

# Brown Trout Bonanza

Jan De La Porte reveals why Bosnia's rivers have the potential to grow trout and grayling to huge proportions.

Jan De La Porte's travelling companion Carsten, with the help of his guide, holds up a near-6lb brown trout, taken on a tiny dry fly.

The fly fishing community has focused on the specialist press devoting a lot of column space to fly fishing in Bosnia. These journalists often have a tendency to speed past the facts a little too quickly, and possibly with too many pictures of a lot of fish. A lot of fish (and big fish) do not necessarily tell the whole story.

I will try to compensate a little for that by offering a more in-depth analysis of the conditions in Bosnia. This will, hopefully, make the reader more and better informed about this fascinating fly fishing destination. Based on a trip that took place in the spring of 2009 I will attempt to point out some of the main features and focus points.

First of all, the extravagant headlines are true! Bosnia has, and will continue to have, fantastic fly fishing opportunities. The surroundings are heartbreakingly beautiful, the rivers are gin clear and the supply of nutrients is very high. Because of this, wild fish can reach very large sizes. Every year brown trout over 8kg and grayling over 2kg are caught and documented.

The Bosnian people are friendly and hospitable. Prices (except fishing licences) are low, the food is good and the climate is sunny and dry, even in the peak season for fly fishing. To crown it all, it's not a million miles away for travelling UK anglers. You're there in a few hours and, depending on flight times, you could actually take in a proper day's fishing when you arrive. If you were heading for New Zealand you'd still be staring at pictures of glossy fly fishing travel brochures for another day! However, one thing is often omitted in numerous articles and descriptions; fly fishing in Bosnia is very, very difficult!

## Tougher Than Tough

My friend Carsten and I are sneaking along the riverbank under swaying branches of broad willows. We are 'Polaroiding' for fish; the water is gin clear, bright-green weed beds are swaying in the current between gravel banks. We slip through the hanging tree branches down to the water's edge. It doesn't take long before we spot the first large fish and by watching it we see that it's quietly feeding on nymphs. It's a good-sized grayling. We then spot another fish;

this time it's a nice brown trout, and yet another nice-sized grayling... the water is alive with big fish!

We move further downstream to see if there's a spot for us to enter the water and cast upstream to all those fish, but we can't. Wherever we look into the water we see big fish, mostly grayling, but there are a few massive brown trout in between them. It would be crazy to splash into the water with so many fish right in front of us. We move on further downstream a bit where we have the same problem and it develops into a complete farce. We

spot so many fish that it simply makes it impossible for us to enter the river without spooking them!

## In At The Deep End

Eventually, and very much against our better judgement, we are forced to splash into the river. When we do the fish dart across the riverbed, they're off like a shot. We take comfort in the fact that, after a while, when things have calmed down,

the fish might come back and take up the same feeding spots again.

After what seems like an age they return; they are even working the surface now. You would think that the stage would now be set for some superb fishing, but the fish will not take. We see a small hatch of small pale yellow/green duns occurring, a lot of insects are floating on the surface as spent spinners. Carsten and I observe a lot of fish rising and sipping down these small insects, but no matter what we present, they refuse to take.

Several times I'm able to observe

how my dry fly drifts right over a large grayling. I watch as the fish moves towards the surface and takes an insect just a few centimetres from my nicely presented fly – we're going nuts! We are surrounded by hundreds of large and active feeding fish that simply refuse to cooperate. Nothing happens until we change to 18ft leaders with 0.12 fluorocarbon tippets and size 22 flies. Carsten has a couple of offers on the fly, but misses out on both of them. The excitement has simply been going on for too long and his nerves are frayed.

## Monster Grayling

I spot a real whopper of a grayling rising regularly and cast to it. The fish shows no interest in my fly at all. From my fly box I pull out some tiny size 24 Pale Morning Duns that I had tied for a trip to Silver Creek in Idaho. I tie it on but the grayling still shows no interest, even though it's feeding on naturals.

After at least 50 casts without any result I'm fast running out of ideas on

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The average size of grayling you'll encounter is better than most rivers you'll find in Europe, if not the world.

how to defeat this impossible fish. It was then that I notice tiny 'curls' on my 'not totally outstretched' leader creating tiny reflections of light from the sun, now high on the sky. It seems like that's enough disturbance for the fish to detect. I stretch the leader completely and try again.

I can see everything happening in the gin-clear water, this is terribly exciting! The microscopic fly drifts steadily, but surely, towards the fish. The grayling rises very calmly and inhales the fly with a loud slurp. I strike and it's fish on!

After a nerve-racking fight I land my personal-best grayling, a whopper at 1.8kg. It's not a very long fish, but it's broad and deep like I have never seen before, a beautiful fish with golden-bronze colours.

Perfect Growing Conditions

No matter where you visit in Bosnia you will see large crystal-clear rivers. The fresh water here is mostly spring water, literally bursting out of the calcium-rich limestone mountains. Anyone who visits the beautiful Plitvice National Park in Croatia will see this phenomenon of water bursting out from the ground.

This means that the rivers in Bosnia



Take a selection of dry flies, but make sure that they're small – size 18 down to 24; these fish are very smart and fooling them takes some doing.

are cold, clear and rich in oxygen. You could look upon them as oversized chalkstreams, notorious for being very productive, meaning that the water is nutrient rich with very high biomass production. Chalkstreams are so named because the water bubbles up through calcium formations, neutralising acidic content and adding minerals to the water,

something that the northern cousins of these salmonoids do not benefit from.

Nutritional values are further enhanced by the southerly latitudes; the winters are relatively short and warm seasons are much longer than northerly latitudes, making growth conditions for trout and grayling substantially better. The feeding season (and fishing season) is, by comparison, much longer, concurrently with the water maintaining a constant and ideal temperature of approximately 6°C to 8°C, regardless of the fluctuating air temperatures – all in all, a superb recipe for trout and grayling.

Bosnia is a non-industrialised agricultural country devoid of pesticides. Insect life above the surface is also extremely rich. I have heard of large hatches of stone flies intimidating people and livestock! I have also tried walking on what I thought was a riverbed gravel bank, but turned out to be banks of caddis cases. That tells you what kind of access to food the fish have!

All the conditions needed are more or less present for some fantastic fishing, but you have to appreciate there are huge challenges in fly fishing for several reasons. The trout and grayling have a long feeding season, up to eight months, and, therefore, are in no hurry to put on weight as quickly as a fish from northern Europe.

Depth Charging

The water is cold and usually fast flowing, thus requiring substantial energy for movement. It therefore pays off for a fish to stay close to the bottom, where pressure from the current is lowest, and feed on the ample quantities of aquatic insects. That is the reason why the majority of fish – approximately 80 per cent – are caught on deeply fished nymphs. In the deepest holes, often five to six metres deep, where very large fish are often found, fishermen mount three or four split shot on the leader performing a sort of 'dip-fishing', which I don't regard as fly fishing. But that is how grayling weighing over 2kg and brown trout over 5kg are caught.

Some of the most skilled locals, who don't appreciate this kind of 'splash-fishing' have developed a special roll-casting technique with long, fine leaders and weighted micro nymphs, and they

catch a lot of fish in the shallower water. Finally, quite a few big brown and rainbow trout are caught on sink-tip lines with Streamers, cone heads and the like.

The point is that most of the time people fish 'deep' here. I think that, when talking about Bosnia, one should know about this. Of course you can catch fish on dries but it is far from easy.

Regardless, the fish are incredibly selective. There is plenty to choose from so why chase and waste unnecessary energy on something that looks a little suspicious? There are rumours of Czech anglers, the highly skilled kind, departing from the Pliva river in Northwest Bosnia empty-handed. Not because of lack of fish, though – there are lots of those and they are big – but because the fish were too difficult!

Access All Areas

Another factor that you have to deal with, if you go to Bosnia is that in most places the fishing is split into so-called open waters and fishing preserves. Open water is owned by the state and everyone has access, for a modest price. The preserves are privately owned and here you often have to pay between €15 to €35 for a one-day licence. These are astronomic prices for the locals, so only few of them fish these. The 'philosophy' is that if foreigners can afford to travel to Bosnia just to go fishing, they can also afford to pay for a fishing licence – pretty difficult to blame on poor, war-torn people. But it also means that in most places you will find quality fishing on the privately owned areas. Open waters are simply overfished by local worm and spin fishermen. There are exceptions, but thorough research is required in order to track these down. On some preserves there has been an unfortunate tendency to release a lot of rainbow trout for the satisfaction of the most 'greedy' fly fishers, but this undesirable trend has now turned around, and the majority of rainbows caught are strong and beautiful.

The preserves are kept under strict surveillance against poachers, catch-and-release is the order of the day and all rubbish is cleared. Unfortunately there are disgraceful sights along many of the numerous beautiful rivers in Bosnia, where rubbish has been dumped directly

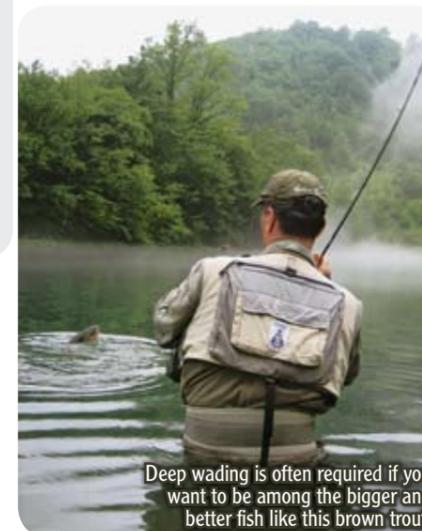


The crystal-clear water means you can spot big grayling like this one with ease. The colours on these clear-water fish are amazing.

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Need To Know

There is a lot of focus on fly fishing in the northwest corner of Bosnia on the rivers Unac and Una, Klokot, Ribnik, Sanica, Pliva and others. People lodge at the towns of Kljuc and Sanski. Most stay at Kulen Vakuf and Ribnik and use these as a base. It's very easy to find accommodation in these places. It is usually with private individuals with prices being more than reasonable. That goes for food and beverages as well. You can fly to the international airports of Sarajevo, Zagreb or Split and rent a car. The language skill of locals is extremely limited, so it's a good idea to have someone with you who knows their way around. There is much focus on four to five rivers in one corner of Bosnia, but I know for sure of numerous other possibilities in other parts of the country. ■



Deep wading is often required if you want to be among the bigger and better fish like this brown trout.

into the river. But one should probably not sit in judgement on people who have been through more than most, and whose biggest worries are somewhere else entirely. Fishing preserves are probably a step in the right direction. Here fish populations really get the chance to gain the density and sizes Bosnia has the natural potential for.

Throughout most of the day spinners were to be found in the river surface – the water was a virtual smorgasbord.

