



A good brown takes the nymph.

Misguided in Murchison

Mark & Sharon Cloutier are sold on guided fishing.

How could a weather man seem so cheery telling his viewers that over 300 mm of rain had fallen in Nelson (NZ) in a day? My heart sank as I saw drenched people shoveling mud from homes, and roads washed away. Their plight was grim, but thankfully there was no loss of life and in time things would recover. For my own selfish reasons, I wondered about how this would affect the fishing as we were leaving next morning for Nelson.

This was the first lodge-based trip that Sharon and I had done together. Nothing was going to dampen our enthusiasm, not even a 'once in a century' downpour. After leaving a rather muddy-looking Nelson, we arrived at Owen River Lodge to be greeted by a big blue sky and cheery host. With so



Sharon rides the Hobbit Express.

many great lodges across the top of the South Island the travelling angler is spoilt for choice. Deciding where to stay is half the fun.

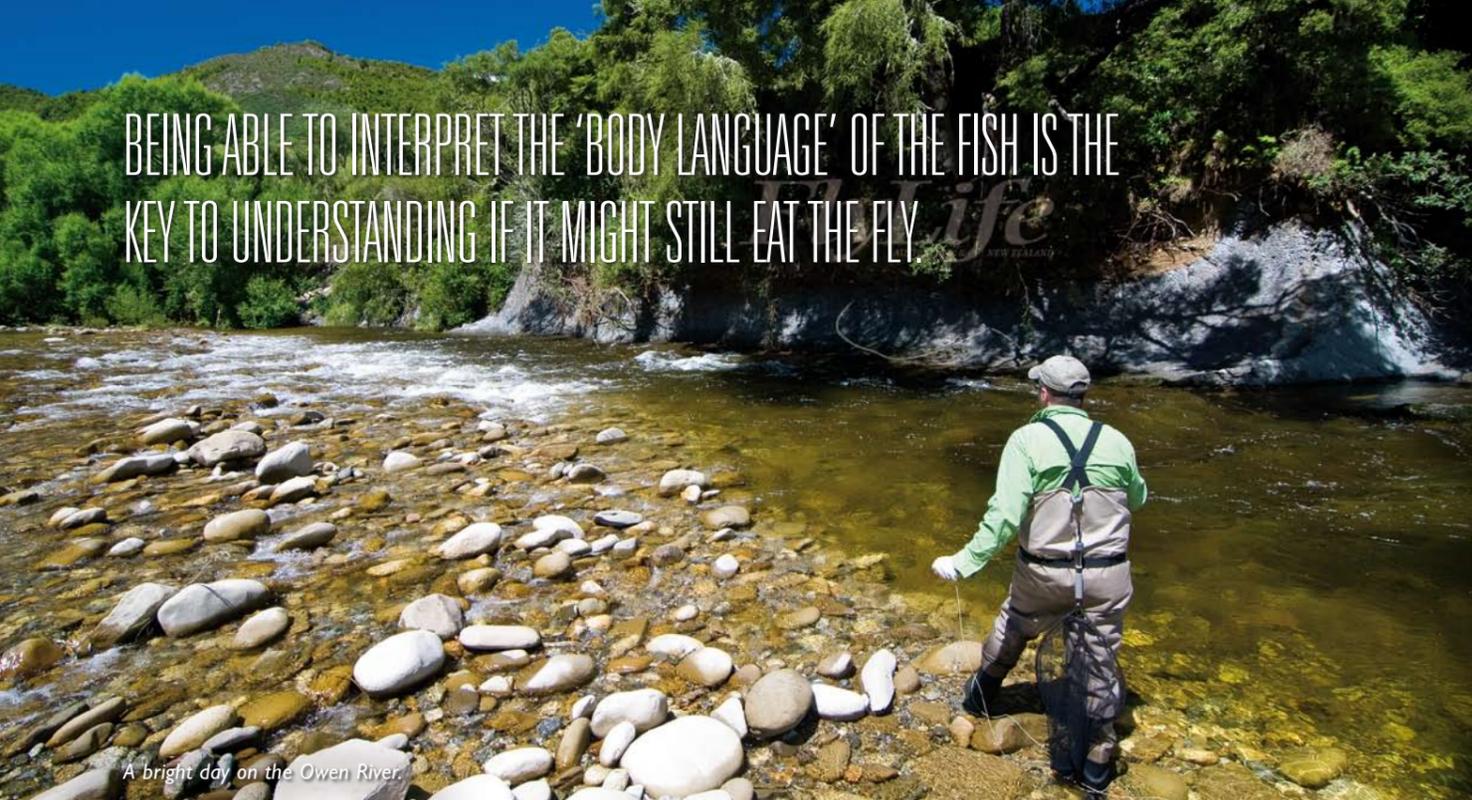
Felix was upbeat and assured us the rain was limited to the Nelson district, with the Murchison region only getting a 'wee top-up' and its rivers already clear. If the Owen River was any indication, we were in for some superb sight fishing. Craig Simpson, our guide for the next four days,

greeted us with his cheeky Kiwi grin and said the rivers would be clear and fast. We threw our kit into the back of his 4WD and were on our way, loaded with enthusiasm and a gourmet lunch. The trip out was filled with a hundred questions. Craig had probably heard them a thousand times, but he soon realised that I wanted to learn as much as I could about fly fishing these world-renowned rivers.

GUIDING THE WAY

When I first picked up a fly rod 37 years ago there was only one guide in Australia, Noel Jetson at Cressy in Tasmania. Guiding was not part of the fly fishing culture, and the expense seemed an extravagance. But as I have since learnt, this thinking is outdated and—dare I say it?—misguided.

BEING ABLE TO INTERPRET THE 'BODY LANGUAGE' OF THE FISH IS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING IF IT MIGHT STILL EAT THE FLY.



A bright day on the Owen River.

Misguided in Murchison . . . continued

We boarded 'Hobbit Express', the local water taxi, and cut a slick V across Lake Rotoroa heading to the mouth of the D'Urville River, made famous by the TV series 'A River Somewhere'. Trout were rising all over the place when we sliced through a leftover wind lane the size of the M1. I wanted to stop and fish 'the broth' but Craig had other ideas. What about the old adage of never passing a rising trout? Oh well, maybe on the way back!

We beached the boat where the river spilled into the lake and I headed straight along the shore to search the drop-off.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," was Craig's call, so I turned and headed towards the river. "I've got a trout here for you Mark."

That's nice, I thought, but where have you hidden it? He grabbed my rod, using it as a giant pointer, and had me staring into the flow trying to locate a smudge next to a rock. I spotted the rock, but the smudge was more problematic. Given that Craig has been guiding for more than a quarter of a century, I trusted his eyes over mine and put out a cast.

"Push up, push up," was the call. I had been tentative with the cast and dropped the fly too short. I needed to

get the nymph well upstream, allowing time for the fly to sink into the fish's feeding zone—essentially swimming the fly right past its nose.

The next cast was bolder and well upstream. My eyes were on the indicator. Craig's were on the fish. Even though the tiny tuft of green wool hadn't moved, when he yelled "Strike!" I snapped the rod back and I was on. These fish can take and reject a nymph so quickly and subtly that the indicator may not hesitate at all. Watching the fish, if you can see it, is always the preferred method.

The river poured out of a mountain wilderness that filtered the water to a state of purity and clarity seldom seen. A scientist claimed that a head-water lake had the purest water on the planet, suggesting you could see 80 metres. I still had trouble seeing trout at 5 metres, but that's why I had a guide. Sure enough, in a twisting side-current that pushed up against a dislodged beech tree, he saw a flash. I have no idea how he picked up the movement, but he was supremely confident it was a trout.

The current was big, swift and ugly and our plan of attack needed some thought. We crossed downstream, moved back up opposite the tree and needed to get the fly deep in a very short drift. A Copper John 'bomb' was knotted on and Craig said, "Forget the indicator, just strike when I yell."

I lobbed the fly upstream in the turquoise wash, he yelled, I struck, and

then I dragged the fish out into more open water to slug it out. On releasing the fish we cheered. It was a wonderful piece of trout.

ANOTHER RIVER SOMEWHERE

Each day we were on a different river. The guides, who share a friendly rivalry, talk in 'shades of grey' of where they are heading. It's an obscure language to those of us drinking beer and wine back at the lodge, but what it means is that guides and clients are spread across the district, so everyone gets to fish 'rested' water with no danger of bumping into another group.

Craig took the 'fresh is best' approach to a new level and could easily get work with CSI. Next day he had us driving down a lane checking for tyre prints in the mud. Once satisfied that there hadn't been a car

My first shot was spot-on. The fish tilted in the water to inspect the fly, then a flash of white, and I was on. The fight was brutal in the heavy current and we needed to find a way off the ledge and into the water to land the fish. When Craig eventually scooped the trout out, I was relieved. I was keen to have a crack at the other fish but Craig said they would be gone, picking up our scent in the water, and sure enough they had vanished. He was quite particular when wet wading and crossing side channels in the braided streams, not wanting to 'pollute' water we were about to fish.

NODS, WINKS & BRAIDS

Having lived in the area for so long, Craig gets to fish some pretty impressive stretches of water. A few secret nods, some winks and nose-tapping

linking arms. If Sharon's feet lifted off the bottom we tended to find another place to cross.

Soon Craig's cheeky smile beckoned—he had another trout for me to try and find. I could actually see this one and rolled out a double nymph rig. The fish deviated but didn't take. The point fly was changed to something smaller and I slung the rig out



A silvery brown, plump and fit.

again. This time the fish ignored it, and Craig muttered something about a "smart-arse fish." Worse still, it seemed to stop feeding and hugged the bottom. Another fly change and still no interest. But Craig was sure the fish wasn't completely spooked, so he put on yet another nymph. On the next cast it finally took.

There is more to this than meets the eye. Being able to interpret the 'body language' of the fish is the key to understanding if it might still eat the fly. Resting the fish, even for just a minute or two, can help, as well as changing patterns to get the right shape, colour and weight. It takes time and persistence but if you get the right drift it pays off. Reading Nigel Birt's 'Spooked' (FL#33) before leaving for NZ would have been a good idea!

The next was one of those classic 'I ain't eating anything' fish, holding the bottom where two currents twisted together. In a cushion of invisible slack, the trout rested up after floods some weeks earlier. I covered it many times until it finally spooked and moved into deeper water. These fish rarely take, but occasionally you can drop a fly into a 'yawning' trout and get lucky. It's the same deal with fish in deeper water. If they are stationary, getting them to take is frustratingly difficult but it can be done with the right fly and drift. A fish will eventually go from not eating to eating, and it may as well start with your fly! If you



Heading downstream at a rapid rate!

down the track in recent times, we toggled up and headed out.

It was a glorious river that reminded me of the more bouldery sections of Victoria's Kiewa River—just bigger and cleaner. In one massive pool, shaded for the most part by the beech forest, a shaft of light found its way onto the water. Hanging in the current was a big trout, lit up like a beacon. Most of the pool was a reverse current, with three big trout lined up and feeding actively. The only problem was room. With trees behind and to the side, and us perched on a steep rock ledge, a roll cast was the only option.

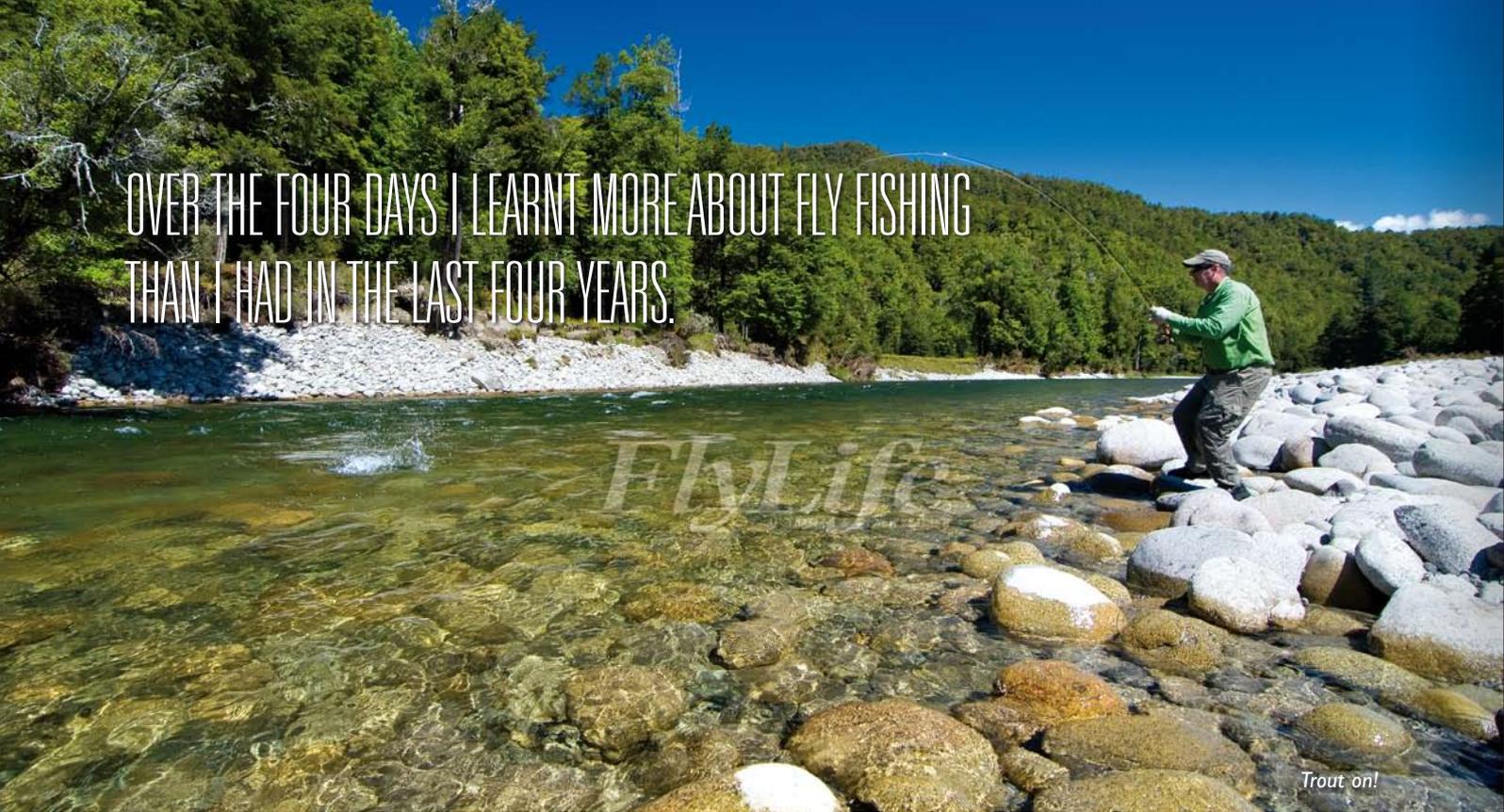
with a local farmer had us driving through private property to get to the river. I was glad I didn't have to wear the blindfold. We faced a hike of several kilometres, but Craig still sniffed the bank like a bloodhound. All was good and we were soon ready to fish.

This river was one of those braided delights, its plaited course following the valley with snowy peaks at either end. It's fair to say that not all braids are created equal. You need to be prepared to crisscross them to find water that has depth, or cover, or both. Some could be crossed with relative ease, whilst others had the three of us



A good view into a turquoise 'aquarium' full of huge trout.

OVER THE FOUR DAYS I LEARNT MORE ABOUT FLY FISHING
THAN I HAD IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS.



Trout on!

Misguided in Murchison . . . continued



A wild brown from a wilderness river.

find an actively feeding fish, moving from side to side and some distance to pick up food, then all you need is a good cast. These are my favourites.

A LOT TO LEARN

Over the four days I learnt more about fly fishing than I had in the last four years. And it's not just spotting fish either, although that in itself is a good enough reason to hire a guide. It's about understanding where a fish is likely to be and why it's there. It's about casting and getting the right drift and reading the body language of a fish. It's about how to fight an

8-pounder in a racing current and taking the time to change flies until the fish takes or spooks. But mostly it's about hiring a lifetime of experience and local knowledge, maximising your chances on the water, and ensuring you're in the right place at the right time.

Sharon and I had come to New Zealand to enjoy the wonderful fly-fishing on offer and to share the lodge's warmth and charm, but we had mostly come to catch fish. It would have been a waste if we hadn't given ourselves the best opportunity to do so. Hiring one of the district's top guides seemed a sensible way to go, and it's an experience that we can both recommend. **FI**



A sideways flick to a front ways trout!