

The Amatolas and the Trout that the Time Forgot

EDWARD TRUTER's lifelong passion leads him back to the Eastern Cape to search for elusive trout

That was three decades ago, but the boy remembers how the swirling mist in the cold, gathering gloom gave up a trout. It was a tiny fish, perfect for a child. It leapt upon a Woolly Worm and danced across the ripple with the wild spirit that trout have. It was his first trout and the start of a new journey.

This took place at Gubu Dam, a sparkling stillwater cupped in the hands of the Amatola Mountain foothills near Stutterheim (an hour's drive from East London). Intrigued by trout ever since, I have chased them far and wide, even travelling to places they call home, like Alaska, but I still go back to Gubu.

It's not that Gubu fishing is easy; it's often challenging, or that there are monsters in its jade depths, but because of the smells in the air and the peace on the wind. It's the kind of place where you can just sit and stare at the water and the mountains and it doesn't feel like you're doing nothing. Come late afternoon

*A little boy stood on
the misty bank,
wishing like mad.
Hoping for a
rainbow trout
that he might show
his Dad*

there is nearly always an evening rise when the trout look to the surface for land bugs that are coming or water bugs that are going.

This is the time when, on foot or in a quiet craft, you can take yourself off to one of the dam's many fingers like Doctor's Creek, Hiker's Hut, The Drift, or Otters to look for risers and have a go. If it comes together, you'll catch some of the feistiest trout of your life, as Gubu's relatively low altitude keeps the

water's oxygen levels high; it's almost like the trout are living in an oxygen tent.

Gubu Dam is at the eastern end of the Amatola's trout water, the western end being at Hogsback, but the real beginning is closer to the middle near Maden Dam. Maden is at the headwaters of the Buffalo River, and a little downstream is the defunct Pirie Hatchery. Pirie was built in 1892 and what it took to transport living trout ova from England to Pirie is a long, incredulous story all on its own about dedication and perseverance. Pirie ultimately provided rainbow and brown trout for seeding the Amatola Mountain streams in the early 1900s.

Some of those earliest stockings were successful and populations of trout still live in a few of the Keiskamma River catchment streams. One cannot but be impressed by the tenacity of these fish to endure. The waters they live in are thin and the area prone to drought, bad road building, floods, hot summers, overgrazed banks, alien plant

MAIN IMAGE: Gubu Dam at dawn by the foothills of the Amatola Mountains.
RIGHT: Amatola streams only have tiny trout, but amid this kind of scenery, size is meaningless.
BELOW: The author fishing a mountain stream for 'forgotten' trout.



infestation and tons of Cold Water Omo, yet they survive and even thrive a century down the line. Higher up, the streams are in a better state and looking for trout, I have been able to follow the flow to where the streams drip from rocks at their sources.

My most memorable trip exploring one of these streams was with two friends, Zak and Borris. I had taken along a hand-drawn map that had been sitting in my to-do file so long that the name of the guy who had kindly scribbled it for me was as faded as my memory of him. Google Earth didn't provide good images of that part of the planet, which helped ensure that our planned walk into the mountains would be a wild goose chase of the purest kind.

Once we'd found a place to park my bakkie next to an old logging road, there was really no knowing what was over the hill until we got there. Zak was worn-in to these blind forays; he knew hardship and disappointment might be all that we found. For Borris it was his first time, which was obvious when I saw him raring to go, wearing a backpack that looked like an elephant's intestine and carrying a bulging Checkers packet in each hand.

We set off along a cattle path and, once around the corner, were amid beautiful mountain scenery, with high hopes, invigorated by fresh aerosols blended from highland herbs, dank bracken, fynbos flowers, forest thicket and delicate, chunky groundcover. After less than an hour's walk, the trail angled into



ABOVE: Camping on a plateau high in the Amatola Mountains. The author and his fishing buddy, Zak, tacking up to tempt the trout that have lived in the surrounding streams for more than a century. RIGHT: "Pick me, pick me!" Choosing the most eager fly is always a bit of a deliberation.

a steep drop towards a series of pools connected by waterfalls. This was exhibit A on my map, and marked as having trout. We spread out and began probing the pools.

These kind of places typically have good numbers of naïve fish, if they have any at all, and I was disappointed when the first few casts didn't attract any takers. We moved upstream and kept trying where the flow faded into a wetland. We had lunch on a streamside meadow and concluded that exhibit A lacked all evidence of trout and that we should look to exhibit B. Exhibit B was located on a stream on the other side of an overshadowing mountain, which did not appear on the sketchy map.

At this point, Borris was having fun. He was soaking up the sunshine, enjoying his six-course lunch, including a selection of fruit and fresh produce from his Checkers packet that would have turned any Fruit & Veg store manager green. His backpack was also not weighing him down. This impressed me, especially when he showed me that his idea of a hiking torch was one of those six D-cell spotlights that Grandpa keeps under his bed to scare the porcupines out of the potato patch from his bedroom window.

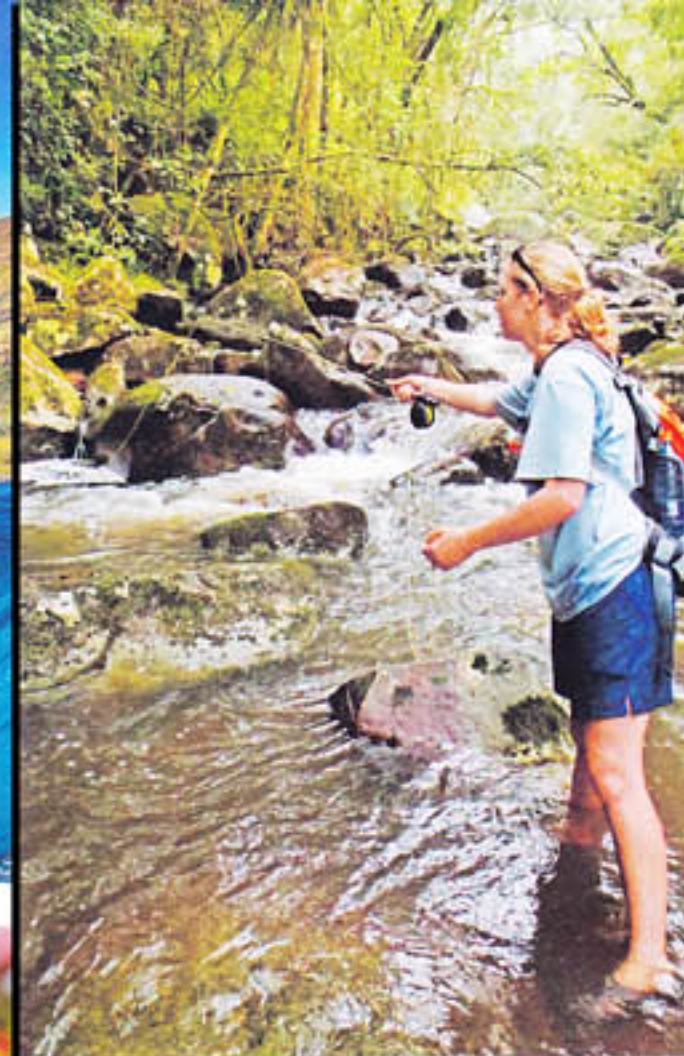
With everyone so full of beans, I figured the quickest way to the other side of the mountain was straight up and over and off we went.



There was no trail so I picked the path of least resistance. Stands of fire-hardened bushes, tangled brambles, and areas of matted tussock grass made for slow going, while the gradient and altitude worked our lungs.

I noticed that Borris had become less chatty and more and more red in the face. It wasn't long before the bushes had shredded his Checkers packet and he'd abandoned the contents. The local bushpigs, finding that lot, probably thought Nasa's fresh produce delivery module had crashed there. But I knew from the weight of Borris's pack that it held more than just his hiking torch and that he still had enough food in tins to last being snowed in until the end of global warming.

When Zak and I crested the mountain, Borris was gone. We lounged around on dolerite boulders until he eventually pitched up and then we ragged him about being 10 years younger, 20kg lighter and even so, a laggard, which made his face redder. It was clear that he was wishing he was back on the couch cradling an icy Coke, crispy chips, and watching



Saturday afternoon rugby between WhatsApp binges. But I knew the steep learning curve was good for him, as would be the new stories for his friends.

A rolling plateau stretched out beyond the rocky ridge where we'd waited, but there was no sign of a stream. The map dictated that we keep heading north to cross the stream and, tramping across hill, dale and muddy swale we reached a lawn of hard ground and short grass. Another mountain loomed beyond that, but twixt it and us, no stream. Standing around a little puzzled, I suddenly caught

LEFT: Fisheries research student, Gerry Taylor, tempting trout in a forest-fairy wonderland. Amatola streams often flow beneath an indigenous forest canopy, which adds greatly to their allure.

MIDDLE: A Gubu Dam trout, next stop the sushi table. BOTTOM: Justin "Zak" Thackeray tests the waters in a plunge pool high in the Amatola Mountains. This pool was full of small trout eager to rise to a dry fly.



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a hint of the sound of running water in a turn of the breeze and walked towards the gurgling. The sound was seemingly coming out of the air. Only when I was a fly rod length from the bubbling brook did I see it hidden in the grass. Downstream it opened into a tiny pool the size of half a bathroom.

I crouched low, unclipped the fly from its keeper and sent a wafting cast over the grass to land the fly where the stream emptied into the pool. I couldn't see the fly, but could tell from the line that it was weaving in the current. I wondered at the late-night stories and map that had brought us this far and what the chances were that a fish might live there.

The odds seemed small, but habitual chasers of wild geese are always overdosed on optimism, so I more expected a trout than didn't. As I lifted the fly I thought I felt something nip at it, but couldn't be sure.

I flicked it back in and craned to watch as it skated across the flow. A tiny trout materialised to dart after it and I shouted out with joy.

That a little fish in a forgotten trickle could bring happiness to three men on top of a mountain is perhaps hard to understand, but that fish symbolised the worth that is sometimes at the end of a rainbow. It also connected us to history and those souls who had overcome unfathomable difficulties to bring trout from another part of the world, and carry them in a bucket on a horse, so that a hundred years later, we might go into the hills and be connected to a fish whose spirit buoyed us all. ■

Map reference F6, see inside back cover

USEFUL INFO

Fishing at Gubu Dam is administered by the Stutterheim Trout Angling Club. Members have free access to self-catering accommodation and fishing. Contact stac.trout@gmail.com for more information. Non-member visitors can stay at the Gubu Dam campsite or in log cabins at Sandilo's Rest (www.sandilesrest.co.za) and purchase a fishing ticket from the Gubu Dam bailliff. (GPS: 32°36'49.84"S / 27°16'33.15"E / 043 683 2687) See also www.amatoliaflyfishing.co.za for accommodation options and wild-trout fishing in the streams or Mnyameni Dam west of Gubu Dam.

