

**Blanking  
and  
Other mishaps that contribute to the fun  
By Andrew Mather**



**“GETTING SKUNKED IS SOMETHING EVERY FISHERMAN MUST LEARN TO DO WITH SOME GRACE  
BECAUSE IT DOES HAPPEN” John Gierach.**

Blanking or being skunked comes with the territory if you're a fisherman. This happened to me over the last river season- more times than I'd like to admit. When I drag my sorry arse home after a fishing trip my wife Tina routinely asks me how many fish I caught. She inevitably makes a remark about my sanity and the futility of having gone fishing, but I don't see it like that and I'm sure that I'm not alone.

The start of this past river season was particularly difficult although it was heavily influenced by the preceding drought conditions. No, let me stop that!. Can you see what happening here...I'm already making excuses!.

Actually we all start looking for excuses when we cannot connect up to a fish. Favorite reasons for failure include that the barometer was dropping, causing the fish to go off the bite.... or that a cold wind was blowing. Many of you reading this will know your favourite face-saving line, especially those super competitive chaps amongst us.

Perhaps one of the most common reasons offered up when we aren't catching, is that we aren't fishing the right fly. We reason that our failure to catch something is that the fly on the end of the tippet isn't working. So we set about ringing the changes, going through our fly box in the hopes that our fortune might change. Sometimes one does get lucky, but more often than not, it doesn't help much. I've known some flyfishers to fish one pattern the whole day and make a pig of themselves.

When Andrew Savides and I fished a section of the Mooi in the opening weekend of the 2016/17 river season, we blanked spectacularly. The day was perfect, just a slight breeze on our backs. We had hiked about an hour or so up the valley and the cool crisp air made the walk pleasant. In mid-summer this would have been very different. The valley was looking beautiful as the early mist started lifting and beams of sunlight started creeping in as the sun crested the ridge line. A herd of Eland came in sight and watched us as we trundled up the path. These magnificent animals, the largest of the antelope family, are gentle giants and roam the whole Drakensberg range. They watched



us, then trotted off to a safer distance, eventually disappearing from sight. The eland have lived here for eons feature prominently in San/bushman paintings throughout this region.



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Eland and bushman painting images courtesy of Peter Brigg.



When Sava and I finally descended to the stream we found it to be clear and low. We took turns fish the riffles and pools, testing every likely spot while offering advice and encouragement to one another.



The freestone streambed was slippery, and several times we almost ended up face-down in the stream. Sava was wearing rubber soled wading boots and I wore felt soles but neither worked particularly well. We were both carrying too much stuff in bulging backpacks, which didn't help. An observer would have seen what appeared to be two drunk oaks staggering around, each waving a stick, occasionally holding on to one another and doing their best to stay upright. Needless to say, with these antics we hadn't seen a fish the whole morning.

Rather despondent, having run through most of our flyboxes, we broke for lunch. We fell into the trap most flyfishers do – we had decided that it must be fly choice that was letting us down. Of course the bright skies, low clear water and the fact that we had staggered up the river sending messages to all the trout that something was headed up towards them didn't enter our heads. We tried to reassure ourselves that our luck was about to improve.

Finding a spot with a view, out came the tablecloth, filter coffee pot and gas burner, complete with Amarula, cream and hot chocolate, snacks and biltong. We sat sunning ourselves admiring the sparkling stream as it flowed down towards us from a steep krantz covered with indigenous forest while the grass whispered around us. We discussed changing our approach as we enjoyed the scenery and the nibbles. Gone was the morning's disappointment; it had been replaced by an appreciation of what a fantastic environment we have in South Africa. Maybe it was an unconscious move to block out our earlier fishing failures.







After lunch we started upstream and we hadn't gone 50m before I slipped and fell completely into the stream, nearly shattering my little streamnet in the process. Sava by this stage was in fits of laughter at my predicament. I bravely dragged myself to my feet, dripping wet and cold. One of my legs was burning from taking the brunt of the fall, but of course I did my best not to show the pain. Big boys don't cry.

I waved Sava on ahead while I limped after him and tried to compose myself. Of course, any sane trout hearing my fall would have swum for cover!.



We continued on up stream until it got quite narrow, by which stage we had virtually given up on catching any fish. At one point we walked along the bank between two nice sized pools where the river had eroded a narrow furrow which we could have jumped across.

We suddenly saw the flash of a decent size fish as it sped upstream. Imagine our dismay – the first fish of the day and we had spooked it. We estimated it was a brown of about 16 inches. We hadn't considered casting into the furrow as the pools looked like the only place we might see fish, but at least we knew for sure there were fish.

At the next pool we fished it carefully with no luck. The same again for the next pool and the pool thereafter. The river had almost stopped flowing here as the hillside had slipped into the stream and what remained was a long gravel bed that would be perfect for spawning fish. But still no sign of fish.

Around the next bend we came across the remains of a dead waterbuck in the stream. The partly decomposed animal smelt so bad we had to exit the stream and forge a path along the far bank. We had been happily drinking straight from the stream all day, oblivious to the decaying corpse just upstream.

Right there and then we decided to call it a day; maybe we were worried we might start vomiting from ingesting the water, I can't recall.

We had at least an hour-and-a-half walk back to the car followed by a two-and-a-half hour drive back to Durban. Walking back we chatted about the day; fortunately the lack of fish hadn't put a damper on the day out. The chance to go exploring under a sunny African sky sharing the camaraderie with a good fishing buddy is enough to remember this as a great day out.

Fast-forward several months; same stream. Andrew Savides and Warren Bradfield fished it – they pigged out. Couldn't do anything wrong. Fish smashed their flies. They lost count at 43. At least they had the decency not to brag too much about it. Guess they had a good day too.

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