

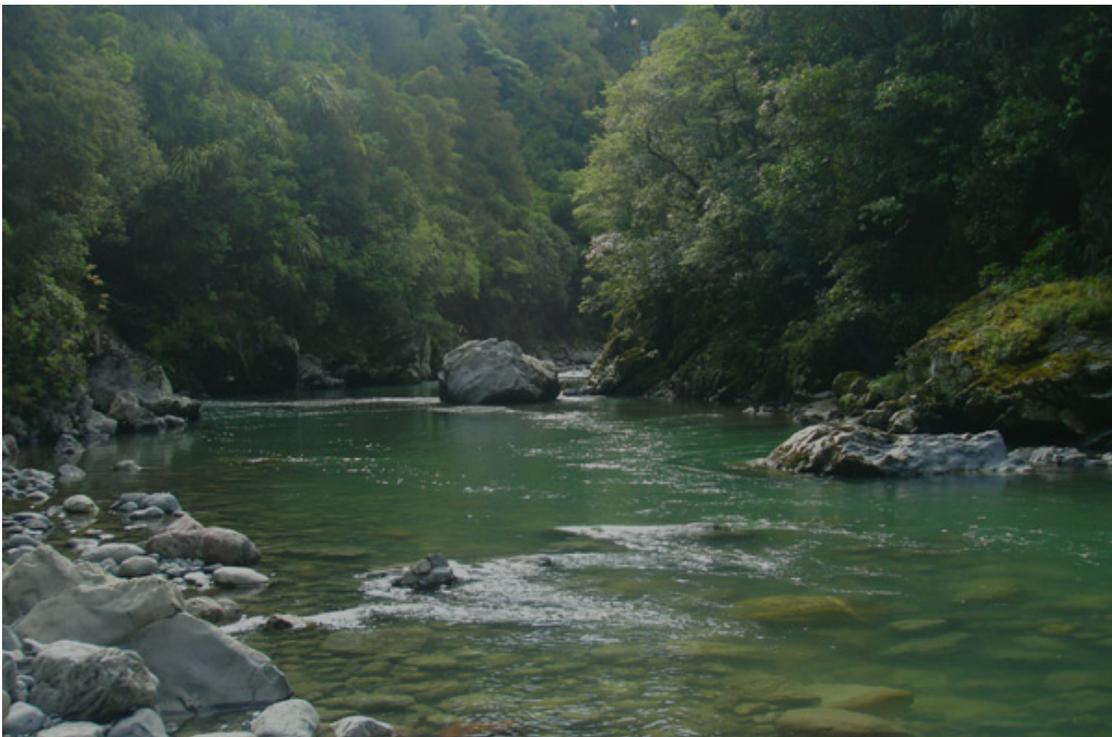
Making sense of the backcountry

Marc Griffiths

The cool length of turquoise pool reflects the varied greens of the native bush valley. Twenty-four inches of fish, bronze body, powder blue head, weave side to side suspended beneath the bubble line. The small white tuft of poly-yarn passes over him, he veers ever so slightly. I strike on a hunch, the rod arches, he shakes his head, once, twice, surging powerfully upstream, leaping high into air, flanks flashing in the afternoon sun. Minutes later the smooth, solid piscine form flexes in my submerged hands. I flick the mayfly nymph from his jaw and he swims away over the sandy flats, morphing into creases of current flowing over dark bed rock. He is gone. I am content.

Backcountry defined

“Backcountry” is the term often used in flyfishing literature to refer to isolated or wilderness areas. Broadly speaking there are two types of backcountry stream/rivers in New Zealand; those that flow through tussock on high country plains or open valleys and those that flow through steep sided valleys of natural bush, deep within mountain ranges. Tussock or high country streams are pretty, but, for me, bush streams are some of the most beautiful places on earth.



PHOTOS: CORONA GRACE

New Zealand is blessed with literally hundreds of bush streams, most of which contain trout. While a few are easily accessible, most require a tramp (hike) of one to six hours, or alternatively a helicopter ride. Certain bush streams are small and intimate while others are large and powerful; but they're all edgy and wild. Deep clear pools flow into white roily rapids, runs and chutes. Progress is over boulders and logs, requiring numerous crossings, and sometimes a swim or precarious rock climb to negotiate a deep pool. The weather can change in an instant, as heavy clouds drift over the skyline and valley walls. Flow rates can rise ten or even a hundredfold in less than half an hour.

There is no dangerous wildlife, either poisonous or toothed, but mammoth pieces of driftwood atop rock walls and in trees above your head, as well as broad scars of exposed mountain where a strip of bush has crashed into the river, remind you, you are here at both the mercy and grace of nature. A fine spell is certainly an invitation, but you need to be careful not to overstay your welcome. Use government websites with information on flow rates and weather forecasts to plan your bush trips carefully.



What backcountry streams have in common, be they bush or tussock, is water as clear as air and large trout. Some rivers - including big names such as the Rangatikei, Ngaruroro, Mohaka and Clinton - contain rainbows and browns, but most have only

Salmo trutta. There is nothing diminishing about “only” in that sentence. I love brown trout, perhaps more than any other fish in the world. They are intelligent, have attractive ways and a lot more soul than many people. Although backcountry trout tend to be large, generally four to seven pounds, densities are lower than most overseas anglers are used to (generally less than 20 fish per km).

On an average day a good angler could expect to land around four fish, lose a couple and miss one or two more. If you are after numbers, fish the lowland portions of the system, where fish populations are higher and the gradients more manageable for smaller trout. A few of New Zealand’s backcountry rivers flowing into lakes are full of skinny, gullible, post-spawning rainbows at the beginning of each season, e.g. the Greenstone, Caples and Hunter Rivers. This article is more about fishing for resident fish.



Fishing the backcountry

Targeting sparsely distributed spooky trout in crystal water requires special techniques. The most effective approach, outside of the cicada season, is to cast only to sighted fish. This means you can spend most of your day walking and searching for shapes and shadows. Sunny skies are almost mandatory. Of course the odd cast to an unfathomable sweet-spot, such as the head of a pool or run, can produce some surprising results, and save a cloudy day.



Once a fish is located, you then present your fly without scaring it off. Backcountry browns will seldom move more than a foot to intercept a nymph or a small dry fly, so the first cast should be accurate and delicate. Owing to the position of their eyes, trout have a blind spot immediately behind them. The most effective tactic is therefore to sneak up on your quarry from directly downstream, and to make a short accurate cast that places your leader, but not the fly line, right over its back. This approach is of course not always possible, and you will often find yourself casting up and across. In such situations the fish has a greater chance of spotting you, so be sure you keep low and false cast behind the trout, changing the angle of your final delivery.

Line flash is supposed to be one of the biggest causes of spooked trout. Dull grey or olive floating lines and 15 to 18 foot leaders are essential. Five or six weight outfits are ideal. Lighter than that, and you will begin to experience problems casting into the wind with large dry flies and heavily weighted nymphs on long leaders - heavier, and presentation becomes less delicate than it could be.

Choice of fly depends largely on the time of year. Early in the season fish focus on nymphs. As summer approaches they start looking to the surface for small terrestrials and hatching mayflies. If your quarry is near the surface and appears to be 'looking up',

try a small bushy dry fly such as a Humpy or a Mayfly Dun imitation on your first cast. If there is no response, switch to nymphs. The chance of spooking backcountry trout in shallow water increases exponentially with each additional cast.

The distance you place your fly upstream of your target is critical. More than about three feet is seldom necessary for dry flies. When it comes to nymphing it is essential the flies attains the depth of the fish by the time they drift past it. If you are using the direct upstream approach, you have a drift distance of three foot less than the length of your leader to achieve the required depth. Cast further upstream and you will surely spook the fish with your fly line.

Try a single nymph in shallow or slow water, but when fish are more than a foot below the surface in water of reasonable flow, use a tandem rig. A Kiwi-style tandem rig consists of two flies: a larger and heavier “dropper” pattern tied directly to the tippet, and a smaller “point” pattern tied to the hook bend of the former, via eight to twelve inches of tippet material (see Fig 1). Although the purpose of the dropper is to provide sufficient weight to achieve the depth required, it will often catch fish if the pattern is carefully chosen.

Swimming nymph and stonefly patterns with lots of weight – e.g. Hare & Squirrel, Hot Wire Stonefly and Twisted Sister - are sensible backcountry choices. Many anglers do not appreciate the weight required to reach their target, and invariably spook it with a volley of accurate but ineffective casts. As a general guideline, fish beneath three or four feet of moderately flowing water require dropper patterns with tungsten beads of at least 2.5 or 3mm.

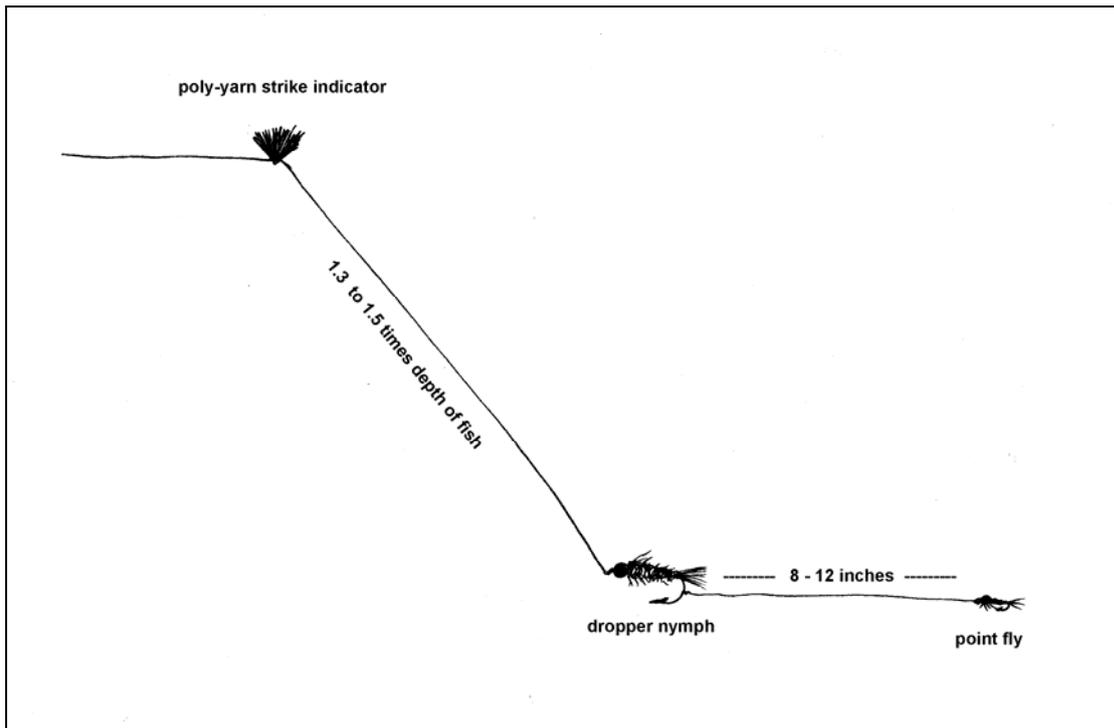


Figure 1: Kiwi-style tandem rig.

Evidence based on scientific research and anecdotal reports of guides and experienced fishermen is unequivocal: backcountry trout become more selective with angler contact. By mid summer, point flies as small as size 18 or 20 are frequently necessary to fool clever fish, effective patterns being those that imitate the most abundant aquatic insect at the time.

Educated fish also become leader shy. Fluorocarbon tippet material is less visible underwater than nylon, and also has better abrasion resistance. Fluorocarbon does not, however, tolerate sudden impacts, so go easy on the strike. Fluorocarbon is not made equal and certain brands have soured the opinions of many anglers. Find a brand you can trust and stick with it. I use Rio Fluoroflex Plus. 5X fluorocarbon is slightly stiffer than nylon of equivalent thickness and will handle dropper patterns with tungsten beads of up to 3mm (size 12). Use 6X for point flies size 18 or smaller.

Choice of knot plays a bigger role in how fish see flies than many anglers realise. The Non-slip Monoloop allows nymphs and dry flies more natural movement as they drift in the current. Weighted nymphs also sink more vertically, which not only looks more natural, but in this position they will sink faster. Another advantage of this knot, is that it

often tests close to the breaking strain of the tippet material, provided you use the correct number of turns above the over hand knot and moisten liberally before tightening. For tippets of thickness 8X to 4X, or breaking strain two to six pounds, use seven turns. Keep the loop as small as possible. Distance between point and dropper flies should be between eight and twelve inches – any longer and the flies are likely to end up in currents of different speeds, with the point fly drifting unnaturally.

Indicators are essential components of the site-fishing nymphing rig, not so much to indicate strikes, but to locate the approximate position of flies and assist with line control necessary to prevent drag. On many occasions I have missed fish by relying solely on the indicator. Watch the fish instead. When the indicator is in the vicinity and you see the trout swerve, wriggle unusually or open and close its mouth, strike sharply.

I am not a great proponent of dry flies as indicators on backcountry streams; except perhaps on flat calm pools or where the fish are near the surface and there is a good chance they could take either. Bushy dry flies are wind resistant and in tandem with a weighted nymph will greatly diminish casting accuracy, especially if there is any wind, and there usually is. My favourite indicator is a small clump of polypropylene yarn attached to the leader by means of a slip knot, and treated with paste floatant.

Polypropylene is hydrophobic which means that it does not eventually absorb water the way treated Globug yarn or sheep's fleece does. White, cream or light grey indicators look like bubbles or natural flotsam - steer away from bright colours, they spook fish.

The distance between dropper pattern and indicator should be one-and-a-third to one-and-a-half times the depth of the water you are fishing. Too short and the indicator will drag under before the flies reach the required depth. Too long and you will miss fish, either because the indicator does not dip under on the take, or because it poorly indicates the position of your flies. Flies in water with complex currents often end up way too much to one side or even downstream of the indicator, especially if the indicator-fly distance is too long, and unknown to the angler the flies drag. It is therefore necessary to continually adjust the position of the indicator (and the weight of the dropper pattern) to match the depth of water you are fishing. Carrying pre-tied tandem rigs with a range of two or three dropper weights means you only have to tie one knot (i.e. tippet to dropper

pattern) instead of three, each time you need to fish a different depth. Fingers tend to become a little shaky with a visible twenty-odd inch fish feeding a few meters away.

Although a good first presentation is the Golden Rule for back country sight fishing, trout in more than about three feet of water frequently require three or five casts, with the same patterns, to elicit a take. Whether this is because they were focusing on other food items on earlier drifts, or the point fly was not drifting naturally or in a convincing position, is anyone's guess.

More importantly do not get put off if your first two casts are ignored by a trout in deeper water. Assuming the trout continues feeding, change the point fly only every five or so drifts. Feeding fish sway from side to side in the current, whereas spooked fish lie doggo, flat on the bottom, or in severe cases dash for cover.



Cicada Season

Backcountry trout are spooky when the season opens on 1 October and become increasingly wily as it progresses. Then, around the beginning of February, when they are close to infuriating, the cicadas hit the water, and all disdainful resolve and superior breeding vanish. Unseen fish lying hidden amongst the boulders, 4 or even 10 feet below

the surface, will happily journey all the way to the top to seize one of these big juicy bugs, or something that looks like one. Even when rivers are low and clear at this time of year, I will only see half of the fish I catch before I cast. Unseen trout are prepared to move considerable distances for cicadas, so you suddenly have access to a larger proportion of the fish in the river. Research on South Island bush streams by the Cawthron Institute suggests that expert anglers notice only 14 to 33% of fish. Careful prospecting using large terrestrial imitations can therefore pay dividends when cicadas are about.

The flightless grasshoppers and tussock/grassland cicadas that drive the terrestrial season on high country streams, are mostly cream/tan below and seldom longer than 2cm. Although impressionistic searching patterns such as Humpies, Stimulators and large Elk Hair Caddis' work well at this time of year, I tend to prefer imitative patterns constructed from foam. They are not only heavier than bushy alternatives, but require less wind-resistant wing and hackle to float, so are easier to cast into the wind. More terrestrials are blown onto the water on windy days than on calm ones. Calm days in high country valleys are also few and far between.



ambitious young trout

The cicada species responsible for the seasonal “hatch” in the native bush each year is *Amphipsalta zealandica*; it also happens to be the largest and noisiest of the thirty or so species found in New Zealand. Fishing big terrestrial imitations to large sighted brown trout in turquoise bush streams during the cicada season, is probably as close to paradise as you could hope to get with a fly rod. Large fish rising through several feet of gin clear water, big snouts poking through the surface and loud suction rises are memories that linger long after the season is over.

The cicada season is a special time to fish New Zealand bush streams and I have written an article on the topic, to be published in the Summer 2007/08 edition of FlyLife magazine, and posted on Wildflies website towards the end of December - just in time for the 2008 season.