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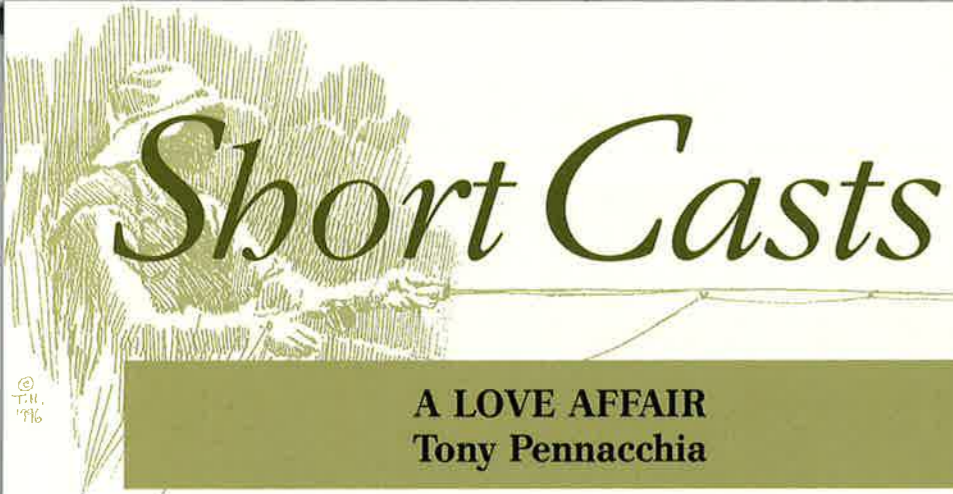
AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

SALT & FRESHWATER FLY FISHING



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Short Casts

A LOVE AFFAIR Tony Pennacchia

Some folks have the good fortune to know, with absolute clarity, why they go fishing. I hadn't figured it out until I started fly fishing. Suffice to say I've been subconsciously afflicted with this burning desire since childhood. One thing I do know, is when it all started...

As a child of immigrants, I had little exposure to luxuries. The few I did get made lasting impressions. I recall my dad taking delivery of our very first TV — oh the excitement! The agonising wait went on forever as he methodically fiddled with the buttons and dials, until eventually, after what seemed an eternity, dad finally settled on a channel.

I can't say if it was destiny, nevertheless there it was, in glorious black and white. Fixated and staring wide-eyed, I watched two bespoke fishermen standing knee deep in a stream, waving their long, thin, bendy rods with whip-like lines stretched out in front, attempting to lasso fish that were leaping out of the water — or so it seemed to my young naive eyes! The narrator went on to describe, in his low American tone, how the fly fishermen were tempting the feeding rainbow trout to take imitation flies tied on the end of their lines.

Imagine that — a rainbow-coloured fish that leapt out of the river to grab insects mid-air — I was mesmerised! To an impressionable kid it was mind blowing, the imagery and words were burned into my brain. When I grow up, I told myself, I'm going to catch one of those rainbow-coloured trout...

Like most fishermen, I started with the humble worm on a hook and progressed to spin gear, mastering both river and sea, but sadly that rainbow trout eluded me. All through my teens and early 20s, plenty of fish, including the ubiquitous brown trout, but not the one I wanted.

Eventually, as happens to most, you meet the 'one', and things of childish

importance are set aside for more 'mature' matters, so fishing, for the time being, is abruptly shelved. Life moves on, and several years later, whilst strolling by an out-of-town angling store, it hit me. There it was, in the shopfront window, a larger-than-life poster in all its glory proclaiming the splendour of fly fishing!

Memories of those high flying rainbow-coloured trout came flooding back! I walked in, quizzed the shop owner and without hesitation purchased a 6-weight Daiwa Firewolf fly rod/reel combo and a Cortland 333 double-taper fly line. And so my 'love affair' with fly fishing began!

I must say, at that time I didn't know what I was doing, or if I was doing it correctly. Determined and bordering on obsessive, it took seven months of flogging water to froth before I snagged my first trout: a small brownie from a tributary of the Goulburn River in

Victoria, taken on a self-tied Pheasant Tail Nymph. Oh what joy at that triumphant achievement!

I should explain: fly tying, as with fly fishing, is like a dreaded infection, that once caught is bound to stay with you for life with very little chance of a cure! Make no mistake, for those of us that suffer from this ailment, fly fishing and fly tying have us by the coglioni.

Time moved on and I still hadn't fulfilled my childhood desire. I did nevertheless snare a couple of pale looking, bloated hatchery fish that were nothing like the rainbow-coloured trout of my dreams. Then, out of the blue, a fateful coincidence. My eldest son's high school hockey team was invited to New Zealand for a series of interschool friendlies! A decision was made: "OK, you go with Mum, and when done, I'll fly over with your younger brother and we will spend a week in NZ."

Having watched *A River Somewhere* and been captivated by the Tongariro episode only a couple of weeks earlier, the location was, without question, sorted. As it turned out, a defining choice, as I finally did get a 'rainbow-coloured trout' (one of several) on that first excursion to New Zealand.

Needless to say, my love affair continues... ■

DUPED BY A BROWN Michael Tweedie

The day after Boxing Day was unseasonably cool. It was 06:30 and I was halfway back to work. I had said that I was going to be late, so the pressure wasn't as intense as it might have been. As I stood on the bridge which crossed a small tributary, I scanned the head of the pool that held a brown trout much too big for this waterway.

I had first noticed this fish in the closed season. Every time I drove past, I stopped and checked on it. It was always there, holding in the current. Sometimes I could sneak up unnoticed; other times its brown trout sixth sense picked me up and it rocketed back to the safety of the bridge.

Having established a rapport with the farmer whose land the river flowed

through, it was only a matter of time until I got my shot at it. Eventually, the season opened and it was time — the game of cat and mouse began.

I would creep up on my knees and hide behind the road barrier to spy on the fish. If I located it, I would sneak over the fence and take my position behind a log.

On my first shot at the fish, I made a couple of false casts, and on the backcast, before I released the line, I felt it touch the fence — but it was too late, I was committed. The big Stimulator splashed down and I watched as the nose of the trout came out of the water as it chomped down on my fly. I struck, the tippet snapped, the fish took off to cover and I was left, leaning on my log, shaking.

I pinned it another two times — once I yanked the fly from its mouth and the next time it buried me in a log jam.

As the weather warmed, the movements of my nemesis became a little more erratic. No longer could I expect it to be sitting there in its run in the middle of the day — sometimes it was there and sometimes it wasn't. I began to worry when I didn't see it. Had it been caught and killed? Had it been overcome by the heat and died? Had it moved on? These thoughts plagued me between visits.

A flash of colour brought me back to reality as I watched a rainbow trout at my feet, darting around. And then, lo and behold, there was a brown. As I watched it cruise up to the head of the pool and take its place in the run, I was already backing up and heading back to the car. I rigged an unweighted nymph and crushed the barb before hopping the fence and taking my position behind the log.

I flicked the nymph into the run above the trout and its reaction was immediate, but I couldn't see the fly or the fish properly. I didn't dare to strike and risk spooking it. So my drift continued and the fish turned and swam down the pool, disappearing. It would be back, it had to be...

A rainbow then began feeding in front of me, but I resisted temptation and waited. Minutes ticked by — I was getting later and later for work but didn't dare move. Eventually, a nose appeared from under a log and hung there... "Easy does it, be patient," I told myself as I loaded my rod for a bow-and-arrow cast in anticipation.

As the brown began to edge forward and entered the pool fully, I led it by a couple of feet and fired. The nymph flicked down, the fish changed course ever so slightly, the familiar flash of white came from its jaws, and I struck. The fight was a blur. It almost seemed surreal when I finally slipped the net under this fish. It was mine. I had won.

A couple of photographs and it swam away. Nothing else mattered for the rest of the day. But a couple of days later I looked at the photos of a previous fish I had landed from this spot — not my nemesis but the 'other' brown that lived in the pool, and realised it was the same fish. The spots on the gill plates matched, the spots on its flank were the same. I'd been duped. How could this be? But little by little it dawned on me that in a way, it was a good thing. My nemesis is still out there, still uncaught, which just means I'll have to keep trying. ■

FISH WELL & ENJOY THE MOMENT Ross Mackenzie

Excited to be back in New Zealand on another week-long fishing trip, I find myself standing waist deep in the Mataura River, just above the falls at Gore, with a big hatch occurring and fish rising all around me. With all this happening I should be in fly fishing heaven.

But no! I am in a living nightmare. I seem unable to cast with any accuracy, my length is all over the place, and my timing is way out. So much so, that I am having serious trouble getting the fly on the water, let alone near a fish.

Do I hear a scoff and mutter — "This sounds like a beginner who needs more practice?" Practice I can always use, but a beginner I am not, having been fly fishing for some 50 years. No, this is a serious one-off, living

nightmare. I am feeling sick with frustration and fear that my whole week will be like this. I know I can cast with some competency, but just not today it seems. This makes the nightmare all the more frustrating.

Eventually I start to display some consistency, which brings prompt results. Yes! A nice fish to hand! Released! Phew, the scorecard is no longer zero. As time goes on — with some wise comments from Derek Grzelewski, my very competent and patient guide — I land several of the 2–3 lb browns that have been rising for the last hour or so.

As with all good fishing trips, the day is relived over dinner and a few grogs. I was hoping that Derek wouldn't lay it all out, warts and all. I needn't have worried too much: "Ross did have a

few problems in the wind before he hooked one." Wind, there was none!

The next morning as the fog burned off, the night-time dreams of casting failure and mayhem dissipated. That was until I realised I was paired with Derek again...

As usual when fishing with Derek, we are sight fishing. Derek is spotting what I would have walked straight past. We have moved maybe 40 metres upstream when Derek stops, looks, looks at me and my fellow fisher, Tony, and says, "Who is first up?"

Tony replies, "Ross is." Oh heck, I'm hoping my nightmare doesn't reappear, and I send weak prayers up to the piscatorial gods: "Please let me cast today with some degree of competency."

With not a word said of yesterday, Derek says to me, "Right Ross, under the willow, a metre up from the left-hand lower leaves and about half a metre in from this edge of the canopy. You will need to cast above the tree and let it drift down."

Simple as that! Maybe... I take three careful paces upstream into a better location from where I should be able to deliver such a cast. I stop, look, think, engage my brain and then plan the cast. Drag seems inevitable so I move a little closer to the tree. My position is good, I lift the rod, a 6-weight, and slowly cast. I then watch with some amazement as the fly lands roughly where I want it to, down it floats perfectly, slowly, no drag, and straight past the fish. No response.

I repeat the process, another good cast. Again the fish ignores my fly. I change the fly, cast again, again ignored, cast again, no response. I change the fly a further five times. The fifth fly is a very small Royal Wulff — I am not confident that this is the right fly but it is worth a try.

I cast. As the fly approaches, the fish gently moves towards it, I get poised to strike, that is until the fish sips a surface insect instead. I cast again, it floats down towards the fish, which seems to take offence and cruises deeper under the willow.

Derek sighs. "It may come out," he says hopefully.

Now I have been watching the fish under the willow and have seen that there is a thin vertical gap in the foliage



Short Casts

that may give me access to the green chasm behind. This I think will allow me to float the fly down the other side of the fish and perhaps prompt a response. Derek suggests that the fish has gone. I reply that I want to give it a couple more casts. A plan is forming.

In order to be at the best angle to use the vertical gap in the foliage, I move upstream a metre. I can now see into the leafy green chasm. I need the cast to be about half a metre longer than the last one to ensure it floats down the bank side of the fish. I strip out extra line. I gather the loose line in my hand, loop on loop. All is ready to cast. I take a deep breath and gently exhale as I lift the fly from the water. One, two false casts – no it is not right. I put the line down on the water well away from the tree and the fish.

I feel sure that Tony and Derek are looking at me as if say WTF! I breathe in and slowly exhale, slowly. Slowly, I realise, is the key word, as this cast needs to be slow but with power, direction and finesse so that the fly lands like thistledown on the water underneath the willow's green canopy.

Deep breaths, focus, act. One cast, two and then lay it out straight with the fly gently landing at the end of a straight tippet. That is the goal and it is in action.

Yes! It has all happened, exactly as I wanted it to. The cast has gone straight, no leaves have been touched, the fly has landed softly and is now floating down deep underneath the willow.

I can just see the fish, and yes, it has seen the fly and with a powerful swish of its large tail it is moving towards it, slowly at first and then with more purpose. Gulp, it has taken the fly.

Strike! Weight is felt. Fish On! The small #16 hook has held and now the fish can be played. Within what seems to be the blink of an eye, the fish is netted. A nice fish of about 4 lb. Released quickly, this fish can swim free again.

I wind in my line and re-joined Derek and Tony. Derek comments with a quizical tone, "You seem to be fishing a little better today Ross". (That I think was the understatement of the week.)

"Maybe you did listen to something I said yesterday!"

That was the truth of it. Yesterday during my fishing nightmare, Derek had been quietly providing sage council. Today it was fully integrated.

"Yes, you gave me lots of good advice yesterday and even though I may not have demonstrated that I had heard any of it, I thought about it all night."

The advice included:

– Breathe, all the time! (I have a habit of holding my breath, which closes up my chest and this constricts my casting action. Basic I know).

– Slow everything down.

– Try to cast at a 45 degree angle to the fish, this helps manage the drift and drag better. It also minimises the chance of spooking the fish.

– Only have enough line out for the next cast. Wind the rest onto the reel.

– And cast gently, gently, above all, always cast gently.

"That was pretty to watch Ross," said Tony as he took up the fishing position. Looking at my watch I realised that some 45 minutes had elapsed since I first started fishing for the willow tree fish. This fish had been sent to me as a challenge, I had accepted the challenge and been found capable of winning it.

No errors, gentle casts as planned, 45 minutes of consistently casting well, fish caught and released. I smiled.

As I now sit in my office writing this, I realise that this fish was the highlight of my New Zealand trip, even though bigger fish were caught, but none challenged me more or provided as much satisfaction. Maybe it was the end of a fishing nightmare, or maybe it was just about slowing it down, really enjoying the moment and possibly synchronising the body, the rod, line and the fly with the fishing universe...

Postscript:

As I walked to the dam at my front gate tonight, after drenching sheep all afternoon, I thought that a quiet fish would be relaxing. There was no wind, my 'Tranquillity Pond' had a glassy sheen on the water, with no fish rising.

Mm... I thought, this might be tricky. Then, all of a sudden, the trout began rising as a small hatch started, and pretty soon I had caught and released three small rainbows. They responded well to a Greenwell's Glory.

I felt pretty good and realised how lucky I was to be able to do this, 120 metres from home. I concluded that with fly fishing it is the quality of the experience that matters. Whether it be several fish in a remote river in New Zealand or one fish caught in a very convenient dam near Geelong, played and brought to hand using a light 2-weight rod... It is all about fishing well and enjoying the moment. ■

MISTAKEN RELEASE

Graeme Parker

We all know that 'catch and release' is where the fisherman catches the fish and releases it unharmed. Then there is the 'self release' where the fish releases itself to save the fisherman the effort. Well, on this day we invented a new one, which involves releasing someone else's fish. Yes, a very dangerous thing to do, but it happened!

Tim and I fronted up to our favourite fishing spot, next to the bridge at Bridge Pool on the Tongariro in New Zealand's North Island, and there was a gent there pleased as punch with the magnificent trout his mate had caught

and placed in a backwater, to keep it nice and fresh. Well that is what he told Tim.

The story I got was that this poor fish had been stranded when the river had recently dropped six feet to isolate the pond. When I looked at the fish it was still alive (and in my defence it looked a little slimy too – as though it had been there a day or two at least) so I thought it would be a good idea to put it back in the river, so I did.

Seeing me release the beautiful wild thing back into the mighty Tongariro, Tim then confessed that it was someone's pride and joy catch for the day