TROUT on the equator

A century of adaptation makes them tough

WHEN you tell people you're going fishing in equatorial regions they might look at you askance, wondering what species you're targeting. When you say you're targeting trout in equatorial regions they're sure to think you've lost the plot. Who would have thought that trout sit in the gin-clear pools of the highland rivers and glacier-fed lakes of Kenya and Ethiopia, when we most frequently associate those countries with high temperatures, the great Rift Valley and tough African conditions. It seems an altogether too hostile environment for delicate trout.

HISTORY

At one stage in the early 1950s, Kenya boasted an astonishing 2 200km of pristine trout streams and rivers. Our forefathers are to blame for such a rich flyfishing playground. Two of us — Sven and Jamie — grew up fishing in Kenya, learning the art of flyfishing on small intricate streams and lakes surrounded by Africa's wilderness. Coming from a long line of colonial imports, we all fished with our fathers and grandfathers and, as young boys, wanted nothing more than to lay our flies in fishy spots and hook wily trout, never once wondering how they got there. As we grew older we learned that it was the

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The biggest waterfall of the Gura plunges into the deepest canyon of the Aberdare range where it merges with the Karuru River.

A beautifully spotted wild brown trout from one of Mount Kenya's moorland streams.

British who'd brought these beautiful salmonids to East Africa and it all started as early as 1906.

Jamie was lucky enough to inherit a book from his grandparents titled *Angling In East Africa*, written by TL Hately and Hugh Copley (1933) which tells the story of when and how trout made their way to the equator. This book has fed our dreams all our lives. Here is an extract from it:

"Many years ago, when the Colony was yet a Protectorate, the late Lord Delamere and Major Ewart S Grogan discussed how the attractions of this land could be brought home to the people in the Old Country. They decided that the two things likely to appeal were wheat in the fields and trout in the rivers. Lord Delamere took the wheat in hand and Major Grogan handled the trout.

"In 1905 Major Grogan purchased and brought out from the Howietown Fisheries a large consignment of ova (browns, Loch Leven and rainbow trout). The Howietown Fisheries lent one of their men, Mr Arnott, for a period of one year to bring the ova out and to establish them in the rivers of the Colony. From railhead to the stocking place, where the Naivasha-Nyeri track crosses the Gura, high up on the Aberdare range, the trout were rushed up by the active co-operation of the then inhabitants of Naivasha."

The book does not cover the journey from England to Kenya, but it would have been an arduous one for the eyed ova. First they would have been shipped across the Mediterranean into the Red Sea, then onto the Indian Ocean and eventually they would have been offloaded at Mombasa port. Next they would have then been put onto the steam train to Naivasha and Nanyuki and placed in a simple hatchery somewhere on the slopes of the Aberdare Range and

The upper section of the Web River still holds the occasional brown trout.

Mount Kenya.

Once hatched they were trekked up by foot and released into the rivers and lakes. Luckily for us, the men involved had the knowledge to ensure the survival of the ova on their journey, keeping them cool and moist on ice. We can not even begin to imagine the tribulations of their journey which was an incredible achievement for that era.

There are no records of indigenous fish inhabiting these cold mountain streams and lakes, although that's not to say they weren't there. Once stocked and settled in these waters the trout thrived and migrated across the cold waters of Kenya.

In 1967 five hundred rainbow- and brown trout fingerlings were introduced into the Danka and Web rivers in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains. Two years later it became apparent that trout were breeding successfully. This stimulated the formation of the Bale Fly Fishing Club. The rainbows did so well that some were taken from the Danka and introduced into seven other streams. The large size and quality of the fish attracted many people to join the club and by 1973 it had established an international reputation. The club was disbanded in 1975, but trout have continued to breed and are still caught in the Web, Danka and Shaiya rivers.

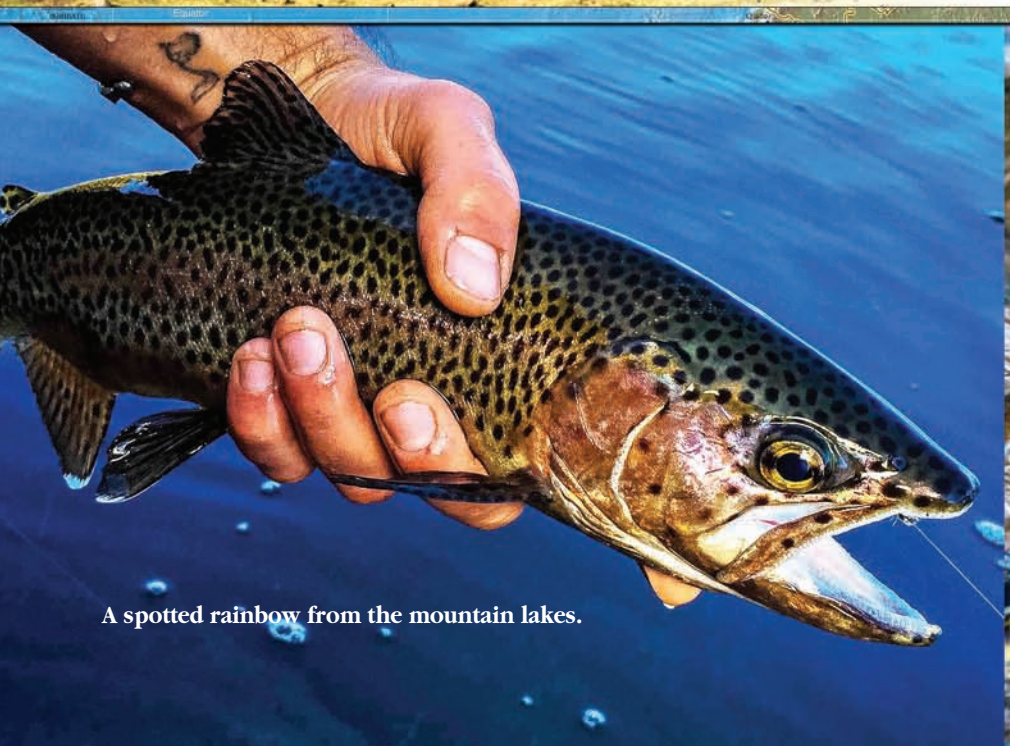
KENYA TODAY

"Those who know the wonderful slopes of Mount Kenya, the Aberdares, the great Mau Escarpment, Elgon and Cherangani realise that God has lavished the wonders of natural beauty on this land with no off hand. The great primeval forests, the abundance of wild flowers, the strange birds, gorgeous butterflies and the timid, seldom-seen forest folk all make a strong appeal to the nature lover.

"In addition to these beauties our mountainsides are richly endowed with rivers and streams.... Man has supplemented the Creator's work by introducing trout, both brown and rainbow, to these virgin waters and the trout have responded to man's initiative and to nature's munificence by multiplying marvellously and waxing exceeding fat.

"The cool, clear water flowing under towering trees which are festooned with creepers with pendant blooms in pink, blue and red; strange and beautiful orchids, giant ferns and the continual play of sun and shadow on trout-stocked pools." — Extract from *Angling In East Africa.*

Despite major development in the lowlands of Kenya, the description above still reigns true in the highlands. Descendants of the original brown trout populations are



A spotted rainbow from the mountain lakes.

thriving in the moorland streams and rivers and they have evolved a phenotype of golden mahogany with blue-ringed red spots and white-lined fins. There's also evidence that rainbow trout are successfully breeding in some of the glacial lakes and can be caught using a variety of flyfishing techniques.

From our consistent observations over the last 15 years it seems that equatorial trout are able to spawn year-round. The main trigger seems to be the onset of the rains and rising water levels. Strangely enough, the pineal gland that reads light levels in northern and southern hemisphere salmonids does not seem to kick-start the reproductive cycle on the equator due to the consistency of daylight all year round and the lack of clearly defined seasons.

Flyfishing in these locations is truly spectacular, and encounters with elephants, buffalo, zebra, bush buck and other game add excitement to every stroll down the river. This makes every fishing trip to these mountains a true adventure.

These remote lakes and rivers can be reached by helicopter, road, and on foot. Some combination packages allow anglers to trek up to the peaks of the mountain, stopping to fish the different rivers and lakes on the way up, while others prefer to fly into the hot spots and see the mountains from the air.

ETHIOPIA TODAY

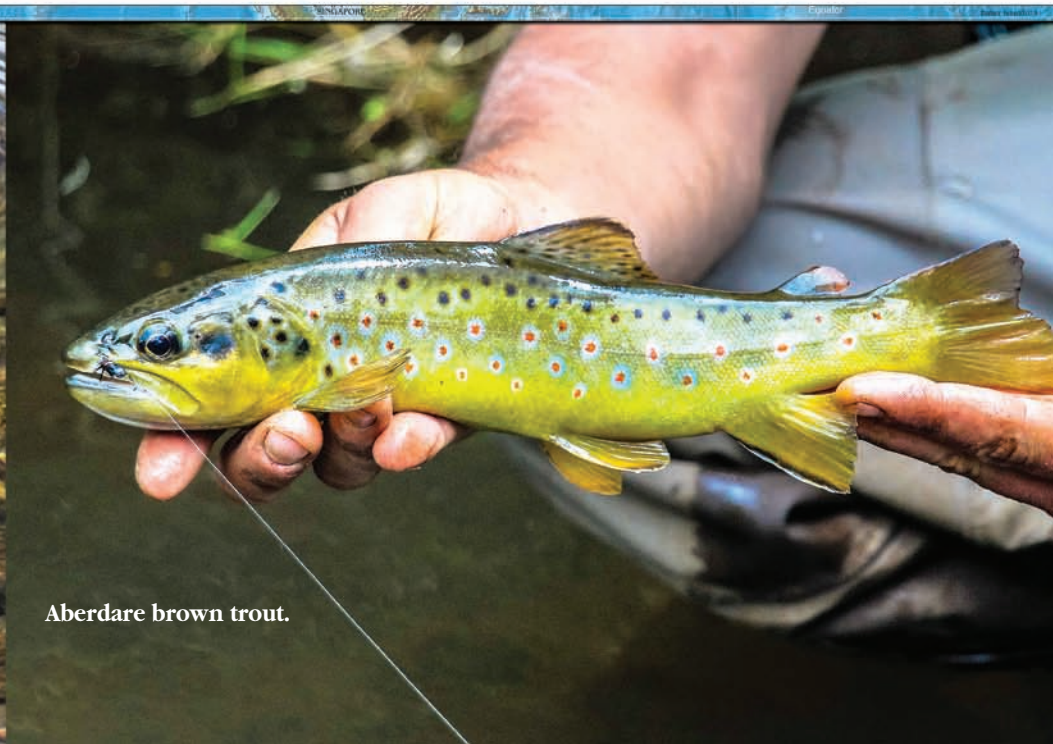
The trout fishing remains special in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains with plenty of big fish to be caught and lots of dry flyfishing opportunities. The landscape is spectacular — wheat fields, jagged gorges and dry afro-alpine forests to the north with lush green bamboo and forest covering the slopes to the south. The rainbow trout are prolific and, on average, much bigger than in the Kenyan rivers, with several specimens over the 6 lb mark having been landed. Very few brown trout are left in the area, but the persistent angler may still be rewarded with a rare catch.

The number of endemic species in this region is outstanding, including birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Some of the more notable sightings are of Cooper's grassland frog, the Ethiopian banana frog, blue-winged goose, yellow-fronted parrot, black-headed siskin, black-clawed mouse, Bale shrew, Menelick's bush-buck, and the Ethiopian wolf — the rarest carnivore on the planet. Seeing one of these endemics while flyfishing is a truly magical moment.

Ethiopia's beautiful Web Valley where trout were first introduced in the 1960s.

This pool on the Web River was full of rainbow trout.

Lake Alice rainbow trout.



Aberdare brown trout.

Here is a snippet of a short story about our first trip to Ethiopia in January 2014:

After arriving in Addis Ababa we travelled through to Dodola where we met up with a couple of mountain guides who put us in touch with a local guide. We shared a few cups of delicious coffee, a long conversation about the trout in the area and a few St George beers before we set off to pitch our tent next to an Ethiopian river full of trout. It was already late in the afternoon, so we quickly set up our rods and ran to get a few casts in before the orange sun slipped away behind the mountains. We split up and were soon each rewarded with two beautiful rainbows. What a start!

We carried on heading east to Dinsho where we met up with our local contact. Gashte, as we soon dubbed him, became our godfather, guide and fishing buddy for the rest of our time in the mountains. He showed us around and shared stories about trout, Ethiopian traditions and politics. We came to have a deep respect for his kind nature and emotional connection to the river and the graceful art of flyfishing. These encounters are what makes flyfishing in Africa amazing.

On our third night we camped on the golden cliff face of the jagged gorge which holds the Web River. Mountain nyala worked their way along the ridge, baboons peered down and warthogs wandered the riverbanks, shyly avoiding us while we fished beneath waterfalls and into slow moving pools. The abundance, health and size of the fish was such a pleasure to see and we had two fantastic days fishing in the gorge.

On our last evening we stumbled upon a long pool where there must have been 30 fish rising in the sunset's pink reflection. The ripples joined as if raindrops were falling from the trout's attack on the midge hatch. That was probably one of the most perfect and enjoyable evenings we'd had on a river in our 20 years of flyfishing. Gashte took the lead and showed us how it was done. He truly was a fantastic flyfisherman, totally at peace with a fly-rod in his hand and has become our local guide on our Bale Mountains trips.

Kenya and Ethiopia and their equatorial trout hold a very special place in our hearts and display African tenacity in the way they have managed to settle in and adapt. The best time to fish for trout in Kenya is between July and October and again from January through to late March. Fishing in the Bale Mountains is best between November and early April.

•For further information on fishing these equatorial regions contact the authors via email on <info@iolaus.biz> or visit <www.iolaus.biz>.