

Kiwi

Crash-Course



WITHOUT A GUIDE, THIS ANGLER MAY HAVE BEEN BESTED BY TROUT.

BY THIERRY BOMBEKE



The Ambien failed badly, giving me just 45 minutes of sleep during a 36-hour slog from coastal Maine to New Zealand, specifically the pastoral town of Murchison, where I started the first leg of a three-lodge, eight-day trout blitz.

Fortunately, fatigue was overridden by the adrenaline high that comes with visiting an exceedingly exotic new place that, amongst other wonders, harbors large brown and rainbow trout in good numbers. Within minutes of my arrival at Scott and Leya Murray's beautiful River Haven Lodge, we were on the banks of a nearby freestone, Scott rigging my 9-foot 5-weight with an 18-foot leader and a strike indicator, the mono tipped with a dark beadhead caddis.

"How in the hell am I going to make accurate casts with *this*?" I half-jokingly asked.

The mild-mannered guide smiled and said I'd get used to it. He told me that New Zealand's trout behave differently from those in the states and that I should be prepared to do a lot of things differently here. The man was right. Over the course of my visit I'd learn that Kiwi trout spook *extremely* easily, and that the list of not-so-obvious things that can freak out a fish is as long as your arm. Figure out 10 of those things, and there are seven left you could be doing wrong.

Fortunately, Scott is one of the best guides in a country full of great ones; after just a few minutes of drifting a nymph blindly through the first run, my indicator paused and my hookset was countered with the throbbing weight of a three-pound brown. The fish was brought to net and released and, the ice broken, we moved to a set of riffles 200 feet above to try some sight-fishing. Halfway up the riffles Scott gestured for me to stop. He pointed to a seam in two feet of air-clear water 15 or so yards away. "Do you see that trout?"

I peered sharply at the spot for 10 seconds and responded, "No. I just see a bunch of rocks."

"See the third rock from the top, the light brown one?"

"Yes," I hissed back.

"That's a five-pound brown."

As I cast, I wondered how long it would take me to develop such sighting skills on my own. Way longer than eight days, I surmised. The inaugural drift

seemed perfect, but the fish refused. Before I could make a follow-up cast, Scott grabbed my tippet and changed to a lighter-colored caddis—a move that was a little premature, in my unschooled opinion. The first drift with the new fly resulted in another refusal. Bang, another fly change. This time the fish took and exploded from the water. After fending off several dogged runs, I had my first New Zealand trophy. As the released fish swam off, I asked Scott why we didn't give the first two flies more of a chance. He said he could see the fish was in a feeding mode and if we had on the right fly the trout would have gulped it on the first drift. To cast again with the same fly would have risked spooking the fish. On my own I would have changed flies, but only after I had cast a few more times, which in this case would have





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been a few too many. I then would have spent an hour or more carpet-bombing the fish with every fly/tippet/drift combination imaginable in an attempt to crack the code on a lock-jawed trout. With Scott, however, instead I spent that time picking my way upstream, landing three more browns of four or five pounds before heading back to the lodge for an evening of lamb, domestic red and some much needed Zs.

The following day we hit the Wairau, a veritable helix of watery braid, with islands running down the center of a stunningly picturesque mile-wide valley. Although most of the water was wadeable and looked very fishy, there was an overwhelming amount of it. New Zealand is a land where quality often comes at the expense of quantity, meaning great-looking water can sometimes be barren of fish, but when you do find fish they're the kind that vault

your pulse. Left to my own devices, my challenge on the Wairau would have been finding the trout (assuming, of course, that I had the sighting ability to spot them in the first place). In fact, despite a high, bright sun, it even took a master like Scott an hour to find fish, but when he did he hit the motherlode, and that day I got shots at a dozen browns weighing between four and eight pounds. I managed to land half of them, but the most enjoyable fish was one I didn't catch—a six-pounder that was finning in 10 inches of water a mere foot off an open bank. Hunching over and quietly shuffling forward on my knees, I was able to get within 15 feet of the fish to make a cast. The fish's proximity to the bank coupled with a current shift a foot above the trout's nose required a mid-air mend that I botched just enough to send the fish packing. I was all smiles nonetheless, my failure to catch the fish vastly overshadowed

by an appreciation of the unique “trout commando” aspect of the whole affair.

At the lodge that evening, I confided in one of the other guests that I was feeling a little inadequate about being so dependent on my guide.

“Welcome to the club,” he chuckled. “I hire a guide every time I come to New Zealand. I’ve fished all over the world and held my own without a guide

on some very challenging water. This, however, is the only place that intimidates me.”

AFTER ANOTHER GREAT DAY IN THE Murchison area, I thanked the Murrays, hopped into my rental car, pointed it toward Wakefield and zipped over to Stonefly Lodge, an incredibly luxurious eco-lodge that overlooks the famous Matueka River. (If you think a zero-carbon footprint and high living are mutually exclusive, trust me, you’re wrong.)

The next morning, guide Paul Van der Loos and I were heli-dropped onto a quaint high-country tributary that featured super-clear sapphire-tinted water. In an instant, Yellowstone’s Slough Creek was supplanted as the prettiest stream I’d ever seen. But something had apparently disturbed the fish prior to our arrival, making them hair-trigger sensitive. To make things tougher, my casting ability abandoned me and, after putting down a pair of nine-pound fish and losing another pair of smaller ones, I accepted my first (and only) fishless day in New Zealand.

That night, over duck confit and braised root veggies, lodge owner John Kerr asked if I wanted to try something different the next day. He proposed a low-lying spring creek that coursed through a kiwi orchard, and I accepted eagerly. So on day five I was dropping a



PHOTOGRAPH BY THIERRY BOMBEKE



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Parachute Adams in front of beastly browns under the instruction of my Kiwi guide while trying not to hook kiwi fruit with my backcast. The venture proved a winner, with the standout fish being a coy six-pounder that sipped the fly so lightly I could have mistaken it for a six-inch chub were it not plainly visible through the entire rise-and-take sequence. As I released the trout I was struck by the size of its maw.

“That thing could inhale a six-pack of mice in one gulp!” I marveled.

“You wouldn’t believe what these big trout eat,” responded my guide, Steve Greaney. “I once saw an eight-pound trout at the bottom of a pool shaking a four-pounder like a rag doll. I’m not talking about a turf war, he was trying to eat the bloody thing! I also occasionally see 24-inch trout with the back half of two-foot-long Maori eels hanging out of their mouths. They’ll sit there for days, swallowing a few inches at a time until the eel is gone.”

Although not much of a skinny-dipper, I vowed to *never* engage in that activity in a New Zealand trout stream.

THE MELANCHOLY ASSOCIATED WITH LEAVING Stonefly and beginning the final leg of my trip was

displaced by the anticipation of new scenery. I was moving from the South Island to the North Island, where I’d get my first crack at rainbows—a fish widely reputed to be dumber than the browns I’d encountered, leading me to believe I could finally be a little less dependent on the guides. My flight schedule got bugged, and by the time I arrived at my final destination, Poronui Ranch in Taupo, it was too late to fish. That didn’t turn out to be such a bad thing, since it gave me time to grab a glass of cabernet, visit with the chef as he prepared the evening meal, and explore the elegant main lodge, which oozed with tradition and nostalgia. It also gave me time to review the progress I’d made: Although I had learned a ton from the guides, there were still two very important things that I’d have to figure out before I could catch fish on my own. First, I’d have to get drastically better at seeing fish. Since the beginning of the trip, I had asked each guide to give me first crack at scanning new water. Of the 75 fish we encountered, I spotted only four, and every one of those required at least one hint from the gillie. Second, I’d need to learn the body language of fish; the guides were expert trout profilers, each having the ability to watch a fish, zero in on its disposition and cater to it accordingly.

The next day guide Dave Wood took me to the Mohaka, a clear, fast-flowing river flanked by rugged hills studded with native manuka trees. Although we encountered a good number of trout, only one was a rainbow, a fish of about five pounds that was stationed about 70 feet upstream on the outside edge of a shallow pool. It was a golden opportunity, except for one problem—a four-foot eel sat between me and the fish. Then I noticed the tail of the run above the pool was just shallow enough for me to ford the river. I could cross about 90 feet above the fish and circle back for an upstream presentation without having to mess with the eel. I pointed this out to Dave.

“No go,” he replied.

“Really?” I pleaded. “I know I can cross without making noise or causing a wake.”

“It’s not about that. The fish will *smell* you when you cross.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me!”

“I shit you not, mate. We’ve got to try him from here.”

So I moved in, the eel refused to give way, I punked out and my day ended *sans* rainbow.

Twenty-two hours later I was deep into the final day of my New Zealand odyssey. We’d helicoptered to

a remote stream of volcanic origins that was populated exclusively by good-size rainbows. In spite of a stiff breeze that made spotting difficult, we’d stalked and cast to a half-dozen nice fish. I hooked two of



PHOTOGRAPH BY THIERRY BOMBEKE



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them, but each managed to divest themselves of the fly within the first couple headshakes. Landing a hog of a rainbow was an experience I desperately didn't want to leave on the table, but now we had only minutes to go before our scheduled pick-up. Dave and I scrambled forward to look for one more fish before the bird touched down.

My hopes soared when Dave, who had trotted ahead to check the last hole on the beat, frantically waved me over. When I caught up he pointed out a fish that was finning lazily, just beneath the surface in the middle of the pool. I quietly moved into position, about 35 feet below, and dropped a big spider pattern eight feet above the fish, cursing myself for not having landed that terrestrial closer. Without the luxury of a redo, I stayed with the drift and hoped for the best.

"Bugger!" Dave whispered over my shoulder, as the fly passed unacknowledged over the fish.

Then, just when I was about to pick up the line, he blurted, "Wait!"

In the moments after the fly passed the trout, Dave detected a shift in its demeanor, and in the milliseconds that followed the fish changed its mind from *reject* to *accept*, turned around, tracked the fly

down and sipped it in. When I whipped the rod sideways the line tightened with a liquid *zip*, and the four-pound rainbow vaulted skyward and blasted upstream. This time the hook held. But when the fish turned and charged toward an underwater outcropping of volcanic rock, elation turned to angst. I immediately thrust the rod tip skyward and dashed toward the rock, keeping the tippet clear of the hazard. From there it was easy going and, several minutes later—as the *clip-clip-clip* of the approaching helicopter became audible in the distance—I was posing for pictures with my hard-won prize.

I received some great mentoring from gillies during my time in New Zealand. As a result, I feel confident enough to try a few days of unguided fishing when I return. I'll probably still get my ass handed to me, but I'll surely have a blast trying. 🦅

Thierry Bombeke is associate publisher of *Fly Rod & Reel's* sister publication, *Shooting Sportsman*. For more information on River Haven Lodge, Stonefly Lodge, Poronui Ranch and other fine Kiwi destinations, visit Best of New Zealand Fly Fishing, at www.bestofnzflyfishing.com/