Fishing 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 SAsian Route between Balclutha and Fairlight will discover numerous waterways to explore. All of the significant streams and rivers hold good populations of resident brown trout between 1.2-2 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 upriver/outer 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 auburn and white colored larvae that imitate these baitfish work well. The best time to fish the tidal areas is generally 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 honey colored lures which imitate bullies and crabs that live in tidal areas year round.

Spin fishing is very popular and probably the easiest way to fish the deep water areas. There are a large variety of spin lures that can be successful including Artificialised Eels, Toby’s, Rapala, and various plastics. Trout lures in small sizes on fairly light line (around #3) are popular. Natural dark colors such as brown and copper are often the most successful. Spin fishing after a fresh (as the river drops and clears after rains) can be particularly deadly.

Fly fishing is done with Hares Ear and Pheasant Tail nymphs (with and without bead-head) which imitate mayfly and caddis larvae, and are fished upstream with an indicator. If you see trout rising continuously during the day it is probably a mayfly hatch and you should try a small dry fly such as a Adams, Twilight Beauty or Dace Favourite. If these are unsuccessful, switch to an emergence pattern like the CDC. On calm summer evenings you can often get caddis hatches and you should use small caddis dryflies such as a elk-hair pattern. On a sunny day when there is a lot of terrestrial insect activity try Blowfly, Cochylis, Royal Wulff and the old favorite Poirier Of The Dace dryflies, especially near overhanging vegetation. Often overlooked but effective are small wet flies such as a Red Tippled Governor fished down and across in the traditional manner. Tie on a size 4 Mrs Simpson hik or all else fails.

Baif fishing with worms and popera grubs can be particularly deadly and this is an excellent method of introducing young children to fishing especially when combined with a family picnic. Simply attach your bait to a hook (most anglers noticeable to fish) and build into a likely looking hole. Some experienced local anglers fish with smelt and bullies which can be irresistible to large trout, especially at night or the change of light.

Fly anglers should try mayfly imitations such as Mr Simpson (red), Parson’s Glory, Jack Sprat, Yellow Dorothy and Grey Ghost lures. While most lure anglers traditionally fish down and across with a wet line, sporting trout with Polasided glasses and fishing directly to them with a dry line can be very exciting.

Upper River Fishing

The larger rivers fish well throughout the season, while the smaller streams tend to fish best early or late in the season.

The main trout food sources are small, caddis and mayfly nymphs, bullies and other baitfish. In summer trout often turn their attention to terrestrial insects such as cicadas, blowflies and bees.

Spin anglers should try Vetric and Maps spinners, Rapala, Toby’s and Articulated Trout lures in small sizes on fairly light line (around #3). Natural dark colors such as brown and copper are often the most successful. Spin fishing after a fresh (as the river drops and clears after rains) can be particularly deadly.

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Lower Clutha River

This very large river splits into two branches below Balclutha around a large flat island known as Inch Clutha. 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 between 0.5 to 2kg. Porch (up to 2kg) can also be found in some back waters and slow moving areas. In the estuarine reaches median and large (1.3kg-1.5kg) 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.

Puerua Stream

This small stream contains a few fish of a sustainable 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 the tidal medium sized trout. It can become very low in summer and fishes best early or late in the season.

Okawa River

This medium sized tea stained stream contains a resident population of brown trout and 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 Okawa 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 baitfish and crabs the trout are normally in good condition and excellent eating. The best fishing areas are usually near the lower but are most effective. On calm 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 contains some fairly large sea-run trout at times especially when there is whitbait in the river. The fishing in the lower reaches sometimes produces trout and flounder.

MacLennan River

This small sized rainforested 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 deep back side vegetation.

Tahakopa River

The upper reaches can produce some good fly fishing on spring and summer days for those anglers keen enough to navigate the back 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 or to use a boat. The middle of the river splits into two branches below Balclutha around a large flat island known as Inch Clutha. 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 between 0.5 to 2kg. Porch (up to 2kg) can also be found in some back waters and slow moving areas. In the estuarine reaches median and large (1.3kg-1.5kg) 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.

Mokoreta River

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

Waikawa

This attractive small river flows through patches of bush and farmland before entering a large estuary. It contains a good band 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 bait fishing and commonly produce trout around 2kg and the occasional large sea-run fish. Anglers heading to or returning from the Catlins should take the time to explore this fishery. There is good access from a well formed road running along the east bank.
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Exploring the lower Catlins River