

# TROUT ON YOUR DOORSTEP

## A quick guide to methods and technique on the Waikato River

Where can you catch large Brown Trout on the fly, day or night, and just metres from a main highway? The answer is the Waikato River downstream from Hamilton.

Surprisingly, this fishery can produce all year round, although January and February are by far the hardest months. Once the water temperature hits 20° C or more, you will probably only succeed at night, and you'll need lots of mozzie repellent!

### Tackle Needed

Spin fishing with a fly or spinner has proven to be the best method for ease of casting. The typical rod used is 1.8 to 2.0m long, with a light open type spinning reel and nylon around the 3 to 4 kg mark, to give you distance when casting.



### Big brownie caught on a \$50 rod & reel setup.

A highly suitable entry level setup that usually only costs around \$50 with nylon is a Shimano IX 4000 rear drag reel with a 6'6" rod of 2-4 kg weight, it's not practical to go much cheaper when chasing these fish, (A \$20 budget special *will not* cut it). The fish above, caught on a Shimano setup, weighed over 6 lbs.

The rear drag reels, though uncommon, are very handy when playing a fish, and very kid-proof. You will also need a short-handled landing net because the weight of nylon used means you can't forcibly lift the fish out unaided.

Terminal tackle consists simply of your chosen fly and a couple of split shot (small and medium) placed on the main line at about 50 and 70 cm above the fly. Place the smaller shot nearest to the fly, it aids casting and presentation, and buy the ones with lugs to make installing and removing off the nylon easier. The use of different weights of split shot will often make all the difference to catch rates.

## Fly Choice



### **Proven Waikato brown trout flies & easy to use split shot.**

The choice of fly is anything that will resemble the largish baitfish that provide the main food source for these fish; Muddler Minnow, Woolly Bugger, Booby, Jacks Sprat etc. However, it is very hard to go past the simple but deadly rabbit fly, it seems to supply just the right action. The current popular colours are dark olive green for daytime/dusk and black for night-time. If you tie your own flies, use chemically sharpened hooks in a heavy gauge, around size 4, but you can go as small as size 8. Use a good long rabbit strip to accentuate the tail action, and you can add flashabou and red hackles or tails to your daylight/dusk creations. A plain, big black rabbit is probably the best for night or coloured water use. Surprisingly, the darker colours stand out better in the discoloured water.

Another effective fly style is to simply tie in 2 largish marabou feathers “streamer style” over a silver chenille body as pictured above. The result looks a bit like a feather duster until wet, when the marabou does its job and provides a great action. Best colour is again olive green, but try also fluorescent yellow or pink!

## Spinning Lure Choice

Of course, spinning lures have their place as well, and are especially effective when the river is at higher levels, or you want to “punch” the line through willows. Popular choices are the black or copper Toby, copper or black Zed, red Veltic, and the black insect spinner, useful for fishing into the dark. Of the 3 weights available, (7g, 10g and 12g) 10g is the most useful in the Toby range, and the 7g, 10g & 12g in the Zed. The Zed also has a higher error-free casting percentage, as the Tobies are designed more as trolling lures, and have a tendency to sometimes kink or catch the line when cast.

Also if feeling affluent, replace all lure hooks with chemically sharpened red large-eyed hooks size 2 or 4, this will result in much higher success rates, because trout use the weight of the lure to help shake the hook free, so you need every advantage you can get.



### **Toby, Zed & blade type spinners plus good hooks.**

In flood or high water conditions the 12g weight in either the Toby or Zed is deadly, the added weight gets down to the trout and the bigger size stands out in the coloured water. Remember that the lighter spinning blade type lures like the Mepps or Veltics require a fluttering action to work, so slow your retrieve down accordingly, or use in slower flowing areas. You shouldn't need any added weight with most spinning lures, just use split shot if you do. You can use slightly heavier nylon, (say 4 kg up) with lures, this won't affect distances and gives you more chance of wrestling expensive lures off the weedy bottom or out of willow fronds.

Spinning lures are very effective on the brownies at most times of the day and especially in that golden light just before sunset. As with spinning the fly, you will find that the first 20 minutes or so of fishing will produce some sort of result if the fish are there. The drawbacks to spinner fishing are that you can't use the majority of them at night, they disturb the water more, and they are more likely to spook a fish that has a half-hearted attempt at it and feels the hook. If this happens and the next 2 casts get no result, swap to a different colour or spinner type. In contrast, a fish that only caught the tail of your rabbit fly will usually keep coming back for more, even after 4 or more attempts, and the percentage of trout hooked & landed on flies is definitely higher than on spinners.

A good practice is always to fish your spot with a fly first to avoid too much water disturbance, if that doesn't work and it still feels "fishy", convert to a spinner and that will often draw a rapid response.

### **Other types & methods.**

**Tokoroa Chickens** (a hollow lead weight with a skirt of feathers) are also successful, usually in a brown or black colour, and relatively small weights. They have the advantage of being able to be used in the day or night like flies.

**Soft baits** have made a large impact in all types of fishing, and have their supporters in trout fishing too. Even the scented types are now legal in our area. Select types that represent the bait fish and don't be afraid to go large, trout often attack very big quarry for their size.



**A few soft baits.**

### **Bait Fishing.**



A perfectly legal method for the Waikato River, use smelt, worms, bullies etc on small hooks either suspended below a float in slack water, or weighted to fish the bottom. Your main issue is not trying to catch all the other species in the river- carp, catfish, rudd, perch, eels, goldfish etc.

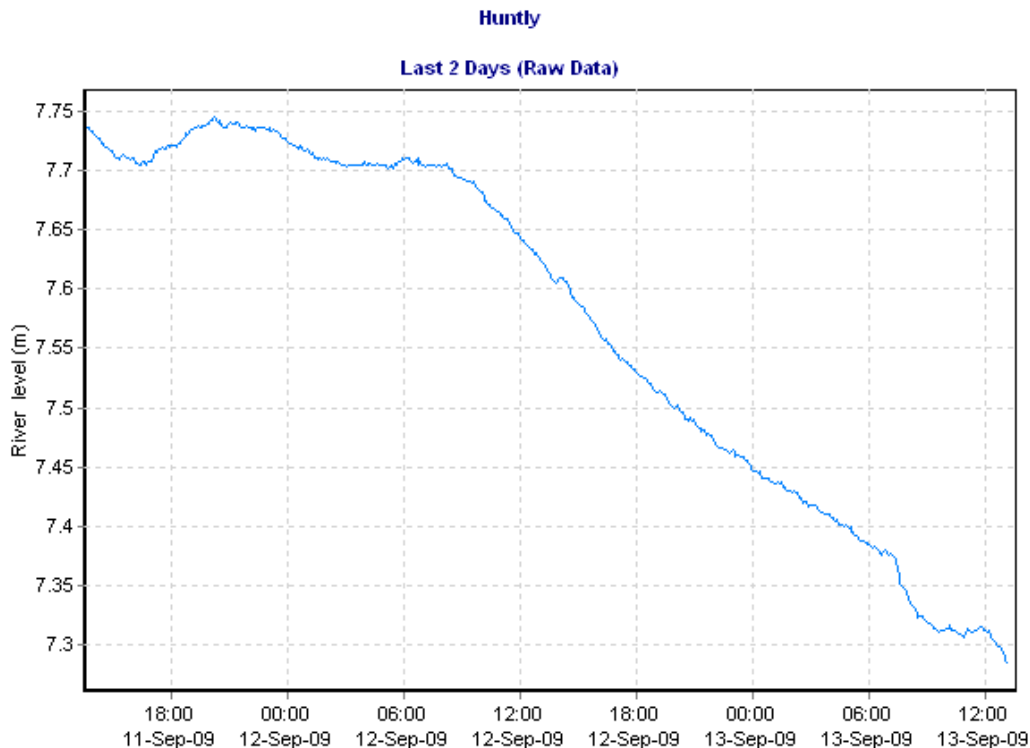
## Where & When to fish.

A good fishing spot will have some or all of the following factors; swift current close to the bank, a weed line, some obstruction or uneven bottom for the fish to station itself behind, and overhead cover. Once you have a few of these spots lined up on both sides of the river, you can pick and choose the most likely areas to fish considering the prevailing wind, water levels and clarity etc.

The amount of bridges spanning the river in this area makes both banks fairly accessible, but always ask permission if crossing private land, and respect the privilege.

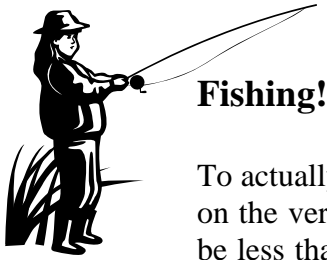
A highly useful website to help deciding when to fish is Environment Waikato's River Level & Flow page, select and save your favourite fishing area's graph onto Favourites and you can check it anytime.

<http://www.ew.govt.nz/riverlevelsandrainfall/cgi-bin/hydwebserver.cgi/catchments/details?catchment=17>



Updated every 3 hours they show clearly the level pattern of the Waikato River and others, and once you have caught fish at any spot you can identify optimum levels, remember those and return whenever the same level occurs. Some anglers prefer fishing when the river is clearing on a reducing level pattern, as shown above, others when it's initially rising.

Around Huntly, the best level for many fishing spots is around the 7.7 to 8.2 metre mark (Power Station monitoring site).



## Fishing!

To actually catch the trout, *stealth* is the prime requirement. Brown trout will be stationed on the very edge of the river to intercept the migrating baitfish, so most fish caught will be less than 10 metres from your rod tip. There's no need to try and cast halfway across the river, treat the Waikato as just another stream. Your quarry will usually be just out in the current from you or downstream, so keep a low profile, keep back from the edge unless it's dark, and keep all ground vibrations to a minimum. Especially avoid heavy footsteps, dropping objects on the bank or dislodging stones.

**Be very aware that in receding conditions the banks of the river will often be lined with wet, shiny mud which is extremely slippery, always avoid this and walk above it or on dry banks. Many rods and egos have been damaged by this fact!**

If you take good care getting into a fishing position and wet your fly first, you are more than likely to hook up on your first cast if the other factors are in your favour. Certainly the first 10 or so casts should be carefully executed, starting close in and then working progressively downstream. Using a spin rod enables you to swim the fly or spinner on a short line right at your feet, and you should always try that first. If you start with small casts at the upstream position of your spot and hook up, you have avoided disturbing fish lower down with your line, and can often hook another brown very quickly after your first, particularly at night. The typical cast is across and slightly upstream, releasing more line if the depth permits, and then a slow (and sometimes jerky) retrieve along the edge. At a new spot you should start your first few casts shallow until you have worked out the water depth.

Very often repeated swirls on the surface will show where a brownie has stationed itself for an easy meal, and these ones are relatively easy to catch. A pair of gold tinted Polaroid sunglasses are handy for spotting trout in reasonable light and clarity conditions. At other times the presence and activity of the baitfish will be your main guide. If you notice a school of these moving upstream at speed or skipping out of the water, cast in behind them, it's most likely a brownie rounding them up.

Bow waves will often give a fish away just before it hits your fly at close range. If it doesn't contact properly, freeze and resist the urge to reel in the fly. The "hanging" fly (and even a spinner) may induce another strike, or you can flip the bail arm and release some line to simulate a wounded fish tumbling downstream. If that fails, wait a while before your next cast, otherwise your movement will spook it. This gives the fish time to return to its normal position.

Once a good feeding position has been found, it will provide you with fish time after time when similar conditions are present, because another trout will rapidly move into that prime position. The lower reaches of the Waikato are very stable, and once you have a sure spot organized it will remain so indefinitely, unlike smaller and boulder type rivers. If you spook or prick a fish, make a note of the time and the ideal cast, and try again in a day or two. It's very common to hook or catch the very same trout over a short period.

When caught, the brownies will normally head downstream, larger fish going deep and head-shaking, smaller ones making runs and tail slapping and leaping on the surface. You might need to adjust your drag for the weight of the fish. Once turned they normally come in easily to your feet, but be prepared for their last bursts of energy close to the net.

The amount of fight they put up will be a good indication of their condition, which is normally pretty good. It is fairly rare to catch trout under the legal size of 300mm; in fact most under 400mm are released because of the abundance of larger fish. Remember always that a short fat trout is far better than a longer skinny one, and the silver, fresh run trout have a better taste than the darker brown “resident” fish.



## Night Fishing

This has always been very effective when targeting brown trout, and gives you even more of an advantage. There are many spots around the towns on the river where easy access and even street lighting can make night fishing fairly comfortable & safe. It is still recommended to fish in pairs if possible for obvious safety reasons.

When possible survey the spot you want to fish in daylight, work out where you’ll stand and picture the optimum cast, even have a few dummy casts, you never know! This preparation will pay off big time at night, because it’s a whole new ball game then. Use large black flies such as rabbit or marabou types as a general rule, with as slow a retrieve as you can manage to maximize your chances. It’s possible to catch multiple trout from one spot if you’re patient enough, and always take your landing net and a good torch or two. Tokoroa chickens are useful in this situation as well, and try a black insect spinner.

## TROLLING ON THE LOWER WAIKATO FOR TROUT



Trolling can be very productive on the Waikato River, and is a great family outing. These are the usual methods used by keen boat-fishos who like to cover a lot of water.

Taking your normal spinning rod and reel, with nylon around the 4 to 5 kg mark, a 1 oz (sometimes 2 oz) free-running ball sinker is anchored by a swivel about 80cm or so above the lure or fly. Suitable lures are the Black Toby in 10g or 12g sizes, the Copper Zed in 7g or 12g, or Tasmanian Devils/Cobras in gold/black combinations.

Flies to use, mostly in darker colours, are rabbits, muddler minnows and other streamer style flies. Use size 4 or bigger, with heavy gauge chemically-sharpened hooks if you tie your own. A useful and easy fly that has been successful consists of a long tail of squirrel or bucktail, small body of chenille and a large round clipped deer hair head. This, when treated with floatant keeps the fly above the sinker when trolled on the bottom.

The optimum time to go trolling is when the river is reasonably high, but dropping and clearing after a period of rain. Always wear life jackets, have a pair of oars, and where possible head upstream initially from your launch area so you are trolling back to your

vehicle. (It's not much fun if your outboard dies or you run out of petrol downstream!) Using your outboard (about 6 h.p. or more) or a strong pair of arms, head off downstream barely keeping ahead of the current. You can easily fish two lines from a small boat (one per angler), sometimes three.

Cast the line out directly behind you at a normal distance, and let the sinker bump along the bottom. The river bottom is mainly sand, and the puffs of sand this action creates attracts the trout. Your rod tip should be "tapping" evenly when you're at the right speed and depth, ie bouncing the sinker along the bottom.

Keep a finger on the nylon at all times to detect takes, with experience you'll also know if you've picked up weed, because the action will change.

Follow the deeper, faster channels (a depth finder is very handy), hug the edges where possible (ducking in and out of the willows) and skirt around the slower, weedy areas. It is surprisingly rare to snag on the bottom, but you can usually retrieve your tackle by powering back upstream and getting above the snag. You will only find good snag-free water by experience, but be wary around towns, commercial areas etc where the bank has been built up.

When you hook a trout move away from the edge and drift down while playing it. If you catch a fish in an area (or get a touch), make a wide circle back upstream to avoid disturbance, check your line and troll back through the area again. There is no point leaving a "fishy" area to carry on fishing blind, you will often hit more fish again in that spot.

This is a great way to find new fishing spots for land-based fishing later, as the differing current rates are easy to spot while in the boat. You can, of course, drift quietly down to a previously unfishable position, anchor or tie up to the willows and fly or spin fish from the boat.



### **Easy Smoking method**

To enjoy the fruits of your labour, try the trout smoked. Simply gut the fish, cut off the head and split it down the backbone leaving the skin intact. Wash and pat the fish dry. Sprinkle on a dessertspoon of plain salt and a couple of spoonfuls of brown sugar or honey, and rub in. A pinch of mixed herbs or lemon pepper can also be added if desired. Cover in cling wrap on a 1-2 cm deep tray and leave it in the fridge (both sides flesh side up) for a few hours if possible.

Using a portable hot smoker with manuka sawdust, smoke it for about 20 to 25 minutes or until the flesh just starts to break away from the bones. You should only need 1 dish 1/2 to 2/3 full of meths, even for 2 fish. While it's still hot and moist, you will be able to remove all the bones easily. If you've got some to spare, trout prepared this way is well received by friends, family and neighbours.