



A GUIDE STORY EXTRAORDINAIRE

My 16 years of fishing in New Zealand have produced some incredible guide stories. Not surprising since the “AAA” group of NZ guides, as a whole, comprise the best trout fishing guides on the planet. The top two guide stories I have personally experienced both involved heavy rainstorms and blown out, muddy rivers. One occurred 11 years ago and involved sight fishing in a cattle pasture for trophy browns after the nearby, roiled rivers had overflowed their banks and flooded a large pasture. The other incident occurred on my most recent trip last month.



This year, much of the South Island in NZ was plagued by more bad weather (heavy rains and wind) than I have seen in my many years of fishing this dramatically scenic, trophy trout fishing paradise. When we left NZ to head to the Ningaloo Reef area of NW Australia, the Kiwi’s were still waiting for their summer to begin. Skies that looked like the photo at left were common.

We were fishing with arguably one of the very best of the top group of NZ guides. Mark Wilson was traveling with his wife Beanie and had combined some of NZ’s grand trekking with fishing. We had scheduled a day to fish together. All through the night before we were to fish, it rained.....and I mean “rained.” It came down in sheets of water all night long. It was still pouring when we made it up for breakfast in the dining room. Many of the local guides check in with

the man who was guiding us to see what his plan is for the day since he knew the area waters better than anyone. Guides were cancelling their fishing day, due to the heavy rains that would have blown out the rivers and streams. We asked our man what his thinking was. He said, “let’s meet back at noon and see how things evolve.”

The rain quit mid-morning. We met at noon and the word was, “if you want to give it a try, let’s go.....bring your rain gear and maybe we can get a fish or two.” We drove about 15 minutes. Along the way, we crossed over a raging brown river. I’m wondering if I should be taking a nap. We parked within a short walk of what I call a typical NZ “farm river.” Usually, these farm rivers are smaller rivers or large streams that run across grazing land. Our guide knew every rancher and has access to all the waters in the area.



As we neared the river, we could see it was flowing brown and was over it’s banks. I’m thinking about that nap again. A worm pattern is tied on below an indicator and Mark is instructed to cast it about 15 feet into the edge where a relatively smooth, sheltered piece of water meets the rushing main part of the river (see the stretch of water in the photo to the left of Mark’s right shoulder). About the third cast, his indicator goes down and ‘fish on.’ The result was the 5.5 pound brown Mark is holding in photo at right.

We walked about 75 yards upstream, looking for what our guide would term a “suitable holding area” on the edge of the main river. Again, he tells me to cast the worm pattern about 15 feet in front of me to a seam where the main river met a small backwater. Meanwhile, the wind had picked up. I was only casting the leader and a short section of the fly line and, with the wind howling, it made an accurate short cast a challenge. After 5 or 6 casts, our guide said, “look there – see it?” It took me a while to spot the fish in the muddy water, but when it moved upward in the water column, it became slightly visible. Between the wind and four fly changes (different worm colors and sizes), it took me about 30 casts to get it into just the right seam.

Fish on.....6 pound brown. After about four hours, we called it a day with six fish released with the 6 and 5.5 pounders the largest.

What did I learn? Regardless of how “blown out” a river is, the fish need to find places they are comfortable.....and all the rain washes food into the river putting the fish on the prowl. They are actually fairly easy to find because the decent holding areas are so few. You just have to know what to look for. And, the fish are far less spooky because the dirty water hides our presence. We would never have been able to get that close to those same fish with clear water. Mark’s short comment after fishing NZ says it all, “I wish I’d discovered NZ 20 years ago.”

That night, it rained again.....hard! Very similar to the night before. Marte and I were leaving that day to fly to Australia so I wasn’t fishing – Mark and Beanie were going to accompany the guide. We saw everyone at breakfast, wished them luck, and said our goodbyes. I thought that somehow Mark would have a good day, despite the conditions. A few days later, while in Australia, I was to learn that Mark took an 8.25# brown that day (photo above left). They had found a river that was the outlet from a lake and, while the river downstream was solid brown, near the mouth of the river, there was water that was barely fishable. I believe that many fisheries are “guide-driven” – i.e., the right guide makes all the difference. New Zealand is certainly one of those destinations.



In the photo at right, the angler is looking at five browns near the mouth of an incoming spring creek. They’re hard to see with the photo’s size reduced, but you can see two directly in front of the angler facing into the spring creek mouth. Lake Brunner is one of the finest still water fisheries I’ve have fished. Using a poled boat to stalk and sight cast to cruising browns in the 3 to 5 pound range with large dry flies is top level excitement. You will not get a shot at a ten pound fish here, but still a fishery I always try to work into my NZ schedule whenever logistics allow.

Photos below: Lake Brunner browns have brilliant coloring and spotting – left and right below. Left center is one of my favorite shallow water areas for stalking at Brunners. The photo right-center is of Joe Restic with a 5# brown from his first NZ experience. Joe was traveling with his daughter on an itinerary that included trekking, some touring, along with some fishing time. He was fortunate to find some clearer waters in the southern part of the island.



PLANNING A NEW ZEALAND ITINERARY

So many options are available when planning an itinerary for a NZ adventure and logistics play a key role in tying everything together. We’ve been assisting in planning the perfect NZ trip for over 15 years and know the options, best guides, top lodges, best logistics, etc. We do everything from “couples trips” (with world class fishing blended in) to family trips; and of course, the hard core fishing variety. If you’d like to see examples of NZ itineraries that may meet your travel objectives, just hit reply and ask.

TWO APPROCHES TO VISITING THE NINGALOO REEF

Marte and I arrived at the Northwest Cape of Australia for our third trip to the remote and small town of Exmouth, a two-plus hour flight north from Perth. On the west side of the cape was the Indian Ocean and the spectacular Ningaloo Reef. This area has attracted global attention for it’s intense marine environment and, in 2011, was designated a World Herrytage Site in the attempt to protect it’s natural bounty. Whale Sharks and Humpback Whales (with cubs) visit here during their migrations. Three varieties of sea turtles nest on the beaches. The coral and reef fish life is outstanding. And then there are the reasons I return: GT’s, Golden Trevally, Permit, Bonefish, Queenfish, etc etc. On the east side of the cape, there is the Gulf, a totally different marine environment with a vibrant population of flats species, especially permit. The specatular coral heads of the reef

side are not present here.....just a super rich marine world which feeds it's sportfish without the natural beauty of the coral structures of the Ningaloo Reef side.



The aerial photo of the Ningaloo Reef at left pictures the physical layout. Inside the reef and extending for about 75 – 100 yards are coral heads, each with a large number of various reef fish and creatures. Between the coral heads and the shoreline, the water shallows to produce a solid habitat for the flats species that are of interest to the fly rodder. Often, GT's are found on both the flats and around the coral heads - also inside cuts in the reef

One other element of the overall fishery is the offshore billfish opportunities. Sailfish and Blue, Black, and Striped Marlin are here. It seems as if everyone in Exmouth has a boat rigged for offshore fishing. This is the part of the fishing that attracts the most attention, leaving less exposure for the shallow water flats fly fishing. There are occasions, such as in November, when sailfish enter the gulf side pursuing baitballs,

when billfish can be sight cast to with a fly.

ECO INTERESTS AND FLY FISHING

On our second day in Exmouth, while waiting for my guide to pick me up, I noticed a guy walking down the road with a fly rod in hand.....not a common sight in Exmouth! So began a relationship with a fascinating young couple from Scotland, Selena and Keith (at right). Keith's primary interest was the fly fishing opportunities, but he and Selena shared a common passion in the natural phenomena of the cape, primarily the nesting sea turtles. Each morning, before departing for fishing, they would arise at dawn and patrol the beaches; every evening, after dark, they would return to the beaches. Their interest was twofold – they wanted to find a momma sea turtle digging her nest and to find a clutch of baby sea turtles popping out of a sandy nest. They found both.



Photos below, l to r: at dawn, a female Green Turtle finishes her nest in the sand, after laying 100+ eggs. As the sun peeks over the horizon, this exhausted mother heads back to the ocean. Early in their trip, they found a few babies hatching after dark.....the newborns use dark to hide their trek from the nest to the ocean from birds and other predators. Almost at the end of their trip, they found what they were looking for – a 100 (give or take) babies bubbling out of the sand and heading for the ocean. At right, for size perspective, Keith gently holds a newly hatched baby.



Keith is a newcomer to the salt water flats. He is a self-taught fly caster who had spent most of his fishing time pursuing stillwater and river trout. However, he enjoyed as much success in the salt with his fly rod as they did finding turtles! Photos above, l to r: One of his highlight days was taking 8 Queenfish in the shallows on

poppers. The Queenfish (left) is a spectacular leaper – a super fly rod fish in the 8 to 20# range. They devoted one day to fishing offshore and hooked and released a 190# Black Marlin taken on a fly. While looking for tailing permit on a shallow flat, a 40# GT was found patrolling the shallows and this photo resulted....a real thrill for a new salt water flats fly rodder on an 8 weight rod!! Other highlights included a 16# Golden Trevally and miscellaneous other species. At right, the Pacific Permit generally have more gold and yellow coloring than their Caribbean brothers. Keith had several shots at these challenging devils and had a few tail on his fly, but taking his first one will have to wait for his next trip.

STRICKLY FLY FISHING

Marte (my wife) is an avid snorkeler and spent most of her days on the coral and reefs. However, for me, it was all about the fishing. Mostly, the fishing gods smiled on me and I “hit it right.” So many highlights on this trip including a 17# permit (right, below) on my last day that included fighting with a 12 foot Tiger Shark over the fish. Four permit my last two days supplied my top highlight. I had 23 clean shots in my first four days at large GT’s that ranged from 40 – 60# with one monster that must have been 80#. I had several fish charge the fly (a GT charge in shallow water is an electric experience), four eats, and hookups with two fish that were over 50# and lost them to coral heads. Finally had to settle for a “smaller” one of about 30#. A large Golden Trevally (left, below) caught over coral heads is a real struggle to keep him out of the coral. The Mantaray Ningaloo Resort is the place to stay in Exmouth (center).



DAILY FISHING DIARY

If you’d like to see my daily fishing diary of our Ningaloo trip with more details on the fishery, click here: [Ningaloo Reef Fishing Diary](#)

Photo Credits: banner photo – Nigel Birt; muddy water browns – Mark Wilson; sight fishing Lake Brunner – John Rathbun; 5# brown – Joe Restic; Eco and Fly Fishing – Selena and Keith.

Either phone or drop us an e-mail if you have questions or would like more information about any of our destinations.

An enthusiastic traveling fly fisherman,
Don Muelrath

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