



Take me to the River (Skysport: The Magazine, July 2014)

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Like many successful sportsmen the best fly fishermen are specialists. Often they will have perfected their intricacies of their craft on just a single river or perhaps a favourite lake. They're also likely to have dedicated a life-time to their chosen sport – the sort of individuals that Canadian author Malcolm Gladwell writes about so eloquently in his 2008 book *Outliers*, which explores the arduous journey to become world class at an art or sport.

His revelation has become known as the 10,000-Hour Rule. Ten thousand hours to

become The Beatles, ten thousand hours writing software as a teenager to become Bill Gates, ten thousand hours to become a chess grandmaster and, on the strength of that I'll hazard a guess 10,000 hours to become a world class fly fisherman.

Depending on your outlook it's either an impossibly long time frame or something you chip away at bit by bit. Rotorua-based guide Simon Robertson sits in the latter camp. So how long did it take him to rack up 10,000 hours targeting trout in our wilderness? Robertson passed the magic mark at the tail end of his second decade fishing the rivers of the central North Island. Since then he's gone on to double that mark *and then* add an additional 17 years of professional guiding into the equation. All in all he's able to draw on over five decades of accumulated knowledge when he pulls on his waders.

My own journey of 10,000 hours started on a grey April Sunday at the tail end of a wet and windy week. I am to spend a day on the Rangitaiki River in the company of Robertson to see if I could unravel some of the sport's mysteries. As a novice I'd spent the days leading up to our expedition doing some background research and had quickly become overwhelmed by the seemingly endless number of decisions facing a fly fisherman: does he fish the river's surface with a dry fly or use a weighted nymph to target fish feeding on the riverbed? Are they better off employing a Blue Dun or a Crystal Stimulator, a Kakahi Queen or an Elk Hair Caddis, or perhaps a Pheasant Tail? And once they have worked their way through that maze, what size fly should he employ: a substantial size 8 or diminutive 22?

So yeah, there was a lot to cover and my lesson began in Robertson's 4x4 as we drove across the Galatea Plains under leaden skies. He gave me the main work-ons for a rookie angler: learn to cast proficiently; master line presentation; stick with a selection of basic flies and nymphs that work for you; and focus your efforts on one stretch of water while you learn your craft.

That last point is a key factor in accelerating your learning that my guide can't stress enough. 'It's a great way for an angler to learn to identify where fish are likely to sit in a river and what flies they're likely to take under the various conditions. Once that has been learnt he can transfer that knowledge to other rivers and in time he'll be able to go to any river, even one he hasn't previously been to, look at a pool and know where the fish will be.'

As the kilometres tick by, our route happens to pass a number of streams that feed into our destination river, the Rangitaiki. They're running high and looking murky, and from the little I know that's not a good sign. Robertson confirms my observation and passes on a useful rule of thumb pertaining to North Island rivers: if you can see your feet while standing in knee deep water then the river is fishable. It's good to know, but it doesn't allay my concerns one iota and I'm a little anxious that we may struggle to catch trout today.

Of course it turns out I needn't have been worried. With the majority of his clients flying in from overseas it's Robertson's diary, not the weather that dictates when he's out on the river, but his encyclopaedic knowledge of local rivers means he can find fishable water in all but the worst conditions. And, sure enough, when we arrive at our destination the water isn't yet clouded and the river hasn't risen excessively despite the recent heavy rain.

The setting is a purely Kiwi landscape. The river in front of us reflects the dark hues of the native forest above the far bank while a pair of tui call out to each other somewhere in the middle distance. Not far away a bush track heads off into woodland full of wet pine. We are sheltered from the wind - the only thing missing is the warmth of a strong sun.

Despite my woeful lack of fly fishing knowledge I do know this much: there are few things more intimidating for a rookie fly fisherman than to look down into their fly box and know only two or three of the 30 to 40 flies in that colourful collection will get the job done. And naturally that's the exact moment the helpful advice from the tackle salesman back in town evaporates in a puff of confusion. Fortunately, I don't have to make that decision. I have a first class guide to advise me, so I ask him how he decides which fly to tie to his line.

'When I arrive at a river the first thing I'll decide is whether I will be using nymphs (which mirror immature aquatic insects and small crustaceans and are weighted to go under the water) to fish the riverbed or dry flies (which typically resemble the adult insects and as their name suggests, are designed to float on the surface of the water) to fish the surface.'

'At the moment we are coming to the change over between the dry fly season, which generally lasts from January to March, and the wetter months when nymphs prevail. At this time of year my choice can change from day to day depending on river levels, and sometimes I'll actually use a combination with a dry fly on the surface and a weighted nymph that sits maybe 400-500mm below it.'

He's decidedly old school when it comes to his choice of flies, preferring proven patterns, and today, with the river a little too full for dry fly fishing, Robertson chooses two nymphs: a size 12 Hare and Copper and a size 14 Prince Nymph, which he ties on a 250mm dropper. Both are weighted with tungsten bead heads.

Once he's determined what flies he will be fishing, Robertson turns his attention to pinpointing where the trout are likely to be sitting. By all accounts it's a much easier assignment when the rivers are low. 'We know that trout have a metabolism that requires them to eat a lot, so they spend the bulk of their time sitting where the food is concentrated - and that's generally along the bubble line where the current is fastest. It's about the amount of energy expelled vs energy taken on.'

The bubble line? It's actually not too hard to locate it, even for a rookie. Somewhat predictably it consists of a series of bubbles floating downstream which are created when the current collides with a boulder or similar obstacle. Trout take it easy in the partially sheltered water behind the obstruction waiting for their meal to get swept straight to them.

For experienced anglers fishing the bubble line during the summer months, when the rivers are at their lowest is as close to stealing candy from a baby as they get. The real challenge comes after the rains arrive and most rivers have a bit of colour in them. With the extra water in the river all but the larger boulders are submerged and most of the bubble lines disappear. Such conditions make it

particularly difficult to locate the faster currents. What's more the trout tend to spread themselves throughout a pool, put their heads down and cease feeding as actively as they otherwise would. It can make for a tough days casting.

It's all very well deciding what fly you'll catch your trout on and working out where they're sitting, but exactly how do you get your tasty morsel out to the exact spot where it will be appreciated? According to Robertson it's as simple as a lot of practice and a bit of restraint. 'I've yet to see someone who has been fishing for six to twelve months who is able to cast a good fly. It's something that you just get better and better at over the years and there's no substitute for time in the water.' Accuracy comes with practice, and practice hours most certainly contribute to an angler's 10,000-hour total.

The other part of the equation is to start by fishing your feet. 'For some reason people seem to think that if you throw a long line you are going to get more fish. You're not. Furthermore you're likely to put your long cast over the top of a fish that is sitting 3m to 5m in front of you and spook him. I've seen enough anglers throwing short casts to know that there are a lot of fish quite close to your feet. So start short and increase your line length.'

Of course, getting your line to arc gracefully across the water is one of the sports rights of passage, so you want to start off with the right habits. 'I think if someone is serious about taking up fly fishing then they would do well to get some casting lessons, either from an accomplished friend or a fly fishing school. Then, once you have your basic cast sorted out, you can look to add the spiral cast and roll cast to your repertoire – both of which are useful in confined areas such as where the bush encroaches right to the rivers edge. Once you've achieved a certain proficiency with your casting, say when you can throw the line say 15m (which is not that long a cast) it becomes more about control of the line, getting good drifts and good line control.'

It's clear from our time together that Robertson believes that not enough fly fishermen truly understand the importance of line control and achieving a perfect drift. 'The fly has to drift as naturally as an insect floating down the river. It's that simple. The number one problem that affects drift is a belly or bow in the line. This happens when a line is floating on the surface and there is a seam of current between the rod and the fly which is travelling faster than the rest of the water. If that's the case, then the faster current will start to pull the fly along faster than normal and force a nymph to rise up from the bottom or a dry fly to start swinging un-naturally on the surface.'

Take a minute to consider either of those scenarios from a trout's perspective. The fish is happily sitting in the river and maybe feeding on 300-400 nymphs a day, and each one of those nymphs is drifting naturally towards him on the currents. So if something comes along and all of a sudden it does something un-natural, well our trout will just ignore it. Fortunately the fix is often simple enough: a simple flick of rod to send the belly up-stream or a recast will do the trick.

The lessons don't stop there of course. The fish still has to be hooked and landed, and watching Robertson set his hook into the half-dozen trout he lands and releases on the day is yet another lesson in itself. There's nothing dramatic about his actions: a positive lift of the rod to tighten the line is all that's needed. He has seen too many fishermen rip their hooks from mouths of trout with aggressive strikes to get carried away. And once he has hooked it, he prefers to let a trout wear itself out against his reel's drag rather than to try and fight it to a standstill the second it's on. Fighting a fired-up trout is just another opportunity to lose a good fish.

The ability to stay calm and do the basics well when under pressure is the key to success in most sports, and that is the beauty of a journey of 10,000 hours – skill levels and experience build up over time so that eventually, when it matters, you know instinctively what to do. That 20% of fishermen catch 80% of the fish isn't a cruel joke on the less successful anglers. It's a reward for the dedicated – pure and simple.
