

(Thanks to Doug Monnig for this excellent and in-depth report on fly fishing New Zealand. Doug has made 14 trips to New Zealand so he has a span of experiences from which to create this extensive report.)



Above: Doug with 10.25# brown taken on a dry fly

Last year, you asked me to send you some photos when I returned from my 2022/2023 season fly fishing trip to New Zealand's South Island. Per your request, a few of the better photos from my recent trip, and some other favorite photos from that South Island region, are attached. This was my 14<sup>th</sup> visit to New Zealand and my 13<sup>th</sup> trip fly fishing the South Island with a true guiding virtuoso since March 2002. Scott and I have fished roughly 42 different South Island rivers together (adding two new rivers to that list this trip) and have landed (and carefully released unharmed) roughly 75 trophy brown trout (8 lb. +), including 18 that were double digits (10+ lb).

The rivers we fish all have the potential to hold large trout, but they vary tremendously in width, depth, flow, gradient, bottom composition, geology and surrounding vegetation. Classic South Island trout rivers vary from boisterous headwater rivers, surrounded by ancient beech forests, with big boulders, deep pools and steep gradients, to wide, braided rivers of cobbled stones with lower gradients, to willow lined, meadow streams, some that one could nearly jump across, to heavily weeded spring creeks. There are still dozens of excellent rivers in that region I haven't fished yet. One of the most incredible scenes I have ever witnessed on a trout stream anywhere played out on a crystal clear, South Island river about nine years ago. I was targeting a large brown that was feeding sporadically on mayfly nymphs, mayfly adults and cicadas. We both stared in astonished disbelief as the trout rose for and then refused a large, natural cicada that was struggling on the surface, and then immediately started lining up on the small, parachute mayfly pattern dry fly that I had just placed a few feet upstream from the live cicada. Expecting the live cicada to disappear into those big jaws, we both nearly forgot about my drifting fly. Our jaws dropped simultaneously as the big brown slowly rose and gently inhaled my small dry fly, turning down the natural, steak entrée for the artificial, after-dinner mint. Regaining my wits, I eventually set into solid resistance and then, after a blistering run, spent the next 10 minutes trying to turn that magnificent 8.5 lb. male and coax it out from under the far bank and back to our side of the river, where we eventually landed it.



Despite some less than ideal weather conditions, breaking my Orvis Helios 4-weight fly rod on a 7 lb. backcountry brown (landed), and losing one of my expensive Galvan fly reels, this most recent trip was very enjoyable and rewarding. We fished 14 consecutive days (including some shortened, easier, half days on nearby local rivers), but we landed trout all 14 days and landed almost 100 browns total for the

trip (1.5 to 10.25 lb.). As I expected going in, the brown trout we landed this more typical 22/23 season were about the same age and length, but roughly 40% lighter in weight than the unusually beefy browns we landed my previous visit during the 2019/2020 season epic “mouse year”, when the trout were



enjoying the largest beech forest mast (excess seed production) and mouse population explosion in over 50 years. With the mice mostly gone, this season’s brown trout were in normal condition to slightly on the lean side, healthy, and very strong fighting, but they weren’t carrying any mouse weight. During my 19/20 season “mouse year” visit (also 14 days fishing), Scott and I landed 15 trophy browns between 8 and 12.5 lbs. (one 8 lb. beauty on a dry fly, the rest on nymphs), including five double digit trout. Trophies were much harder to come by this season, and I only landed two trophy browns – 9 lb. and 10.25 lb. (photos attached), both on dry flies. The 9 lb. brown slurped a #14 CDC mayfly pattern and the 10.25 lb. brown ate a #10 black cicada. Numbers were good for younger, smaller trout, but recent

floods seem to have taken out some of the older, larger fish. The dry fly fishing, with both mayfly and cicada patterns, was pretty special this trip and probably the best dry fly fishing that I have ever experienced on the South Island. I had 10 cicada eats one day on a backcountry river, and 6 another day on a local river, all from large (5 lb.+ ) brown trout. Scott, who has probably landed as many wild, naturally grown (non-canal), double digit browns as any South Island guide, said that the 10.25 lb. trout I landed this trip was the first double digit brown that he has seen landed on a dry fly in over 21 years. In our experience, the larger browns are usually taken by sight fishing with nymphs, but surprisingly, the largest trout we landed on four different days this trip (all big males at least 6.5 lb.) were all taken on a dry fly.

**Note on my terminology:** A “local” river refers to a river section that one can easily drive to and access without a specialized, off-road vehicle. A “backcountry” river refers to a river section that requires a helicopter, a boat, a specialized, off-road vehicle or a long hike to access.

From season to season, it continually amazes me how dramatically those South Island rivers change in appearance (big floods move around a lot of real estate), the way they fish, and the number, size and condition of the trout they hold. New Zealand gets a lot of rainfall, particularly on the South Island’s West Coast. During any month of the year, it can rain hard for days, blowing out rivers for several days in a row. According to biologists, the size and frequency of South Island floods are major factors in limiting brown trout numbers, size and condition, and the South Island has seen some major and damaging flood events over the last year or so. All New Zealand rivers, both backcountry and local, are experiencing increasing angling pressure, and we all know how large, wild brown trout respond to angling pressure. It is always a chess match to work around other guides/anglers in the area, to work within the angler’s calendar and helicopter budget constraints, to pick the right stretch of river (unfished for several days) for the flow and weather conditions, to find a feeding trout, and to select a fly that will fool the trout into a regrettable meal choice and an embarrassing photo. [We’ve all been there, mate.] In my experience, there are always off days when the weather or flow isn’t what it should be, or the trout are either absent or simply not willing to play, but allowing for at least 5 full fishing days at each base location and having

an experienced and knowledgeable guide with a strategic approach for the week's fly fishing, taking all factors into account, are key to a successful New Zealand fly fishing trip.

During this recent trip, we flew by helicopter (at right) into backcountry rivers five different days and drove to nearby local rivers the other 9 days. My most productive day was on a beautiful backcountry river where we spotted 45 or more good trout, stuck around 25, and landed 21 between 3.75 lb. and 9 lb. Fifteen of those landed were over 5 lb., and seven were at least 7 lb. The trout were feeding well most of the day. Most ate #14 or #16 mayfly nymphs, but I also had 5 dry fly eats (mayfly and cicada patterns) from browns that all looked to be over 5 lb., including the largest brown landed that day - a beautiful 9 lb. male (~30 inches long).



Another day, we decided to roll the dice on a shot at a trophy and flew into a backcountry river known for large and very spooky trout, but where I have landed multiple trophies with Scott in years past. I, and fly anglers more skilled and accomplished, have also been completely blanked on this challenging trophy river. Despite a less than stellar angling performance by me that day, and missing a couple of nymph takes from large trout, I stuck and lost a smaller (5 lb.) brown, and landed one long (29"), skinny, 6.5 lb. brown that was probably a solid, double digit fish at one time. I did, however, land it on a #16 standard grizzly hackle Adams dry fly. That skinny brown, which had been rising to mayflies on the surface, is noteworthy only because it was only the 2<sup>nd</sup> trout Scott has ever seen landed on a dry fly from that particular river, and the first on a dry fly in 25 years. Another day, on a third backcountry river, the large trout were actively searching for cicadas after 10 AM, and I had 10 dry fly eats on a #10 black cicada. Several big browns moved at least 6 feet to stalk and slowly inhale that cicada pattern from the surface, including my best trout of the trip, and my largest brown trout ever on a dry fly - a beautiful 10.25 lb. male (~31 inches long). For a trout guy like me, it doesn't get any better than hunting big noses on the surface with a dry fly. Seeing those two massive jaws slowly come up and out of the water around my dry fly was a magical experience beyond description, and is a lifetime memory beyond price.

Local rivers also provided some very interesting fly fishing this trip. One easy day, fishing only 2-3 hours on a nearby river, we found a few decent trout feeding actively below willows in shallow water within a few feet of the bank. We targeted, stuck and landed three of them between 2.5 and 4.75 lb. The largest was occasionally eating on the surface, but refused to eat a dry fly. It took 30 fly changes before it finally ate a little yellow caddis nymph. Just fun, challenging, sight fishing. Another day, on a small stream less than a 20 minute drive from the lodge, we spotted 6 or 7 good browns (all over 5 lb.) actively feeding over about 200 yards of stream. We targeted, stuck and landed three of them between 5.25 and 6.5 lb. in about an hour of fishing at the end of the day, using caddis nymphs. We could see the trout turning on their sides to scrape caddis larvae off the rocks with the sides of their jaws. That last hour made the whole day. On my last day fishing, we drove about 50 minutes to a larger local river (wider, lower gradient) surrounded by pastures. Being mostly wide open, with a few deep pools, this river is a joy to fish with either nymphs or dries. We spent most of the day fishing up the main river, spotting nine browns (2.5 to 7 lb.), getting two to eat a nymph, and two to eat a deer hair cicada dry fly. The trout we landed in the main river were all under 4.5 lb. For the last 1.5 hours of the day, we continued a few hundred yards up

a smaller tributary river and things suddenly got more interesting. We found eight good browns in a few short runs and they all appeared to be at least 5 lb. We stuck four on the cicada and landed three beautiful browns between 5 and 6.5 lb. The fourth big brown jumped 2 feet out of the water and threw the dry fly. It was a long, hot walk back to the truck, but that day was a good way to end the trip. As with any good fly fishing trip, each day brought new adventures, new challenges and a new story. That's why I keep a fly fishing journal, so I can remember each of the 50+ days I spend on a trout stream each year.



New Zealand's South Island offers some incredible fly fishing, mostly sight fishing, for large, wild trout on a staggering number and variety of beautiful rivers, both local and backcountry, but my South Island fly fishing experience has **not** been all rainbows and unicorns. The fly fishing can be difficult, unproductive for long periods, and physically demanding. The sand flies can be annoying and the prolonged periods of unsettled weather can be frustrating. South Island fly fishing can also call upon a different set of skills than most American fly fishing. Contrary to some of the promotional hype one sees, I can state with a high degree of certainty that wild, double digit, brown trout are **not** sitting in front of every South Island river boulder, nor are they eagerly waiting to eat an artificial fly, "mouse year" or not. Executing,

with accuracy, that all important first cast and drift, after scrambling over boulders for the last half hour without casting, and while staring at a spooky, 25"+ brown trout, is not a situation in which most American fly anglers routinely find themselves. Remaining as still as possible, I have cast to a single, continuously feeding, 8.5 lb. brown trout for over 1.5 hours, with over 40 fly changes, before finally getting that bruiser to eat a tiny mayfly nymph and landing it after a fierce battle. That one-on-one contest with a sighted, large trout is what makes New Zealand fly fishing unique. Luck and chance always play a major role in fly fishing, but, in my experience, the ability to set aside the nerves and sore legs, to quickly adjust to the situation at hand, and to calmly and effectively capitalize on the limited number of trout opportunities that may present themselves, is a very valuable skill set for South Island fly fishing. Experienced fly anglers, with reasonable expectations and willing to put in the time and effort, are usually rewarded in proportion to the amount of time and effort they invest. Novice fly anglers, expecting blue skies, instant results, easy walking/wading, and lots of large trout landed each day, may be setting themselves up for some frustration and/or disappointment. Based on the season, the river, the amount of flooding that has occurred, and whether mice are available to the trout, I try to maintain reasonable expectations about the numbers and size/weight of the South Island trout I am hunting. NZ trout, on average, tend to be large compared to American trout, but a mile of a good South Island river may only hold a handful of mature trout that spook easily. Hence, the greater need to hunt for and locate the trout before casting, rather than spooking fish and wasting precious time by blind fishing every spot that could, but probably won't, hold a mature trout. My experience has been that hunting South Island trout involves covering a lot more water (always moving upstream to avoid detection, typically 4 to 7 rugged miles in a day) than I would on most similarly sized American trout streams, which often hold ten or more times as many mature, but generally smaller, trout.

Every angler's South Island experience is different, but as a seasoned fly angler in my 40s and early 50s, and fishing world class rivers for at least a week each trip with an excellent guide, I made seven wonderful fly fishing trips to the South Island (2002 -2012), landing plenty of magnificent, wild, 5 to 9 lb. brown trout, before I landed my first double digit brown. We've all seen photos and videos of the huge, football-shaped, double digit brown trout landed during the 19/20 season from picturesque South Island rivers, and even during the following 20/21 season (during the Covid border closure), but those two seasons incorporated an unusual, once in 50 years, beech mast/"mouse year" event. Anglers were finding trophy browns in South Island rivers, both local and backcountry, where trout of that size had not been seen for many years. I was fortunate enough to be there during that 19/20 season. It was amazing, but those mice-fattened trout were **not** typical of what I would expect to see during a normal season. Beech-mast "mouse year" events of varying magnitudes, and impacting different river basins to varying degrees, will continue to cycle through the South Island every 4 to 8 years, but I doubt that I will ever see the same numbers of those supersized, 19/20 season brown trout again during my lifetime. During a normal season, when mice are not a significant food source (like the current 22/23 season), those same 28" to 30" South Island trout might only weigh 60% or less of what they would weigh if they were eating lots of mice at night (7 lb. vs. 11 lb.). As the photos from my recent trip will attest, 8 lb.+ trophies are still a real possibility during a normal South Island season, but they are, and should be, the happy exception, not the expected norm. It is tempting to focus only on backcountry trophy rivers, but by doing so, I would have missed out on some amazing fly fishing. The most incredible fly fishing I have ever experienced were days spent stalking 3 to 6 lb. trout on beautiful, lesser known, South Island rivers that rarely see a trophy trout. South Island rivers are constantly changing and cycling, and trying to duplicate a previous season's successes on any particular stretch of river is usually a fool's errand. A flexible and adventurous attitude (which I increasingly struggle to demonstrate with aging knees) may be the most valuable gear one can bring to the South Island for enjoyable and successful fly fishing. Like every South Island river, every South Island season is unique, and each should be valued and enjoyed for the unique fly fishing offered.

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