Articles By Steven Brooks

On Hot Water – March 2009

A FRESHWATER ARTJCLE

by Steve (Foamy) Brooks

When I returned late last November from a two-month spell overseas, I fully intended to go fishing in the first week back home. It didn't happen and eventually I arrived at Brewitt's top dam on 17 December 08.

Normally, I don't fish for trout after the first 10 days of December until around the middle of March, or later depending on the weather, due to the high water temperatures during that period, but this December I expected that the water would still be cool after all the cold wet weather that had gripped Durban and surrounding areas for months. It was 19 degrees, which for me is a degree too high, but I decided to fish having gone all that way. I had a good day and enjoyed catching some strong fish that fought well. On the way home, I remembered some of the influences that had imposed this annual period of denial.

One major influence was Rob Karssing, when he managed the hatchery at Kamberg and the fishing at Kamberg and Highmoor. In those days, these very popular waters were closed to trout angling from 18 December to 1 March and I remember seeing announcements to this effect in the Leader newsletter from the FFA. I think it was during a talk to an FFA monthly meeting by Rob that the reasons for this were explained.

During the summer the fish suffer severely from heat stress, especially in shallow dams and it doesn't take much more to tip them over the edge. A trout that has been hooked and that has fought long and hard in the summer months is often a virtually dead trout; *they may swim away, but they just don't recover*. Adding to the stress by netting and lifting them out of the water, keeping them out of the water to take photographs and holding them up for video cameras in the disgraceful manner of TV fly fishing programs, this just makes the situation even worse.

So, I hear you asking, what is the point of all this?

If waters are not closed, anglers will fish, end of story. Well, the point is that if you must fish, then don't you owe it to the fish you catch to give them the best chance to survive? Some things are pretty obvious - use barbless hooks and strong tippets and don't even take the fish out of the water, unhook it in the net or for small fish just get hold the fly as the fish comes in *(its fairly easy with a 10lb tippet)* and the fish will soon free itself.

Unless, that is, the fish is completely worn out. In order to play a fish and bring it in quickly, the tackle used must be up to the task.

I first heard the phrase 'balanced tackle' in the UK in the late sixties, when the "Leicester Likely Lads" (i.e. likely to win!) dominated match fishing, led from the front by a great angler, Ivan Marks. They fished for coarse fish, often landing big bream (not a strong fish) on hooks as small as size 26 and 12 oz bottoms (tippets), using rods designed for the purpose. These rods have test curves (the stress to pull the tip until it is at right angles to the butt) of two or three ounces. At the other end of the scale, what is needed to bring in big, strong fish like carp, yellowfish or barbel in snaggy water or weed is a rod with a test curve of around 2 pounds.

Most anglers would guess that they were pulling on the fish with much more than two pounds strain whatever rod they were using; and they would be wrong most of the time. The illusion has something to do with the fact that the rod is actually being used as a flexible lever. I think it is possible to pull more than the test curve, but that entails locking the rod up so that its capacity to absorb lunges by the fish is completely eliminated and then the chance of a break somewhere in the system, rod or line, is significantly increased. Ivan at Kingfisher in Durban showed me his party trick where he wraps 40lb line around his sleeves or his gloves, he then gently tightens and then gives a little jerk. The line breaks like cotton.

However, fly fishermen are not concerned with test curves; they have other things to think about. One is the weight of line that the rod will cast and then the aesthetics of the cast (**but not the length of it**), such as smooth, tight loops. A third is the weight of the flies that will be on the business end during a day's fishing. This results in a situation where increasingly anglers are fishing for big trout in dams using three weight rods and strong tippets and think they are fighting the fish appropriately. If there is a chance of hooking a trout much over 1Kg in high summer, then in order to bring the fish in quickly, we should be looking at six weights.

If I see another magazine article extolling the pleasures to be had by playing big trout or even yellow fish on 3 weight rods on hot summer days I will probably *foam at the mouth* (*hence the foamy middle name*) and turn into something really evil.

Thanks for this article Steve. Ed

MY STERKFONTEIN EXPERIENCE

By Steve Brooks

I had intended for quite a while to have a go at the yellowfish in Sterkfontein dam, but I was overseas when the Durban Fly Tyers made their trip last year. So when friends invited Linda & I to spend a couple of weeks there in February this year, I did not need much persuading. There was a time when I was living in Yorkshire in the North of England that my fishing companion & I, both research students in the Chemistry Department at Leeds University, spent a couple of days a week fishing for a species named *Barbus barbus*, which are known as Barbel, which are cousins of Barbus Nataliensis & some other Yellowfish of S. Africa. So please forgive me if I call them Barbel, because that is what they will always be to me.

We used to fish for these English Barbel in rivers, particularly the Yorkshire Ouse & the Swale, using cubes of luncheon meat, live or dead fish called Stone Loach as bait, fished hard on the bottom. Landing small ones around 1.5kg was no big deal, but there was a point, or rather a weight, of around 3kg where it was difficult to stop them. Some days that should have been memorable often were, but for the wrong reasons, like six bites, no fish landed. We would go in summer on Sunday afternoons after the angling competitions had finished & pick up the dead small fish from the margins & cast them, lip hooked, alongside weed beds & under bushes. Generally, the bites were slow steady pulls, sometimes from another species called Chub & sometimes Barbel.

When I attended the DFT meeting early in 2009, when the good Doctor van Zyl's Beetle was the fly to be tied, I talked to everyone I could find who had made the trip about how one fished for Yellowfish in Sterkfontein. I came away full of tales of sight fishing for rising fish & using floating lines with dry flies. Jay was kind enough to give me some materials that I was missing, especially that gold paint, in return for all of which he got a bottle of wine. I spent three days tying foam beetles in various sizes & colours, foam ants, parachute Adams, hoppers & others. Then I sat back & drew breath. (No doubt you had a bottle of *RED* next to the tying bench).

It was then that the niggling doubts set in. English barbel feed on the bottom. Like Natal yellows, they have mouths on the underside pointing downwards so they can eat anything that swims or crawls on the bottom. What are they doing on the surface? It was then that plan B was developed. Sinking line (sink rate1) with strong leaders & tippets mounted on a #7 wt rod. I got the rig from the internet, recommended for Sterkfontein large-mouth yellowfish. I tied nymphs to match & felt confident that the important avenues were covered.

The day dawned when it was time to go get 'em, but there was a delay for a day, then another & another. After a week, I said to Linda we are going tomorrow & that's it. And so we did. Just before we left I looked on the Internet at the windsurfer's weather forecast. Can you believe it? On a Windsurfers web site they give the most accurate weather forecast for Sterkfontein dam. I asked my daughter, who is a keen diver, if she knew the web site. "*Oh, yeh, Dad that's a cool web site; everyone knows how good their forecasts are.*" Well, it said the weather was going to change that very day from brilliant to terrible. So what happens now? Denial sets in. I am going to be there so the weather will be great. Forget all the September trips we made to Vidal & the wonderful Friday afternoons followed by rain & sand-blasting winds the whole weekend. I was going to Sterkfontein & it would be awesome weather, but I did something I had not done before in all my time in S. Africa - I packed a pair of wellington boots.

We arrived at Qwantani on Wednesday afternoon. The weather was glorious & the dam was just rippled by the breeze when we arrived. Charmaine & Terry, our hosts, had been water skiing for the afternoon & were preparing the food & booze for our evening at the communal braai. It was great. We staggered home late & went to bed. I didn't get my gear ready as I had planned, but it didn't matter because the following morning

we awoke to a heavy storm so I did the preparation & waited for the rain to stop. It did eventually & at the mouth of the harbour I stopped to talk to a couple of gentlemen who would have been at home on Vetch's pier. They were two Afrikaners fishing 6 rods in total; beach casters with worms or lumps of bread as bait soaked in some special muti. They seemed to be chucking it halfway across the dam, which is a long way. They had caught six yellows, which they had imprisoned in a tiny net about the size of the bags that old ladies use for their shopping in Westville. When we introduced ourselves, they had names that I couldn't spell so could even less remember & they kept calling me Steve like they had known me forever & would never forget my name.

I drove the road along the bank to a point where I judged I could walk left or right & be back at the car in double quick time because the clouds looked very angry & ready to start unloading at any minute. I had a cup of coffee, walked along & watched for insects on the water & for the tell-tale rises that would indicate feeding yellows. There weren't any. As for sight fishing, the gusting wind was pulling the water into respectable waves, so I was reminded again of Vetch's pier. After 2 hours of chuck & chance with no fish, I could see the rain coming down like a curtain over the landscape across the dam, so I decided to go for lunch & reconsider my position. I had seen no fish & no rises, so I resolved to start with sinking line plan B for the next session, but the rain started & it didn't stop, so I read a book, watched TV, drank beer & did all the stuff that I could have done had I stayed at home.

By day 3, I was glad I had taken my wellington boots. The whole site was a giant puddle. I wondered why it was necessary to pump water out of the Tugela when there was so much falling out of the sky. We decided to drive to Clarens on Saturday, have lunch & a stroll round the shops. Saturday dawned bright & sunny, still, we would be back early enough for me to fish the evening rise, if there was one. We weren't.

Our hosts are keen squash & tennis players, as well as water skiing, so as soon as the tennis courts looked liked drying, they wanted to go & bash balls, I was expected to join in. Sunday morning, I rose very early & was overjoyed to see some sun, the blue sky & not much wind. I was out & on the bank before you could say *"anyone for tennis?"* & I felt quite confident. I drove to a spot we had passed on the way to Clarens & it looked really good. While I was tackling up I saw the fry, there were lots of them, scatter in the weed, naturally I went to cast to whatever was chasing them. After five bass, I decided to move on to yellows. Again there were few rises to help me; they were all well out & the bank was low so it was difficult to spot fish closer in. Three hours later, I went for breakfast & tennis. The only yellows I had seen were courtesy of the pap gooier's I had met on the first day.

The Windsurfers web site had lived up to its weather-forecasting reputation, the weather was generally poor from mid-morning onwards; apart from that day in Clarens, it just kept on raining. Actually, they were thunder storms. We could see them coming & the rain falling from them was so heavy, it blotted out the landscape. I had realized that fishing between downpours was probably as good as it was going to get. I felt like the Natal Sharks must feel, late in the second half, when the game plan hasn't worked & desperate measures are called for. The beetles & ants I had tied were not working, either because the end of February was the wrong time of year or the weather was too cold. Certainly the copper beetles & the flying green shields come out in November & are gone by Christmas in Hillcrest. It is the food floating on the water that pulls bottom feeding fish up from the depths.

It was the last full day. After breakfast, we played tennis in the morning for about 20 minutes & then were rained off. I had lunch & went to the dam; I had given up on every afternoon because of the thunder storms, but it was a case of now or never. I could see the rain coming, maybe an hour away. I looked at the water & saw a rise, not too far out & not too far away; actually, it was more than a rise; the fish came up out of the water & crashed down like a grass carp, the sort of rise that comes behind your float tube & frightens you to death. Incidentally, I'm told there are no grass carp in Sterkfontein, so it will be very weedy

some day, considering the water clarity. I had two rods with me, one with the sinking line & the other with a floater, so I cast the floater to the area where I had seen the rising fish. The only flies around looked like small sedges in a little cloud by the water, so I had tied on a deer hair sedge. It was too far to see the fly, but after a few seconds the belly flop happened again, where I judged the fly was. I drew 20 cm of line gently back & felt nothing. After another rise, I came to the conclusion that the fish were missing the fly as must happen at times when bottom feeders are taking stuff from the surface. The temptation to leave it there & wait was very strong but I could see the storm coming & I was agonizing that if I kept on doing the same thing, the result would not change. I took off the fly & tied on a big DDD & from that a short length to a green caddis imitation that would fish 15 - 20 cm under the surface. The plan was not to react till the DDD disappeared. No takes ensued & the rain was already spitting so I put the sedge back on below the DDD & again, within seconds, a splashy rise, but the DDD stayed afloat. It occurred to me, a bit late, I know, that the fish could be trying to drown the fly to take it under water & it was too buoyant with the deer hair. I retrieved the fly & smeared it with "Sink It", the next cast told me I had been doing something that I shouldn't do. To get distance I had released the line from my hand on the final forward cast & the loose line had all come up to the rod. The DDD vanished, there was no slack & the rod was pointing at the fish. The 5 Ibs tippet snapped like it was a spider's web.

Five minutes later, a duplicate rig winged its way out & there was another crashing splash, but this time it seemed to have gone for the DDD, which I suppose looks similar to a backwards version of a Goddard's Caddis. (By the way, I see that English fly tying circles are calling the DDD an Adams Irresistible! Bloody cheek!). It's very hard not to react quickly, but I promised myself that next time I would leave it. It began raining big spots & I could see the lightning crashing into the hillside on the far bank. I saw another rise much closer in & only fifteen yards to my right. I crept along the bank, had three more casts & each time something rose, but the DDD stayed afloat & I didn't hook anything.

By then, I was too nervous about the lightning to mess around with the rods, I just threw them in the car and got into the driving seat. Somehow, it didn't seem so bad that I hadn't caught anything, at least I had seen some fish and had some takes. The memories of driving home from the Yorkshire Ouse resurfaced in my mind.....eight bites, no fish.

I am going back in November..... with my beetles.

The Fishes' Window – April 2012

By Dr. Steve Brooks

We are very fortunate nowadays that when we have time to spare and are not fishing or tying flies, we can read about, listen to or watch on TV and Videos others doing it. However, I have to ask, if you have time to spare, why are you not fishing or tying flies? (Or should that be *fly's*? I never know these days how far off the grammatical beaten track that SA English has wandered.) My personal preference is books, although there are some websites that I enjoy. My least favourite is magazines. If I buy a magazine, it is for one, or maybe two, articles, which I read immediately. Then I put the magazine by my bed and tell myself that I will read the rest during the next few days. Months later (or should that be *month's* in SA english? - buggered if I know), it's still there unread. In contrast, there are some books that stand rereading a number of times. This is about a chapter in one of those.

What can a fish see? Maybe you all know this, but I didn't until I read this book. Until then, I had this mental impression of a trout with the sharp end of a cone stuck on its head; something called "the fish's window." That "window" referred to the binocular view (i.e. seen with both eyes at once) that the fish has towards the surface of

the water and beyond. Why is it a cone facing upwards? That has to do with the design of the trout's eyes and where they are positioned in its head.

Imagine you are a trout sitting, or lying, in your dining room. It's like being inside a huge teapot without a lid. Through the hole where the lid should be you can see the sky and birds, the tops of trees and anglers, so that's the "window." It's round or elliptical, going forward quite a way; the angle at the base of the cone is about 97degrees, which means, if you are ten feet deep, this window at the surface is twenty-five feet in diameter. Quite a big cone, in fact, but if you are lying only one foot deep then the window is only two-and-a-half feet in diameter. If an angler throws a fly on the surface eighteen inches to your right or left and if you were to think that the trout may not detect it visually, you would be right for a flowing river and almost right in a still water or a deep slow pool in a river. Just beyond the edges of the window, the undersurface of the water is actually a mirror, but sometimes it's a lousy mirror. It's a mirror because instead of being refracted from outside the water, the light entering the fish's eye from the undersurface of the water has been reflected off that undersurface, so you are lying in a hall of mirrors where you can see images behind you and in front of you. (The trout can see almost all around in monocular vision, if it retracts its eye lenses.) When an angler throws in a sinking flash-back nymph, you can see the flash in the reflection like a lady can see the front *and the back* of her hair brush when the brush is in front of her. That's how flash works; otherwise a fish below the fly, which is where they often are, would never see the flash.

So when is it a lousy mirror? Well, a good mirror has a perfectly smooth surface and is flat so the reflected light rays all bounce off the mirror in the same order that they hit it to produce a faithful, sharp mirror image. But this aquatic mirror is not always flat or smooth; ripple on the surface will mess up the reflections and make them wave around, added to which the reflection of the bottom of the river or dam is going to be dimmer at increasing depth. In this world of aquatic checks and balances, things are complicated again by the fact that the trout's acuity (clearness of vision) is not great. We humans can attain 20/20 vision or close to it; trout have around 20/200 vision. That means humans can see an object at 200 inches as distinctly as a trout can see it at 20 inches. The trout has a better tolerance of light levels than humans or, more importantly, better eyesight than most other things that swim, so dawn and dusk should be a big advantage to the trout, particularly in still waters. It's interesting to note, however, that while the dawn and evening rises give the impression that at those times trout seem to prefer attacking silhouettes seen in the window against the sky, the mirror may be dim but it is very useful in the hunt for food during hours of daylight, when fish see food items reflected in the mirror and the window is full of the bright sun.

Now, I come back to the issue of a trout's lying one foot deep and visually detecting a fly that lands on the surface outside the window. Eighteen inches to one side I said, when the trout's window is only thirty inches across, this is 15 inches each side. How does it do that? The answer revolves around the mirror's being flexible and the object's (in this case a fly or a terrestrial) sitting in the surface film and distorting the mirror producing visual signals that the trout can recognise. The body, the legs and the feet create blobs of bright light in the mirror in a pattern that indicates food, so anglers' flies that don't have a good body shape or legs that poke into and maybe through the mirror are not doing the full job of fooling the fish. If the water surface is broken, for instance in a river, the light pattern of the fly is lost in myriad flashes of light.

There is still a lot more to say; too much, in fact, to say here (the effects of colours, for example), but one important thing must be said. The edge of the window is close to the point where the light rays that enter the window at an angle of ten degrees or less are compressed together, so images seen in the water will be distorted. This is the area where the trout is most likely to make a mistake. Images will be most clearly seen if light rays from them enter the window above the ten-degree angle, in which case an angler six feet tall is not going to be seen at all by a fish if he is 30 feet or more away from the fish. Closer than that, his head and, closer still, his shoulders will be poking over the rim of the window and clearly visible to the fish, maybe even magnified by the distortion at the edge. Similarly, the fly rod may look as thick as a telegraph pole. Two years ago, I thought I could be a decent river fisherman, who

wrote numbers like ten and fourteen on catch returns on rivers. I was fishing with a cheap Dean seven footer, but I succumbed to marketing chat and bought better, longer rods. Now I look the part, but I don't catch much. Nine or ten feet of telegraph pole are waving over my head and maybe the fish are waving me bye bye, because their teapot doesn't have a lid on it. All right, that's a very simplistic view, but otherwise I have only myself to blame.

The other side to the story is that the trout actually has a whole battery of techniques to pinpoint food and is capable of using them very well. I was fishing Balbarton dam up in The Karkloof. The dam has a deep channel that runs close to one bank right to the dam wall. The rest of the dam is shallow and weeded. After paddling up and down close to the channel and casting into it, I retired to the bank near the dam wall for coffee and sandwiches and sat watching the minnows by a small weed bed being klapped. The minnows would come out to play and the trout would cruise up the channel like killer whales and chomp anything they could catch. Eventually I noticed that periodically there was a hefty swirl under a little bush by the nearby dam wall. Something was eating something. I crept around the dam wall and flicked out a DDD onto the water under the bush. There was literally a wall on the dam wall, so I had that and the bush to hide behind. What happened then was beyond belief. Two trout came cruising up the channel; I could clearly see them thirty feet away in the clear water, close to the surface. Straight past the minnows they came, past my wife and me and straight to my fly. They came to the surface looked at the fly, turned around and swam back again. A bit likes the dance on Saturday night when I was a teenager. Those fish were at least ten yards away when that fly hit the water and they came straight to it. Maybe every time that anything drops on the water the trout know. They decide whether it's worth a look; mostly they decide not to bother.

The man who wrote the book is John Goddard. I have personally contributed financially to his gaining fishing knowledge and experience, to the point where Lefty Krey said of him,

"Without doubt, John Goddard is the best trout fisherman with whom I have spent time on the water...John is the best.""John Goddard is one of the best all round fly fishermen who has ever lived."

His father was Frank Goddard of EFGEECO (F Goddard & Co) UK fishing tackle and accessories manufacturers, from whom I still have some items. Through the firm, he had the opportunity to fish with and befriend a whole long list of angling greats and in time became better than almost all of them. I was interested to know who John Goddard thought was the greatest. Richard Walker appears to be the answer to that, but that's another story.

The book is "Trout Fishing Techniques," illustrated by Charles Jardine and published by the Lyons Press. 1996.