

A quick guide to methods and technique on the Lower Waikato River

Where can you catch large brown trout, day or night, and just metres from a main highway? The answer is the Lower Waikato River downstream from Cambridge.

From March through to November this fishery is an abundant food store for the large browns, especially during the whitebait season. Too many anglers overlook this local stretch of water, however this guide should help to show the techniques used to tap the potential of this under-used resource.

Tackle Needed

Spin fishing with a fly, spinner or softbait has proven to be the best method for ease of casting. The typical rod used is 1.8 to 2.0m long, with a light open type spinning reel and nylon around the 3 or 4 kg mark, to give you distance when casting.



Big brownie caught on a \$50 rod & reel setup.

A highly suitable entry level setup that usually only costs around \$50 with nylon is a Shimano IX 4000 rear drag reel with a Spectrum 2m rod of 2 - 4 kg line weight, it's not practical to go much cheaper when chasing these fish, (A \$20 budget special *will not* cut it). The fish above, caught on a Shimano setup, weighed over 6 lbs.

The rear drag reels, though uncommon, are very handy when playing a fish, and very kid-proof. You will also need a short-handled landing net because the weight of nylon used means you can't forcibly lift the fish out unaided.

Spinning with a fly

Terminal tackle consists simply of your chosen fly and one or two split shot placed on the 3kg main line at about 50 to 70 cm above the fly. You can have the split shot closer when used at night, and a tip is to buy the ones with lugs to make installing and removing off the nylon easier. The use of different weights of split shot will often make all the difference to catch rates. This method of fishing suits those anglers who prefer light tackle and a delicate approach to the fish- every touch is felt.

Fly Choice



Proven Waikato brown trout flies & easy to use split shot.

The choice of fly is anything that will resemble the sizeable baitfish that provide the main food source for these fish; Muddler Minnow, Woolly Bugger, Booby, Jacks Sprat etc. However, it is very hard to go past the simple but deadly rabbit fly, it seems to supply just the right action. The current popular colours are dark olive green for daytime/dusk and black for night-time. If you tie your own flies, use chemically sharpened hooks in a heavy gauge, around size 4, but you can go as small as size 8. Use a good long rabbit strip to accentuate the tail action, and you can add flashabou and red hackles or tails to your daylight/dusk creations. A plain, big black rabbit or woolly bugger is probably the best for night or coloured water use. Surprisingly, the darker colours stand out better in the discoloured water.

Another effective fly style is to simply tie in 2 marabou feathers “streamer style” over a silver chenille body as pictured above. The result looks a bit like a feather duster until wet, when the marabou does its job and provides a great action. Best colour is again olive green, but try also fluorescent yellow or pink!

Spinning Lure Choice

Spinning lures are a popular choice in this fishery, and are especially effective when the river is at higher levels, or you want to “punch” the line through willows. Popular choices are the black or copper Toby, copper or black Zed, red Veltic, Rapalas and the black insect spinner, useful for fishing into the dark. Of the 3 weights available, (7g, 10g and 12g) 10g is the most useful in the Toby range, and the 7g & 12g in the Zed. The Zed also has a higher error-free casting percentage, as the Tobies are designed more as trolling lures, and have a tendency to sometimes kink or catch the line when cast.

Also if feeling affluent, replace all lure hooks with *chemically sharpened* red large-eyed hooks size 2 or 4, this will result in much higher success rates, because trout use the weight of the lure to help shake the hook free, so you need every advantage you can get.



Toby, Zed & blade type spinners plus good hooks.

In flood or high water conditions the 12g weight in either the Toby or Zed is deadly, the added weight gets down to the trout and the bigger size stands out in the coloured water. Remember that the lighter spinning blade type lures like the Mepps or Veltics require a fluttering action to work well, cast them upstream on an angle and let them flutter down, or use in slower flowing areas and slow your retrieve down accordingly. You shouldn't need any added weight with most spinning lures, just use split shot if you do. You can use slightly heavier nylon, (say 4 kg up) with lures, this won't affect distances and gives you more chance of wrestling expensive lures off the weedy bottom or out of willow fronds. **Pg 3**

If your lure or fly gets caught on the bottom downstream from you and you can't get below it, try releasing a big loop of line down below it. Once it's pulling on the lure, give a good heave on the rod upstream, then reel in quickly. Quite often the change in pull direction will release the snagged hook.

Spinning lures are very effective on the brownies at most times of the day and especially in that golden light just before sunset. As with spinning the fly, you will find that the first 20 minutes or so of fishing will produce some sort of result if the fish are there. The drawbacks to spinner fishing are that you can't use the majority of them at night, they disturb the water more, and they are more likely to spook a fish that has a half-hearted attempt at it and feels the hook. If this happens and the next 2 casts get no result, swap to a different colour or spinner type. In contrast, a fish that only caught the tail of your rabbit fly or softbait will usually keep coming back for more, even after 4 or more attempts, and the percentage of trout hooked & landed on flies and softbaits is definitely higher than on spinners.

A good practice is always to fish your spot with a fly or soft bait first to avoid too much water disturbance, if that doesn't work and it still feels "fishy", convert to a spinner and that will often draw a rapid response.

Soft Baits

Soft baits have made a large impact on fishing success for the Waikato river. Trout must regard them as very lifelike because they certainly attack them well. Their advantages are ease of use with various weights available, quiet entry into the water unlike spinners, and the soft tail which doesn't alert fish in the event of a missed strike. Even the scented types are now legal in our area, another advantage. Select types that represent the bait fish and don't be afraid to go large, trout often attack very big quarry for their size.



The "Storm" range as shown is very popular, the paddle tail versions with internal jig head are easily attached to the 3 or 4kg mainline with tension hooks, snap swivels or loop knot. Price wise they are cheaper than most spinners but are not as durable, however they will usually catch their share of fish before loss occurs.

Be aware if using the original hook assemblies, these softbaits are often taken deep, so you'll need a pair of long nosed pliers or a knife to release them from the fish. You can replace the treble hooks with a single hook quite easily, this also helps prevent snagging the bottom or your net.

These softbaits also work well on Perch, another good eating fish found in the river and often described as "freshwater snapper".



The selection of lures here show 5cm Rapalas, softbaits including the naturalistic brown & rainbow trout and sculpin, smaller softbaits with ball head jig heads installed, and at the bottom is a ***combination insect spinner with a softbait body attached to the treble hook.***

In this way you can experiment with different colour combinations, and even use Gulp type scented softbaits as an irresistible tail for the rig. These are often used best by casting upstream and reeling them back towards you.

Experiment with any lures, salt or freshwater, if they roughly resemble the trout targets they will be attacked!

Other lure types & methods.

Tokoroa chickens (a hollow lead weight with a skirt of feathers) are also successful, usually in a brown or black colour, and relatively small weights. They have the advantage of being able to be used in the day or night like flies.

Bait Fishing.



A perfectly legal method for catching trout in the lower Waikato River. Use smelt, worms, bullies etc on small hooks either suspended below a float, or weighted to fish the bottom. You can only use fauna that comes from the area, and *parts* of fish like ova are illegal, so check your licence.

Using a ledger rig with a small ball sinker and about a 1 metre trace, the usual bait is a few worms on a single hook. You can cast upstream and bounce it along the bottom much like a spinner, or just allow it to rest on the bottom in a suitable position.

A second rig to try is with a float, select a trace length to match the water depth and use enough split shot to have the worms hanging naturally below the float. You can then cast into back eddies or slower parts of the river. Watch your float at all times to detect takes. With this rig you can also find a suitable clear bank and “walk” with the bait to cover more area- this is referred to as “trotting”.

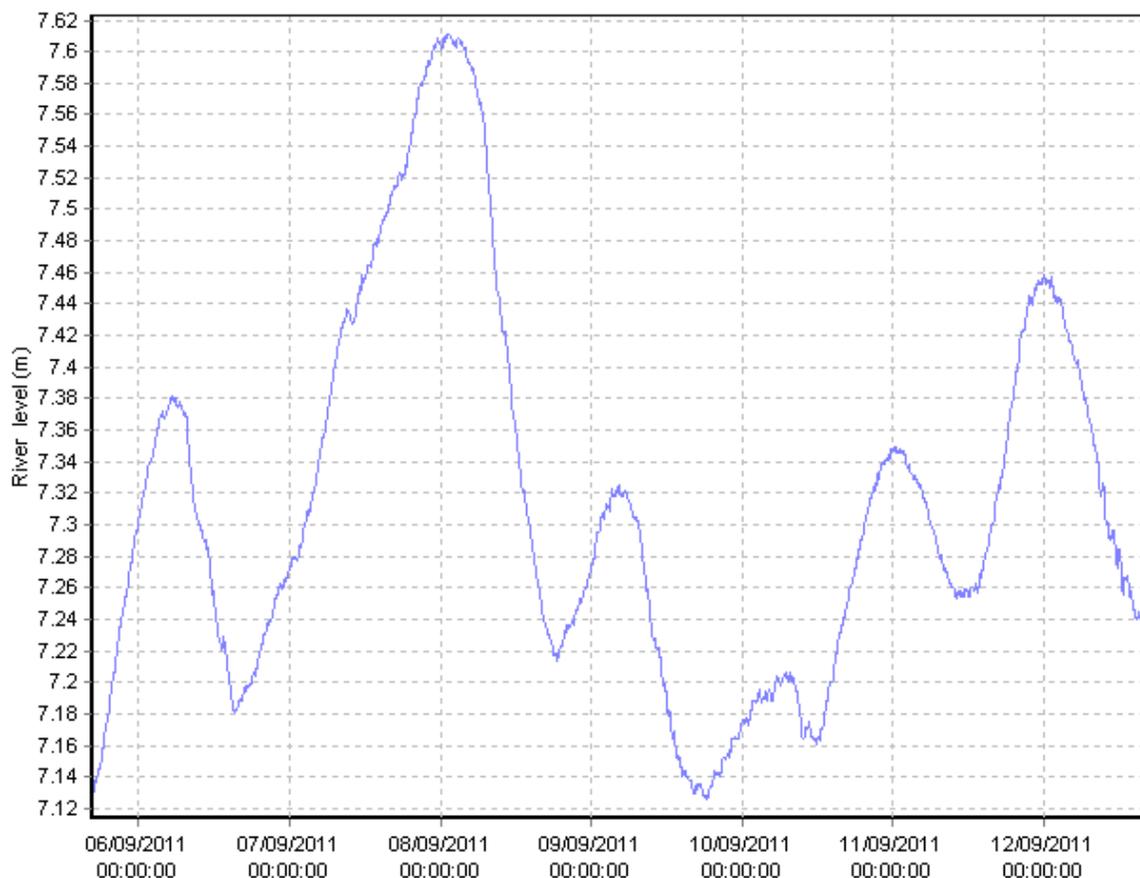
Where & When to fish.

A good fishing spot will have some or all of the following factors; swift current close to the bank, a weed line, some obstruction or uneven bottom for the fish to station itself behind, and willows or overhead cover. Once you have a few of these spots lined up on both sides of the river, you can pick and choose the most likely areas to fish considering the prevailing wind, water levels and clarity etc. The many bridges spanning the river in this area leaves both banks fairly accessible, but always ask permission if crossing private land, and respect the privilege.

Three ways to use your computer to fish!

A highly useful website to help deciding when to fish is Waikato Regional Council's **River Level & Flow** map page, select and save your fishing area's graph onto "Favourites" and you can check it anytime.

<http://www.waikatoregion.govt.nz/riverlevelsandrainfall/cgi-bin/hydwebserver.cgi/catchments/details?catchment=17>



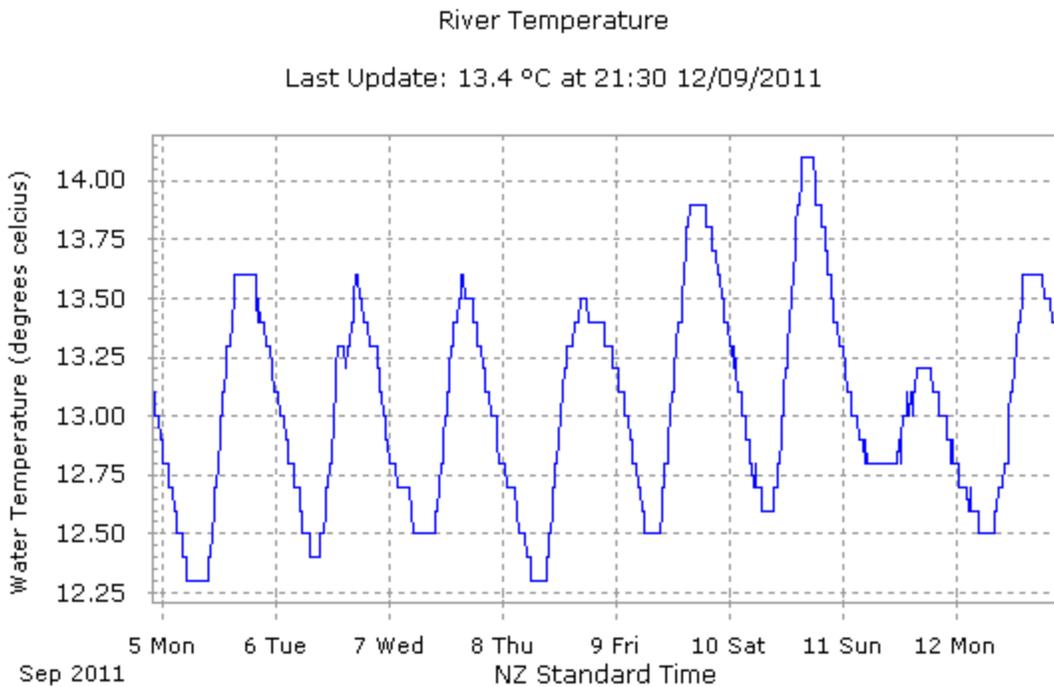
Huntly River level graph September 2011

Updated every 3 hours, they show the current water surface height above sea level for the Waikato River and others, and once you have caught fish at any spot you can identify optimum levels, remember those and return whenever the same height occurs. Some anglers prefer fishing when the river is clearing on a reducing level pattern, others when it's initially rising.

Around Huntly, the best level for many fishing spots is around the 7.6 to 8.4 metre mark (Huntly Power Station monitoring site).

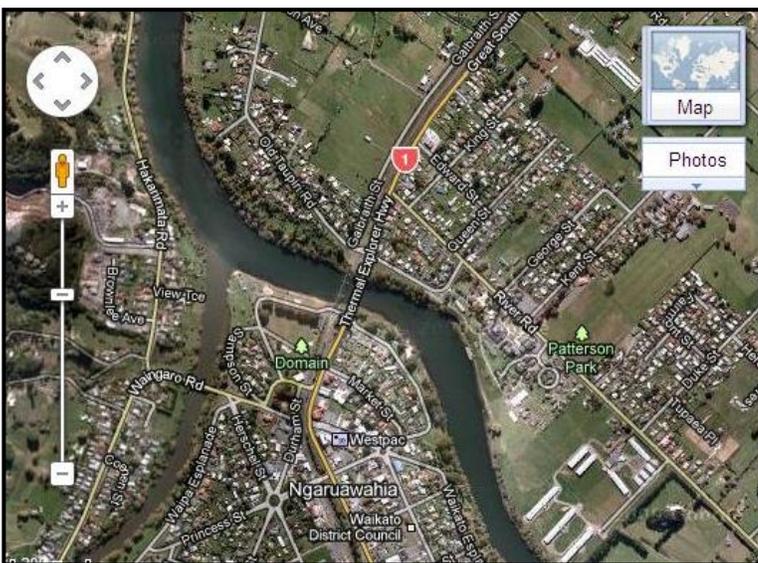
Another important consideration is **temperature**, optimum brown trout habitat is 13-17° C, and again Waikato Regional Council has a valuable resource on their site- Water temperature levels in the Waikato region.

<http://www.waikatoregion.govt.nz/Environmental-information/Rivers-lakes-and-wetlands/Water-temperature-levels-in-the-Waikato-region/>



Waikato River temperature at Rangiriri September 2011

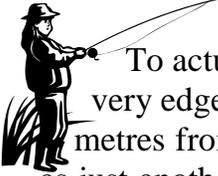
In this graph of river temperature at Rangiriri in early September, note the typical fluctuations from day to night, also the steady increase in overall temperature for 6 days, until the rain on Sunday 11th. Once average temperature hits 19 to 20° C plus in November, it gets increasingly hard to catch trout in the daytime. Wait for nightfall or a good drop of rain to cool the river during December to February.



Another tip: Use **Google Maps** to select an area you want to fish, use the *satellite map* option and zoom in to get a clear but overall view of the river. Use the mouse to crawl your way along the river following the twists and bends, and look out for good holding water close to access and roads. This gives you a perspective you might otherwise lose when standing on the bank of such a large river as the Waikato. You will find that most of the areas you normally catch fish in are on the outside of bends, bringing the main current and channel close to a deep bank.

Satellite Map of Ngaruawahia Point, where the Waipa and Waikato meet.

Fishing!



To actually catch the trout, *stealth* is the prime requirement. Brown trout will be stationed on the very edge of the river to intercept the migrating baitfish, so most fish caught will be less than 10 metres from your rod tip. There's no need to try and cast halfway across the river, treat the Waikato as just another stream. Your quarry will usually be just out in the current from you or downstream, so keep a low profile, keep back from the edge unless it's dark, and keep all ground vibrations to a minimum. Especially avoid heavy footsteps, dropping objects on the bank or dislodging stones.

Be very aware that in receding conditions the banks of the river will often be lined with wet, shiny mud which is extremely slippery, always avoid this and walk above it or on dry banks. Many rods and egos have been damaged by this fact!

If you take good care getting into a fishing position, you are more than likely to hook up on your first cast if the other factors are in your favour. Certainly the first 10 or so casts should be carefully executed, starting close in and then working progressively downstream. Using a spin rod enables you to swim the fly or lure on a short line right at your feet, and you should always try that first. If you start with small casts at the upstream position of your spot and hook up, you have avoided disturbing fish lower down with your line, and can often hook another brown very quickly after your first, particularly at night. The typical cast is across and about 45° upstream, releasing more line if the depth permits, and then a slow (and sometimes jerky) retrieve along the edge. At a new spot you should start your first few casts shallow until you have worked out the water depth.

Very often repeated swirls on the surface will show where a brownie has stationed itself for an easy meal, and these ones are relatively easy to catch. A pair of gold tinted Polaroid sunglasses are handy for spotting trout in reasonable light and clarity conditions. At other times the presence and activity of the baitfish will be your main guide. If you notice a school of these moving upstream at speed or skipping out of the water, cast in behind them, it's most likely a brownie rounding them up.

Bow waves will often give a fish away just before it hits your fly at close range. If it doesn't contact properly, freeze and resist the urge to reel in the fly. The "hanging" fly may induce another strike, or you can flip the bail arm and release some line to simulate a wounded fish tumbling downstream. If that fails, wait a while before your next cast, otherwise your movement will spook it. This gives the fish time to return to its normal position.

Once a good feeding position has been found, it will provide you with fish time after time when similar conditions and levels are present, because another trout will rapidly move into that prime position. The lower reaches of the Waikato are very stable, and once you have a sure spot organized it will remain so indefinitely, unlike smaller and boulder type rivers. If you spook or loose a fish, make a note of the time and the ideal cast, and try again in a day or two. It's very common to hook or catch the very same trout over a short period.

When caught, the brownies will normally head downstream, larger fish going deep and head-shaking, smaller ones making runs and tail slapping and leaping on the surface. You might need to adjust your drag for the weight of the fish. Once turned they normally come in easily to your feet, but be prepared for their last bursts of energy close to the net. The amount of fight they put up will be a good indication of their condition, which is normally pretty good. It is fairly rare to catch trout under the legal size of 300mm; in fact most specimens under 400mm are released because of the abundance of larger fish. Remember always that a short fat trout is far better than a longer skinny one, and the silver, fresh run trout have a better taste than the darker brown "resident" fish.

Night Fishing



This has always been very effective when targeting large brown trout, and gives you even more of an advantage. There are many spots around the towns on the river where easy access and even street lighting can make night fishing fairly comfortable & safe. It is still recommended to fish in pairs if possible for obvious safety reasons.

When possible survey the spot you want to fish in daylight that same day, work out where you'll stand and picture the optimum cast, even have a few dummy casts, you never know! This preparation will pay off big time at night, because it's a whole new ball game then. Use large black flies such as rabbit or marabou types as a general rule, with as slow a retrieve as you can manage to maximize your chances. It's easy to catch multiple trout from one spot if you're patient enough, and always take your landing net and a good torch or two. Tokoroa chickens are useful in this situation as well, and try a black insect spinner or softbaits in darker colours. Short casts are the norm, fish at your feet!



Steve Farrar night fishing 2012



A night's bag of 5 browns for 3 anglers



Steve Farrar (above) & Troy Garrett with a couple of nice browns (this one 3.224kg)▲ Pg 9

TROLLING ON THE LOWER WAIKATO FOR TROUT



Sol Taplin's trout of condition factor 56 from the Waikato river at Huntly, caught trolling 2010.



Trolling can be very productive on the Waikato River. These are the usual methods used by keen boat-fishos who like to cover a lot of water.

Taking your normal spinning rod and reel, with nylon around the 4 to 6 kg mark, a 1 oz (sometimes 2 oz) free-running ball sinker is anchored by a swivel about 80cm or so above the lure or fly. Suitable lures are the Black Toby in 10g or 12g sizes, the Copper Zed in 7g or 12g, or Tasmanian Devils/Cobras in gold/black combinations.

Flies to use, mostly in darker colours, are rabbits, muddler minnows and other streamer style flies. Use size 4 or bigger, with heavy gauge chemically-sharpened hooks if you tie your own. A useful and easy

fly that has been successful consists of a long tail of squirrel or bucktail, small body of chenille and a large round clipped deer hair head. This, when treated with floatant keeps the fly above the sinker when trolled on the bottom.

The optimum time to go trolling is when the river is reasonably high, but dropping and clearing after a period of rain. Always wear life jackets, have a pair of oars, and where possible head upstream initially from your launch area so you are trolling back to your vehicle. (It's not much fun if your outboard dies or you run out of petrol downstream!) Using your outboard (about 6 hp or more) or a strong pair of arms, head off downstream barely keeping ahead of the current. You can easily fish two lines from a small boat (one per angler), sometimes three.

Cast the line out directly behind you at a normal distance, and let the sinker bump along the bottom. The river bottom is mainly sand, and the puffs of sand this action creates attracts the trout. Your rod tip should be "tapping" evenly when you're at the right speed and depth, ie bouncing the sinker along the bottom.

Keep a finger on the nylon at all times to detect takes, with experience you'll also know when you've picked up weed because the action will change.

Follow the deeper, faster channels (a depth finder is very handy), hug the edges where possible (ducking in and out of the willows) and skirt around the slower, weedy areas. It is surprisingly rare to snag on the bottom, but you can usually retrieve your tackle by powering back upstream and getting above the snag. You will only find good snag-free water by experience, but be wary around towns, commercial areas etc where the bank has been built up.

When you hook a trout move away from the edge and drift down while playing it. If you catch a fish in an area (or get a touch), make a wide circle back upstream to avoid disturbance, check your line and troll back through the area again. There is no point leaving a “fishy” area to carry on fishing blind, you will often hit more fish again in that spot.

This is a great way to find new fishing spots for land-based fishing later, as the differing current rates are easy to spot while in the boat. You can, of course, drift quietly down to a previously unfishable position, anchor or tie up to the willows and fly or spin fish from the boat. This method is very effective at dusk and into the night.

Easy Smoking method

To enjoy the fruits of your labour, try the trout smoked. Simply gut the fish, cut off the head and split it down the backbone leaving the skin intact. Wash and pat the fish dry. Sprinkle on a dessertspoon of plain salt and a couple of spoonfuls of brown sugar or honey, and rub in. A pinch of mixed herbs or lemon pepper can also be added if desired. Cover in cling wrap on a 1-2 cm deep tray and leave it in the fridge (both sides flesh side up) for a few hours if possible.

Using a portable hot smoker with manuka sawdust, smoke it for about 20 to 25 minutes or until the flesh just starts to break away from the bones. You should only need 1 dish 1/2 to 2/3 full of meths, even for 2 fish. While it's still hot and moist, you will be able to remove all the bones easily. If you've got some to spare, trout prepared this way is well received by friends, family and neighbours.



Michael Lynch, Huntly

This version of the guide is bought to you by the organisers of the Lower Waikato river trout contest (2017). Now in its eighth year, results from the competition are used to give a snapshot view of the fishery. In terms of results and measurements of the fish caught, we can advise that the fishery is doing very well- results and catch rates are well ahead of the mid 1980's competitions held in the same area.

In fact many of those original young anglers are now parents, and bringing their children into the competition to share the excitement. The size and condition of these fish is ample evidence of a robust fishery with abundant food sources, and our wish as a committee is to show the general public the great untapped resource we have on our doorstep.

John Charteris of Taupiri, the instigator of the latest competitions, has been taking samples of trout otoliths (ear bones) to Waikato University for spectrum analysis. Measuring concentrations of chemicals in a cross section of the otoliths enables scientists to discover which waterways the trout has been in, and for how long, much like tree rings. His paper has been published covering local trout movements throughout their life cycles.

Contest organisers-

John Charteris, Peter Sweetman, Michael Lynch, Sharnay Cocup, William Van Zyl & Bob Gamble. Many thanks to our sponsors overleaf, who have helped immensely with their support. Pg 11



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