

GUIDE TO STERKFORTEIN DAM

BACKGROUND

This massive body of water is some 20km south west of Harrismith on the road to KwaZulu-Natal via Oliviershoek Pass. The land surrounding the dam is a nature reserve administered by the Free State Province, all amid magnificent mountain scenery. The reserve itself offers self-catering chalets plus caravan and camping facilities (phone 058 62223520) and there are a number of other establishments nearby offering accommodation from upmarket to fairly rustic.

As this reservoir is some 16 km long and 7 km at it's widest and has a rugged shoreline it is certainly advantageous to have the use of a powerboat to reach many of the choice fishing spots. There is a good slipway for launching boats at the northern point of the provincial resort. However care should be taken when using a boat as Sterkfontein is notorious for stormy conditions with high winds and surprisingly big waves which often develop within a very short period of time.

The fishing for yellowfish is arguably some of the finest in the country particularly as the very clear water lends itself to excellent sight fishing. Most of the yellows are Orange/Vaal smallmouth, but there is a very small population of Orange/Vaal largemouth present. There are also large numbers of sharptooth catfish, some very big, as well as common carp. Both these species are also targeted by fly fishers as well as the odd rainbow trout and the Orange River mudfish. The small banded tilapia is sometimes taken on tiny flies and there are disturbing reports that largemouth bass have entered the lake and if these are caught they should be killed immediately.

The yellows of Sterkfontein, which are the main quarry of the fly fisher, are highly nomadic. Breeding season and food supply mainly drives this behaviour. Breeding occurs primarily when water temperatures are highest and the summer rains allow these fish to migrate up the three larger streams. This is mainly between late November and mid January. This is often considered the best fishing time for yellows but the pre-breeding period of September to November and the post-breeding months of mid-January to April can be equally good. In general, yellows feed very little during the winter from about late May to mid- August and in any case fishing during this time can be unpleasant at this high elevation (1 800 metres) with frequent snowfalls on the surrounding mountains and right down to the shoreline on occasions.

During the breeding season there tend to be higher concentrations of yellows in the southern part of the reservoir, particularly close to where the three main breeding streams enter, while outside this season they are more dispersed throughout the impoundment. It is most important to note that to protect breeding fish both Boschklouf and Qwantani Bays are closed to fishing, as is the area south of 893/Sedan 3. No-entry signs will soon be in place to demarcate these areas. Although the Eastern Shore is not a restricted area please do not wade here during the breeding season as this will disturb the fish that breed on these gravel beds.

Although provincial regulations permit the killing of 2 smallmouth per day it is strongly recommended that all smallmouth yellows be returned to water unharmed. This should be done employing the usual precautions of barbless hooks, nets without knots and if you have to handle the fish this must be done with wet hands. Breeding areas available

at Sterkfontein are very limited for this species and there has been considerable illegal killing of yellows during spawning so it is vital that we conserve our stock of fish. Under no circumstances should largemouth yellowfish be killed as they are classified as 'vulnerable' and enjoy protection of the Free State provincial regulations.

THE FISHING SPOTS

The Cliffs and Whale Rock

The Cliffs can be very temperamental. Spectacular one day and not a fish the next. Calm conditions or a light westerly wind during the non-breeding season are best. First acquaint yourself with the couple of places you can climb down to release fish. If the N.westerly (the predominant wind) is blowing, move down to Whale Rock, a massive submerged boulder at the southern point of the Cliffs, as the N.W. wind creates a good scum line off the point. There are good gravel beds between the shore and Whale Rock. Dries like Caddis, Brown Spiders, Daddy Long legs, Dave's nymph and the Christmas Caddis have all produced fish along the Cliffs. You will also be able to cast to large carp and catfish along this bank and try a tiny fly for the banded tilapia which can be found here in large numbers.

Coots Corner, Short Wall and Sandy Bay

This area does produce yellows in the non-breeding season but is better known for it's outstanding carp fishing and huge catfish that congregate to feed on the flotsam that collects in the Sandy Bay area. A walk along the wall spotting fish can be very rewarding.

North Pier, Ledges, South Pier, Bird Island and Bird Island Bay

This section is very dependent on the weather. If the NW wind is blowing then the water discolours quickly. This area is best when the wind is light or an offshore easterly is blowing.

One can get to this area on foot, but prior permission must be obtained from the office. It is a long walk best done with ankle length boots as protection from the many puff adders. Drive across the Short Wall until you reach the fence, park and then walk the 2-3 km along the bank until you get to North Pier. A very noticeable dolorite dyke runs east-west into the dam. A further 1.5 km is Bird Island (submerged in high water levels). Between North Pier and Bird Island Bay is good yellowfish water through summer. The Bay just after the fence, before you get to North Pier, is excellent for carp. Large catfish are ever present and large schools of banded tilapia can be found in the bay just before North Pier.

View Point Bay, Vulture Restaurant and Crows Corner.

View Point Bay and Vulture Restaurant are both protected from the northwesterly. A good scum line forms across the bay when this wind is blowing. Both offer good vantage points to sight fish. Crows Corner can only be fished in a light wind or a south easterly when a great scum line bends around the corner bringing with it some big cruisers.

Heron's Valley, North and South, Sedan 1,2 and 3.

Heron's Valley North and South invariably have good scum lines across their mouths, regardless of the wind direction, and good shore angling with high banks for sight fishing. This area is particularly active in the breeding season.

Sedan 1, 2 and 3 are all much the same as Heron's Valley N+S. With Sedan 1 being the favoured bay with good mooring and great fishing from the South bank. These bays, especially 2 and 3, can become dirty when the North Westerly is pumping.

Poachers Corner.

This is as far as we are allowed to go up the Driekloof Valley, unless accompanied by an Honorary Ranger or a member of Parks Board. There are no-entry signs painted on the cliffs just before Poachers Corner, and a series of buoys in the water warning you to stay out. Heed these warnings as the penalties are high. Report any boats that you see passing into the area to the authorities. There is a small stream flowing into Poachers Corner and the water does tend to become dirty after heavy rain. The southern banks offer the best sight-fishing and with a strong south wind a good scum line bends into the bay allowing for superb dry-fly action, any terrestrial patterns will generally do

Driekloof Corner, Seheletwane Bay, Klavervlei Bay, Elizabeth (3 point Turner) and Driehoek.

These are all in the restricted section and are no-go areas. As environmentally responsible fisherman we must respect these areas and consider them as sacred ground.

893, Niewejaars Bay and Niewejaars Vley

893 offers shelter in a southerly but the topography is very flat and shallow and is better suited for carp and catfish. Fishing can be superb in the bay but there are few opportunities for sight fishing. There is a shallow area just off the point between 893 and Niewejaars Bay where we often find "mid-water" fish. When the water is lower there are a few trees that stick out. Look for this bank on your depth finder and have a few casts in this area.

The western banks of Niewejaars Bay and Niewejaars Vley offer good fishing with high banks ideal for sighting. Dig out those big Woolly Buggers when you go past the submerged trees as they are home to many large yellows.

Dassie Island, 3 Anchor Bay (also known as 3 Sisters) to North Point.

Dassie Island offers protected fishing under any conditions, with the scum line that bends off the southwest corner (when the north westerly is blowing) being the prime spot.

3 Anchor Bay, named after the three piles of rock that are visible when the water levels are low. Be warned; go through this gap with great caution. This channel between the island and the mainland acts as a funnel for food and is productive with a dry.

North Point and Drop Off intercept the scum lines that come from across the bay at Ararat and from the west bank of the dam. Letting a fly drift over these areas with the wind has produced fish on occasion. Favoured flies in this area are the Xmas caddis and any flashback nymph-type- arrangement. We believe these sub-surface flies work in this area because the food has had time to sink as it drifts across the bay. The Xmas caddis works very well during the hottest months of summer as there are huge hatches of iridescent, green and black beetles of the Buprestidae family literally clogging the scum lines. Later on in the day the Caddis dry fly pattern becomes a winner.

Craigielea Bay

The fish tend to swim deep in this bay and even though you might not see any fish, we have had good success with sinking lines along the deep water near the trees on the

west bank. Try teasing the fish to the surface with a large fat-bellied orange Rapala. It works very well as a searching pattern when the fish are not visible on the surface.

Qwantani Bay, Qwantani Cliffs, Boschkloof and Barbel Bay.

These bays are characterized by submerged trees and vegetation, reeds and large areas of water lilies. If you are planning to fish these areas, it is best done from a float tube or from the boat. Shore access and fishing is difficult and very restricted. Boschkloof and Qwantani Bay are both very important breeding areas for the yellows and some other species and access to these areas is soon to be restricted. These bays are also important catfish feeding areas.

Qwantani Cliffs offers the best shore based fishing with superb sight fishing opportunities.

Ararat, The Ruins, Blueberry Bay and Ararat Bay

This whole area produces fish under the right conditions. The best fishing is in the late evening. There is always a good Caddis hatch along this bank and a dry caddis pattern is the favoured fly for this area.

Dogshead Bay, Dogsleg Bay, and Caddis Corner

Dogshead Bay is mostly shallow water with low banks, good for carp and catfish. Caddis Corner, however is a spectacular cliff face with magnificent indigenous forest and a resident Osprey and prime dry fly water in a north wester. Two scumlines converge at this point and then extend across the bay. Here one has to fish from the boat and a trawling motor will make your life a lot easier. Any terrestrial patterns will work but my most successful fly is Dave's hopper tied with a yellow body. Dogsleg Bay has good fishing late in the season, with the buttress on the east holding good size fish amongst the submerged trees.

Many Waters, First Stop, Stratherrick and Eskol North and South.

These bays offer sheltered fishing when the north wester is blowing. Many Waters has a small river flowing into it so the water at the top end of this bay is often dirty. There are some interesting structures in the form of submerged reed patches, which would be a good place to target the few largemouth yellows and of course catfish. The slopes on the north bank offer the best sight fishing opportunities and is normally our first stop, hence the name.

Stratherrick Bay has some good banks for sighting and holds good numbers of fish early and late season.

Eskol is another area where one can fish from shore but one needs to be a member of one of the local fishing clubs. This area is very popular amongst the coarse fisherman and as a result we don't boat too close to the banks.

Quarry Bay, Willy's Corner and Turner's Secret.

The Quarry is now full of water. Good vantage points, deep water with great gravel beds near the entrance make this an outstanding spot early and late season.

Willy's Corner still holds the odd trout. So if you have really blanked out on the yellows or you find yourself on Sterkies out of season, try for some lunger trout at Willy's Corner.

Turner's Secret is only an island when the water level is much lower than it is at present. At present it is 2-3m deep at this spot. A great scum line usually extends over this area from the Cliffs, so sound for it with your depth finder and you could be in for some great mid-water fishing.

STERKFONTein DAM

SCALE 1 : 50 000 (1cm = 500 metres)



All information supplied by David Weaver and the Maluti Flyfishing Club and published with the kind permission of 'The Complete Fly Fisherman'. For up to date information you may call David on 083 3034230.