

THE GIANT TROUT of Tierra del Fuego

JIMMY CARTER

HAVING GROWN UP IN SOUTH GEORGIA, where the water in all the streams and ponds is warm, I had never fished for trout until I served as governor of Georgia and lived in Atlanta, just a short distance from the Chattahoochee River. That's where I learned the rudiments of fly fishing, and since then, my wife, Rosalynn, and I have taken every opportunity to learn the finer points of the sport, or art, from fine anglers and fly tiers who were kind enough to share their knowledge and experience with us.

In addition to some of our favorite streams in Pennsylvania, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Alaska, we have also fished in Canada, England, Wales, Ireland, Switzerland, New Zealand, Japan, Chile, and a few other places where our travels have taken us. We've caught and released trout, grayling, Arctic char, steelhead, bonefish, and Atlantic and Pacific salmon. But I was not prepared for the brown trout of Tierra del Fuego in one of the southernmost rivers of the Western Hemisphere.

The Adventure Begins

AFTER WE HAD FISHED for a day on Montana's Ruby River last summer, guide Chris Francis told me that he was booking trips to the Rio Grande River in southern Argentina. The fishing season there is during their summer, from early January to mid-April. At the time, I had no intention of traveling that far for another fishing adventure, but later some of my friends and I decided to make the trip.

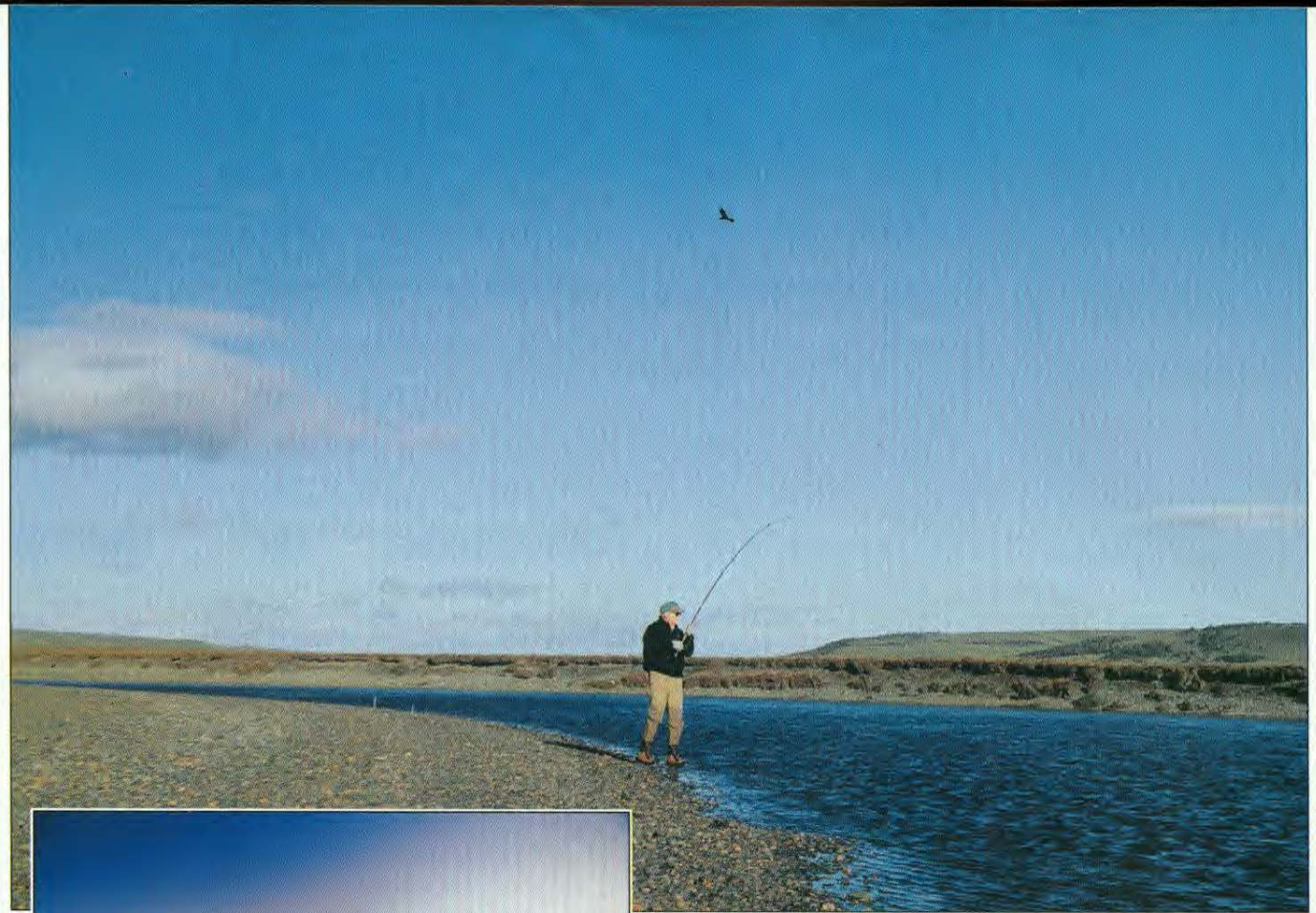
Treasury Secretary Bob Rubin told me that he had a good collection of relatively unused fly rods that he wanted to exercise when he retired from government service,



and Wayne Harpster, my annual host at Spruce Creek in Pennsylvania, said that he would like to join us. Even at a late date, we were able to book our party (including John Moores and Bob Wilson) late in March, near the onslaught of winter.

From the airport in Buenos Aires, our smaller commercial plane flew first to Ushuaia, the farthest point south in the world that is accessible by land vehicles. Explorer Ferdinand Magellan named the archipelago in 1520 when he saw many fires on the shore maintained by aborigines who had sighted the strange Portuguese ship. The Beagle Channel, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, was named for the ship on which Charles Darwin made his historic voyage. We then flew back north to the town of Rio Grande; the river of that name flows for about 60 miles, from the snow-covered Chilean mountains to the Atlantic Ocean. From there we drove westward about 35 miles to Estancia San Jose to spend five days in a newly remodeled and comfortable lodge.

During the long trip south, I had read *Tierra del Fuego*, a fine travel guide written two decades ago by Rae Natalie Prosser Goodall that included descriptions of the land, history, geology, flora, and fauna and had detailed maps of the area. When I arrived at the San Jose lodge, I asked our hostess, Cristina Azyera, if she was familiar with the book. She smiled and said, "The author is my aunt, a biologist, and I still live where she did most of the writing." I expressed hope that I might see some guanacos, a cousin of the llama and alpaca that lived farther north. I also said that I was especially interested in adding to my life birding list, and appreciated her aunt's descriptions of some endemic species that I might sight while on the river.

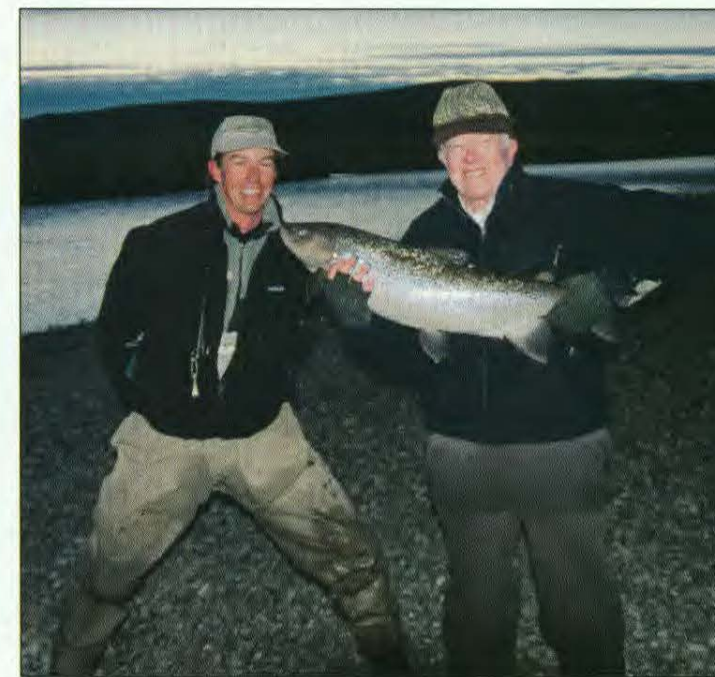


Former President Jimmy Carter catches the fish of a lifetime on an Argentine dream trip.

Rosalynn and I are avid birdwatchers, having taken up this new pursuit in Tanzanian game parks after climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in 1988. Since then, we have made appointments with knowledgeable birdwatchers in many of the countries we visit in our work for The Carter Center, and we have enjoyed mostly early morning visits to promising habitats, often in or near large cities.

Chris Francis had advised us to bring 8- or 9-weight rods, with both floating and sinking-tip lines, and flies that are commonly used for large trout in the Northern Hemisphere. I also had a 6-weight outfit just in case he was exaggerating the size of our quarry. On the other hand, Wayne Harpster brought a 14-foot Euro-Spey rod, to be used when fishing a dry fly in the strong winds. This is the most common tackle for most of the lodge's European guests.

On the first night there I met guide Justin McCarthy, who told me that he had been on the estancia each season for seven years and had seen some remarkable improvements in the lodgings and the countryside. He spends parts of his year guiding on the Kola Peninsula of Russia, Northeast Iceland, and Los Roques, a group of

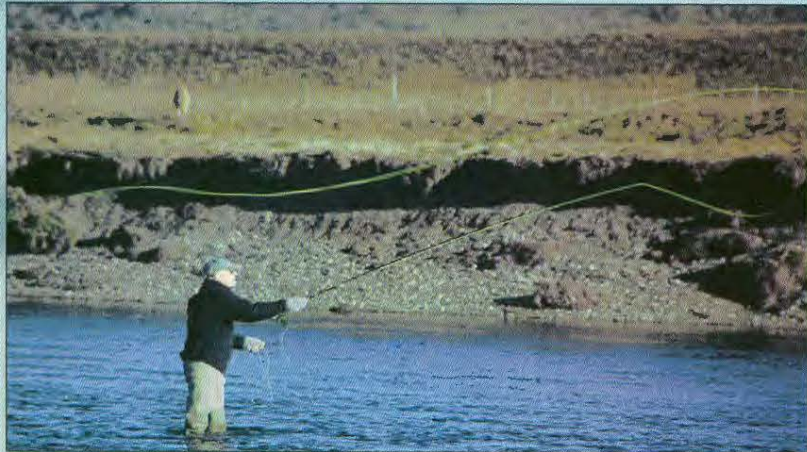


Former President Jimmy Carter (above) holds his first Rio Grande sea-run brown trout and (right, top) plays it on the San Jose water near the Argentine/Chilean border as an Andean condor soars overhead. "Just before sundown, I had a ferocious strike . . . I finally beached him in shallow water and Justin tailed him. It was a book-jawed male brown, strongly colored, that I measured at 36 inches . . ."

President Carter's last piece ("Spruce Creek Diary") appeared in our Jan./Feb. 1982 issue. The Editor.

islands just north of the mainland in Venezuela. I was pleased to learn that he was familiar with bird species of the area. He promised to help me sight one of the giant Andean condors during the week, but he said the Chilean flamingos had already moved north to warmer places.

The sun was shining brightly the next morning, and I was relieved that I didn't have to burden myself with the many layers of clothing I had brought. On the way



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to the stream with Justin, I was surprised and pleased to see dozens of guanacos, a large group of wary wild horses with their foals, several gray foxes, and a wide variety of hawks, eagles, caracaras, ibis, and geese. We stopped the Land Rover so I could have a good look at each new bird. The hilltops were covered with trees, mostly beech, but there was little foliage in the lower plains except some tree clumps along the streams.

Justin pointed out that all the sheep had been removed from the 24,000-acre estancia, and the natural

grasslands were returning rapidly. The entire area would now be a permanent wildlife refuge, with all birds and indigenous animals protected. The exceptions were the feral gray foxes and enormous beavers, twice as large as those I knew in Georgia, which were severely damaging the scattered woodland areas that border the river.

One of the nice features of the San Jose lodge is that its land lies along the relatively impassable border of Chile, so that guest fishermen are almost completely isolated, except for a few poachers from Chile that are apprehended and turned over to the authorities. A beneficial and unobtrusive exception to the isolation is a high antenna that provides telephone and Internet connections from San Jose through Rio Grande to the rest of the world.

We drove in a general northwestward direction to reach the river where it serves as the border with Chile. Justin explained that with the clear skies we had, he would recommend a floating line and light-colored flies, either hitched with the tippet to skitter across the surface or permitted to run at a depth of an inch or two. This was the same technique that Rosalynn and I had used for Atlantic salmon. On cloudy days or at night, we would also be trying darker flies fished deep, perhaps using stacked upstream mends to let the sinking-tip sweep the fly along the bottom.

Trout and Condors

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT THE RIVER, I was delighted to find a smooth gravel bottom, perfect for wading even without a staff. Most of the choice fishing places were along steep undercut banks that could be approached by wading out on sloping bottoms from the opposite side. The only serious problem was the strong cold west wind, which varied from 20 to 45 miles per hour. In most places, a long double-haul cast was helpful in keeping me well away from the deeper pools that held the shy sea-run browns. Fortunately, we were usually facing northward, so that, with the wind coming from my left, as a right-hander I was not

forced to roll-cast constantly nor was I threatened with a fly line being wrapped around my neck. Despite the sunshine and what seemed at the lodge to be a moderate day, I was soon trembling all over and trying to keep the exposed tips of my fingers from freezing.

I had been casting a dry fly close under the far bank and letting it dance across the surface for about an hour when there was a powerful swirl and I had a nice female brown trout on my line. She leaped several times as I carefully backed into shallow water, and Justin shouted, "Look behind you!" I twisted around enough to see an amazingly large bird gliding down from the Darwin Mountain range in Chile, its flight path almost directly over us and toward a steep hill across the river.

"It's one of the condors, and it's coming to soar in the updraft from the hill. They have a wingspan of more than ten feet, and that's a big male," Justin said. He took some photos of me, the fish, and perhaps the condor, and we released a 27-inch sea-run brown trout, its strong coloring showing that it had been in the river for several weeks. It was one of the largest trout I had ever caught: I have taken an 8-pound rainbow in New Zealand, several steelhead in the 12-

pound range on the west coast of Canada, and a 12-pound rainbow from the Copper River near Lake Iliamna in Alaska. By the time I cast again, there were three condors soaring above the nearby hill.

Between lunch and afternoon tea back at the lodge, we had the first snow flurries of the coming winter, so I put on all the clothes I had brought and also borrowed an extra jacket. We went back to the river at about 4:30 P.M., planning to fish for about five hours until well after dark. Still using a floating line, we tried different flies, including Silver Blues, Golden Stones, Salk River Shrimp, Teeny Leeches, Woolly Buggers, and a small fly with rubber legs similar to one of my favorites for bluegill bream in my farm pond. All of us caught "small" browns and rainbows in the 16- to 26-inch range, some of them year-round residents and others having returned to their home stream from a stay in the ocean.

Just before sundown, I had a ferocious strike. An obviously powerful fish went to the bottom and resisted the force of my doubled rod and maximum reel pressure for 15 minutes. I finally beached him in shallow water and Justin tailed him. It was a hook-jawed male brown, strongly colored, that I measured at 36 inches and the guide estimated to weigh 17 pounds.

Bob Rubin, on his first day, fished the upper reaches of the Menendez River, a tributary of the Rio Grande. He was looking for resident trout, but hooked and landed a 16-pound sea-run brown on his relatively light tackle. After that, he decided to join us on the larger river.

Trophy in the Run

THE MUD HOLES IN THE ROAD were frozen solid each morning, and we sometimes fished in driving rain or snow, but no one was ever tempted to stay in the lodge when fishing was available. Because of the cold, I had a problem, usually after dark, with ice filling the guides on my rod. Dipping the rod in the water would give temporary relief. We rotated stretches of the stream each half-day during the rest of the week, and all of us caught at least one brown trout that exceeded ten pounds. They were progeny of fish from Europe that were first introduced into the Tierra del Fuego streams about a century ago.

With limited natural food but superb spawning conditions in the cold, swift, gravel-bottom streams, a portion of the browns began spending their growing seasons in the sea, and they developed into the beautiful specimens of today. There is also a good population of resident trout, both browns and rainbows, that we could see rising in the shallower water and often swimming around our legs as we stood still and cast our lines.

Some of them were large enough to give a shocking thrill in most trout streams I had fished.

On the third morning, I landed a 13-pound female brown on a small, sparsely dressed Silver Blue fly, and on the way downstream toward another pool I looked up to see a pair of long-necked birds. As they passed overhead, we could see that they were Chilean flamingos. This was the fifteenth of the Tierra del Fuego bird species that I could add to my life list. That afternoon we rotated up to the head of the estancia's stretch of water. We stopped long enough to climb a hill adjacent to the stream that gave a breathtaking panoramic view up and down the river and across of the Chilean mountain range.

After making a few casts in a large stretch named Humphrey's Pool, we walked upstream to the narrowest run where the river rushed through a deep channel. As I began to make short casts into the turbulent water, I was startled by a high-pitched tinny sound, and looked up across the opposite bank to see a large male guanaco, protesting because I was encroaching on his territory. I was using a Salk River Shrimp pattern on a #14 hook when a large fish took my fly and began swimming slowly



"I was using a Salk River Shrimp pattern on a #14 hook when a large fish took my fly and began swimming slowly and majestically downstream . . . When I finally pulled the trout up on the gravel, we measured her to be 39 inches long . . . That evening the guides and lodge manager honored me by naming the site 'Carter's Run.' I almost dropped my trophy fish before we released her."

and majestically downstream. I moved in the same direction, maintaining as much pressure as I felt the 1X tippet could take, thrilled and alarmed each time the silver-sided female leaped into the air. Justin ran down the bank about 75 yards to show me a partially exposed log on which the fish might become entangled, but the fish finally turned and moved back toward me and I took in line as rapidly as possible.

When I finally pulled the trout up on the gravel, we measured her to be 39 inches long. Justin estimated that

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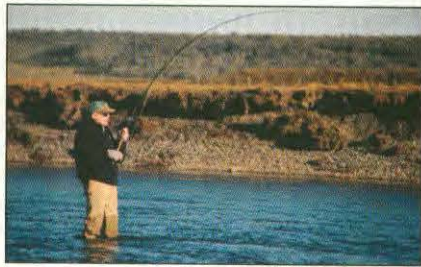


TIERRA DEL FUEGO . . .

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she was nine or ten years old and weighed 22 pounds. After taking some photographs, we watched the fish disappear into the stream, and I sat on the bank until I could recover my strength and wits enough to fish again.


That evening, the guides and lodge manager honored me by naming the site "Carter's Run," a place I'll never forget. In one of the toasts, I promised that the next time I come to fish the Rio Grande, I won't bother to bring my smaller rod.



"I moved in the same direction, maintaining as much pressure as I felt the 1X tippet could take . . ."

It was a thrill for me to catch some enormous trout, but I will also never forget how all of us forgot our rods momentarily as we watched the Andean condors glide overhead and then soar high above a nearby hill. One of the guides said, "That largest male has a wingspan of about eleven feet. Except for the wandering albatross, that's the greatest of all."

During our last meal together, we all agreed that we had never had a fishing experience like this one. The almost constant wind and increasing cold had faded into relative insignificance as each of us landed trout that would have been literally incredible in most places on earth. The beauty of the strange landscape would never be forgotten, and the crystal-clear river with its gravel bottom was a delight for wading and casting.

Each day, we had seen more wildlife than in most national game parks, and it was exciting to know that the natural habitat was being restored to its original state—similar, perhaps, to what it was when the natives first sighted the Portuguese ships 460 years ago. We were all glad that Magellan had made the discovery. 

JIMMY CARTER, an avid fly fisher, was president of the United States from 1976 to 1980. This is his second contribution to FLY FISHERMAN. His first was "Spruce Creek Diary" (January/February 1982). He has written 14 books, including *An Outdoor Journal* (1988), and founded The Carter Center (www.CarterCenter.org), a non-profit organization that works to prevent and resolve conflicts, enhance freedom and democracy, and improve health globally.

JIMMY CARTER'S GIANT SEA-RUN TROUT

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