

## Southland NZ – Mataura River (and related) by Bill

I was putting together notes on the trip to Gore for the Jun 2018 edition of *Burley Line* when it occurred to me that we actually hadn't ever produced a 'places you should go' report on the Mataura. This seeks to redress that major omission.

My trout fishing trip to New Zealand was actually spin-fly fishing – ie flies off a spin rig using a bubble float – this was back in Dec 2001.



A number of trips to North Island followed before Peter and I had a first trip to the famous Southland Mataura River in March 2007. For this trip we spent one week at Waikaka (near Gore) then followed up with one week at Omarama in Otago – rivers up there will have to await another post. The Gore trips have continued most years since that time with the addition of Ian and latterly Lyall

To get us keyed into these waters, we've always engaged the services of local guide Barry Perkins of [Fly Fish Mataura](#) for a couple of days intro. Our 2007 trip was early days for Barry's guiding service (and indeed somewhat for me with fly) and we each have had a long and fruitful relationship since. If you are in the district, I highly recommend you approach Barry.



*Barry at work – Peter smiling for the camera ☺*



*Bill's first trip yielded a 3 1/4lb*

Our first foray onto the Mataura accessed the river via private farm access courtesy of Barry and quite a deal downstream from Gore. However, as you can see below

from the [Fish and Game brochure](#), there are any number of angler's access points for those who don't have the privilege of farming friends.



The river here is usually broad but still fast and often deep. Either side of the river is farmland (typically dairy cattle) and there's an argument that the consequential phosphorus levels in the water mean that the Maitai is free of the dreaded dydymo. Regardless, good biosecurity procedures are needed when moving from catchment to catchment and of course on our way home.

Our first trip saw low water levels and we were able to wade several metres away from the bank in knee deep water. Barry was adamant we needed to cast across the full extent of water in front of us, including hard against the bank as the browns were content to sit in little hollows in what would otherwise be less than a foot deep. It

proved a valuable tip in 2007 and we've emulated it many times since. When the river is running particularly hard, the fish down here will also hug the bank, hiding behind anything that blocks the flow (or in the soft water ahead of the blockage) and often in surprisingly shallow water.



Shingle beaches are a frequent and welcome occurrence throughout the river.



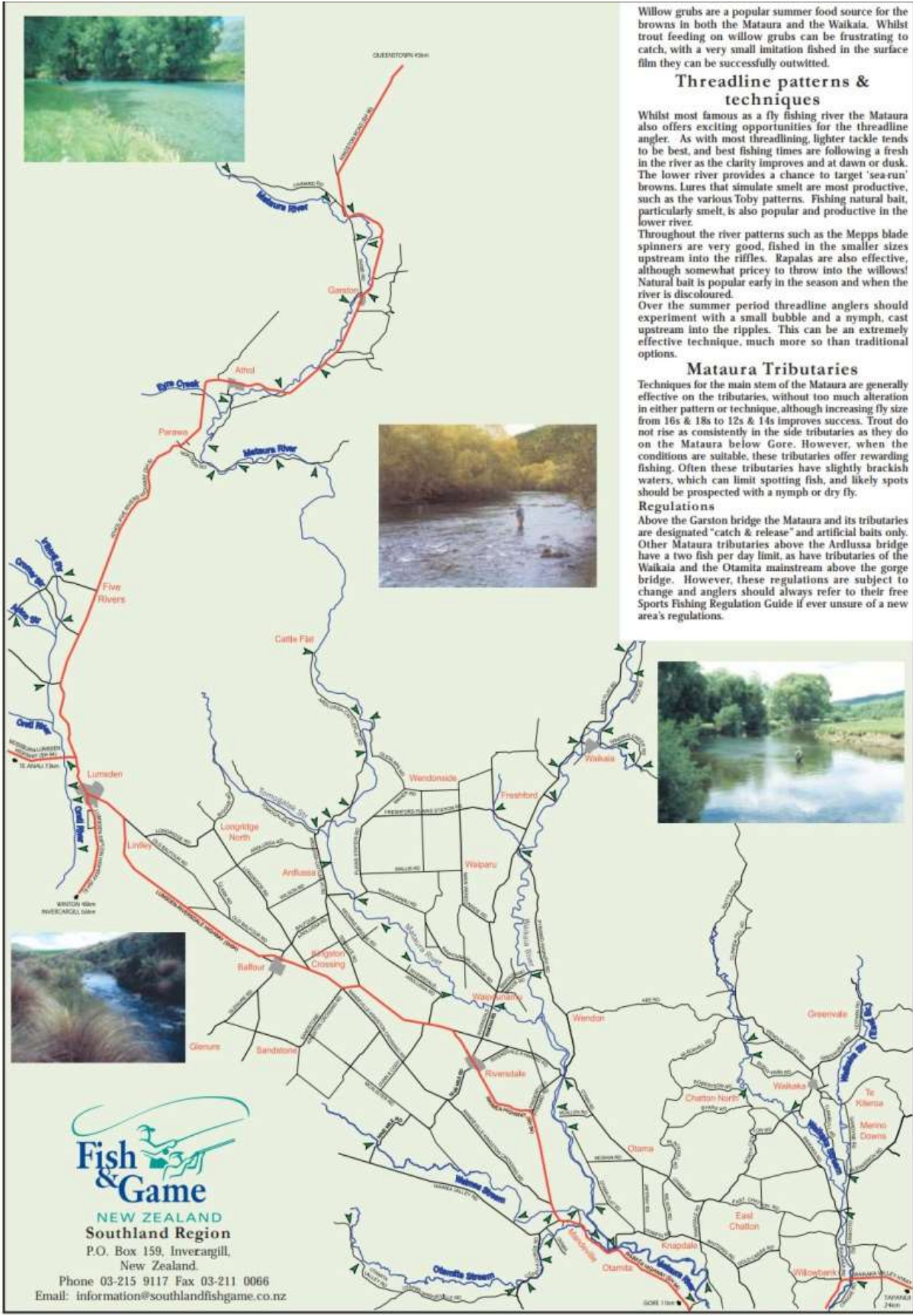
But also you'll often need to negotiate overgrown and undercut banks – gorse bushes and broom are a particular nuisance.





Generally speaking, the river upstream to perhaps the Wakaia confluence, is big water unlike nearly all rivers I've fished in Australia. Perhaps the Goulburn River which I've not really fished might be similar. The apparent lack of structure can be daunting, but looking closer and at the edges you start to sense where the fish are hanging out. Such consideration is important when starting off with the typical Mataura rig of double nymph and indicator. The favoured patterns seemed to focus on scruffy hare and copper plus some kind of flashback/beadhead.

But then the river puts on its signature 'mad Mataura rise' – or perhaps more recently a smaller rendition. Mayflies start hatching and suddenly the entire river seems to be alive with rises. Parachute Adams and Dad's Favourite (all small sizes) become the favoured treat. Local guide and dry fly expert David Murray-Orr's aerowing emerger and dun of the same material have had great success, but Bill and Lyall rue the day when rises all around us were being ignored (only to hear from David that they were rising to take nymphs just under the surface ... another lesson tucked away). Such rises can occur any time of day, along with the occasional caddis hatch, in all parts of the river. Seeing fish regularly rise at one spot over and over just waiting to be targeted has become my favoured approach. Let's face it, I'm just getting too lazy to cast to the possibility of a fish!



Willow grubs are a popular summer food source for the browns in both the Maitava and the Waikaka. Whilst trout feeding on willow grubs can be frustrating to catch, with a very small imitation fished in the surface film they can be successfully outwitted.

**Threadline patterns & techniques**

Whilst most famous as a fly fishing river the Maitava also offers exciting opportunities for the threadline angler. As with most threadlining, lighter tackle tends to be best, and best fishing times are following a fresh in the river as the clarity improves and at dawn or dusk. The lower river provides a chance to target 'sea-run' browns. Lures that simulate smelt are most productive, such as the various Toby patterns. Fishing natural bait, particularly smelt, is also popular and productive in the lower river.

Throughout the river patterns such as the Mepps blade spinners are very good, fished in the smaller sizes upstream into the riffles. Rapalas are also effective, although somewhat pricey to throw into the willows! Natural bait is popular early in the season and when the river is discoloured.

Over the summer period threadline anglers should experiment with a small bubble and a nymph, cast upstream into the ripples. This can be an extremely effective technique, much more so than traditional options.

**Maitava Tributaries**

Techniques for the main stem of the Maitava are generally effective on the tributaries, without too much alteration in either pattern or technique, although increasing fly size from 16s & 18s to 12s & 14s improves success. Trout do not rise as consistently in the side tributaries as they do on the Maitava below Gore. However, when the conditions are suitable, these tributaries offer rewarding fishing. Often these tributaries have slightly brackish waters, which can limit spotting fish, and likely spots should be prospected with a nymph or dry fly.

**Regulations**

Above the Garston bridge the Maitava and its tributaries are designated "catch & release" and artificial baits only. Other Maitava tributaries above the Ardlussa bridge have a two fish per day limit, as have tributaries of the Waikaka and the Otamita mainstream above the gorge bridge. However, these regulations are subject to change and anglers should always refer to their free Sports Fishing Regulation Guide if ever unsure of a new area's regulations.

**Fish & Game**  
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The Waikaka is a major tributary of the Maitava and has a large catchment. It contributes significantly to the flow but also, unfortunately, can colour up the

Mataura in the event of heavy rain the Waikaia catchment. The Waikaia itself has lots of good fishing, but I might need to defer any discussion on it to another day.



Above the confluence, the Mataura generally becomes more wadeable.

It has many public accesses up till Cattle Flat. The latter is quite a long walk from the car park and so we've not visited for some years. The river is generally a less challenging scale and sometimes becomes braided giving us some of Ian's favourite water of anabranches and backwaters. This will often be gin-clear and hold trout just at the junctions. Careful stalking and slow approach is key to not spooking these fish. It is also where Ian's advice of casting to anything that looks like a fish or looks like a log (as these 'logs' so often swim off if you didn't offer them a cast!).





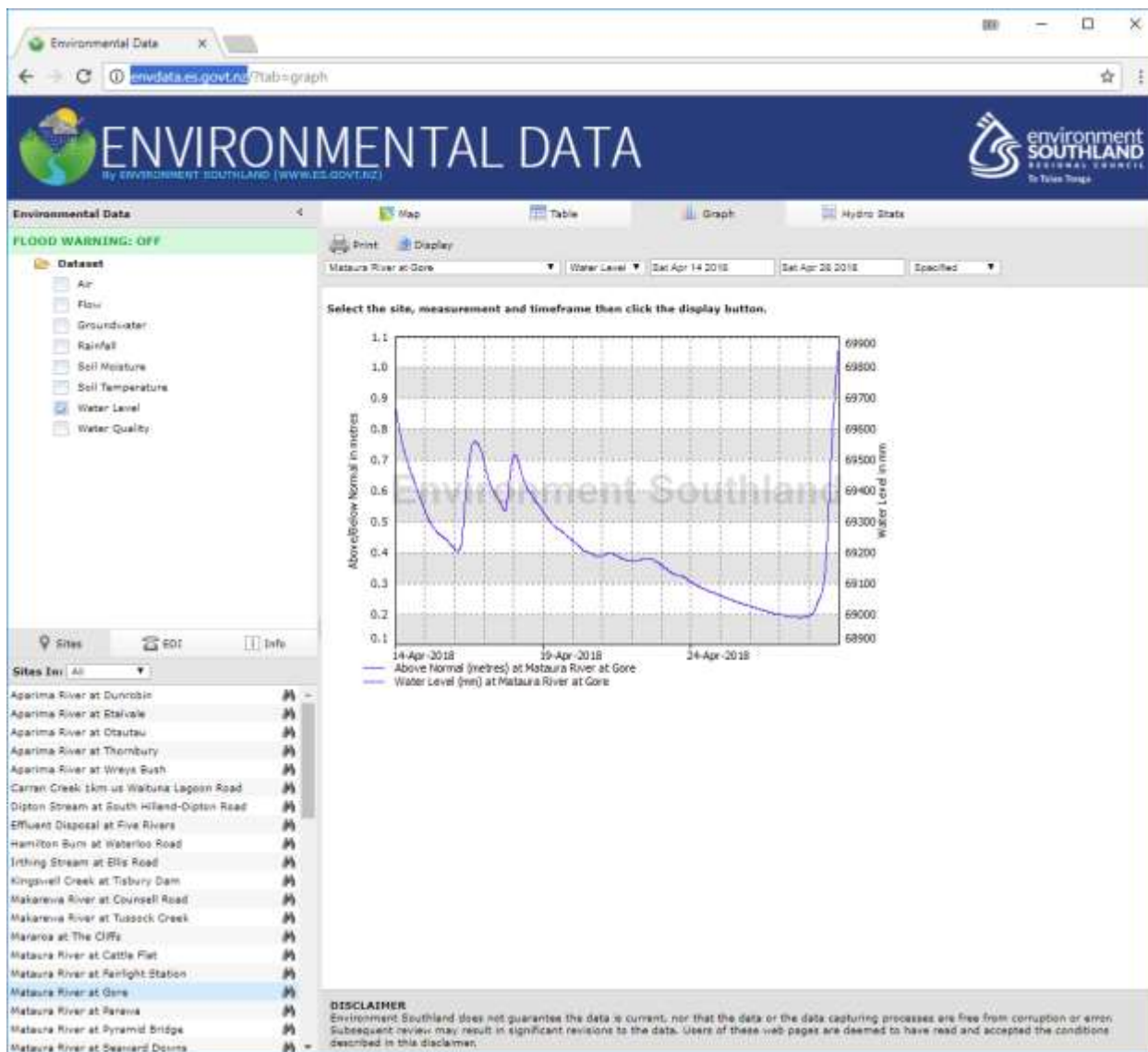
There is then quite a gap in accesses due to the river passing through [Nokomai Station](#) where a rather 5 star lodge will put you onto spectacular water.

Above there in the vicinity of Athol and Garston you start getting into skinnier water and something more like a mountain stream. Accesses continue all the way up into the headwaters which Peter and I explored during our [2017 campervan adventure](#).



*Upstream near Garston the river becomes more of an Australian scale – spectacular backdrop*

A very useful resource is the [Environment Department website](#) with information on river depths and flows. Will give you some real good clues on where on the river to go for a fish. For example, here is a chart covering a visit in April 2018 – conditions were pretty bad at the beginning, came good towards the end and then disaster struck.



So ... a magical river well deserving of its brown trout reputation. Flights from Australia will take you to Queenstown about a 2 hour drive from Gore or half that from Garston.