

# Trout on the doorstep

## The Upper uMngeni

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Version no	6
Date	January 2021
Editor	Andrew Fowler

## **An introduction to the upper uMngeni River as a Trout river.**

### **Name:**

Not much is known about the meaning of this Zulu name. The spelling was originally “Umgeni” and that spelling is still widely used. In recent years it has been spelled Mngeni and uMngeni, the latter seemingly having taken hold as the correct version.

### **Source:**

The Umgeni River is said to flow from the Umgeni Vlei which lies at an altitude of 1870 metres on a plateau not far from Fort Nottingham. It could also be true to trace any one of the streams flowing into that vlei and declare one of them the true source. This has been done, and of course gives rise to controversy. There are three main streams which contend for the status as “the one” and depending on whether one selects the longest one, the strongest one, or that which rises at the highest altitude, you will get a different answer. Suffice it to say that these streams drain the “Spioenkop mountain that one sees to the south east of the Lotheni Road, (close to where the tar ends and the turn-off to the Kamberg valley), and the high ground to the south of that on the cusp of the Inzinga river valley. The Umgeni’s upper catchment boundaries about those of the Mooi River and the Inzinga.

### **Trout water:**

Either way, from the vlei, the stream is barely able to sustain Trout until it enters the gorge in which it falls from the plateau, and at the base of that gorge where it flows under the district road (D290), it becomes a definable stream, in which one can fly fish. It maintains that status as a fly-fishable trout stream for some 17kms until it reaches the Dargle falls just below the main Dargle Impendle road (P134). Below the falls Trout are still caught, but they compete with Natal scaly and smallmouth bass, all the way down to Midmar dam, along which route there are ever more rare reports of trout being caught.

### **Tributaries:**

Significant tributaries include the Poort Stream, which rises from the vlei land on Ivanhoe farm, and joins the river just below the gorge at Umgeni Poort Farm. The Furth Stream is also a major tributary coming from the high ground around Rainbow Lakes and beyond to the South. It joins the river on Brigadoon farm. Further down, Barnett’s stream joins from the north East where it rises on Warsash farm and joins at Chestnuts farm.

### **Accessibility:**

The river flows entirely through private farm land and is accessible only to the farmers and their invited guests, but the Natal Fly Fishers club has access to some 12 kms of the 17km stretch.

### **Fish:**

The water was one of three streams stocked with Loch Leven strain brown trout in 1899 and this population breeds and persists until today. No yellow fish or other species of interest to

anglers are found above the Dargle falls. Trout are typically 8 to 13 inches in length. Fish of up to 18 and 19 inches are not uncommon at all.

### **Water quality:**

The stream flows over a largely rocky bed, but with a mud bed in many places too. The water is known to dirty quite quickly in summer spate and take a while to clear, unlike other berg trout streams that are inclined to run clean at all times other than briefly during severe spate. In normal high summer flow the river runs a very slightly “ginger beer” colour.

There are no immediate threats from dairies or piggeries discharging directly into the river, and there is very limited habitation in this upper catchment. Riverside cultivation is also very limited due to the topography. Plantations are however an influence, as they are often the source of unchecked runoff and siltation. Scrub wattle and gum are a bigger problem than formal plantations.

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

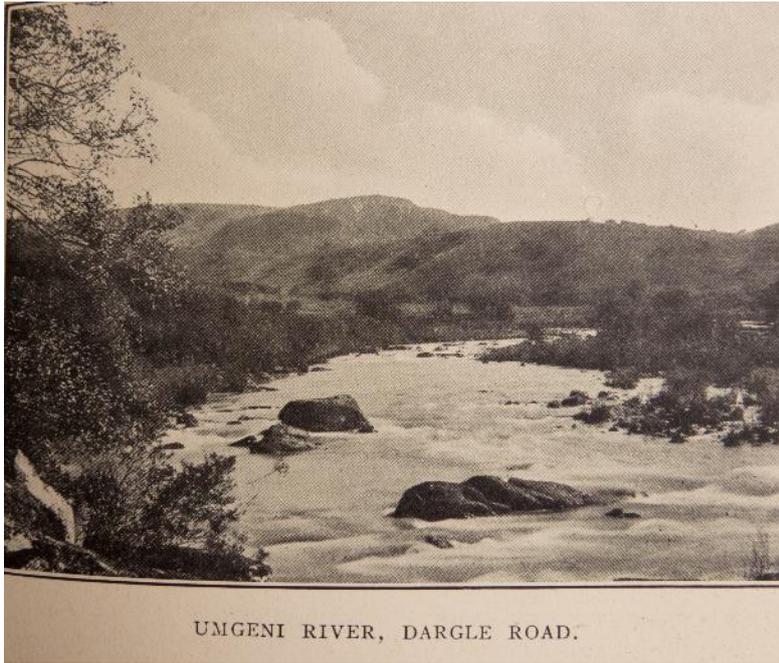
All of these alien invasive species are problematic. The wattle and gum in particular inhabit patches of unplanned scrub land where erosion is problematic, and silt load contribution can be high. There are moves afoot by organisations such as the Dargle conservancy, DUCT, WWF and NFFC to eradicate wattle, gum and bramble, both alongside the river, and in large groves on the hillsides and in the valleys. Several of these projects have already achieved considerable success. Ongoing maintenance is a problem, and a considerable task, and gains made on projects are at risk of being lost if continuous follow up work is not conducted.

### **Aquatic Insect populations:**

Generally the stream has a healthy population of all 6 major aquatic insect species: Mayflies, Caddis Flies, Dragonflies & Damselflies, Stonefly and Midge. However mini SASS assessments done in 2013 suggest that the scores are not as high as they could potentially be. In areas inundated by wattle, anglers have tended to encounter populations dominated by the hardy heptagenidae mayfly clingers and not a lot else. Areas of better biodiversity and grassy banks are considerably better. It is hoped and expected that removal of the wattle canopy and trees on the immediate bankside will bear dividends in this regard.

### **History**

Trout were stocked in the Umgeni river in 1890, and have lived there ever since.



#### Trout as aliens:

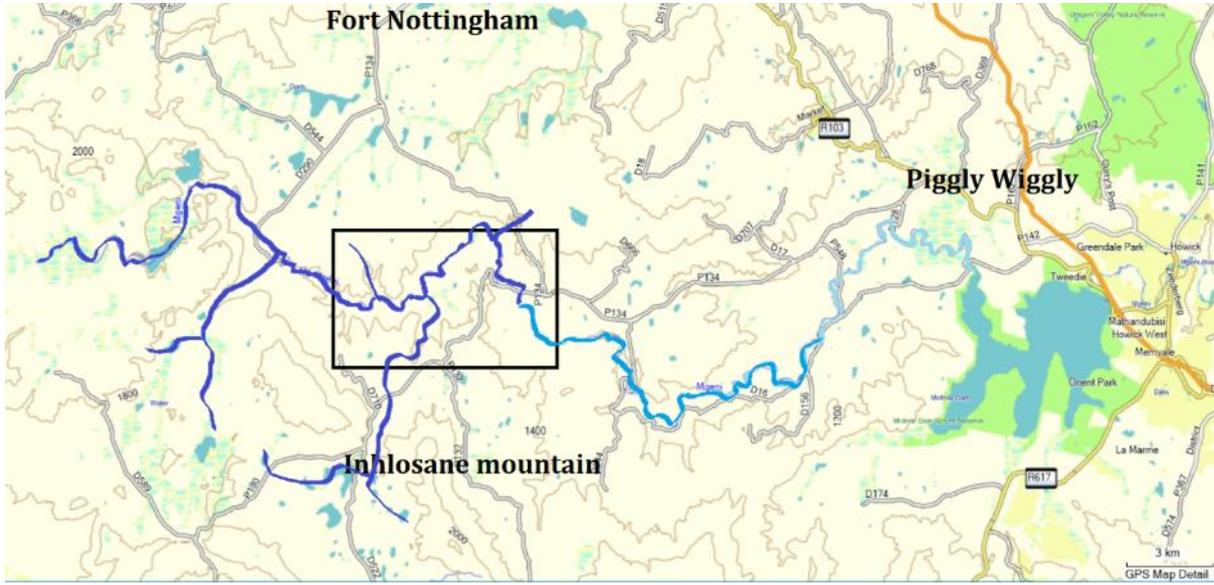
There is considerable controversy around the fact that Trout are alien in South Africa, and there is a small band of scientists determined to eradicate trout at all costs.

It is strange that other species, such as largemouth bass, which are virulent and spreading like wildfire, have not been targeted to the extent that trout have. One website makes the bold statement that “Research conducted in South Africa has conclusively found that trout eat indigenous fish, amphibians and invertebrates” . We hope that the research didn’t cost too much money, they could have asked a fisherman, who would have confirmed this, as well as providing a long list of other creatures and indigenous fish which eat the same food, including some other venerated indigenous species!

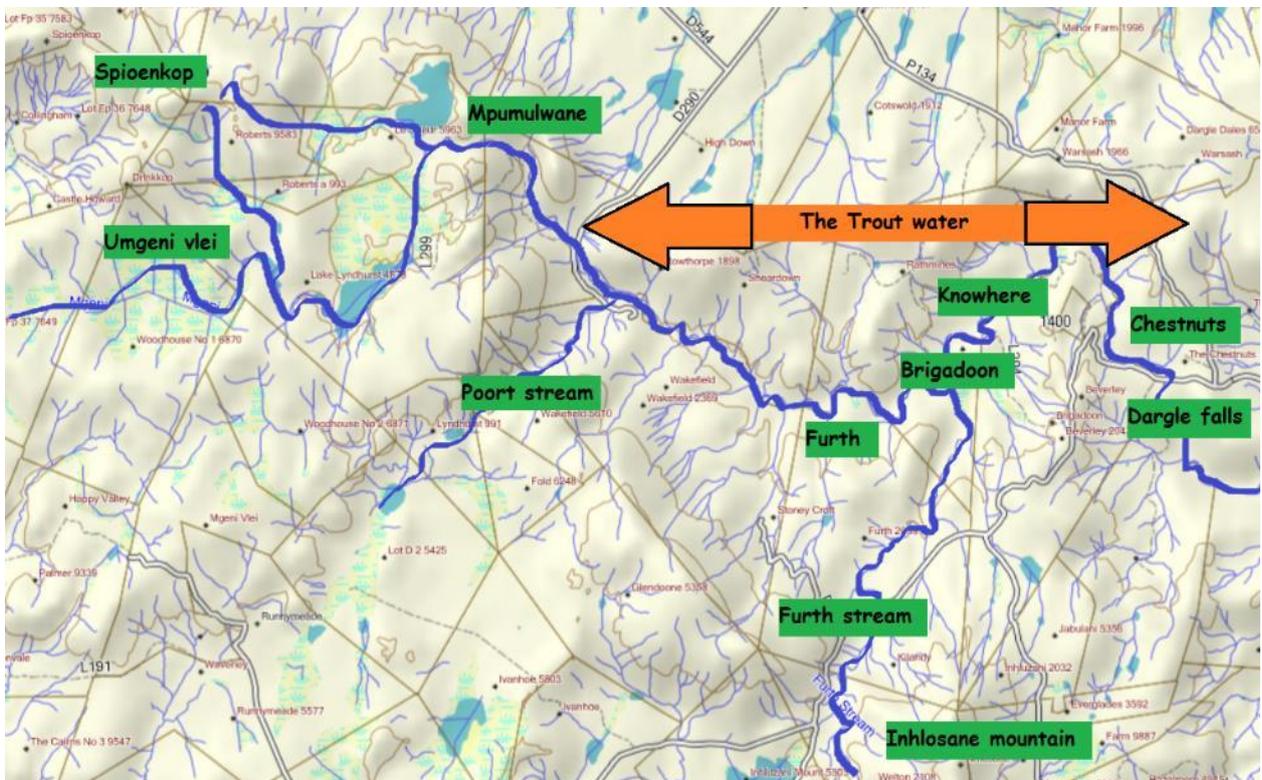
The range of trout is actually in retreat, due to worsening water quality and global warming, and there are no known areas at risk of invasion by trout in South Africa that were never previously inhabited by them. Furthermore alien vegetation encroachment is a considerably more severe problem, with significantly more dire consequences for water resources and erosion in particular. Coupled with this, fly-fishermen are widely understood to be conservation minded custodians of landscape, and aggressive moves by advocates of fundamentalist, extreme, biological purity have met with dismay from the flyfishing fraternity. Trout fishing has been the catalyst for expenditure of over R300,000 on alien vegetation removal along some 12kms of the Umgeni river between 2013 and 2020, and the work is ongoing. If trout were to be eradicated from the uMgeni, this work would stop. In the USA, environmentalists understand this. For example the environment and economy in the Driftless area of South West Wisconsin has benefited from expenditure of \$45 million by “Trout Unlimited” over the last 13 years, in restored streams for the benefit of angling species, including those that are non-native.

## Maps:

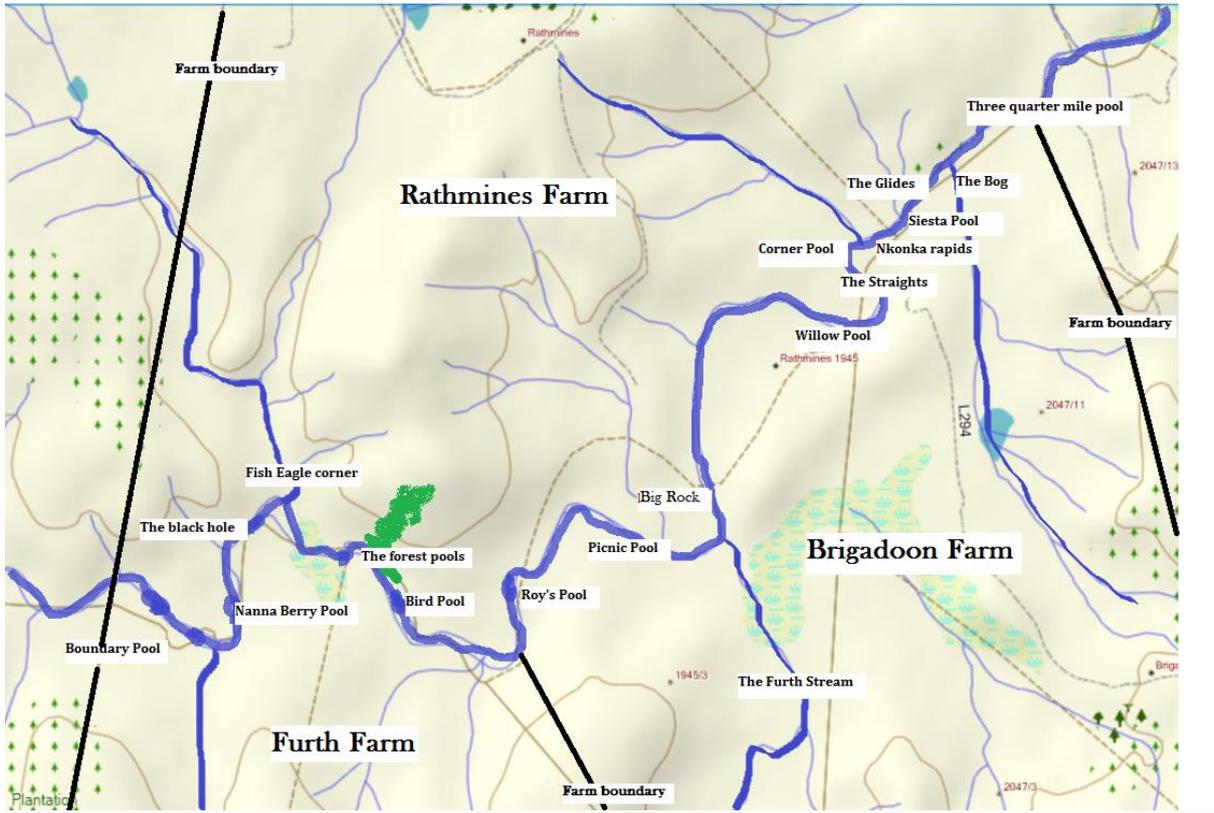
Where does the Umgeni run?



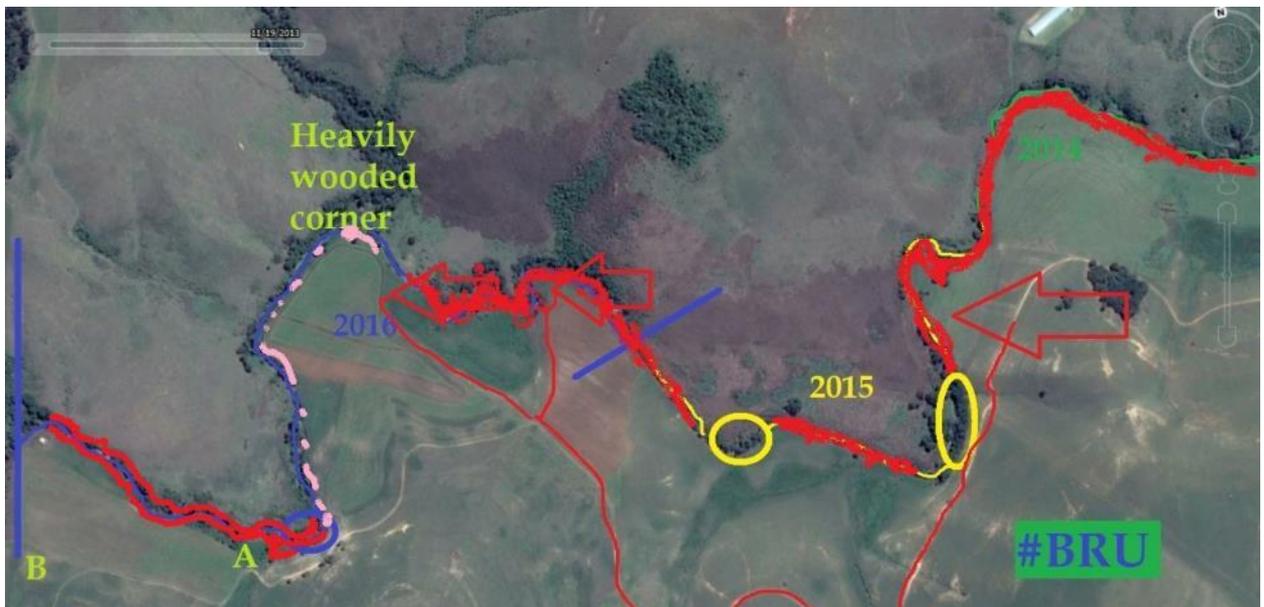
The “Trout water”



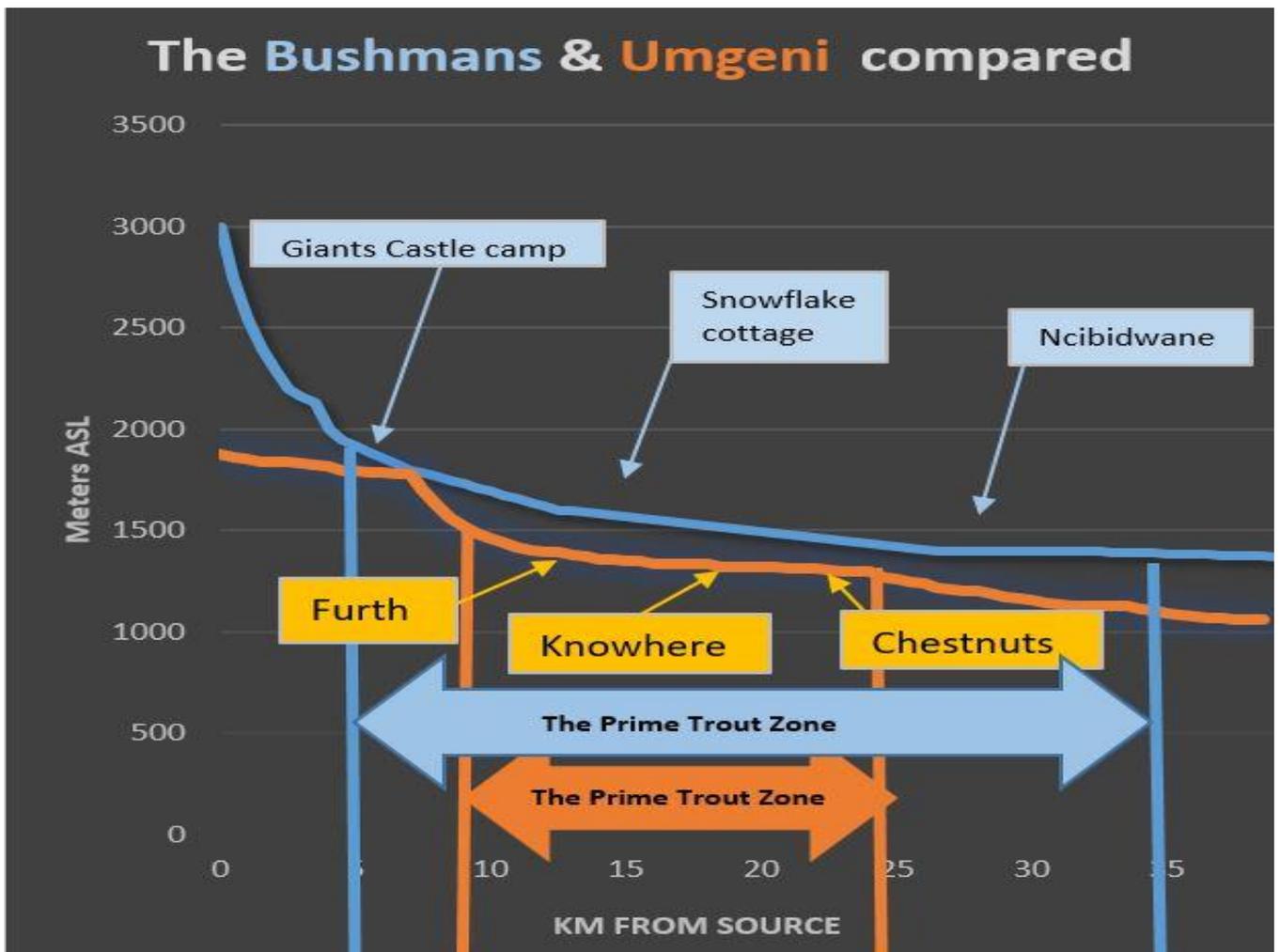
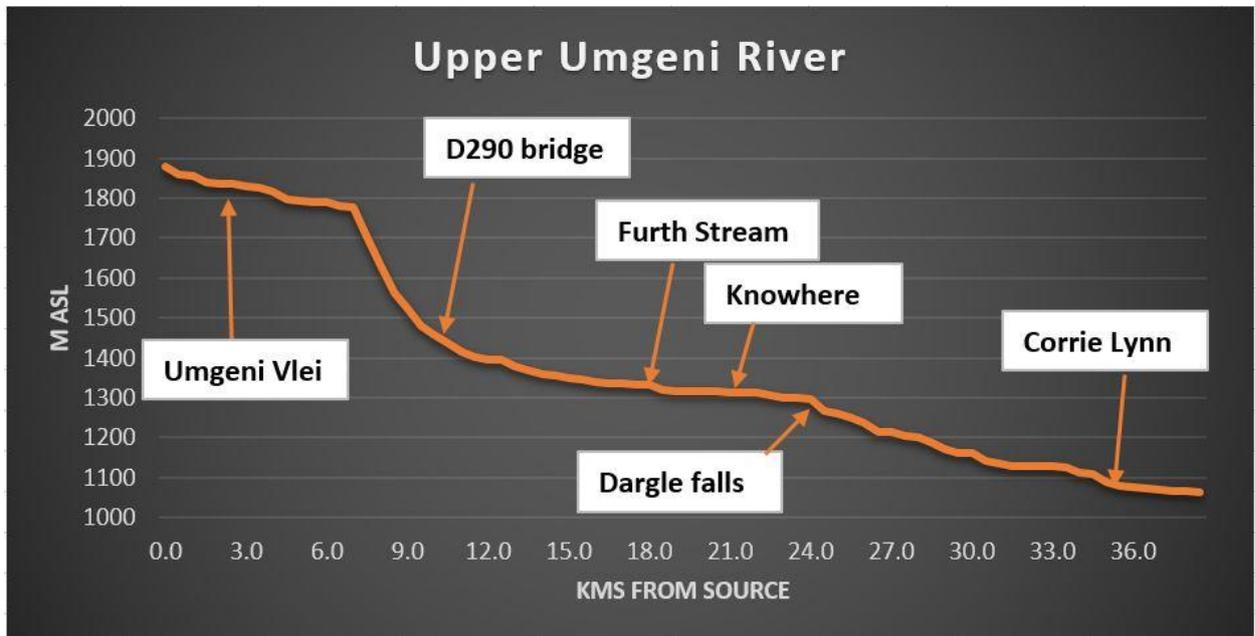




**Map of recent wattle clearing on Brigadoon/Furth: 2014, 2015 and 2016**



**River profile:**



**Books of relevance and interest:**

My Dargle by Brian Griffin

Stippled Beauties: Seasons, landscapes and Trout by Andrew Fowler

Trout Fishing in Natal by RS Crass

Life in the Country by Neville Nuttall

"The Creel"...a compendium of club newsletter 1972 to 1983: Natal Fly Fisher's Club

Hooked on Rivers by Jolyon Nuttall

## **Wildlife:**

Some animal species you can expect to encounter in the valley:

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

## **Bird list:**

- 1 Apalis, Bar-throated
- 2 Apalis, Yellow-breasted
- 3 Barbet, Black-collared
- 4 Barbet, Crested
- 5 Batis, Cape
- 6 Batis, Chinspot
- 7 Bishop, Southern Red
- 8 Bishop, Yellow
- 9 Bishop, Yellow-crowned
- 10 Blackcap, Bush
- 11 Bokmakierie
- 12 Boubou, Southern
- 13 Brownbul, Terrestrial
- 14 Bulbul, Dark-capped
- 15 Bunting, Golden-breasted
- 16 Bush-shrike, Olive
- 17 Bush-shrike, Orange-breasted
- 18 Bustard, Denham's
- 19 Buzzard, Forest
- 20 Buzzard, Jackal
- 21 Buzzard, Steppe
- 22 Camaroptera, Green-backed
- 23 Canary, Brimstone
- 24 Canary, Cape
- 25 Canary, Forest
- 26 Canary, Yellow-fronted
- 27 Chat, Anteating
- 28 Chat, Buff-streaked
- 29 Chat, Familiar
- 30 Cisticola, Croaking
- 31 Cisticola, Lazy
- 32 Cisticola, Levaillant's
- 33 Cisticola, Pale-crowned
- 34 Cisticola, Wailing
- 35 Cisticola, Wing-snapping
- 36 Cisticola, Zitting
- 37 Coot, Red-knobbed
- 38 Cormorant, Reed
- 39 Cormorant, White-breasted
- 40 Coucal, Burchell's
- 41 Crane, Black
- 42 Crane, Blue
- 43 Crane, Grey Crowned
- 44 Crane, Wattled
- 45 Crested-flycatcher, Blue-mantled
- 46 Crow, Cape
- 47 Crow, Pied
- 48 Cuckoo, African Emerald
- 49 Cuckoo, Black
- 50 Cuckoo, Diederick
- 51 Cuckoo, Klaas's
- 52 Cuckoo, Red-chested
- 53 Cuckoo-shrike, Grey
- 54 Darter, African
- 55 Dove, Laughing
- 56 Dove, Lemon
- 57 Dove, Red-eyed
- 58 Dove, Rock
- 59 Dove, Tambourine
- 60 Drongo, Fork-tailed
- 61 Duck, African Black
- 62 Duck, White-faced
- 63 Duck, Yellow-billed
- 64 Eagle, African Crowned
- 65 Eagle, Booted
- 66 Eagle, Long-crested
- 67 Eagle, Martial
- 68 Eagle, Verreaux's
- 69 Eagle, Wahlberg's
- 70 Eagle-owl, Cape
- 71 Eagle-owl, Spotted
- 72 Egret, Cattle
- 73 Egret, Great
- 74 Egret, Little
- 75 Egret, Yellow-billed
- 76 Falcon, Amur
- 77 Falcon, Lanner
- 78 Firefinch, African
- 79 Fiscal, Common (Southern)
- 80 Fish-eagle, African
- 81 Flufftail, Buff-spotted
- 82 Flycatcher, African Dusky
- 83 Flycatcher, Ashy
- 84 Flycatcher, Southern Black
- 85 Flycatcher, Spotted

- 86 Francolin, Grey-winged
- 87 Francolin, Red-winged
- 88 Goose, Egyptian
- 89 Goose, Spur-winged
- 90 Goshawk, African
- 91 Grass-owl, African
- 92 Grassbird, Cape
- 93 Grebe, Little
- 94 Greenbul, Sombre
- 95 Ground-hornbill, Southern
- 96 Guineafowl, Helmeted
- 97 Hamerkop
- 98 Harrier-Hawk, African
- 99 Hawk, African Cuckoo
- 100 Heron, Black-headed
- 101 Heron, Grey
- 102 Heron, Purple
- 103 Honeybird, Brown-backed
- 104 Honeyguide, Greater
- 105 Honeyguide, Lesser
- 106 Honeyguide, Scaly-throated
- 107 Hoopoe, African
- 108 Hornbill, Crowned
- 109 House-martin, Common
- 110 Ibis, African Sacred
- 111 Ibis, Glossy
- 112 Ibis, Hadeda
- 113 Ibis, Southern Bald
- 114 Indigobird, Dusky
- 115 Jacana, African
- 116 Kestrel, Rock
- 117 Kingfisher, Brown-hooded
- 118 Kingfisher, Giant
- 119 Kingfisher, Half-collared
- 120 Kingfisher, Malachite
- 121 Kingfisher, Pied
- 122 Kite, Black-shouldered
- 123 Kite, Yellow-billed
- 124 Lapwing, African Wattled
- 125 Lapwing, Black-winged
- 126 Lapwing, Blacksmith
- 127 Lark, Rufous-naped
- 128 Longclaw, Cape
- 129 Longclaw, Yellow-throated
- 130 Mannikin, Bronze
- 131 Mannikin, Red-backed
- 132 Marsh-harrier, African
- 133 Martin, Banded
- 134 Martin, Brown-throated
- 135 Martin, Rock
- 136 Masked-weaver, Southern
- 137 Moorhen, Common
- 138 Mousebird, Speckled
- 139 Myna, Common
- 140 Neddicky
- 141 Nightjar, Fiery-necked
- 142 Olive-pigeon, African
- 143 Oriole, Black-headed
- 144 Owl, Barn
- 145 Paradise-flycatcher, African
- 146 Parrot, Cape Parrot
- 147 Pigeon, Eastern Bronze-naped
- 148 Pigeon, Speckled
- 149 Pipit, African
- 150 Pipit, Buffy
- 151 Pipit, Long-billed
- 152 Pipit, Plain-backed
- 153 Plover, Three-banded
- 154 Prinia, Drakensberg
- 155 Prinia, Tawny-flanked
- 156 Puffback, Black-backed
- 157 Quail, Common
- 158 Quailfinch, African
- 159 Quelea, Red-billed
- 160 Rail, African
- 161 Raven, White-necked
- 162 Reed-warbler, African
- 163 Robin, White-starred
- 164 Robin-chat, Cape
- 165 Robin-chat, Chorister
- 166 Robin-chat, Red-capped
- 167 Rock-thrush, Sentinel
- 168 Rush-warbler, Little
- 169 Sandpiper, Common
- 170 Sandpiper, Wood
- 171 Saw-wing, Black
- 172 Secretarybird
- 173 Seedeater, Streaky-headed
- 174 Shelduck, South African
- 175 Shoveler, Cape
- 176 Shrike, Red-backed

- 177 Snipe, African
- 178 Sparrow, Cape
- 179 Sparrow, House
- 180 Sparrow, Southern Grey-headed
- 181 Sparrowhawk, Black
- 182 Sparrowhawk, Little
- 183 Sparrowhawk, Rufous-chested
- 184 Spoonbill, African
- 185 Spurfowl, Natal
- 186 Spurfowl, Red-necked
- 187 Spurfowl, Swainson's
- 188 Starling, Cape Glossy
- 189 Starling, Common
- 190 Starling, Pied
- 191 Starling, Red-winged
- 192 Stonechat, African
- 193 Stork, Black
- 194 Stork, White
- 195 Sunbird, Amethyst
- 196 Sunbird, Collared
- 197 Sunbird, Greater Double-collared
- 198 Sunbird, Malachite
- 199 Sunbird, Olive
- 200 Sunbird, Southern Double-collared
- 201 Sunbird, White-bellied
- 202 Swallow, Barn
- 203 Swallow, Greater Striped
- 204 Swallow, White-throated
- 205 Swamp-warbler, Lesser
- 206 Swift, African Black
- 207 Swift, Alpine
- 208 Swift, Horus
- 209 Swift, Little
- 210 Swift, White-rumped
- 211 Teal, Red-billed
- 212 Tern, Whiskered
- 213 Thick-knee, Spotted
- 214 Thrush, Groundscraper
- 215 Thrush, Kurrichane
- 216 Thrush, Olive
- 217 Tinkerbird, Red-fronted
- 218 Tit, Southern Black
- 219 Trogon, Narina
- 220 Turaco, Knysna
- 221 Turaco, Purple-crested
- 222 Turtle-dove, Cape
- 223 Vulture, Cape
- 224 Wagtail, Cape
- 225 Warbler, Barratt's
- 226 Warbler, Broad-tailed
- 227 Warbler, Dark-capped Yellow
- 228 Warbler, Sedge
- 229 Warbler, Willow
- 230 Waxbill, Common
- 231 Waxbill, Orange-breasted
- 232 Waxbill, Swee
- 233 Weaver, Cape
- 234 Weaver, Dark-backed
- 235 Weaver, Spectacled
- 236 Weaver, Thick-billed
- 237 Weaver, Village
- 238 White-eye, Cape
- 239 Whydah, Pin-tailed
- 240 Widowbird, Fan-tailed
- 241 Widowbird, Long-tailed
- 242 Widowbird, Red-collared
- 243 Widowbird, White-winged
- 244 Wood-dove, Emerald-spotted
- 245 Wood-hoopoe, Green
- 246 Wood-owl, African
- 247 Woodland-warbler, Yellow-throated
- 248 Woodpecker, Cardinal
- 249 Woodpecker, Golden-tailed
- 250 Woodpecker, Ground
- 251 Woodpecker, Olive
- 252 Wryneck, Red-throated

**Overleaf: Writings about the upper Umgeni by various authors:**

## THE UMGENI

**M**OST IMPORTANT of all the rivers in Natal is the Umgeni. That would be the verdict if one looked at rivers merely from the viewpoint of their value in supplying water to cities. Both Pietermaritzburg and Durban draw their supplies from the Umgeni catchment.

To an angler, a river's value lies in its ability to produce fish, not water for a townsman's taps. From this point of view the Umgeni is not so outstanding, but it shares with the Bushmans the distinction of having supported brown trout longer than any other water in Africa south of the Sahara. When John Parker liberated the 1 500 two-month-old trout which he had hatched from ova imported in March, 1890, the upper Umgeni was a natural choice for one of the three batches into which he divided his pioneer stock. To this day one may still catch descendants of those first Natal trout, which were hatched on Boschfontein, near Balgowan, on a tributary of the Lions River which is itself a tributary of the Umgeni.

The Umgeni's source is on top of the Inhlusane range where it runs up to the slopes of Spioenkop; not the Spioenkop overlooking the Tugela, but another spy hill, lying between the valleys of the Mooi and Inzinga. This Spioenkop is an outlier of the Drakensberg foothills, its flat crest capped by Cave Sandstone, lying at an altitude of 7 000 feet. The river's head-streams gather on a plateau south-east of Spioenkop and move eastwards through a series of vleis on top of the Inhlusane range.

These marshy depressions offer ideal dam sites and recently two artificial lakes were created on the lofty plateau where the stream was too small, in its natural state, to support trout. Now the waters of the upper Umgeni feed some 200 acres of lake into which rainbow trout have been introduced. Breeding is occurring in the feeder streams. Indeed, there was a spawning migration at the beginning of September 1970, when the introduced trout were only 16 months old. Most of the migrating fish were males, which often mature as yearlings. The early maturity of the few females that did

have fertile eggs may have been due to their having been imported stock. Female trout do not normally mature before before their second autumn.

As well as the new dams on the upper Umgeni there are six other dams along the top of the Inhlusane range on streams which join the Umgeni. All six of these dams contain trout which breed in the feeder streams. The extent to which breeding occurs varies, but one dam on the Furth stream has a completely self-sustaining population of rainbows. This dam is on the upper Furth where brown trout had been established for some time, but the rainbows have gradually gained the upper hand, until browns are now scarce.

On the main Umgeni, the highest point at which trout became established in the natural watercourse is on the farm New Forest, which the stream reaches after cascading down from the top of the Inhlusane range. The New Forest section begins by flowing rapidly over a rock-strewn bed with indigenous forest trees and bushes lining the banks. Farther down, the course is less torrential, with pools becoming more frequent.

The river gradually sinks into a trough, with rounded hills rising on the north bank and the steeper escarpment of the Inhlusane range on the south

Where the Furth stream joins the main river, the valley is narrow, with little alluvial land. Within a short distance, on Beverley, the valley broadens out, the gradient amounting to only two or three per thousand. Pools form more than 50 per cent of the water course. One particular pool, created by a dolerite dyke that acts as a natural weir, is nearly half a mile long. It is quite narrow, not more than 15 yards across, with low banks well fringed by tall grass. On a day when the fish are feeding freely, one may take half a dozen brown trout averaging 12oz. or more from this pool by carefully casting under the overhanging tufts of grass. There are other good pools as well, but many of them have high banks and growths of nehichi bushes or wattle trees to make life hard for the angler.

The Umgeni is not an easy river to fish, but it was a favourite with that well-known Natal fly-fisherman the late Canon Pennington. He used to say, however, that the Umgeni should not be fished during the day. He preferred to wait for the evening rise, and today it remains true that if you have an opportunity to visit the Umgeni it is advisable to plan to

remain on the water until dusk. An overcast or drizzly day is also good, as it is on any trout stream.

After winding peacefully through Beverley and The Chestnuts, the river passes under the main Dargle-Impendhle road and drops over a 30ft. waterfall. Below the fall the river hurries through a rocky gorge, the big dolerite boulders giving good shelter for trout. There are few breeding places, however, so the stock of fish is somewhat sparse. Nevertheless this section may provide good sport down to the farm Owthorne, now owned by the Department of Forestry. This part of the river was frequently fished 50 years ago by those who stayed in the old Dargle Hotel. Today the hotel is a private residence and lower trout waters of the Umgeni are not often frequented by anglers.

Farther down, below the trout zone, is Midmar Lake, built to conserve water for city dwellers, but well known to anglers who catch large numbers of bass, bluegill and carp.

# Brown trout at Big Rock

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**I** happened, one day, to be fishing the Umgeni River, on John Black's farm, when I came to a well known spot we call Big Rock Pool. It is always a likely lie for a good trout, with water spilling into a long narrow run and swinging around one side of a boulder the size of a two car garage, so I fished it carefully, starting at the back end, working slowly through the water that slides around the big rock in the middle of the pool and on up to the head, where the current sweeps in with some force.

It was late in April, with the river running fine and as clear as a young parson's conscience. Around me the soft mid-afternoon sun bled palely through the thin tapestry of autumnal foliage, lighting the landscape in the warmest gold and yellow hues, the colours that herald the imminent creep of the coming winter.

On near enough my last cast, I turned a good fish without pricking it and then watched as it briefly swam around once or twice on the surface, showing the brown of its flanks as it hunted for the fly. I judged it to be around the four pound mark, a monumental trout, and had I managed to land it, it would certainly have been my best from this pretty piece of water. Come to think of it, it would then have been my best river fish ever, full stop.

I rested the run briefly before casting again (a mistake, I'll admit, because I should have cast over that trout faster than you can say Isaac Walton) but it had lost interest in my fly and, try as I may, I could not get it to come back. I took a mighty careful note of the exact place it had come up and decided to try again later in the week.

I was back at Big Rock within three days. It had rained in the intervening time and a large wattle branch had drifted into the pool, the heavy stem (I know it was heavy because I tried very carefully to move it) resting against the bank I was fishing, making it a difficult spot to land a fish.

I put a weighted nymph across the stream, a rod's length above the rock, and on the third or fourth cast the fish came up and I

*"It was late in April, with the river running fine and as clear as a young parson's conscience."*

hooked it solidly.

Fortunately it sped across the stream to the opposite bank, away from the branch, and I gave it plenty of room to move in. Twice it swam past me close enough to count the spots on its back, but each time I put on any rod pressure, it swam away strongly and without much difficulty.

It was also clear that the stranded wattle branch was going to be more of a problem than I had first thought. Positioned where it was in the pool, there was little hope of netting the fish from my side, so I moved slowly around to the opposite bank, carefully wading through the shallow end of the run where the water thins out ankle deep.

The fish quickly sensed my change in approach and immediately altered its tactics, swimming out from the cover of the far bank straight into the thick of the submerged branches, totally ignoring the firm sideways pressure I put on it.

I was determined to disengage the leader before the fish snapped it, so I rushed in over the top of my thigh waders; but I was too late by a yard and it broke me easily, long before I got anywhere near it.

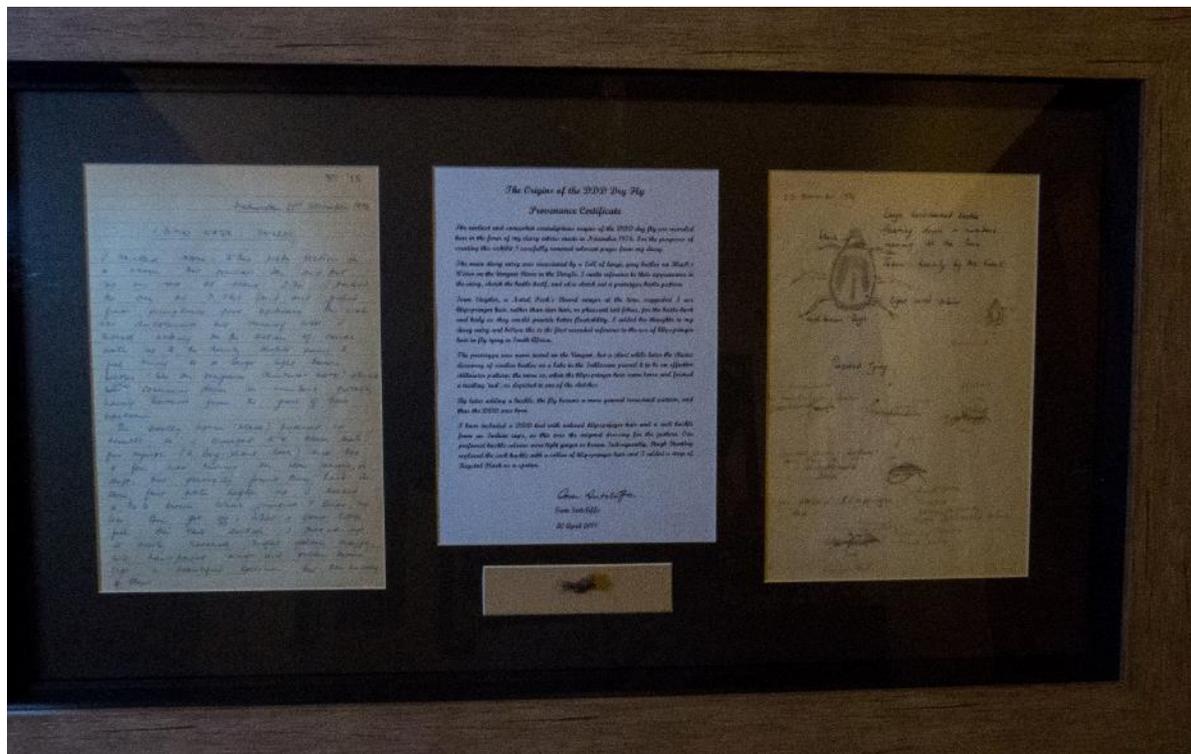
A short while later, I happened to recount this story at a public flyfishing gathering which, of course, was a grave mistake. As I might have guessed, the fish was caught within a day or two by some fellow who had obviously hastened to the spot with all speed, confirming my long-held belief that a particularly hot place in hell should be reserved for anglers of his sort.

Oh, and the weight of the fish?, I hear you ask. Well, it came in at three pounds fourteen ounces, which was close enough to the four that I had predicted. Thereafter, I hear, it was promptly delivered to some taxidermy outfit for mounting.

Which makes me think that the fish and I might have done ourselves a lot more good had we both kept our mouths tightly shut.

**Notes from Tom Sutcliffe of the development of the “DDD” from an experience on the Umgeni above Big Rock in 1973:**

In preparation for a fundraising auction in May of 2017 (the proceeds of which were for the #BRU efforts on the Umgeni), Tom Sutcliffe took from his diary of 1973, the pages in which he describes a foray on the Umgeni on “Blacks Water” (Furth farm, then belonging to John Black). On that day beetles were falling into the water and being taken by the Trout. Tom describes his day and then does a sketch of a beetle pattern, with later notes inspired by Ivan Steytler, in which the use of Klipspringer is proposed in place of deerhair in the new fly pattern. Tom framed these notes, with a typed “provenance certificate” between them, as well as a DDD tied by him, and they were auctioned on the night. At time of writing this, the item hangs on the wall of Wayne and Roxanne Stegen’s house in Hilton.



## *The Origins of the DDD Dry Fly*

### *Provenance Certificate*

*The earliest and somewhat serendipitous origins of the DDD dry fly are recorded here in the form of my diary entries made in November 1976. For the purposes of creating this exhibit I carefully removed relevant pages from my diary.*

*The main diary entry was occasioned by a fall of large, grey beetles on Black's Water on the Umgeni River in the Dargle. I make reference to their appearance in the entry, sketch the beetle itself, and also sketch out a prototype beetle pattern.*

*Ivan Steytler, a Natal Park's Board ranger at the time, suggested I use klippringer hair, rather than deer hair, or pheasant tail fibres, for the beetle-back and body as they would provide better floatability. I added his thoughts to my diary entry and believe this is the first recorded reference to the use of klippringer hair in fly tying in South Africa.*

*The prototype was never tested on the Umgeni, but a short while later the chance discovery of similar beetles on a lake in the Inkhosane proved it to be an effective stillwater pattern; the more so, when the klippringer hair came loose and formed a trailing 'tail', as depicted in one of the sketches.*

*By later adding a hackle, the fly became a more general terrestrial pattern, and thus the DDD was born.*

*I have included a DDD tied with natural klippringer hair and a cock hackle from an Indian cape, as this was the original dressing for the pattern. Our preferred hackle colours were light ginger or brown. Subsequently, Hugh Huntley replaced the cock hackle with a collar of klippringer hair and I added a strip of Krystal Flash as a spotter.*

*Tom Sutcliffe*

Tom Sutcliffe

30 April 2017



XXI

## The Dargle

IT is always interesting, and usually a pleasure, to the angler to visit fresh places and to fish new waters; he approaches the unfamiliar stream in a spirit of happy anticipation, even of adventure. But there is always one river that he knows and loves best and there is generally one stretch of that river which, as the good years pass, becomes his spiritual home.

I think I know every stone, every tuft of grass and reed, on the banks of The Chestnuts Water which runs through Walter Mitchell's farm in the Dargle\*. Again and again I go back to it and always, year after year, my delight in its quiet, friendly beauty deepens and grows. The Dargle is like a woman, kind and lovely, whose gracious charm unfolds with dear acquaintance.

"Age cannot wither her nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety."

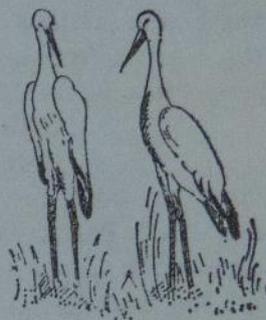
Here beneath the krantzies and grassy slopes of Inhluzan, the young Umgeni gathers strength for its journey down to Howick Falls and over them to the sea. It is a gay little stream in its upper reaches; though by the time it has reached The Chestnuts its many pools and long, quiet runs give it a sedate maturity, that is shattered by the mad plunge over the falls at Dargle and the wild tumble through the gorge below them. It was one of the first Natal streams to be stocked with Brown Trout and it has already quite a history. It has never been as prolific as the Mooi or the Umzimkulu. You do not hear of record baskets taken from its waters, and if you are a beginner and need encouragement you should not start in the Dargle. The fishing is not easy. Skill and patience and the years that bring the philosophic mind are almost as necessary to the angler who will be happy here as rod and cast and flies. You will have many blank days, but, as I have tried to show in another chapter, even a blank day on a river can be full of happiness for the contemplative man; and

If you patiently persist  
In brilliant sunshine, wind, and mist,  
One day you'll have a screaming reel,  
And stippled beauties in your creel.

\*This was in 1947—N.N.

they are usually still sluggish and not very eager to feed. In spring the banks are pleasantly clear after the winter burning, but you will be glad of the reeds and long grass later on for the cover they give.

In the Dargle summer is best. Then you will see the gentle valley in all its green and blue and gold, and as the storms gather in magnificent menace over Inhluzan, you will pray fervently that they may break below the Furth Stream and not spoil your fishing. A muddy river is common enough at this time of the year, but when it clears, as clear it does for at least a day or two, the fishing is all the good angler could desire. For then you may have one of those warm, misty days that are the best of all, and the trout are lively from early morning until the evening light slowly dies out with the flaming sunset. In summer the whip-poor-will (or "piet my vrou" or "speak for yourself" bird) is back from his winter travels, shouting from the tall gums and wattle trees; and storks walk sedately to and fro in the folds of the valleys. In summer the days are long and the countryside is alive with the sound of running water. Birds are everywhere. At midday you may bathe gratefully below the rapids of Simpson's Reach, and stretch yourself comfortably in the late afternoon under the Big Willow, watching the Home Stretch for the first signs of the evening rise. You can nearly always rely upon an evening rise in the Dargle in summer, though whether you can hook the rising fish will be largely a matter of the right fly and the quality of your casting.



The majority of experienced anglers seem to agree that autumn fishing is the most satisfactory for results — if "results" means the number and size of the trout in your creel. "Give me a good day in April," they say, "and have your biggest frying pan ready for the supper I'll bring home." This is probably as true of the Umgeni as it is of other Natal streams. I will not dispute the fact that you will get your best fish when the shortening days bring in the dirge of the dying year and

"On acres of the seeded grasses  
The changing burnish heaves."

There is a crispness in the air and sometimes more than a hint

of frost. Inhluzan, which dominates the valley through the changing year, becomes gaunt and sharp against the sky, and storks and whip-poor-wills and swallows have long been gone. Soon it will be too cold, and the rods will be put away until the spring.

When the bleak, incessant winds howl drearily and fling their dust upon the ugly dorp of Poufcastle; when life is uncomfortably a succession of irritations; when the stupidity of the local branch of the human race assumes overwhelming proportions; when the bad qualities of the South African parent and the crudities of the South African child appear to be their only qualities; when the overworked headmaster is in danger of losing his sense of proportion in the welter.

Of leaking taps and naughty boys  
And all the purgatory of Noise;

when, in short, the exile chafes most bitterly against his banishment to a particularly humdrum outpost of opportunity, there comes with solace to his mind a recollection of past tranquillity; and the knowledge that the river still flows through the lovely Dargle restores him to sanity and the refreshment of hope.

The dew on the grass, the Mitchells say, is a sure sign that there will be no storm this afternoon. An anxious glance at the river below the house shows that the stream runs clear in spite of last night's rain; they must have got most of it at Mount Park. The day may be hot when the mist clears, so let's have an early breakfast and get up to the top boundary as soon as possible. Connemara Black and Professor today, with perhaps a change to March Brown later on. It's quite a pull up the old wagon road to Kwa-Kwa's huts. There he sits, the old patriarch. Quite a character is Kwa-Kwa, quite the gentleman. He went to London, to King George V's Coronation, you know, and how he loves to talk about it! Now we can see the Horseshoe Pool and the long reach past the Blasted Oak. Yes, the mist is still coming down over Cotswold and there's a gentle ripple on the water. By Jove, look at the fingerlings in Barnett's Stream. That's a good sign. Here we are, right at the boundary fence. I'm going to fish every yard of The Chestnuts Water today.

What a thrill there is in the first cast of a perfect fishing day! Across and down; lift the point of the rod; out it comes; back; pause; out; across and down again. The fly's going out nicely. Just off that clump of reeds, a foot or so to the right; back again and out and — ah! here we come; what ho, my beauty; just a

him all right. Give him line; more, more. Now we're coming back. Off again! Here's a fighter. Finished at last. Pound and a half. Number six.

And so down to the Home Stretch below the house as the light begins to fail and the ha-de-dahs squawk their blundering way to the Big Willow. This is the sweetest time of all; a warm, still, summer evening and the river a-boil with rising fish. Just enough light to put on a Coachman and just time to catch one more trout before it's too dark to net him. Here he is, feeding in the stream on the Home Stretch, rising steadily; almost rhythmically. A long straight cast right down the river. Don't sink the fly now. On to the water she goes and, sure enough, up comes the trout. Got him! A good fight again, a darned good fight. This is a heavy fish. Work him round to where that fallen lump of earth makes a possible stance near the water. Yes, now we're ready for you. The net again. Gently. Out! It's almost too dark to read the scale. Strike a match. So. Two and a quarter pounds. Number seven. Good fishing.

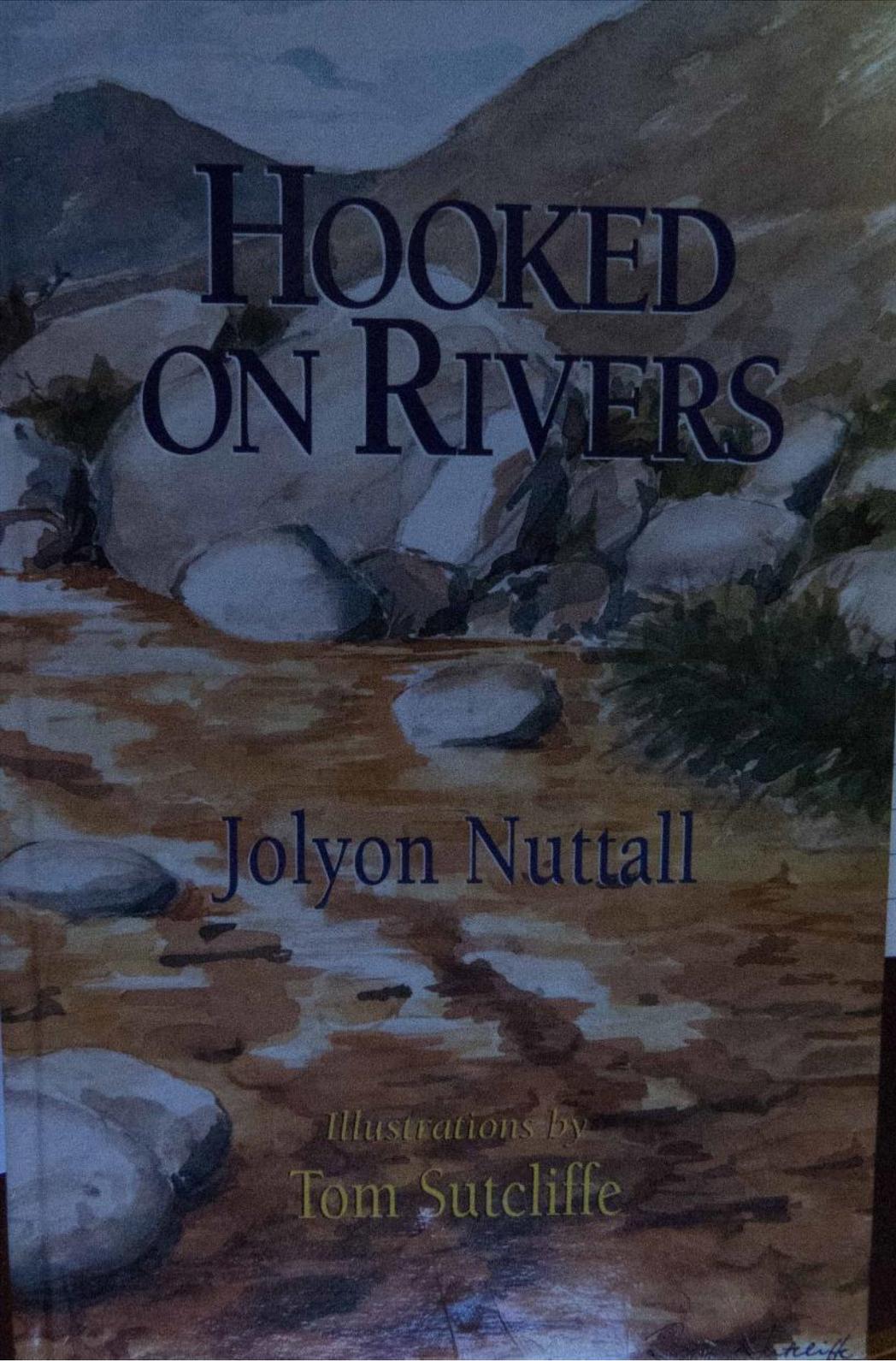
Back to the house and a bath and a drink before dinner and the tale of the day's adventure. A day to remember, a day to treasure in the mind, a credit balance for the future.

Another day tomorrow, and another, and another. Sometimes one good fish to make adventure memorable; sometimes nothing at all. But always the Dargle, washed in sunshine or soft and gentle with rain; always the river runs over its stones and through its grassy banks. Always, even when I'm trying to deal out pedagogic justice in the harsh and dreary North, these pleasant places are here under the sky. I know that there is laughter in the farmhouse and solace on the stream. I know that a time will come again when I shall hear the Christmas Beetles shrilling from the bush and the sound of the water as it tumbles over the Falls. I shall see again

“ . . . . . the grass fires nightly  
Wreathed upon the hill.”

And early in the morning I shall go down through the wet grass in the paddock and put out a Hardy's Favourite on the Battle-field. The fish will not rise at that time of day, of course. They never do in the Dargle. But I always go out and get my feet wet on the first day of the holidays. I always will. And what an appetite the keen air gives, as you plod, with empty creel, back up the hill to breakfast!

Jolyon Nuttall's book, which is peppered with references to the Umgeni River:



# HOOKED ON RIVERS

Jolyon Nuttall

*Illustrations by*  
Tom Sutcliffe

*An article from Wade Fly mag, 2012:*

### **Ramblings on the Umgeni River**

There is a small river which flows through the soft folds of the Dargle Valley that converses in the same languages that I do. Three languages to be precise. English, Afrikaans and Zulu.

Let me explain.

The uMgeni itself, the Zulu speaker, emerges from a highland vlei as a small stream. It is joined a few miles down, by the Afrikaner (die Poort), and some way along by the Furth (the Englishman). And I think that it is only at this last confluence that it can truly call itself a river, and even then only in the South African sense, given its diminutive size. And then it really doesn't last for very long as a Trout stream before plummeting over the Dargle falls, after which it hangs on to its population of wild Browns for a moment longer, before becoming a sullen brown, dammed thing.

I grew up on the farm that was once listed as the lower boundary demarcation of the Trout zone: Corrie Lynn farm, the same one that is accessible to NFFC members today. My links to the uMgeni go further up though. At the small farm, Umgeni Poort, which as the name suggests is at the confluence of those two babbling streams, my great grandfather is buried in a grove of trees, and it is here that my father spent his early childhood. I have a photo of him atop a very large horse named "socks", when he was a very small boy. The picture is taken overlooking the pasture at Umgeni Poort.

This was once a most picturesque haven amongst the wooded hills: It is tucked into a narrow valley with the river rushing by in the way that mountain streams do. It was a small neat farm, with an orchard on terraces built by the Italian prisoners of war, a stone house, and pastures that were ploughed by oxen. It was complete with a water wheel that generated electricity from the uMgeni river (and which was known to spin uncontrollably after a storm, blowing light globes at will before the old man could get down to the river to close the sluice.)



*The confluence of the Poort and the Umgeni viewed from the top of the hill*

It was here that my grandfather would attend the afternoon milking with his mind on the Trout, and his old cane rod and creel leaning against the stone wall outside, in preparation for the evening's real business.

That old cane rod is the one I started fly-fishing with, and it hangs on the wall in my lounge to this day.



*My Grandfather's Milward's cane rod*

In my youth I visited Umgeni Poort a few times, and the Catholic Nuns who then lived there would welcome me, and the river was mine for the day, but sadly, by then the farm was infested with wattle trees, the terraces were crumbling, and the place had an unkempt feel about it.

It was my grandfather who attempted a road up the escarpment from the base of the hill on Umgeni Poort. His first attempt was an unplanned one, and he reached a point in his road-building when he looked up and saw that he had engineered himself to the base of a very steep krantz, with no prospect of proceeding any further. The second attempt succeeded and despite his attempt to name it "the Burma Road", it is still known after its less glamorous predecessor: "Fowler's Folly".

That steep and rocky road, takes one up onto the top of the hills to some of the most expansive and lovely countryside I know, and I am fortunate enough to have access to the place. It is the source of the Poort stream, and has some lovely still waters with a good head of Trout in them.

Off to the South East of this plateau of vlei land, the iMpendle road winds its way along an upland valley, with Rainbow Lakes, and other magnificent dams in the Furth Catchment, off to the East side of the road: The Old Dam; Smiths; The Doctor's syndicate, and many others.



*The view over Rainbow Lakes from the slopes of iNhlosane.*

The road then descends the Furth cutting, where, if you dare take your eyes off the precipitous road, you look down onto a cascade of white water where the Furth breaks through beside iNhlosane mountain, and descends towards the uMgeni below.

The walk up iNhlosane is a strenuous one if you are unfit, as I was reminded last week, when we went up there. But the view is a magnificent one, which makes it all worthwhile. It is a view that encompasses the entire uMgeni Valley in the “trout zone”.



*Looking out over the valley of the uMgeni from the top of iNhlosane*

Sitting atop the boulders above the cliffs you can trace the river's descent off the top of the hills from Mpumulwane, down its own gorge beside the similar shaped iNhlezela mountain, on through uMgeni- Poort, and Wakefield, and to the farms "Furth" and "Brigadoon", which I am very pleased to report the NFFC has access to again.

There is some pretty thin stuff, and by that I mean both pretty and thin, where the water slides over smooth bedrock. This is beguiling water, where shadows and glides play with your eyes, and what you think are fish turn out to be crevices in the rock. And the Trout that are there are never where you think they should be. And then there are some seriously deep and mysterious looking pools, where try as you may, you can't get a sense of how deep they really are, and what lives down there. But I can tell you that some good Trout live down there. I have on two occasions seen fish of over three pounds come out of Brigadoon.



*Siesta pool on Brigadoon*

Below Brigadoon there is positively the longest pool you will ever encounter, on the farm called Knowhere. It is over a kilometre long, deep and slow, and with a population of feisty little Browns that I last fished for many years ago.



Brett Coombes on "Knowhere"

Below that the river glides in a large sweep along the base of steep South facing hills covered in natural forest.

It was here that as a student myself and two friends drove a VW beetle down a steep track through the forest, standing on the brakes all the way down to the river where we were to fish for the day. Then at the bottom, in an awesome display of student wisdom we decided we needed to remove the wheels to let the brakes cool. So there stood the beetle on little cairns of stones, in the ryegrass field, while we went off to catch Trout.

Below this is the farm Chestnuts, that Neville Nuttall wrote so fondly of:

*In Dargle Stream the Brown Trout lie  
And tantalise the passer- by.  
They will not rise at times laid down  
in books perused by Men from Town.  
But if you patiently persist  
In brilliant sunshine, wind and mist,  
And if you keep casting out  
Your flies to tempt the wily Trout,  
One day you'll have a screaming real  
And stippled beauties in your creel!*



This is of course NFFC water too, and well worth a try. I have fished Chestnuts many times, but not so in recent years and have vowed to get back there soon and re-acquaint myself with its Trout. Chestnuts is more difficult to fish than I think it was in Neville Nuttall's day. It has its share of wattles and brambles and the usual bankside vegetation, and getting in and out of the river requires a bit of bundu bashing. That is to say, if you are not bundu bashing, you are probably missing the best fishing. And good fishing there is. This stretch has always produced a fair number of fish between one and two pounds. You will get them on nymphs sunk deep in the pools and in tight, against steep undercut banks. And all of this will demand that you get dirty and wet, and get into the river to really experience it properly.



*A Brown from Chestnuts*

Below Chestnuts and the road, the river plunges over a waterfall into a gorge , which many consider signals the end of the Trout water. Of course this is not entirely true, and the 'forestry section' as it is known has some very good water , much of it not explored by fly-fishermen in many years (and that includes a little known tributary called Walter's creek).

I was last on the forestry section too many years ago. But around that time I do recall a glorious September day on the uMgeni at Chestnuts with the late Mick Huntley, on which we both hit it right and made pigs of ourselves. Mick gave me a fly he was tying at the time, made entirely of Guinea Fowl feather.



*Mick's fly*

I still have that fly, stuck in an album with a photo of Mick beside a row of really decent river Browns, and one Rainbow, of over two pounds.

That is the only Rainbow I have ever caught from the uMgeni. Unless of course you count the one I caught in the tiny stream that is the uMgeni in its headwaters , alongside Lake Overbury. That is above the Mpumulwane gorge, where the river has come together from Lake Lyndhurst in a definable channel for the first time.

Above Lake Lyndhurst you can't really claim to be on the uMgeni river as such, but the threads of streams lead up to some lovely lakes tucked up there in the linen folds of grassland. These gems ice up around the margins on winter mornings, when your lips are so blue you can't speak any of your three languages.



*Wild country*

It's wild country, where the grass doesn't get to grow very long, and the wind blows a lot.  
A perfect setting for a decent Trout stream to set out on its journey through your life and memories.

*An excerpt from the book "Stippled Beauties, by Andrew Fowler*  
**Roots**

A year or two back, my son and I accompanied my father and his brother on a Saturday sortie to inspect a farm in the midlands of Natal.

It was not just any farm this one. It was the farm of my roots in a way. It was the place where my father grew up.

Umgeni Poort is situated near the headwaters of the Umgeni river, in a tight little valley which stretches South East from the little known Mpumulwane mountain. While I was born nearly twenty years after my father left the place, my great grandfather is buried there, and I feel a certain affinity to the place. As a student I took it upon myself to make the acquaintance of the German nuns who occupied the farm at the time, and as a result I fished the river there several times. Strolling about the property stirred feelings of rediscovery. Beneath its rolling pastures and overgrown hedgerows are crumbling stonework and iron artifacts that jog one's imagination. There is much that is decrepit and forlorn about the place. Uprooted trees lie across old walls and fenceposts as weathered as Stonehenge stand guard like long forgotten sentries.

The land is sadly overgrown with wattle trees and brambles, and the river banks are choked in places to the extent that they shield the water from the sun, in dark and gloomy tunnels.

On this damp Saturday morning we crossed the Poort stream at the entrance to the farm very slowly, casting our eyes up its course into the dark trees. The Poort is a happy little stream that joins the Umgeni from the West. It has its source up on the high plateau that is now Ivanhoe farm, and which also belonged to my Grandfather prior to 1948. It cuts a steep slice back into the escarpment, forming a valley that is hidden away and mysterious, due to its inaccessibility and the fact that it cannot be seen from any road or house in the area.

My father has told how the family would go up that valley to a spot on the northern slopes, where there was a sawing hole. This was in a patch of forest where they cut the odd grand yellowwood by hand for timber, in the days before that was considered a crime. They would picnic there and I imagine that Granddad would fish the Poort for trout. The sight from the road suggests that the stream is simply too overgrown to fish now.

Beyond the confluence of the streams there is a maze of watercourses in the meadow that beg exploration, and which came to life with my father's explanation as to what this is all about. There is an old weir across the Umgeni, and from it there leads a deep stone lined furrow. Following its course it takes you across the pasture on a raised levee for fifty yards or so. Then the ground falls away into a deep chasm, filled with water. On closer inspection the axle of the waterwheel is visible in the stonework, and all comes to light. Literally in a sense, because this waterwheel was used to generate electricity! Dad tells of the summer nights when a storm in the headwaters would raise the water level, spinning the wheel out of control, and pushing heady voltage through the system, causing light bulbs in the house to pop like balloons at the fair! He spoke that morning of the run down to the river by moonlight to close off the water valve, and of the cupboard under the stairs stocked to the brim with spare globes. He seemed to come alive in the memories.

He took us through the front door of the crumbling house, and showed me where his father's desk took pride of place before a window, looking out over the garden. Through the hall was a pantry the size of my living room, and the kitchen with its woodstove told tales of hearty

stews on winter nights before a blazing fire. Leading from Dad's old bedroom, was a narrow verandah, where the two boys were allowed to pull their beds out on hot summer nights, to sleep with the sounds of the African night.

Beneath the house was a cellar, cold and damp, which would probably still be keeping crisp apples and good wine, were it not for years of neglect.

Off to the side of the house were the terraced orchards and vegetable gardens, all built by hand by the Italian prisoners of war. Of course all is now under thick grass, and the fruit trees are no more, but father reminisced about how his mother took fright at the cruel pruning performed by the Italians. In the few years that followed the trees bore fruit like never before!

Below the house is a very old stone dairy, which was in use right up until the time of my student visits. Grandad, I am told, would make his way down from the house with his wicker creel and cane fly rod, and lean them against the stone wall. After he had attended to the milking of his few cows he would carry on down to the Umgeni, and catch a few trout for dinner, at the death of the day.

When I first started fly fishing properly, I was permitted to use one of my Grandfather's old cane rods as well as some of the other tackle that hung in the passage in our house. Although Grandfather had died a few years back, my father had very seldom fished, and so I was using flies out of Grandad's old Wheatley fly box. They were March Browns, Invictas, and Butchers. They were also probably the very flies he had cast in the upper Umgeni after milking.

We walked around the property, and surveyed the poor quality buildings of later years that now lay in unsightly ruins. There was wire and litter about the place. We walked up to my Great Grandfather's grave. Although my Uncle has done a fine job of restoring the headstone, the spot is surrounded by ugly gum trees, with bare earth beneath them.

There is a wonderful old aerial photo of Umgeni Poort that hangs at Petrus Stroom. Knowing when it was taken I can only imagine that it was shot from a very old bi-plane that would have had to dive down into the valley to get a view like that. It is one of those black and white pictures that has had the colour added afterwards, such that the whole thing is sepia, and vaguely unreal. It portrays a particularly neat and tidy farm tucked between the hills. In it one can see an ox drawn plough in action, trees and hedges in neat rows, and orchards beyond an immaculate garden.

I think I prefer the memory of that picture more than what I saw that morning, but due to my having seen the farm in such contrasting condition, I am bound by a desire to one day own that land, and turn it into what it was.

## Member's story: Fishing Knowhere

- Craig Ebersohn February 2017



My wife was left unamused when my alarm woke us before sunrise, and my response to her seeing me donning my fishing garb and asking where I was going, was .... Knowhere.

Me insisting I was going to Knowhere took some explaining.

Not having heralded from the Midlands I am often fascinated by those who do, but are blissfully unaware of the beauty and serenity that surrounds them, or just don't get it. The benefit of many of the NFFC waters is that they are so close, allowing one to work a full day and squeeze fishing the afternoon rise in, during the work week. During summer Knowhere is a splendid stretch of water just thirty kilometers from Howick, allowing me to allocate a few hours in the morning or afternoon to ply my skills against the stippled beauties of the Umgeni ... as Andrew Fowler calls them.

Knowhere is characterized by long slow-flowing pools, fished from the banks. In

the mornings I approach the river stealthily, not only to avoid being spotted by the wily browns, but to hopefully catch a glimpse of a resident Bushbuck which I often see before sunrise along a stretch of the river. On my first visit to Knowhere I was introduced to a very exuberant local resident. While my attention was focused on selecting my dry fly setup for the morning, there was suddenly commotion behind me and I almost jumped into the river to avoid a ferocious Ridgeback that had snuck up on me, ready to pounce. This was my first meeting of the Riparian Owner David Mann's ridgeback Ben. As you pass the farmhouse Ben makes a point of running across the fields to greet visiting trout fishermen. I now look forward to his over-zealous greeting every time I visit Knowhere. The Umgeni borders on cattle pastures as it meanders through David's farm, and the other regular spectators to my pursuit of the stippled beauties are the inquisitive cattle, the most of which seem to be the young calves.

I always carry an armory of two rods with me, my trusty 3wt with floating line, and 5/6wt with intermediate fly line. I have enjoyed success fishing various techniques. A dry fly setup on my 3wt often fished with a dropper fly is always exciting but a looonnnggg leader with an Olive Beaded Nymph or GRHE (a favourite of Anton Smiths) with a slow figure 8 retrieve has yielded success as the day warms up. When the 3wt fails me I will revert to my favourite 5/6wt with an intermediate fly line, fishing with patterns better known in still-water fishing. With the lack of rain the river will flow slowly but in summer an intermediate line helps to get the fly down to where one anticipates the fish to be.

So, if you are looking for a water that is closer that the exquisite waters of the Kamberg for a quick morning or afternoon fishing session, I highly recommend giving Knowhere on the Umgeni a bash.

Keep a keen eye out for Ben, lest you end up taking a swim when he surprises you. Tight lines!

***The following article appeared in "The Complete fly fisherman" magazine in April 2017.***

### **The Umgeni**

In the early spring, when there is mist between the soft rolling hills of the KZN midlands, one can wake in the wee hours of the morning to the faint, harsh, three note call of the drongos, and contemplate Trout before breakfast. This is because Trout are near enough to the homes in Howick, Hilton, or Maritzburg, that your average salaried man can go and get some on a Saturday morning and be back for breakfast, at least at a breakfast time that one's teenage daughter would consider reasonable.

So how close to town are these Trout, you may be asking. Well, I live in Hilton, and if I have my gear packed near the front door the night before, I can be casting a fly well within forty minutes of having pulled the door closed behind me (and yes, I have allowed for walking down to the river from the car and tying on the first fly). Non fishers and newcomers to the area listen to these things with a look of skepticism, or even downright disbelief. The Umgeni river is better known for its supply dams (warm water, with Yellows, Bass and Carp), or for its nature reserve in the bushveld. But of course every river must have its highland source, so you can see them trying to place where this river might rise. If the river's headwaters are in the 'berg' how can I claim to be able to get up there to its highland Trout waters so quickly?

Here is where one needs to pause and take a look at some interesting geography. In the previous article in this series, I wrote of the Mooi River. If one stands in the Mooi River at around Riverside or Stillerus, and looks directly downstream, the river will point to a fairly significant mountain, lying further down the valley, and off to the west of where the Mooi runs. That mountain is known, as Spioenkop, and is part of a chain of high ground that starts out along the western perimeter of the Mooi catchment. From the summit of Spioenkop (2146 m ASL), and other less prominent high points forming that chain of high ground, rise streams that trickle down to a significant vlei .....The Umgeni vlei. That vlei lies at an altitude of 1850m ASL, is not far from the hamlet of Fort Nottingham, and is a collection point for the streams that join to form the Umgeni just before it tumbles from the high ground into the Dargle valley.

From the gorge at Mpumulwane, where the stream comes down off the escarpment, it turns south and flows roughly parallel to that escarpment for a few kilometers, before it turns east somewhere below the iconic Inhlosane mountain, falls off a cliff at the little known Dargle falls, and sets off for warmer climes.

In that short seventeen kilometre stretch the stream roughly tracks the escarpment that runs from above Fort Nottingham to Inhlosane and beyond, and also receives succour from it, in the form of further cold water becks. The most notable of those are the Poort Stream, and the Furth Stream. Perhaps it is these streams, or perhaps it is the shade of the steep forested south facing slopes that shield parts of the river from the warmth that can pervade these altitudes, but either way, Trout thrive here. This is despite the fact that the stream in these parts runs between 1475m to 1300m above sea level. Consider by contrast, that all of what we deem to be the Mooi's Trout water, lies above 1400m ASL, and the Bushmans crosses the 1400m contour way down on Rockmount farm.

So the Umgeni as a Trout stream is something of an enigma. Equally enigmatic, is the fact that years ago it was heralded as Blue Ribbon Trout water, little has changed on the river, and yet in the not too distant past, it was all but forgotten.

Given my own interest in this, my home river, I am repeatedly having people come forward and tell me of their fishing on the Umgeni years ago. Keith Hobday recently told me how as a youngster he loved to fish the lower stretches. He related how it often meant clambering over logs and through thick undergrowth to deliver a single well-aimed flick of the fly. His colleagues often weren't prepared to go to that much trouble and were puzzled by his fascination with the place, when they could stand on the shore of a Stillwater and cast unhindered. Mike Lello was on the phone to me recently relating how 50 years ago he fished the river for "several miles above the falls" and had a great deal of success. In my own student years I remember (and can verify from my logbooks) great days on the stream, like a September day on Chestnuts with Mick Huntley, where we just couldn't go wrong. There were several two pound fish amongst our catches. There were similar days with Paul deWet and Brett Coombes on Brigadoon, and I was present at the catching of two fish over three pounds. At that time our enthusiasm spread like wildfire and measures had to be adopted to limit rod numbers. Last year Jolyon Nuttall related to me his story, and how as a young man he took a quick run out to the Umgeni on Chestnuts after work with the sole purpose of catching a fish for a special dinner with a special girl. He had no backup plan for dinner, and thankfully none was needed. I do believe the same was true of the girl. Of course it was his father Neville Nuttall who wrote so fondly of the Umgeni in his 1947 book "Trout Streams of Natal" (later incorporated into "Life in the country" ...1973). Most remember the iconic map of the Umgeni that appeared in that book, and which still hangs in the farmhouse on Chestnuts.

Most of those who re-tell these stories, of the Umgeni in earlier times, follow that with a question as to how it is now, and I am able to say "great!" , only because it is.

The Umgeni is no longer that 'forgotten stream'. It is as though the place has come back around from behind the moon, and suddenly we can all see it again. Fly fishers have rediscovered this gem on their doorsteps. For one thing, the Natal Fly Fishers Club has access to some 12 kms of this 17km stretch. In fact this is the only "public" water, and the balance of the water is probably not fished at all. Maybe that unfettered water acts as a refuge where Trout can swim unhindered and later spread out into the waters we all have access to. One thing is for sure and that is that Browns on the Umgeni do indeed hole up in big pools in times of heat or drought, or even just seasonally low water. There are many big deep pools on this river, but none so big and so deep as that in the middle of Knowhere. The fam "Knowhere" is a stretch of veritable canal. "Three-quarter-mile-pool", I have been calling it, but in true fisherman style I may have stretched it a bit. I see Bob Crass in his 1973 book "Trout fishing in Natal" says it is half a mile. Measuring it up on Google Earth I see it is precisely 1.1kms (0.7 of a mile), so both of us are liars. Either way, the place is thick with fish in a drought, and in a good summer it is a little less prolific, suggesting that the fish do indeed go hunting. Browns, of course do that, and I refer the reader to George Daniels' streamer fishing book "Strip Set" in which we read that Browns on the Ausable river in the USA can range over 900m in a single day.

There are of course a number of great big pools on the Umgeni, but since I addressed my piece on the Bushmans from the top down, and the article on the Mooi from the bottom up, let's stick with my concept of fish ranging up and down from the giant pool on Knowhere and explore the river accordingly: Up and down from the centre.

Above Knowhere, is Brigadoon. This dairy farm was once owned by the late Derek Fly. In the days when I started fishing this stretch Derek's father Vic was enjoying his fly fishing on the Umgeni, and his son had the decency to mow a path along the river's edge with a tractor drawn mower once or twice a season. This was to make it just a little easier for the old man. Not too easy, mind you. It was

never a park, but it did help one's passage along the banks. What went with that mowing, was a level of care and custodianship that bears fruit to this day. Brigadoon's banks are relatively easy to negotiate, and the place is a pleasure to fish. In anything but the height of summer, one does best to walk with your flies at the ready, skipping long sections where the barren bedrock is visible, and fishing the holes in-between. Of course when flows are up, the fish move into lies that in earlier weeks you would have passed up. At these times the Browns seem hungry, and the fishing can be at its very best. Brigadoon has long stretches of such open water with bedrock as a base, but from the upper reaches of this farm, past the confluence with the Furth stream, and up onto Furth farm itself, there is more holding water. Furth farm has beautiful pools with thick stands of Nchi shi and Nannaberry along the banks, making havens for its shy and elusive Browns. This stretch is more remote, is out of cellphone signal, and is best reached in a four wheel drive, all of which enhances the Trout hunting. It is also from Furth farm upwards that the steep south facing slopes on the northern side of the river become more prevalent, and the shading of the river in the evenings becomes an event that one keys into during your Trout hunt. Those shadows shield shy trout. They also make you less visible, and they extend the part of the day in which light intensity is lower, and which we already know is the preferred feeding time of Brown Trout. Take note.

The stretch of river from the top boundary of Furth farm, through to the causeway beneath the shadow of Mpumulwane mountain, is private water, currently not accessible to any club or public body. These farms: Stoneycroft, Wakefield and Umgeni Poort remain private, and seldom, if ever fished. Off to the south west the Poort comes down a waterfall and passes through thick forest before its cool waters join the main stream. Above the road causeway on the Umgeni itself is a steep mountain kloof, again, on private land, where the water tumbles down at you from above.

Now if we make our way back down to "Knowhere", we can explore the stream below. When working a small streamer or deep sunk nymph in the slow waters of the very long pool at Knowhere, one can hear the rush of water just below the boundary fence, where it breaks through the dolerite sill that gives rise to this impoundment. From there the river curves into a steep forested hillside, in a series of short rapids and long pools. This curve's riparian zone is carved into a number of smallholdings, but where Barnett's stream joins the river from the north east, that bank heralds the start of another fishing club stretch, namely the farm Chestnuts. If my descriptions of clambering over logjams and aiming sniper casts hold true, it is more so on Chestnuts than anywhere else. To be fair, in its upper reaches, neat ryegrass pastures extend down to the river's edge, and ignoring for a moment the ballet dance one does over the electric fence, the going really isn't that difficult. The fishing, on the other hand, is not for the feint hearted, and despite my love of the place, I have had the presence of mind to send beginners elsewhere, lest their hopes of Umgeni river Browns be dashed along with their confidence from the very start. As with much of the Umgeni, the banks here are often high and near vertical. Together with that the water is more often than not the colour of a weak ginger beer, so that you can't always see the bottom. Then you have some giant poplars or reeds to deal with, and it becomes apparent that you need to be *in* the river. When you cannot see the bottom, this literally takes a leap of faith. Anyone who has been there will know what I mean. At some point you commit, and slide down a steep bank, your rod held higher than your hopes, and no means of stopping yourself or reversing this leap. Typically you land with a mud stripe down your longs that gets you strange looks at the coffee shop on the way back home; in water no deeper than your waist; cooler than your tender bits were expecting; and with a riverbed of stone, when you thought it would be mud. Now you can relax and fish, and your only mild worry is how you might get out again. You always find a way. (If you don't, call me. It will make for a good story).

The middle sections of Chestnuts are perhaps the most difficult to get at, in view of a riparian zone of bush and tall grass. The grasses, sedges and weeds grow higher in this warm valley than you will find on the upper Mooi or Bushmans in mid to late summer. Don't be embarrassed or surprised if you have one of those days where you lose two flies without yet getting them wet! It happens to all of us, and some experience, calmness and presence of mind helps when getting the fly from the keeper into the stream. It also helps to climb into the stream, and work with water around you, instead of dense vegetation.

The lower sections of Chestnuts revert to ryegrass pastures, and in that short stretch visible from the main Dargle/Impendle road, the fishing is a lot easier. The river passes under that same main road, and then within sight of the road disappears over the falls.

The river below the falls does hold Trout, and even very recently, there have been reports of Trout caught amongst the Natal Scaly and Smallmouth Bass. It does however seem that the halcyon days of great Trout as far down as Walters Creek, and Doug Ritchie's old farm Esseldene, are long gone. Hugh Huntley used to tell me of his forays on Doug Ritchie's in a way that made my mouth water, but it is no more. We can speculate as to the reasons, that may range from global warming to afforestation, but we will never really know.

What we do know, is that the water above the falls holds good fish, and that there are plenty of them. We also know that they probably average twelve inches, and that eighteen inch fish are common. There is also more than enough water there to keep you busy, and all of it is closer to town than any of KZN's other Trout streams.

#### Info blocks appended to the article:

Inhlosane mountain is an icon of the valley. At 1958 m in altitude it stands guard over the river, and its domed shape appears over the skyline from just about everywhere on the river. Inhlosane is also visible from as far away as Greytown, Boston, Nottingham Road and parts of the Inzinga valley. In winter it regularly receives a good dollop of snow.

I use the "Hunting" term here, as Tom Sutcliffe and Bob Wyatt no doubt did in the naming of their respective books, with the purpose of conveying a message. That message would be this: You don't fish the Umgeni for Trout....you go hunting Trout there. That is to say, you don't climb in and make your way up the river dusting fast runs with a nymph or dry. It is just not like that. This is different from both the Mooi and the Bushmans and almost all other Trout streams you know. Rather you walk in to known pools and deep slots, and at each one you stalk and deliver very few well-placed casts, often from heavy undergrowth or around logjams. You may find yourself doing this in the humidity of summer, in tall bankside vegetation. You may get in only a few dozen casts in a whole morning's fishing, and unless you hit it just right, you may come away with just a fish or two. You might come away with none at all. If this is how you experience it, you have not failed. This is what the Umgeni is all about. If you can slow down enough to embrace this, and enjoy it, I may just see you on the banks of this river. Welcome.....you too are a convert!

If you want to hone your skills on this "hunting" aspect of fly fishing, you would do well to read authors, both in print and online, with exposure to the spring creeks of Wisconsin in the USA. They call this area "The Driftless", and its parallels to the Umgeni are sometimes remarkable. And when you have found and read these passages, and have then fished the Umgeni, at least several times, and if you identify with the place and the style of trouting, then I would encourage you to find and

buy a book called "Jerusalem Creek". It is written by Ted Leeson (of "Habit of Rivers" fame), and Leeson is an unparalleled master of exquisite writing on flyfishing. While its contents are considerably more philosophical and parochial than they are technical, I believe that in reading it, you may come to identify with the love of place that Leeson has for a lesser known stream, that I have for the Umgeni, and that perhaps you too will come to have for this tiny gem of a Trout Place that lingers tentatively, so close to the heat of development and commerce.

Techniques: You will occasionally have the good fortune of an evening rise, or perhaps a single fish rising, and get to use the dry fly. But for the most part, the deeply sunk nymph holds sway on the Umgeni. Good fish often hug the bottom of the deepest pools, and it takes small, heavily weighted nymphs on light tippets to get down to them. Furthermore, the often slightly coloured, and sometimes downright dirty water may be the reason why a bigger nymph or even a small streamer can produce the best results. For one thing, unless you plan to clamber right in, which I do recommend, you might want to consider a long-handled net with which to reach down to fish hooked from high banks.

*Conservation notes: The Umgeni catchment in these parts is affected less by intensive agriculture or pollution than it is by runaway scrub timber, and timber farming itself. The wattle control problem has however received a significant boost in recent years from the likes of WWF, DUCT, 'Working For Water', and our fly-fishing fraternity's own endeavours with the #BRU initiative. Many previously wooded banks, which were also devoid of soil-holding grass, are now open and already thickly covered in grass*

*This article appears on Vagabond flymag*

## **Belief and expectation**

### *Flyfishing off the beaten track*

*“It takes time to know a trout stream, but if you visit one often enough to learn at least some of its idiosyncrasies, you begin to fish the water not only with a greater expectation of success but with an increasing sense of affectionate familiarity, even on those days when the trout hand you your hat.”*  
**Ted Leeson, Jerusalem Creek**

I knew there had to be a fish in the deep dark water just above where the fish eagles nest. I had returned there several times in the season. Once with James, to take photos in the early morning on a hot day.

Another time with Graeme and Garth, and a third occasion.....I can't quite remember when.

All had been without result at this spot.

Graeme had landed a fish up ahead at “Nannaberry pool”, and both Garth and I pricked a fish on separate visits at a pool just above the forest, but nothing from this pool.

Here the water is black with depth, and there is a succession of overhanging bushes on the north bank...a few ntchishi's and a sage bush.

Each time, I had stopped to change to something smaller and heavier. I needed a sleek heavy nymph. It needed to plummet, but without a splash, so it had to be a #16, and on a 6X tippet. I know I used the Troglodyte this time, and being the creature of habit that I am, it was probably a Troglodyte last time too.

Same place, same fly. In flyfishing you can try the same thing over and expect a different result.

Earlier in the season the open southern bank beside the stream had left me exposed. The vegetation was at ankle height, and the only means of avoiding detection was to remain below the skyline behind, and approach upstream in the belief that the fish was looking the other way.

Belief.

Belief that this stream will produce you a fish now and then. Belief that persistence will pay off. Belief that this deep pool, of all the spots on the river *MUST* hold a fish.

Each time I stood at that spot, I believed and I dreamed. When the dagga had been waist high, I fished with belief and hope. I expected the take as the fly passed silently through the black water. Weeks of summer had now passed. We had had heat, and spate, and the river valley was thick with the product of humidity and sunshine. The river ran clear now, and a little lower, but the vegetation was at it's peak. Stems had bolted, and seedpods had begun to dry. One not so much walked along the bank, but waded through a forest of weed and grass, an act that on a warm March day had you sweating and reaching for your water bottle. Now

as I stood amongst blackjacks and dogweed that stood shoulder high, I believed again. I dreamed briefly of that fish from the Lions River back in the late seventies...the five pound Brown that made the newspaper and surprised everyone. I dreamed, and I believed that if that could be repeated, then of all spots on the Umgeni, this is the one that might do it for us.

“plip” went the Troglodyte. It landed just off the sage bush, exactly where I wanted it to go. No snag in the weeds behind me. This time I didn’t hang it in the bush, and it landed as near as I could have hoped to the overhanging limb.

Belief. Expectation. Nothing.

I repeated the performance a few yards higher at the overhanging ntchishi.

Belief. Expectation. Nothing.

And then I saw a dimple opposite the shrub above. The dimple was like that of a falling seed or stick, but there was no wind, and it was too far beyond the overhanging bough to have fallen from it. I looked more carefully into the blackness of the water. I had the mid afternoon sun in my face, as I looked westward to where a ghost may be. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom into which I peered, I began to make out the streambed in the slow water. There were more pale forms below the surface. Rocks on the streambed. The water was not as deep here as that which I had just fished, so I did not cast. My fly would likely hang up on the streambed. I only observed. Then I saw it. It was unmistakable. It was a fish. As I adjusted my perception of what I was looking for, it became clear. I could now see and track the fish. It was about twelve inches long. A pretty Brown.

Not the five pounder, but that moment of discovery held no space for disappointment.

I watched it finning in the current. It was feeding actively, moving this way and that, and I would see its white mouth open and it ingest food coming slowly down to it in the pedestrian-speed current. A wary Trout, finning shallow in slick meadow water like this would ever be easy.

I moved forward to within casting distance, but with the weeds reaching my nose, I was comfortably concealed. Next I dropped my rod and photographed the fish. This is something of a standard procedure. A fish spotted in the difficult conditions of a midlands stream is not to be passed up. Our sometimes slightly coloured water, the relatively low fish population, the shading of much of the water, and the cautious nature of the dappled Browns themselves, make an observed fish a rarity in this neck of the woods. A rarity that should be observed, photographed and revealed in before one executes a cast.

With some photos of the feeding fish safely captured, I commenced a change of terminal tackle. The indicator came off, and a small unweighted nymph went on. The fish was barely breaking the surface, but was holding shallow, and would not see something passing beneath it. The splash of a heavier fly also wouldn’t do. My habitual right hand shepherd’s crook presentation, would be perfect here. Mercifully so, as the left hand one is not a sure thing for me. My tippet felt fine. I checked the vegetation behind me. It was consistently shoulder high. “Just throw it into the sky behind you”, I told myself again, and I did

The cast landed a little further left than I had planned, but the fish was leftmost of its circling when the fly landed, and within seconds it spotted my nymph, and finned confidently over to it. Then it turned to follow the nymph down. Its mouth opened slightly, but instinct told me it was a few inches short of my fly. The mouth opened a second time, a little more obviously. The tippet was upstream of the fish, and in an arc that may aid the hook-up, but the fish was still facing me, and that required an agonising delay in reaction. Delay, delay (Belief, expectation) and lift.

I just pricked it, and it was gone in a flash.

The day before a club member had fished Brigadoon, just downstream of where we were. He had had two follows from fish and had remarked "I will be back".

The following day an angler got an eleven inch Brown on the same stretch. Just one.

This is the middle Umgeni. It is the closest thing we have to a spring creek here in KZN. Its source is in a vlei that trickles water into the system year round, but if you want to put a fine point on it, it is still surface water, and the river is rain-fed rather than receiving the cool water that a limestone sponge would give. So it does suffer the vagaries of drought and heat like all our other streams do. The nature of the river however is more akin to a limestoneer than a cascading freestone stream. The path of the river is characterised by an open valley of deep fertile soils and it is farming country. Riffles of babbling water there is, but more often the river slides over solid bedrock, and then flows over a lip into a deep shady pool below. The resident browns are sulky fish, that present when they see fit, and not when you have a movie crew. Vegetation is taller and more rank than streams at higher altitude. While this makes for difficult casting in late summer in particular, it is also responsible for a lot more shade than some other streams can boast. Likewise the Umgeni lacks those boulder strewn sections where white sun baked rock heats the water. It therefore offers us a microclimate suitable to Browns, close enough to town that if you were determined enough you could go up after work to fish the evening rise on a week-day.

The fishing is not for everyone. Firstly, many sections present casting challenges, and even walking the river banks is more strenuous than what one experiences in the berg, where the veld is short and the river shallow. Having said this, after a winter burn, the banks of the Umgeni in September can be an absolute pleasure. In summer, and if the water is up after rain, it is often discoloured. At best, in high summer, it is still a ginger beer tone. Of course the fish move about in these conditions, and streamer fans are fast discovering this secret of the Umgeni... For the rest, and when the flows are down and the water crystal clean, one's flyfishing day is not necessarily one in which you work steadily upstream fishing every pocket. Rather you target a pool, and fish it, before extracting yourself and looking for the next likely spot and planning an attack. If you are after fish numbers, and enjoy picking off Trout at will, as one might expect at Injesuthi for example, then this stream probably isn't for you. Here you will creep about and target a single fish.

A red letter day: one of those rare ones when the Browns are 'on the prod' may see you land say half a dozen fish, a dozen at very most.

But if you enjoy the hunt, and the challenge of difficult Trout. If you are prepared to invest in blank days and lessons deeply etched. If you are one for off-the-beaten-track, different, eclectic and skill nourishing flyfishing; then maybe you would like to fish the Umgeni.

There might be no better way of familiarising yourself with what it has to offer than spending a morning on a guided walk along the middle Umgeni.

On 6<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Andrew Fowler will be guiding interested fishermen, conservationists and their families on a 7.5km walk along the middle Umgeni exploring the fishing, the history of the district, the fauna and flora, and visiting the sites of recent stream restoration efforts. This event is free of charge and open to the general public.

For information on the river walk visit <https://blueribbonumgeni.wordpress.com/> or email [chairman@nffc.co.za](mailto:chairman@nffc.co.za)

That evening, the Natal Fly Fishers Club hosts its prestigious gala dinner and auction in nearby Pietermaritzburg, and from Friday through Sunday of the same week-end, guided fishing will be on offer for dinner ticket holders.

For information on the dinner and fishing visit [www.nffc.co.za](http://www.nffc.co.za) or email [nffcgala@gmail.com](mailto:nffcgala@gmail.com)

## “Opening Day – 1 September 1990”

By Brett Coombes

After a winter of repeated tackle cleaning, fly tying and general pent-up abstinence, fly fishermen, myself included, seldom miss an opening day of the season.

It was the first day of spring and we were to have the privilege of fishing a small stretch of the upper Umgeni River. The old Merc bumped, lurched and scraped its belly down the stony track towards the farm “Knowhere”, with its large house overlooking the bend in the long pool and the downstream flats along the southern bank of the river dotted with grazing sheep. We parked by the side of the track near the top of the hill, briefly admiring the idyllic setting below us, then opted to walk the last few hundred metres to the farmhouse rather than risk doing serious damage to the underside of the car.

After exchanging courtesies with the friendly landowner and fending off three large, overenthusiastic farm dogs, we were at last free to stroll down to the river bank to see what condition the water was in following some early spring rain two days before. The river level had risen and, while slightly off colour, was just clean enough so one could see the fly in the water and just discoloured and turbulent enough to allow fishing from the high banks without being spotted by the wily browns that live in this stretch of river.

I rigged up a five-weight outfit for my girlfriend Jacqui and a three-weight for myself. The leaders were topped with small, bright orange foam strike indicators and the light tippets finished off with a freshly tied “Peacock Woolly Worm” on the five-weight, and the three-weight with my favourite “Wezani” nymph. The Wezani is a somewhat simple, but very effective, olive green and black seal’s fur nymph that Paul de Wet and I had developed and refined on several trips to the forested streams above Weza in southern Natal. The Wezani is best tied well weighted with wine bottle lead, or with plumber’s lead if you don’t drink wine. These flies seem to improve after catching a couple of fish when they become more tattered around the thorax.

Within the first hour or two of the morning’s fishing I caught and released a number of small, feisty browns around half to three-quarters of a pound. They were typical ‘geni browns - beautifully coloured and healthy. The fish were eager and hungry after the long winter but, as usual, tricky and evasive.

Approaching midday, I wandered over to the high bank from which Jacqui had been casting to hear that she had just hooked and lost her first ever brown trout. She appeared to be taking it quite well and wasn’t nearly as distraught as I would have been. I sensed that I would only be getting in her way and that any offers of consolation or tuition would not likely be welcomed, so I continued a short distance downstream and squatted down behind a clump of bush to continue the steady rhythm of casting and drifting the nymph slow and deep along the bank.

The foam strike indicator dipped once more, but this time more decisively, and disappeared into the green depths. I lifted the rod gently and struck hard. A large, brightly speckled brown more than half a metre long flashed its long flanks, writhed and then dived to the bottom of the stream. The soft little rod bucked hard and my road arm trembled as the fish thumped and knocked against the stream bed and then dived headlong into some submerged reeds against the opposite bank. It showed itself on the surface one more time and then sounded again.

Almost half an hour later after a dogged battle interspersed with powerful runs, we beached the grand old fish into a clump of weed about a hundred metres downstream. As I reached down to slip my index finger into its gills, the small fly shot out of its mouth with an audible “ping”. I jumped into the water up to my thighs and, using both arms, scooped the exhausted monster onto the bank. With some sadness, I reluctantly administered the *Coup de Grace*. It was well beyond reviving after the unnecessarily long fight. I had not come prepared for fish this size.

The old cockfish was long and wiry with a large head, a pronounced rounded snout and a hooked jaw. His big, round spots were charcoal-coloured, with some bright red ones surrounded here and there by large silver rosettes. It was stunning. Measuring 57cm and weighing 3lb 15oz., it was my largest brown and by far the biggest stream fish I had ever seen, or had ever hoped to see on any trout water.

Those of you who have fished this stretch of the Umgeni River will probably agree that its landscape and the very long, slow pools around its middle section are quite unlike other classic ‘berg and midlands waterways. Under normal water levels, this section is typically slack or at best slow-flowing and there are no riffles or fast water to impart movement and action to your fly, or to excite the downstream angler. The high banks demand a stealthy, upstream approach and the fish, while fairly plentiful, can at times be a real challenge. A good measure of patience, concentration and sharp reflexes are required as you crane your neck watching your barely moving leader, waiting and begging the strike indicator to stop and dip into the murky depths. And then you pick up the line and repeat the exercise, cast after cast.

Strike indicators are a matter of personal preference. I don’t mind them and in situations like this I like to use a small polypropylene yarn or a stick-on foam indicator at the very top of a short leader, typically 7 to 8 foot long. Just about any small nymph will do the job, but after several trips to this part of the Umgeni I can vouch for a generic Peacock Woolly Worm in sizes 10 and 12 as a confidence-boosting, backup pattern when the water is dirty, and a well weighted Wezani (or similar) nymph in sizes 12, 14 and 16 to cover various depths to structure when the water is on the clean side.

The beautiful early spring day was capped off when Jacqui eventually landed her first Umgeni brown late that afternoon after several frustrating near-misses. Around sunset, we trudged wearily but contented back up the steep hill and turned the car homeward to “sticky troutless, Durban”\* (with sincere apologies to Neville Nuttall).

On the drive home, my thoughts inevitably returned to the day and it was only then that I remembered the 3lb 10oz. fish that Paul de Wet had caught on a nearby stretch of the Umgeni the year before and the apparently much larger fish that our friend Conrad Raab had lost earlier in the 1988 season. While the Umgeni is certainly better known for its browns of half a pound or sometimes up to a pound if you are lucky, 2 pounders are not unheard of and, as we now know, a trophy fish is never out of the question.

This is indeed a special and very different stretch of river and only a small part of a much larger, diverse waterway that demands our time and exploration.

B.J. Coombes

*This article appeared in "The Bobbin" September 2017*

## **Uncovering the Umgeni**

**By Ian Cox**

A good sign of a healthy organisation is its ability to regenerate and build better things on the foundations of its previous successes. The Natal Fly Fishers Club is a very healthy organisation by that measure.

A new team is running the NFFC and if early signs are anything to go by, they are going to do the old team the NFFC membership proud. In fact if you are not already a member I would join and do so quickly before membership becomes a matter of taking one's place on a waiting list. New teams mean new perspectives and initiatives. The NFFC chairman tells me that the NFFC will be concentrating more on rivers than it did in the past. There are sound practical reasons for this. It looks like the four decade love affair that KZN trout anglers have had with still water fishing is beginning to wane. There are many reasons for this but a big one is the degradation of still waters as a result of climate change, pollution and increased water abstraction. Another is that the recent explosion in light tackle technology and fishing techniques have made river fishing a much more exciting affair than it was when we pursued tiddlers with 6 weights. A third is that more and more good river fishing is becoming available. The last of these bears special attention.

River health in South Africa is declining so much so that the quality of water in some areas has got so bad that it cannot even be safely used for irrigation. This has resulted in an increased focus in recent years in trying to redress this trend. Common sense dictates that these activities focus on the catchments first. These catchments just happen to be the places where trout thrive.

Dr Preston from DEA's working for water program insists that trout should be declared invasive because they are alien to these catchments and thus, he believes, destructive of the natural (as in nonhuman) order that he says underpins river health. The truth however is proving very different. It turns out that nature is not a racist and that human beings and our impacts are not all bad.

It turns out that the introduction of trout has been good for KZN's rivers. The sought of environment that sustains trout and the value that come with the presence of trout have encouraged responsible environmental stewardship in these areas. This has resulted in win wins where the general trend of environmental degradation has been reversed because trout fishing has improved. Those whose belief systems put nature on a pedestal and class humans as alien interlopers hate to acknowledge this, but human impacts can be beneficial sustaining earth systems that underpin our health and wellbeing.

The work that NFFC has done and is doing in the Umgeni catchment is a good example of this. Paradoxically a lot of this work has been done in co-operation with Dr Preston's WfW programme. The result has been a significant improvement in recent years in the health of the upper Umgeni catchment and consequently in the trout fishing in the area.

I was privileged to be part of a weekend showcasing this revitalised fishing venue that was arranged by the NFFC. I was originally going to fish on the Sunday with Andrew Sava but my wife who is ever supportive of my fishing said of course you can go but we will be celebrating your son's birthday. So I went on the Saturday instead and what an experience that turned out to be.

I was paired with Craig Ebersohn who lives in Howick and regularly fishes the Umgeni. We were placed on the Knowhere beat which was where we were told the fish are.

And the fish were there and bloody big fish to. I hooked into a monster which had I landed may well have been the biggest fish I have ever caught on a river. Anton Smith who fished the same beat an hour or two later hooked into and lost a fish that he said made him go weak at the knees.

I was fishing a 3 weight rod and a 5x tippet which on reflection was probably on the light side. I would have preferred to be fishing a 5 weight if truth be told. This is most definitely not the place of a Sage 000 or a light bamboo rod.

But the fishing was tough. The water was clear and on the thin side. I would class myself as the novice amongst anglers fishing the river that day and no one managed to catch anything. Sunday proved much more successful. Lee who fished the same beat on the Sunday had an excellent days fishing. Such are the vagaries of fishing!

The Umgeni is a famous brown trout river. It was eulogised around the globe as great fly fishing water over a century ago. People used to come from all over the world to fish it. I could never work out why until Saturday.

The Umgeni is once again showing signs of being a great river. What is more it is accessible being an hour's drive from Kloof. It also has a good eatery in the form of Il Postino nearby that sells craft beer. So if you cannot find solace on the river there are alternatives.

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### **Details of the #BRU initiative:**

The Blue Ribbon Umgeni (#BRU) initiative was the brain child of Andrew Fowler, but has since been adopted by a group of volunteers and concerned flyfishermen, many of whom belong to the Natal Fly Fishers Club (NFFC), which has done a great deal to fly the flag.

The dream has always been to arrange volunteers, plus whatever donations could be mustered, and to steadily work away at all the riverbanks to which fly-fishermen have access, and beyond. The primary objective is to increase flows of cold clean water by removing runaway scrub wattle and gum, and to restore the landscape to one of rolling veld with small stands of forest on the southern slopes, in which erosion is limited.

Fundraising first started in November 2013, when a raffle of a box of donated trout flies was held at an NFFC event in Pietermaritzburg. R1,700 was raised. In early 2014, work parties commenced, and bramble and bugweed were cut and sprayed, and wattles were cut or ring barked. The work started on lower Brigadoon farm, which was relatively clear of problematic alien plants. As successive work parties of just a few volunteers worked their way upstream, areas of heavy wattle infestation were encountered on the upper reaches of Brigadoon Farm, and then on Furth Farm.

It was decided to tackle the problem in a very focused way by limiting the #BRU initiative to an intensive 3 year period, with a defined end in December 2016.

At this point, sizable donations were made to the project by both the NFFC and 3 members in their personal capacities. That money was used to hire a professional tree felling company on several occasions. In addition, the farmer allowed the use of his tractors and a TLB, and a local company lent its TLB to do many days work. Small groups of volunteers continued to accompany the heavy machine work, and DUCT committed their team of river clearing staff in 2016. The work intensified in late 2015 and into 2016, and the top 4 kms of water on the farm Furth and upper Brigadoon were almost entirely cleared, with literally hundreds of tons of wattle felled and dragged from the stream. Bramble was also sprayed.

To finish off the project, no less than 13 fencing stiles were donated and erected to make the river more pleasant to access.

Now, in early 2017, almost all that remains to be done on this particular stretch of river is for the last of the dead bramble and piles of brush from the wattle felling to be burned. Of course work with more finesse can continue thereafter: removal of wattle on some steep slopes or where tractors could not access; re-establishment of indigenous grasses where weeds are now proliferating; removal of wattle from tributaries; erosion control; removal of more log jams from the river; planting of forest trees on the steep southern slopes to augment shrunken forest patches; removal of old wire from the veld; and of course ongoing follow-up work with both bramble and wattle.

Bramble continues to re-seed due to birds eating the fruit on plants in neighbouring areas, and wattle seed is known to germinate an alarming 50 years after it has fallen from a tree to the ground. The challenge will be to persist with the relatively light follow up work every year.....for 50 years! The consequences of failing to do this, is that the river will revert to the state in which it was found in 2013, and the cost of getting it to where it is now will be enormous again.

In early 2017, with the #BRU idea having taken root, and with some publicity in the flyfishing fraternity, various people came forward with offers to help with further fundraising. This is having the effect of triggering what has been dubbed as #BRU2!

With money raised in early 2017, the small team of enthusiasts will have to decide on a way forward. The next area to target will depend on the greatest need, the benefit of some public or club access, the amount of money available, and the willingness of volunteers and landowners to participate.

The success of the initiative so far has been in the non-partisan outlook; the co-operation with other entities working to similar goals in the catchment; the fact that every cent of the money has gone to the work, with absolutely ZERO admin cost; the fact that motivated volunteers have worked alongside paid contractors; and the fact that the fly-fisherman can see very tangible dividends in a very short space of time. These factors will be repeated in future work, to ensure the same success formula that #BRU achieved in its first 3 years.

Ideas on the table currently include:

- Approaching landowners UPSTREAM of the initial work first, then later , Downstream.
- Trying to persuade landowners to partner 50/50 in terms of resources in order to stretch the efforts and money of volunteers a lot further.
- Helping WWF and/or DUCT with any work they are doing, particularly follow-up work
- Performing follow up work on the areas cleared by the NFFC/volunteers
- Promoting and enhancing fly-fishing on the river in order to keep the volunteers and donors interested.
- Looking to create small stream specialist fisheries on tributaries which will raise the status of work contemplated in clearing or maintaining the riparian zone on those too.

And more broadly:

- Fostering river fly-fishing by teaching fly fishers how to achieve success and enjoyment on a river
- Performing work on the Mooi River, the Yarrow, and others
- Publicizing this project in an attempt to encourage fly-fishers to participate in conservation across South Africa.
- Drawing from international enthusiasm, experience and exposure in stream restoration projects to further the longevity of the initiative.

Here follow various articles about the #BRU initiative

***An article on the Umgeni BRU project from "Flyfishing" magazine in early 2016:***

**River of hope**

We live in a world in which even fly-fishermen fall into the trap of consumerism, and in which environmental degradation is an inconvenient by-product of that. Us flyfishermen fall into this trap in two ways. Firstly we all want to own the latest and greatest tackle. Factories that make fishing tackle most probably pollute the globe in some way. But I will grant you, that would be a tenuous argument, and I for one will choose not to venture that way, for fear of being labelled a bunny hugger. Besides, I like great fishing tackle!

The second involves the way in which we get sucked into the "eternal upgrade of the spotless photo album". By this I mean that we hanker after better, more glamorous, and exotic fishing locations. We pursue memories and photos from wonderful fishing moments in magnificent settings. In trying to reach these, we spend pension money, burn air-miles, and perhaps stretch the patience of our spouses. Now don't get me wrong, I too have something of a savings plan (yet to kick off) to achieve several of these fishing trips to exotic locations. Again, I won't argue against this. In fact in a certain light, I consider it a noble pursuit!

My only problem with those exotic trips, is that I believe we should not pursue them at the cost of forgotten fishing spots. Spots that no longer hold our attention, and therefore don't command even a slither of our annual spend. Because I believe that if we all run off after something piscatorially superior, we become part of the reason why a local spot becomes piscatorially inferior. Our common and decidedly "not exotic" local stream needs us to fish it, care for it and keep it in the limelight just a little, to ensure against its demise when it becomes threatened in any way.

Those who know me will know by now, that for me that local stream is my beloved Umgeni River in KZN.

Apart from being one of the three rivers that were first stocked with trout in May of 1890 (the Bushmans and the Mooi being the others), the Umgeni holds an appeal for a few other reasons. Firstly, for those who live in Maritzburg, or Howick or even Durban, you simply don't get a trout stream closer to home. Just a week ago I left home at 3pm to fish the evening rise on the Umgeni, and was back home by 7:30 for supper having had close to 3hrs of fishing. The other thing is that I can do most of the trip on a tar road with just 2km to 8 km of gravel road travel at the end, depending on which stretch I am fishing.

For me personally you can add to that the fact that 3 generations of my family have grown up on the banks of the river, that I have fished it since the 1980's, and that I have had some wonderful days there. I have caught some very good trout, both many years ago, this season, and many times in-between.

So what is the downside?

Well, the Umgeni has been in need of help. The Umgeni is not your pristine babbling mountain brook that makes it onto the cover of magazines. The truth is, it gets dirty more often than any of us would like, and even when it is clean, the water often holds a slightly ginger beer colour. Added to that, much of it is tricky to fish on account of the bankside vegetation. Wattles and brambles in particular are a problem, as are logs lying in the river.

Furthermore this river does not look like the upper Bushmans, or Mooi, which have many rapids and pocket water amongst mountain stones and rocks. The Umgeni is a slower flowing “meadow stream” with a lot less rushing water than many of our trout streams. Some may consider it a lot less attractive than streams like the Lotheni, or the upper Bushmans. But if you watch enough YouTube videos, and read enough articles online and in magazines from around the world you will know that there is a place for the slower, meandering stream, with its gentle currents, and big pools. Sometimes these streams hold monster fish, hidden in impossible places under fallen logs. When you have watched and read enough of that, and you want to put some of that type of fishing into the mix that is your fishing season, then you need look no further than the Umgeni River.

The Umgeni is slightly unusual, and is a high profile river. Unlike nearly every other trout stream in KZN, it does not rise in the Drakensberg proper. It rises on a high plateau between Fort Nottingham and Impendle in a sort of out of the way no-mans-land, amongst commercial farms. From its source it ambles just a few kilometres before plunging down a naturally wooded kloof. Where it exits that kloof, it runs under a public road, and from there on down, for just 17 kms, it is a viable trout stream. That road is a cul-de sac, and is very seldom travelled, since it leads to just 3 farms, which offer no accommodation or river access, and the river only comes into public view again, 17kms later where it runs under the bridge on the Dargle Impendle road, just moments before plunging over the Dargle falls. These falls mark the lower end of the “trout only” water, and the Umgeni as a trout stream exists in that short, and largely hidden stretch between the two road crossings.

There is however 11km of that 17km stretch, that is accessible to the public in a manner, through the Natal Fly Fisher’s Club (NFFC). Club members and their guests therefore get to drive down into this lesser known valley and explore the stream for trout.

What the club members have been experiencing over the last thirty years is a stream in which environmental degradation has crept up insidiously. American brambles have proliferated. Dirty water has become somewhat more common. There is increasing evidence of silt on the otherwise rocky streambed, and one could argue that the low flows at the end of winter are just that much lower than they might have been in the formerly treeless valley. Added to that, there are numerous logjams....more than is desirable or necessary to provide cover for fish.

The dirty water, silt and low flows are symptoms of the worst invader: the black wattle (*Acacia mearnsii*). While it may be only because its name starts with an “A”, the *Acacia mearnsii* is the first one listed in the world’s one hundred most invasive species.

The problems with this sucker are numerous. Firstly, it is just that, a “sucker”, in that its demand for water far exceeds that of the veld grasses that would otherwise line the banks of the river. In addition the wattle is allelopathic, meaning it gives off chemicals that prevent all but its own species from germinating in its immediate vicinity. One therefore finds a great deal of bare earth under wattle trees, and while their roots do hold the bulk of the soil, surface erosion is a problem in stands of wattle trees. That runoff contains not only valuable topsoil, but the fine detritus of the wattle tree itself, which is laden with tannins. Some believe that tannins in high enough concentrations are poisonous to many insect species. Even if you don’t believe that, Jake Alletson tells me that, unlike the relatively nutritious leaves of indigenous “ouhout”, “[wattle] leaves do not decay readily due to those tannins, and so are not available to the bugs”. Insects also rely on a variety of leaf matter falling into the river and feeding the ecosystem, as well as some sunlight. In the cases where wattles choke the banks to the exclusion of other species, this biodiversity is curbed. A simple fly-fisherman’s survey (turning over rocks on the streambed and looking for insects) reveals a

dominance of *heptageniidae* nymphs (those common flat headed guys that crawl around under rocks), and little else.

In patches of river where the banks are made up of veld grasses or even pastures, some great fishing is to be had. We still catch descendants of those lovely Loch Leven browns that were stocked over 130 years ago. But back in the deeply shaded spots, where wattles make casting near impossible, the fish are few and far between, and the fishing day is one of struggle and torment. Fish do of course get caught. Last season an angler remarked “overgrown and difficult, just the way I like it”, and proceeded to report four fish between 10 and 18 inches! But for the most part, catch returns on particular stretches carry comments about the difficulty. The risk with this, is that discouraged fishermen then spread bad news, the Umgeni gets written off in people’s minds, and as a community we cease to care about what happens to it.

But before you give up on the Umgeni, here is some good news. In a world filled with bad news, I am happy to report a shining ray of promise and hope relating to this lovely trout stream. It is difficult to say why things are coming together for the Umgeni catchment. It is perhaps the fact that people are recognising the frailty of this short river, and its importance to KZN’s people and economy. Whatever it is, there is a band of organisations, all working pretty much towards the same goal in the catchment, albeit for slightly differing reasons.

We have the Worldwide Fund For Nature (WWF) working tirelessly and spending hundreds of thousands of Rands, felling or poisoning large tracts of runaway wattles, with the main goal of increasing water flows. Gareth Boothway of WWF is charged with managing contractors, finding solutions, and negotiating stewardship agreements with landowners. A few weeks ago he told me about plans to release a biological agent, an insect, which renders wattle seed useless. We have Penny Rees of the Duzi Umgeni Conservation Trust (DUCT) who has walked the Umgeni and just about all its tributaries from source to sea, and has raised great awareness of what needs to be done through her excellent blog ( “River Walks” found at <https://umngeniriverwalk.wordpress.com/>). We have the Dargle Conservancy launching a project to clear the Dargle stream, and introduce the concept of custodianship to riparian landowners. And then added to the end of that we have the Natal Fly Fishers Club (NFFC) wanting wattles out for the good of the fishery. Suddenly we have groundswell, and we have progress.

This is not about bumper stickers and raffles. This wave of conservation effort is real. When you cross the Dargle stream, you can see it has been beautifully cleared. When you cross the Furth Stream higher up, you see the same. As you drive up the valley you see wattles in the road reserve felled and stacked. And if you were to venture into the hidden valleys of the Furth, The Poort Stream, and the Umgeni itself, you will find felled trees, piles of trash awaiting burning, and logs laid along contours awaiting the soil holding rescue of planted grass. This is exciting conservation. It is the stuff of real progress and real results.

In case you think that this topic is straying a little far from the important business of fly-fishing, consider this: The WWF has poisoned trees along close to 10km of the southern river bank in the trout zone. The NFFC is coming alongside them to cut and pull trees before they fall into the river, and to fell and remove the trees on the opposite bank as well. Since this all gathered momentum in early 2014, a stretch of lovely trout water about 4 kms long has been opened up to the point that it is a pleasure to fish, from the southern bank at least. Late last season, some hype started to build, and the Umgeni was fished more than it had been in several years prior. Many beautiful browns were caught, and you started to hear about the Umgeni on social media and in the local pub.

The WWF project comes to a close in April 2016. As it draws closer to its end, we are all sensing that we need to catch the wave of enthusiasm, and achieve the maximum between now and then. WWF certainly seem to be finishing strongly, with their work forging ahead at an impressive rate. The NFFC mobilised again this year, dug deep into its pockets, and hired commercial contractors to join in on one of its volunteer days. The farmer added to that with heavy machines, tractors, and labour. The results were impressive. In a single day, dozens of large trees were felled and dragged from the river. Word has spread, and as I write this, we have just had a fourth volunteer day, and again we were offered chain saws, tractors, and everything else we needed. Brambles were sprayed on over a kilometre of river frontage, and some major pools were completely cleared. Other farmers in the valley have enquired when their farms might receive some of this attention, and they have come forward with offers of tractors and labour. The enthusiasm has been infectious, and many members of the NFFC have displayed commitment and passion. Having been part of these days, I can personally attest to the almost palpable camaraderie and drive as the guys get stuck in, dragging logs and cutting branches until their backs ache.

And the rewards? They will be slow. We have to be realistic and realise that the stream's biodiversity will take time to recover, and that while we have tackled about 4 kms, most of that has been on one bank only, and we have the most heavily wooded 2kms still to go. Fortunately there is a stretch beyond that where WWF is busy removing trees completely but we have a great distance of river that is plagued by log jams. These log jams go beyond what you might consider as healthy cover for fish. They are prevalent to the point where they are way more than just a nuisance.

The other consideration is that we cannot rely on volunteers alone, because people have families, commitments, and fishing needs to take care of. The reality is that we will need to start putting more cash towards hired help and machines to get this heavy work done. And even when we are done with that, fishermen will still have to clamber over logs and pick their way through brambles for a few years to come. This type of fishing is not for everyone. The enthusiasm has been tempered by the reality of several blank days on the river by fly-fishermen in recent months.

But with a few other days that were spectacularly good days both last season and this, the river is no longer relegated to the ranks of "second class stream", and a determined band of keen river fishermen have the #BRU hashtag imprinted on their consciousness. The "Blue Ribbon Umgeni" is more than just a hope and a dream. We fully expect that the more work we do, the more the browns will spread out from the previously grassy sections, into the restored sections of stream, and that catches will be less skewed in favour of just a few beats. The Umgeni River as a top class and sought after fly-fishing destination is on the brink of becoming a reality.

### **Want to help restore and preserve the upper Umgeni? Here is how:**

- Attend an NFFC volunteer day on the Umgeni
- SMS the words "DONATE DARGLE to 40580 to donate R20 to the Dargle Conservancy river project
- If you have access to fly-fishing for Trout on the Umgeni, use it, enjoy it, and tell your friends about good catches. A valued river will be a 'cared for river', and there are few enough river fly-fishers that the Umgeni will never be crowded.
- ~~Buy a copy of the limited edition of my book "Stippled Beauties". All the proceeds of this edition are going towards the project.~~ **SOLD OUT**
- Where ever you are fly-fishing, if you see a baby wattle tree on the river bank: KILL IT!
- If you have in mind a more significant contribution, or would like to discuss how you or your company could help, please mail Andrew Fowler on [truttablog@gmail.com](mailto:truttablog@gmail.com) or call 082 57 44 262.

### ***From the Meander Chronicle 2015:***

#### **Wattling about on the Upper Umgeni River**

On Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2015, about 30 volunteers flyfishermen and chainsaw operators came together and embarked on clearing an 8km section of the Upper Umgeni not too far down from the source.

So, what would drive a bunch fly-crazy fisher folk to spend a full day on a lovely Brown Trout River without taking any rod, line, leader, or flies. No, these people had not succumbed to a sudden bout of amnesia. We were on the river for a very important reason: to launch a serious attack on the Wattle Trees growing on the banks of the river. The question is, why do people who are pushed for time do this kind of thing? The answer is quite simple; the people in the Fly-fishing Community are environmentally conscious for many reasons. Firstly because it is the environment which attracts us out there, secondly, it's the right thing to do and thirdly, without sustainable waters, we won't have sustainable fishing for ourselves and the generations to come. The impetus for this exercise came from Andrew Fowler, Vice Chair of the Natal Fly Fishers Club (NFFC) and a long-time lover of the Upper reaches of the Umgeni River.

Volunteers included members and friends of the NFFC, representatives from WWF and Penny Rees from DUCT. The tree felling crew from Don's Tree Fellers did a sterling job in making short work of a large number of well-established wattles. We are grateful to the farmer who provided 3 tractors and a TLB to assist in removing all the felled trees from in and alongside the river – without these we wouldn't have accomplished a fraction of the work. Whilst a lot of work has been done in the Dargle area regarding the eradication of alien species, and wattles in particular-the river banks themselves are still in need of work. Said Fowler "These wattle trees suck up water from the river at an astronomical rate and eradicating them is imperative. Because very little grows under the trees, erosion and silting of the river occurs, which prevents the breeding of insects and fish residing in the water"

The NFFC are committed to clearing this section of alien vegetation in the long term and more of these work parties are planned. The next will be on 17 October 2015 where we'll concentrate mainly on the eradication of the bramble on the banks of the same stretch of river.

### ***Dave Prentice – Natal Fly Fishers Club***

### ***September 2015 feedback to the NFFC***

#### **#BRU.**

The NFFC held its third clean-up day on the Upper Umgeni River on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

Unlike previous clean-up days the club hired in professional tree fellers to join the party of volunteers, and farmer Russell Watson, provided no less than four tractors to assist.

With this considerable man and machine power, a highly successful and satisfying day was had.

Don's tree fellers from Durban were there at 8:00 am and a deafening roar of chainsaws had begun before the first volunteers arrived!

One party of volunteers, together with the tractors, and most of the chainsaws were concentrated on a stretch of river approximately 350 metres long, that was severely choked with large and difficult trees on the southern bank in particular. The contractors worked tirelessly and cleared the entire stretch, with tractors dragging trees away from the river and stacking them in large piles. The volunteers helped with old logjams in the river and trees on the opposite bank. This area is now completely transformed. The river is running freely in open sunshine!

The second party of volunteers, with three chainsaws, ventured a little further up. Their mandate was to fell only trees that would not fall into the river, or if they did, could be removed by hand. This was expanded to include the removal of branches overhanging the river. Looking from afar their success was perhaps less dramatic. What they achieved however, was to open up and improve over a kilometre of river that is now eminently available to fly fishermen, if not completely clear.

This year's first day (the second is to follow on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October), was significant in that there was a widespread publicity campaign around it, aimed at achieving enthusiasm, concern for the river, appreciation of it as a trout fishery, and more volunteers. NFFC members were joined by representatives from DUCT and WWF. A piece was published in the local "Midlands Chronical", the hashtag #BRU (For Blue Ribbon Umgeni) was launched, and great momentum was achieved. Two weeks after the event Andrew Fowler released news of his first book, (Stippled Beauties: Seasons, Landscapes & Trout), and the fact that the proceeds of the collector's edition will be spent on further clean-up days, such as the one held on September 12<sup>th</sup>. In the weeks following the day, several fly-fishermen visited the river, and while some had blank days, others caught lovely trout.

The stretch of river being targeted in these clean-up days runs from the NFFC's Chestnuts beat above where the Dargle/Impendle road crosses the river, up to above Umgeni Poort farm, where the next public road crosses the river. The WWF is working on large stands of trees on several farms, where farmers have signed stewardship agreements. These block are largely away from the river itself, but their work is considerable and water flow benefits are likely to be significant. The NFFC is working on river banks on 4 farms on which it has access to over 11Kms of water, and some farmers are conducting clearing of their own volition. Collectively this means that virtually the entire stretch of river of relevance to flyfishermen (17 Km) is receiving attention. With enough energy and

common will, it is not impossible that this stretch will be transformed between now and April 2016. This is a truly exciting groundswell from several organisations, working together towards a common goal.

We are close to witnessing a Blue Ribbon Umgeni, with better flows, cleaner water, and better access for flyfishermen.

## Is our water in good hands?

Duncan Hay

21 October 2016

Pravin Gordhan recently spoke at an event where the theme was *Active citizens ensuring national resources are used for good*. One of his take home messages was “your money is in good hands”. This got me thinking about another national resource that is arguably more important than money and is increasingly on everyone’s mind – water.

Is our water in good hands? If we are to believe Ivo Vegter, writing in the Daily Maverick, then the answer is clearly no. He describes the problem of water scarcity and apports the blame in this way “.....inadequate infrastructure mismanaged by government.”

What does the evidence tell us? Let’s start with some basics about the uMngeni River Basin that provides water for 6 million people and supports a regional GDP valued at R 462 billion. It covers an area of 4 440 km<sup>2</sup> and has an average annual rainfall of about 1000mm. This means that, theoretically, rainfall provides about 4.44 billion cubic metres of water annually for us to work with. Practically most of this water is not available – it evaporates or is transpired by plants. About 15% or 674 million cubic metres annually ends up flowing down our rivers and streams in the system. The dams on the uMngeni are able to store a little less than 800 million cubic metres of water but they do not constitute our largest water storage facility. The soils of the river basin have the potential to store double that – 1.6 billion cubic metres – which, as an aside, provides a rather compelling argument for soil conservation.

Who are the big water users in the river basin? Umgeni Water processes and supplies about 400 million cubic metres of water annually from the uMngeni system and supplies it on to the three water service authorities. eThekweni and parts of Ugu Municipality use 78% of this, Msunduzi 14,2% and uMgungundlovu 7.8%. Commercial forestry plantations of about 650 000 hectares are estimated to use 64 million cubic metres annually. **Alien invasive wattle trees in the catchment are estimated to consume 7.2 million cubic metres of water over and above what would have been consumed by natural vegetation.** Formal water licensing for irrigation purposes indicates that farmers are entitled to abstract about 58 million cubic metres annually from the rivers, streams and dams. Registered use from boreholes is very low at only 1.5 million cubic metres.

So, the largest users of water are our water service authorities who supply us with water for domestic, commercial and industrial use. How well are they looking after our water and how much is being wasted? Wastage can take a number of forms: it can be direct leaks from pipes or it might be unbilled authorised consumption or it might be illegal consumption and metering inaccuracies. These combined losses are referred to as Non-Revenue Water (NRW). For eThekweni this constitutes 40% of its total and direct leaks account for 30%; for Msunduzi the total is 45% with leaks accounting for 20% and in the uMgungundlovu District the total is 56% of which 25% constitutes leaks. Without going into detail the bottom-line is that we are losing more water and revenue equivalents from failing municipal infrastructure and services than is being used by irrigated agriculture and commercial forestry combined. If we value the water at what it costs the water service authorities – about R 6 per cubic meter – and set the overall loss at 40% then we are wasting R 960 million annually. If we value the water at a municipal sale price of about R 20 per cubic metre we are wasting R 3.2 billion!

Considering eThekweni alone because it is by far the largest water user; if one was to halve the water lost through leaks (from 30% to 15%) this translates into 47 million cubic metres of water that would not need to be purchased; a saving of R 282 million. If one was to halve the lost revenue from illegal connections (from 10% to 5%) that would translate into increased revenue of R 312 million. Together this would give eThekweni more than half a billion rand annually to invest in infrastructure development and maintenance.

Considering the uMngeni River Basin overall, over the past six months we have pumped 64 million cubic metres of water from the upper Mooi through the Mearns and Spring Grove transfer schemes to replenish the drought-hit system. During that same period between 46 and 56 million cubic metres of water leaked out of the pipes. We have built a multi-billion rand dam and transfer scheme largely to compensate for the leaks!

So, water is clearly not in good hands and Ivo Vegter is correct – we have inadequate infrastructure that is being mismanaged by government. But if we go back to Pravin Gordhan's assertion that "our money is in good hands" what he is really saying is that we have a sound fiscal policy. In reality money is in everyone's hands. If we all decide to remove our money from the banks our fiscal policy is meaningless – the system will crash. In the same way as money, the responsibility for managing water is in everyone's hands. If we all open the taps our water policy is meaningless and we will crash.

I do not have the answers to the problems. No single individual and no single organisation has the answers – it requires an integrated response by government, business and civil society. In developing solutions, we should recognise exactly that; that water resource management is everyone's business. Second, we need to be far more transparent about the problems and their possible solutions – not simply building more dams when we should be fixing leaks; third, we need to be sharing information far more broadly so that everyone who wants to can contribute to finding solutions, and finally, we need to invest far more in our green infrastructure so that it can sustain our water yield and protect our built infrastructure.

Duncan Hay is the Executive Director of the Institute of Natural Resources ([www.inr.org.za](http://www.inr.org.za))

### Wattles in the context of South African Trout streams:

Black wattles line the banks of many streams in the KZN and Eastern Cape highlands, on the eastern side of the escarpment. In fact when flying over the landscape, or looking at an orthophoto, you can see where the rivers run, by tracing the snaking ribbon of wattle trees.



#### *The leaves and flowers of a Black Wattle (Acacia mearnsii)*

They seem to favour the moist environs, and don't appear to be a threat in the drier montane places like the Rhodes area. They don't do all that well in the higher Cape Mountains, but are clearly a problem in places like the lower Witte River valley

The problem with these trees in the moist areas, is that they are an *invasive* species, meaning that they are spreading wildly: they are in a runaway expansion mode. Conversely, an oak tree for example, while not indigenous to our country, is not spreading and/or threatening any other species or creating any sort of problem

(And it always puzzles me that some environmentalists put Trout in the same category as wattles, not as Oak trees, despite the fact that they are most definitely NOT in a runaway expansion mode in South Africa. It all seems very illogical, but let's put that topic aside for now)

Back to wattles and their expansion. They don't burn easily (timber farmers use them as a firebreak); their seeds germinate thickly even many years after they have fallen to the ground; they are "allelopathic", meaning that they have a natural defense mechanism, whereby no other species will grow close to them; and partly as a result of that, they tend to create bands of wattle monoculture. They also fall over into rivers, causing an erodable foot wound, and creating log jams that render a stream unfishable. Why is that a problem? Well to quote the Global Invasive Species database: "

"It threatens native habitats by competing with indigenous vegetation, replacing grass communities, reducing native biodiversity and increasing water loss from riparian zones. "

And to quote Matt Wood, editor of life sciences blog :“Insects and microbe decomposers that live in streams depend on a variety of nutritionally diverse leaves that fall into the water as a food sources. “

And, as was explained to me by our own Jake Alletson, the tannin rich leaf matter that they produce is alleged by some to be poisonous to insects, but even if you don't agree with that, it seems to be widely accepted that their leaf matter is preserved by the tannins. It is therefore not available to microbes, and since wattle leaf matter occurs to the exclusion of any other leaf litter in zones of wattle domination, there just isnt any food there.

So under that ribbon of wattles , the biodiversity is most certainly snuffed out.



### ***Wattles lining the Umgeni River***

Now before the scientists take me down for incorrect quoting protocols, biased and cherry picked quotes and the like, let me just say that the above quotes support what I see on our Trout streams.

Under a tunnel of these trees, one sees Heptageniidae nymphs predominating under river stones, above all else. You see fine silt covering rocks. I attribute that to the bare ground beneath the trees, and the fact that banks no longer have dense stands of grass. You see heavily shaded water. And if you speak to old timers, they will tell you that the flow in our rivers is WAY lower than it used to be, especially in dry times, like at the end of winter.

I can tell you that my fishing logs support the assertion that Trout populations are lower on stretches of river where wattles predominate, and are better on the same stream where it flows through pastures, *Ouhout* and natural grasslands.

When you are off flyfishing on a lovely stream and you see a tiny little wattle sapling, do ~~me~~ us all a favour.....KILL IT! Take out your penknife, use your teeth, anything, just kill it while it is tiny please. When wattle trees get bigger, they are so hideously expensive to eradicate that few people have the mettle to even try. And when that happens: Bye bye Trout stream!



***Removing full grown wattles from trout streams is very hard work!***

It is one of those insidious, cancer like things. I believe that we as fly-fishermen need to start doing something about it BEFORE it becomes an obvious problem. Hence my encouragement to anglers to learn to identify black wattle, and to pull them out as you walk the Trout streams and elsewhere.

Here are some Trout streams that I know of, where wattles are in various stages of throttling the life out of everything.

- The Ncibidwane...a tributary of the Bushmans....wattles high up a hidden valley, way up into the world heritage site. Not too bad at all (yet) but they are unknown, unseen, and unchecked.
- The Mooi River below the Reekie Lyn stream: a sprinkling of trees, but I tried editing all the wattles out of my photos from a day's fishing there last year, and it was a bit like my aged uncle asking the barber to cut out all the grey in his hair!



*An angler framed by Wattles on the Mooi River (KZN)*

- Side valleys and the main Bushmans from below Chris Brown's farm, all the way down to Rockmount and below: there are some quite bad patches there.
- The Inzinga above the Lotheni road: a dense stand on a short stretch there.
- The Unkomaas up at Vergelegen: a lot of small saplings. Ezimvelo has clearly done some work, but we should help them.
- The Luzi as it tracks the lower Pitseng pass (quite awful!)

But in general, on the eastern seaboard of the Eastern Cape and KZN, every trout stream is affected. I don't know any in KZN where you will not find at least some wattle saplings.

Streams where there is a problem, but something is being done about it:

- The Mooi at Game Pass (Well done Ezimvelo!)
- The Umgeni (Thank you WWF, NFFC and others)
- The Little Mooi as it comes out of Highmoor...I think it was "Working for Water" who felled these: a fantastic job!



***Game Pass, Mooi River, KZN: the foreground in this picture was once a sea of wattles before Ezimvelo rehabilitated the area.***

**Find out more, or do more:**

If you would like to offer assistance of any kind in the furthering of this feel-good, community based initiative, please phone Andrew Fowler on 082 57 44 262 .

For additional information, visit: <https://blueribbonumgeni.wordpress.com/>

**Noteworthy participant organisations:**

