



On The Bite



Catch and... relief

Failure is not an option for the Fly-fishing guides of New Zealand, who tend to take their craft very seriously indeed...



By Bill Bachman

I've always approached fly-fishing more as art than craft, ever hopeful that instinct will triumph over science. Which is to say, I'm basically lazy when it comes to mastering the finer points of fly selection, knot tying, fish behaviour and most of the other highly-detailed (some would say obsessive) aspects of the sport. My approach to fishing involves wandering along a mountain stream and casting into all the likely places. More often than not, this approach seems to work.

Faced with a Tasmanian lake or a fast-flowing South Island river, however, I just sort of stand there and wonder where to begin. All the good instincts in the world suddenly seem pathetically inadequate in the face of so much water. And 'just wandering along' doesn't feel like much of a plan. Which is why our trip to the Nelson region of New Zealand was all about the guides. Without them, it would have been all about the scenery.

Mind you, the scenery was pretty good. It was one of those weeks in early autumn when the windows of the sky were flung wide open. Under a pale spotless blue canopy, the roadside grasses

were taking on a russet tinge and the riverine willows had already begun to round the turn towards winter. Cold nights, misty mornings, warm, sunny days. The rivers were at just the right level and the big brown trout that are such a feature of this part of NZ were in peak condition. We were very eager – and to be honest, very ignorant.

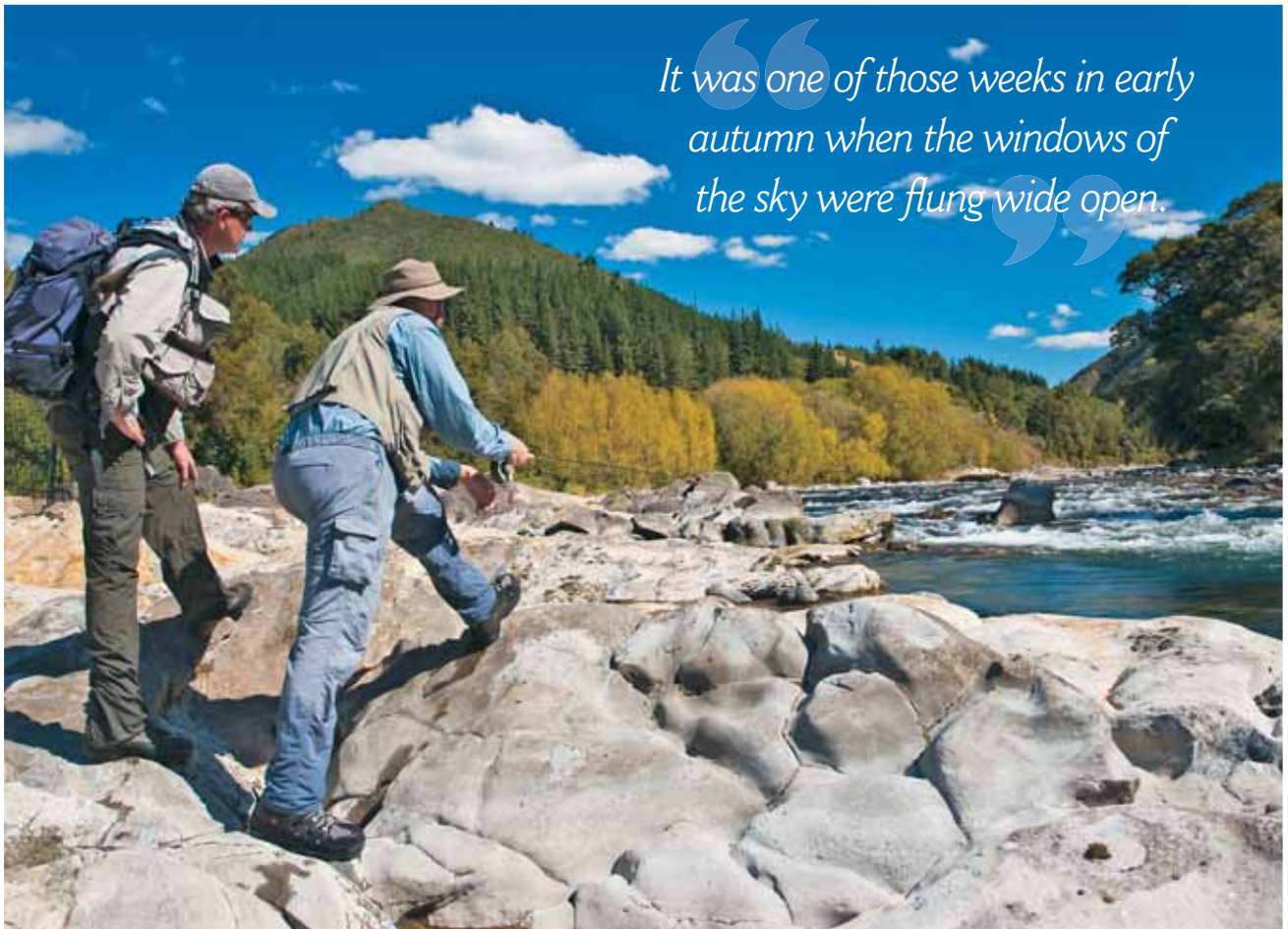
LINE OF SIGHT

Fishing to visible trout is the name of the game, but here's the problem: in these rivers, you are working with thigh-deep water, which flows quickly over chocolate and butterscotch rocks with glints of red and gold – the colours of trout themselves. Tiny panes of clarity open and wink shut too quickly for you to be sure whether you're looking at a fish, or the bottom of the river, or both. It can be dizzying just standing there watching the current; actually seeing anything within it is almost impossible for the untrained or inexperienced.

It takes very special skills to read these shifting shapes and recognise what is fish and what is

Page 94/5: The upper Wangapeka River, South Island, New Zealand.

Below: Sightfishing the Wangapeka.



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It takes very special skills to read these shifting shapes and recognise what is fish and what is figment.

figment. As Owen River Lodge proprietor, Felix Borenstein, our host for the week, puts it: "What makes the top of the South Island unique is the size of the fish, the clarity of the rivers and the stalking aspect. There is nowhere else in the world that has all these characteristics. It is sight fishing at its very best, and good guiding is an essential ingredient."

At up to \$NZ650 per day (which covers two clients), the services of a good guide do not come cheap. But as Felix says, "You can have a great day fishing on your own, but it will almost always be better with a guide. They will find fish for you and keep you from wasting time on unproductive water. We encourage people to use a guide as often as they can comfortably afford. Don't even think about how much each fish is costing you – it's not about that. It's about having the best experience possible."

Luckily, Felix reserved guides for us well ahead of our visit – a good idea in this part of NZ, as the best guides are usually booked up months in advance. Enter "The Stalker," "The Water Strider" and "The Wombat" – three of the South Island's sun-browned finest, all at our disposal for five days.

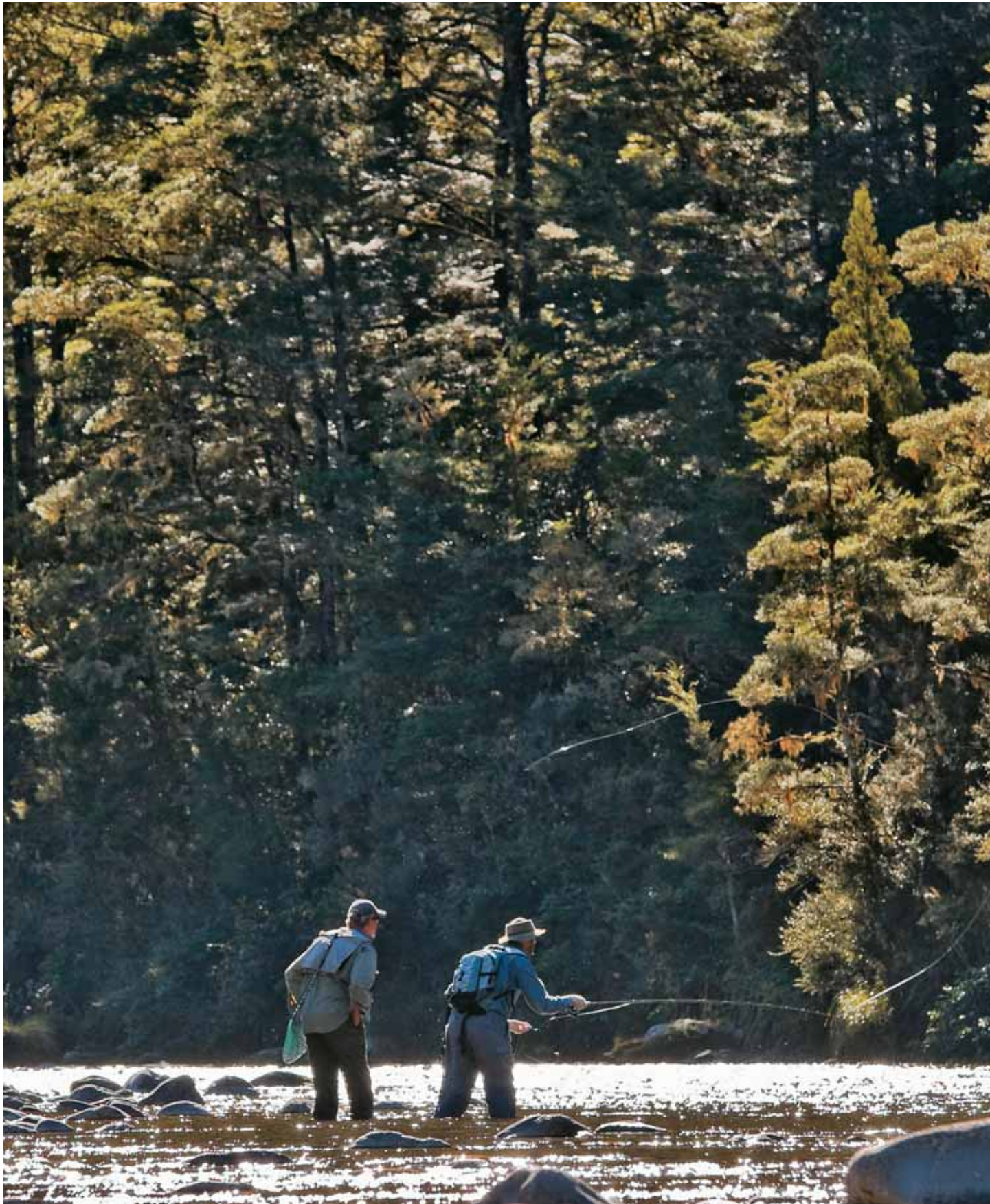
THE STALKER

The first thing we learned on day one was that trout keep incredibly civilised hours in this part of NZ. Most of the rivers fish best between 10:00am and 4:00pm, with early morning fishing highly over-rated (a bonus when you're on holiday) and not much happening from 4:00pm until almost dark (by which time any sensible angler is onto his third Scotch). Also, warm, sunny days are much better than cool, cloudy ones, when the fish are more difficult to see and harder to please. Thus educated, and with a chilly mist enclosing the lodge, the first order of the day was more coffee.

I can think of few professionals who have such passion for their work as fishing guides. Maybe heli-skiing guides – both NZ specialities. They can't wait to get onto the water and are always reluctant to leave at the end of the day. It could have been the caffeine at work or just his natural enthusiasm, but before long The Stalker was herding us – another NZ specialty – into his twin-cab: "We're not going to catch fish standing around here," he said.



*Top: A client takes advice.
Above: A handsome
Wangapeka River resident.*





My partner for the week was Rob Sloane, lifelong angler and Tasmania-based publisher of a world-class fly-fishing magazine. Despite authoring several books professing to reveal everything in the universe about trout and catching them, he also has a refreshingly unscientific approach to actually doing it and an occasional tendency towards ineptitude, which made us well-suited.

After a 50-minute drive and a short walk through a cow paddock, we waded into the Wangapeka River at the crack of 10. The Stalker was up on a rock immediately, leaning forward with thumbs hooked in the straps of his rucksack and cap pulled low over his eyes, peering intently into the current.

Somehow, these guys can unpick the camouflage of water rippling over riverbed to reveal trout moving and holding in the flow. Don't ask me how – time and again I stood close, looking along the line of an outstretched arm at what, to them, was a trout of a very specific size and colour and to me was, well, a bit of coloured water shimmering in the sunlight. In the end, I just tried to put the fly where they told me to and hoped for the best.

Guides also get very agitated if they go for more than 10 or 15 minutes without seeing a trout, so The Stalker was visibly relieved when



A relieved guide shares his client's success.



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It is sight fishing at its very best, and good guiding is an essential ingredient.

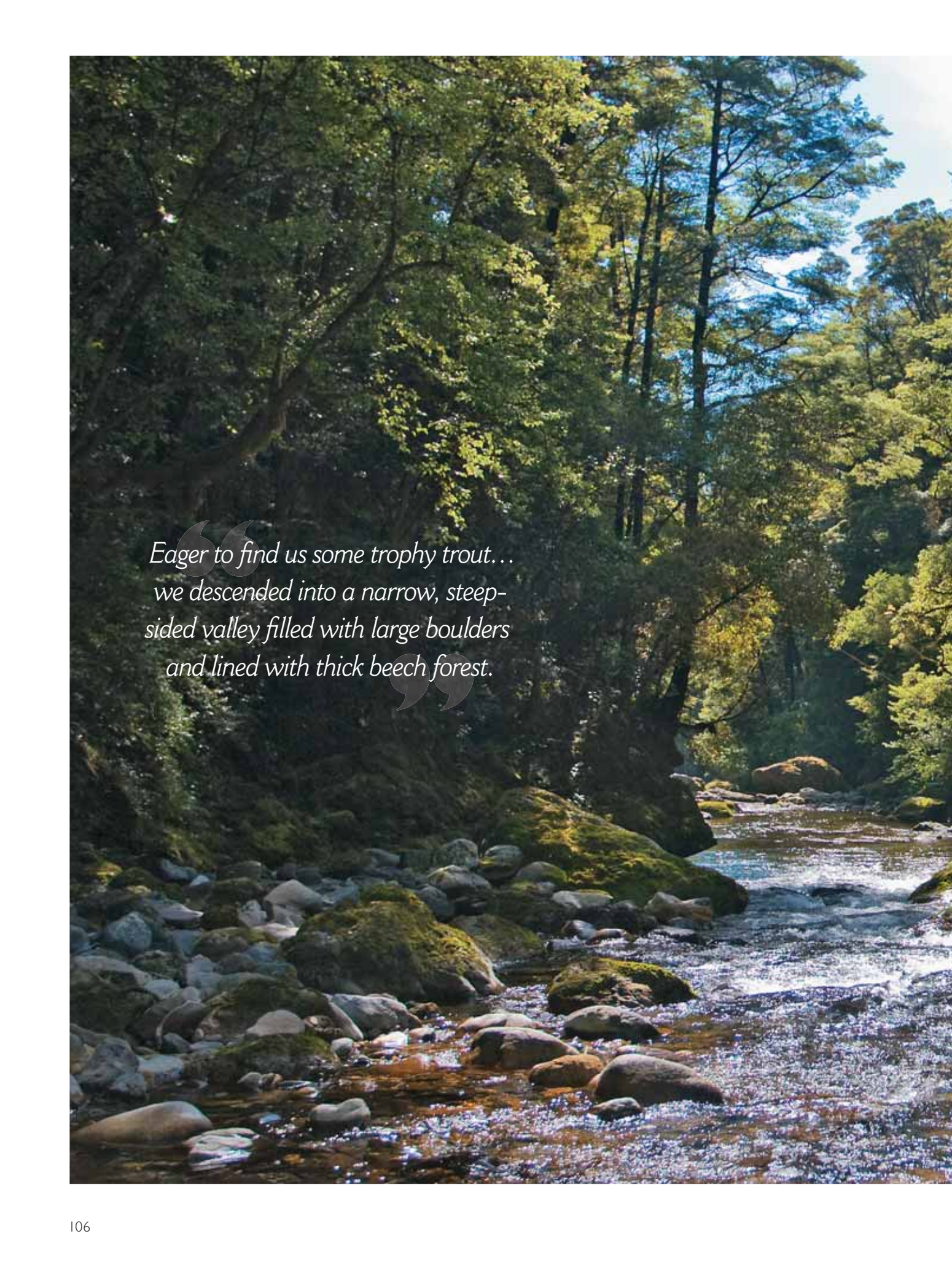
Rob caught a nice four-pound fish at almost exactly mid-day. (Trout are always measured in pounds. "1.8 kilo trout" hasn't got much of a ring to it, has it?)

Twenty minutes later, in a small pool formed by some beautifully sculpted boulders, I hooked a seven-and-a-half-pound golden brown spangled with red spots. I was using my little 7'9" stream rod for a bit of fun, and it turned out to be a boy on a man's errand. It took me fully half an hour to finally bring the fish in.

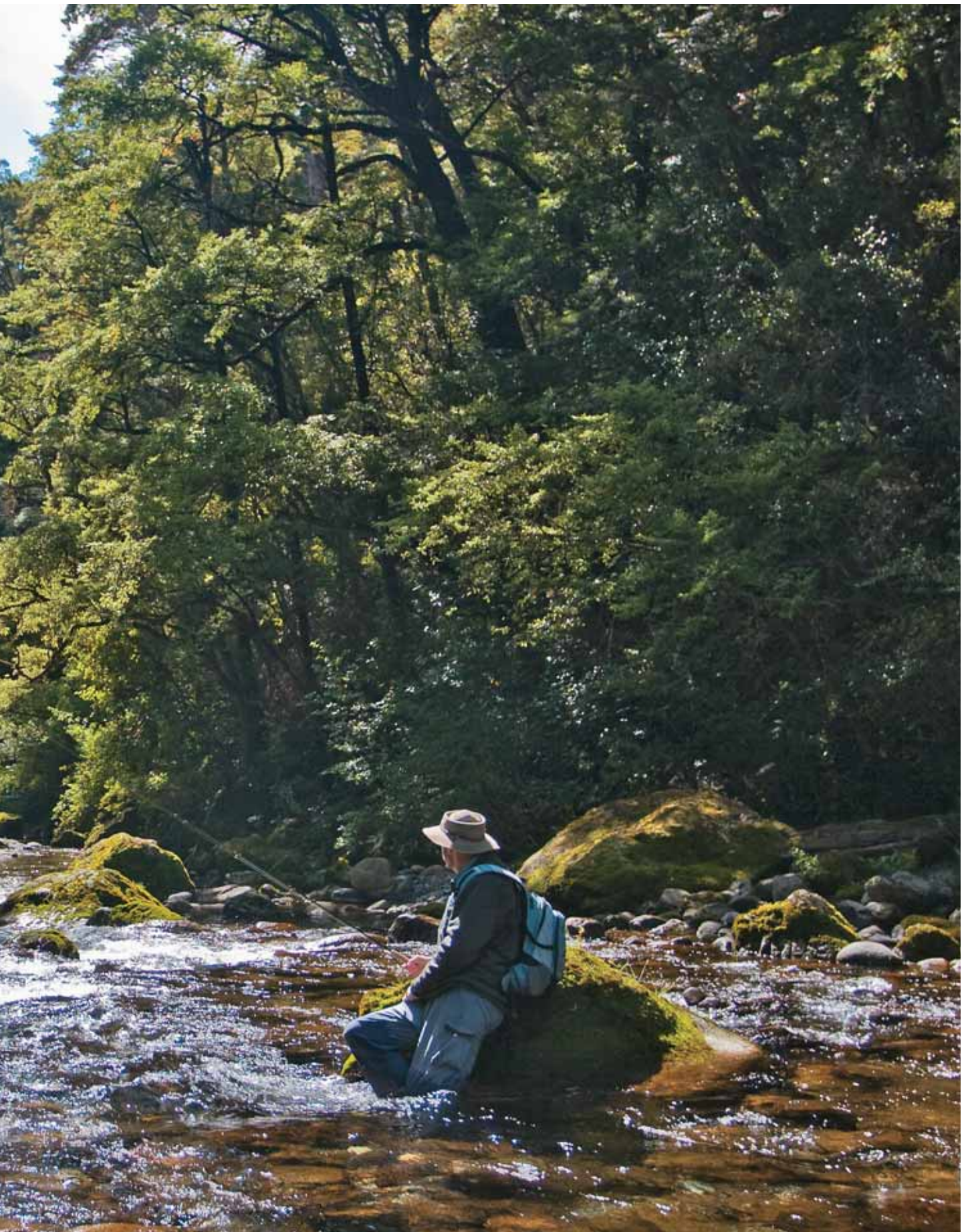
For most of the time the fish just burrowed in about ten feet down, head and shoulders to the bottom and tail up, like a rugby forward in a scrum. Occasionally, he would swim in slow, brutish arcs, which felt more like the entire scrum in motion. My tiny rod was bent like a horseshoe throughout and it was only with great patience that we finally steered him into the net.



A guide can lead to the best fishing experience possible.



*Eager to find us some trophy trout...
we descended into a narrow, steep-
sided valley filled with large boulders
and lined with thick beech forest.*



“Nice work,” said The Stalker. “You might want to think about using a bigger rod tomorrow.” The Stalker was happy with the quality, but a little disappointed at the quantity. They expect a lot, these guides.

THE WATER STRIDER

On Tuesday, a new guide, The Water Strider, took us to the Motueka, a popular and easily-accessible river flowing through a broad valley alongside a major highway to the north. It was much bigger water than we had fished the day before; the sort of river neither Rob nor I would have been naturally drawn to – or even bothered with. So, once again, we were happy to have a guide to make sense of it for us.

The Water Strider was a talented and energetic fishing guide. The minute he hit the river, he took off with alarming speed, like a long-legged wading bird, scissoring through the current. Every time we looked up, he was across the river and was scouting for trout on the other side. Just keeping up with him was more difficult than actually catching fish.

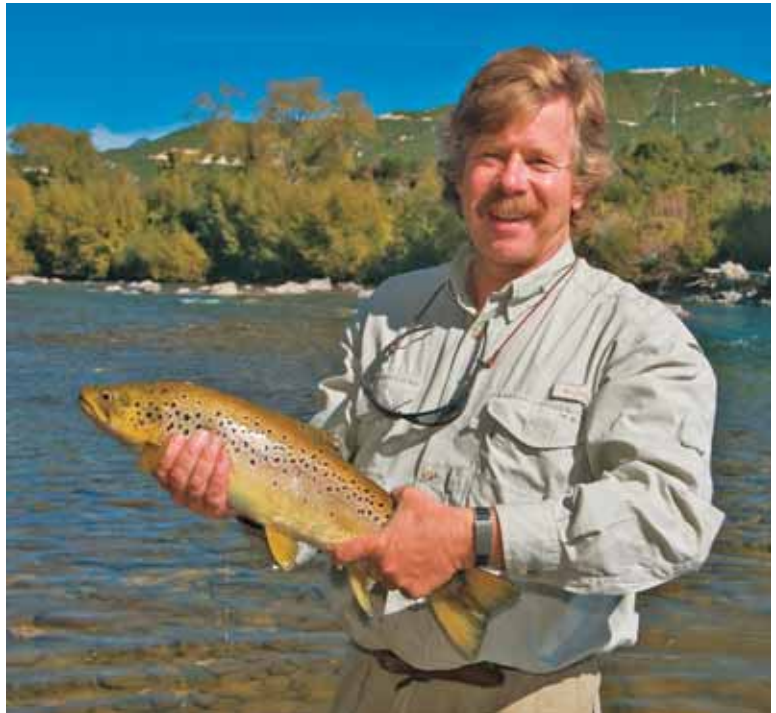
We frequently tested The Strider’s forbearance with some awful casting and such comic mishaps as an exploding reel while connected to a five-pound fish. Rob and I thought all this was hilarious – a perspective The Strider seemed not to share. Despite ourselves, by day’s end we had netted a dozen around five pounds and probably dropped or missed as many more.

There is a Kiwi saying that goes: “You hook half as many fish as you see and catch half as many fish as you hook.” Based on that, we were textbook clients – just ask The Strider.

THE STALKER RETURNS

Wednesday: another day, another frustrated guide – due not so much to lack of skill on our part, but lack of success on his. Eager to find us some trophy trout, The Stalker took us through miles of picturesque dairy country and up ever-narrowing valleys until there were no more houses or fences. At a trailhead at the junction of a river we will call the “Tally Ho”, we descended into a narrow, steep-sided valley filled with large boulders and lined with thick beech forest.

True to his name, The Stalker went straight into hunting-dog stance; on point with hands clasped behind him and back leg cocked, eyes drilling deep into the water. He already knew



In the end, I just tried to put the fly where they told me to and hoped for the best.

Above: The author with a Moteuka River brown trout.

Below: A leaping Moteuka River trout.



every rock and pool; he'd been saving this water especially for us and the fun was about to begin. But after 20 minutes, he shook his head and snorted, "What is going on? There should be fish here!" It wasn't until I stumbled across a single footprint and some fresh orange peel an hour and a half later that the game was up – we'd been beaten to it, and all the fish had gone to ground.

At 3 o'clock, back on the Wangapeka, Rob finally caught a beautiful five-and-a-half-pounder – and no guide has ever been happier to see trout meet net.

THE WOMBAT

Our guide on Thursday was a veteran of 23 seasons as a fishing and hunting guide. He was short and solid as a strainer post, with skin stained walnut by the sun. He seemed like a wombat to me as he burrowed purposefully through the tangled beech forest leading down to Larry's Creek – hence the nickname.

Like all the other guides we spent time with, The Wombat had remarkable recall of all sorts of detail: what the weather was like on a particular day, how many trout were caught and on what flies at what time at what bend of the river, how big they were, what colour rock the fish was lying



Above: A 7-pound brown trout is caught and returned to Larry's Creek.



Left: The size 18 nymph proved successful.



Far left: Bushbashing through beech forest.

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next to and on what cast it was taken. The list, frequently, went on and on...

For a bloke so low to the water, The Wombat could spot fish like no one I'd ever seen. He must have found us 30, although catching them was another matter. Some saw us coming, but we fished to at least 20, and quite respectably so to the dozen we didn't spook with clumsy casting. In a few rare cases, we even fished perfectly to them. Result: nothing.



Returning from a successful day on Larry's Creek.

Four o'clock came and went and we were literally a cast or two away from packing it in when I finally landed a seven-pound brown; probably the nicest fish of the week. At least The Wombat had one memory to take home.

Fishing in New Zealand is not for the faint-hearted. The fish are big and smart and when the water is clear or the weather turns bad you need all your wits and skill to tempt them onto a tiny hook. That, and a good guide. 

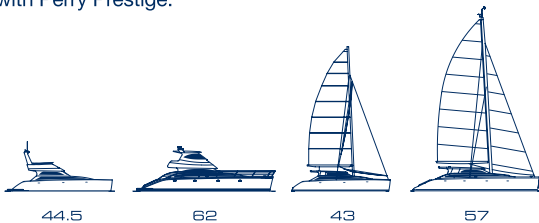
*“For a bloke so low to the water,
The Wombat could spot fish
like no one I'd ever seen.”*



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There are many similarities between owning an ocean-going yacht and owning a fishing lodge.

– Felix Borenstein

THE LODGER

Melbourne-born Felix Borenstein left school at 15 and, by his own admission, has never held a job for more than two years since. He bagged groceries, sold shoes, was a ladies hairdresser and a porter at posh hotels, and even worked at the legendary House of Merivale and Mr John in Collins Street, selling trendy women's clothing while dressed in a powder blue three-piece suit. After a stint as a windsurfing instructor, he got into the IT industry in the mid-1980s and eventually owned a large recruitment agency.

In 1995, he discovered fly-fishing and soon began crossing the Tasman to feed his newfound addiction. By the time he had visited NZ 19 times, he decided it would be cheaper to own a fishing lodge than to keep paying through the nose to stay in those owned by someone else. In February, 2003, he bought an old farmhouse overlooking the Owen River not far from the town of Murchison, about an hour-and-a-half southwest of Nelson.

“At one stage after I bought it, there were 27 people working on this place. I added up what I was paying out per hour and had to go lie down. On the day we opened, there were no doors on the cupboards and all the ladies in the valley were unpacking beds and setting up the cabins for guests who were about to arrive any minute,” he recalls with a slight shudder.

His aim was to create New Zealand's best fly-fishing lodge. “Not the biggest, not the most expensive, but the best.”

Four years on, the vision is pretty much complete. Food and drink is served in the made-over farmhouse, where local legend, Jude rules the kitchen and serves tasty, honest meals made from fresh local ingredients. Maximum number of guests is 12, with a couple of rooms in the lodge itself and four purpose-built cottages (two more are on the way) featuring waxed wooden floors, high ceilings,





king-size beds and large picture windows looking out over the Owen River Valley to a nearby mountain range. Behind the farmhouse a curving pathway leads past a cheerfully eclectic kitchen garden to a large hot tub overlooking the river.

The overall style is laid-back and modern, and Felix's slightly oddball sense of humour is a welcome touch in the rarefied world of high-end fly-fishing, where dressing for dinner in a wood-panelled dining room festooned with the heads of



dead animals (Felix opts for original contemporary art instead) can sometimes take the gloss off the rustic pleasures of a day on the river.

In October, 2005, the lodge was awarded a 5-star Qualmark rating, signifying it as "exceptional – among the best in New Zealand."

For more information: <http://www.owenriverlodge.co.nz>.

Owen River fly fishing lodge, Nelson Region, South Island, New Zealand.