



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH MATTHEWS

Mountain Monsters

Headhunting for big trout on Patagonia's eastern fringe. by Zach Matthews

The wind is no joke. ‘That’s the first thing they ought to tell you about Patagonia,’ I thought as I winced in pain. I had just buried a Double Deceiver in my back, both hooks digging in from the feel of it, and I was suppressing the urge to turn the air blue. The day was not going well. I rotated, awkwardly, and asked my wife Tracy to pry the fly free. As she performed triage, I stared at the mountains rising hard out of the edge of the lakeshore.



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EXPEDITIONS

We were bobbing in a boat on Lago Larga, a small high-altitude lake on the eastern border of Patagonia's vast Los Alerces National Park, on the northern end of the region. The Patagonia region of Argentina, I was surprised to learn, is approximately the length of the American West Coast. We were in Chubut Province (roughly analogous geographically to Northern California), trying desperately

to put the third leg on what the locals call the Patagonian Grand Slam.

Our week started spectacularly. On our very first day we landed multiple rainbow trout up to 23 inches long in a different mountain lake, so far off the grid that we bumped three coveys of California quail (not to mention about a hundred sheep) on our way into the heart of the estancia. Much of Patagonia is still di-

vided into ranches so vast they make even Ted Turner's holdings pale in comparison. Local outfitters generally have their own private waters on these estancias, with access arranged in mysterious ways with the ranch managers, ensuring the fishing pressure is minimal (the region's sparse population also helps).

Our head guide for the week, Emiliano Luro—a knowledgeable former schoolteacher—had taken one look in my box of gargantuan stoneflies and immediately picked out the very largest. His hunch was proven right when a two-foot silver torpedo promptly launched itself off the bottom of the lake, and smashed my fat fly as it flew into the air. I, of course, missed the set, but fortunately that rainbow had lots of willing friends. Both Tracy and I left the lake worn out and smiling. You could catch rainbows like that forever.

There was only one problem: I hadn't really come to Patagonia to catch rainbow trout. You see, brown trout are, for me,



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IF YOU GO

The Region
Chubut province is in the north-central area of Patagonia, spanning the region south of sprawling Bariloche and centered on picturesque Esquel. Air links are available to both Bariloche and Esquel, with the Esquel flight being more convenient. Lodging is available within the towns of Esquel as well as Trevelin, which both also host ski travelers in the winter. Because Patagonia's seasons are flipped from North America's, trout fishing begins on November 1st and ends on May 1st for most waters, with a few closing in February, and a few others open year round.

Travel Tips
Anglers should expect to pay a reciprocal entry fee of \$160 in order to enter Argentina from the United States, as well as a weekly license fee of approximately \$90. Bring lots of U.S. currency; the Argentine peso fluctuates widely, and guides and staff prefer tips in U.S. dollars.

Outfitters
Most lodges prefer to work through a travel outfitter, although local guides typically also run independent services. Hemispheres Unlimited (www.hemispheresunlimited.com) is run by an American named Justin Witt, who lived and guided in Trevelin for several years, and is now an Argentine citizen. Hemispheres offers bookings with a variety of lodges with four-star accommodations and exquisite dining (including Lago Rosario Lodge in Trevelin, where we stayed) as well as outfitters (including a "dirt bag" semi-DIY trip package). Patagonia River Guides (www.patagoniariverguides.com) hosts trips in the Trevelin area, farther north in the famous Lake District, as well as in the Rio Pico region in the south. They too offer access to a number of private estancias. Tres Valles Lodge (www.tresvalles-lodge.com) on the Rio Las Pampas, near the Rio Pico as well as the Rio Nilson, is a good choice if you want to penetrate the true hinterlands of central Patagonia, far away from any air links.

Cast and Blast

One of the most unique things about northern Patagonia is the wide variety of bird hunting options, which it also offers. California quail are exploding in numbers; coveys of over 100 birds are reasonably common. Quail season begins March 15th, near the end of the fishing season, so it's possible to mix cool weather trout fishing with unsurpassed upland bird hunting. Many lodges can arrange to have twenty-gauge double shotguns on hand, as well as trained gun dogs, eliminating the need to fly with your firearm. The cast and blast option is especially appealing for fly casters unaccustomed to casting in roaring winds—on an especially windy day, you can just go bird hunting instead and wait for better weather.

something of an obsession. I grew up in Arkansas, which shares Patagonia's distinction of producing world-record class browns. As a result, the brown trout has always held a certain extra caché in my personal conception of a trophy fish. I reasoned that the brown trout—a European originally, just like most Argentines—evolved in conjunction with human angling. It has thus been a combatant in our private arms race the longest, and (at least in my experience) that makes it the hardest trout to catch, especially in trophy sizes. I knew Patagonia had huge browns and so I had shown up with flies so large the locals laughed as they passed them from hand to hand. My guides, however, seemed professionally interested in seeing me give them a try.

My first chance was on the Futaleufú River, a gorgeous tailwater just outside the Welsh colonial town of Trevelin, primarily used by the local guide culture as a bunny-slopes rainbow trout factory. There were big browns in its clear, blue waters, but they rarely rose to dry flies, which most visiting anglers preferred by default. Not me; our guide for the day, Nico Fliess, smiled in anticipation as I unlimbered my 8-weight, with its massive sinking line, and tied on a fly the size of a chinchilla. Although already a father of four, Nico was young and energetic (possibly due to his fondness for mate, the local tea-like energy drink). He seemed amused by my plan to break the rules, as it were.

One of my first casts on the Futaleufú will haunt me forever; I chunked my yellow, articulated contraption across a swirling whirlpool and onto a large shelf, and quickly stripped it back. Both Nico and I saw a shadow the size of a Labrador retriever surge off the bottom and smash my fly. I set the hook and felt the head shake only a truly enormous brown trout can impart—that slow pulse, with enough of a pause between the surges to let you know the trout's head is tracking across inches as it shakes, like a greyhound slaughtering a hare. I raised the rod, began to recover line, and then it was gone. The hook hadn't sunk in; my set at long range had not been sufficient; the fish beat me.

Dejected, I looked back to Nico. "That might have been the biggest brown trout

I have ever seen in the Futaleufú," he admitted in a small voice. "In fact, it might have been a king salmon." I asked him whether he thought that was a real possibility (yes, Patagonia also has salmon), but neither of us had ever seen a salmon attack a fly quite like that, and anyway it was too early for their run. "Twenty eight inches, you think?" I asked, intentionally seeking solace in a conservative estimate. "No," Nico said sadly, shaking his head. "More like thirty. More than thirty." I went back to plying the waters, only to watch the same movie end the same way several more times that day. We caught fish (Tracy delighted in dry fly fishing at short range for willing rainbows), but I lost what would have been my personal best brown trout two more times that day.

Biologically Rich

The very best thing about experiencing Patagonia is not the Malbec they serve habitually with every meal, or the exquisite, crystal clear lake water that we drank, showered in, and plied for trout,

or even the astonishingly good food: the prosciutto and capocollo (dry cured hams), the bread baked chlorine-free with pure lake water, or the olives. No, it is the biodiversity. Bees abound. There are actual flocks of game birds just walking beside the gravel roads, healthy working ranches full of livestock and enormous European hares, and a surfeit of plant life (including, it being summer in February there, stands of wildflowers like purple lupine). But above all, Patagonia has the richest biodiversity of salmonids of any place on earth. Salmonids aren't native, but they all flourish; rainbow and brown trout, king salmon, Atlantic salmon, and even Labrador-grade brook trout.

All this biodiversity isn't found smashed together in one river, of course. Rather, there are so many different watersheds that in one day you could theoretically catch a rainbow on a dry fly in a lake at breakfast, drive a few minutes to chase browns with streamers in a broad river at midday, then finish by swinging for brookies in a lake-fed stream in the evening.

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EXPEDITIONS

The most beautiful river the region
may well be the Corcovado. It is fed, much
like the Yellowstone River, from a large
lake: Lago General Vintter, which spans
the Argentine-Chilean border. Reportedly,
huge rainbows as well as truly massive
brook trout spend most of their year in the
lake, but make two runs into the Corco-
vado River to spawn. These runs (one for
the rainbows and one for the brookies,
with their counterparts coming in to feast
on fresh trout eggs) bookend the season.
We were able to catch the very beginning
of the brook trout run, which begins in
Patagonia's fall (late February).

Fishing for huge brook trout in the
Corcovado resembles nothing so much as
Erie steelheading, if only the Erie river bot-
toms were dead clean and there were abso-
lutely no other anglers for miles. The trout,
as Emiliano Luro explained from his long
experience, stay clustered together, holding
in certain specific runs. While aggressive,
they have a Jekyll-and-Hyde mentality when
it comes to flies. Swing the same pattern in
front of the same fish for two hours and he
might ignore it for all but fifteen minutes,
and then violently slash at it during that
specific window of time. The reasons are
known only to the brookies themselves.

Big brook trout fight differently than
big rainbows or even browns. They are
bulldogs, surging then holding, more
like a redfish, although they occasionally

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jump. Their colors range from greenish to
oiled bronze to even brick red. Their spots
are quasi-fluorescent, but they retain their
slick juvenile skins even into large adult-
hood, making the spots almost invisible
unless you turn them just so, when they
erupt and glow in the light. In sum, they
are some of the most beautiful trout I
have ever caught, more akin to endan-
gered Montana bull trout than to the blue
line brookies of the Appalachians. Our
day on the Corcovado was a restful one,
with a long hike over a friendly estancia,
lunch near an unoccupied gaucho home,
and a nice reminder that those who
single-mindedly pursue one goal often
wind up missing out on life along the way.

Which is not to say, of course, that
I had given up on catching a monster
brown. The third guide of our trip was a
vorable Argentine named Gonzalo Mar-
tinez—a trained sushi chef who briefly
worked in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. He
was the guide who took us to Lago Larga,
a deep pothole of a mountain lake, chock
full of huge browns which typically show
themselves about three to five times a day.

By this point in our trip, the wind had
become so ever-present as to begin to fade
into the background; a nuisance, like a
sunburn, which only makes its presence
known from time to time. One such violent
gust was the one that buried my Double
Deceiver between my shoulder blades. But
in all honesty, that might have been the only
day I could look back on and wish it was
windier. If it had been, I might not have seen
the truly epic scope of my failure.

The problem, I eventually worked out,
was the flies. They worked; oh yes, they
worked almost too well. In a lake known
for producing three or so fish a day, mostly
making slashing attacks, we pulled (and
counted) no less than twenty-one. Many
of those fish were over the two-foot line.
A couple rivaled the Labrador retriever
I lost on the Futaleufú. About a third of
those fish actually swatted my fly, but the
same issue continued; I simply could not
get a hook set on any but the smallest of
the browns. While we wound up breaking
the imaginary twenty-inch threshold, I re-
mained haunted by what could have been.
My flies, you see, I had tied on hooks that
I usually reserve for striped bass. The wire
gauge was of the heaviest size, and I was
not yet experienced enough with stone-
mouthed mature browns to truly set the
hook with a tarpon-like vigor. We returned
the next day, armed with my only smaller-
hooked Double Deceiver, and I managed
to boat the largest brown, which saw fit
to strike. But the magic spell had broken;
whether because the fish saw the flies the
day before, or merely for the usual reasons
of weather change and fickle trout brains,
we drew a standard hand, and saw only
three of Lago Larga's huge denizens.

Realistic Standards

There comes a point in any trip—and
indeed sometimes in life—when it's time to
stop chasing the arbitrary goals we set for
ourselves and take a step back to appreciate
what we already have. The last day of our
trip rolled around and Gonzalo asked if we
wanted to once again pursue that monster
brown. It was tempting; by this point I
had landed a twenty-three inch rainbow,
a twenty-one inch brookie, and a twenty-
two inch brown trout, but I now knew for
a certainty what else was out there. I could
feel the pulse of those huge fish again; their
surging heads as they shook the fly, then the
absolute anticlimax of the line going slack.

And then I looked at Tracy. A new
angler, she had nonetheless gamely hung
with me for an entire week; her large rain-
bow from the first day had been followed
by day after day of fruitless headhunting.
She was sunburned, worn out, and giv-
ing me the same haggard "I'm with you
wherever you go" look she had worn for



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days. I owed her better, and I knew it, and
so I told Gonzalo no. A friend told me
not long before I left that you don't really
want what you deserve in life, and he was
right; I had already caught more gorgeous
mature fish than I deserved, and I had
only myself to blame for those I had lost.
This would be Tracy's day.

And so we went to the Rio Frio, a
small stream with small, eager trout.
Tracy, who came into the week having
only thrown a five weight on a hand-
ful of occasions, gleefully raked in fish
after fish. After some consultation with
Gonzalo, her casting suddenly ascended
to an entirely different level; her line sailed
through the air, cutting the wind instead
of being shouldered aside by it. Her rod
flicked, and the dry fly at the end of her
tippet settled perfectly onto the water,
where a trout immediately inhaled it. All
told, she caught more than 40 fish.

At the end of the day I found my-
self standing on a pebbled shoal with
Gonzalo, just watching her. It was late,
getting cold, and I knew there was beer
in the cooler back at the truck. "Are you
about ready, Trace?" I asked. She finished
landing yet another trout and looked
at us—the two anglers standing on the
shore with miles and years of water under
our feet, and said, "Three more casts?"

You don't go to other side of the
world to bag trophies like a mountain
climber knocking off peaks. You don't
even go for the food, or the gregarious
and friendly people, or the gorgeous
unspoiled landscape. You go because you
love to fish, and you want the people you
love to know what that means; and when
they understand, when they truly see it
the same way you do, you realize that you
couldn't have found anything more valu-
able there, no matter what.

Zach Matthews is the host of *The
Itinerant Angler Podcast* and a frequent
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