

Trout of the Aysén

ROAD BUILDING BY the Chilean government in the past two decades has pushed a finger of civilization into the remote District 11—the Aysén region—where mountains and lakes created by plate tectonics and the last glaciers set the habitat stage for the introduction of trout (and salmon) in late 19th century.

This geologic serendipity, with a little help from colonizing Europeans, created what is now the world's last, and least explored, wild-trout frontier. Follow the new road, the Carreta Central, north through the gilded snowcapped peaks of the Andean Cordillera near Chaitén, strap on a backpack, and explore waters where some rainbows, browns, and brook trout have never seen a fly. This may be the last place on earth that offers the ultimate freedom of adventure in the search for the Golden Fleece of fly fishing—untouched, pure water with innocent trout in rivers surrounded by ethereal ramparts. Hurry, because it is being “discovered.”

[To put this geologic/trout story into perspective, see *The River at the End of the World: Fly Fishing in Argentine Patagonia*, by Adrian Latimer, available from Medlar Press (medlarpress.com) or in the U.S. by emailing callaban@cheshire.net). The book deals mostly with Patagonia fly-fishing history, but also includes Argentine/Chilean Andean geologic history and how it created the fly fishing we explore today. THE EDITOR.]

▲ JOHN RANDOLPH

Los Lagos Region

The lakes of the eastern Andean (Aysén) region are what create the great trout habitat. They absorb the

snow- and glacial-melt runoff and act as “cushion reservoirs,” bleeding cold water all summer to deeply graveled rivers, creating ideal trout spawning and rearing habitat.

The introduction of trout to these rivers and lakes was so recent (at the end of the 19th century and later) that their presence in the Andean ecosystem is less than a geologic minute. But in about 100 years, browns, rainbows, and brook trout (and recently escaped Pacific salmon from fish farms in the estuaries) have occupied and flourished in virtually all the rivers and lakes of the western slopes of the Chilean Andes as far south as Tierra del Fuego.

Head eastward from Aysén into Argentina and the rainfall diminishes into the grassland (steppes or pampas). Great trout streams rise there too, born also from Andean snow-melt, but it is in the Aysén western watersheds that heavy annual rainfalls scour hard-charging freestoners and lakes, creating home waters for large trout.

Volcanic Impact

Chaitén volcano erupted in 2008 and 2009 after 1,000 years of dormancy. Torrential rains flooded Chaitén village with ash and mud, sending the residents fleeing into a roadside barn in a nearby village as we arrived to fish in late March 2009.

The rivers were on the rise, so with the help of Patagonian Basecamp Lodge guides, we explored tributaries and lakes of the Rio Palena, Figueroa, and Rosselot drainages, the core trout rivers of the region, along with the Rio Yelcho, all flowing to estuaries on the Pacific.

I previously fished the Palena from its uppermost reaches down to its mid-river haunts, and was familiar with its long wading flats and its hook-jawed browns and rainbows concealed under massive bank logs.

It was (and is) a river of large fish (Joan Wulff caught a 9-pound+ brown there), where, fishing from framed rafts, you lure trout by casting Fat Alberts, articulated leeches, Chile Buggers, Double Bunnies, or Swimming Jimmies.

You twitch them . . . working the large flies hard and with riveted attention until your arms are limp with exhaustion. Large fish suddenly loom up beneath your fly: spectral images ascending from dark depths.



Photo | John Randolph

► Snow and ice from the Patagonian Andes melt cold water into the deeply graveled rivers of the Aysén region to create ideal trout habitat.

► Large foam rubber-leg dry flies and a variety of streamers work well in Aysén Province. Inset: Freshwater crabs (*pancora*) are a major food source, especially for large trout.

Photo | John Randolph



► Rio Palena tributaries (this one unnamed) offer wilderness fishing for browns and rainbows.

Photo | Mike Michalak



[Palena means "River of Spiders" in the native Tebuelche dialect. It was discovered by Father Nicolas Mascardi in the mid-17th century. THE EDITOR.]

Aysén Today

Mike Michalak and I explored rivers, lakes, flats, and tributaries of the Aysén region for six days in March 2009 with the help of young Patagonian Basecamp Lodge guides, and here are my findings.

On a Palena River drift, guides and guests depart in the early morning, drive two hours to the upper river launch, float downriver in 14-foot Catarafts, and then boat- and wade-fish the long upriver flats and midriver logs. They overnight at a small river-bank lodge and the next day float and fish down to the main lodge.

When the river rises in spate, the guides jetboat up into gin-clear Palena tributaries, where waters spread over wide flats ideal for wading and streamer fishing for large browns and rainbows. (On all Aysén region waters, carry two rods—a fast 5-weight for dries, and a fast 7- or 8-weight for streamers.)

Rio Rosselot is an ideal driftboat freestoner with long drifts followed by overnights in a platform tent camp, making the trip both an eco-fishing adventure and a learning experience for beginners. Large browns and rainbows take Chile Buggers (black body, white rubber legs), Autumn Splendors, or black Crystal Swimming Jimmies,



Photo | John Randolph

▶ **Guides use** jetboats and rafts to transport fly fishers to and from Patagonian Basecamp Lodge outpost camps and the main lodge.

on floating lines or 200-grain integrated shooting heads.

On this river, as well as the Rio Cinco or Figueroa, boat fishing is the only access.

They are rivers where both fishers and nonfishing companions can easily catch trout in addition to planning

a sightseeing itinerary and other off-water activities.

If the rivers are up, guides and anglers horsepack to clear high-mountain lakes and sight-fish for browns or 'bows up to 25 inches.

Or, if the weather is calm and clear, they launch on Lago Rosselot to "scumline fish" small flies for 18- to 20-inch trout surface sipping spent insects.

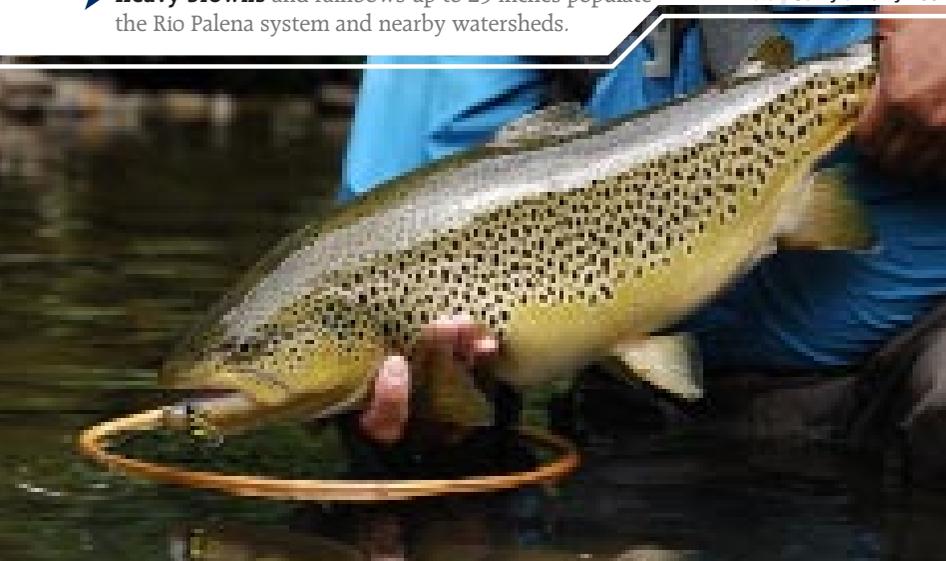
When scumlining is at its best, expect 30- to 50-fish days, with most fish in the 18- to 20-inch range. The scumlines are fished effectively with #18-22 Griffith's Gnats or other midge imitations (on 5X tippets).

Wading the shallows, and stalking large browns and rainbows feeding in the weeds can be one of fly fishing's most riveting experiences. You hunt riseforms or look for weeds being moved by pancora-hunting trout; cast weedless imitations or Chernobyl Ants; and wait for explosions. When you patrol the outer edges of the lake's reclining logs, large trout, lying concealed and waiting, shoot out and grab. It's intense sight-hunting and urgent casting at its best.

January and February are the best months for fishing on Aysén rivers

▶ **Heavy browns** and rainbows up to 25 inches populate the Rio Palena system and nearby watersheds.

Photo | Cathy & Barry Beck



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Photo | John Randolph

▶ **Marcel and Caro Sijnesael** own Patagonian Basecamp Lodge on the banks of the Rio Palena.

and lakes because they are the driest. The region experiences from 200 to 300 inches of rain annually (due to steep watershed gradients, rivers go into spate quickly and drop fast when rains cease), and since boats are the only means of reaching and fishing the waters, good timing can mean the difference between river or exclusive-lake fishing.

The many small tributaries can provide superb fishing for large trout, and the experienced guides know them well. (An 8-foot, 3- or 4-weight rod and a selection of #12-14 Royal Wulffs or Stimulators are ideal for this fishing.) The guides also fish six or seven small lakes that provide excellent sight-fishing to cruising browns up to 25 inches.

When You Go

Patagonian Basecamp Lodge (patagonianbasecamp.com) on the banks of the Palena opened in 2001. It was designed and built by owner Marcel Sijnesael (a former Dutch shipping company owner) to host 12 guests and service the Palena, Figueroa, Rosselot and Yelcho rivers, tributaries, and nearby lakes. The lodge also has mountain biking, horseback riding, and nature tours for nonfishers.

The lodge has a tying room, and the guides are expert tiers who provide instruction and flies that work best on Aysén waters. Preferred river

patterns include Turck's Tarantulas, Fat Alberts, Zonkers (white and olive), articulated leeches (black, white, olive, and purple), stonefly nymphs, beadhead Hare's Ears and Prince nymphs, Royal Wulffs, and Griffith's Gnats for scumline fishing.

Rods should include 5- and 7-weights, with matching floating and 200-grain sinking-tip lines.

Patagonian Basecamp Lodge in 2009 banned the use of foreign wading boots by guests to prevent the introduction of invasive species such as whirling disease, New Zealand mud snails, and didymo. It has equipped the lodge with rubber- and felt-sole wading boots with sizes for all guests. Sijnesael says these boots will be used exclusively on the waters that the lodge fishes. Guests will not have to bring their own (bulky) wading boots or shoes.

Patagonian Basecamp Lodge is booked by The Fly Shop (flyshop.com) and by Travel Adventures (travela.com).

Yan Kee Way Lodge (yankeeway.com) is located on Lago Llanquihue, also in Aysén.

Aysén Province is reached by flying to Puerto Montt and La Junta, Chile. Pesos are available at airport ATMs.

John Randolph is publisher emeritus of FLY FISHERMAN.