



# Eastern Cape Revisited...

by *Michael Sommerville*

**FIRST visited Thrift Dam in 2003, when I was invited at the last minute to join some friends on the dam. On the day I thoroughly embarrassed myself by failing to catch anything, while my friends caught plenty! At the last light of day, I finally managed what was probably the smallest fish to be taken on the day! I blame this, of course, on the loan equipment I had been forced to use. .... However, while I do believe that familiar and comfortable equipment does give you an edge, on this day I think I just had a bad day and an element of bad luck.**

When I returned to the Eastern Cape in October 2005, I made sure I went prepared. I took all my gear, including my own float tube. I was therefore very pleased when my friend Malcolm Stolz, owner of the East London tackle shop, Targetline, and local farmer and professional hunter and fishing guide, Andrew Renton, arranged a fishing trip for me. The venue was to be the Thrift dam, situated in the Winterberg area, and on the private game reserve, Bowers Hope Game Farm. There excellent trout fishing, as well as hunting for a wide variety of animals, is available. The Price brothers, who own the farm, have an annual hunting concession of animals that would allow the most discerning hunter to achieve most of his dreams, if not all! Since I have never seen the ability to release a hunted animal, I stuck to the trout fishing. Details are available at [www.swartkeisafaris.com](http://www.swartkeisafaris.com)

We arrived at Thrift Dam early on a Friday morning and immediately set about inflating the float tubes and assembling the rods. Andrew set the standard by catching an early fish off the bank, before we all hit the water. The locals in the know use huge flies! The most popular is a two inch long Walkers Killer, and another fly of similar size, called an appetizer. I do not enjoy using such big flies, but after a couple of hours, with only one fish to show for my efforts, I reluctantly changed to the big flies. This time I decided I better use both, and joined them in a New Zealand style tandem rig.



I soon started to get more action and after catching a few fish I felt confident enough to combine the huge fly with a more conventional pattern, a San Juan worm. By late afternoon, when we were forced off the water by the cold, I had caught 5 good trout - as many as Andrew and more than any of the others except for Malcolm, who proved that local knowledge certainly is best. At 2000 meters above sea level, the evenings were cold – very cold! It had been an amazing day with incredible scenery, and superbly conditioned trout up to seven pounds. The bird and wildlife wandering around the lake alone was sufficient to ensure an enjoyable and memorable day. We were parked on the edge of a culvert bridge dividing the upper dam into two, the evening calm caused the water on the lee side of the bridge to glass off.

The first rise was almost imperceptible, but soon there were dimples appearing all over the calm water. There could only be one thing causing those rises – midges! The light was failing fast and it would take to long to retie a new fly on with frozen fingers, so I grabbed my rod and covered the rises with the flies I had on. I was almost immediately rewarded with the strong pull of a big fish. It tore off across the lake and then the line went slack. I pulled the line in and carried on fishing, covering rises without any success. Examining the rig later I found out that the fish had broken the worm off the large appetizer, and without the worm the fish were no longer interested while the were keyed into midge. I learnt a valuable lesson that day – I should have been prepared for the midge hatch, but I wasn't, and I missed out on a fantastic fishing opportunity. I should have had the rod loaded with midge pupa and worms and I should have had gloves and a head torch on and been watching for the hatch. Preparation and foresight are everything!

That night we drove for an hour to get to the other side of the mountain, where we stayed in an old farmhouse on the game farm. We made a huge fire and had a very late dinner of huge rump steaks, which were ridiculously cheap in that rural part of South Africa! After dinner and a many drinks we retired to the huge bedrooms and comfortable beds for a well deserved sleep.

The morning dawned clear and calm and after a quick breakfast of coffee and rusks we headed to Lamietkloof Dam, just a short drive along a dirt game-viewing track from the house. The dam was perfectly still and the mirror surface reflected the mountains in the background. We launched the float tubes under the watchful eyes of wild springbok, and spent the morning searching for the elusive trout the dam is famous for. The calm conditions were not conducive to fishing and only one trout was caught, on a 'Hein's Benmore Fugly' fly, as described in my previous article. The bird life and game, along with the spectacular scenery, made the fishing worthwhile and enjoyable, despite the lack of fish. The dam has produced some spectacular fish in the past, and I look forward to a return visit. All too soon it was time to return home as the Curry Cup final was on that afternoon.

A few days later I joined my friend Heinrich, of the 'Hein's Benmore Fugly' fame, and we drove up to Vicky Bell's Highland Lodge ([www.highlandlodge.co.za](http://www.highlandlodge.co.za)), whose dams have recently become justifiably famous for trophy trout. Unfortunately the weather was not kind to us





and lack of rain had rendered Bernard's, the trophy dam, too low to be fished. We tubed Sid's Dam, another of the dams nearby on the farm, but the beautiful, warm conditions, while pleasant to fish in, yielded no fish. After a few hours the breeze died completely and the water glassed off. A noise in the distance caught my attention and it took me a while to realise that the cause of the noise was wind, which hit us with sudden vengeance from the opposite direction to where it came from previously. The temperature dropped by at least 10 degrees in the instant the wind dropped, and black clouds appeared up the valley. We both started to paddle for the bank near the car, and by the time we got out the water the rain was starting and thunder and lightning echoed across the mountains. I could not believe how suddenly the weather had changed and realised that this had probably been the cause of the poor fishing.

We spent the night in the beautiful main lodge, which was shaken by the lightning

striking all around us. The morning was calm and we decided to fish the slightly less picturesque Spur Wing dam, just above the lodge. The fishing was a bit slow, but the fish we did catch were in superb condition. Deep bodied and strong, they provided excellent sport on the 5 weights, and the quantity was definitely offset by the quality. Wildebeest wandered down to the water's edge and watched us with interest, until something disturbed them and they thundered off at a gallop. They continued to be regular visitors, and when not at the water they were visible among the varied species of buck on the hills around the dam.

What made this fishing trip truly memorable though, was the midge hatch. All around the perimeter of the lake were huge midge shucks, each over an inch long. This time, when the familiar buzz sounded in my ears, I was prepared, and had spent the entire day waiting in eager anticipation of a good hatch. I was not disappointed. The evening breeze died when the sun dipped below the horizon, and the first rises started to appear along the

margins. Hein and I were in our tubes, and we chased these rises around the dam. However we soon realised that this was not necessary, as the fish were moving. All that was required was to find a spot that we were confident would produce fish, and set ambushes.

My preferred spot was just off a single clump of weed. Fish would rise all around this weed and I used a pair of flies – a midge suspender pupa with a San Juan Worm, or my friend Dean Riphagen's version, called a 'Mambo #5', tied about 10 inches below. The technique was to make short casts to get the pair of flies out into the deeper water and leave the fly to be discovered by the fish. Then, very slowly, using a figure of eight retrieve, work the flies back. The retrieve was really more to maintain a direct contact with the flies and was not essential. The worm also tended to drag the pupa underwater, and so the speed of the retrieve was set to maintain contact and to keep the worm from sinking too far down and into the weed. Most of the fish took the worm, and if you did not have contact, the fish



would have spat the worm out before any sign of the take would be registered. As the light faded though, it allowed the takes to be felt when sight alone would have resulted in missed fish.

While fishing we would be maintaining contact with the flies by either watching the suspender midge 'indicator', or slowly retrieving. All the time we would be watching for rises close by. If a rise was seen, we would try to estimate the direction of the fish and lift the flies and place them in the expected path of the fish. Often the fish would apparently change direction, or another fish would rise nearby, and the urge to move the flies and cover the new rise was usually irresistible, although I am sure the strike rate would have been as good, if not better, if the flies were left in the vicinity of the first rise.

The takes were solid and usually it was unnecessary to set the hook. The fish, feeling the bite of the hook, would take off in the shallow water, heading for deep cover. The sound of the line ripping off the reels and through the guides would signal one's success to the other angler, who was virtually invisible in the dark. We fished until it became impossible to see what we were doing and then headed back to the warm fire, and the hearty meal prepared by the staff, at the lodge.

The next evening saw us making a hasty escape from another very ugly and nearby electric storm. The sky turned black and the lightning could be seen tracking in our direction. There was no chance of a rise and we returned to the lodge for our last night, enjoying a hearty dinner, plenty of good SA red wine and a long evening chatting to old friends. This is, after all, what trout fishing is all about.

On our last day we spent the morning on the lake, and then headed back to pack up and prepare to leave. We spent most of the day checking the conditions to see if there would be an evening rise, as we were not going to leave before dusk if there was any possibility of this happening. Luckily we were not disappointed, and soon after we arrived at the lake the first dimples appeared. Fishing from the bank, and without waders, limited the area we could cover, but we both caught a brace of good fish before the lightning closed in again.

We dismantled our 5-weight 'lightning conductors' and took refuge in the car. The wind whipped the water up and there seemed little likelihood of further rises. After a lengthy, but unsuccessful photo session, trying to capture the lightning without a tripod, we started to head for the lodge. As we turned the truck around, we saw the familiar dimples reappear, and I made Hein stop the car. We both jumped out and reassembled the rods – the fear of lightning overcome by the promise of more midge-eating trout! I was rewarded with another two, and Hein another one, before we had to admit defeat and head back to the lodge to collect Hein's patient wife, Riana, and return to East London. The trip had reminded me of the fantastic fun that midge fishing can provide, and also the need to always be constantly aware of the conditions and opportunities that are obvious to the observant and organised angler. And, as I said before, foresight and preparation will ensure the best possible chance of ensuring success.

I thought at that stage that my fishing was over for the trip, and so I planned a bit of quality family time with my wife and sons at a beach resort about 140km's down the coast, at a place called Mpekweni Beach Resort (<http://www.mpekweni.co.za>). The resort is situated on a river mouth right on the beach, and accommodation was in comfortable motel type rooms set around



a central restaurant and communal area overlooking immaculate lawns and a swimming pool. The estuary lagoon and beach provided a wonderful backdrop to the scene. The place was very child friendly and a great place for a break. We hired a baby sitter at night from the hotel staff and were able to enjoy long, leisurely dinners, while the kids were safely asleep only a short distance away. The staffs were very good with kids, and when Conor heard that they had a jumping castle, it was inflated and set up, even though he was the only child on the resort at the time.

Of course I took my saltwater fly rod with me, and I was soon asking the general manager, Colin, about the fly fishing opportunities in the lagoon. He was not too familiar with fly fishing, but told me about a game farm across the road with a dam on it that had a reputation for big largemouth black bass. It turned out to be another of the Price brother's game farms, and so permission was sought, and granted, to fish the dam. Colin took me that afternoon across to the dam and as we arrived, a beautiful mature fish eagle was right in front of us, resting on a dead tree rising out the water. Unfortunately I did not have my SLR camera with zoom lens, and a fantastic photo opportunity was therefore wasted, but just seeing this majestic bird so close was a thrill.

I spent the afternoon fishing for bass from an old jetty. The wind was howling, which made fly casting difficult, and I was forced to use a saltwater Crazy Charlie fly, but the bass were keen and I had good sport with three to four pound fish. Unfortunately the rhino on the farm chose not to visit, but there were plenty of birds and other smaller animals like bushbuck to be seen.

The resort has Indian canoes and my four-year-old son and I took a leisurely paddle up the river, catching elf on the fly along the way, and seeing a variety of animals on the game farm, which bordered the southern side of the river.

With no malaria in the region, the Eastern Cape is fast becoming one of the premier game viewing regions of South Africa, and trout and saltwater fly fishing opportunities are readily available. Fly fishing for yellowfish should offer a chance for most New Zealanders to chalk up a new species, and Andrew Renton can arrange fishing for these hard fighting fish on the Kei River on his farm. While the fishing had not been outstanding at that time of the year, it certainly made me realise what a wonderful holiday destination the Eastern Cape can be, with plenty of affordable opportunities for fishing, and family fun, readily available.

