day. It was an air of curiosity and comparison. An introspective sense of evaluation, and an acute appreciation of the nature of this river. The reason for this is that the outing was hot on the heels of a visit to Rhodes in the North Eastern Cape.

Now those rivers are unquestionably different. We had done well at Rhodes, and refined our skills a little more. We had adapted to those rivers and moulded our approach around them, and here I was back on home water. Now I was asking myself whether I would fish this river as I had at Rhodes, and if not, why not.

The first observation was that Guy and I remarked on the clarity of the water on the Mooi. It was full, and sparkling, and looking great. However it was not a patch on the clarity of the Bell or the Bokspruit. It was however still clean by a fisherman's standards, or by any standards, as no one in their right mind would have described it as "off colour" or "dirty" or anything else other than "clean". The difference is that a Bokspruit Rainbow at a depth of ten feet would have been able to classify your eye colour if you happened to poke your head more than six inches out of the bankside cover. (And very few Bokspruit pools are ten feet deep).

The Browns at the Trout bungalow would have difficulty spotting you standing beside their pool, from their deep green depths, and the Mooi on this stretch has many pools that look over ten feet deep in places. So I think this gave us an advantage on the Mooi.

I mentioned bank-side cover. As we moved upstream along the banks we were in and out of thick grasses, weeds, shrubs, and all manner of flora which was waist to chest high. The North Eastern Cape is undoubtedly more stark. The altitude is a contributing factor, but the air is drier up there, and it simply isn't as humid and lush as the Natal midlands.

This factor alone means that the North Eastern Cape rivers are much easier to fish in. A lot easier, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise! Once you have managed to master the bank-side vegetation on the Mooi and the Umgeni, and other rivers like them, the Bell or Sterkspruit will be a breeze, from the point of getting your fly out into the flow. However, if you walk up the banks of those Cape rivers as we do on the Mooi, fishing the water at your feet, the fish will run a mile. They will see you coming, due to that clear water, and the less dense cover. So are those rivers really easier after all?

I started in on a particular run on the Mooi, where a good pool spills out into a stretch of pocket water. I love to fish this stuff. I waded in a few feet, and very nearly saw my tail on the slippery rocks. The

bottom at that point, like anywhere else up and downstream, was strewn with jagged rocks of every different size imaginable. There are very few flattish footfalls on a riffle in the Mooi. Your ankles will be twisted, and your shins tested against sharp rocks all day. Oh for those gentle gravel bars on the middle Sterkspruit!

My fly went out smoothly and I progressively fanned the run with short precise casts, covering all the better looking holes. The indicator bobbed along in the sunshine, and I tracked it eagerly. Not a touch. I moved up a dozen feet at a time, and fanned the water with well-placed casts.

Not a touch.

Had that water been on the lower Bokspruit I would have had a dozen takes at least. Guaranteed!

Right down at the tail of the pool, was a much shallower piece of water. I put one drift over it, using it more as a place to put my line while I moved up between the protruding rocks to tackle the main pool. As I stepped up out of the deeper water into these shallows, a shadow measuring around twenty inches shot out from under my feet.

A few weeks earlier, in a different province, I would have put money on the fact that such a spot would not have held the king of the pool in the absence of a rise, as was the case here. The position of the better fish in the holes, runs and lies was somewhat predictable in the North Eastern Cape. That is a bold statement to make, but it is a well-considered one. We had spent days on end there, wading rivers, putting up fish, seeing fish, and catching them. Sometimes it was surprising to see a fish come out of a spot, but invariably one was less surprised after landing the fish, and going in to see how deep that spot was. Deep holes, no matter how small, hold better fish in North Eastern Cape waters. Knowing where those holes are, or finding them without walking into them first, was the challenge there. I think the difference here has a lot to do with the fact that the Mooi in KwaZulu-Natal is a Brown Trout stream, and one of the characteristics of Browns is that you find them in unlikely places.

I went on to fish the main pool without result. My confidence began to flag. Even a heavy nymph, placed right up into the tongue of current where the "littlies" lie, produced nothing.

Not a touch.

I clambered out and moved up to a stretch above the pool. This stretch was not a patch on the pocket water and the pool below. It contained a broad band of light coloured bedrock, which the current swept across. Below this and to the far side, however was some broken riverbed, and it seemed unwise to leave it out.

I clambered back down the bank, and slid into four foot of water. The Mooi runs in a deeper channel than a river like the Sterkspruit. If I had to judge the quantity of water flowing down these two rivers, I reckon it would be 'much of a muchness'. The Mooi however, consistently runs in a channel that could accommodate two to three times that flow, without it being much wider, or bursting its banks. Not so the Sterkspruit, and others in the Kraai system. So that Sunday on the Mooi, I was acutely aware that I was climbing up and down banks a lot more, and having to do so, as deep pools precluded me from remaining in the river all day as I had done down in the Cape.

Anyway, once in the water I worked my fly over that pale coloured band of rock, and sure enough, after a few casts the indicator slowed slightly as the fly came off the rock shelf. That fish lifted my spirits immensely. It was a glorious Brown with a distinct yellow glow to it, and bold chestnut spots along its flanks. It measured eighteen inches, and I believe would have tipped the scales at two and a half pounds.

The two fish that followed were utterly surprising.

Above the shelf of rock, and running down either side of me in the channel, were two tongues of flow tight against the bank. This water was shallow, but it had close cover, and it ran dark and moody against the bank. Nice looking water, I thought. Ideal stuff for a few six to eight inch fish.

Each side of the river produced a sixteen inch hen. I was off to a very good start!

It so happened that I caught nothing more for the next hour or so, which I spent in a long run of good pocket water. A large pool lower down produced two Brownies of ten inches.

Later in the afternoon the fish began to rise. It often happens on KwaZulu-Natal rivers, that the evening rise serves to confirm that there are in fact a lot of fish in the river. I have fished days where I have seriously questioned the fish population, only to be shown up in the late evening, when that same "dead" water positively boils with fish.

On this particular evening they did rise. There were however, not enough fish rising that I could compare the fish population with that of the Bell or Kloppershoekspruit. In my view there were definitely fewer fish. They were however just as spooky in the tails of the pools, and I put a good many down. I did take some fish. I got them on a small DDD as well as a pale Elk Hair Caddis.

When it came to fishing the dry fly in the evening, the tactics required of me there on the Mooi, were no different from what I had employed on the Bokspruit, or any other North Eastern Cape river. The issues were the same: working tongues of water for drag free drifts; positioning oneself correctly below the fish; throwing loose leaders; and avoiding lining the fish. I suppose that getting below the fish was

generally more difficult, given the depth of water. There were none of those lovely gravel beaches to walk up, and the darkening sky coupled with the unpredictable riverbed made wading treacherous.

So all told it was a wonderful and memorable time on the Mooi. I suppose I fished it with more thought in view of the comparisons that I drew during the day, and I sense that I did a little better as a result. I think I was a little less lazy on the river than I have been in the past. I spent more effort getting into position in the river, and for whatever reason I waded more. I think the Cape served to remind me that there are fish in all manner of places, and that it is worth putting a fly over them all. On the Mooi this often meant one had to work harder, and therefore cover less river in the day. But this was a pleasant change, and I am sure I walked past a lot fewer fish than I usually do.

One thing is for sure: although our regular forays down to the Cape are irreplaceable, we Natalians have world class fishing right on our doorstep.

Riverside

On the last Saturday of September a few seasons back, Mike and I headed out to Riverside on the upper Mooi River. This stretch of river is club water, and is on a dairy farm that sits within the “U” shape formed by the KwaZulu-Natal parks area of Kamberg Nature reserve.

We were blessed with a pleasant sunny day, the temperature peaking at just twenty two degrees C, and the occasional light gust of wind.

One parks under some plane trees at the farm entrance and fishes upstream from there.

This is classic KwaZulu-Natal river water for me. Quite high river banks, through which runs a stream, deep and moody in its big pools, and light and babbling over sheets of shelf-rock in other places, with just occasional rapids through a tumble of jagged rocks. You generally wade up until it gets too deep, then you clamber out and go around the head of the pool, where you slither down the bank again. In mid-summer your forays out of the river involve pushing through grass and maize higher than your head, with the odd fence or bramble bush to keep you on your toes. But in September, while the landscape has turned green, the fields are dusted in short grass, large areas are burned, and the going is really very easy.

The other aspect of KwaZulu-Natal rivers that I consider “classic”, is the small Brown Trout. Little happy fish, which you can catch almost at will on a good day, and which all but disappear when they decide to. This is what one expects on Riverside, and is what has characterised our catches for many, many years. A twelve inch fish is a good one. A fifteen inch fish is excellent.

My logbook for that day fails to record what Mike caught. Apologies Mike: I must have been caught up in the excitement of the luck that came my way later on.

At around midday, having landed one six inch fish, I arrived at a pool with an unusual shelf of rock. The river flows straight at the leading edge of the rock, and half of it pushes in underneath, where it has cut a deep dark well for itself. The balance of the water pushes up over the top. When approaching this from downriver, and when the river is a bit low, as it was that day, you see a straight line of raised water clear across the stream. It is really quite strange.

Getting a fly in under there on a drag free drift is probably impossible. One looks at it and hankers for a fast sinking line and a streamer, because something large could live in there!

There are spots like this all along the Mooi: They scream “Big Trout” at you, but when you do get a fly in there, out comes a nine inch fish. It defies reason, but one gets used to it.

So I looked at this underwater cave again, and while I was thinking thoughts of lead, and big flies, I noticed a small rise up in the shallow water at the head of this pool.

Not having seen a rise all morning, I thought it would be fun to get something on the dry fly. So I sat down on the bank, and did some running repairs to my 5X tippet, and tied on a general dry: a little size sixteen CDC and Elk. While I was doing that the fish rose again. It was rising in really shallow water,

where the sun penetrated and lit up the entire river bed of pale rock, so that anything there was entirely visible, but for a bit of a dappled effect.

I looked closer at the third rise, because there was a disturbance some distance from the rise as well. That was the fish's tail!

Hands trembling, I finished tying on the fly. Then I measured up the approach from where I was sitting, not daring to move for fear of alerting the fish to my presence. With a plan of attack in mind, I then half crawled, half slithered down the river bank. From there I inched forward, tight against the bank, and with the fish in clear view. I had decided not to risk a long cast, so I moved in quite close.

Gaining my chosen position, I delivered what I knew would be the only cast I would get in. One swoop of line to get some weight for loading the rod, followed by a single false cast, off to the left of the fish, and the final delivery slightly right of that, with a shepherd's crook to the right. The fly drifted four feet, and she rose and took it, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Textbook!

(At twenty one inches, this hen is the biggest river Brown I have ever caught. More remarkable than that, is that Hamish Gerrard happened to be fishing the same beat the following day, and landed a cock fish of the same size!)

Game Pass

On the headwaters of the Mooi, well above the camp at Kamberg Nature Reserve, lies what was once a private farm, called Game Pass. Back when it was owned by a well-known Maritzburg family, it was something of an anomaly: A piece of mountain landscape, set between two high ridges of the little berg, well up the slopes of the greater Drakensberg, and upstream of a national wilderness area. It was in other words, an island of privately owned land within a vast wilderness area. In that context, the expropriation of the farm, like that of “Solitude” on the Injisuthi, was inevitable.

As a school kid, I visited there with a bunch of spirited friends. Some of us hiked up beyond the wattle plantations and fished quite far up, catching a few small Browns and enjoying the pristine stream. Others hung around lower down, where the river was pretty, but set amongst trees. They may just have poached a little by crossing the boundary fence and venturing onto the nature reserve. The fish bones that the school master found at their camp fire that afternoon sure did smack of a better sized Trout. He was of course suspicious, as any good school master would be, but he had no proof that the fish in question came from the hatchery a few hundred metres into the reserve.

Our fish were certainly smaller higher up, but the scenery made up for it.

In recent years, and after a long absence, I have ventured back. The lower reaches are a different picture now. The state has spent a great deal of money since the expropriation, in eradicating the wattle and other alien species there. In that I suppose, the expropriation, no matter how heart-wrenching it must have been for the family concerned, was justified. Under its new custodians, the landscape has returned to one of open grassland as it should be.

For any of you who may have visited, you will however know that the area previously inundated by the trees, while looking great from far off, is far from restored to pristine veld. That is a goal which, certainly in our highland sourveld region, has evaded many a conservationist. The area in question is populated with indigenous looking *erogrostis curvula*, and amongst that, sadly, a plethora of American bramble. Dreadful stuff that grabs at your longs and at your fly-line, causing you to have to pick your way through this minefield, and detracting from the fishing in my view.

My fishing pals and I prefer to hike up the old Jeep track through the farm, retracing the road we would have been driven along by our gullible schoolmaster back on that 1983 trip. That walk takes you safely through the recovering grassland. If you are familiar with the difference between virgin indigenous veld, and previously disturbed ground, then the line down the mountainside where that change takes place, stands out as clearly as a fence line. At that point we drop back down to the river’s edge and begin our fly-fishing day.

The stream in these parts is post card perfect. The water, in all but the highest summer spate, is as clear as the soda in your evening whiskey. It bubbles over stone which in many places is as pale and dappled as that of the Western Cape streams. Ambers and ochres mix with whites and pale yellows to create a captivating backdrop to each and every searching glance one delivers in search of the elusive Browns. Water tumbles between boulders, and fans out into pools, the depth of which conjures up mystery and

intrigue in the mind of the angler. In truth the fish are nearly all small, but those great big pools, unexpected this high up any valley, do a good job of keeping your heart in your throat.

There is pocket water too: the sort of stuff that threads and weaves its way through rocks of varying depth, creating hidden holes and dips, which contain pretty Browns.

As one walks and scrambles up banks to get around steep sides, you are surrounded by tall hills, with bands of sandstone cliffs rising ever closer to the river. There is the odd patch of green lawn grass where feed troughs once stood, and occasional bits of steel reveal themselves in the thick grass, hinting at the fact that this was once cattle country. But now it is pristine wilderness, which I am fortunate enough to be able to visit and fish on a day trip from my home.

We typically do ten to twelve kilometres of hiking in a day, and most times we will, with some difficulty, select a piece of water to skip. So there is plenty of room to stretch your legs, and hopefully your tippet too. On that score, the feisty little Browns are no different to other Browns: They are downright moody, and will grace you with some action when they see fit and not “at times laid down in books by men from town”. So we have had days where we really struggled, and came back with one or two fish each. On others the little guys have been obliging, and even if we haven’t hooked them all, we have seen plenty of action.

This is a good mid-summer venue. Sure, a storm can roll over those steep valley sides and unleash itself on you, and there are probably more than a few berg adders around, but it is far enough upriver that this is where you go to find clean water.

Roy and I spent a day up there recently, and it rumbled and threatened from the moment we cast the first fly until we left that evening. Then at some point it let us have it. That is to say the lightning crashed all around and we were pelted with ice cold rain. In the absence of any nearby caves, we laid our graphite rods down in the veld like sacrificial lambs and sat a hundred metres away huddled in our rain gear, side by side, taking the punishment of the river Gods! But like all things, it passed eventually, and the fresh washed landscape thereafter was so beautiful, that I had difficulty casting a fly at all on account of all the photographic opportunities.

Therein lies another thing. Up there in the mountains in summer the variability of light and cloud offers so many scenes that just have to be shot, that I for one struggle to put the camera away to concentrate on the fishing.

This is what a fishing buddy is for. I can put him on the prettiest water and let him out-fish me ten to one, but if I return with some great images, it all seems worthwhile.

I guess that is the way it should be.

PD and I returned from there the other day, and just before we packed it in he asked me to take a picture of him posing in front of the river. It was an unusual request from PD. I normally have to sneak up on him. But he had dinner guests that evening, and the man in question owns a beat on the river Test in England. PD said “I just have to show him what we have here under our noses practically for free”.

As it turns out we had load shedding that night, the e-mail could not go through, and the bloke returned to his hallowed water not having seen just how good we have it here.

Magic Pool.

There is a pool on the Mooi River in which I have seldom fished without seeing, if not fooling a Brown Trout. That is quite a statement, particularly from someone like me, who is as likely as to have a blank day on a river as he is a cracker. My friends who have fished with me at this spot may roll their eyes at this point, having seen me empty handed at this pool many a time. But I do struggle to remember a time when I fished it without having a take, or seeing a fish dart off, or rise, or show itself to me in some way.

And it is for this reason that I named it "Magic Pool" many years ago.

The pool is at a spot where the river emerges from a hard collision with a steep cliff face. The water pushes against the steep rock side, and gurgles through splintered and shattered boulders at its base, before slithering down a chute between two smooth, living room size slabs, into the pool itself. In the early morning, that water is emerging into the sunlight from the deep shade of this south facing slope. It falls into the pool, and fans out over a dappled bed with all the asymmetrical, chaotic structure you could hope for in a decent river pool. There is a slot beside the chute where fish reside during droughts. A little further out is a shelf beneath which small fish shelter in a slither of sunless refuge, and from where they are known to dart out to hurriedly take a fly. Off on the far side there is a bank of silt, in the dark water, that is seldom visible, and that looks like a deep dark dungeon, is in fact shallow slack water in which an evening fish will cruise and feed. That spot often sports a line of river scum, beneath which lurks shadow and promise. As the water gathers momentum towards the tail end, it passes over a jumble of pot holes, rock lines and narrow slots, which are perhaps the most productive residences of all. And in its tail section, it turns into a glorious glide, which is at its best in strong flow.

A quick inspection of the chute at the top is an instant measure of flow. It is like an engineer's V-notch plate, but without any semblance of conformity to the bounds of manmade form. In the driest of years the chute is in fact sun-baked, and the pitiful flow sneaks ashamedly beneath the chute through some miserable rat hole, and spews weakly into the pool out of sight. In high flow, I have found myself about to leap over the gap between the rocks, only to check myself, and allow sanity and safety to prevail. I have once or twice encountered it in a condition in which I dared not even think of crossing. For the most part the chute is conquered with a single swinging leap, and the lunch spot on the other side is a little sweeter than the easy side, partly on account of the minor challenge of getting there.

We normally approach the pool from below, fishing upstream. Most often we will slither down the steep grassy slope and while one takes a seat in the grass to tie on a fly, or to watch, the other drops off the steep southern bank into the fast water and proceeds to work the quick glides. By mid-way up the pool a long cast gets you over that narrow shelf, and if you have failed until that point, there is still a better than average chance that a little will sneak out from under that rock line and snatch the fly.

By the time you have jumped over the chute, your fishing is done, and your position is merely one of comfort and reflection. I am happy to sit there and study and memorise the structure of the river bed from that vantage point. This is most often done over a cup of good coffee, or a sandwich pulled from the day-pack. I may dwell there a little longer than is practical, and remember a day, or a fish I once caught there. A magical fish, from magic pool.

Mooi River Conservation

Much has been done on the expropriated farm known as Game Pass, within the Kamberg Nature Reserve, to remove wattle and bramble and restore the original grassland landscape. Large areas of wattle were cleared after the 1990 expropriation. By 2005 there was much regrowth, but this too was removed. Early work attempted to plant *Themedia triandra* (redgrass), but the evidence suggests this was not successful, as *Eragrostis curvula* now dominates the restoration site. The grassland landscape has at least been restored. Ongoing bramble and wattle control remain important, as these species are tenacious! Farmers along the banks of the upper Mooi such as the Moller family, the Johnstones and the Vos family have done a great deal of work to keep their river banks free. In 2018 the Natal Fly Fishers Club spent R30,000 of its funds from the Roy Ward Fund, to see to eradication of wattle on Reekie Lyn farm. 'Working for water' has done substantial work up the Reekie Lyn stream, as well as in the zone from Reekie Lyn down to the Spring Grove dam (2018/9/20), although their practice is to frill trees and leave them to fall in the river.