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Photography by R. Valentine Atkinson

BELIEF

After landing my first trout on a fly rod 45 years ago, and guiding for 21 years, I've come to recognise the importance of belief. It starts with you, then travels all the way to your fly, and finally to your presentation, establishing a total connection. Without this basic conviction, everything else will be more difficult, and result in less fun and fewer fish landed.

Most folk who come to fish the top of the South, hang their hats on sighted fish. I can totally understand—so did I, for my first 20 years. But in reality, there is so much more to fishing for browns in this area.

These creatures love to hide, and hide they do! Even after all my years of fishing, they still blend into some amazing places and fool me. Sight-fishing-only can be a dangerous trap. You need to be prepared each day to be multi-dimensional, as this will help you to become a better angler, improve your accuracy, increase your patience and improve your catch rate.

FISHING BLIND

To me there are two forms of blind fishing—'having a go', and reading the water. The first form is just blind, hopeful speculation and quite often does nothing but warm up the casting arm. In the second form, you read the water as if you are sight fishing. There is a lot about this approach that deserves more attention. It requires:

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- *Building an understanding of where fish feed.*
- *Believing that this works and that each cast will produce.*
- *Being 'in the zone' and becoming one with all that surrounds you, as if you were a fish.*
- *Knowing when and how to mend line, especially aerial mending, without thinking about it too much.*
- *Gaining a sixth sense. This only happens when all of the above come together.*

Now this may sound a little airy-fairy, but I know it works and it can work for you as well. Just work on one aspect at a time, starting with the first. This will help build knowledge, understanding and experience.

DAVE WHITLOCK

I first saw these principles in action over 15 years ago, when I first fished with American icon Dave Whitlock. It was raining, all the rivers were low, and the fishing had been rather flat. Dave and I drove 50 minutes to fish a larger river, and by the end of the

Top South Island Tips

Murchison guide Scott Murray offers advice on fishing his home rivers.

Doug Monnig from Colorado is a very keen angler. When we first met, 11 years ago, he had heard a lot about the challenging browns of the top of New Zealand's South Island. On the first day we flew by helicopter to a remote little stream where Doug fished very hard, all day long. Alas, by the end we were fishless, bar one take. He was mortified.

Back at the lodge I immediately got Doug to the bar and made sure he got a double whisky down before

he could get a word out. I knew what he was thinking, having paid a lot of money for no fish. After downing the whisky, he said, "I've lost it! What happened? What do I do now?" All I could say was, "Get another whisky down ya!" So he did.

When Doug got around to asking what we were doing and where we were going tomorrow, my brilliant answer was: "We're going fishing again!" His face dropped in horror, as I added, "We're flying again as well!"

The next day was beautiful—no wind, sunny, and a totally different river. After starting out rather tentatively, Doug returned to his former glory and set a new lodge record for the number of fish landed over three pounds!

The moral of the story is that, when fishing for browns in this district, the circumstances differ markedly from one river to another, and from one day to the next. Basically, you need to be prepared for all that is chucked at you.



TO ME THERE ARE TWO FORMS OF BLIND FISHING —
'HAVING A GO', AND READING THE WATER.

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Top South Island Tips . . . continued

day we had only spotted two fish. The other lodge guides had also seen few fish, and struggled to land any. After all the discussion and bar food and beer, Dave, in his mild-mannered voice, was eventually persuaded to confess. He had in fact hooked 24 fish

you were relaxed, and not even thinking. You see, you've been there! To succeed you need to allow your mind to find the same 'zone'.

Of course there are smaller South Island rivers that are only suitable for sight fishing, and a few rivers that you

sion builds, and everything can turn to custard! Mix it up a little and it will work so much better for you.

STEALTH

It is important to select the right river for the conditions. For example, depending on local streams being high or low, and whether it's sunny, overcast, raining, or windy, there are certain waters that fish much better. This is where a guide will help, but if you have plenty of time to familiarise yourself with different waters, you can work it out.

The next step is approach. These browns require stealth. I always take advantage of bushes, trees, banks and boulders to blend in, so the fish are less likely to see me. If it is windy, for example, you can blend into a bush with your rod waving around and look like part of the bush, but you can't do that as well using a boulder. It's amazing how close you can get to fish by blending in and using the conditions.

On open water I'm always mindful of the trout's cone of vision, which demands standing at least 25 to 30



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and landed 22, all between 3 and 7 pounds, and all by blind fishing!

What I saw Dave do that particular day involved all the points listed above. He did it with intensity, precision, and hardly spoke a word. He was in the zone, at times hooking fish just by lifting the rod tip for no apparent reason... 'sixth sense'!

I'm sure many readers can relate to days like this. And I bet it was when



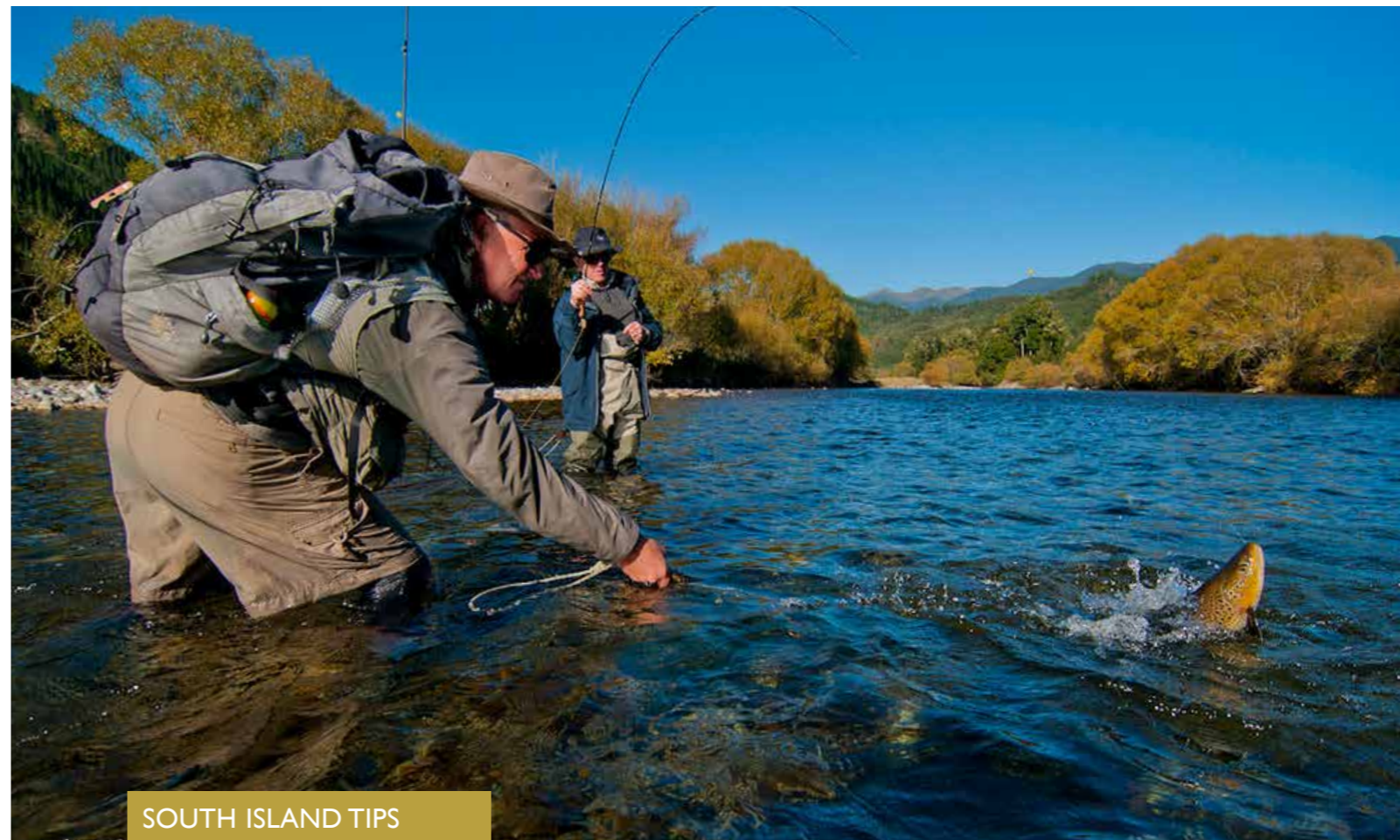
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can only fish blind. However, most rivers offer a bit of both, and what a wonderful way to have a fulfilling day, combining sight fishing and blind fishing.

I know from personal experience that after blind fishing actively, you do become very sharp at spotting a feeding fish. And I also know that when restricted to sight fishing, many visitors develop 'stage fright', as the ten-

feet behind a sighted fish to be safe (unless of course you crouch to move closer).

The longer the leader you can cast out straight, the better. Personally I like to go to 18 to 20 feet, but if you're used to 12 feet, try to go up by increments. Try 14 feet till you get used to it, then once you're comfortable with that, go up another one or two feet. The reason for the long lead-



SOUTH ISLAND TIPS

1. Browns in these rivers have their own behavioural quirks (e.g. preferring to feed upstream, in front of a boulder, rather than hanging behind), so you have to be prepared to adapt.

3. Do as much background research as you can, and if you can afford it, employ the services of a reputable guide.

4. Fish with a friend to share tactics.

5. Have everything—fly-lines (darker), clothes, hat, bags, etc—matched to the colour of the surroundings.

6. Watch the weather and adjust plans to suit the conditions.

7. Read the water and look to places where fish might be: upstream of boulders, current seams, rough/broken water, deep guts, drop offs, sand bars etc.

8. Mend line to create sufficient slack in the fly line, typically when there is fast water between you and the fish.

9. Be prepared to change flies. Generally, after a refusal, they have a memory. To cast the same fly again will only spook the fish.

ers is simply that these browns will spook if they see the fly line (even a dark one).

TACTICS

Dry flies, single nymphs, dropper combinations and double nymph rigs all come into play. Some rivers require just one fly, as two flies will spook the fish; on others two flies are far better than one, due to blind fishing opportunities.

Then it's really about depth and how quickly and naturally the flies can arrive at the level of the feeding fish. Sinking too quickly will alert

them. Sinking too slowly means you have to cast further in front, especially when standing behind them. My favourite approach is to stand on the edge of the river, and not in the water. Cast across, but from a distance far enough (i.e. 40 feet) to be outside of the fish's cone of vision. This way all the fish sees is the flies, not fly line. You can then send the flies well upstream of the fish to allow a more natural drift. Odds are you'll need a mend. Make it an aerial one.

Try to practice accuracy, especially when nymphing. When approaching a fish from directly behind, try cast-



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SOUTH ISLAND SEASONS

October/November: Expect cooler temperatures and fewer people in October, with November warming up a bit. Potentially more nymph than dry fly action, though in the past few seasons, October has produced plenty of dry fly action.

December/January: The start of summer generally has more sunshine and the fish are feeding more actively. A very good time, with duns on the water and the browns becoming fatter.

February/March: Mid to late summer, cicadas should be in full flight and dry fly action on, provided the weather doesn't cool down.

April: One of my favourite months, having landed many large fish at this time of year. The weather is cooling, but generally mild. Mainly nymphing.

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Top South Island Tips . . . continued

MAINTAIN YOUR QUARRY

The longer you can keep a fish feeding, whilst changing flies, the better your chances of a hook-up.

I once fished with brothers Scott and Tim Rorrick. We were fishing a very small, secluded stream for large browns. As we came around a bend in the river we spotted a large fish holding over a submerged boulder, seemingly sunbathing, feeding left and right. We spent more than four hours on this brute, with approximately 60 fly changes! Using a 20-ft leader, 5X tippet, a tiny #18 nymph and a piece of split shot, we finally induced the fish to take. He charged straight upstream and within seconds cut the tippet on a rock. I estimated that fish to be around 15 lb! Tim was very dejected, especially when his brother



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hooked and landed an 11 lb brown just two pools upstream on the very first cast!

The moral is to be prepared to change flies, without spooking the fish. **FI**

*Scott and Leya Murray operate River Haven Lodge, Murchison, NZ
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ing your flies at least two to four feet upstream of the fish, to allow a natural drift whilst still keeping the fly line behind the fish. Of course, all this depends on the speed and depth of the water.

Dry fly fishing is much easier. I prefer to place the fly directly on or near the fish's head (??) or even downstream a little. This is all within their cone of vision. However, if you think you've made a bad cast, leave it! The fish is aware of the fly, so don't pull it out of the water early. So many times I've seen anglers rip the fly clean out of the water because they thought it was a bad cast. A fish comes over to inspect the commotion, then bullets off in fright.



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