

A Hundred Years of Solitude: The Genesis of Trout Fishing in Argentina

by Adrian Latimer



Bébé Anchorena, in 1961, with 24-pound world-record brown caught off Boca Chimehuin. From the collection of Francisco Bedeschi.

IN 1961, IN ARGENTINA, a man with a splendid name waded into the famous Boca Chimehuin just below the Devil's Throat and cast a fly. He was Bébé Anchorena, one of the early heroes of fly fishing in Patagonia. As darkness fell, he staggered out of the river soaked, bloodied, and exhausted, but clutching a world-record brown trout that weighed 24 pounds. Argentine fly fishing was on the map.

But how? When Magellan first looked for the passage west to the Pacific in 1520, there were no trout or salmon in Argentina (or Chile). The most exciting fish you could have found was a perch. Darwin studied a mass of flora and fauna on his legendary 1831–1836 expedition aboard the HMS *Beagle*, but none of the fauna had adipose fins. Even as the great explorers of the nineteenth century dis-

covered the Lake District, the Andes, and the amazing multiplicity of rivers and still waters, there was not a trout or salmon to be found. And yet now Patagonia offers some of the finest, unspoiled fly fishing in the world in surroundings that are as beautiful as any and far less populated than most.

If we go even further back into the mists of time, we can see how this pristine landscape evolved. Interestingly, the key to the whole ecosystem is the lakes. I am no geologist, but books by Bill Leitch¹ and Marcelo Beccaceci² offer a fascinating introduction to the ice age history and formation of the Andes. About two hundred million years ago, the continents of what are now Africa, India, and Antarctica were united as Gondawandaland. The Sahara was somewhere around what we'd now call the South Pole and was ice. As the continents split apart during the Middle Cretaceous period (a mere hundred and fifty-odd million years past), the Atlantic Ocean rose up for what is now three thousand miles of water between them. Meanwhile, the South American Plate drifted west for millennia, until it collided with the Nazca Plate heading east, way

under the Pacific. The latter, being denser rock, was forced under in the collision, and the plates continue to move in opposite directions. Of course, this monumental crash caused massive frictional heat, and boiling magma surfaced through the inevitable cracks in the earth's crust. The Andes began to rise. As the plates rubbed, bent, and buckled, huge chunks of rock were thrust upward, and the land was rent by earthquakes. When Darwin crossed the Andes, he found marine fossils thousands of feet above sea level, which triggered the scientific research and thinking that was to culminate in the hugely controversial *Origin of the Species* and his theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest.³ The mountains and ridges of volcanoes were born. At 4,300 hundred miles long, the South American cordillera is the longest continuous mountain range on the planet.⁴

In fact, there was a second age of volcanism, a mere fifteen million years ago, which formed the beautiful, threatening ice cones that we see today, their heads regally in the clouds, waiting to belch destruction into the air. Nor have these volcanoes finished their work yet: in

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The Perito Moreno Glacier in the icefields of southern Patagonia creates a dam across the Brazo Rico arm of Lago Argentino in this photo from 2004.

*Image courtesy of the Image Science & Analysis Laboratory
(<http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov>), NASA Johnson Space Center, ISS004-E-9707.*

1991, the Hudson volcano erupted in Chile, carpeting Santa Cruz in stifling, poisonous ash and killing more than a million sheep.⁵ Even more recently, as I write this in May 2008, Chaitén is erupting in Chile, sending a plume of ash 10 miles into the sky and leaving a cloud that has crossed the Andes into Argentina, heading for the Atlantic coast, five hundred miles away. The nearby towns of Chaitén and of Futaleufu on the border are being evacuated, covered in a thick layer of ash, so toxic in its acidity that it kills all vegetation and damages watercourses. From a purely selfish fishing point of view, the effects on the rivers in the Chubut region may be serious, but they are a salutary reminder of the ever-present force of the Andes. According to radiocarbon dating, the last time Chaitén erupted was in the year 7420. Oh, and that's before Christ—more than nine thousand years ago.⁶

But back to that previous age. At the same time, the ice age came, eventually covering the whole of what is now Patagonia with a freezing thick layer. And when I say thick, I mean up to four thousand feet of glacier, pushing the earth's crust down with its weight and carving channels out of the mountains as if with a butter knife. The ocean soon filled these enormous wounds (now known as the Beagle Channel or Magellan Straits) down in Tierra del Fuego. About nine thousand square miles of glacier still exist in Patagonia today. Argentina only split off from Antarctica about twenty-five million years ago, at what is now Drake's Passage or Strait.

The facts are difficult to comprehend, but one third of the earth's surface used to be ice (now it is one tenth), and sea level was more than a hundred meters lower than today.⁷ At their peak, the glaciers extended 60 miles east of Lago Argentino, and the Atlantic coast was a hundred miles farther east than now.⁸ The glaciers sculpted the mountains and valleys that we see currently and pushed east into the flatlands, but as the climate warmed and they melted, little moisture reached across the Andes, thus leaving the semiarid desert that is the steppes. A few millennia earlier, hundred-foot-long dinosaurs were happily munching the trees and shrubs until the smothering carpet of volcanic ash solidified them into stone, leaving petrified forests and whole fossilized tree trunks.

Darwin gives you the scale of it all:

The geology of Patagonia is interesting. . . . The most common shell is a massive gigantic oyster, sometimes even a foot in diameter. These beds are covered by others of a peculiar soft white stone. . . . This bed extends for 500 miles along the coast. At Port Julian its thickness is more than 800 feet! These white beds are everywhere capped by a mass of gravel, forming probably one of the largest beds of shingle in the world: it certainly extends from the Rio Colorado to between 600 and 700 nautical miles southward; at Santa Cruz it reaches to the foot of the Cordillera; half way up the rivers its thickness is more than 200 feet. . . . If this great bed of pebbles was piled into a mound, it would form a great mountain chain! When we consider that all these pebbles, countless as

the grains of sand in the desert, have been derived from the slow-falling of masses of rock on the old coast-lines and banks of rivers, and that each of them has since been slowly rolled, rounded and far transported, the mind is stupefied in thinking over the long, absolutely necessary lapse of years.⁹

But as the glaciers retreated, they left huge, empty valleys at the foot of the peaks; hence those all-important lakes. If you look farther north, above Patagonia toward the Caribbean, there are no such catchments of still water at the source of rivers. What happens is then dependent on rainfall and snowmelt, creating streams of wildly fluctuating temperature and water flow, an inhospitable habitat for trout. But in Patagonia you have the magnificent lakes as natural reservoirs, and it is no accident that the best fishing is around such areas as San Martín, Bariloche, and Futalaufquen, the lake districts. The Pleistocene glaciers deposited those lovely riverbeds of gravel that so impressed Darwin, "hand-made" for large trout to spawn in.¹⁰

THE FIRST STOCKING OF TROUT IN ARGENTINA

But handmade by whom? Not the omniscient digits of Nature. The lakes and rivers might have been perfect for trout, but there weren't any. Instead, they were full of smaller fish that for some reason did not really benefit from the terrain. They developed neither in size nor geographic range. And they were not considered "sporting" by fishermen of the age (or now). Thus began what you may view either as one of the greatest human interferences in natural history, sowing the seed for abundant and wonderful trout waters, or a shocking destruction of biodiversity.

When I was a kid, I can remember being taken by my grandmother to the Hurlingham Club in London. It was all very posh; the sort of place where one ate genteel (but tasteless) cucumber sandwiches and sipped tea from porcelain cups while watching croquet. Well, believe it or not, in 1893, the English were doing just the same in Buenos Aires, at *their* Hurlingham.¹¹ The only difference was that polo replaced croquet and cricket. Amongst the grounds wound the little Arroyo Moron, and rainbow trout were stocked. The stream was too slow and warm for the fish to survive, but the idea was there. When Francisco "Perito" Moreno was sent by the Argentine government to explore Patagonia and, especially, the frontier with Chile, he saw the possibilities and reported back in 1875.¹²

By 1892, a Frenchman, Ferdinand Lahille, was commissioned by the Museo de la Plata to undertake a study of the underwater fauna of the lakes and rivers. He found perch, “criolla trout,” pejerrey, peladilla, and puyen. Italian and American fishery scientists followed, and by 1903, American John Titcomb took a nineteen-day trek to get to Nahuel Huapi (Puma Island), sent by the Argentine government to set up the first hatchery. He chose a small stream that drained into the Rio Limay.¹³

The result was a slightly overzealous importation of fish of all sorts, and in 1904, fish roe were shipped by Eugene Tulien¹⁴ from the United States via Southampton in England to Buenos Aires. The only boats that had big enough refrigeration units were in the United Kingdom, but the initial fish actually came from the States—a million whitefish eggs, a hundred thousand brook trout, and fifty thousand landlocked salmon, although he also picked up fifty thousand brown trout eggs in Germany. The boxes arrived, pretty much safely, on April 25, a day that surely goes down in angling history. The whitefish were all put into Lago Nahuel Huapi and disappeared forever, no doubt to the relief of modern fly fishers. Stranger things followed: rainbow trout arrived a month later,¹⁵ but so did freshwater cod (burbot?) and several species of Pacific salmon. They were planted any- and everywhere. The cod also vanished, and the Pacific salmon could not cope with heading east to the wrong ocean and never returned from the Atlantic. From 1904 to 1910, eight shipments of *Salmonidae* roe came from the United States and later from Europe. Hatcheries were set up, and in 1930, the Argentine government received 175,000 brown trout roe from Chile.

And thus was created perhaps the world’s largest and finest wild-trout region as the introduced fish adapted to the area and spread like wildfire. Sport-fishing, a novel idea, began to take off; the first trout taken from Lago Nahuel Huapi weighed more than 7 pounds and fell to Ernesto Ricketts (another American) in 1915. What is amazing is that what we now take for granted did not exist a mere century ago. Let’s take one of the best-known and prettiest rivers in northern Patagonia, the Rio Traful. It is famous mainly because of its stocks of landlocked salmon from Maine, *Salmo salar sebago*. The popular story is that an ox-cart drover was carrying eggs destined for the hatchery at Bariloche when he noticed that they were hatching. In a panic, he poured them into the nearest river, the Traful, and by 1914, they were known to be spawning. The great



The Rio Traful, March 2008.

American fisher, architect, and writer Ernie Schwiebert tells a slightly more detailed version of the accidental stocking, whereby the fisheries biologist in charge of the eggs from Lake Sebago in Maine became worried that the eggs were about to die and thus decided to create a minihatchery trough and try to rear the eggs there. He built a small spawning channel in the Cuyin Manzano, put dams across to control the water flow, and settled the eggs into suitable gravel found in the riffles. The eggs did indeed hatch, and the biologist and his cavalry escort guarded them briefly to protect them from bird predation until the fingerlings dropped downstream into the main river. (Fewer than a hundred miles away, there had been major frontier battles with the Araucan Indian warriors, and dangerous war parties were known to be loose in the Andean foothills; hence the military protection.) A decade after the initial stocking, and six thousand miles south of Maine, world-record-sized landlocked salmon were being caught.¹⁶

What is sure is that the Estancia Primavera was built in the 1920s by an Australian, Guy Dawson, who came out to farm Corriedale sheep and decided to stay. By the 1930s, he had set up the first guided fishing trips, but the Depression finished him off financially and he sold out to a French military attaché, “Pim” Lariviere. Dawson was one of the founding members of the Club Norysur on Lago Melinquina and one of the country’s first star fishermen. The estate be-

came so famous for its salmon runs to the lake that General Perón (husband of Evita) confiscated it as a sporting retreat for his retinue, and it was only given back under the revolutionary junta of General Aramburu. Dawson recorded a 26-pounder caught on a spoon, which would have been the world record if claimed and verified, and there were several caught that weighed in the mid-20s—all because of a chance mistake, a very diligent fishery scientist, and a military escort.¹⁷

But fly fishing remained a minority sport, a few exclusive Portenos (Buenos Aires dwellers) meeting on the lawn of the Palermo Gardens to practice casting and clink whiskies. By the last half of the century, the Traful and other hot spots, such as the bocas (where lakes drained into rivers) of the Chimehuin and Correntoso, were attracting both wealthy Argentine fly fishers (in a country where most fishers used cruder methods) and a worldwide “fishing aristocracy,” especially from the States. This was what we might call the first era, the very birth of Argentine fly fishing, headed by Bébé Anchorena, Jorge Donovan, and Prince Charles Radziwill (a Polish exile). At the time, the level of sophistication was low. This was a largely British-dominated set, and tackle was basic—they did not even know how to nail-knot their backing to their fly line. Rods, lines, and flies were heavy (split-cane bamboo), and the target was the huge trout of the bocas, trophies to be grappled ashore and killed. One must also remember the sheer effort

of actually getting there: no planes, no Route 40 (three thousand miles of road, the backbone of Patagonia). To travel from Buenos Aires to Neuquén to catch a fish involved serious dedication.¹⁸

THE ORIGINS OF ARGENTINE FLY FISHING AND THE AMERICAN INFLUENCE

By the second half of the century, new influences were trickling in from the States. Donovan had founded a fly-fishing association back in Buenos Aires and met Joe Brooks in New York in 1954, a moment that became the real genesis of fly fishing in Patagonia. Donovan happened to be passing the Trail & Stream store one snowy morning on Lexington Avenue and decided to pop in and have a chat about fishing. Brooks was then unknown to him, but before long he found himself in Florida's Islamorada marveling at the crystal water, coral reefs, and amazing back shoot and double haul of the master caster. Brooks first went to Argentina in 1955 to fish the Rio Grande at Estancia Maria Behety with Donovan and Anchorena. He arrived with strangely short fiberglass (Ted Williams) rods and immediately caught fish while the locals watched "open mouthed." He went on to land a 12-pound fish, a fly-caught record at the time (how things have changed since!). They then rode up to the Chimehuin and fished the Quilquihue. I will let Donovan take up the story:

To our surprise, Joe tied on a dry fly. He entered the stream in a place where we had never seen anybody fish before and started working upstream. Although the wind was strong enough to affect the average caster, it didn't bother Joe in the least. After a time, we felt that this unfamiliar method would not be productive and were about to suggest going to another pool when Joe hooked a nice rainbow. Just to prove it wasn't an accident, he hooked nine more. They all ran between three and four pounds.¹⁹

They then went to Lolog Lake, where Donovan heard that Brooks "caught quite a few up to seven pounds and that he chose to return these to the water. This was somewhat of a shock. Up till this time we never released trout, nor did we waste them. Conservation was an unknown topic for us and even less familiar than fishing with a dry fly, something about which we at least had heard."²⁰

This was when Patagonia took off as a sporting destination. From here started the flow of new techniques, know-how, and a cast of star American fishers and

writers: Schwiebert, Lee and Joan Wulff, Roderick Haig-Brown, Charles Ritz, Lefty Kreh, Don Williams, Art Lee, and their ilk. President Eisenhower even fished on the Traful, and Billy Pate searched for big browns for twenty-two years in a row. Art Lee fell in love with the Malleo and its dry-fly hatches. With them, these high-profile Americans brought modernity. Brooks taught the nail knot and the double haul, and imported new tackle, such as those fiberglass rods. He was recognized as "the prophet." The locals learned quickly—Anchorena landed a 17-pound leviathan off the Chimehuin on a dry Wulff pattern, and in Brooks's style, to prove it was not a fluke, took another on a skating spider.

On that first 1955 trip, Brooks ended up on the boca at Chimehuin. Donovan and Anchorena took several fish of 9 to 12 pounds, but the great American topped them with a 15- and then an 18-pounder, at the time the fly-caught record. But let's fast-forward a few years to 1961 and the mighty trout that beat even that.

The Chimehuin is dominated by Lanin, the Fuji-like, snow-capped volcano that peers down from twelve thousand feet at Lago Huechulafquen. Centuries ago, an earthquake split open a crevasse in the walls that encircle the lake, and the river flooded out into the Devil's Gorge, surging through channels in the black lava, the water whipped into spray by perennial 50-mile-per-hour winds that rage down the lake.

Amidst such scenery, Bébé Anchorena waded out to cast his streamer (by now

on a Ted Williams fiberglass rod). The fly was actually a saltwater bucktail streamer and is in itself an interesting piece of history.²¹ Let Joe Brooks start the story:

"What do you have there, a shaving brush?" Jorge Donovan asked me. We were standing at the Boca of the Chimehuin River, on the east slope of the Andes in Argentina and I was tying a 1/0 Platinum Blonde fly on my 3X tip-pet. The long, tandem-winged bucktail did look a little like a shaving brush. But the only lather I had in mind was the foam a big brown trout would whip up when he hit that fly. This was my first trip to Argentina, back in 1955. Packing my tackle at home I kept thinking about the 10-, 12-, 14- and even 20-pound brown trout that Jorge Donovan had told me were in the Argentine rivers. Remembering that old theory that a big trout likes a big mouthful, I had reached into my salt-water tackle box and picked out a handful of "blonde" flies—big, white bucktails that I used for striped bass.²²

Jorge Trucco now takes it up:

The Patagonia region of Argentina is, fishing-wise, so similar to the American west that all American flies apply to Patagonian fly fishing. Here again, Joe Brooks pioneered this trend of American flies in Patagonia. And what's more, he brought some patterns that were actually uncommon in the West. He introduced the "blonde" in five versions: honey, black, strawberry, platinum and Argentine. The "blonde" was originally a saltwater fly and it was tied with bucktail on a 3407 Mustad hook,



Joe Brooks. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

and was not designed to attract trout; however, these “blonde” flies were extremely effective on big browns, especially in the Chimehuin.²³

Those first fish caught by Brooks, Donovan, and Anchorena in 1955 were taken on a Blonde, four of them weighing more than 9 pounds. But the origin of the fly remains obscure. Joseph Bates²⁴ attributes it to Homer Rhode and his 1950s Tarpon Bucktail fly, along with Joe Brooks, but Brooks seems more precise in claiming ownership:

Back in 1939, when I used to fly fish for stripers in the Susquehanna River near Port Deposit, Maryland, and in the shallows of the Chesapeake Bay, I used a white bucktail on a 1/0 hook. I took plenty of small stripers, but for three years nothing over six pounds came to my flies. That's when I started thinking about a bigger fly, something that would look like the size to seven-inch-long alewives, herring or anchovies, such as stripers feed on. I tied a three-inch-long white bucktail wing right in back of the eye of a 1/0 hook, another three-inch wing at the bend of the hook, then wrapped the body with silver tinsel. That was the Platinum Blonde, the first of the series. It raised the average weight of the stripers I took.²⁵

Either way, when Anchorena cast, he had a white shaving brush of a fly at the other end of his line. Schwiebert gives a gripping account as told him by Anchorena.²⁶ Bébé had worked down the pool with long casts when a huge boil threw spray into the air. The fish sulked and then lunged downstream; Bébé stumbled after it, falling heavily, bruising his ribs and gouging both knees badly while desperately trying to unknot the line that had caught round his reel. When he finally managed to free it, the fish stayed out in mid-stream so that he was convinced it was fouled round a rock. His spirits fell, and he hurt physically, but he went downstream and pumped hard at the fish, alternating pressure and slack for ten minutes. When he had given up hope, the fish moved and then stopped again. Bébé knew it was now tiring and forced it to the surface, where it rolled and charged downstream toward a dreadful deadfall of tangled logs that had come free from the shoulder of the volcano and wedged in the rocks during high water. It was

already dark. He kept dragging the fish off balance as the moon rose so high it lit up the canyon and flashed off the great belly as the fish flopped, weakening. Inch by inch he fought it into the rocky shallows and reached with the gaff. The fish made one last run for the current, as his arms shook. The gaff stuck and held, the fish thrashed wildly, showering Bébé with water, then twisted free, almost



Jorge Donovan. From the collection of Jorge Trucco.

pulling him into the river. He aimed again and hauled the beast ashore. His scales bottomed out at 20 pounds.

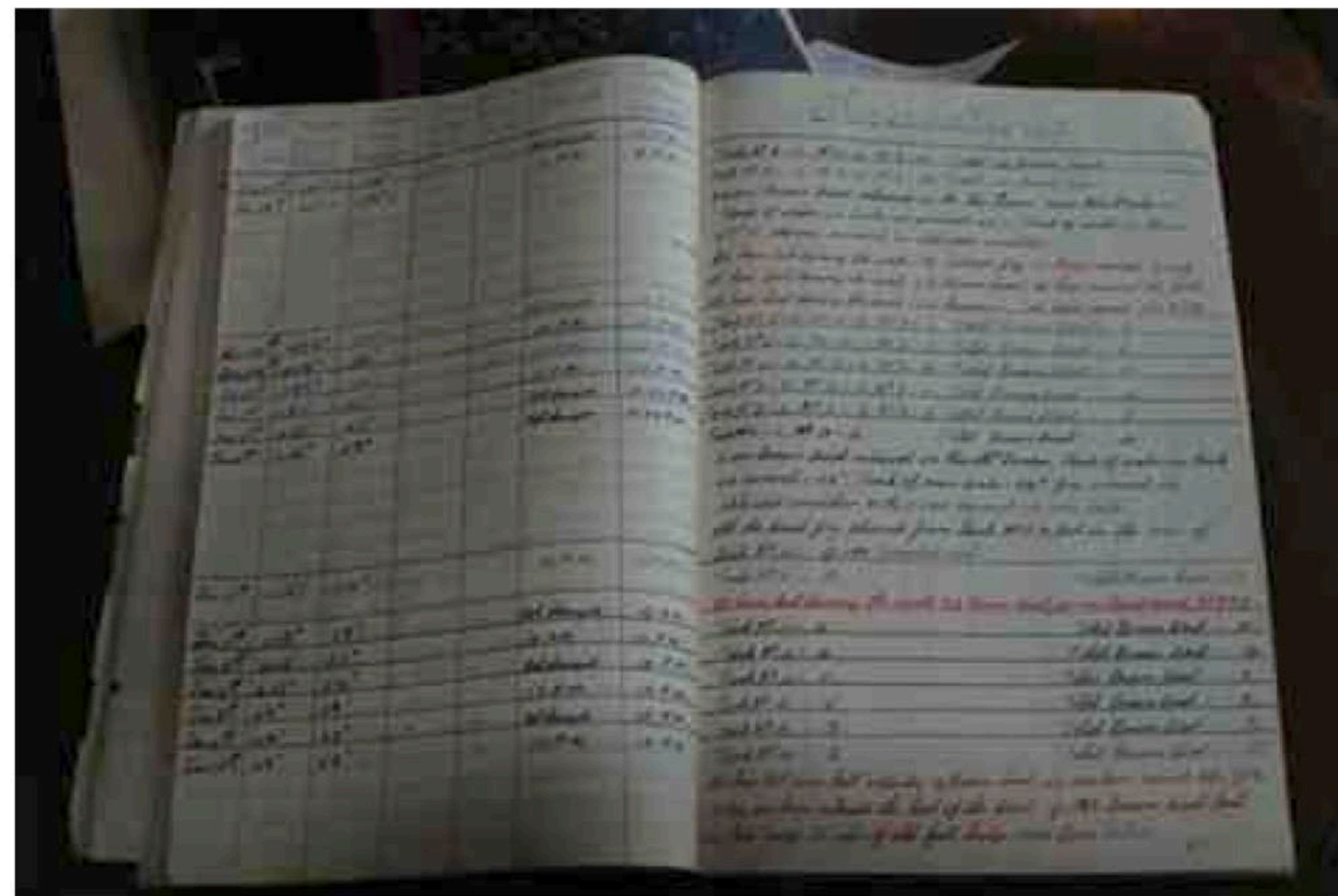
THE ARRIVAL OF PROFESSIONAL GUIDES AND MODERN ETHICS OF CONSERVATION

By the 1970s, the mood was changing, a transition largely achieved and related to me by Jorge Trucco.²⁷ Anchorena's record had fallen to a fish a pound heavier by Luis Peirano on the other great boca, the Correntoso (claimed by some to be the shortest river in the world—it runs between two lakes for a few hundred yards only).²⁸ Old pioneers were still there, longing for their double-figure dreams from the bocas, but a new generation began to see the delights of

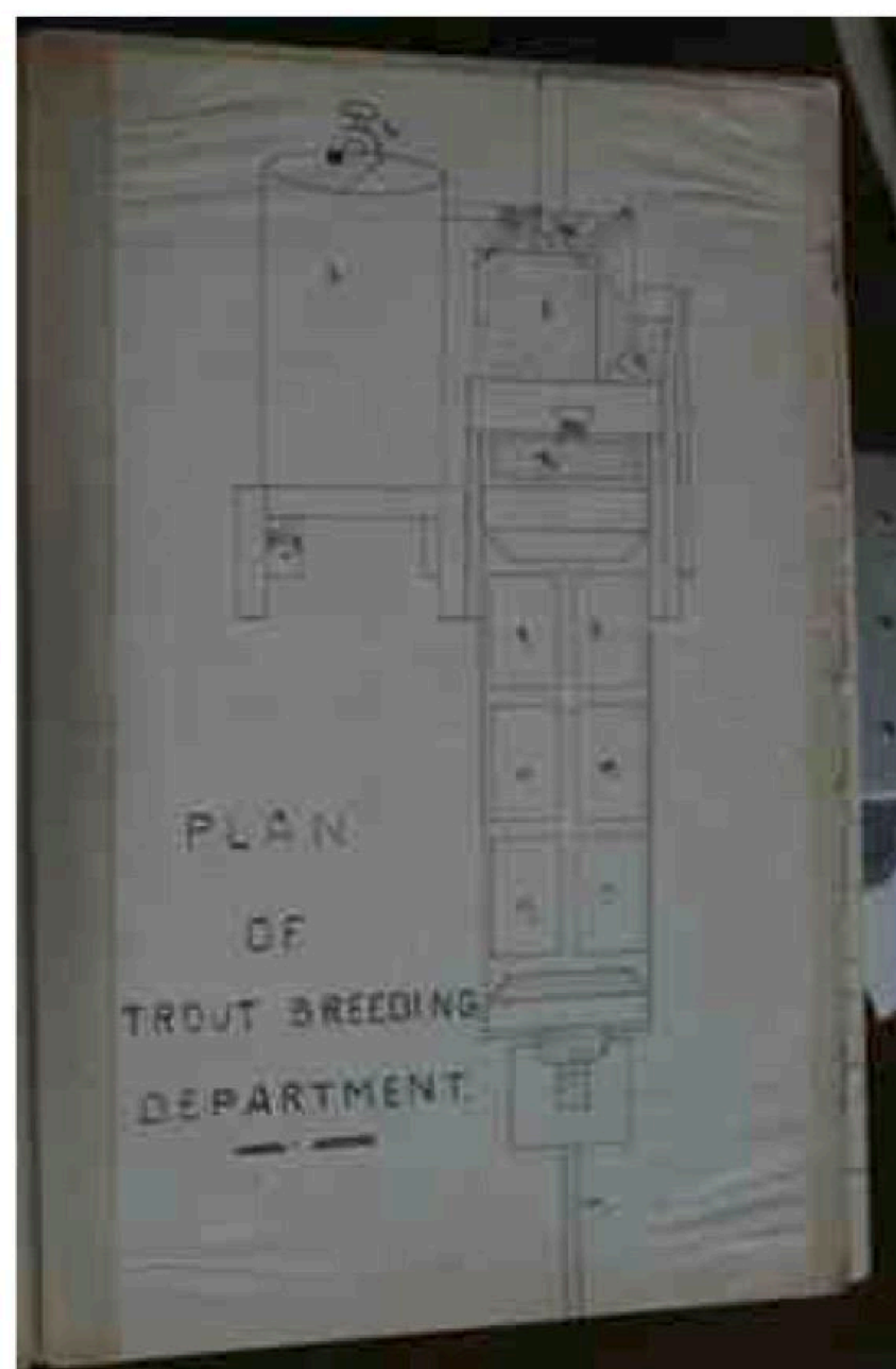
delicate dry flies on the Collon Cura or Malleo. Whereas previously fish shorter than 20 inches would have been sneered at as small fry, now the pleasure of fishing 4-weights and size-18 hooks began to spread. Trucco was a financier by trade, but by 1978, he'd given it up to concentrate on his passion and bought a hotel in San Martín de los Andes. I am dead jealous—he rubbed shoulders with the great pioneers, but also enjoyed and fought for those first unspoiled days of dry fly when a hundred fish a day was not uncommon.

But it was not a free ride. Trucco went to Wyoming every year to learn how guided trips worked. He brought back foreign expertise and, somewhat unpopularly, foreign guides who knew how to angle a drift boat down the current, roll cast and switch, tie Ephemeroptera, and recognize a larva, nymph, and subimago. With Donovan, Trucco set up the first real fly shop in the country. He also started the long haul to convince the locals, both fishers and regulators, to legitimize and protect fly fishing and the fish themselves as pressures built up.

Donovan had been the first to understand the need for catch and release, an ethic already taken for granted in the United States. But in Argentina, it was controversial, against the grain, and seen as a terrible threat to tourism (whereas, of course, it was actually an essential criterion to encourage the yearned-for American fishing visitor to come). Emotions ran high, and local complexities muddled the waters further; some extreme fly fishers in Buenos Aires demanded that trolling on the lakes (the lifeblood for many lodges) be banned outright. Trucco lived in Patagonia, unlike the early Porteno pioneers, and was there to engage the fight locally, on the riverbank. Mentored by the scratch golfer, great caster, and record holder Anchorena, he was able to bridge the gap to modernity and largely to American fishing practices. He introduced the first rafts made in Argentina to float the rivers. In 1983, he set up with Frontiers, the international fishing outfitters/travel firm, and the foreign “colonization” of Patagonian fly-fishing outfitters began as the word spread and zealots the world over rushed to the southern end of the planet to taste the extraordinary fishing that was available. Float trips



Clockwise from above: A portrait of John Goodall, Goodall's hatchery log, a detailed stocking report, Goodall's hatchery design, and some of Goodall's flies. All images from the collection of Steffan Jones.



on the Collon Cura, the Limay, and the Alumine added another dimension.

After intense lobbying, the first fly-fishing catch-and-release regulations started in Neuquén in 1985 and on the fabled Chimehuin in 1992. Now it is pretty much universal,²⁹ although floating and public access brings its own problems of excess fishing pressure and a need to restrict—or at least control—access. An example is the Chimehuin. By the 1980s, it suffered from too many public access roads, but it was then controlled and improved. Now it has allowed float trips, which could increase the number of rods and threaten that critical balance that needs to be respected between the resource and the paying demand.

THE (ACCIDENTAL) INTRODUCTION OF SEA-RUN BROWN TROUT INTO TIERRA DEL FUEGO

But this evolution was mainly in the finest, lake-fed districts of northern and central (“Welsh”) Patagonia. These days,

Argentina is probably even more famous for its world-beating sea trout, yet another freak fortuity between man and Nature. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, an impoverished Spanish immigrant, José Menendez, bought some land at the very end of the earth and started to farm sheep. By the early twentieth century, he had the largest estancia in Tierra del Fuego and five million sheep. At Villa Maria, the “King of Patagonia,” as Menendez was known, had an Englishman as his manager: John Goodall, who loved to fish—for trout, not for mullet (of which they still catch quite a few today). The rest, of course, is history, and the Menendez great-grandchildren now own some of the most famous sea-trout lodges in the world.

Clara Bridges was the granddaughter of one of the first white families to reside permanently in Tierra del Fuego. She was born on the Falklands/Malvinas islands in 1902 and was raised on her parents’ Estancia Harberton. In 1930, she married the aforementioned John Goodall, who was an engineer contracted on the Menendez estancias to construct and

administer a meat-freezing plant in the town of Rio Grande. Later, they conceived two sons, and the family still manages estancias on Tierra del Fuego. From what they say, John was fishing mad. He was seldom home, being either out with a rod or looking after the hatcheries, which he produced and managed by himself.

Goodall had gone back to England temporarily and set to work to stock rivers back home in Argentina.³⁰ In 1935, one hundred thousand eggs were shipped over from Europe via Puerto Mott in Chile, packed in egg churns, moss, and water. Amazingly, more than sixty thousand survived and were stocked in tributaries of the Rio Grande and then the Gallegos. The riverbeds here are formed of small, loose gravel, perfect for spawning, so natural reproduction took off way beyond everyone’s expectations. But natural food in the rivers was inadequate, so some of the fish went out to sea, where they discovered the Sardina Fuegina, huge schools of baitfish off the Tierra del Fuego and Santa Cruz coasts. As whale populations



Boca Chimehuin: Bob Solomon, Bébé Anchorena, Jorge Trucco, Don Williams, April 1983. From the collection of Jorge Trucco.

PATAGONIA TODAY: A HAVEN FOR FLY FISHING

For the sea trout, it was the 1980s and 1990s that saw many of the most famous lodges set up—Kau Taupen, Villa Maria, Bella Vista—many on working estancias, who presumably saw an extra source of income in leasing what was fast becoming the most sought-after sea-trout fishing in the world. Old houses were refurbished and became comfortable, purpose-designed fishing lodges. The major outfitters moved in fast, and now you can find offers all over the Internet. Nets are being removed and fly-only catch-and-release regulations imposed on most private beats. Happily, both the numbers and average size of the catches are up, year on year. That once-record 12-pounder of Joe Brooks is now only a pound or two above the *average* weight on the Grande just fifty years later. To catch a record today, you'd need to triple that size. Nor would Brooks recognize the scene as it is now: several lodges on both sides of the river all the way up to Chile; dozens of rods from all over the world rolling out heavy Teeny lines with often double-handed (Spey) carbon-fiber rods; and modern nymphs with twitching rubber legs or, more spectacularly, a Bomber skimming and skating across the surface. I am sure the latter fly is something of which the American father of Argentine dry-fly fishing would have very much approved.

Argentina has developed a sea-trout technique all of its own, differing on Rios Grande and Gallegos, and the new millennium is seeing yet another new world open up on the Rio Santa Cruz, where the Pacific Northwest is meeting the glacial majesty of the Andes and the South Atlantic. A unique steelhead fishery is developing that will require its own techniques and where the history book is still virgin, waiting for today's pioneering fishers to write it.

Thus it was that the somewhat haphazard stocking of multiple alien fish species, the dogged persistence of the early converts, the influx of accomplished experts such as (especially) Joe Brooks and Mel Krieger, and the vision of locals such as Jorge Trucco transformed an inhospitable playground for the wealthy fly-fishing aficionados of Buenos Aires into one of the greatest fly-fishing destinations in the world, with accommodation, guiding, and up-to-date fishing techniques to match the smartest outfitters in the Rockies or the poshest tackle stores on Fifth Avenue. Let me quote one of the most influential fishers, Mel Krieger: "Patagonia has be-

plummeted, the lower rungs of the food chain exploded. There was no need to travel far; fewer than a hundred miles offshore, the world's fattest sea-trout run was established. A 20-pounder will have spawned four times.

Of course, at the time, this was all unexpected. Goodall's diaries show brooks, rainbows, and "browns." Nobody then distinguished between the resident and sea-run version of the brown trout. (In England, Hugh Falkus³¹ was one of the first who did, and he demanded that they be treated and fished for separately, dedicating a whole book to the subject.) Goodall's flies were traditional Scottish wet flies: Alexandra, Professor, and his most successful one—the mysterious Prince Charlie.³² On further investigation in Tom Stewart's *50 Popular Flies, Volume IV* (London: Ernest Benn, 1973), I discovered that the Prince Charlie is an old loch fly—made up of a red floss tail and body, gold rib, black hen throat hackle, and gray mottled partridge tail feather wing—presumably named after Bonnie Prince Charlie, the eighteenth-century pretender to the Scottish throne. It has fallen out of use, but is having a bit

of a comeback. They were tied in relatively small sizes and fished in a traditional Scottish loch style, three on a cast. But the fish came as a plump surprise, as a note from September 1944 shows:

Today Val Hardy called me to see a large brown trout. I examined the fish and no doubt it was a brown trout. This fish was caught in the nets about Tres Puento in the sea, it weighed 6.05 kilos or 14.22 lbs. This fish was well spotted with brown spots not red and fairly silvery on belly. A female.³³

At first the fish were exploited purely for sport and food, and by the 1980s, they were in sharp decline. Then came the growth of worldwide luxury sportfishing and the tenets of catch and release and fly only. What is ironic is that I am told (though cannot verify) that the original eggs came from River Thames trout, and now that they are abundant in Rio Grande and almost extinct in the Thames, there is an idea of trying to restock the mother from the child, sending eggs from Argentina to England, as the fish in Tierra del Fuego are still genetically pure Thames stock.

come my church. I find inspiration, solace, adventure, companionship, solitude, and all of my other needs in this wondrous corner of our planet. I will continue to return to Patagonia until I no longer have breath.”³⁴

A mere century ago none of this existed. The first stockings of trout were in their infancy, and nobody yet thought of fly fishing for them. Guides, entomology, and current angling technology were mainly unknown. Sea trout were a species from the other, northern, hemisphere, a long, long way off. And yet now, after just a flicker of an eyelid in the millennia of Andean history, the region supports the greatest sea-trout fishing anywhere. Landlocked salmon and brown trout have passed into the world-record books of history. Anglers from the world over jostle to cast upon the unspoiled wilderness streams that flow like crystal jewels down from the volcanoes and glaciers of the world’s longest mountain range and give rise to fantastic fly hatches and their feeding trout.

All in that blink of an eye. A hundred years of glorious, trout-filled solitude.

ENDNOTES

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3. Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1997 [reprint]), chapter XV and throughout the text.

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7. Miguel Angel Alonso, *Handbook of Lago Argentino and Glaciar Perito Moreno* (Buenos Aires: Zagier & Urruty, 1994), 12–13.

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9. Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, 163.

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11. *Ibid.*, 17–25.

12. Eduardo Moreno, *Perito Moreno’s Travel Journal: A Personal Reminiscence* (Buenos Aires: El Elefante Blanco, 1997).

13. Francisco Bedeschi, *Fly Fishing Patagonia: The Lake District* (Bariloche, Argentina: Fly Fishing Patagonia S.R.L., 2003),

taken from the introduction therein of “Trout in Patagonia” by Pablo Costa, 11–12.

14. Bedeschi, *Fly Fishing Patagonia*, 11–12.

15. Carla M. Riva Rossi, Enrique P. Lessa, and Miguel A. Pascual, “The Origin of Introduced Rainbow Trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) in the Santa Cruz River, Patagonia, Argentina, as Inferred from Mitochondrial DNA,” *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* (2004, vol. 61, no. 7), 1095–1101.

16. Schwiebert, *Remembrances of Rivers Past* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 132.

17. *Ibid.*, 131–34, and Leitch, *Argentine Trout Fishing*, 145.

18. Descriptions of the pioneering years come from conversations and phone interview with Jorge Trucco, June 2007, and his written approval of this article, April 2008; Leitch, *Argentine Trout Fishing*, 125; and Jorge Trucco, “Rivers of Patagonia: The Golden Years,” introduction to Francisco Bedeschi, *Fly Fishing the Best Rivers in Patagonia, Argentina* (Buenos Aires: South End Publishing, 2005), 14–18.

19. Jorge Donovan, “My Friend Joe Brooks,” *Fly Fisher* (1981, vol. 14, no. 1), 156.

20. *Ibid.*, 156–57.

21. History and pictures of the “Blonde” series of flies is published on the Fly Fish Ohio website: www.flyfishohio.com/a_party_of_blondes.htm.

22. Joe Brooks, “Those Deadly Blondes,” *Outdoor Life* (December 1963), 24–27, 72, 73.

23. Jorge Trucco, “Bamboo Rods and Argentine Fly Fishing,” *Power Fibres* (April 2004, vol. 15), 22.

24. Joseph Bates Jr., *Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Stackpole Company, 1966), 152.

25. Joe Brooks, “Those Deadly Blondes,” 26.

26. Schwiebert, *Remembrances of Rivers Past*, 224–26.

27. Conversations and phone interview with Jorge Trucco, June 2007, and his written approval of this article, April 2008.

28. Leitch, *Argentine Trout Fishing*, 150.

29. *Reglamento de Pesca Deportiva Continental Patagonico 2007/2008* (Continental Patagonia General Sportfishing Rules and Regulations).

30. The story of Goodall’s stocking comes from written correspondence with Steffan Jones (March–June 2007) and his conversations with the Goodall family (including Adrian, son of John Goodall), and access to family records, as well as Francisco Bedeschi and Juan Pablo Reynal, *Fly Fishing Patagonia: The South* (Bariloche, Argentina: Fly Fishing Patagonia S.R.L., 2003), 106.

31. Hugh Falkus, *Sea Trout Fishing* (London: Witherby, 1975).

32. From a photo of John Goodall’s fishing records shown to me by Steffan Jones of Angling Worldwide in Carmarthenshire, Wales (from Goodall family records at their estate in Tierra del Fuego).

33. From a photo of John Goodall’s diary/fishery log from 1944, shown to me by Steffan Jones of Angling Worldwide in Carmarthenshire, Wales (from Goodall family records at their estate in Tierra del Fuego).

34. Mel Krieger quoted in Bedeschi, *Fly Fishing the Best Rivers of Patagonia, Argentina*, 11.



Rio Grande modern flies tied by the author. Photo by Adrian Latimer.