



Stalking the wild brown trout of the Isle of Islay, Scotland by Todd Oishi

When I reflect on my time spent fly fishing in Scotland last month, images of single-malt whisky, castles, kilts and bag-pipes instantly comes to mind. Fishing in a part of the world where fly fishing is an important part of their culture and heritage left me somewhat envious of the lifestyle and sense of community that our Scottish counterparts enjoy.

My two week-long adventure, which began in central Scotland and concluded on a small island just off the southwestern coast of Scotland, was truly a trip of a lifetime that surpassed all of my expectations. Although the opportunity to revisit Loch Leven (the Mecca of brown trout fishermen throughout the world) was high on my list of “things to do while in Scotland”, it was my time spent fishing in the picturesque lochs of the Isle of Islay for wild brown trout that proved to be the greatest challenge and provided some of my fondest memories...

The Isle of Islay is a small island (approximately 600 square kilometers in size) that is situated just off the southwestern coast of Scotland, lying only 25 miles north of the northernmost coast of Ireland, which can be seen on a clear day. Islay is a popular tourist destination that is famous for its immense beauty, wildlife viewing and bird watching, and producing world-class whisky (eight active distilleries). The pristine lochs of Islay are blessed with healthy populations of hard-fighting, wild brown trout that attract fly fishers from all over the United Kingdom and Europe to these waters to test their angling skills - and luck.

The brown trout of Islay are wild fish that generally average between eight to twelve inches in length, with the island's larger trout inhabiting the lochs where the stickleback are found in their greatest numbers (the primary food source of the larger trout). Retention of fish that are caught is a way of life for the local anglers, and is strongly encouraged by the local angling authorities, as the lochs have an over-abundance of naturally reproducing trout, whose growth rates are stunted as a result of over-population and competition for food.



Bank angling is an enjoyable and popular method for angling on the lochs, as boat access is quite limited due to the size and remoteness of many of these waters. Although many of Islay's lochs are situated right alongside the roadways, some of the more productive lochs lie tucked away behind the rolling hills that are dotted with sheep and cattle, as well as the occasional deer.



Accessing these lochs often requires fairly strenuous hikes over open grasslands and through peat bogs. The majority of these lochs are situated on private lands, with access controlled by the estates that have ownership or title to the surrounding properties. Day permits are issued by the estate offices, but are only provided to a limited number of anglers in order to ensure a quality angling experience.



Although accessing some of the more remote lochs required a fair amount of effort, they often possessed larger populations of scrappy, little brown trout that were comparable in size to those found in the more easily accessed waters. The colouration and markings of these trout were absolutely stunning and always a welcomed sight for this weary traveler.



The solitude and serenity that was experienced when fishing the remote lochs always made the journey well worth the effort - regardless of how much effort was involved. In these special and sacred places the distant past and present day embrace one another, as remnants of ancient civilizations stand silently, serving as a timeless testimony of the triumphs and hardships that they endured.



The gentle sloping hills and dense peat that surrounds the lochs often concealed a series of small streams, which are commonly referred to as “burns” by the Scots. The burns provide an ideal spawning area and nursery for immature brown trout and stickleback. During heavy downpours the flow rates of the burns increase, which attracts both the stickleback and trout to areas where the burns deposit fresh water and nutrients into the lochs.





The importance of fishing the burns had been stressed to us by local fly fishers who were always willing to help ensure that we had a quality experience while fishing their waters. We followed their recommendations on locations and patterns, and targeted the burns, which we found to be especially productive when working the surrounding waters with short casts from the bank, or while wading deeply and casting our flies tight against the banks. To our surprise we often encountered brown trout foraging for food in water that was so shallow that it was barely able to cover their backs.



The brown trout seemed to be drawn to the structure of weed beds and the rocky shorelines, where they feed upon aquatic and terrestrial insects that became dislodged or washed into the deeper water as a result of the pounding waves and undertow that is created. At times, the dark colouration of the larger lochs masked what lay beneath their surface, which made locating structure and fish quite challenging – while in comparison - the shallow nature of the smaller lochs and their gentle sloping shoals made the task of locating trout a fairly simple process.



Finding the fish was always the greatest challenge, but once they were located, a floating, MidgeTip or intermediate-sinking line was basically all that was required to effectively cover the water, as the trout were typically found in shallower water or in slightly deeper water with their attention focused on the water's surface.



We were told that if the trout refused a slower presentation that using extremely fast retrieves often entices the browns to strike, as they are extremely aggressive by nature, and tend to be very opportunistic in this environment. This theory was confirmed time after time, as trout after trout intercepted my flies while they were pulled through the water at speeds that seemed far too fast for a conventional presentation. Armed with this new revelation (and a few cans of Red Bull) our angling success-rate increased dramatically.



We quickly discovered that Islay's brown trout were very light-sensitive creatures that rose freely during low-light conditions and while the clouds blocked the sun, but dropped to slightly greater depths as soon as the rays of the

sun caressed the water. During sunny and flat-calm conditions we prospected for trout in deeper water with faster sinking lines, while using Snatchers, Sedge Hogs, Kate McKlarens, Clan Chiefs and several other traditional mini-lures.



Exploring the potential of “local” patterns always fascinates me whenever I travel to fish the waters of a foreign country. The experimentation often provides an assortment of new fly patterns, tactics and techniques to add to my fly fishing arsenal. The true thrill and satisfaction comes when I successfully deceive trout in my favourite stillwaters here in British Columbia - with a pattern that originated from the bin of a fly shop halfway around the world. This is an event that never ceases to amaze me.

As our trip drew nearer to its conclusion, we learned the hard way that not all rental vehicles are intended for travel in the more remote areas. They also seem to lack the necessary clearance to successfully navigate the island's secondary roadways that possess rocks that have developed an obvious liking for oil pans...



I suppose that one of the most memorable trout that fell for the charms of my fly was a feisty, wee brownie in Loch Finlaggan that accepted my offering on my final cast of the trip (fifteen seconds left in my session). It took the fly hard and fought admirably. I savoured every second of the battle and its eventual release, as I knew in my heart that this would be my last encounter with Islay's remarkably beautiful, little brown trout.



Stalking Islay's wild brown trout while standing within the shadows of ancient ruins, and traversing pathways that were once traveled by the island's earliest settlers - and perhaps even Vikings - left me humbled and in a constant state of wonder. Catching a fish or two somewhere along the journey gradually became less important and was purely a bonus...

