

REPORT – FIRST TIME IN NEW ZEALAND

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Fly fishing the rivers of New Zealand is a study in contrasts: the predictable and the unexpected, the frustrating and the exhilarating, nymphs and dries, blue sky, crystal water days and cloudy days with brown, raging rivers. I experienced both such days and each was truly memorable.

I had already fished 2 days with Scotty Murray and it was clear why he is one of New Zealand's top guides! We had landed at least 10 fish each day and a number of these had been in the 3 to 4 pound range -- all beautiful healthy browns.

By the evening before my last day fishing with Scotty, the rain began coming down in buckets, and it continued through the night! The next morning the river by the lodge was a chocolate-colored torrent. At breakfast I was thoroughly prepared to hear that everything was blown out and fishing impossible. I should have known better!

Scotty knew his rivers, and while the Tutaki was high and brown, it was fishable. Right off he spotted a nice fish holding in the shallow water close to shore. I thought I'd seen him too and after a few tries sent the nymph where Scotty directed. Maybe it was the tension of not knowing if and when we'd see another fish, but I was keyed up. I set the hook on an "imagined take" and spooked the fish – not a great way to start the day.

We moved up stream but similar spots that held fish were not to be found. The next misadventure was with Scotty's net. The "business end" had come loose and fallen while we walked. We searched a bit and then he went back to the truck for the spare. Now I just needed to shake off my discouragement and give him reason to use the net.

As the morning progressed the sky stayed mostly cloudy but rain did not return. The water was slowly clearing and fish were becoming evident. However, it wasn't until after some hard fishing, very tough river crossings and Scotty's decision to use a worm pattern that I finally hooked and landed a fish. What a beauty and my largest in NZ so far -- a bit over 5 lbs!

In my fishing journal this day has been labeled, "*A Comedy of Errors and All's Well that Ends Well.*" Our next comedic error involved a tree that had washed into the river and a water bottle. Scotty spotted a fish just up stream from the tree's huge root section. "When you hook him", Scotty said, "I'll jump right in above the roots, so he won't break you off in that mess." The fish was hooked and Scotty dashed into the river. As he did so my fly line caught around the water bottle on his backpack. Much shouting and splashing ensued, but in the end the fish did break off. A great laugh was shared by all 3 of us!

I did say the day ended well, because I land another five pounder in the next hole up, and in a final quick look before we headed home, the missing net was found. That one unexpected, stormy day on the Tutaki was a treasure I'll remember always.

Fast forward, through 10 days touring the South Island. Again, Don has booked me with an "A-list" New Zealand guide. Dean Bell picked me up at my motel on a beautifully clear and windless day – one of the few such days on this trip. Our destination was the Oriti River – well know for its big browns!

When we got there the river and the sky were vying to show off their most spectacular shades of blue. The air was cool and still. No more perfect day for fly fishing New Zealand

was possible! After hiking hard downstream for at least an hour it was time to fish. The walking was wonderful and served to loosen my nerves a bit. While Scotty had been friendly and extra encouraging, Dean was more reserved and, I'd been told, could be a very exacting guide.

In spite of the spectacular conditions it took a while to spot a fish. Dean tied on a blow fly pattern – an exciting change after the 3 days of nearly exclusive nymph fishing with Scotty. The fish rose for the fly but my hook set was too quick. Dean explained that when you see the indicator good down the fish has already taken the nymph so a timely set is essential. When a fish breaks the water for a dry, you need to hesitate just a bit and give him time to reach the fly.

This is the kind of “exacting guide” I’ll fish with any day. The next time one of the big browns broke the surface I timed it right and had a beauty to show the camera! I know now that when Dean gave advice it was to be headed.

It took us all day to fish the stretch of river we had walked down in an hour. My efforts were rewarded with 3 more “photo-worthy” fish and a number of learning opportunities – aka “goof-ups.” My most memorable mistake was when a huge brown took my fly just above a rough stretch of boulder filled water. When the fish took off down stream and Dean yelled, “run!” I was amazed that I did just that across a similar rock pile on shore. What I didn’t do was keep running when my feet got to easier ground. One slight pause to catch my breath and the fish easily broke the 5X tippet! Without a doubt, this is my favorite “lost fish” of all times.

Thank you Don for lining up these amazing days with Scotty Murray and Dean Bell. Different in so many ways they both brought amazing fish, beautiful surroundings, valuable lessons and good company. Both were fishing days of a lifetime!