



Reliving the *gold rush*

When a fellow fly angler with a glazed and faraway look in his eye whispered into my ear the tale of a fly-fishing destination where one can wade the shallows on foot, stalking and sight-casting to visible fish in ankle-deep, gin-clear water with virtually no one else around, my saltwater fly-fishing mind drifted instinctively to the legendary bonefish that frequent the glistening white sand flats of the idyllic Seychelles islands.

Article and photographs by Graeme Field





Seven species of yellowfish are found throughout South Africa's river systems

with a six weight rod, floating lines and a host of tiny terrestrial and aquatic insect imitations I was ready to tackle whatever Sterkfontein threw at me.

The dam is situated just outside Harrismith in the eastern Free State in the very upper reaches of the Vaal Dam catchment on the Nuwejaarspruit River, a few kilometres from the edge of the Drakensberg Escarpment. It is surrounded by a nature conservation area, and is characterised by rugged mountains, endless expanse and a lot of water. Besides the excellent yellowfish fishery, the area is also a popular spot for biking, hiking and game viewing. Oribi, reedbuck and rhebuck are all found in the reserve, grazing on mountain slopes decorated with wild myrtle, redwood, proteas, silver sugarbush and the scarce tree fern. Yellowwood, wild peach, koko tree, silky bark, black bark and bush guarri flourish in the sheltered kloofs, and birds such as bearded and Cape vultures, black eagles, martial



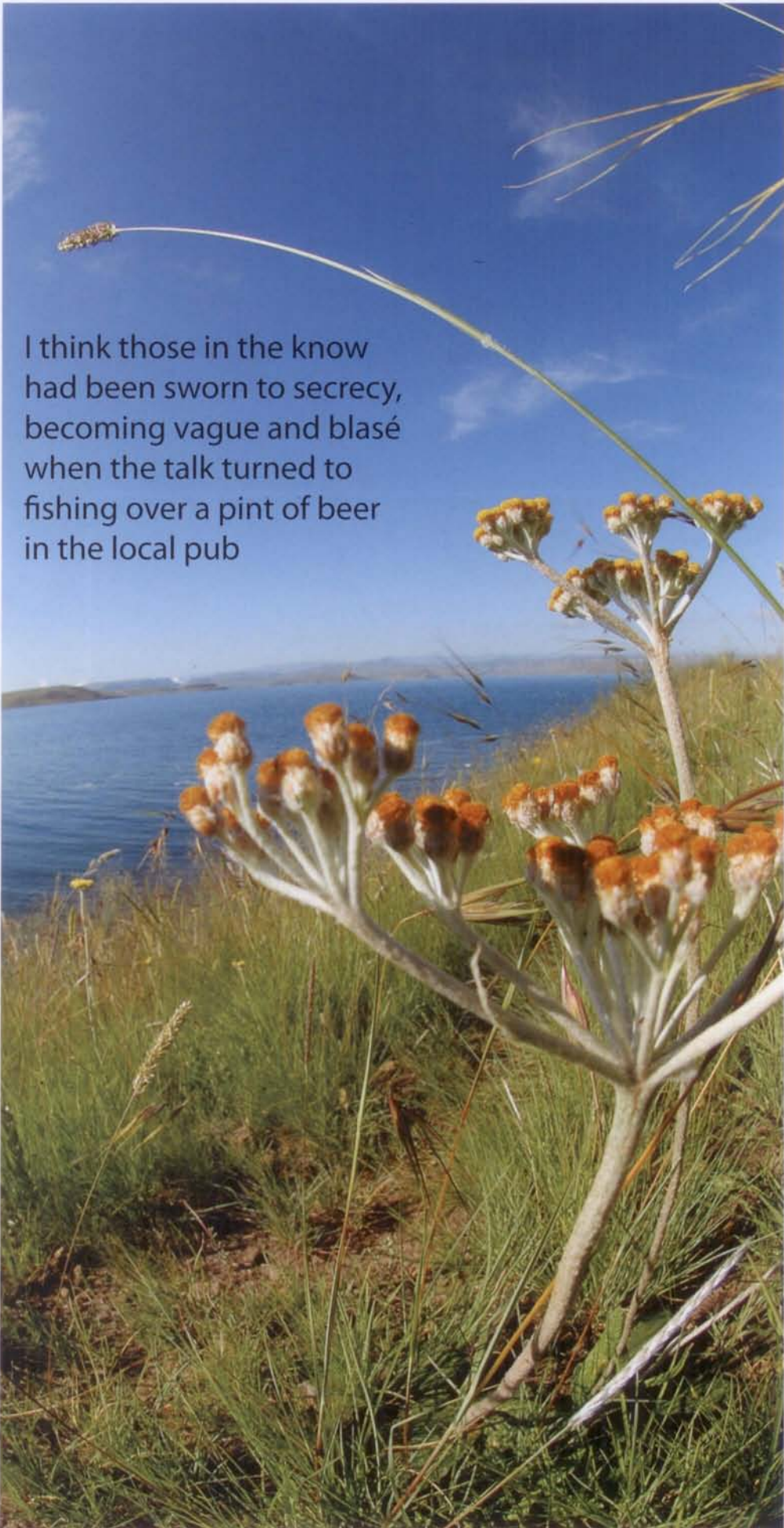
eagles and secretary birds all call this area home.

The first glimpse of the dam is quite something. It's a seriously large expanse of water, but the colours are what really take your breath away. Rugged and rolling green hills, impossibly blue skies, snow white cumulus clouds and deep blue-green waters all give one the feeling of standing inside a massive real-life pastel painting.

While starkly beautiful on a sunny windless day, Sterkfontein is notorious for its rapidly changing weather (the area is the epitome of four seasons in one day) and one should be prepared for every eventuality. While it is generally regarded as being quite windy and therefore popular with sailing enthusiasts, the sheer size of the dam and the fact that there are hundreds of bays and creeks tucked behind every headland means that anglers are almost always able to find their own little patch of windless tranquillity.

My first impressions of the dam and the fishing were quite mind-blowing – I couldn't believe what a fly-fishers paradise this was. The water is crystal clear and fish are clearly visible below the surface as they cruise the edges searching for food. Smallmouth yellows, largemouth yellows, carp, barbel and bass are all available in the dam, and most will be visible to the patient angler. Sharp rocky shelves are interspersed with shallow gravel beds, reeds and mud flats, and fish can be found in a variety of habitats. The geography of the dam is incredibly diverse, and the fish life is abundant.

I've been fortunate to have fished extensively in the Seychelles atolls after working as a guide there for many years, and it's easy to become blasé about sight fishing when one is so spoiled. Generally, the fishing in South Africa pales in comparison to that of tropical atolls, and I find it increasingly difficult to get excited about what our local waters have to offer. There was no such problem with Sterkfontein Dam! Hiding behind a low bush as I watched two



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big yellowfish cruising slowly along a shallow gravel bed, my heart was pounding and my knees shaking – and that doesn't seem to happen too often these days! This really is fantastic sight fishing.

While a decent sized (and seaworthy) boat is a necessity at Sterkfontein due to the size of the dam (and because the ever changing weather can cause some really rough water and waves out in the unprotected middle areas), once you have reached the bay in which you plan to fish, you can fish on foot and stalk visible fish from the banks.

With the dynamic structure and make up of the dam, we had opportunities to sight cast at bigger fish cruising slightly lower in the water column off the deeper ledges, delicately present tiny floating ant patterns to fish nosing

around in incredibly shallow water and even drifted lightly weighted patterns over the submerged weedbeds to barely visible schools of fish. There is something for every style of angler, and every style of angling at Sterkfontein.

As with any successful trip the fishing seems to blend into one, a blur of splashy rises, bent rods and excited chatter. But when all is said and done, there is always a moment that stands out from the others. Sometimes it's a particular fishing session, sometimes a single fish or just a split second moment that is ingrained on one's memory, but there is always something in particular that remains a highlight of the trip. For me it was a toss up between a large, wary yellowfish on a shallow gravel bed that required all my skill and patience

(and a perfectly presented dry fly) to fool; and the final fish I landed on the trip. It was a close call but I think that final fish late on the last evening was just perfect.

As a fitting end to a great adventure and a surprising local discovery, I made a long cast out to where a fish had been rising on the edge of a channel. It was a warm evening, the wind had dropped completely and the water was mirror smooth. Almost the same second that the fly landed, the final fish of the trip rose in the silvery dusk to gently sip a bushy sedge imitation, breaking the surface in a classic head and tail rise. It was a beautiful sight, a dry fly-fisher's perfect moment. As the line pulled tight and the rod bent and shook for the last time, I knew without a doubt that I would be back.





Sterkfontein Dam

When that same person confirmed that the target would in fact be shallow water “bones”, but that the destination was a mere two hour’s drive from the centre of Johannesburg I assumed that this particular chap was either suffering from tropical sunstroke or was deliberately sewing the seeds that would send me on a wild and fruitless goose chase. This while he heads off in the opposite direction to some top secret fly-fishing Mecca. This kind of anti-social behaviour is not entirely uncommon in the cut-throat world of fly-fishing.

But he seemed deadly serious, and the disbelieving expression on my face must have clearly begged for further explanation. Bit by bit his initially outrageous statement began to make sense as details were unveiled and secrets were shared. I had heard mutterings about this place before - but how good it actually was I had no idea about. I think those in the know

had been sworn to secrecy, becoming vague and blasé when the talk turned to fishing over a pint of beer in the local pub. But I was assured that within a two hour drive of the city that was the epicentre of the gold rush 120 years ago, a place existed where one really could sight cast to “freshwater bonefish” in conditions that were not far off those quintessential islands that one normally associates with flats style sight fishing. My interest was sufficiently piqued, my fishing mind more than intrigued and I needed no further convincing to agree to undertake an exploratory expedition to these waters.

A plot was hatched, plans were made and early one morning after catching the first flight out of Cape Town, I met up with my fellow “guide” in Egoli, the Place of Gold. After loading up the 4x4 truck, we headed south towards Harrismith and the magnificent Sterkfontein Dam. In so doing we were embarking on our own

modern day gold rush, this time in search of the golden fish that inhabit these hallowed waters – the revered smallmouth yellowfish (*Labeobarbus aeneus*). These streamlined, golden yellow indigenous fish are very similar in shape and appearance to bonefish; it’s basically just the colour that differs (and, of course, the fact that they live and breathe in fresh water). Like bonefish they too are powerful and fast and put up a serious fight on fly tackle, thus earning themselves the moniker of “freshwater bones”.

Seven species of yellowfish are found throughout South Africa’s river systems, and are usually caught by using a “Czech nymphing” technique to prospect the likely holding areas with weighted flies. The chance to sight cast at these fish and take them on dry fly would be considered the ultimate challenge and reward, and my excitement was brewing as we neared the turn off to the dam. Armed