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- LEARNING TO FLY • STILLWATER TACTICS • ADDICTED TO CARP •
- FLATS STRIPERS • SOLID SHOULDERS • FISHING BLIND •
- BACK TO SCHOOL • A DAY ON ARTHURS • GOOD NEWS ALASKA •
- PINECONE CICADA • MAGICAL MALAYSIA • NIPPLE DUSTER •

SOLID SHOULDERS

April Vokey highlights the seasonal diversity of the New Zealand trout fishery.

...A MESMERISING GAME OF COLOURS SET AGAINST THE MOST STUNNING LANDSCAPE I'D EVER SEEN.

TRACY MOORE

I'm a trout snob. Worse, I'm a trout snob who built a reputation chasing the world's largest rainbow trout in the most remote corners of the northern hemisphere — trout kissed by the ocean's salt and adorned with scaly perfection. So, when I fell in love with an Australian man, he did what any forward-thinking bloke would do: he introduced me to the perfect parallel — the world's largest brown trout in the remote corners of the southern hemisphere.

My first trip to New Zealand took me to the South Island during peak season. I'd heard February and March were prime time, and I was more than happy to trade Canada's biting winters for the warmth of the southern sun. Unsurprisingly, I immediately fell in love with the experience. The rivers captured the sunlight, gleaming gold as they poured and pooled — a yellow and green ombré framed by the soft cream of pebbles lining the edges. We waded

upstream, squinting and tilting our heads to catch the faintest blur of silver or grey — a mesmerising game of colours set against the most stunning landscape I'd ever seen.

I quickly learned that brown trout often linger just off the bank in shallow water, that they were tougher to catch than rainbows, that sharp eyes were crucial, and that fly selection truly mattered. Each opportunity was absolute — either you won, or you lost, and no amount of money, persuasion, or skill could alter the outcome.

For years, I returned to both the North and South Islands, and in many ways New Zealand became my home away from home. Like Canada, it offered adventure in the mountains and the grounding humility of its natural beauty. Rocky peaks anchored

my spirit, while sea-run fish navigating glacial rivers eased my homesickness. I loved it there.

Recently, I received an invitation from Carla at Poronui Lodge to fish the North Island's early season. I hesitated. Steelhead season at home wraps up in late October, so a November trip

...IN MANY WAYS NEW ZEALAND BECAME MY HOME AWAY FROM HOME.

THE REDUCED HUMAN ACTIVITY CREATES
A SERENE FISHING EXPERIENCE...



Low, clear rivers make fishing challenging, but stealth and perseverance often pay off.

TRACY MOORE

south felt rushed. Then there was the timing issue: I'd always fished New Zealand's trout season from February to April. Surely, there was a reason it was considered 'prime time'? But Carla explained the advantages of early-season fishing and encouraged me to see for myself. I took her up on the offer.

This isn't a destination piece, so I won't delve into the many wonderful features of Poronui Lodge and the surrounding waters. What I will say, however, is that the fish here are some of the best-managed I've seen, making them a perfect case study for early-season angling. During our week of fishing, I had some major revelations about what I've come to appreciate — and maybe even slightly favour — about early-season fishing.

LOWER ANGLER PRESSURE

Trout season in New Zealand runs from October 1st to the end of April, with fewer anglers on the water from October to November. This results in less pressure on the fish, making them more likely to feed aggressively. The reduced human activity creates a serene fishing experience, with higher catch rates since the trout haven't yet become overly wary.

During our trip, we observed fish rushing our flies, less suspicious of leader sheen or an imperfect presentation. While it wasn't exactly easy,



it was clear we had an advantage — one I'm not ashamed to admit I thoroughly enjoyed.

Interestingly, bridge fish and other trout exposed to regular human activity were just as finicky as they are later in the season. While less likely to flee, they remained just as tight-lipped. Learned behaviour doesn't disappear with the seasonal opening or regulation change, so there's only so much you can expect from the closure period.

Some anglers might argue that fish don't 'remember', but as biologist John McMillan shared on my podcast, *Anchored*, fish do retain patterns of predator behaviour. There's a reason fish don't return immediately to your fly after being stung, or why they'll retreat to the depths once they've deemed you a threat. While early season isn't a complete fresh start, it does offer a decent reset for fish that have let their guard down. After a winter of relative inactivity, trout are eager to feed on emerging insects, leading to aggressive takes on nymphs and dry flies. This eagerness is another key benefit of fishing early season, where you have both the advantage of less-pressured fish and their hunger from winter.



Fly selection can make or break a catch.

TRACY MOORE

PROLIFIC HATCHES

October and November offer some of the best mayfly hatches of the year. The 'Kakahi Queen', or *Coloburiscus* mayfly, stands out for its size and appeal, with yellow wings and an orange-brown body that excites both trout and anglers alike.

These cooler spring months often bring overcast conditions — ideal for triggering hatches. In addition to mayflies, early caddisfly hatches contribute to the diversity, keeping the fishing dynamic and engaging.

Even the first signs of terrestrial activity, such as green beetles, make an appearance in November, setting the stage for thrilling evening sessions.

One of the reasons I enjoy the early season so much is that the trout don't seem to be dialled in to any specific hatch just yet. While weather — something we will explore next — certainly plays a role, the aquatic life in spring is as diverse as a smorgasbord. From dries to nymphs, streamers, and even mice, everything is up for grabs, and the trout are willing to take a shot at just about anything.

...DRIES TO NYMPHS, STREAMERS, AND
EVEN MICE, EVERYTHING IS UP FOR GRABS...

A hefty Poronui brown trout with solid shoulders.

SOLID SHOULDERS

continued



From an experimental standpoint, the spring season is a fantastic opportunity to 'throw it all at the wall and see what sticks.' When I see trout chasing down deer-spun mice patterns, roly-poly'd across the current, it's hard to imagine they're completely focused on any one thing.

drop, which can make fish sluggish.

This stable early-season weather, with its occasional overcast days, is ideal for hatches of mayflies, caddis, and other aquatic life, which provides ample opportunities for anglers. The consistent water conditions also allow trout to remain active and in prime

feeding mode. In contrast, summer often sees higher water temperatures and reduced oxygen levels, which can cause fish to become lethargic, particularly in the warmer parts of the day.

Trout emerging from winter are often in excellent condition — well-fed

CONDITIONS FISH & WEATHER

As mentioned, water levels and the weather play a significant role in the success of a week of fishing. Spring in New Zealand brings cool but generally stable weather, offering more consistent fishing conditions than the unpredictable heat of summer. The temperatures are comfortable, ranging between 10–20°C, and the clearer water provides optimal conditions for sight fishing. During the early season, rivers are typically low and clear, after winter's higher flows have subsided, but before the summer heat has caused the oxygen levels to

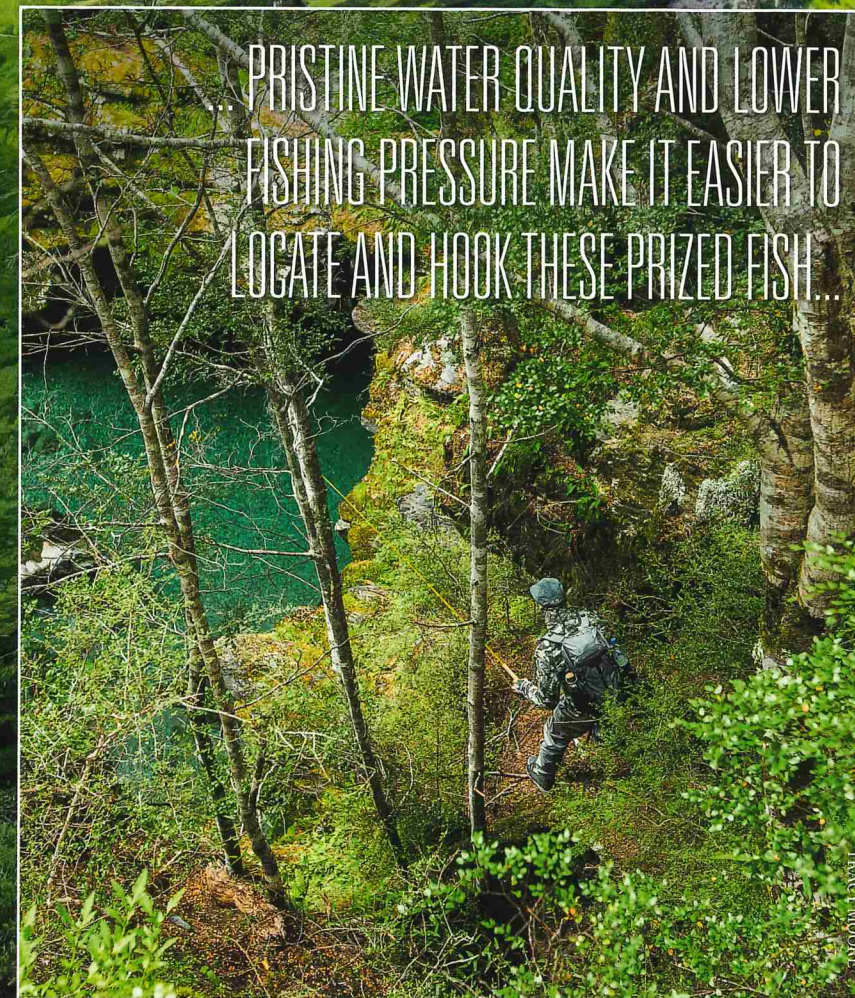


Gin-clear water, native forest and big brown and rainbow trout in the heart of New Zealand's backcountry.

and eager to take flies. The cooler, more stable water allows them to remain in feeding mode longer and take on size during the winter months, feeding on the abundant aquatic life stirred up by spring runoff. Every fish we cast to was in its prime — thick shoulders, drooping bellies, sharp-edged tails, and sculpted noses. These early-season fish have had the time to recover from the stresses of winter, and they are often at their most robust and aggressive, making them more willing to strike at a variety of offerings.

Early-season fishing also presents a rare opportunity to target trophy fish before they have been heavily pressured or have felt the impacts of rougher conditions. The lack of angler activity in the early months means that fish have not yet been conditioned to avoid lures, flies, or boats. This gives anglers an edge, as the fish are more likely to take chances, increasing your chances of success. Moreover, the pristine water quality and lower fishing pressure make it easier to locate and hook these prized fish, often with less competition from other anglers than during the peak summer months.

PRISTINE WATER QUALITY AND LOWER FISHING PRESSURE MAKE IT EASIER TO LOCATE AND HOOK THESE PRIZED FISH...



EARLY-SEASON FISHING ALSO PRESENTS A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO TARGET TROPHY FISH BEFORE THEY HAVE BEEN HEAVILY PRESSURED...



Guide Angus scrapping with a fish in tricky water conditions.

SOLID SHOULDERS

continued



MARTIN DAVIES

AS WATER TEMPERATURES RISE, TROUT METABOLISM PEAKS, MAKING THEM MORE ACTIVE...

New Zealand is famous for its helicopter fishing.

LATER SEASON APPEALS

That's not to say that fishing later in the year doesn't have its advantages, and I'd be remiss not to mention why the shoulders of the trout season — both at the start and the end — are solid enough to lean on.

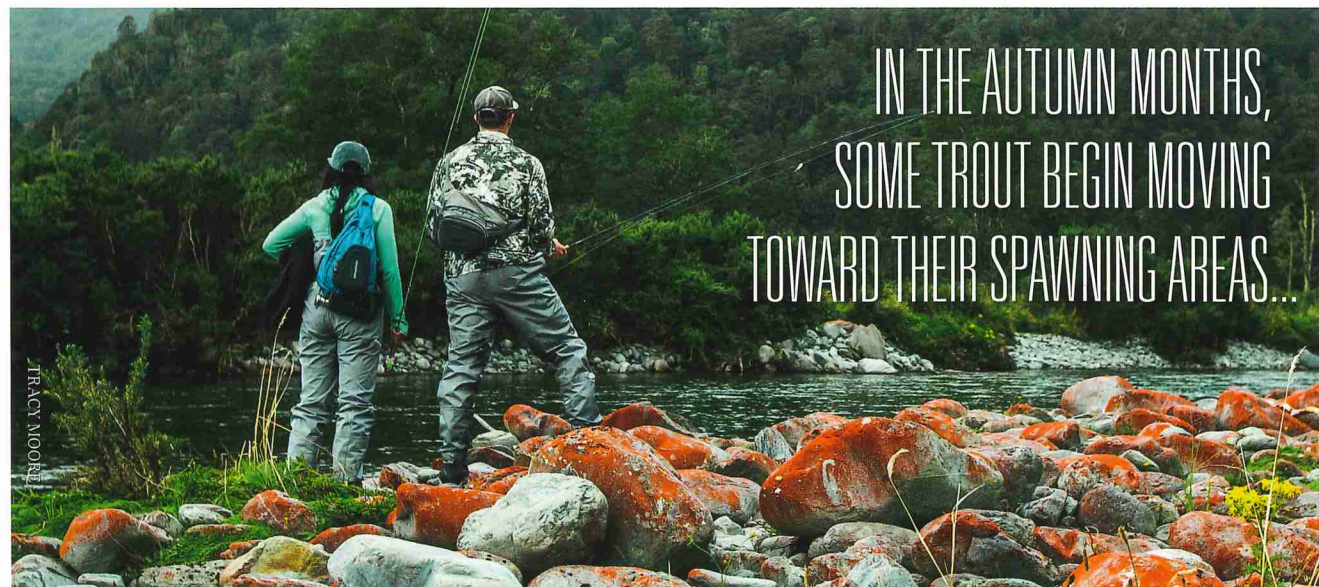
By February and March, the terrestrial insect population — cicadas, blowflies, and various beetles — reaches its peak. These insects

become a significant food source for trout, often triggering surface feeding behaviour. This can lead to exciting dry fly action, with trout aggressively rising to snatch insects from the surface. As water temperatures rise, trout metabolism peaks, making them more active and willing to feed throughout the day, particularly in the warmer afternoons.

Bug life continues to flourish, and

with caddis and mayfly spinner falls, evening fishing offers thrilling action as well. For anglers who enjoy top-water action, these months provide some of the best opportunities for watching fish rise in a feeding frenzy.

In the autumn months, some trout begin moving toward their spawning areas, particularly in backcountry streams. This migration can concentrate fish in certain areas, making



TRACY MOORE

IN THE AUTUMN MONTHS, SOME TROUT BEGIN MOVING TOWARD THEIR SPAWNING AREAS...

Sight fishing can be tough when the sun isn't in your favour.



April cradling a beautifully coloured rainbow trout from this remarkable region.



THE QUIETER STREAMS AND RIVERS OFFER A MORE SERENE FISHING EXPERIENCE...

them more accessible and easier to target. It's a unique time, as the fish are actively preparing for spawning and may be more aggressive in their feeding to build energy reserves. Additionally, trout are often in excellent condition after a summer of feeding on abundant food sources, making for larger and healthier catches in the later season.

Finally, while January and February may be the peak months for tourists, March and April offer a rare opportunity to enjoy the same beautiful waters with less angler pressure. The quieter streams and rivers offer a more serene fishing experience, and with fewer people around, you can enjoy undisturbed access to prime fishing areas.

In my opinion, any fishery with a season stretching over seven months deserves to be considered in its entirety. To reduce it to just its peak months is to overlook the subtle

yet powerful nuances that make it truly special. My time in New Zealand has shown me that every phase of the trout season offers its own unique rewards. From the peaceful, unpressured waters and prolific hatches of early spring to the explosive terrestrial activity and backcountry adventures of late summer, there's no 'wrong' time to cast a line.

If anything, these experiences have only deepened my appreciation for why trout fishing — whether in the northern or southern hemisphere — remains a lifelong pursuit for me. It's a game of patience, observation, and humility, intricately bound by the seasons and the rivers that define them. No matter when you fish, it's always about more than just the catch; it's about understanding the rhythm of the water and embracing the challenges that come with it. And in New Zealand, that rhythm never stops playing.



The Taharua River runs through the heart of Poronui, while the famed Mohaka River forms its southern boundary. Protected by a National Water Conservation Order they offer spectacular scenery and an outstanding trout fishery.