

>ROSS PURNELL

Photo | valatkinson.com

LORD of the RINGS

*Prepare yourself
for adventure and
adversity in New
Zealand's storied
North and South
islands*

**ON MY KNEES IN THE GRASS,
IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO AC-
TUALLY SEE THE TROUT.** Ed Halson had a much

better vantage point high on an outcropping of eroded schist. Flattened like a sniper, he could see the black spots of the trout, and its yellow, outstretched pectoral fins as it held a position at the head of a long, glassy pool.



Photo | valatkinson.com

LORD of the RINGS

▶ **New Zealand's** hard geology—on both the North and South islands—provides more opportunities to sight-fish for large trout in small streams than any other place in the world.

The trout's spotted marbled eye recognized something at the surface, and its pectorals instantly adjusted to the target.

"He's seen something," Halson called out. "He's moving to the left. He's coming up," and with the nimble agility of a pachyderm picking a peanut off the floor, the great trout plucked a small, tan cicada from the surface.

With some types of fleeing prey like caddis or hovering damselflies, trout prefer to explode through their target like a breaching orca. But with stranded terrestrials there is no such display. This trout moved in a coldly calculating fashion to a point just below the insect, flared its gills, and like the opening of a bellows, created a vacuum that sucked the insect from

the surface, leaving only telltale rings spreading across the pool.

In the golden afternoon light reflected from a grassland of silver tussocks and speargrass, I watched the demise of another cicada, and again the rings rolled down the pool like the sweeping, glowing arm in an old-fashioned radar display.

I wanted to get closer, but I knew that if I waded up the pool, my own disturbance could just as easily inform the trout of my presence—and from his vantage point he could see everything going on above him. In this respect, the trout had total command of his watery realm, decimating insects as they floated into view, and holding tight reins on who could stand in his presence.

The trout's watchful influence

made me so nervous, it reminded me of a famous antagonist in the JRR Tolkien trilogy: "His gaze pierces cloud, shadow, earth, and flesh." So I crawled on my belly like Gollum, collecting dry sheep dung and cockle-burs on my shirt, and I found myself hissing at Halson as we conspired to usurp the "Lord of the Rings."

The trout was positioned at the head of a pool shaped like the lower half of an hourglass. I wanted to creep closer, but any movement on the high bank would certainly spook the fish. Wading through the glassy bottom end of the hourglass was out of the question, so I rose to my knees and made a long cast toward the feeding trough. It wasn't the kind of cast you'd prefer to make to a rising trout—at that range with wind and

a 16-foot leader it was difficult to be precise, and if the trout did eat the fly it'd be nearly impossible to pick up all the slack and set the hook. But at least I wasn't spooking the fish. Yet.

I held my breath as the fly drifted slowly out of the trout's view, slowly exhaled as the trout rose right where my fly had just been, and I made another long aerial delivery.

"He's seen something he doesn't like," Halson called. "Get down! He's coming to have a look!"

I couldn't pick up the line without spooking the fish, so I dropped to my belly, and pointed the rod tip downstream. The line and the fly drifted past me as I peered through the grass and watched the trout reconnoiter its territory. He certainly appeared to be looking for something as he swam just yards from my hiding place, across the tail of the pool, and

then back up the other side.

Was it me he was looking for? Or was he searching for a cicada that may have slipped past him? I've watched dominant trout in other New Zealand rivers make similar patrols, and surmised that the trout were defending their territory from interlopers. But the searching eye of this trout seemed to gaze suspiciously up to where I had been kneeling. I didn't move, and he recognized nothing out of the ordinary.

A few minutes later he was back at it, and so was I. My best cast landed neatly in the ring of his last rise.

"Bulls-eye," I thought, beaming with self-congratulation.

"You've got to time it better," whispered Halson. "Wait until the rings disappear. Try to anticipate his next rise."

My next cast was better timed (I thought) and should have coincided

with a rise. Instead I saw nothing.

"Why did he stop?" I thought, and just as Halson again yelled "Get down!" the trout was already eyeballing me from the end of my rod tip.

"Bugger!" Halson cursed. "He's seen you now. I think we're done."

The big brown had certainly seen something he didn't like, and slowly drifted out of sight under the rocky ledges near the pinch in the pool.

"The same thing happened to me when I was here last week," Halson admitted. "A big trout like that intentionally moves around, and he knows where every rock, bush, and clump of grass should be. If he gets the feeling something isn't right, it's game over."

And so it goes with New Zealand trout hunting. Long leaders, long casts, and long walks, and even after all that you can still come up short. As fly fisher Theodore Roosevelt said,

Arriving Ready to Go

For first-timers heading to New Zealand, it can be a bit daunting looking at your empty travel bag and wondering just what to put in it so you arrive river ready with everything you need for success. I've fished the rivers of New Zealand extensively over the past 35 years, here are some of the lessons I've learned.

Rods. Each season I take a 4-, 5-, and 6-weight rod with me, but I leave the rod tubes behind, and put all the 4-piece rods in a PVC pipe that's about 29 inches long and just over 3 inches in diameter. This saves weight and space, and there's still room for a 7-weight (not normally needed) to fish the big, often windy estuaries on incoming tides where the South Island rivers meet the Tasman Sea.

Leaders. I buy 10-foot, 3X leaders and then add 2 to 3 feet of 4X tippet when I'm fishing. On smooth water, spring creeks, or casting to smarter late-season fish, I add 2 feet of 5X. So you always know exactly what you've got, first knot 4X, second knot 5X. If you are casting into a wind, you can shorten the sections to improve accuracy.

Indicators. Most indicators or materials to make them in North America are fluorescent red or lime green, and you should leave them at home. White or cream indicators work much better because they look like bubbles or foam. About a decade ago I started using the webby foam wrap material that they put on wine bottles at the duty-free stores, or on delicate fruit at the grocery stores. You just rip a

piece off, attach it with a loop to your tippet (or next section up), then trim it as small as possible. When you want to go back to a dry, just tug your tippet to cut off the indicator instantly. [See *detailed illustrations in "Short Casts," page 10.* THE EDITOR.]

Flies. Heavy hatches and selective feeding are uncommon, so bring lots of different patterns in sizes 12 to 16 to imitate the caddis and mayflies that sprinkle down during the day. The trusty Adams and CDC Caddis are two of my favorites. Add some little black foam creations with rubber legs and you are set for the dries. For summer and fall, you'll need a small selection of cicada patterns as well. The popular Clark's Cicada in olive and tan is excellent and the Green Machine (Umpqua Feather

Merchants) is another good bet. As for nymphs, this same size range is the ticket, and variations of the Pheasant-tail Nymph and the popular Hare & Copper are all you need. Tie them with black beads and not with gold or silver. In recent years, I've also come to appreciate an unweighted Pheasant Tail, especially on smooth water. With a BB-size indicator, it lands softly like a dry, and takes the disturbing surface "squiggle" of tippet out of the equation by drawing the tippet beneath the surface.

Wading boots. Felt-soled boots are now banned in New Zealand, and they are not really needed anyway. The rivers are not very slippery. I use rubber soles with studs because I carry cameras, but most of the guides use and recommend straight rubber

because they are quieter and don't click, grind, and make other noises as you approach the water or wade.

Waders. Lightweight waders have their place early or late in the season, during rainy weather, or when a southerly rolls up the islands. But during the heart of the season, 90 percent of seasoned veterans and guides wade wet with shorts or nylon pants. On your first visit, this seems like a hard pill to swallow, but throughout the course of the day wet wading is more comfortable, and the water is not that cold, usually between 55 and 65 F. for most of the season.

Scent. In most of the trout-fishing world, scent is not an issue, but in New Zealand it's a big deal. New Zealand guides always fish upstream because

it's a better way to sneak up on fish, and your smell washes downstream. Oddly, some cows can cross a stream and the trout will slow down for a short period. But a wet-wading human crossing the stream can easily shut them down for hours. For this reason, the etiquette in New Zealand requires that if you see another car parked along a river, you keep driving for at least

several miles. This is another example of what a wonderful classroom New Zealand is. To be able watch the fish and to see how well trout can see and smell, to watch their reaction to your last cast or to the guy who just waded across the river 100

yards upstream, all add up to priceless lessons that will make you a much better fly fisher wherever you go.

—David Lambroughton

Photo | David Lambroughton



▶ **Sight-fishing in** many cases means casting small, dark nymphs to large, spooky trout. Bring size 18 Pheasant Tails with black tungsten beads and as little flash as possible.

The Best Lodges*

New Zealand presents a massive opportunity for solo, do-it-yourself backpackers to walk for miles, eat Spam sandwiches and Ramen noodles, sleep in the wilderness, and find hidden rivers and giant trout in the backcountry. But that's not what this story is about.

If you've got the budget for it, New Zealand is also perhaps the most civilized, comfortable trout-fishing adventure you'll find in the world, making it perfect for couples. Even if your companion doesn't fish much, New Zealand lodges know how to pamper all their guests, and most provide other activities that will make their vacation memorable. Here are my favorite places:

North Island The Farm at Cape Kidnappers

Set on a 6,000-acre working farm overlooking the Pacific Ocean, there is no fishing on the property, but the lodge arranges both helicopter fly-out trips, and drive-out fishing trips originating at one of the most luxurious lodges on the North Island. The property is owned by Julian Robertson, the former hedge fund manager who is known for starting the investment firm Tiger Management Corp. with \$8 million in 1980, and growing it to \$22 billion by the 1990s. To Robertson, the The Farm at

Cape Kidnappers is more than a luxury resort. Together with his two closest neighbors, the Hansen and the Lowe families, they have created the Cape Kidnappers Sanctuary—the last bastion for many of New Zealand's native species, and the largest privately owned and funded wildlife restoration project in the country.

The sanctuary is protected by a 10-kilometer pest-proof fence that stretches from coast-to-coast along the base of the peninsula to keep out the feral cats, weasels, and stoats which have eradicated many of New Zealand's native fauna. Inside the sanctuary, you'll find established, reproducing populations of native kiwi, pateke, tomtit, rifleman, and introductions of South Island takahē, red-crowned kākārīki, and North Island kākā. Robertson has also funded the introduction of Cook Strait tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatus*). This order of lizard-like reptiles (Sphenodontia) were abundant in the Triassic and Jurassic period and now—with the exception of the rare tuatara—are gone from the planet.

At Cape Kidnappers you'll stay inside this sanctuary and can see the tuatara and take part in activities like organized kiwi discovery walks which take place daily with professionals from the sanctuary. You can also visit, on the property, one of the world's

largest gannet colonies, take day-long horse treks, or golf at the par 71 course designed by the legendary golf architect Tom Doak, and recently ranked by *Golf Magazine* as the 41st best golf course in the world.

Julian's son Jay Robertson is a dedicated fly fisher who manages The Farm at Cape Kidnappers with his wife Claire. The couple met at a fishing lodge, and Jay has fished all over New Zealand, and has connections with top guides in this area, and at their property Matakauri Lodge on the South Island.

Poronui Ranch

The finest trout-fishing venue on the North Island, Poronui has 25 miles of fly-fishing water within its boundaries on the Taharua (a spring creek) and on the free-stone Mohaka River. Adjacent to the ranch are huge tracts of Maori-owned land, and Poronui has exclusive access to many of these rivers as well. The result is more than 100 beats of sight-fishing trout water that are either private—on Poronui or Maori land—or so far in the backcountry on public lands that trekkers rarely reach it.

Poronui has a strict maximum of seven guided fishing parties per day, with the primary goal of resting the water a minimum of two weeks between outings. Whether you walk out your front

door to fish a beat on the Taharua, or fly 20 minutes deep into Kaweka Forest Park, Poronui has exclusive access to much of the best fishing on the North Island.

Helisika maintains a full hangar of helicopters at nearby Poronui Station so helicopter fly-outs are quick and efficient, and the full-time professional guide staff here is outstanding. Poronui was started by New Zealand guiding legend Simon Dickie, and although he no longer owns the place, his legacy is still evident in the manager he hired 25 years ago—Eve Reilly—and in the guide staff who aren't just experts at spotting and netting fish. They are caretakers of the land and of the trout, casting coaches, and quick-witted fishing companions with no shortage of funny stories. These are exactly the types of guys you want to spend time with. Dave Wood was my guide at Poronui, and his energy and enthusiasm were contagious. He was one of the finest trout guides I've ever walked beside.

South Island Stonefly Lodge

Situated on 150 acres of private forest on the banks of the Motueka River—between the confluence of the Wangapeka River and the confluence of the Baton River—Stonefly Lodge is within striking distance of three major national parks: Kahurangi,

Abel Tasman, and Nelson Lakes. The lodge is built from stone and timber acquired from the 150-acre property, and the lodge is known for its environmentally sensitive development and sustainability. The entire facility is powered by alternative energy sources built on site to reduce the environmental footprint.

The owners/operators John and Kate Kerr have over 50 years combined tourism and hospitality experience and enjoy putting together complete packages that also cater to nonfishing guests. Two of their specialties? *Lord of the Rings* heli tours to sites like the peculiar rocky outcropping where Frodo and the fellowship of nine companions had lunch, and hid from the Crebain crows of Saruman before entering the Mines of Moria. The Kerrs are also proud of their "His & Hers" day trips they call "the ultimate compromise for couples."

Matakauri Lodge

A small, 5-star boutique hotel, this isn't a "fishing lodge" by any stretch of the imagination. Owned by Julian Robertson (see The Farm at Cape Kidnappers) and managed by Jay Robertson, this is where I stayed on my recent visit to Queenstown. Guide Ed Halson (shown on the cover of this issue) picked me up from Matakauri and we drove from there to his local

secret haunts. I also flew by helicopter from Matakauri with Jay Robertson and guide Gordy Watson, past the Greenstone River and into the rivers of Fjordland National Park. Watson is also a hunting guide, and does helicopter SCUBA trips. For lunch, we had fresh venison and lobster (they call them crayfish) that one of Watson's associates had plucked from the nearby ocean hours ago. They were still moving when we sat for lunch.

Queenstown is the adventure capital of New Zealand and the jumping-off point for trekkers headed to the Milford Track, climbers aiming for Mount Aspiring, and numerous other of adventurers. To put it in perspective, this is the town where they invented bungee jumping.

The list of activities near Matakauri Lodge are too numerous to mention. At the lodge, the spa, the infinity pool with views of Lake Wakatipu and Mount Cecil, the fine dining, and the mountain biking should keep you occupied for days, but the lodge can put together any adventure you are willing to pay for. During my stay, one couple had a picnic on a glacier in Mount Aspiring National Park, and returned in time for cocktail hour.

Owen River Lodge

Located near Murchison, in the Nelson Lakes district, guests



Photo | Ross Purnell

▶ **New Zealand's** top lodges have options to drive or helicopter to local waters on Maori land, national parks, and wilderness forests.

can drive to more than 25 rivers inside of 90 minutes, or fly by helicopter into another dozen wilderness watersheds, some of them inside Kahurangi National Park. Owner Felix Borenstein is an Australian by birth whose passion for New Zealand trout fishing drives him to provide the best possible experience for all his guests, whether they are fishing or not. In and around Murchison there is hiking, mountain biking, whitewater rafting, and there is an on-site spa where you can work out the kinks at the end of the day. For a mellow day, Keeley the yellow Lab will take you on hikes, or take you to the swimming holes on the property where you can both can both relax in the river.

* Mike McClellan of The Best of New Zealand Fly Fishing (bestofnzflyfishing.com) has arranged all my fishing days in New Zealand on two previous trips, and did the same for my mentor and the previous editor of this magazine John Randolph. Mike has a home in New Zealand and has spent many weeks per year there over the past 25 years. He is more familiar with the fishing, the accommodations, and the other activities in New Zealand than any other American. His business can arrange for you to stay at any of these lodges (and more), and his expert advice costs consumers nothing. His fee comes from the lodge.

—Ross Purnell



Photo | Ross Purnell

▶ **New Zealand** trout rarely feed selectively on hatches of specific insects. Bring attractor dries and a variety of cicada patterns.

"Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty."

In that light, New Zealand is the pinnacle of the dry-fly fishing universe. Nothing there is "easy," but every step of the process is worth doing.

The Big Picture

My friend Tola Chin grew up in Las Vegas, but now owns a vacation home along a spring creek near Rotorua. When I fished with him there, he expressed dissatisfaction with how New Zealand has been presented in North American media, and I agree. The problem is that although New Zealand looks like a tiny part of the globe, it has continental-scale geography with tectonic coastal mountains, arid grasslands, temperate rainfor-

ests, snow-capped volcanoes, and vast freshwater ecosystems rivaling Alaska or the Great Lakes.

Unfortunately, there's no way to tell the "whole" story of New Zealand. Even in a two-week visit you'll only get a taste of the place, so you'll want to pick out the most distinctive flavors of New Zealand. The flight from Los Angeles to Auckland is 6,500 miles and crosses the International Date Line. Does anyone want to go all that way and fish blindly with a strike indicator, cast streamers in a roadside river, or stand elbow-to-elbow drifting egg patterns for lake-run fish? All are possible in New Zealand, but that's not why you go there.

What New Zealand has, more than any other country in the world, is leagues of untrammelled wilderness

cut by thousands of small streams so ridiculously clear that your brain takes an extra second trying to decipher where the air stops and the water starts. Big trout in clear water draw fly fishers from around the world to New Zealand.

Plate Tectonics

There is agriculture, industry, logging, and erosion in this island paradise, but it came relatively late to New Zealand, and occurred mostly in populated lowlands, sparing the headwaters of the many injuries caused by humankind. But it's mostly the geography and the geology that create the spectacular scenery, and clarity of the water.

The North Island rose up from the seabed as a result of volcanic activity. Both Lake Taupo and Lake Rotorua

are volcanic caldera, and the streams in the region—the breadbasket of North Island trout fishing—are paved with the evidence: pumice, chert, and shellfish fossil beds.

The Southern Alps of the other island were uplifted from the earth's basement by tectonic collision between the Pacific Plate and the Indo-Australian Plate over the last 45 million years.

In both cases, the hard geology creates stable watersheds with relatively little erosion. When the monsoon rains come, the impermeable landscape can create massive muddy floods of course, but when the water drops into trout-fishing shape during the summer seasons, there is relatively little in the way of sedimentary particulates, microscopic drifting algae, acidic tannins from peat and

▶ **Mt. Cook** is the highest peak in the Southern Alps, the range that runs the length of the South Island and provides a scenic backdrop for many of the best trout streams.



Photo | David Lambroughton

pine forests, or other pollutants. These nascent rivers refract the colors of the chlorophyll-based plant life, making them look like your favorite gemstone: peridot, aquamarine, emerald. You name it, the comparison has already been made.

There are other isolated places in the world where you can find headwater streams that are almost as pretty, and in them, you'll find headwater-sized trout. But in New Zealand, the headwater/main stem ecology we are used to is turned on its head, as juvenile trout are most common in the lower reaches of larger rivers. As you travel upriver into the headwaters, the water gets smaller, clearer, colder, yet the trout get larger.

It seems that mature trout migrate upstream—often in floodwater—to spawn, and they stake out their territories in hidden pools deep in the backcountry, forcing smaller trout to make a living downriver in the more accessible lowlands.

These solitary giants are famous for their longevity—some otolith studies have shown brown trout as old as 17 years. And because they thrive in relatively infertile water, they don't like to share. In most cases, a single dominant trout "owns" the pool and will chase smaller trout from it. And they sit in slightly different places than you'd expect a dominant trout to sit in some streams in North America, where

there is a pecking order and numerous trout queue up to feed on aquatic insect hatches. In New Zealand, trout tend to sit wherever they have the most commanding view of the territory, and because they still can't see everything, they regularly move about.

This vision, clarity, and awareness of the trout (not to mention their size) sets New Zealand trout apart from all others. They are difficult not because they are particularly choosy about fly patterns. They aren't. They are difficult because they are so sensitive to their surroundings.

Guides won't wade across a rocky stream even a quarter mile upstream of a trout—I thought this was hogwash when I first heard about it, but it's been proved to me too many times.

One day I fished a remote North Island tussock-land river with guide/legend Simon Dickie. Fishing was steady for hours, with big trout scattered here and there, exactly where you'd expected them. But the next pool was barren, and the next one. "Something is not right," Dickie told me as he surveyed the empty pool. A half mile upriver we found another empty pool, and around the corner? A solitary deer hunter sunning himself on the rocks in his underwear. Slightly embarrassed, he told us that he had taken a bath in the river and fallen asleep in the sun. To Dickie, this was no coincidence. Human scent in the

water had spoiled the river for fishing for nearly a mile downstream.

The guides painstakingly dye their fly lines a dull, dark shade of gray or olive so the trout don't see any flash or color in the air, and the guides all dress in the same funereal color schemes on-stream. One day I showed up at breakfast wearing a blue shirt and it was as though I had farted at the dinner table. "You're not wearing that fishing are you?" the astonished guide winced.

Sixteen-foot leaders are common. The dull color scheme of the fly line is aerial camouflage—the trout should never actually see the fly line, but the guides take every possible precaution in case their guests make errant casts, or just can't deal with an adequate leader.

You will crawl on your hands and knees (if you're lucky) and possibly on your belly, and there are thorns, speargrass and ongaonga—a stinging nettle with a powerful neurotoxin that can make an extremity go numb for days. As a result, shorts are a bad idea, yet it's often too hot for waders.

Kiwi fishing attire is dark-colored stretchy base layers, with an old pair of drab shorts over the top more for modesty rather than functionality. Not many of us prefer to be seen on the river strutting in only the latest running tights. (A long-sleeve shirt and neck gaiter will also help protect you from nettles, insects, and the relentless UV assault in the Southern Hemisphere.)

Bring a new pair of boots, but in a brand and size you are familiar with, and comfortable in for long walks. The fish can be widely spread in a river system, and a five-fish day in New Zealand can frequently mean a walk of more than 5 kilometers in rough terrain.

After all that careful preparation and effort, you may spot a large trout feeding in the current, and do everything right. You stay in the shadows, crawl into position, use one false cast to lengthen the line, the leader and the fly drops gently into view, and the trout just slowly drifts into an undercut for the rest of the day.

Sometimes you do everything right, and the seemingly omniscient trout still knows you are there. Whether it's the rattle of rocks underfoot, or just the presence of the artificial fly itself, you seldom get a second opportunity with the same fish.

Second Chance

Walking downriver after a long afternoon in the hot sun, Ed Halson and I thought we were finished, and we were both already reveling in an outstanding day. I had landed four

trout that Halson weighed for a total of 27 pounds. I lost another big brown when it ran deep beneath an undercut, tangling my tippet in submerged tree roots.

The only other trout we'd seen that day was the big brown that made eye contact with me, and disdainfully stopped feeding. I nicknamed that fish "The Lord of the Rings" for many reasons—the riseforms he created at the surface, the ways he seemed to "see" everything like Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and because of the landscape we were in. This particular South Island locale provided the sweeping grasslands and mountainous backdrop used to shoot many of the scenes in the movie *The Two Towers*.

Ed knew the fish was 10 pounds because he'd caught it himself a month earlier on a small, dark nymph, when the river levels were still high from snowmelt and the road into the valley was barely passable.

"Let's walk back that way," he pointed "and see if that brown is back at it." His tone indicated that it was a long shot, but we approached the pool carefully anyway. Halson wiggled onto the outcrop overlooking the river and I took the long way around to take up my position at the tail of the pool.

Apparently a steady stream of cicadas provided too much incentive, and the trout was again wallowing at the head of the pool, and sending rise rings down the glide about every minute or so.

"Don't start casting yet," Halson advised, and I waited in the grass and watched the trout take a few more small cicadas. On cue, his sentry duty took him slowly and carefully down my grassy bank, and back upstream to his feeding station.

Gulp. The rings spread across the pool, and I began a countdown in my head. The rings disappeared and I cast straight over the trout's shoulder, with just the fly and 4 feet of loose 5X tippet landing gently in the trout's field of vision.

"Here he comes," Halson exclaimed. "He's got it!"

"God save the Queen," I uttered as I waited for the trout to turn back toward the bottom, and then I set the hook. 🎣

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