

Tumut - Season's Over

I had a good feeling about today's fishing. It was the last day of what had been a terrible season. Six major floods on the Tumut River system had meant a season of turbid water and left mud and debris everywhere. Trout were difficult to find; favourite spots had disappeared.

The weather forecast was looking promising. After a bleak week of overcast and wet weather the Bureau had predicted a frosty morning followed by bright sunshine - a beautiful early winter's day. And indeed on cue the local fog lifted and the clear blue sky seemed to go on forever. I had walked the river regularly of late and each time had been pleasantly surprised at the number of rainbows and browns I had managed to spot. Just like previous seasons the browns were lying close in to the rocky walls, close to the surface and alternating between sub-surface and surface food. The rainbows were mostly hovering off the gravel beds dotted regularly along my stretch of river; it was no accident that these beds were the main source of the daily mayfly and caddis hatches.

I set out alone with enough supplies for a full day on the river. I stopped at all the regular haunts, scenes of previous successes. It wasn't long before I approached a favourite spotting position. Above a steep rocky bank stood a massive River Red Gum, more than 3 metres in diameter - a perfect hiding spot to peer down into the quiet water along the margin. There was a prominent half-submerged log right below me and every time I had checked this spot over the last five years there had been a nice trout feeding; always facing downstream collecting food from a long back-eddy.

Many of my guests have spotted a fish here and have tried and failed to land one. Water clarity was back to its normal level, and sure enough a trout was well entrenched and feeding happily under the log. Casting required an intrepid climb down to the water's edge about 15 metres downstream; an approach from upstream in the fish's blind spot was out of the question due to heavy undergrowth and a cattle fence running right into the river. With overhanging branches and steep banks, a side-cast was essential; accuracy to within 300mm of the overhanging log and a soft landing were also critical. A precise drop almost on the trout's head would be needed.

The odd rise was interspersed with sub-surface feeding. A long leader and a nice size 12 foam-winged Caddis pattern which I had recently purchased on a trip to the U.S. would work best I thought. I tied a 300mm dropper off the shank and added a size 14 Copperjohn, my favourite Tumut River late season nymph pattern. From the casting position there was no way I could see the trout. With some hesitation I launched the first round-the-corner side arm cast which surprisingly landed where I intended, but nothing happened (just like the many other times I had fished this spot). With no spotter and a trout facing downstream and looking straight at me the odds were low. The second cast also landed in the target zone; the foam dry actually sank quickly. "No, that must be a fish on the nymph" laboured across my synapses. Luckily it had hooked itself well and after a short duel a nice 2 lb trout was in the net. A one-handed photo and a quick release gave me a chance to reflect on a small victory.

As the winter sun rose higher in the northern sky a couple of hours went by filled with prospecting, spotting and spooking fish, not necessarily in that order. Just twenty metres upstream one large brown, about 4lb and silhouetted black against a sand bar got the adrenalin pumping - again facing downstream in an impossible position. I should have launched the drift boat! So I bade it farewell and headed further upstream.

I didn't see another person all day; that's not unusual as this stretch of the river hasn't been fished at all this season. Some speculative cast in deeps holes, riffles and long runs produced no immediate results.



After lunch a slow walk downstream ensured I covered all the water. I was shocked to suddenly come across a pod of seven trout all surface feeding in a deep pool covered by protective basket willows.

The leading fish was a 3lb brown and a mixture of six browns and rainbows in the 1lb to 2lb category completed the picture. I've seen plenty of school fish on the Tumut over the years but they are usually juvenile rainbows in what I call a nursery area. I've not seen so many adults in one area feeding.

The fish were all lined up facing upstream and the tree cover was above and upstream of them. I quickly snipped off the dropper and waded well into the river up to my armpits to get a direct shot at them. There were quite a few Caddis coming off in the sunny conditions and I thought I had matched them pretty well.

Almost unbelievably the first cast attracted one of the trailing rainbows and it was in the net without incident. Two more casts saw a brown and another rainbow in the net after some acrobatics like I hadn't seen since the Sydney Olympics (the fish, not me)!



Surely the commotion had spooked all the fish. I quietly moved to the shore and upstream to see that the large brown was still in position and feeding below the surface. A few changes of fly bought no luck and eventually I tired before the fish.

A few final casts at the next shallow pool right at dusk saw a few juvenile rainbows tempted to the dry and then it was time to get out of the cold and in front of the log fire at the Lodge. As I reflect on the day's action I have to conclude that it was of the best day's fishing on a small stream that I've ever encountered – a day when the most optimistic of fisherman's expectations were well and truly exceeded.

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