

# Fishing the Catlins



Owaka river entering the Catlins Lake

## Fishing in the Catlins

Surrounded by remote rainforest and rolling hill country, anglers seeking solitude and scenery will find the streams of the Catlins rewarding. With consistently high annual rainfall and plenty of valley systems, anglers following the Southern Scenic Route between Balclutha and Footrose will discover numerous waterways to explore. All of the significant streams and rivers hold good populations of resident brown trout between 1-2 kg, and in their lower reaches sea-run brown trout which can reach 3-4kg.

Most streams originate in rainforest or tussock swamplands (giving the water a tea stained coloration) and flow through forest and farmland before entering a tidal zone and then the Pacific Ocean. Anglers should adjust their fishing methods depending on whether they are fishing in the estuary/lower, or upper reaches of a river.

## Access

Anglers are able to enjoy southern hospitality and good access to most rivers in Otago and Southland. Please don't take this access for granted and following these guidelines. Park vehicles away from gateways and not on tracks, leave gates as you find them, stay within river margins, don't disturb stock and if in doubt ask for permission.

## Lower River and Estuary Fishing

The main trout food sources in tidal and lower river areas are bait fish such as whitebait, smelt and bullies and also crabs. Whitebait enter river mouths in spring, and smelt can be found in tidal areas over spring and summer. This is when silver and white colored lures that imitate these baitfish work well. The best time to fish the tidal areas is generally early in the morning or late evening or on an incoming tide when trout hunt baitfish. Latter in the season anglers often use black and gold, and banana colored lures which imitate bullies and crabs that live in tidal areas year round.

Spin fishing is very popular and probably the easiest way to fish the deep water areas. There are a large variety of spin lures that can be successful including Articulated Eels Tobys, Rapalas, Tasmanian Devils, Wedges and Zed Spinners. A small copper Zed Spinner fished close to the bottom is a great crab imitation. Often the key with spin (and fly) fishing is to keep changing your lure until you find something that works.

Bait fishing with worms and porana grubs can be particularly deadly and this is an excellent method of introducing young children to fishing especially when combined with a family picnic. Simply attach your bait to a hook (most anglers put the bait below the sinker but if you put it above the sinker it can be more

noticeable to fish) and hurl it into a likely looking hole. Some experienced local anglers fish with smelt and bullies which can be irresistible to large trout, especially at night or the change of light.

Fly anglers should try baitfish imitations such as Mrs Simpson (red), Parsons Glory, Jack Sprat, Yellow Dorothy and Grey Ghost lures. While most lure anglers traditionally fish down and across with a wet line, spotting trout with Polaroid glasses and fishing directly to them with a dry line can be very exciting.

## Upper River Fishing

The larger rivers fish well right throughout the season, while the smaller streams tend to fish best early or late in the season.

The main trout food sources are snails, caddis and mayfly nymphs, bullies and other baitfish. In summer trout often turn their attention to terrestrial insects such as cicadas, blowflies and bees.

Spin anglers should try Veltic and Mepps spinners, Rapalas, Tobys and Articulated Trout lures in small sizes on fairly light line (around 3kg). Natural dark colors such as brown and copper are often the most successful. Spin fishing after a fresh (as the river drops and clears after rain) can be particularly deadly.

Most fly fishing is done with Hares Ear and Pheasant Tail nymphs (with and without bead-heads) which imitate mayfly and caddis larvae, and are fished upstream with an indicator. If you see trout rising consistently during the day it is probably a mayfly hatch and you should try a small dry fly such as a Adams, Twilight Beauty or Dads Favorite. If these are unsuccessful, switch to an emerger pattern like the CDC. On calm summer evenings you can often get caddis hatches and you should use small caddis dryflies such as a elk-hair pattern. On a sunny day when there is lots of terrestrial insect activity try Blowfly, Cochybudu, Royal Wolff and the old favorite Peveril Of The Peak dryflies, especially near overhanging vegetation. Often overlooked but effective are small wet flies such as a Red Tipped Governor fished down and across in the traditional manner. Tie on a size 4 Mrs Simpson lure if all else fails.

potential. Containing lots of baitfish and crabs the trout are normally in good condition and excellent eating. Often the best fishing areas are close to structure such as reefs and logs and near deep holes and drop offs. During the spring and summer months, evening and night fishing and can be very productive (especially off the Hina Hina Road on dark nights). Red Mrs Simpson lures work well in the evenings. After dark, use lures which present a defined shape against the night sky such as Black Woolly Buggers. It pays to have strong line because this lake can produce some large trout. Scout your spot in the day light to identify any snags and remember the lake is tidal so don't get caught out. If you see a large bow wave in the dark be careful it is probably a monster sea-run or a seal!

## Catlins River

The upper Catlins flows through hill country pastures before entering the Catlins Forest and then running through grass flats and spilling into the Catlins Lake. Access to the upper river can be challenging because of the gorse and other vegetation. Good numbers of small and medium sized brown trout are distributed throughout the middle and upper reaches, with the odd large trout present. This river can experience good mayfly hatches, often on overcast and drizzly days or under forest cover. In the forested middle reaches fly casting can be difficult because of over hanging vegetation. This is where light spinning rods with small lures such as Veltic spinners, and bubbles and flies can be easier to use because no back cast is required. The Wairepo Creek (a tributary that enters the Upper Catlins River on the true right hand side) contains a few medium sized brown trout.

## MacLennan River

This small incised tannin stained stream contains a few small and medium sized brown trout and flows into the Tahakopa River just above the estuary. Often fishing is challenging because of dense bank side vegetation.

## Tahakopa River

The upper reaches can produce some good fly fishing on spring and summer days for those anglers keen enough to navigate the bank side vegetation which can be quite thick in places. In the upper reaches the best access method can be to walk up the middle of the stream bed so anglers should take care and wear a good pair of waders or be prepared to wade wet. The estuarine area can hold some fairly large sea-run trout at times especially when there are whitebait in the river. Bait fishing in the lower reaches sometimes produces trout and flounder.

## Mokoreta River

The upper reaches of the Mokoreta contain brown trout which are mostly fairly small in size. They tend to rise freely and take small spinning lures well. This small tea stained stream often gets very low in summer.

## Waikawa

This attractive small river flows through patches of bush and farmland before entering a large estuary. It contains a good head of small and medium sized brown trout in the upper reaches and the occasional large fish, especially in the tidal zone.

## Lower Mataura River

This is the second biggest river in Southland and probably one of the best brown trout factories in the world. The lower reaches are well suited to spin and bait fishing and commonly produce trout around 2kg and the occasional large sea-run fish. Anglers heading to or returning from the Catlins should make the time to explore this fishery. There is good access from a well formed road running along the east bank.

For more fishing information check the Otago and Southland region links on [www.fishandgame.org.nz](http://www.fishandgame.org.nz)

## Lower Clutha River

This very large river splits into two branches below Balclutha around a large flat island known as Inch Clutha. The Matau branch (on the west side) can be easily explored by anglers heading to and from the Catlins. The gradient is relatively low and the river contains lots of deep pools and runs which hold large numbers of brown trout and some rainbows between 0.5 to 2kg. Perch (up to 2kg) can also be found in back waters and slow moving areas. In the estuarine reaches medium and large (1.5kg -5kg) sea-run and estuary brown trout can be caught year round, but especially in spring and summer. Chinook salmon (normally around 2-6kg) may also be caught in summer and autumn months as they run upstream to spawn.

## Puerua Stream

This small stream contains a few fish of a reasonable size in the upper reaches but most of the fishing is done in the tidal area.

## Glenomaru Stream

This small stream can hold a few brown trout which are mostly fairly small with the odd medium sized fish. It can become very low in summer and fishes best early or late in the season.

## Owaka River

This medium sized tea stained stream contains a resident population of brown trout and some sea-runs in the lower reaches. Fly anglers can experience some mayfly hatches in the middle reaches on calm days. Worm and spin fishing is popular in the lower section. The Owaka River flows into the Catlins Lake.

## Catlins Lake

Good numbers of large and medium sized sea-run and estuarine brown trout reside in the Catlins Lake. This waterway is fairly large and has lots of fishing

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Otago Region

Southland Region



Prize Catch

# Fishing the Catlins



Exploring the lower Catlins River



**Regulations**  
 Angling regulations are reviewed annually, please check your regulation guide booklet before fishing any water.

**Clutha Country**  
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