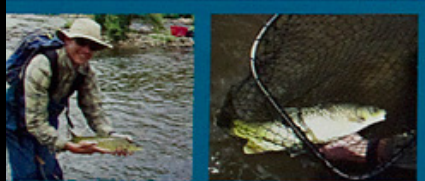


On the Vaal River, two fishing friends finally succeed in their quest for the Yellowfish. Words by Leon Marais.

A river paradise around the corner



The Vaal River in the Parys area is just over an hour away from Johannesburg and offers 'A River Runs Through It' experience with a bit of a local twist. Ok, so there's no spectacular Rocky Mountains backdrop, but the surrounds are beautiful nevertheless, especially during the wetter months of the year when the grass is green, the birds and insects are abundant and the sky is painted with giant cumulonimbus clouds. The river itself is lovely, with long, slow-flowing pools and stretches of rapids and riffles, where the Smallmouth Yellowfish (*Barbus aeneus*) like to hang around.

These streamlined fish are the local answer to the more famous but exotic Rainbow Trout. They keep station in the current behind rocks, where eddies and back-currents allow them to hold position without fighting against the flow. From such positions they can dart out into the current to snatch up insects and insect larvae as they flow past, before returning to their original positions. If their feeding tactics are known then all one has to do is to match them with rod and fly, and success should be forthcoming, right? Well, in theory anyway. In practice it's not that easy. They are wily critters and will stubbornly ignore any fly that is not behaving naturally. Success comes with persistence (don't necessarily expect to have much luck on your first expedition unless you are already an expert) and using the tried-and-tested set-up and tactics. The correct tactic is called 'Czech-nymphing' among fly fishers and it is a bit different to fishing for river trout. With Czech-nymphing a dropper fly and strike-indicator are used. The strike indicator is a brightly coloured, floating, pea-sized ball that is attached to the leader close to the actual fly line and allows the fisher to keep track of things in the torrent. A foot or so below the strike-indicator is where the dropper fly is attached, and right at the end, in the normal position, is where the terminal fly is attached. This terminal fly is usually a bead-head nymph of some description, with the bead and the dropper fly adding the necessary weight so that they bounce along close to the bottom, where the yellows feed. If the set-up is a bit different to what's used for trout, then so are the actual tactics. There's no need to cast thirty feet upstream. Rather use a short section of line, ten to twelve feet long, which is flicked out upstream and brought back in the current, with the key lying in finding the places where fish will hold and bringing the fly in with the minimum of drag and unnatural movement.

With a bit of patience and persistence, success will be forthcoming, as it was for me and my fishing friend on a recent excursion to Eendekuil, a fine venue along the river about 15 kilometres north of

Parys on the R 500. We had been to the area a few times without much success and it initially seemed that it would end up being yet another blank day. The morning was slightly crisp despite the time of year, the river flowing at a perfect 26 cumecs (flow is controlled at the barrage upstream) and the first few hours produced nothing but tired arms. After a break for breakfast and coffee we tried again and soon the first fish was hooked, though admittedly it was a foul-hook and it was brought in by the tail. Nevertheless, it seemed to herald a change in fortunes and it was just as I had finished taking photographs of Elton's tail-hooked fish that I caught one – this time hooked in the pectoral fin. Well, we were getting closer to the mouth at least! Now, in fishing there's often a bit of subtle competition, even between close friends. There are also lessons to be learned and sometimes learning follows competition. Elton caught his second fish, legitimately hooked in the mouth, and soon lost a couple more, while I was still on number 1. Furthermore, he would be getting married in four days time, while I am still very much a bachelor, so my hackles were slightly raised when he caught another fine yellow. Does he have to have all the luck? Well, I thought to myself as I began a cast, there's naught that I can do except to persevere with the tactics I know are right. As the fly landed in the torrent I felt a nice fish take and soon landed probably the best fish of the day. So there's the lesson: when things are not going your way, just do what you know is right and keep trying – there's not much else that can or needs to be done. By the end of the day I had caught three yellows and a mudfish (a similar yet less sought-after fish that behaves like a rock when hooked) while Elton had also caught three yellows, making it to date our most successful day on the Vaal – and I know that fisherman are full of tall stories but we have the photographs to prove it!

So next time you feel the urge to use your fly rod, forget about going all the way to Dullstroom or the Natal Midlands and head down to the Vaal. It's close, there's much to do in the area for non-fishers, the surrounds are beautiful and peaceful and the fishing experience can be extremely rewarding. Who knows, you might even come away with a lesson or two learned.

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Equipment and what to take with you:



- Fly rod: an AFTMA 4 – 5 weight rod, floating line, strike indicators, 5 – 8 lb leader material, plenty of bead-head flies and assorted nymphs.
- Landing net and wading stick (I balked at the idea of a wading stick at first, but hence found it to be most useful in the difficult wading conditions).
- Waders are optional. There's been talk of bacterial infections from the water, so I prefer to use light waders.
- Broad-brimmed hat, polarised sun-glasses and plenty of high-factor sunscreen.

For further information contact your local flyfishing shop, or take a drive south on the N1 towards Bloemfontein and take the Potchefstroom / Vanderbijlpark interchange, heading west on the northern side of the river and choosing any venue as you circle around towards Parys.

