

The Walls to The Cliffs

Daniel Hackett explores the Mersey River.



Remote campsite, upper Mersey Valley.

I was first introduced to the wilds of the Mersey River while working on *In Season Tasmania*, along with co-author Brad Harris and mate Greg French. On this initial journey, Greg led us up agonising hills into the Walls of Jerusalem World Heritage Area, through soups of leeches and moss, past inspiring dolerite peaks, and finally to a distant bushmen's hut. Beneath the storybook setting of the split-timber shelter sat Lake Meston, at the headwaters of the Mersey River system that now haunts my imagination. From this trip began a fruitful obsession.

I had poked around the Mersey before, but not on any stretches that I would label as wilderness: Kimberley, Merseylea and Dunorlan were the usual areas. Each trip would involve a stop at Elizabeth Town Cafe for a cappuccino and a pie, while the rest of the days would be meandered away knee-deep in the river. It's a perk of my guiding job, and to me

was time spent in research and development. Excluding a 3 lb rainbow, the fishing was always disappointing: well-structured riffles and runs, along with pockets, nooks and crannies that looked hot-to-trot consistently failed to produce even pan-sized fish. Miniature rainbows and browns were the norm, though good mayfly and caddis hatches always promised more. Many of these days would end when I reached the downstream extent of the Alum Cliffs, where I'd sit and wonder what secrets lay within the rocky walls of the intimidating gorge ahead.

Eventually I lost interest in the Mersey, in favour of several spring creeks nearby, but whenever I crossed it in the Mole Creek area the obligatory road bridge pause revealed masses of black spinners with studious 1–2 lb trout working their beats.

It wasn't long after one of these spring creek missions that I found myself back in the future, standing with Greg and Brad above Meston, the most beautiful lake I had ever seen. The deciduous beech or 'tanglefoot' was in full autumnal prime, its yellows, reds and golds juxtaposed against the blend of smooth reflections, dark sclerophyll and pre-historic rainforest. On that trip I became hooked on the Mersey system, obsessed with its wilds and history. But it mostly still remained as unknown blue curves and black contours on maps, and the honed text of historical accounts, myths and legends.

EXPLORATION

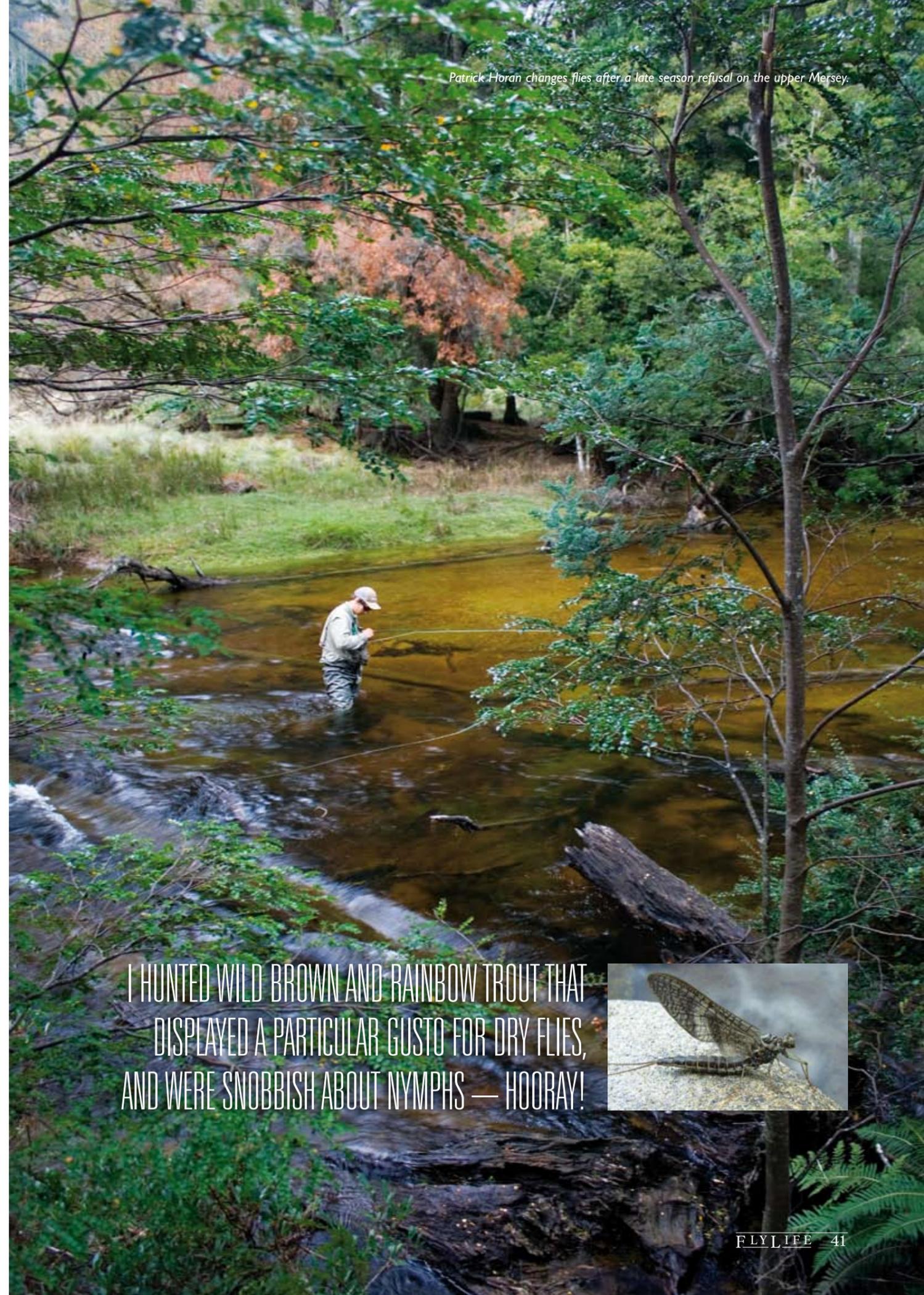
Within a month of the Meston trip, and now in the depths of winter, I was back in the Mersey system. Watched over by the snow-peppered peaks of Mounts Pillinger and Pelion East, Bishops Bluff and Twin Spires, I awoke from my tent in the most spectacular river valley imaginable. Within earshot, the overgrown Mersey busily raced itself around serpentine hairpins and chicanes, enveloping log-

jams and spring creek type weedbeds with un-hindered, slightly tannin waters. Rainforest species of the evergreen myrtle beech, along with sassafras, wattles and tussock grasses lined the river, and oxbows marked its tendency to roam.

This part of the world is a mixture of World Heritage Area, National Park and freehold high country grazing land, where cattle are still grazed seasonally. Bushranger Matthew Brady may have been the first white to see this part of Tasmania, but aborigines were the first people to use it, managing the land with fire that likely created and preserved the high country paddocks. By the late 1880s the association of the area with high country cattlemen had well and truly begun, with trappers also forming bonds with the land that lasted a century. These men had (and their families still have) a personal association with the land, taking only what it can sustain. Basil Steers was the most famous snarer, building unique drying huts at Pine Hut Plain and further to the west on the February Plains: he was the subject of a 1980 ABC *A Big Country* documentary entitled 'The Paddocks'. Historian Simon Cubitt's *Snarers and Cattlemen of the Mersey High Country* and *A High Country Heritage* drew me further into the romance of the valley as a whole.

I vowed to come back, and did. I found endless kilometres of perfect creek fishing. I hunted wild brown and rainbow trout that displayed a particular gusto for dry flies, and were snobbish about nymphs—hooray! The fish were all sighted from high banks, but stalked from their watery runs, among fluorescent green weedbeds, and log-jammed lairs. I also encountered something else unexpected in this part of the world, a relative trophy of 4 lb-plus, adding weight to Greg's stories of larger fish encountered in the area. Little did I know that more big fish encounters were to come.

Patrick Horan changes flies after a late season refusal on the upper Mersey.



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The Walls to The Cliffs . . . continued



A better-than-average Mersey brown.

FINNERS

By October I was fishing the Mersey flat-out, from the Alum Cliffs through Mole Creek, all the way to Lake Parangana, and further upstream past Lake Rowallan. I started with the obvious, friendly-looking water—what I thought would be stereotypical river fishing amongst perfectly structured pocket waters and gliding runs.

During this first trip to the Mole Creek area, I found mayflies racing up semi-submerged rocks where they hatched into duns. From next to these peaking rocks I clumsily spooked 1–2 lb brown trout. This was to be my first key lesson on the river—fish the shallows. It became obvious that from October to mid-December, the main source of food was the black spinner mayfly *Nousia*, which in this habitat was a crawl-out hatcher by preference. As the insects crawled up the semi-submerged rocks to hatch, the larger fish would move in accordingly, often finning around with their tails and dorsal fins exposed in mere inches of water while hunting moving nymphs and drifting duns. The presence of clouds of caddis along the river edges added to the shallow water fish-fodder, compelling me further to fish the skinny water. Good success followed on Shaving Brush flies, Bruce Gibson emergers and the like, but a deerhair fly I christened the Fastwater Dun won hands down—this was to become one of my staple flies throughout the year.

As summer approached, terrestrial activity was the next highlight. Black-tailed, red-coloured scarab beetles were everywhere, along with medium sized black cicadas, soldier (tea-tree) beetles, cinnamon jassids and gum beetles. Every eucalypt in the valley seemed to be in flower, along with

tea-tree and native waratah. The trout quickly turned to these land-based insects as their predominant food source, which continued right through to the end of the season.

As the terrestrial fishing improved, I began venturing deeper into wilder country, among gorges like the Alum Cliffs, Standard Hill, and the awesome looking stretch of river upstream of Croesus Cave State Reserve (which features public camping areas). Getting in and out of some of these mini-canyons was a real challenge, normally consisting of an hour or two of commando-course scrub-bashing when heading in, and equally when heading out.

The river among these places consists of wide sections, with enough room for two anglers to fish side by side. Huge glacial conglomerate rocks

instead, they are full of fish from 0.5 lb to 3 lb that are easily sight-fished and will take a dry fly from September until season's end in late April. The Mersey generally complied with this description—small fish, perhaps even small by Tasmania's standards, with 12-inch browns in the glides, and scrappy rainbows and browns in the fast water.

That said, the Mersey does differ further from most Tasmanian rivers. On dedicated occasions when I searched long stretches of water hard and fast, covering at least 4 kilometres or so, I would more often than not find a solid fish of 5 lb or better. These were fish with huge shoulders and short bodies, and intimidating to see after polaroiding 10-inchers all day. Greg and I and a couple of other mates managed to find eight or ten major fish, from 4 lb up to—wait for it—well into double figures. None were landed, such were the challenges.



Fishing an outside run on the Mersey, not far from Lake Rowallan.

are deposited throughout these gorges, creating serious pocket water, requiring reliable rock hopping skills from the angler. As a Gen XY fly fisher, I never thought I would use a wading staff, but I was converted as this enabled me to glide across the pocket water at speed, fishing 'rough and ready' in search of something that began to feature more and more—trophy trout.

Tasmania is no New Zealand, and our rivers rarely hold fish over 4 lb—

THE TROPHY

The fish (as it became known among my friends) was the biggest fish I had ever seen. Well into an afternoon, after five or so hours of gorge-hopping with Greg, I polaroided a huge, black tapered shape positioned smack in the middle of an open, gravelly tail-out. "It must be a blackfish," I reacted, but that didn't make sense—"Perhaps a giant native crayfish," I thought, with these known to grow up to double



No, this is not Fiordland NZ. It's rainforest country, upper Mersey Valley.

GRIG FRENCH

...THE SECTIONS OF HEAVIER POCKET WATERS WITHIN THE GORGES FEATURED HATCHES OF GIANT BLACK AND RED STONEFLIES...



digit sizes. But I knew what it was. I just wouldn't believe it—a massive brown trout. Greg raced over and shook his head, and I looked at my completely undergunned 7-foot cane rod. Nonetheless, from a position hidden by a massive boulder, I tied on a single nymph to help avoid drag in the tail-out. I went without an indicator—the only thing that differentiates Aussies from Kiwis, I remarked at the time, an anxious joke to calm the nerves.

The first couple of casts landed to the left side of the trout and resulted in nothing, so I tried for the right—most trout show a preference to feed on one side of their body or the other. The ploy worked, and on the second right-side cast the trout turned and nailed the nymph. Putting the wood to the trout from the word go kept it on a tight rein, leaving it thrashing on the surface while I made ground on bringing it down to me, but soon the hook pulled from the heavy kype and the fly flew back at me. I was devastated, but when the fish cruised down next to us, turned and hovered, I felt a mix-

ture of awe and further inspiration for the fishing possibilities of the Mersey. That night, camped beside the timeless scree of the river, we celebrated hard... probably too hard, resulting in some missing hours the next day as March flies feasted on my hung-over carcass.

TECHNIQUES

I learnt a lot on that day the trophy got away. Greg loves catching fish, and is never too precious to hang a nymph under a dry, which I admit I can be. In the skinny riffles he out-fished me easily, with small rainbows hitting the nymph half the time, and his buoyant orange Carrot Fly on the top the other half. Meanwhile, my conservative single dry was effective in the runs, but wasn't raising the fish it should have been. By the end of the season I had learnt enough to know that a nymph is essential to catch a good number of rainbows in the shallow, very fast riffles, but a two-fly rig consisting of the orange Carrot Fly (which the rainbows would take) and

the Fastwater Dun on the point was perhaps the best all-round rig for the bumpy water, while a Glister Tag and an unweighted Ostrich Herl nymph was ideal for the slower stuff.

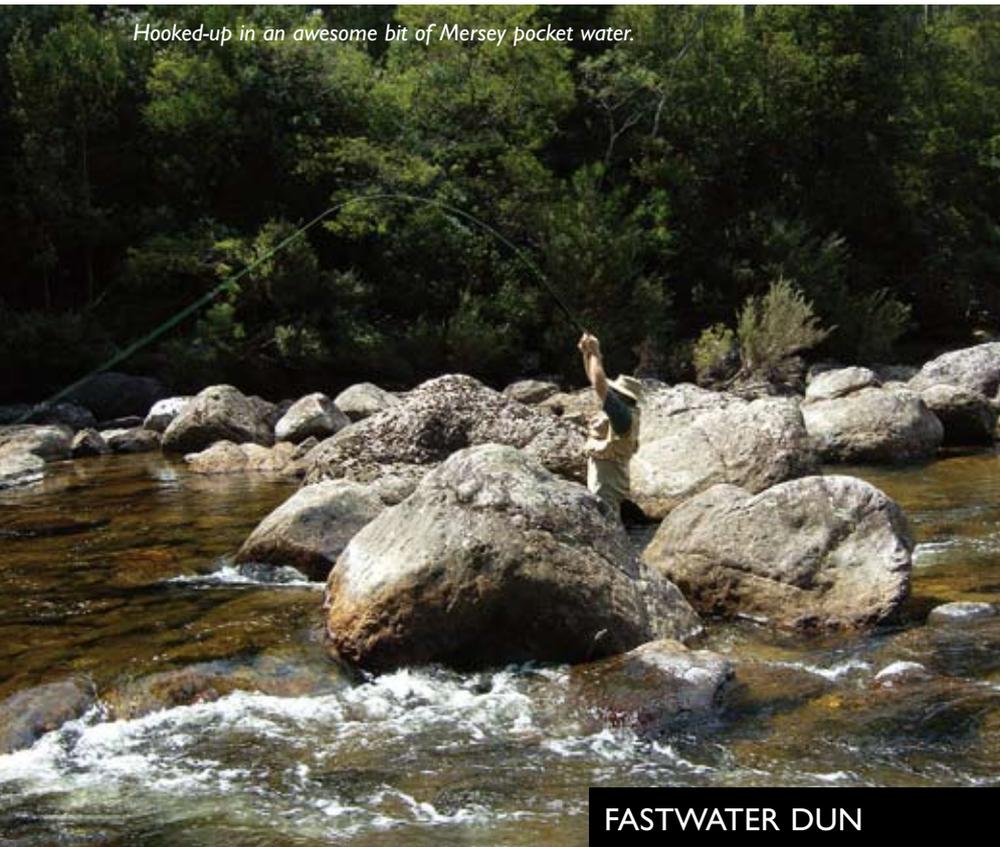
OTHER HATCHES

I have mentioned the terrestrial fishing through summer, and the spring mayfly hatches, but the Mersey has more. For a period of two or three weeks, during the peak of summer temperatures, the sections of heavier pocket waters within the gorges featured hatches of giant black and red stoneflies—think salmonflies in *A River Runs Through It*, or stoneflies in *The Hatch*. These are special, pre-historic insects. Huge nymphs ran up the semi-submerged boulders where they broke free from their nymphal skins.

I started fishing in a crass fashion—big black and red Chernobyl Ants matched the colour scheme and size perfectly, and trout, in particular rainbows of a pound, would rocket up through metre-deep pockets and smash the fly, often three or four

The Walls to The Cliffs . . . continued

Hooked-up in an awesome bit of Mersey pocket water.



FASTWATER DUN

HOOK: *Tiemco 100 #9-14*
THREAD: *Black 6/0*
BODY: *Rabbit or hare with lots of spiky guard hairs, sparsely blended with a little UV reflective dubbing*
TAIL: *Natural CDC*
OVERWING: *Premium deer hair, stacked prior to being tied in*



times. Hook-ups were poor, as they normally are with Chernobyl Ants, so I switched to my own WMD hopper. On patterns where I had substituted an orange body for the normal yellow I had instant success, and good hook-up rates on the messy, savage strikes. Short leaders, rod-length casts, and explosive takes—the fishing was fast, visual and exciting.

For the first time, the long, dark and deep runs of the Mersey also came alive during summer, with morning caenid hatches blanketing the water. To my surprise and satisfaction, good numbers of above-average sized browns could be polaroided as they cruised the surface for a couple of hours each morning, mopping up the hatched insects. CDC F-Flies and semi submerged Black and Peacocks were suitable flies but demanded quick, concealed and accurate casting. By late February these morning hatches dissipated, only to be replaced by some flat-out ant falls, leading to prolonged and challenging sight fishing sessions among these same pools.

THE FUTURE

As I write, my season of discovery on the Mersey is coming to an end. The last few weeks have been spent fish-

ing Lake Rowallan, a run-of-the-river hydro lake on the Mersey, where fish have been working up and down the screed lake edges mopping up gum beetles and ladybirds methodically. It is May, but the sight fishing has been as good as any you'd expect during the warmer months.

The thought of getting to Meston for a final fling this season electrifies my imagination, and the health of the Mersey River below Parangana

throughout the year bodes well for the future. Though man's impact on the valley in the form of Lake Rowallan and Parangana is disappointing, we all want electricity, and the impoundments are understandable. Community action during the late 1990s headed by John Reed, the Hedditch brothers and the Mersey NRM is credited with prompting the release of environmental flows from Parangana, and within a year or so of the first release in 1999, aquatic bug life was back to natural levels. The fishery is well on its way to recovery from what was, post-hydro, a dry river bed, though the fish populations still need a bit longer. In my opinion they still don't consist of the expected year class structures, but a plethora of young fish in the river bodes well for its future as a fishery on the rise—how often do you hear of fisheries on the rise these days? Let's hope the current State government considers the health of the Mersey as it works through current (economically and environmentally questionable) plans for increased irrigation networks throughout the state.

Forestry is another issue that has the potential to affect the fishery into the future. A majority of the river from Mole Creek to the Walls of Jerusalem is bounded by State Forest, managed by Forestry Tasmania. Clearfell coups above Rowallan impact heavily on the renowned wilderness values of the catchment. Logging south of Lake Rowallan impacts on both the entrance to the Walls of Jerusalem World Heritage Area, and the history-filled grazing properties. Eco-tourism is planned for this area, another interest group that Forestry Tasmania must work with for the benefit of Tasmanians. We must ask them to work better as forest managers, rather than forest harvesters, and in more constructive cooperation with the stakeholders of the valley, for the valley. **FI**



Caning a brown in ideal Mersey water—a shin deep run.