

Back to school

By Ian Cox



I took a couple of days off earlier this month and met up with Martin Davies at Loch Lochy. It involved 17 hour round trip for two days fishing but if the truth be told, I really like fishing in the Eastern Cape. It is a world, to paraphrase Norman Maclean, with dew still on it, more untouched by wonder and possibility than I have known. It is a fishing destination where the long drive to get there builds one anticipation of delights to come and the drive home gives you time to savour the magic that is ones memories of the place.

So I guess I like fishing in the Eastern Cape a lot and I especially like fishing at Loch Lochy. Perhaps it is because I have now fished there three times and am getting to know the place. Perhaps it is because it reminds me of the KZN Midlands of my youth before Joburg got hold of the place and Michaelhouse was a school rather than a branding opportunity. It is certainly because Lochart and Jenny Wylie are such delightful hosts. And Martin is a delight to fish with. Easy going, joyful and enthusiastic, not to mention also being knowledgeable and incurably tardy.

This trip was no different. "Be sure to leave early, Ian", he said. "I want to make the afternoon rise." So I was on the road at 5am. I phoned him from Queenstown which is about one and a half hours away from Loch Lochy and was assured he was just leaving. "See you on the dam he said".



caught the evening rise but precious little else. But this was not entirely unexpected. You see I had arrived with my new toy. A trolling motor that fits on a float tube. I was keen to try it out. That took a bit of getting used to especially the business of juggling the motor its tendency to pull away from you with the fish finder and of course the business of fishing.

It took me a couple of hours to get it all together so it was about the time the sun went down that I had it all squared away ready to seize the next day.

Surprisingly or, if you know Martin well, not surprisingly, no Martin. I had left my phone in the car deciding wisely that there is only so much in the way of electronic gadgetry that a man can be expected to deal with simultaneously. I was relieved to learn that Martin had called but somewhat surprised to find that he was in Queenstown. He would arrive in an hour and a half. Bit odd I thought. Queenstown is a off route if one is travelling from Grahamstown.

But the Welsh are with the fairies (or is it trolls?) most of the time so off I went to the Wylies to catch up and enjoy a wee dram or too. An hour later I phoned to see how Martin was getting along to find he was still in Queenstown. He had got lost or so he said but I was to start cooking supper because he would not be very long.

Two hours later still no Martin. Now remember it only takes just over two hours to drive from Grahamstown to Loch Lochy so where really was Martin? That is something I never got to find out. But arrive Martin did and a fine time was had by all.

Martin also does not do early starts. His students (for those who may not know, Martin is an Ichthyologist) had written in his fishing day book that spawning at 10am does not mean that. It means sometime later that day. But the weather is chilly in those parts so a late start seemed like a good idea.

Martin's eyes widened when we got to the dam and I started rigging up my float tube. He suggested "leave the float tube alone Ian and fish the shallows". I would have none of it. A bit of a breeze had got up and I was keen to show him what the new motorised Ian Cox could do. So off I went.

The fishing was thin but on balance it seemed that I had the better of it. By evening I had covered most of the dam and had one 1.2 kg fish to show for my troubles. Martin who by now was fishing the shallows at the dam outlet had nothing to show for his troubles.

The sun went down and the need for whiskey began to preoccupy my mind but Martin was still fishing. So pulled on a pair of boots and wandered across to see what the holdup was. Martin was by then into his fourth fish. "Hell Ian, they are going crazy" he said. I replied "there is a fish rising about two meters to your left Martin". He flopped a fly two metres left and a second later he was into fish number five.

Now Martin does not do catch and release in the ordinary sense. For him catch and release is catch and release eventually after he has studied his catch and divested them of their eggs and spawn. This involves tying the fish to a log string which is pinned down thus enabling fish to swim around but not get away.

This takes time so while Martin was playing at being a scientist I was given his rod and told to give it a go. A couple of casts later I was also into a trout that had risen pretty much at my feet. Sadly, however that was the end of it so back to the farmhouse and whiskey we went.



I must confess to being somewhat weary after what was a long day but not Martin. He was fired up. “Man” he said, “tomorrow is going to be good. We must get to the dam early. “

“Yeah, Yeah”, I thought. “That will be the day.” I was somewhat startled to be roused at sparrows the next day and chivvied off to the dam without the benefit of coffee or breakfast. Martin rushed off to the shallows again and I headed to the weed beds at the top of the dam.

The trolling motor makes that journey impressively easy. It was a matter of moments and there I was dropping flies into holes in the weeds with the fish finder going berserk. The fish finder did not lie. I quickly hooked into a fish which just as quickly broke me in the weeds. A hook up with a smaller fish by just as quickly lost that one as well.

Disheartened I left the weeds for clearer water.

Martin was in the meantime making a pig of himself. He was four fish up and ready he told me to do some breakfast. I was not so keen. Jimmy Renton and Hylton Lewis had driven up from East London and also were fishing from float tubes. I was interested to see if they would fare any better. An hour later and no fish other than the ones that Martin was pulling out with monotonous regularity and it really was time for breakfast.

So what were you fishing Martin, I asked on the drive back to the farmhouse. Hobson’s snail and the version seven of a secret Mrs Simpson variation we are working on he replied. “And” I asked? About 50/50 he replied”

Breakfast was soothing so much so that Martin declared that he was off to have a nap. I did not complain as I really needed to tie up a few of Hobson’s snails. So I did and by the time Martin awoke I had a handful of the little beggars ready to help me redress the score.

“What do you think”, I asked Martin. “Hmm” he replied. “The tail is not barred enough and the collar should be orange and the body dark olive ice dub”. I had tied the body green and the collar dark olive. “Not to worry”, I thought and I quickly retrofitted an orange collar.

Back to the dam we went and back Martin went to his little glory spot and back I went into my float tube thinking that the Hobson’s snail would make all the difference. It did not but Martin was still culling fish in his spot in the shallows. So defeated, I joined him.

“The trick is to stay low”, he said and “cast to sighted fish as they swim onto the shallows. When you do it is a case of a cast a fish”, he said hooking into another one. Easy to say when you are descendant from welsh coal miners and thus about 4 feet tall. It’s a bit harder when you are the strapping descendant of Scottish folks who for generations have regarded quick trips across the border for additional grub as a fine way to get takeaways.

But nonetheless I tried by best to reduce my profile and cast just as he did to sighted fish as they swam onto the shallows.

It was unnerving to see fish race past my beautifully presented offerings only to gobble up Martin’s fly lying only a metre or so away. It became disheartening when this happened time and time again. And it was not only me who was platzing it. The boys were also coming up equally blank.

Abject failure needs its scapegoats and since we all could not be rotten fishermen, nor Martin some kind of fishing genius, it had to be in the colours of my snail. There were all wrong. And perhaps I will have to take the trouble to tie a few of Alan Hobson’s secret Mrs Simpsons variations.

So it was that when it was too dark to fish any longer Martin was still catching gazillions of fish and we were still blanking. But all was forgiven. As I said Martin is a fantastic fishing companion and in this case fantastic meant having a bottle of Glenlivet in his car.



The whiskey did not survive!