



The Far Side of the Moon

Catching the biggest trout
of your life over and over.

Story by Zach Matthews

Photography by Rebecca Shaneyfelt

We had picked our way through a boulder field ragged and strewn with white rocks standing like ancient coral and surrounding us on all sides. We had finally made it to shore where we moved along water's edge from high spot to high spot looking for space to cast. We were all bemused by the solid-looking rocks that turned to white powder beneath our wading boots, and as I prepared to launch a cast, I shouted to my companions above the wind, "I feel like I'm fishing on the moon." The laughing ceased though when the shaky footing caused me to lose my equilibrium. As I struggled to regain balance, my 8-weight, with perfectly awful timing, began to buck and surge. A trout

had inhaled the fly. I scrambled down the loose pile of chalky stones, my feet sliding in one direction as the wind screamed and tried to force me in the other.

The rainbow on the end of the fly line streaked toward me. Its near ten pounds of silver-teal flesh flashed occasionally just beneath the blue but rippled surface of the lake, and the fly line grew ever more slack. Knowing I had made a poor strip-set, I stashed the rod under my arm and began hand-lining as fast as my two fists could whirl. It wasn't enough. The fish leapt for the third time and threw my leech pattern into the air—a perfect tableau of defiance as the fly sailed away and the fish dropped

*Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.
Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.
Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.*



Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.
Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.
Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit. Write to fit.



who has guided everywhere from Kamchatka to India, and who lived in Patagonia for several years in the lush town of Trevelin. This stop was just the first in what Witt expects to be at least two years of travel in search of new rivers in Mongolia and Russia near Lake Baikal. Becca Shaneyfelt, a talented photographer and EMT from Montana, also volunteered for the expedition after a previous trip to Strobel was blown out by 50-mile-per-hour winds. Her return resembled a spirit quest as much as anything—she does not let failure stand unredressed. As for myself, I was along as the de facto trip secretary; something like the William Clark to Witt's Meriwether Lewis. Together, we strapped on our packs and tramped downwind as far as the trail could take us.

Lago Strobel has a lot of similarities to western American lakes, particularly Pyramid Lake near Reno. In addition to its very large fish, it is, like Pyramid, a remnant lake—the last puddle, in a way, of something that was once much larger. The rim around Strobel is ringed with

a kind of scum line, forty or fifty yards higher than the present waterline, and it consists of calcified mineral salts, which slowly covered the boulders around the lake during the thousands of years the lake receded. In places, the calcification is rock hard, like wader-shredding coral. Gore-Tex doesn't stand a chance, and even rubber wading boots fall victim. In other places, the mineral shell is like powdered sugar, waiting to give way as you bound along. All around, natural caves have literally grown up where the calcifications have merged and are inhabited by enormous Patagonian foxes the size of coyotes—some almost tame—which feed on sea birds and guanaco scraps left by pumas. Strobel is an old place, and it has been this way for a very long time.

The fish, however, are a new factor. From that first stocking truck back in the '80s, trout have grown to dominate many niches in the littoral ecosystem. Some trout cruise along, high in the column, basically filter-feeding, like a paddlefish or whale shark, and reaching

weights of more than 15 pounds. These trout are near the end of their lifespans; older, yes, and sometimes with old injuries too, but still making a living and willing to eat a well-placed fly. Other rainbows, younger and fast as tuna, run the bluewater depths almost like pelagic fish, streaking after small swimming crustaceans. The biggest bruisers mostly stay down deep, making excursions to the shoreline feeding grounds at dusk or on cloudy days, when the lake's clear water is less of a handicap.

Small leeches (about size 12) seem to be the prized food source, and flies tied with the color blue were particularly effective for reasons known only to the trout. Justin Witt stuck one of the old surface cruisers almost immediately, landing 10 or 12 pounds of trout with the practiced brio of someone who has personally handled a thousand just the same.

The dominant characteristic of the far side of Strobel is wind. Everywhere in Patagonia is windy, but this far

People, Places, and Equipment

Silver & Gold (page 12)

Denver Bryan fished for bonefish in the Turks and Caicos Islands (more specifically, South Caicos) and made arrangements through Beyond the Blue Bonefishing (beyondtheblue.com). More of Denver's work and the work of other fine photographers can be seen at imagesonthewildside.com.

Lone Star Gobbler (page 34)

Russell Graves hunted the rolling plains of the Texas Panhandle not far from the town of Childress. See more of his good work at russellgraves.com.

Susquehanna Smallies

(page 54)

Barry and Cathy Beck fished the Susquehanna River near the town of Nescopeck, Pennsylvania, and an area known to have been a camp for the Susquehannock branch of the Iroquois nation. They fished with local guide Jim Kukorlo (jbkukorlo@pa.metrocast.net). More of the Becks photography can be found and barryandcathybeck.com.

Gordon Allen

An artist from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Gordon has been contributing to *Gray's* for years. His line art is scattered throughout this issue. You can see more of Gordon's work at www.gordonallenart.com.

south (a full 10 degrees farther down than the tip of Africa), the wind never really stops howling. The key to fishing is to locate shelter. The lakeshore is heavily indented with bays, many piled high with tumbled rocks from ancient earthquakes. Behind these rock piles are small, perfectly white beaches. By positioning ourselves on the leeward tip of the rock piles, we found a satisfactory casting position—elevated, with wind mostly at our backs, and a glass-ceiling view into the intense clarity of the lake.

Part of the problem with sight fishing to the largest trout you've ever seen is that you just can't help yourself; you are going to screw up and probably more than once. Witt quickly corrected my tendency to stop the strip once I saw a mammoth trout begin its approach: "You have to keep the fly moving or if anything accelerate it," he said. "Anything in here is going to try to get away from a fish that big." With the right angle, standing in a cockpit of rocks, you can bomb casts to distant, cruising fish, or plumb the drop-offs where the water shifts from turquoise to a deep submarine blue.

Becca came to catch fish, not just take pictures and toy with casting at faraway cruisers. She focused her efforts on the deep holes between rocks, in a style resembling pocketwater fishing in a high mountain stream, and it proved to be laughably effective. Silver torpedos—younger, hot fish, nearly tunoid in shape but still huge by any objective standard—blasted from the bottom, unseen until the last second. Steelhead in all but name, these trout leapt and twirled exactly like their sea-run counterparts. Setting hooks wasn't always easy with chop and waves battering our hips and chests, but Becca landed "the biggest trout of her life" over and over again.

Strobel is, above all else, the place where personal records fall. Untramed wilderness usually equates to unpressured fish, and this far out, some of these fish had never even seen flies—the most effective patterns were not the articulated, flash-laden contraptions anglers are slinging back

home, but instead simple, classic flies, many of them out of style in the U.S. for decades. A single strip of rabbit fur on a bead-headed leech was enough to tempt double-digit trout, and angler error accounted for most refusals

As good as the fishing is, Strobel is not the kind of place where you can allow yourself to get distracted. Though pumas are about, other dangers are more likely to ruin your trip.

On one hidden beach, I found a perfectly round platform atop a rock where the crown of an old calcified boulder had flaked away. Although the spot was exposed, the wind had momentarily died, so I took a position atop the rock and began searching the water for the drop-off. After sticking and losing a fish, my focus intensified, and I failed to notice a shift in the wind. Rollers began washing around my feet, then my knees, as I stared, oblivious, into the clear depths. Finally the inevitable happened, and two rollers crashed into one, shoulder-high. The wave detonated on my rock, and its concussive force almost tossed me onto shore behind me. I stayed in place only because I had hooked my feet under the lip of the old calcified shell of the boulder. Soaking wet and shaking, I remembered that miles of boulder fields separated me from any vehicle, and beyond that, seven hours of off-roading separated me from medical assistance. I timed my escape between the next two waves, then sat on shore, watching my platform disappear beneath wind-generated artificial tide.

In terms of trail length, the span of shoreline accessible from the gaucho house isn't huge; maybe seven or eight miles to the terminus—the absolute windy end—where rollers always come in big enough for surfing and casting is all but impossible. That seven or eight miles is deceptive, however, because the trail never moves in a straight line and rarely levels out. In places the path is what climbers call "Rated X." It's not necessarily impassable, but make one mistake and you're looking at broken limbs or worse. Justin Witt repeatedly



called out to remind us, "If you think it's questionable, don't even try it." Near the lake edge itself, the wet, slick granite threatened to tumble us into the bone-breaking waves with any misstep.

And so it was that we found ourselves, at the end of our longest day of hiking, miles from home base, sitting on the sand of a beach, in the lee of a large boulder, burning driftwood as we awaited a pre-arranged Hilux pick up. We were like party guests at the end of a feast, tired, fat and sated, and perhaps even a little drunk on success. We had each caught multiple large trout, sight-fished, deep-lined, you name it. Both Becca and I set personal records for rainbow trout, although we didn't try to quantify exactly how big each fish was.

There aren't many places in the world where you can stitch together so many fine experiences at once: fishing perfectly pure water that has rarely—perhaps never—seen a line filled with trout that are all big beyond belief and happy to eat simple flies.

As the Patagonian sun went down in flames over the rim of the lake, I brought my hands to my face and in-

haled deeply, smelling the smoke, the native sage grass and, most importantly, the remnants of every giant trout of the day. That is the finest smell of all. ■

Zach Matthews has contributed to many outdoor magazines, including our sister publication, American Angler. He's also host of The Itinerant Angler podcast. This is his first appearance in Gray's. When not fly fishing or hunting, he practices law in Atlanta.

If You Go

Travel to Lago Strobel from anywhere in the United States begins with a flight to Buenos Aires. Argentina has recently waived its old \$300 entry fee, and fishing licenses are not required on the private estancia. Be mindful of your airports, however; Buenos Aires's international airport at Ezeiza (EZE) is across town from its domestic airport, Aeroparque Jorge Newberry (AEP). Allow at least three hours for cross-town transfers; better yet, spend a night in Buenos Aires and check out the tango scene and European-style

streets of the picturesque San Telmo neighborhood. Quality lodging is available in town for less than \$75 per night, and the wine is terrific.

From Buenos Aires you will fly cross-country to El Calafate, one of the last sizable towns before the end of the line in Tierra del Fuego. Nearby glacier fields are popular tourist destinations, especially with non-anglers in tow. You can expect the Hilux transfer to Lago Strobel to take at least six hours, so bring snacks.

The road to Lago Strobel Lodge passes by Estancia Laguna Verde Lodge, its sister operation. Trips that combine both lodges are under consideration so if you want to experience all Lago Strobel has to offer, please inquire.

The far side of Strobel is presently accessible through Hemispheres Unlimited (404-783-2114; hemisphere-sunlimited.com), its American booking partner (operated by Justin Witt). Hemispheres has a strong understanding of Argentina and any problems tend to go away quickly, which is an invaluable asset in any overseas operation.