

Come As You Are

By Andrew Savides

I can't believe my ineptitude and lack of foresight. It's early on a Friday afternoon and I have, sooner than expected, concluded business in Cape Town. Without my usual need to rush like a madman to the airport I have some time to take in the scenery and to reflect on how seriously I've messed things up.

What I'm referring to here is the sudden realisation that I am in one of the finest fishing destinations in the world, on a Friday, with my travel expenses paid, several good friends in the area, several good couches in the homes of those friends on which I could comfortably sleep - and I've let the opportunity slip me by.

With the disgrace in my failure and burden of lost opportunity weighing heavily on my mind I pull into the car rental return slipway.

My phone rings. It's the Giant. I ignore him. It rings again.

"What?"

"Savs?"

"What, I'm busy."

"How you?"

"I'm pretty shit, actually. Can you believe that I'm in Cape Town and...", I managed to get in before I was rudely and abruptly cut off.

"Whatever. I was just being polite. Now shut up and listen carefully."

He'd just been on the phone with the Supermodel and was (not atypically) in a state of high excitement. The Pro had apparently stumbled onto an incredible deal for international flights. Calls have been made and hurried agreements have been struck and in a turnaround time of around fifteen minutes there was a trip to New Zealand in the offing. I need to commit immediately.

Stepping into the terminal my phone beeps to tell me that a transfer of funds from my account to that of Qantas Airlines has taken place.

Game on.

With six months between the time of booking and departure our collective focus turned to tackle and flies.

We went over as a group of four anglers with four different ideas on flies. There was some intersection in our thoughts, but we all reflected them differently.

The Supermodel and I either don't tie or tie under extreme duress. We both did our research; I on the blogs and pages of local guides and he with his well-travelled friends. He bought all of his flies commercially and I tied a few but mostly had some seriously gifted friends tie them for me. I bought a box of flies that Gary Glen-Young had tied for a NZ trip and when they arrived I was astonished by how small and plain they were. I was similarly taken aback at what I saw on the New Zealand internet pages – traditional (or variations on traditional) flies in only slightly larger sizes than we would be used to. Certainly the wire on the hooks was heavier, but that was about it.



Gary Glen-Young New Zealand Fly Selection – Heavy in sparse, weighted size 16s

The Pro tied what the Pro tied. He'd been before and had a clear idea of what he wanted. He had carefully numbered, catalogued and filed many, many terabytes of photographs of guides' and locals' fly boxes and stuck to his game plan. Every fly was identical the one next to it. This boy can tie.

The Giant just went nuts and invented most of his flies right there at his vice. They tended to be big, flashy and as heavy as the news that your teenage daughter has been impregnated by the neighbourhood skollie. He tied hundreds of them. Wire and UV fuzz and lead and tungsten flew around his tying room and the tackle shops are giving their staff extra bonuses this Christmas. Hundreds, I tell you. At one point he bought the entire hook stock of a well-stocked tackle shop. Ask him if you don't believe me.

I suppose that I could just tell you what worked, and I will, but here's the summary.

All of them worked. Well, to a greater or lesser extent. **As flies do.**

We pitched camp as darkness descended on the banks of the Ruakituri. In front of us was a large slow pool, to our immediate left was a stand of poplar trees (with a slightly frightening tendency to snap off and impale a large branch immovably into the ground next to you) and behind us was a field that doubled as a toilet (bring your own spade and an ambivalent attitude towards personal hygiene).

The sun has been up for an hour or two and the Supermodel and the Giant are standing in front of the bank like kids in front of a Christmas tree. Following advice from a friend they are dredging the pool with streamers and intermediate and sink tip lines respectively. The Supermodel, in his pyjamas, gets his first brown on a black woolly bugger right up against the bank and his hands shake uncontrollably as the Pro tries to get a photo of it. The Giant drums up from the bowels of the pool a meter long eel that he has foul hooked with an epoxy minnow. Nobody wants to go near to it on account of its hooked teeth that are currently snagged up in the net.



The Supermodel with a Pyjama Brown – Please contact his agent before reproducing this picture (copyright reserved by Vogue Magazine)

The Supermodel and I head upstream in pursuit of browns and fish, unsuccessfully, with nymphs in the margins. The Pro and the Giant head downstream and land a few nice rainbows in an area where a strong current drops off and to the side of a deep ledge.

Feeling disconsolate after earlier dropping a good rainbow in a strong riffle the Pro takes me to his honey-hole, suggests a change in patterns, and I landed, against the run of play, a strong brown. On the first swing past the net I see the fly tight in its jaws. When we land it the fly is pinned into its pectoral fin and I breathe a deep sigh of relief.



A 20" Brown by the Handsome Author



The Pro with a Beautiful Ruakituri Honey-Hole Brown

Over the next few days we find rainbows along or behind ledges in the heads and riffles and browns tight to the bank.

Now, understand clearly what I mean about *"tight to the bank"*. I'm talking about potholes, preferably under vegetation, where often the fish was hardly covered by water. From time to time, say once in every four or so fish, the browns would come out where the rainbows typically held, but for the most part you are looking for very slack water in areas that you would normally splash through without concern on your way to the good stuff.



Typical Brown Trout Lies



Dropping a Nymph over the Edge & Into the Deep Water below Accounts for a Great 'Bow



The Giant Chases a Rainbow Downstream

We were cursed with very strong winds for the most of our trip, but in the evenings we would have sparse mayfly hatches of the largest mayflies that I have ever seen. Every rock that you picked up would have a caddis or two and a lot of mayfly nymphs under and on it. In one of the sort of potholes that a brown likes the Supermodel and I spent some time watching clinger mayflies swim in numbers from rock to rock.



A Typically Large, Dark Mayfly – Several other species were bigger than this

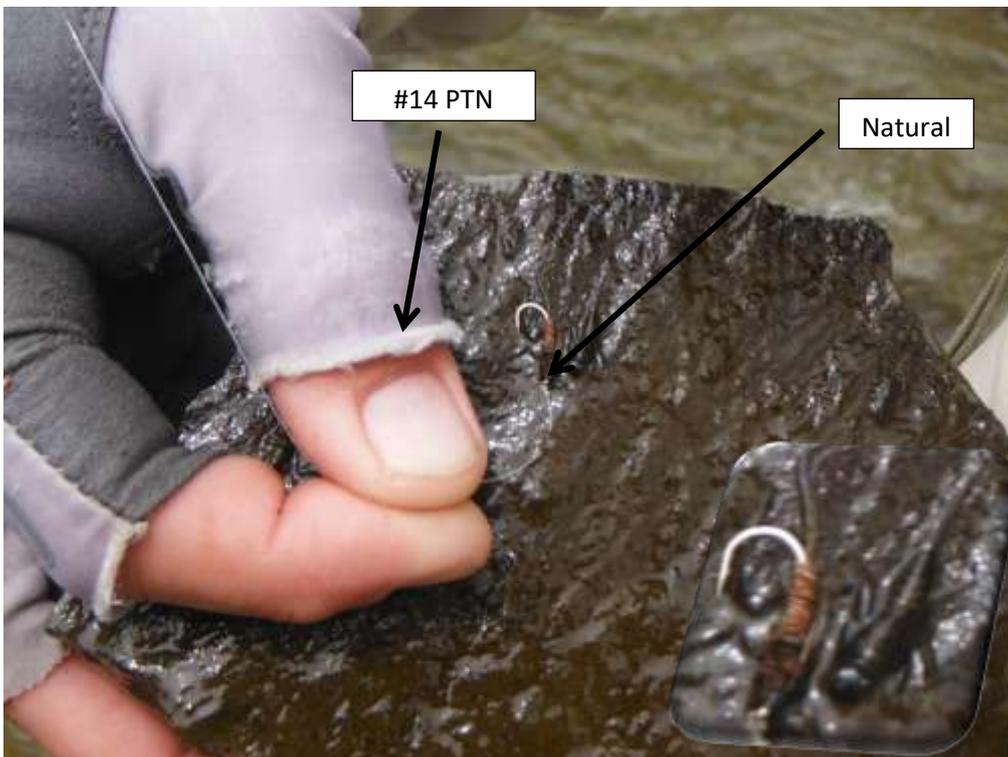


A Pale Sulpher Dun – This thing is so big that it is a rod length in front of the rod tip which is being held at arm's length. It stands 30mm high.

Now that we understand something about the river let's get back to the flies.

There was little to no dry fly action. The river was simply too fast and the wind too strong for reliable hatches. Down below was a different story and a well-presented mayfly nymph did the business.

By well-presented I mean that you had to find where the fish were and then get it to them - Flyfishing 101.



Match – Then Get it Down

The Pro, the Supermodel and I walked some distance to a run where the previous day the Giant and I took a brace each (including a 23" bow and a 20" brown).

Above the head of the pool is a long stretch of very strong and turbulent pocket water against a very overgrown island. Flipping a lightly weighted nymph into a static pocket next to the flow I turn to the Pro and suggested that we wrap it up. From the corner of my eye the line twitches and I am tight into a nice brown that eventually sawed me off on a rock. The next pothole up I hook into another brown – with a similarly depressing ending.

Targeting these fish requires a longish leader and any nondescript (you guessed it) mayfly nymph. Heavily weighted nymphs are of no advantage here. Perdigon styled flies are fine for this but any suitable nymph will do.

The reason that the Supermodel and I did so badly on the first day was that we weren't getting to the fish. The bow that I lost was on a Copper John and in retrospect this doesn't surprise me as the ability of that fly to cut through the water column probably lay behind its success. Essentially any fly that resembles a caddis or a mayfly nymph that you got in the right place at the right depth was in with a shout.

The most successful fly was probably the garden variety Pheasant Tail Nymph. As a mayfly imitation it is, in my opinion, second to none and it proved its worth. **But** (there's always a 'but') you have to get it down. For that you need to pair it behind a much heavier nymph. I think that only two fish were landed on the weighted fly, but mine was a rather sickly looking brown in very poor condition.

The ultimate weighted fly was the Pro's "Iron Maiden". Incorporating a wire abdomen, double tungsten beaded thorax and a few bits of flash the thing is an absolute anchor. In really fast water or where you needed to drop off a shelf quickly this thing was the out-and-out winner. Remember that when you're in the backcountry you don't want to drop one of these on a foot. Help is a long way away.



Iron Maiden on the Left

Me and my mediocre casting skills battled with the Iron Maiden and unless absolutely necessary I tended towards patterns like Copper Bombs. The Giant's tungsten, lead and red wire caddis things were also perfect, if not a bit oversized for my taste. He did however take a great 22" rainbow on the Whakapapa on it.



The Copper Bomb – it's a sinker, don't get puritanical about it

As we experienced rain and turbid water rubber legged and darker patterns also had some appeal, but only if you could get them to the fish.

The Pro and I were making our way upstream. The river conditions had deteriorated to the point that it was almost unfishable.

In a moment of patriotic fervour I tie on a Zak that I had adjusted for the trip on my own vice. Knowing that flow rates would be stronger than they are at home I tied it slimmer, sparser and with a less stiff tail in the hope that I'd get a better sink rate. I also incorporated more of the purple flash into it than normal.

I caught the only fish of the day on that fly, a 20ish inch bow, and was as content as a South African boy of mediocre experience and a long way from home could possibly be.



Some Other Thoughts...

Tackle

- Rods:** 9 foot, 5wt. Think Midlands dams and you've nailed it.
- Over-line it if you want or if the wind blows. A 6wt can be handy, but don't bring smaller or shorter rods – they're a total waste of time.
- Make sure that you can use the damned thing. I'm not a fantastic caster and would have benefitted from stalking and casting at hadedahs on my lawn. For sighted fish you get one cast. You're going to stuff up and you're going to be depressed – you want to keep this to a bare minimum.
- Lines:** Floating is pretty much all you need. We took fish on streamers where an intermediate or sink tip is an advantage. I fished a braided sinking leader and it got the job done.
- Leaders:** I rekindled my love affair with braided leaders. Where casting is critically important these transfer the cast to the fly (or some scientific mumbo-jumbo like that) smoothly. Certainly for dry fly work I'll not fish a tapered nylon leader again.
- Tippetts of 2X and 3X will get all of your work done. In clearer, smaller rivers with smaller ('smaller' means around 16 inches on average) you can use a 4X. After too many broken tippetts I fished almost exclusively 2X tippet.
- Check your tippet frequently for abrasions and discard it immediately. I didn't catch a fish under 20" in almost two weeks fishing and they are, especially in strong currents, a lot more powerful than you're probably used to.
- I was broken off on 2X by an estimated 8 pound brown and it had me reaching for my spool of 0X. Don't buy crap tippet. You're looking for the highest breaking strain for its diameter. Not all X's are created equal.
- Reels:** You will (rejoice brothers, rejoice) see your backing. A reel with a smooth drag helps. But you knew that already.
- Other:** If you buy anything before you leave make sure that it's a pair of decent wading boots. You may only use those awful rubber soled things. The premium brands are up to 25% cheaper over there, but if you buy them at home put studs in them before you go. Trust me, you don't want to buy studs over there. R50 a stud. Eight to ten studs a boot. Do the math. I never had an issue that they made noise on rocks like you often get told that they do.
- Clothing:** While angling pressure is light the few who are on the rivers take a dim view of fishing naked. Bring clothing. Warm stuff too. And a proper jacket. We wet waded. Because we're African and aren't a bunch of sissies.

You are going to take too much stuff with you. It's part of being an angler. Embrace it.

Here are some other images that may be of interest. For all fly requirements I strongly suggest that you contact Anglerfish on 0839933870.



A Very Useful Selection of Streamers & Nymphs – the first two flies in the left column are a Christmas Tree and a Yoshi Bugger & both are excellent stillwater flies



Christmas Trees for the 'Big O'(left) and the 'Big O' (right)





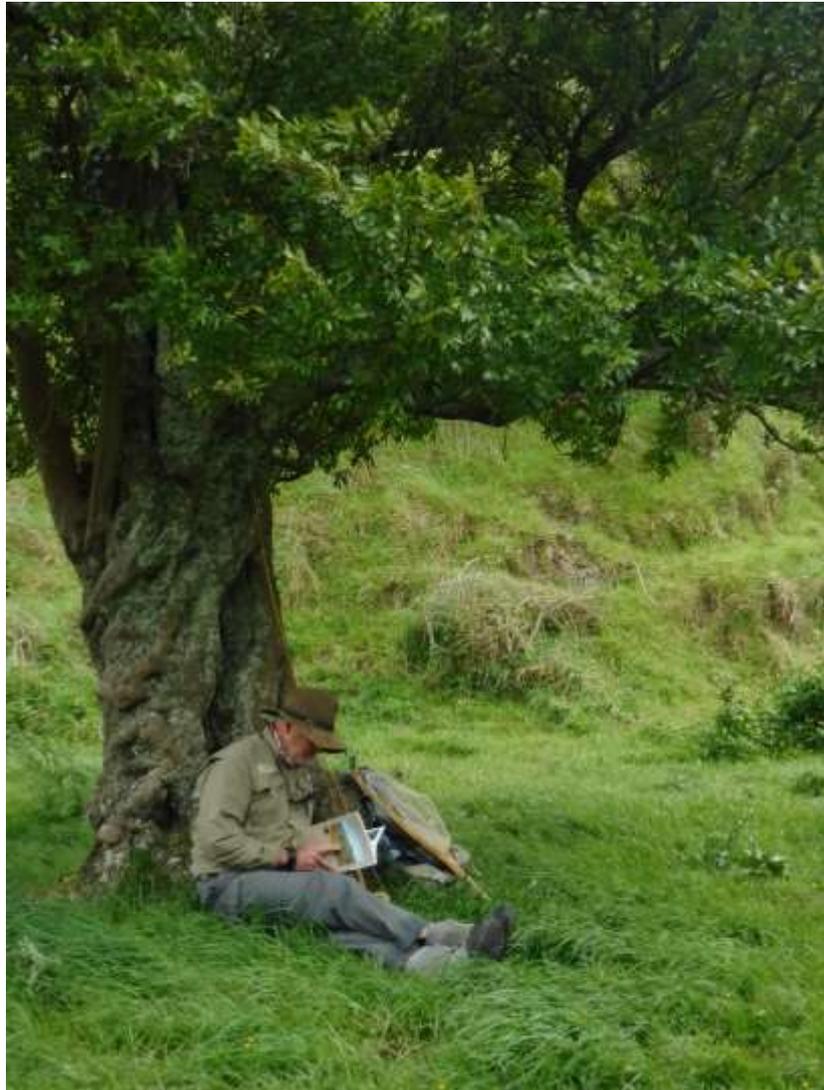
Happy Days on the Big O



Sandflies – What you heard about them is untrue (they're even worse than that)



Come On In, The Water's Fine



Reading "Tales of the Ruakituri" on a Windswept Day