

Chilling out while catching bugger all

By Ian Cox



February should have been a great month apart from having to pay tax that is. I had to go to Grahamstown and on the way back wanted to stop in and see David Walker about some trout related stuff. I also had my annual trip to Sterkfontein planned. As I say a happy month should have been on the cards.

The trouble is that we are in the middle of an epic drought so nothing works as it should. That was what I was thinking until I hit the Kraai driving in on the Bastervoorpad road. Man did the river look good. The torrential floods were a thing of the past as was the more obvious consequences of the drought. Even the Bell which is being sucked dry by a couple of farmers who should know better was flowing.

So it was a happy fisherman that arrived at Walkerbouts and sucked down a much needed libation with my mate Dave Walker. And I remained happy, Dave is good company and a wise man until my other good mate from Rhodes pitched up, namely Tony Kietzman.

Tony had a client in tow a Canadian political journalist. I did not know Canada had any political journalists, politics in Canada being boringly honest, well-meaning and well managed. But they do and as nice as he was – and he was delightful- nothing could hide the disappointment of two blank days on the river. It was a case of perfect water- no fish.

Anyway a faint heart never caught any fish so after standing Tony to breakfast at the hotel, (the prospect of bad fishing must be leavened) off we went. But before I regale you with talks of no fish did you know that Madiba was a trout fisherman. It seems that Canadian political journalists know a thing or two. You see he had been reading Long Walk to Freedom and found a bit about a youthful Madiba fishing the place of his birth with bent needle as a hook. Now I am hopefully damn certain that where he fished was trout water so what else could he have been after. Further research is required.

I banged on about Madiba because Francisdale was beautiful but bereft of fish. Yup, neither Tony nor I saw or interested a single fish. So we departed early for a late afternoon party at Tony's place with his partner the artist Gail Machanik and her daughter Keren. This merry and believe you me it got very merry was enlivened by the arrival of Myles and Inge Divett.

Tony had to work the next day guiding a wildflower party so I took off with Myles Andrew Calderwood and old school mate of his from Zimbabwe to try out Ben Laws. We saw fish but caught none at Ben Laws but had a fine old time catching up. You see we were all lawyers so of course we had nothing to talk about.

This blanking thing was getting to me, interesting chit chat aside so I suggested trying the Bell above Tenehead having had some luck there in thin water conditions before. Inge, bless her suggested lunch so we duly stopped off at the Tenehead hotel for the best 50 buck lunch I have eaten in my life.

Things looked up after that. I find that high mountain streams which are relatively un-impacted by the practice of burning grazing lands boast a great number of bogs that protect them in times of drought. The fish which are tiny anyway thus hang about rather than going in search of better water in times of drought. And so it was that we had a good an afternoon fishing as I have had anywhere. I managed 2 – one of 12 inches and one so small that I lost it on the back cast. Miles did 7 but my goodness is he good on small water and Andrew got 1.

Three weeks later and I was on a very empty Sterkfontein. The dam was about 80% full which meant a lot - no all my go to spots were growing grass. I was this reliant on my fishing partners Rob and Pete who fortunately know the dam well. It also meant that my old go to habit of fishing nymphs was probably not going to work as we went in search of cruising fish.



We fished hard for four days and saw a lot of fish. I only caught one. Rob and Pete who are seriously good fly fishers managed three apiece. We each blanked on all but one of the days which gives one an indication of just how tough it was.

I wrote last year that I thought the dam was being hammered by recreational fly anglers and that is still my view. There are many who blame netting by subsistence anglers but I don't share that view. There was no shortage of fish. The trouble is they were

spooking at the fly. One had to fish ridiculously light tippet given the size of your quarry and tiny flies. There has not been any noticeable increase in netting as far as I can see and as I said there were a lot of fish about.

What has changed is there has been a massive increase in recreational fishing pressure. That in the absence of proper research – and there is very little of that these days- must be the go to culprit.