

STORY BY WALTER HODGES

Passions of
ARGENTINA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WALTER HODGES
AND PATAGONIA RIVER RANCH

It was mid-March and we were floating Argentine Patagonia's Collón Cura River. As it winds through the rolling hills near the Andes, this large freestone river resembles the Snake passing through Jackson Hole, cut instead through a high arid valley, similar to parts of Oregon's Deschutes. Wide, swift and deep, its girth comes from the surrounding Malleo, Allumine and Chimehuin rivers. Dusty, green, low-slung willows grace its banks, allowing the true visual expanse of the place to engulf you, the same way "Lawrence of Arabia" originally filled the widescreen. Joe Brooks fished these rivers in the '50s and recounted trout of incredible size. This is a big, gently flowing landscape. The wind owns this place. Normally, there's very little in place to stop it; on this day, if it chose to, a butterfly could land on your nose.

Six of us—two people and a guide in each raft, set up specifically for fly fishing—were on an overnight float trip arranged by the folks at [Patagonia River Ranch](#). While waiting for the guides to get the rafts set up that first morning, I waded out into the river with a 5-weight and tossed out a size 14 Parachute Adams. As my fly hit the water, it disappeared into the anxious mouth of the smallest trout I caught on the entire trip—maybe 10 inches, max. I stripped it in and gingerly brought the fish up to my hands for a gentle release.

You know how trout flop around a little as you try to remove a barbless hook? This trout didn't flop. It thrashed. It didn't stop moving, ripping and tearing at the bonds holding it to the line. It wouldn't allow itself to give up the fight. I was astounded and I could barely get my hands on it. I swear, as I ever-so-gently let the

small fish go, it turned, looked back at me as it swam away, and the little punk gave me the finger! Not that I didn't deserve it, but still, it's the principle we're talking about here.

Ungrateful little bastard.

Once we hit the water, trout filled the day—all of them in the same foul mood as that first 10-inch fish. My friend Jim Stenson and I quickly learned that in this river, a 16-inch trout is nothing to get excited about, just a necessary nuisance to put up with. Several times, Jim and I both fought strong fish at the same time, from different ends of the boat. I just shook my head and laughed quietly.

Welcome to Argentina.

The first night, we camped about six miles from the take out, just above the reservoir. We'd been hitting great fish on dry flies through the half-light of absolute dark. Our hosts arrived in camp ahead of us, set up our tents, and—most importantly—prepared the chorizo, which waited for us as the rafts snuggled up to the bank. Lanterns lit our way to the already-set dining table. An amazing glass of malbec and a crisp, smooth Fuente brought the day to a close under a moon holding water and the Southern Cross surrounded by more stars than words to suffice.

The tents were plenty large and the sleeping bags fit comfortably on sizable air mattresses—perfect for a good night's sleep.

Or so we thought.

Talk to any woman alive and you'll get the same response: As a wide brush stroke, men have an innate affinity to buffoonery,



lunacy and inane harrumphing. As this evening's evidence, we were rudely introduced to the average gigantic Argentine red stag. These guys are bigger than large. Rutting season. The females smiled and wandered about; the males went berserk and walked straight into concrete walls. Are there any women in the audience familiar with this approach?

If you've never camped surrounded by a city of red deer in rutting season, then you have something to learn about how to party. When sexually bellowing, these stags sound like a cross between a howler monkey on acid and a badly tuned chainsaw. It's an imposing statement of sexual frustration and desire. A couple of people actually slept, but for most, it was a very long night. As

the guests rose with the Argentine sun, Larry Willey, one of the wittier anglers, stepped out of his tent, stretched in the cool morning air, and loudly laughed, "Folks, I got brand new appreciation for the concept of horny."

After a great breakfast, we got back on the river and instant-

ly found fish. Some folks used small dry flies. Some used wet. Think Montana or Idaho, Oregon or Wyoming, late summer or early fall. The flies are pretty standard fare. In the case of Patagonia River Ranch, we actually didn't have to bring any gear

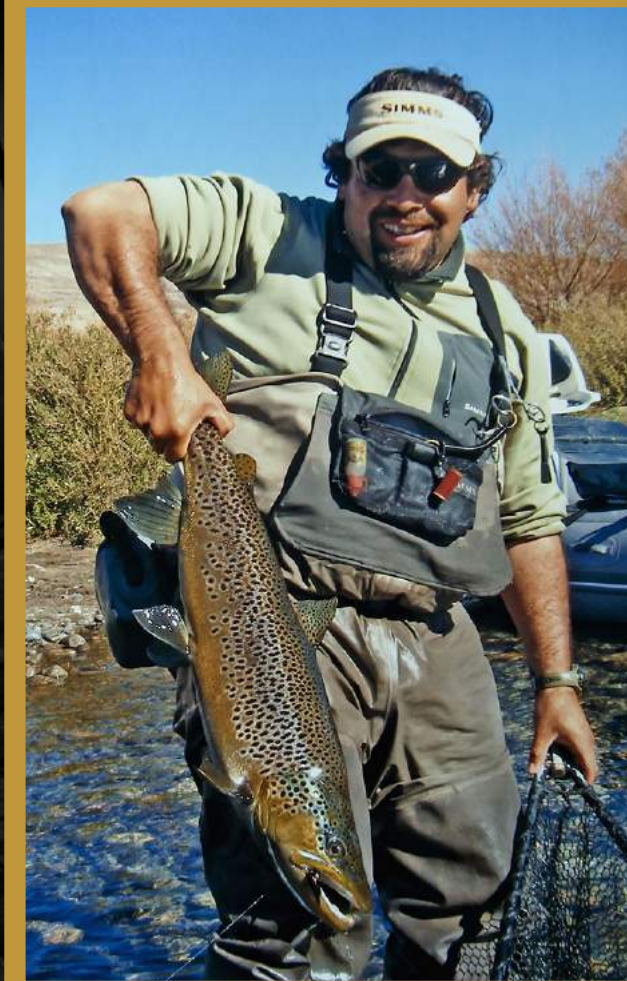


at all, because they could have provided everything (including rods) if need be. We could have shown up naked and they would have gotten us dressed.

One odd thing about the Collon Cura is the minnow migration. They move upstream from the reservoir in February and March, on either side of a two-to-three week window. The fish turn onto the minnows almost to exclusion, and if you hit it right, a sparsely tied inch-and-a-half long Clouser-like fly has the potential to change your life.

Seriously change your life.

Most of my fly fishing career has been similar to everyone else's, meaning of course that I "should have been here yesterday, or last week, or last year." You never see this sort of stuff coming. Like love, it simply appears and lands in your lap. After all, it's not



like you really deserved anything.

Half-awake from no sleep. One more run. Just above the take-out on the second day of the float, stripping streamers, thinking



about what it must have been like when I should have been here last year, when suddenly last year became today.

Became right now.

I might have waded 20 meters here to there. An hour. Twelve fish: the smallest 16 inches and rainbow; the biggest 24

and brown. Pound for pound, each the strongest trout I've ever encountered—nearly every one into the backing, mimicking the behavior of a northwestern steelhead. In between trout, I laughed a lot. I'm supposed to be the photographer, so there isn't a photo to prove I did any of this. But I do own the memory. The most amazing hour of fishing I've ever seen. Possibly the best I'll ever see. All that success and I still didn't make the Blue Label Club. What's a guy to do?

The Blue Label Club: Ken Gangwer thought this one up. He owns the ranch, which is about an hour outside of San Martin de Los Andes. In order to get your name on the 4-year-old Blue Label Club list, you've got to catch a trout over 25 inches. There are more than 100 names on this list in four years. As in more than 100 people caught trout over 25 inches. In four years.

Well, whoop-dee frickin' doo.

Back at the ranch, putting the Blue Label Club in perspective after what had just happened to me was so problematic that I simply ignored it and toasted my health and good fortune with a huge glass of Havana Club rum and a cigar before dinner.

To hell with that Blue Label Club I chuckled to myself.

This day—not when I should have been here yesterday or even last year—I was the world's greatest fisherman. At least 'til I finished the cigar and the glass of rum.



*Today there are rivers still left in the world
where at any moment you can cast a fly
on just about any reasonable looking piece of water and
there's a great chance you'll talk about the next few min-
utes for the rest of your life.*

