

## Undiscovered fly streams



The truth is I've never really discovered a fly stream. Well not in the purest sense, meaning you research an area, plan an exploratory visit, find a piece of previously 'unknown' water that is way beyond beautiful and full of wild trout. But I've come pretty close once or twice.

There was the day Ed Herbst and I explored a stream well inland of a village midway between Worcester and Villiersdorp. The village is called Hamanshof just in case you want to go there yourself. It's no more than a store and two houses. The rumour of trout started when a fruit farmer in the area reported seeing brown trout in his irrigation furrows. To cut a long and very painful story short, Ed and I drove up to meet him. He took us into the mountains beyond his fruit orchards to a spot where three streams joined from three separate gorges. There was a weir across the part of the stream he was irrigating from and there was no flow below the wall. According to the farmer the middle stream was short and very steep and the fork coming in from the left usually dried up in summer. So the right fork was the one we needed to explore.

The farmer left us to it and we made slow progress up the stream breaking through thickly-matted alien bush that formed a complete canopy over our heads. There was enough flow to hold fish, the water was clear and cold and deep in places, but the bush was so thick we couldn't get a cast in. Not that we saw a fish. It was just too shady and dark in there.

Around midday we got to a section where a recent fire had swept through leaving a landscape of charred black scrub and burned stalks that wasn't any easier to get through than the bush had been. But by mid-afternoon we'd made it above the burn. Here the landscape suddenly changed. The bush gave way to true fynbos

and the stream took on the look of typical Cape cascade water flowing in semi-open, alien-free countryside. The stream was clear and bright, the sort of water that had *trout* written all over it. We did an hour's careful fishing but caught no browns. To make absolutely sure we weren't missing anything I spent time patiently studying a few good looking runs in case there were actually fish in the stream, just that they weren't on the bite that day or were generally good at hiding. The only fish we found were tiny kurper. The stream was thick with them and the insect life was abundant. I don't think I've ever seen more adult dragonflies alongside riverbanks anywhere and the stream bed was crawling with *Baetis* nymphs. We sat looking up a lovely run pondering what was going on here.

In the end we kind of convinced ourselves that there must be the odd brown trout in the stream. At the same time we decided if there were fish here it wasn't that many, and that catching them wouldn't warrant the long bash through miles of alien vegetation, which made us feel better.

Just before we left I climbed a hill to see how much more river lay upstream of us and from that vantage point I realised we'd come up a massive horseshoe of bushed-in river that we needn't have covered at all. There was something of a path over the hill that had we known about it beforehand would have brought us out right at the best part of the stream in 20 minutes. The truck wasn't a long walk away, but when we got to it we were river-scorched and looked like a pair of firefighters who'd just come down from a bad day fighting a mountain blaze – blackened wading pants torn to shreds, scrapes and bruises all over.

Worse, we hadn't found any trout. Even though we thought there were probably a few in the stream, it's not the sort of thing you can be dead certain about. If we'd actually caught one though, or at least spotted a couple, it would have felt like we'd won a heavily loaded jackpot, because previously unknown, suitably remote, high mountain brown trout streams are, quite frankly, priceless.

We should have gone back to do some more scouting but in the first place getting permission to explore this stream hadn't been easy and we got the impression the farmer wasn't that keen on having people on his farm. And it's a long drive from Cape Town over some rough roads. Look, I'm making excuses, I know, but a

day like we had doesn't leave you with a burning appetite to rush back to a place.



But there is an account of unearthing a little gem that's a far happier story and it goes like this: A while back, Ed and I were staying with Donie and Juan-Marie Naude on Vrederus, their farm between Rhodes and Maclear, when we got the chance to fish an enchanting and largely unknown section of the upper Luzi that flows through a nearby farm belonging to one of Donie's friends. Donie had driven us to the edge of an escarpment right above the river leaving us a simple walk down a steep slope into the riverbed. A young couple, Gerhard and Marli Weldhagen, happened to be staying at Vrederus at the time so we invited them along. This section hadn't been fished in the farmer's memory and the expedition yielded more than we'd hoped for. In fact, the valley was that beautiful and the fishing was that exciting, the Weldhagens returned to Vrederus a few months later to explore this stream a little more. That went well and apparently got them serious about exploring a few more new streams in the area.

Poring over maps at Vrederus one evening, the Weldhagens came across what looked like something that was either puzzling or promising. An official topographic map of the area charted the course of a stream running in a nearby valley. It was just a sinuous blue line that had no name alongside it. Donie knew of the stream but didn't know much about it – like if there were still trout in it and whether people fish it. That got them really excited. So Donie set up things and Gerhard and Marli got to try the valley. Result? They found a pretty stream full of wild trout on a section of water that according to local opinion had likely never been fished.

That's about as good as it gets. What was even better is the stream had some excellent holding water and they took a few decent trout, one of them around sixteen inches if my memory serves me right. I mean this is real pioneering stuff, which when I think about it, is probably half the fun.

The news drew Ed and I like a magnet. In fact, not a month after the Weldhagen's windfall, we were back at Vrederus in early autumn, the sole purpose – to explore this new-found fly stream.

We quizzed Donie about it, came to the conclusion that we wouldn't mind getting closer to the mountains than the Welhagens had, to fish right to the very source of the stream if we could. As luck would have it, Donie happened to be leasing the ground the upper sections of this stream ran through. He said the farm was last occupied many years back, had since remained uninhabited and that on the occasional trip he and his brother, Stefaans, make in there to check on their livestock, the little stream had always looked promising.

We left Vrederus in Donie's 4X4, with fly tackle, cameras and one of Juan-Marie's formidable lunch packs, planning to meet Donie's brother en route, the idea being they'd do a pre-winter stock check while we fished.

We crossed the little stone bridge over the Swith, climbed a distance up the Naude's Nek Pass then turned onto a teeth-rattling side road that half an hour later brought us to the new stream where it flowed under a low bridge. As we approached the crystal-bright water I saw a startled fish fly for cover. Below the bridge the stream seemed to run into something of a gorge, but above the bridge it meandered invitingly off towards the mountains.

'The Weldhagens walked downstream from here for an hour, then fished back up,' Donie said. 'You're welcome to do the same, or if you don't mind a rough ride I'll take you a few miles into the mountains. I can't exactly say no one ever fished up there, but it's unlikely.'

Outside of Siberia, it's not often any flyfisher hears words like that. Besides, the Weldhagens had already proved that the section below the bridge held some good fish, and if the upper reaches hadn't seen a fly line, at least not this side of the last decade or two, that's where we wanted to be. It was the kind of situation that if we'd left the upper stretches untested it would have niggled at us until we did. So we accepted Donie's offer and took a rough ride into the mountains.

Stefaans joined us on the bridge and we began the trip in convoy, Ed joining Stefaans who'd just had a lonely two hour drive. These farmers don't get much chance for company. Most days they're rattling around their farms or in the district alone in their cabs so when the chance comes Ed and I like to share a little news with

them. The road narrowed, then became no more just a rough track. We seemed to bounce and rattle for ages, driving right up into the arms of the Drakensberg, first through gently sloping grassland country, then into landscapes where hillsides were studded with bright green tussock grass reminiscent of the sort of vegetation you see in the higher, colder parts of New Zealand.

We pulled up where the track eventually ran into the river. There was a drift of sorts here, but it looked impassable. Ed and I walked to the stream. It was tiny and transparent, the riverbanks scattered with tatty willows and ouhout trees (*Leucosidea sericea*, to be exact). On the far bank I could make out the ruins of an abandoned farmhouse. I wondered what stories lay behind those falling walls. We drank coffee in a patch of shade, Donie and Stefaans left, and we set up our gear. I thought we'd need to walk on eggs to catch trout in this stream. I was right.

When you tackle little-fished, gin-clear, high-altitude trout streams, you naturally hope the trout in them will be conveniently naïve and co-operative. But these fish were in a stony stream that offered little cover other than in the deeper, bubbly basins. So as we'd expected the fish were wary. They were rainbows that held tentatively and spooked as quick as birds, thin, sylph-like fish that seemed to take on some of the glassy transparency of the water they lived in, mainly only easy to spot when it was too late.

I did spot one quite respectable trout of around twelve inches while I was looking down off a high bank. It was lying directly below me in a sparkling run no wider than a kitchen table. I took a few photographs of the fish while Ed was moving into position to cast. Although it was moderately easy to make out from the bank, it was still just a wavy outline, sort of half in, then half out of sight. I wasn't that surprised when I downloaded the pictures to find I couldn't point it out with any certainty. I guided Ed's cast but he put just an inch of yellow fly line over its head and in this kind of wafer-thin water not unexpectedly it was gone like a leaf on a high wind.

Eventually the trees disappeared, gave way to small, purple-grey brush, rough clumps of emerald-coloured grass, scanty stands of scraggily briar dripping with tiny red berries, plants we sometimes call rosehips. They're part of the rose family apparently

and according to one local farmer, so too is the ouhout. Hard to believe.

Once the river opened up the fish seemed to come to the fly more easily. In fact the stream changed in a few interesting ways. It got slightly wider in places and there was less solid bedrock and more by way of tiny undercuts. The fish were small, quick, ice-cold to the touch. They were heavily spotted and shivered with energy in our hands. They preferred our tinier ant and beetle patterns to any larger, more standard river flies.

I put my thermometer into the water where the trickle of a tiny feeder stream came in. It read a surprisingly cold 10°C right there, but in the main stream the temperature was 12°C. We fished on to where the stream got so narrow if you took just a few steps away from a bank you couldn't see any water at all. In fact, standing a little distance away watching Ed cast, the scene was vaguely surrealistic. It looked as if he was trying to catch trout in a solid patch of purple-grey brush and rosehip bushes.

Eventually the stream divided, each branch too tiny to support fish. We trudged back, cutting across a small hill until we reached the old ruins at the drift. If you had to pick the most remote farmhouse in South Africa, I guess this one would be a top contender. It was a strangely cheerful place though. There were the remnants of what had once been a garden with a nearby fruit orchard, the garden sloping into the stream, the remains of last summer's weavers' nests still bobbing over the water. Noisy birds threaded the tangled trees giving a sense that life was still going on even if the house had stood empty for what looked like the last 100 years.

There was the usual appeal I find in places where the solitude and isolation is this striking, but there was the appeal also of its beautifully-rugged mountain setting. I took a stroll through the yard and through the long grass in the old garden. The roof looked like it wouldn't keep out the rain, but the dressed stone walls were largely intact and seemed solid enough. I imagined restoring it, adding a comfortable north-facing veranda then moving in permanently. There was a certain, indefinable attraction to the notion, but when I couldn't quite figure out what I wanted to escape from, or who I'd have for company living right out here – it certainly wouldn't be my wife, that much I knew – I sort of shelved the idea and settled for

paying the stream the odd visit whenever I was up Donie's way.

We discussed our day back at the truck, helping ourselves to Juan-Marie's ham rolls and coffee. The stream was beautiful and even if the trout in it were small and sparse and tricky to catch, we told Donie that just walking along its banks made the visit worthwhile. It's not the sort of stream where you need to worry if you've got enough backing on your reel and it's maybe not everyone's idea of how a trout stream should be, but Ed and I don't mind our fishing like this. Clearly, further downstream and certainly below the road bridge, the river takes in a few more tributaries, grows in depth and we know the trout get a little bigger.

While we were packing up Donie said there were more unexplored, upland streams just like this one. He said he'd check them for us and report anything worthwhile. We said to expect us back the moment he came up with something interesting. We were ready to leave. We helped load the truck. We'd fished for a few hours and lost ourselves drifting dry flies through shadows and bubbles, watching for the flash of fish in the lips and curls of currents, setting the hook – simple, uncluttered pleasures that seemed to flow through my arteries, as if pumped there by my heart.



For years I fished the Umgeni where it ran through a forest alongside a sawmill in the Dargle valley in KwaZulu-Natal and for years we kept secret the sort of brown trout fishing you'd ordinarily only dream about. It's a medium-sized stream by South African standards, quite clear in autumn and through winter but not much use in high summer when it was often too high to fish comfortably and too murky to be enjoyable. For a year or two it was enough unto itself, as they say, and we spent at least one afternoon a week on it through the late autumn and into early spring.

Then one day taking a back road we discovered a tributary coming in from the south below the mill. It was no wider than a city pavement, just a thin flow of clear water linking a staircase of tiny pools. We tried it and soon enough you couldn't keep us away and if the fish were one or two sizes smaller than those in the main

river, it never bothered us. The stream had a special charm and maybe because it was so much smaller and more fragile than the robust river it flowed into, actually hooking its diminutive, brightly coloured brown trout seemed an act almost of higher deceit, a miracle in miniature as it were and, perhaps in some ways, more marvellous. But as usually happens with serious honey holes the news got out and soon enough the place was fished heavily enough to lose a lot of its trout and the charm of its exclusivity.

At the time in Natal a few really small streams were rumoured to hold trout and we hunted some of them down. There was a creek near Boston, a tributary of the Elands, that I guess was no bigger than a garden path and I'm being dead serious. It was tiny. On the first trip Colin Vary and I made into the place we had a long walk into a valley that seemed threaded with rivulets and swamps. We wouldn't have found the main stream if we hadn't stumbled on it by chance. The bigger pools were the size of a bathtub and the flow between them was barely deep enough to cover your shoes.

We hooked a monster trout in the first pool that leaped clear out of the water onto the bank. When I say monster I mean a rainbow of say two pounds. In a stream this size that's like a trophy from Alaska. And the fishing went on like that all afternoon; one unbelievable sixteen to eighteen inch trout in almost every pool. The fish were strong, definitely naïve, but the magic of the fishing was in the diminutive size of the stream itself. Again we kept it quiet, fishing there once in a while until one year a flood hit the valley. After that we couldn't recognize a thing. Our stream had been wiped out and the valley was a mess of fallen trees and twisted fences and any other kind of debris you can think of.

Then there was the Yarrow. The Yarrow we didn't so much discover as reinvent. There were always brown trout in the Yarrow that nobody seemed to fish for anymore. The story was that it had become so overgrown the trout had died out, which as a hypothesis sounded seriously flawed enough for us to try it. We took an exploratory trip in and found a stream bigger than the tributary on the Elands, but not much bigger. The riverbanks were covered in tall grass and at every likely pool there was somehow a tree or a branch in the way, but we took a few fat ten inch browns that held tight as glue under the banks.

Over the next season or two we got expert at throwing needle-threading casts between the dead branches, or just alongside gnarled roots, or under overhanging tufts of grass. You wanted little if any line in the back cast and only half a rod's length in the forward and if you were lucky, once in a while you didn't hang up. The fish were not that easy unless you put the fly right under the bank, or you happened to find yourself a rare piece of knee-deep, open water where the casting was easier. But I loved being on this stream at the time as much as I liked being on robust, big name rivers, like the Mooi at Glenfern or the Bushman's on Peter Brown's farm, where the fish were bigger and casting was a picnic by comparison.

In a strange way this wasn't the sort of stream we wanted to keep secret. For a start it needed plenty of work because a lot of it was that grown over you just couldn't fish it. Also it belonged to a man who fished himself so I knew his friends would soon enough be up there. In the end we set up a few work parties and did a good job of restoring a big part of the stream. Come winter we used to go up to its headwaters with an electro-shocker to collect fingerling brown trout for our dams. For years the stream stayed good for a trip or two each season, but just the other day speaking to Peter Brigg he told me there isn't any sign that the fish survived the few intervening years of continuous drought.



I just got back from some prospecting here in the Western Cape. On the strength of a tip-off that came to our ears via a pretty circuitous route, my friend Leonard Flemming and I took a day out to travel into a deep rural part of this province to explore a valley. Already you should be reading into this that I'm not going to be saying too much about our destination, other than when I heard it I said, 'A trout stream near where? Never!'

We'd taken a few wrong turns and landed up in the backyard of a farm before we got onto a road that from the scant description we'd been given felt about right. Also there was a surrounding amphitheatre of small mountains that we agreed had the potential to be a catchment. We popped our heads over a few bridges hoping to find enough running water to hold trout but none had enough to

cover the dorsal fin on a three inch rainbow.

Then suddenly there it was and we were saying in chorus, ‘This has to be it!’ From what I’d understood we’d be in some rough country miles from anywhere and permission wouldn’t be a problem. Instead we were standing on a bridge flanked by fruit orchards and old trees. There wasn’t a scrap of natural fynbos in sight, but then neither was there a farmhouse. The stream looked typical of any number of the small streams down here – rocky, swift flowing, clear and inviting.

‘So what do we do now?’ I asked Leonard.

‘Well we can’t be a hundred percent sure we are where we should be,’ he said, scratching his chin, ‘but we are on a lovely piece of river water one way or the other. So why don’t we just drop a fly in and test it.’

I agreed. ‘Testing’ may be a euphemism for poaching to some people, but when you’ve driven a long way, aren’t sure that you are exactly where you should be, but know for sure you are looking at a sweet stretch of river water, the word gets a convenient ring to it.

We parked the truck, pulled on our boots, grabbed rods and went testing. We began by walking downstream where we came to a bright pool. There were three trout holding in it but they were in an impossible position and Leonard couldn’t get a fly over them. But then Lefty Kreh couldn’t have got a fly over them either. In the next run I rose a fish and then landed one. It was a pretty ten inch rainbow. So we decided to carry on testing, naturally only driven by the pure spirit of scientific advancement. I’m glad we did because before too long both of us had taken decent fish, meaning rainbows of up to twelve inches and maybe even bigger.

The fishing was difficult in that just about every likely run had a branch or two hanging over it. It was also clear that the stream never got fished, at least not on a regular basis, or by any bunch of enthusiasts, because enthusiasts wouldn’t let a stream get this overgrown and when a stream does need serious pruning you are always going to spot snapped flies hanging on curls of nylon from high branches. In the few hours we were there we saw none, but we left a few ourselves that wouldn’t be that hard for somebody else to notice. On the more heavily bushed and popular Cape streams, like the Holsloot, you won’t often cover a beat without noticing the odd

fly or two dangling from high branches like Christmas decorations. There were also plenty of old sticks in the riverbed.

We'd missed enough fish on dry flies starting out that we changed to fishing small, lightly-weighted nymphs drifted under a chartreuse poly-yarn indicator, which meant we ended up doing a lot of striking at what turned out to be the submerged vegetation. They call them *stick trout* in some quarters. At times it can look exactly like a subtle take. If the submerged twig bends the indicator slows up just as it would in a take and the strike can seem as alive as a trout for a long-feeling second.

One or two sections along the riverbanks were thick with wild bramble which – you probably know this – is not a plant you ever want to land a fly in, or worse, a few coils of fly line. But apart from these few minor problems the river had great charm. We also had a pretty continuous canopy of branches over our heads so we kept cool despite it being a fire-hot day and cloudless.

We'd begun fishing around ten thirty that morning and by four thirty we were looking for a way back. We climbed through a loose fence and found ourselves on a farm track that led straight back to the truck through a fruit orchard. Even at 5 o'clock in the afternoon the truck was cooking. I did what I always do when the car has been standing unprotected in the sun for a while. I opened all the windows first to let the breeze blow through. We'd had a good day's fishing and we'd discovered a good fly stream that with a little attention and some gardening could just become a gem. It's in a mighty hot part of the world and clearly what saves the trout is the canopy cover shade, so we won't be taking out any of the old oaks or willows. But then I'm getting ahead of myself here because we still don't know who owns the place. We decided that was the next step. We'd need to track down the owner to see if he would allow us occasional access. That much we agreed on. The tricky bit would be explaining just how we'd come to know there were trout in the stream in the first place.



Just the other day I got to hear that a couple of people had done a little exploring of their own up the Hamanshof stream I was telling

you about. Apparently they found that the middle and left forks definitely held no promise and a trip up the right fork again yielded nothing you could describe as brown in colour, linear in shape and covered in spots. So we can rest a little easier now – unless, of course, they're pulling the wool over our eyes.

