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Sea-run browns of Tierra del Fuego

BY GEOFF MUELLER

PHOTOS BY TIM ROMANO

Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan circumnavigated Earth in 1520 aboard his topsail schooner the Trinidad. In the seafaring boondocks between Europe and Asia, he scoped the island archipelago now known as Tierra del Fuego and discovered wind-tortured shorelines dotted with spear-wielding natives. But by all accounts, old Ferdi did not find trout.

Today, reaching the uttermost end of the Earth is a scurvy-free endeavor thanks to the introduction of aviation. The trip from major U.S. hubs involves watching internet downloaded movies while emptying cute bottles of Malbec at 30,000 feet over the Caribbean, Brazil, and Paraguay, and on down South America's stumpy leg to where its foot is cleaved by the straight that bears Magellan's name.

It's here, in Tierra de Fuego, where energetic rivers formed in the Andes carve paths across a stark landscape until they hit the estuaries of the South Atlantic. In the Rio Grande, the largest watershed on Isla Grande, swim the world's greatest population of sea-run browns. During Magellan's day it was devoid of trout. And it would stay that way until the 1930s, when a tinkering engineer named John Goodall seeded it with life, forever altering the course of history.

By today's standards, if someone dumped tens of thousands of non-native species X into remote and pristine watershed Y, there'd be some explaining to do. The eco-terrorism backlash would span the social mediums, and someone, somewhere, would be de-friended by many. But during Goodall's era, introducing *salmo trutta* invaders to a place so far removed from civilization was nothing short of miraculous.

Goodall started life in England, and in the early 1900s began a career with the Haslam Engineering Company. The Haslams were refrigeration trailblazers, manufacturing equipment that revolutionized the long-distance oversees transport of raw meat. After several years on the job, Goodall hopped on a boat and transferred to Puerto Sara, Chile, to oversee work on their new freezer compressors.

Adept at keeping things cool, Goodall was in demand. In 1916, several estancias combined forces and contracted him to manage freezing facilities in the City of Rio Grande, where he worked for local land baron, Jose Menendez, until 1941. The gig was good, but something was missing from the experience, something with an adipose fin and a heartbeat. "Dad's greatest hobby was flyfishing," says Goodall's son, Adrian, who now lives at Estancia Viamonte near his hometown of Rio Grande. "Unfortunately, the streams of Tierra del Fuego did not have trout at that time. So dad cooked up a plan to sow the rivers, bringing in brown trout from Bariloche [Argentina] in 1931."

Goodall's first planting attempt failed, due to inadequate transport methods for the susceptible trout. But by September 1935, commercial airlines had established a base in the region, and with them came a healthy delivery of alevins (fry) from Europe to Puerto Montt, Chile. Goodall went to work stocking tributaries of the Rio Grande and later the Gallegos. And over the next three years, more than 400,000 trout entered the cradle of Tierra del Fuego's expansive river systems.

Goodall packed his browns in milk cans filled with water and moss, and successful stockings took place in the Candelaria, Herminita, Menendez, and MacLennan rivers—all tributaries of the Rio Grande. But upon entering those waters, prospects were grim: the spawning habitat was excellent, but the food forage-base was slim pickings. So, like any enterprising species with an instinctual urge to thrive, those trout went in search of a better dining experience.

They followed currents downstream, eventually backpedalling out along a South Atlantic coastline exploding with baitfish. Like steelhead, they'd be forced to acclimate to both fresh and saltwater environments, where they developed blueprints for growth. And the growth was good. Tierra del Fuego, it turned out, offered few threats, because conditions were often too harsh to host them. Human progress was measured in sheep production across bucolic acreages; not by automobile manufacturing or massive urban developments. Fishing pressure did not exist, and it would remain that way for the next several decades.

As for Goodall, the godfather of Tierra del Fuego trout, he "certainly saw and enjoyed the fruits of his work, but not the final results and size of the sea-run brown trout we know today," says Adrian, who never caught the fishing bug, presumably causing his father much grief.

Goodall retired from the "freezer" in 1941. According to family, he spent his remaining years tying flies—traditional Scottish wets such as the Alexandra, Professor, and Prince Charlie—building fiberglass rods, and practicing casts into teacup targets in front of his home. He died in 1955. But his grand experiment continues on. He brought trout to Tierra del Fuego to rekindle a sense of home; to catch a local fish in remote waters. And, unbeknownst to him, he'd picked the perfect species with enough plasticity to conquer life in the upside-down environments of the Southern Hemisphere.

Today a massive sea-run trout statue in Rio Grande pays homage to the fish. There's a street named in Goodall's honor, as well as a fishing club. But there's no greater tribute to the man than the booming yearly return of this now self-sustaining stock. And 30 years after Goodall's death, those populations of wild trout were finally about to get their due.

WELCOME TO RIO GRANDE—THE TROUT CAPITAL OF TIERRA DEL FUEGO.

Fast-forward to April 2014. Fall is enveloping Tierra del Fuego, and I'm on a mission to get to know the great-grandchildren of Goodall's first trout.

After an uneventful red-eye from Dallas to Buenos Aires, I snare a cab. Inside the sweltering deathtrap, it's about an hour-long crawl to the domestic terminal on the Rio del la Plata. Traffic sputters, stalls, and restarts. World Cup fever radiates from billboards advertising cold beers and "football" pandemonium. Graffiti, on the other hand, invades every square inch of concrete and is more politicized, indicative of a tanking economy and a populous on the brink of strife. I'm guessing the latter will be exacerbated if this whole soccer thing doesn't pan out.

Flyfishing for sea-run browns seems way off the radar in the hectic metropolis—and as the crow flies, it is. The City of Rio Grande, my next destination, is one more long flight ahead. But as I depart the cab and prepare to board the last plane, fishing comes back into view. Telltale signs sprout from the waiting area in the form of goofy vests, quick-dry pants, and luggage ready to birth 4-piece rods, waders, and boots. It's like a police lineup where the perps are all too obvious.

One suspect in particular catches my eye. Tousled hair itches to escape a weathered Simms hat and he's wearing a Zorro-mask suntan from long hours gaping at rivers from behind polarized shades. He looks South American, but throws me a smile that indicates we both speak the same language.

I nod, casually, and ask, "You fish?"

"Si, and you?" he says.

And so it goes. Carlos shotguns me with oversized fish stories from his homewaters in northern Patagonia. (Argentine machismo, evidently, is not an exaggerated trait.) In turn, I spit back with tales of endless days getting blanked in the Pacific Northwest. (Because self-loathing is what we steelheaders do best.) In between the awkward moments—how do you say "asshole fish" in Spanish?—something clicks. Fishing commonalities bridge the language rift, and we're on our way to becoming friends.

Several hours later our plane touches down on the tarmac at Rio Grande, where a one-man greeting crew waits with a baggage cart. His grin is familiar; so is the wavy unkempt hair. The kid's name is Charly, and he's unmistakably Carlos's son—a first-year guide at Kau Tapen Lodge, who squirreled away his tip money to spring for his dad's visit.

Brief hellos and hugs are exchanged and the three of us load the car and begin our final leg toward Kau Tapen Lodge and the fishery that a Brit with a hankering for trout helped make complete.

During John Goodall's time and long after it, news traveled slowly out of Tierra del Fuego. Northern Patagonia fisheries received most of the hype thanks to published accounts by American fishing luminaries such as Joe Brooks. Anecdotes depicting massive trout entering rivers to the south, on the other hand, were mostly insulated by time and space. But by the early 1980s, with the construction of a new lodge underway near Rio Grande, a momentous turn of events was astir.

Minnesota-native Douglas Larsen was a 20-year-old college sophomore at the time, working summers for Bud Hodson at Golden Horn Lodge in Alaska's Wood Tikchik State Park. As the story goes, Hodson strolled into camp one morning and mentioned that a start-up on Argentina's Rio Grande was hiring. It was an opportunity to explore new water on an unknown fishery—exotic, even by Alaska standards. Larson immediately raised his hand, then spent the next several days pestering his boss for the gig.

At that time, more than 9,000 miles to the south, an entrepreneurial spirit by the name of Jacqueline de las Carreras was busy detailing plans for Kau Tapen Lodge, set on family-owned land bordering the sprawling Rio Grande system. De las Carreras, who suffered from polio as a teenager, and was later confined to a wheelchair during her adult life, was a visionary with ambition. Her challenge: lure intrepid flyfishers to one of the most inconvenient places on the planet. Working in her favor, however, was the same phenomenon that sent Larsen's imagination into overdrive: the promise of annual returns of chrome slabs.

Oftentimes dreams don't deliver, and that was the case with Larsen's first several seasons guiding in Tierra del Fuego. Alongside Hector Mansilla, an impish cook turned river guru, and Fernando de las Carreras, Jacqueline's son, the learning curve was vertical. "By the caliber of what would qualify as good fishing, it wasn't remotely close," Larsen says. Clients were pulled in by the promise of adventure, not numbers. "They flyfished. And they knew it was a flyfishing trip," he adds. "But once they got down here, the fishing was pretty mediocre."

Although Goodall's trout experiment had worked, the action was limited. And for Larsen and his germinal guide squad, the mostly unexplored Rio Grande was a frugal playmate. Clients with long miles beneath their feet beached one trout, maybe, in the 10- to 12-pound range during a week-long stay. They'd stand on the river's crooked gravel bars, where they were pummeled by ripping 50 mile-per-hour winds. And when that large sea-run finally came to hand, it was time the pop the corks and celebrate.

Several factors contributed to slow fishing during the early '80s. Techniques had kinks, locals clobbered returning trout for their dinner plates, and the run sizes were generally meager.

KAU TAPEN LODGE, ABOVE, TRANSLATES TO "HOUSE OF FISHING." HERE, "HOUSE OF PAIN" BEST DESCRIBES THE CLIMATE.

But that was about to change. Catch-and-release came to the Rio Grande later that decade. A dirt-road system opened access. Flock of Seagulls hit the airwaves. And two-handed rod advancements—brought in by European Atlantic Salmon fishers—revolutionized how the river was fished.

"It got so good by the '90s that it almost hurt itself," Larsen says. "People were dragging big fish up the beach like they were cod. And their next move was a backcast as they walked forward into the run to catch another one."

Catch rates skyrocketed from a brown every couple of days to double-digit outings. Goodall's lonely river was transformed into a prime-time destination. And Larsen witnessed the transformations firsthand. After his guiding stint in the '80s, he returned in the mid-'90s to a more cooperative fishery. But it's the hard-earned fish from those exploratory seasons that resonate.

"The fish I remember best were the ones I caught by myself. It would be 10 o'clock at night and you'd have this sense that you were miles and miles away from the nearest human," Larsen says. "I had five years of Alaska experience under my belt before Kau Tapen, but it never produced the same feeling. In Alaska you always had this support network around. Here, you got out of the car, alone, walked forever to the river, and would connect with a rocket in fading light."

Today, the Rio Grande is a sea-run trout powerhouse, well known for its torpedo-like fish. From its headwaters in the Chilean Andes to its outlet in the South Atlantic, it courses eastward for 150 miles. Most trout enter the system during peak tides in January and February. Some will reach 12 years in age. Some will make as many as eight spawning returns. They will average nine pounds. One in five will weigh more than 15. And one in 50 will reach 20 to 25 pounds.

According to regional biologist Miguel Casalinuovo, the river's average run size ranges from 50,000 to 75,000 fish. To put those numbers into perspective, what's classified as "great" winter steelhead returns on Oregon's North Umpqua will eclipse the 12,000 fish mark, while a couple of thousand returning wild steelhead is the norm for many Washington and British Columbia systems.

Sea trout sampled by Casalinuovo and his team near the Río Irigoyen mouth are fat with sprats and squid. Isotopic analysis, Casalinuovo adds, shows that their diet is similar to a penguin's. Like wild steelhead, feeding is not a priority when they re-enter the river to spawn. So duping these fish with a swung fly is all about instigating a cat-and-mouse-like response.

Rio Grande sea-run browns live in freshwater from one to four years before they smolt and head to sea. During six months to a year in the ocean, they pack on an average of six pounds before returning to the river and its tributaries to spawn. Sea-runs on their fourth return to freshwater can weigh more than 20 pounds. And these larger fish, on the Rio Grande in particular, are becoming more common.

The growth phenomenon, Casalinuovo says, is aided by the obvious factors: There are no more hatchery runts to dilute the in-river gene pool. Native gillnets and concrete do not block upstream migration. Nor do commercial fishing fleets. And overall, angling pressure on the Rio Grande is limited—concentrated on beat systems managed by guides at Kau Tapen, Villa Maria, and Maria Behety lodges.

So, wading nipple-deep in pushy water for two full days without a fish, I'm beginning to sweat my prospects. Where are these tens of thousands of sea-run browns?

For two torrential weeks leading up to my stay, the Rio Grande bumped to more than twice its normal size. Smart clients packed it in, while the rest lingered to drink wine onboard a sinking ship. The bright news is that flows are on the drop and water clarity has improved. The not-so-bright news is that no one is catching fish—other than Carlos and his son Charly, who I'm suspecting must be nymphers.

What's worse, the prospect of a fishless week feels eerily ordinary. Something like experiences with anadromy back home, of which I know the routine. I start by staring blankly across rolling hillsides aglow in hues of burnt ochre and try really hard to just enjoy the shit out of nature. Wild guanaco bounce over endless fence lines, flocks of waterfowl pepper the horizon, and Tierra del Fuego's infamous, nuclear gusts animate the entire landscape. It's stunning, really. But still no fish.

That night I upgrade from Malbec to something stiffer. And by the morning of day three, my odds slip deeper as I navigate another broad run. Upstream, the father-son duo, and all that hair and unbridled optimism, work the riffle. I bid them goodbye and choose the path of least resistance, way downstream, where I'd spotted rolling fish the day before.

Across the river, a deep bubble line follows the serrated clay bank for about a hundred feet. I yank line off the reel, poke a cast into a favorable crosswind, and watch as my tubefly lands in the soft seam and gallops toward mid-run, where a player intercepts it.

Leaping into the air, the sea-run brown is thick-shouldered and all chrome. At my boots, in the water, I pause to trace its spotted flank and can't help but try to connect those dots and halos. Combined, they all lead back to the man who so many years ago filled these empty rivers with the promise of trout.

It's good to finally find one. Thanks, John Goodall.

CHARTREUSE AND BLACK, ALWAYS A GOOD BET. CHARLY AND CARLOS TRISCIUZZI BRANDISH THE WINNINGS.