

WAKEFIELD'S
BEEFY BROWNS



This legend-like Ooty River brown trout was Coan's first brown on fly. What a wonderful start!



Emma swim the next brown trout right down to the front of our camp to photograph and release.

Scott Amon discovers an outstanding and easily accessible brown trout fishery in his stomping grounds of New England in NSW.



This is a girl under pressure! Emma nudge boyfriend Coan's first brown trout on fly.

The general non-fishing public often tends to think there is a fair bit of, to put it politely, 'bovine manure' surrounding the whole fishing ethos. Of course, at serious angles, we know that there's a lot more to it than bullsh*t, but having said that, I admit that I recently experienced a definitive link between the two.

My wife Trish and I run a beef cattle operation on the Mid North Coast of NSW. We were in the market for a good Charolais bull and looked to the respected Wakefield Charolais and Angus Stud for the right sire for our cows. So off to their annual sale we went.

I'd been to the Wakefield property once before and had made a mental note of the significant watercourse we crossed to reach it. It is the Oaky River, and it's an extremely pretty waterway. I was also well aware it was a good trout fishery.

To cut to the chase, yes, we purchased a magnificent Charolais bull, but just as importantly, we discussed the Oaky River with Wakefield owners Greg and Jenny Fitzell. They informed us that they had recently purchased the property on the northern side of the river, creating exclusive access to 4km of the river. They also mentioned that their eldest daughter, Lucy, was operating Waterfall Way Farm Stay



in the renovated four-bedroom home on the new property. Lucy was keen to promote the farm stay, and there was also the option of camping for approved clients. Well, we applied for that 'approval' immediately, which was most thankfully accepted.

A month or so later, we towed our new Atlantic Caravan up to Wakefield to set up on the banks of the river to sample the fishing... But before we get to that, just a little education on the property, region and waterway...

Wakefield is situated about 50km east of Armidale, adjacent to the Waterfall Way that connects Armidale to the coast just south of Coffi Harbour. The main property has been held by six generations of the Fitzell family over a period of 155 years. They currently breed Charolais, Angus and some composite bulls, as well as operating a significant commercial beef cattle establishment.

The Oaky River begins as a trickling stream in the Cathedral Rock National Park, before crossing Waterfall Way. Fed by numerous creeks, it winds south-east, before joining the Chandler River, which then runs into the mighty Macleay. So the Oaky is an eastern watershed, and its lightly tannin stained waters eventually run into the Pacific Ocean at South West Rocks - all-up one heck of a picturesque journey.



Guardians of the camp.

The Oaky is a designated 'brown trout only' fishery, and it is stocked with fingerlings, and at times large broodstock, by the nearby Dumont Trout Hatchery. Greg Fitzell obviously knows the

fishery well and he believes the browns breed in the river, too. The family also has a large dam, well away from the river, which has been stocked with some ex-hatchery broodstock rainbows.

The Only gurgles below camp as the sun sets on a hot October day.



Greg Pizal cradles a fat farm-dam fish prior to release.

The Fishing

There is a large selection of private and scenic nooks and crannies for camping along the river. Greg and Jenny guided us through a few paddocks and down onto a nice little flat right on a big bend. There were significant pools close by, both upstream and downstream, and right at our doorstep was a babbling rapid. This created the perfect ambient tonal backdrop – particularly with the many birdcall overtones.

Triah and I set up the caravan, and we were joined soon after by our son Coen and his girlfriend Emma, and then by our daughter Becky. The kids are currently studying at the University of New England, so they were only a stone's throw away in Armidale. Coen and Emma had actually spent the previous night camping on the pretty Syaz River, only half an hour or so's drive away. They'd caught some nice little browns that they had kept for the smoker, but larger fish had eluded them.

It was getting late in the day by the time we were all set up and settled in. As the shadows stretched and eventually vanished, terrestrial insects came out en masse. It had been a very warm October day and all manner of flying bugs danced across the water surface in the twilight. From the comfort of our camp chairs, we could see obvious fish activity.

I was in a pretty vegetative state, content to watch the water singlets of feeding trout, but it got the better of Coen, Emma and Triah. Coen took off with his fly rod and the girls each grabbed a spin rod with a small Squidgy Wiggler attached. I stayed put in my chair, thoroughly entertained by Coen at the head of the pond, waving his magic wand, and by the girls frantically casting at every sip and bob.

After a while, I could see their frustration at the lack of interest from the fish – and the light was really fading fast now. I walked up to them



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Wakefield's elevated dam proved a perfect place to practice flycasting – and to knock over a #9 rainbow trout at the same time.

and they vented their frustration regarding the 'damn funny' trout.

"Mind if I have a quick cast?" I asked.

"All yours!" said Trish, as she pushed the little spin rod into my hands in sheer frustration.

I shot a cast right up along the nearside bank where I'd seen a fish rising a couple of times. I think the little Wiggler had only swum about a metre when it got eaten and I lent back and put a savage bend in the little spin rod.

"Yep!" I exclaimed.

"What?!" came the exasperated call from the girl.

The fish swam out into the middle of the pool and I got my first glimpse of it as it rolled on the surface. It was a ripper brown. Coen had seen everything play out and he was already on his way with the net. It played up for quite a while before I could glide it into netting range. Coen made no mistake and my personal best browny lay calmly in the part-submerged net.

I raced back to the van to get the camera as Coen kept the fish in the water. I came back and photographed him with my fish, which, with its pronounced black spots, looked like a sort of leopard fish. A great start to the trip, as far as I was concerned.

The next day was another warm one, albeit with more breeze than the previous. Coen and I walked about 2km downstream and threw all manner of lures and flies into some of the most productive looking water I've seen in the New England region. There were many large, rocky

Trish was excited at catching this plump rainbow from the dam.



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Our cozy little river flat right on a bend in the Oakley River. We could watch trout feeding from the awning of our Atlantic caravan.



poles that were partly shaded by big river oaks. Perfect water, but only one fish showed interest all morning.

It is well known that brown trout can be incredibly frustrating at times, but we were pretty confident they would come out to play late in the afternoon, like they had the previous day.

MID ARVO MADNESS

It was around 2pm and we were lounging around after lunch under the awning of the caravan when we noticed a few large boils in the same spot just upstream from camp. Coen picked up his fly rod and wandered up.

He strode up to the bank and made short presentations to where the fish had been working. He was fishing a pretty dull looking Olive Yabby wet fly under a dry fly. I didn't like his chances so close to the middle of the day but was soon beckoned by all to grab the camera.

I made it up there in time to snap some shots of Emma netting a big, heavy brown and I photographed the hell out of the fish and a

glowing angle displaying his first ever brown, caught in his first year of flyfishing.

Well, that sparked the others to get more motivated, and Emma started flicking the 'old favourite' black and red on gold Celta into the same pool. I'd grown up using that lure on rainbows in the NSW Southern Highlands and Greg Feizell had also said that, if all else failed, it was a pretty handy lure in the Oakley.

I was back at camp, downloading the image of Coen's fish to my laptop, when the call rang out yet again for a cameraman. (Lucky I managed to catch that first fish, because I didn't get much of a chance to concentrate on another!)

By the time I was ready with the camera, Emma had swum her fish right down to directly below our camp. I shot off some pics of one very happy young lady holding another leopard-like brown trout, before swimming it off as healthy as ever.

The late afternoon bite did not quite eventuate as expected, but the girls sat on the bank in the fading rays of daylight, watching platypus pop up

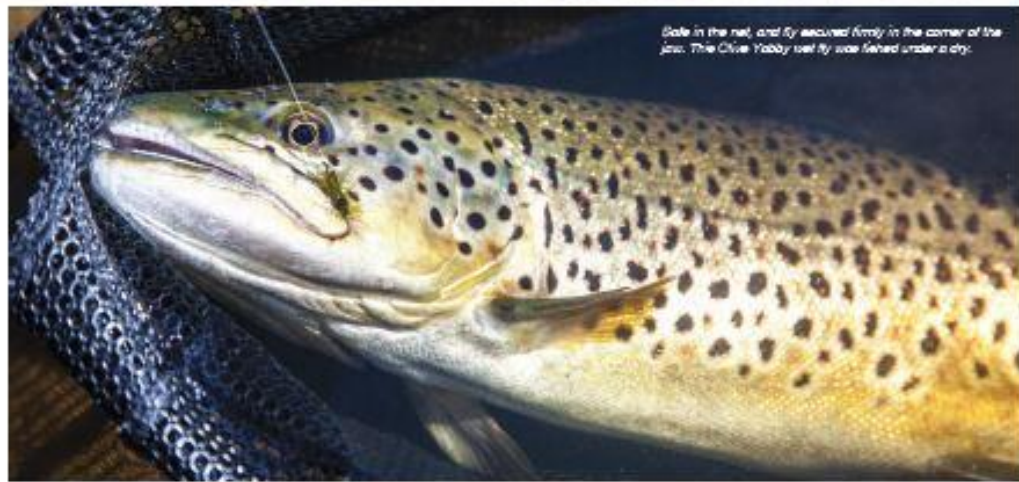
to the surface and then wiggle away when they spotted the intruding humans.

RAINBOW'S END

Next morning, Coen and I had a quick walk upstream and spotted a few fish feeding, but they refused all offerings. Coen just about cut his arm off at a smallish brown that was finning in the shallows at the head of a pool. The bugger wouldn't take any fly in the box and finally spooked when a presentation came too close for his liking.

We had to shoot off that day, so we packed up camp and drove up to the Fizzell house. They wanted to show us the dam with the big rainbows in it, and we were keen to have a look.

Well, at that dam we certainly had no trouble catching the biggest, fattest rainbow we had ever seen. Greg and the girls caught them on Tassie Devils and Celtas, and Coen had no problems getting just about any wet or dry pattern eaten. It was a fun morning and we got some lovely shots of those wonderful hues that rainbows are renowned for.



Gale in the net, and fly secured firmly in the corner of the jaw. The Olive Yabby wet fly was fished under a dry.

WAKEFIELD'S BEEFY BROWNS



The sun lights up the back of a majestic Wakefield Brown that ate a black and red Caddis.



A big strawberry-hued rainbow guides in for release.



Coen Aron shows off the author's wonderfully patterned brown, taken at last light on the first day.



Hot up against the banks of the Oatly, Coen makes the smoke box for some smaller brown salmon earlier in the day from the Oatly River.



Not a fish, but the purchase of the Chordale bull Jack De Nimble led to our discovery of Wakefield's wonderful trout fishery.

There's no doubt that Wakefield has far more to offer than we saw in our short stay, but we certainly saw enough to want to get back there very soon. I'm positive that those browns would free up along the entire stretch of river on the right day.

If you'd like to experience the fishing, farmstay and farm life on this pristine property, give Lucy Fritzell a call on the number in the information contacts below. You simply won't find hosts more genuinely helpful than the Fritzells.

Also, I've had a bit of a chat with FishLife contributor and master flyfisher Peter Morse and we may well organise a flycasting clinic at Wakefield with him in 2016. Keep an eye on the FishLife Facebook page for that one.

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