

# Maestro v Magician on the Mackenzie

*(words by BJ as endorsed by Claude)*

BJ, Claude and 'The Maestro' (Claude branded work chum and trained on the Scottish Burns – talented angler Gary) took their first fly fishing holiday trip to the Mackenzie Region of Sth NZ. Initially a location chosen via the randomness of Claude's extended family having vacancies at their sometime AirBnB cabin in Twizel, to then find out it's a bit of a Mecca for CAA members past and present – which brought us an abundance of enthusiastic info, advice chats and books. Many thanks to Bill, Ben and particularly Mark for thoroughly prepping us and providing a laundry list of 'must-do' fishing locations. It's one of the many bonuses of being a club member.

On with the trip report ..... We had awkward and stumbling start coinciding with the abhorrent events in NZ on Friday 15Mar. A Qantas Canberra departure delay shortened our changeover at Melbourne airport, and our bags did not arrive with us in the saddest airport in the world - Christchurch. A quick replan to stay in a hotel in Christchurch for the night so we could ensure our bags were received AM Sunday rather than hoping for delivery to Twizel when a driver was available for the 7 hr round trip. We then encountered a highway closure 30min out of Twizel due to a major accident where tourists had a head on near a lookout. Distracted Driver behaviour near the spectacular landscape sights is an ever present hazard. Ever the itchy anglers, we hatched an alternate plan that we would just fish the many options on our side of highway closure until it opened again. The Mary Burn was on the 'must do' list but we clearly weren't paying enough attention to pre-briefings and entered at the SH8 bridge and fished up without much to reward us other than practice of 'stealth mode',



tussock hopping, and discerning Sockeye Salmon from trout. Apparently March is spawning for the Sockeye and they have returned in record numbers to their [spawning grounds](#). We learned to get

used to them over the week in every smaller stream we approached and add that to stalking senses. If you move a brace of salmon, the pool guardian Rainbow would also be alerted.

Monday was our planned guide day with [Declan Wong](#) at the head of Lake Pukaki and working the tail of the Tasman River. Moving slowly, scanning and spotting cruising fish in the lake shallows and casting nymphs to twitch without spooking was the task. It seemed like Bonefish fishing when wading in shallows (between calf and mid-thigh depths), crystal clear water and spotting cruising fish which were never below 50cm in length. Maestro was into it early with a couple of large browns to hand (arms) thanks to the assistance of his 'net boy' Claude.....a relatively consistent job. Many moving trout I would successfully skitter with an unsubtle cast. We eventually moved to the river mouth and the even more subtle arts of stalking large browns in prime lies. It was a bright day – yet the fast water, depth and light angles still meant a sixth sense (or prior knowledge!) was also essential. Declan maintained a tight rein on 3 anglers moving up together without spoiling a prospective lie. A number fish were unattainable, and lessons were learnt (mine was about rod v drag tension management without busting – twice!). Gary nearly did a 'Brad Pitt – River Runs Through It' downstream run to hang on to a 7lb-er, but Claude was the happiest player with an 8lb Brown



that was captured on a mean drift with a Black Gnat from across the stream, after the downstream drifts with nymphs failed to excite. Claude tamed and backed the fish across to the shallows for beaching and hand capture. We dragged as much local region tips and directions from Declan as we could on our laminated maps before letting him go back to Queenstown at 7pm. What a day! If you've ventured to Declan's website you'll know that he is also a professional stage 'sleight of hand' Magician and film maker. There was however, no sleight of hand or special effects in our experience. Experience and guided skill was very real in success. We were amazed with the number fly changes – dries, nymphs – weighted and unweighted, tippet strength and casting tactics....including purposely casting a foot or two to the side so you could detect if the fish was going to hit your fly.



We were now on our own recognisance for 5 ½ more days fishing and we hit it hard, with a couple of 12 Hr days. Loch Cameron, Upper Ahuriri River and Tarns,



Lower Ahuriri River and spring stream tribs, Tekapo and Gray's River (including nightmare 25km/h chunky gravel access road trip), Hopkins River, one hour on the Kelland Pond, and the lovely Fraser Stream in our accommodation backyard that produced the freshest smoked trout attainable.



A lot of water & kms marched in waders, high stepping tussocks breaking a sweat. We landed some very pleasing fish from hand sized to armfuls.....at least one good fish was caught by at least one of us on all bar one outing. But the ones that got away (on spooking cast, obstruction or tight drag) were going to be the best. Imagination has assured that. The fishing, perfect weather, good mates



and the unbeatable scenery



made us want to desperately earn enough brownie points at home to come back soon-ish. Maybe it could rain a bit in Australia too?

Some of the take-aways from our trip are:

- The rivers typically have big fish or normal Australian sizes – but not both
- When fishing a 'big fish' river/stream we rarely 'saw' a fish between the bends with a pool at least a meter deep
- When trying to stalk a likely area and you happen to come across a fish earlier than expected, freezing like a 'tree' doesn't fool the large trout
- Get a guide if you are going to a new area
- Fishing in salmon streams in March can be a smelly experience....lots of dead fish in the river and on the banks
- Change flies regularly
- It's great not having to worry about snakes or bears!
- Do exercise before you go so it doesn't hurt so much on the trip.
- Wear a buff and gloves to protect yourself from the midges