Fishing the Catlins

Fishing in the Catlins

Surrounded by remote forest and rolling hill country, anglers seeking solitude and scenery will find the streams of the Catlins rewarding. With consistently high annual rainfall and plenty of valley systems, anglers following the Southern Scenic Route between Balclutha and Freetown will discover numerous waterways to explore. All of the significant streams and rivers hold good populations of resident brown trout between 1-2 kg, and in their lower reaches sea-run brown trout which can reach 3-4kg.

Most streams originate in rainforest or tussock swamps (giving the water a tea stained coloration) and flow through forest and farmland before entering a tidal zone and then the Pacific Ocean. Anglers should adjust their fishing methods depending on whether they are fishing in the small/unruly, or upper reaches of a river.

Access

Anglers are able to enjoy southern hospitality and good access to most rivers in Otago and Southland. Please don’t take this access for granted and following these guidelines. Park vehicles away from gateways and not on tracks, leave gates as you find them, stay within river margins, don’t disturb stock and if in doubt ask for permission.

Lower River and Estuary Fishing

The main trout food sources in tidal and lower river areas are bait fish such as whitebait, smelt and bullies and also crabs. Whitebait enter river mouths in spring, and smelt can be found in tidal areas over spring and summer. This is when white and yellow colored fish that imitate these baitfish work well.

The best time to fish the tidal areas is generally early in the morning or late evening or on an incoming tide when trout hunt baitfish. Latter in the season anglers often use black and gold, and banana colored lures which imitate bullies and crabs that live in tidal river areas year round.

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Most fly fishing is done with Hares Ear and Beecroft Tail nymphs (with and without bead-head) which imitate mayfly and candle larvae, and are fished upstream with an indicator. If you see trout rising consistently during the day it is probably a mayfly hatch and you should try a small dry flies such as a Adams, Treflight Streamer or Dads Favorite. If these are unsuccessful, switch to an emerger pattern like the CDC.

When fishing in the Catlins the main hatch you need to look out for is the Red Tippet Governor or Bombers. This is where light spinning rods with small lures such as Veltic spinners, and bubbles and flies can be easier to use because no back cast is required.

The upper reaches of the Mokoreta contain brown trout which are mostly distributed in the middle and upper reaches, with the odd large trout present. This river can experience good mayfly hatches, often on creast or drity days or under forest cover. In the finessed middle reaches catching cotulies can be difficult because of the fast flowing nature of the river. Spin fishing with small smelt and bullies can be effective.

The upper reaches can produce some good fly fishing on spring and summer days for those anglers keen enough to navigate the bank side vegetation which can be quite thick in places. In the upper reaches the best access method can be to walk up the middle of the stream bed so anglers should take care and wear a good pair of waders or be prepared to wade wet. The estuarine area can hold some fairly large sea-run trout at times especially when there is high tide in the river. Fly fishing in the lower reaches sometimes produces trout and flounder.

The lower Mataura River

The smooth small water flows through patches of bush and farmland before entering a large estuary. It contains a good head of small and medium sized brown trout in the upper reaches and the occasional large fish, especially in the tidal zone.

Pauanui Stream

This small stream contains a few fish of a reasonable size in the upper reaches but most of the fishing is done in the tidal area.

Glenomaru Stream

This small stream can hold a few brown trout which are mostly fairly small with some sea-run in the lower reaches. Fly anglers can experience some mayfly hatches in the middle reaches on calm days. Worm and spin fishing is popular in the lower section. The Owaka River flows into the Catlins Lake.

Lower Clutha River

This very large river splits into two branches below Balclutha around a large flat island known as Indus Island. The Mataura branch (on the west side) can be easily explored by anglers heading to and from the Catlins. The gradient is relatively low and the river contains lots of deep pools and runs which hold large numbers of brown trout and some rainbow trout between 0.5 to 2kg. Perch up to 2kg can also be found in back waters and slow moving areas. In the estuarine reaches medium and large (1.5kg - 2kg) sea-run and estuarine brown trout can be caught year round, but especially in spring and summer. Chinook salmon (normally around 2-6kg) may also be caught in summer and autumn months as they run upstream to spawn.

Owaka River

This medium sized tea stained stream contains a resident population of brown trout and some sea-runs in the lower reaches. Fly anglers can experience some mayfly hatches in the middle reaches on calm days. Worm and spin fishing is popular in the lower section. The Owaka River flows into the Catlins Lake.

Catlins Lake

Good numbers of large and medium sized sea-run and estuarine brown trout reside in the Catlins Lake. This waterway is fairly large and has lots of fishing potential. Containing lots of bullies and crabs the trout are normally in good condition and excellent eating. The best fishing areas are close to structure such as reefs and logs and near deep holes and drop offs. During the spring and summer months, evening and night fishing can be very productive (especially off the Hina Hina Road on dark nights). Red Mrs Simpsons lives well in the evenings. After dark, use lures which present a defined shape against the night sky such as Black Woolly Buggers. It pays to have strong lines because this lake can produce some large trout. Ascot your spot in the day light to identify any snag and remember the lake is tidal so don’t get caught out. If you see a large bow wave in the dark be careful it is probably a monster sea-run or a seal!

Otago and Southland Region

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For more fishing information check the Otago and Southland region links

Lower River and Estuary Fishing

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The upper reaches can produce some good fly fishing on spring and summer days for those anglers keen enough to navigate the bank side vegetation which can be quite thick in places. In the upper reaches the best access method can be to walk up the middle of the stream bed so anglers should take care and wear a good pair of waders or be prepared to wade wet. The estuarine area can hold some fairly large sea-run trout at times especially when there is high tide in the river. Fly fishing in the lower reaches sometimes produces trout and flounder.

MacLennan River

This small sized tea stained stream contains a few small and medium sized brown trout and flows into the Tahakopa River just above the estuary. Often fishing is challenging because of dense bank side vegetation.

Tahakopa River

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Mokoreta River

The upper reaches of the Mokoreta contain brown trout which are mostly fairly small in size. They tend to rise freely and take small spinning lures well.

Waikawa River

This attractive small stream flows through patches of bush and farmland before entering a large estuary. It contains a good head of small and medium sized brown trout in the upper reaches and the occasional large fish, especially in the tidal zone.

Lower Mataura River

This is the second biggest river in Southland and probably one of the best brown trout factories in the world. The lower reaches are well suited to spin and bird fishing and commonly produce trout around 2kg and the occasional large sea-run fish. Anglers heading to or returning from the Catlins should make the time to explore this fishery. There is good access from a well formed road running along the east bank.
Fishing the Catlins

Exploring the lower Catlins River

Regulations
Angling regulations are reviewed annually, please check your regulation guide booklet before fishing any water.

www.cluthacountry.co.nz