

A South Island Fishing Journey

Claude, Gary, BJ & Lachlan

11–25 March



Claude, BJ, Lachy and Gary

March 11–12 – Arrival in New Zealand

The journey began on **11 March**, Claude, Gary and Lachlan boarding the 6am flight from CBR to SYD, BJ followed a little later. After regrouping in Sydney, we caught the 0935am flight from SYD to Queenstown.

Arrival into Queenstown on in the early afternoon of **11 March** was calm and efficient. As tradition demanded, the first stop was the local fishing and hunting store — a quiet ritual of scanning fly bins and checking leaders — followed closely by a thorough run through Pak'nSave to stock up for the weeks ahead. From there, the road carried them on to Omarama and into a modest, functional house that would be home for the trip. With a single bathroom shared between four anglers, coordination became an unexpected but necessary skill from the outset. As the shopping and drive took longer than expected, a pub dinner was enjoyed at the local 'Boots & Jandals Hotel'. The meals were great, in particular Claude's lamb shoulder.

March 12 – Hakataramea River

Fishing began the next day on the **Hakataramea River**, a stretch everyone felt they knew well. Claude and Lachlan headed upstream, while Gary and BJ worked their way down.

There was early promise — Lachlan snapped off on what felt like a serious rainbow (lesson – always use 3X tippet when fishing in NZ), while Claude landed a small trout on a dry right at the entry point. But as the hours passed, the river felt quieter than remembered. Claude spotted one large feeding brown, only to spook it with the first cast. Trout numbers appeared lower than in past years, and upstream results reflected that. Downstream, however, BJ found better success, quietly hooking a few fish with deep pool buggers, working out some Day 1 gear problems and finally landing one chunky rainbow with a heavy nymph below fast water, setting an early benchmark. Gary started well with a 3lb rainbow on a dry but then lost two fish in tricky lies which was frustrating.

March 13 – Larches Stream and Ahuriri Clay Cliffs

The morning of **13 March** started with ambition but was quickly shaped by the elements. Larches Stream, high near Lake Ōhau, greeted the group with strong winds and rain. Claude and Gary pushed through the tough conditions and were rewarded when Gary landed a solid 5.5lb rainbow trout, a fish that justified the effort and the cold and got the others to move from the car. Salmon filled the river, and soon everyone had their turn playing them, a chaotic contrast to the trout they came seeking. The weather won in the end as the wind was untenable as the day went on.



By the afternoon, the group relocated to the **Ahuriri Clay Cliffs**. It was immediately clear the river had changed — floods and bulldozing had reshaped familiar water. Old productive runs were gone, replaced by new, untested structure. While some fish rose and others spooked, Lachlan adapted best upstream with his euro rig and came away with the day's most consistent success. Gary ditched an NZ indicator rig that proved fruitless despite many decent drifts, a change to a longer leader using a stimulator as an indicator paid off with two browns.

March 14 – Lake Pukaki

On **14 March**, Pukaki provided a slower, more relaxed day. Lake fishing filled the early hours before the group moved onto the river. Gary landed six nice rainbows, while Claude and BJ connected later in the day on the lake. It was noted that there were far fewer browns in the river this year.

After a frustrating day on the river, including more gear failures with BJ's reel uncommanded disassembly in the lake silt. BJ was then surprised to come across a family of French tourists who's kids landed a healthy rainbow trout using basic gear and a lure — a reminder that trout don't care how prepared you think you are. They were surprised by the catch from muddy banks of the recently flooded spring creek. BJ had to convince them it was a good eating fish. Lachlan also learned that the most direct line back to the car is not always the easiest... after going knees to ears for almost an hour!



March 15 – Dobson River

The drive on **15 March** up the right-hand side of Lake Ōhau into the Dobson Valley was long and scenic, peaceful until broken by the roar of jet boats. BJ, in particular, found this grating, and his vocal disdain for the jet boaters became one of the trip's ongoing sources of humour.



Claude landed a 2 LB rainbow from an offshoot using a pile cast just downstream of some fast water. Claude and Gary had a chat with two hunters who had spent the weekend camping slightly upstream. They pointed out likely holding water, but fish were easily spooked. Gary lost a good fish when an old hook broke, prompting a fly swap and some good-natured frustration. Fuel prices — pushing three dollars a litre — became another quiet hit on morale.



March 16 – Main Ahuriri Valley

The **16 March** session on the main Ahuriri began with a long walk-in and a steep descent that took its toll before fishing even started. Gary started with an early brown on the swing. Wind built steadily throughout the day.

Salmon dominated the river. Claude and Lachlan each landed several, but trout refused to show themselves despite plenty of promising water. Upstream, BJ made a poor choice of route and communed with thorn bushes and damaged his waders. Wading was difficult, the current demanding a wading stick, and eventually Gary and BJ called time due to how hard the river had become to fish.

We finished the session swinging for eager chinook salmon on the spawn run. Swinging buggers reigned supreme.

March 17 – Hakatamea River (Lower Reach)

On **17 March**, curiosity paid off. Claude and Lachlan convinced the group to explore a lower, previously unfished stretch of the Hakatamea, with Gary dropping them off seven kilometres downstream from their normal starting point.

The water felt alive. Lachlan landed a beautiful brown trout of around 4 lbs on his euro rig. Although the fish slipped free during photos, the moment mattered far more than the picture. Claude added a couple of fish of his own, and the group agreed this section held real promise. This also included a wonderful rainbow that Lachlan guided Claude onto where it was happy sipping down surface food, including Claude's dry. Fishing the normal upstream section from the bridge, Gary and BJ encountered fewer fish and some spin anglers, reinforcing a sense that pressure and low water were shaping the river fishery performance.



March 18 – Grays River

The **Grays River**, fished on 18 March near Tekapo, tested everyone. Wind made casting difficult and the downstream walk was physically demanding.



The day's defining moment came when Claude spotted a solid brown holding in complex currents. After dry droppers failed due to drag, a switch to a bugger produced a first-cast hookup. With BJ's assistance, the fish was netted — heavy-headed, lean, and around 4–4.5 lbs . After release, it lingered briefly before being guided back into the main current. It was a shared win, built on patience and teamwork.



March 19 – Lower Ahuriri

Lachlan chose the venue on **19 March**, keeping things close to home. Claude landed a small brown early; Gary broke the tip of his Hardy rod whilst netting a nice 2+ lb brown, earning extra kilometres back to the car.



Later, Claude tied on a hopper he'd created back in Canberra and landed a beautiful brown after a strong downstream fight — a deeply satisfying moment. BJ also successfully stalked a couple of middling rainbows, a good

2.5lb brown on unsinkable caddis. He then stalked, hooked and unfortunately lost a very good brown that needed to run faster and farther than he was ready for. While Lachlan continued to impress upstream with euro nymphs. This was a surprisingly good stretch of river that the group thought would have been much more popular being so close to Omarama.



March 20 – Lower Ahuriri (Above Benmore Dam)

On 20 March, Lachlan took a rest day while Claude, Gary, and BJ tackled the lower Ahuriri above Benmore Dam. The walk-in was punishing, but the reward came fast.

Claude started the day landing a powerful brown of around 4.5 lbs, shortly followed by Gary with



another solid fish from a large corner pool. The day continued with side braids, missed

chances, and quiet water. BJ picked up a couple of decent rainbows from one long glide to a corner, and was surprised by a nice brown taking the dropper, sitting on an edge while he was casting to a dark smudge that was likely a rock.





March 21 – Larches Stream, Revisited

Returning to **Larches Stream on 21 March** felt almost like being given a second chance. The weather had softened, the wind had relaxed, and the river felt far more welcoming than it had earlier in the trip.

Before committing to Larches proper, the group made a decision to walk down the **Dobson–Hopkins River** to see what it offered. Almost immediately, it became clear how much easier this approach was compared to previous days of relentless high-knee wading through grass and scrub. It was a lesson worth remembering — sometimes the easiest path is simply the better one.



Salmon were still present but noticeably fewer than further upstream. The anglers paired off as they'd grown accustomed to: Claude and Gary together; BJ and Lachlan working as a second team. Rather than pushing hard, everyone "bunny-hopped" each other up the river, swapping water and exploring side braids as they went.

Gary set the tone early, spotting two impressive trout he estimated at around 5 lbs . He pursued them patiently for close to an hour, changing flies and angles, but the fish remained untouched and eventually slipped away.



Claude moved further upstream and spent a long stretch seeing nothing at all, until persistence paid off. Blind casting into a corner of the river produced his first fish — a solid rainbow of around 2.5 lbs — a satisfying reward after a long visual drought.





Meanwhile, BJ and Lachlan hunted then spooked a few early on then ventured into a tough offshoot. Progress was slow, footing unreliable, and the enthusiasm to return to the main channel was unanimous. BJ locked onto a large rainbow and after a hopper take that didn't stick, nor spook, he spent a full hour changing flies and throwing everything he had at it, only to be met

with refusals and indifference — the fish calmly eyeballing him, entirely unmoved until he stood, then it bolted.



Just upstream, Lachlan spotted another pair of rainbows tucked around a bend. They were a long cast away, so he invited Claude to take the first shot. On Claude's second cast, he hooked up — only for the line to snap instantly at the dropper knot. The line had been checked after the previous fish, but the knot had clearly taken enough stress to fail. The lesson landed hard and clearly: after landing a fish on the dropper, re-tie — every time.

Lachlan stepped in next, throwing a beautifully long euro cast. On his second or third attempt, the larger rainbow exploded from the water, shaking its head violently before throwing the hook. It was one of those moments where disappointment was eclipsed by how spectacular the fish looked in the air. Gary then hooked another rainbow on a hopper in the same pool which got off, his third loss of the day. Three fish were eventually landed to cheer him up and one may have been the big fish earlier in the week which was spotted under a bank and came out to take the hopper on first drift. It had lost a 1 lb since previously caught or there were fewer stones in the net!

Claude and Gary continued upriver, with Claude adding one more fish in the afternoon — his best personal result on Larches across the trip. Eventually, everyone fished as far as they could before converging back at the car. The long drive home followed, tired but quietly satisfied.

March 22 – Wanaka and the Matukituki

On **22 March**, the group packed up and left Omarama, heading south toward **Wanaka**. With hours to spare before their Airbnb became available, a half-day fishing plan took shape.

The initial idea was to fish the **Matukituki River** near its mouth at Lake Wanaka, but the scene was chaotic — jet boats slicing past and helicopters ferrying paragliders into the air. It didn't feel like the place to settle in. Instead, they pushed further upstream into **Mount Aspiring National Park**, scouting water they planned to fish more thoroughly the following day.



The river was clearer than remembered from earlier trips. Splitting into loose sections, Claude, BJ, and Lachlan worked downstream, while Gary stayed slightly upstream. BJ delivered a beautiful cast along a bank that produced a tidy two-pound brown, followed by a smaller fish. Gary added a small rainbow of his own. Conditions were tough, and those proved to be the only fish of the day — but the scenery alone justified the decision to stay.

March 23 – Makarora River and Lake Hāwea

Fishing on **23 March** shifted to the **Makarora River**, though access and wind immediately complicated things. Claude and BJ worked upstream from the car park, while Gary and Lachlan headed downstream. Fish were scarce, midges were biting and plentiful and progress slow.

BJ provided the day's most exciting moment, hooking into a powerful rainbow near water Claude and Gary had fished on a previous trip with Mark. The fish launched itself skyward in a clean, confident leap before throwing the hook — spectacular and heartbreaking in equal measure.

As the group regrouped, a fisheries ranger stopped by for a licence inspection and offered advice, suggesting fishing further down the valley. The plan shifted again. Attempts to access the river closer to Lake Wanaka turned into a frustrating exercise — muddy ground, fencing obstacles, and unpleasant footing.

Gary and BJ persisted, while Claude and Lachlan made a call to divert to **Lake Hāwea**, arranging to pick the others up later. On the drive back, they spotted what would have been a far better river access — wide, open, and straightforward — one of those discoveries that always comes ten minutes too late.

Fishing the lake proved difficult. Claude eventually spotted a fish and worked hard to reach it, even with Lachlan calling direction, but the wind picked up relentlessly and casting became impractical. With daylight fading, Claude and Lachlan retrieved Gary and BJ and headed back, empty-handed but wiser.

March 24 – Makarora River, Wilkin Valley

The final fishing day, **24 March**, brought the group back to the **Makarora River**, this time near the Wilkin Valley. The setting was stunning — wide valleys, clear water, and space to breathe.

Lachlan took a rest day to dry gear and prepare for travel. Claude and Gary started upstream, battling wind but eventually finding success when Gary hooked the first fish on a buggie beneath the willows. After lunch, the sound of BJ's calls downstream — fish spotted, hookups happening — drew them in.

Joining BJ felt like stepping into a different river. He'd already landed three rainbows. Fish were comparatively everywhere. Gary landed a couple of strong trout, while Claude finally tempted a fish to take a grasshopper — only to pull the fly clear just before the trout closed its mouth. Close, but not quite.



BJ had the day everyone hopes for at the end of a trip, landing three or four excellent fish. Gary followed with two or three of his own. For Claude, the last two days produced doughnuts, but paradoxically no disappointment — the story still felt complete.

That evening, gear was washed, boots were dried using a McGyvered heater setup, and everything was packed carefully. It felt like closure.

March 25 – Homeward Bound

On **25 March**, the car was packed in a masterclass of Tetris efficiency. Lunch at an Arrowtown pub — burgers, chips, and a beer — served as a final punctuation mark.

BJ was dropped at the airport first, then the car returned. Lachlan joined Claude and Gary as they made one last Pak'nSave chocolate run before their own flight. That flight was delayed long enough to miss the Sydney connection, resulting in an unexpected night in a five-star hotel in Mascot.

Looking Back

The trip wasn't measured by numbers alone. Claude and BJ recorded their most successful outing, Lachlan embraced and enjoyed the fresh challenge, and although Gary (Maestro) landed fewer fish than he typically would—still out-catching Claude and BJ— he enjoyed the trip just as much.

The trip was never just about the numbers. Scarcer, hard-earned trout, relentless winds, the odd roaring jet boats and consequential colourful language, and changed rivers all shaped the experience. More than a few nights ended with team members dozing off on the couch, carefully balancing a drink or a phone, worn out from a full day of pushing through the river. Yet there was also laughter, persistence, shared strategy, and the rare satisfaction of standing mid-stream, miles from anywhere, certain there was nowhere else you'd rather be.

Lessons / Trip Takeaways

- DEET &/or head net for midge
- Build long leaders & create a labelled leader ziplock, incl shorter and long. (Just like Gary 😊)
- More Hoppers, Stimies and unsinkables + lightly weighted buggers
- Be prepared to let them run, even down through the next riffle if snagless
- Improve my wind casting techniques
- 2 suit cases (big/small) is a good idea + rod carrying case
- Waders optional in Feb/Mar with neoprene skinz ([Shop Backcountry Skinz Australia — Bluey's Hunting & Fishing](#))
- don't need many nighttime or going out clothes, or many extra socks if there is a washing machine in accommodation
- Carry spare reel/spool in backpack
- Disassemble and reassemble reels thoroughly to make sure all is tight
- Don't lay rod in grass when paused or getting ready. Lean up against something out of foot range
- Downstream fishers take keys

- Replace /re-tie dry dropper rigs after big fish catches
- don't be afraid to fish close to home
- flouro for dry tippet worked well
- coord Team first aid supplies, incl waterproof tough strips & savlon/betadine.
- Use 3X tippet as a minimum
- Don't be afraid to replace the Euro nymph leader more often. Take spare spools of Euro leader material.
- Always carry spare reel in backpack (euro/dry line opposite to what is on the rod)
- Always take a midge net for the hat and deet for the fingers (but mind the line!)
- Remember anti-histamines (Telfast) and anti-inflam (Ibuprofen)
- NZ Topo (app) is very useful
- When the water levels are low, a productive beat from previous years may not perform. Try beats further down river instead.
- Freestone rivers (particularly parts of a delta) hold less fish where the course of the river is unstable. Look for structure like rocks and established river banks to increase likelihood of spotting fish.
- NZ indicator rig doesn't work well in clear slower water. Longer leader with dry dropper is better or a naked nymph.
- Flat light and cloudy days made spotting difficult on several days. I think that should drive you to rivers with higher numbers of fish more suitable for blind casting techniques. i.e. Haka rather than Upper Ahuriri on cloudy days.
- Be careful with the angle of your rod when trying to bring a fish to the net – keep a decent bend in the rod or else it shall likely snap!
- Having a separate smaller bag for fishing gear in my luggage made the transit through customs much easier.
- Dark Lark is an excellent tippie – thanks Lachy
- Book very early if you want 4 bedrooms and high quality accommodation. Options are few as 3 bedrooms are most common.
- Low light polaroid glasses (yellow) can be quite useful.
- Air fryer chips good end of day 'bar snack' with beers

Flies of trip:

- EHC – normal and unsinkable
- Foam hopper – brown and yellow
- Stimulator
- Blowfly (blue)
- small unweighted green nymph
- Gambugger - black, black/red
- Katka's chartreuse wire nymph
- The Blue Ninja pheasant tail
- Peeping caddis
- Put heavier beads on some of the woolly buggers (or remember split shot)
- 3+mm pink bead head nymph when salmon or trout are laying eggs