

Marchfly Madness on the Tooma!

Al Mc



I had been planning this trip into the Tooma River in the Snowies since picking up on some hints at the CAA's club night at the Compleat Angler in '21, and I decided to head in early January 22 and hopefully biv' on the river bed for two nights. It had rained heavily in mid December and I had received reports of an unfordable torrent which boded well for my own trip some 10 days later. I was expecting a healthy flow and hungry trout.

My map suggested Snakey Plains Trail was relatively gentle, unlike the last 100km of the drive to get there. The absence of water in the hydro-scheme I put down to the major upgrade underway and remained hopeful of the conditions at my destination. There were a few cars parked on the road side and I did subtly inspect them for empty rod tubes and forgotten nets to see if I would face any competition. So far so good.

The walk did start flat, but it was stinking hot at 11am and the marchflies were out in force. This scourge is something not experienced in New Zealand and it was a shock to me that not even keeping moving was enough to stop them nailing me through my polypro leggings, worn I thought, for sun protection. To add to the aerial menace, there was actually quite a steep and persistent section to the track up to 1550m of elevation, and I was really starting to wonder if I had correctly interpreted the nature of the walk.

The hike did improve and I found a number of healthy creeks to stay hydrated on the walk in to Wheeler's Hut, which I was keen to investigate as a piece of Australian backcountry history. It is a photogenic spot at which I found four other hikers (on the way out I returned and was advised 12 people stayed there the second night I was on the river!)



After a coffee at Wheeler's I finished my walk into the river, bivvying at the small grassy camping area near the ford. When I first sighted the river from the top of the hills I had assessed it as 'smaller than expected' but realised as I started my afternoon of fishing by heading downstream, that fording it could prove a challenge. I was able to make it down maybe 1.5km before I felt that further exploration, whilst achievable, would be slow, and began fishing back up to camp.

Over the next few hours I landed 10 small rainbows and lost a number of others. I did dabble with some indicator nymphing expecting the better fish to be deep, but due to success with the dry and occasionally the dropper, decided to stick with what was working, and fun. The trout were found in all the expected places, however that evening I did ruminate on the lack of browns, which had been surprising. A big highlight of this day's fishing was the platypus that 'rose' a few metres from me inspecting my stimulator before proceeding upstream.

I made it back to my camp after the sun had dropped below the surrounding hills, but with plenty of light remaining for dinner. Some niggling rain did force me into my bivvy early, but nothing to trouble the camping experience.

The next day was my only full day in the river and I had planned for it to be a big one. I commenced fishing just upstream from the ford, and was able to easily navigate the river over the day. In contrast to the day before, I specifically targeted good brown trout locations and was rewarded, landing five of them in addition to another handful or more rainbows. I was constantly on the lookout for snakes, and any other wildlife of interest, slathering on a lot of sunscreen throughout the day. Unfortunately, I discovered that I was not dressed appropriately for the marchflies, now in plague proportions, and regularly found myself thigh deep in river to get

respite. Some trout downstream of me did very well out of it as many a marchfly fell to my frantic leg slapping and ended up drifting in the film.

Once again, I lost a couple of possibly more respectable fish, and whilst a biggie eluded me, I was still having a great time. I realised in the early afternoon that I was probably committed to staying in the river up to the next ford, and then walking the track back to my camp. Needless to say, as the day waned, I started getting nervous about the lack of ford, however I saw some cyclists pushing their bikes up a hill in the distance and figured I was on track. For those spending time in these hills, this is a great option to avoid bashing back down the river, and I think I covered the 6km back to camp in about 45 mins.

It rained through most of my second night, relegating me to the biv' early, which was no bad thing as at this point I was a bit broken! In body, but not spirit of course.

It was a late start for me the next morning, and it looked like it may be slightly overcast which was a relief, albeit it made the conditions glarey and very hard to see my dry fly. It didn't stop the marchflies however, and as soon as I found the river, they found me. I only fished a few pools downstream, but having tuned my techniques, I was able to land my best brown for the trip, and also lose another rainbow that probably would have been my biggest if landed.

The walk back to the road is noticeably easier than the hike in. At this stage, the wildflowers were in full bloom and being able to walk through a sea of white, orange, yellow and purple flowers, with myriad butterflies in attendance was special. All in all, a great trip, marred only by my being inappropriately attired to keep the marchflies away. I will return!