

The writer draws a big grayling to the net on a sparkling pool on the Unec.

Grayling at the foot of the Alps

Slovenia's rivers are stuffed with grayling but, as PAUL PROCTER discovers, catching the big ones demands stealth and skill

GRAYLING AT THE FOOT OF THE ALPS CONTINUED

← **F**OR A COUNTRY that's half the size of Switzerland, Slovenia has a wealth of incredible fishing on offer. Part of the former Yugoslavia before independence, it lies on the eastern edge of the Alps and it is those mountains that give the rivers their character.

The alpine limestone combines with snow-melt to produce cold, turbulent but calcium-rich mountain torrents that wend their way into the lush green valleys. Here the gin-clear water runs over golden pebbles to provide some of the best — and most spectacular — trout and grayling fishing in the whole of Europe.

Anglers can stay at the scenic Bača Retreat.

Bigger fish are on offer, too. A local sub-species of *Salmo trutta*,

the ferocious marbled trout frequents the darker corners of the rivers and lakes, waiting to ambush any fish that pass too close. Marbles of 20 lb are not uncommon, thanks to their high-protein diet.

Despite the huge head of quality fish, the clear water means skill is needed to charm the slippery residents. Take the Unec, for example. Pronounced "Oonitz", this cheery but chilly chalkstream flows through the Postojna cave system, disappearing several times before finally surfacing near the rural village of Plannina. The enriched waters then quietly shoulder their way towards the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana.

Although a recognised brown trout river, it has a very healthy head of grayling. As you'd expect in such a calcium-rich stream, many of them push the scales to that sought-after 2 lb mark. Spotting the shoal fish is relatively easy but tracking down the larger, solitary specimens requires patience. Grayling are masters of their environment and simply melt into the pebbly substrate, betrayed only by the occasional delicate rise.

Luckily, I was staying with guide Kevin Smith, of Slovenia Fly Fishing, who has more than just a

good eye for locating the better fish.

The rich stream is blessed with a menagerie of insects: shrimp, caddis and upwinged flies are the most common. As blue-winged olives headed the bill during my visit, a size 16 Cul de Canard (CdC) pattern seemed most appropriate. The clear water and the possibility of fickle fish called for a long leader, too.

I finally settled on a 14 ft leader tapering to a 2 lb point. Grayling are notoriously quick to reject a fly and the local river guard (bailiff to you and me) reckons these fish rank among the fastest he's seen. I greased the leader to within 2 ft of the fly to ensure a swift, clean lift but decided it was best to hone my

reflexes on some moderate-sized fish before graduating to those silent shadows lurking close to the waving ranunculus fronds.

Fortunately I found a shoal guzzling down flies on what appeared to be a fairly innocent-looking glide. How wrong can you be? Quietly located downstream of the feeding pod, I launched my assault. For once everything landed precisely as intended. Drifting some 2 ft, my dry-fly was just reaching the critical zone when an unseen force whisked it sideways. Further attempts ended in much

the same way as some vicious micro-currents thwarted my attempts at a drag-free drift.

Although a single-fly policy exists throughout Slovenia, there are no restrictions regarding fishing

risers and made a tentative cast. This time, a slender shape peeled out of the ranks and pivoted upwards to meet my fly. Suspended agonisingly in mid-water, the grayling hovered below

it for what seemed an age before finally committing itself to a gratifying rise. Minutes later, 16½ inches

of pristine Unec grayling was straining my net.

To say that the grayling have striking markings is an understatement. Rich golden flanks embellished with black freckles and a dorsal fin that sports a →

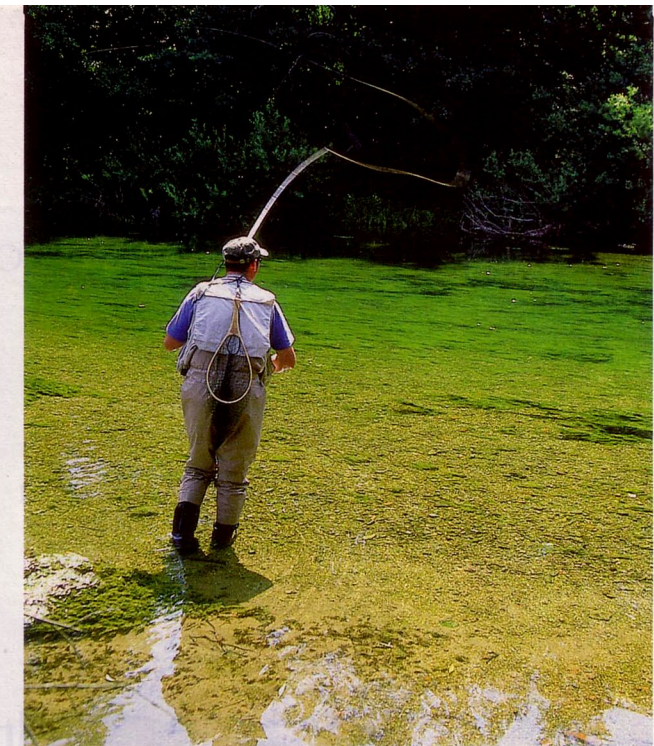
"Grayling are masters of their environment"

downstream. In turbulent currents or places where converging creases and folds make presentation tricky, a downstream cast can be your only real hope.

I revised my position so that I was just upstream of the dimpling



Fishing upstream of the bridge, where subsurface flies may be used.



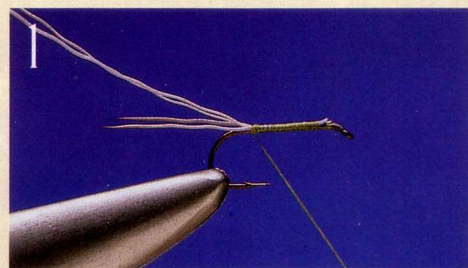
Gin-clear water means you can see the fish clearly — but they can see you, too.



Dressing the CdC Olive

Kevin Smith, our guide and lodge owner ties numerous fly patterns to his credit, most of which are designed to suit demanding waters like the Unec River and the famous Soca. His CdC Olive is a delicate little number that fools the most selective fish — the CdC wing gives it superb flotation properties and a great outline, too. It is a must for the fast, broken waters of the Slovenian rivers.

Hook Size 12-18 **Thread** Olive 8/0 though this may vary, depending on imitation **Tail** Dun elk hair **Back** Dun elk hair **Wing** Natural CdC



Catch in the tying thread and tie in four elk hair fibres — two by the tips and the others, which will form the tail, by the butts, immediately behind the hook eye. Secure all four on top of the hook shank with firm turns of the thread. The tail whisks should sit on either side of the other two fibres.



Divide the tail fibres by pulling the butt ends of the elk hair towards the hook eye. Take the thread in open turns back to the eye to create a segmented effect. Trim away the waste butts. With the thread positioned three or four turns from the eye, tie in two CdC plumes with the tips pointing forward. Secure them with two turns of thread.



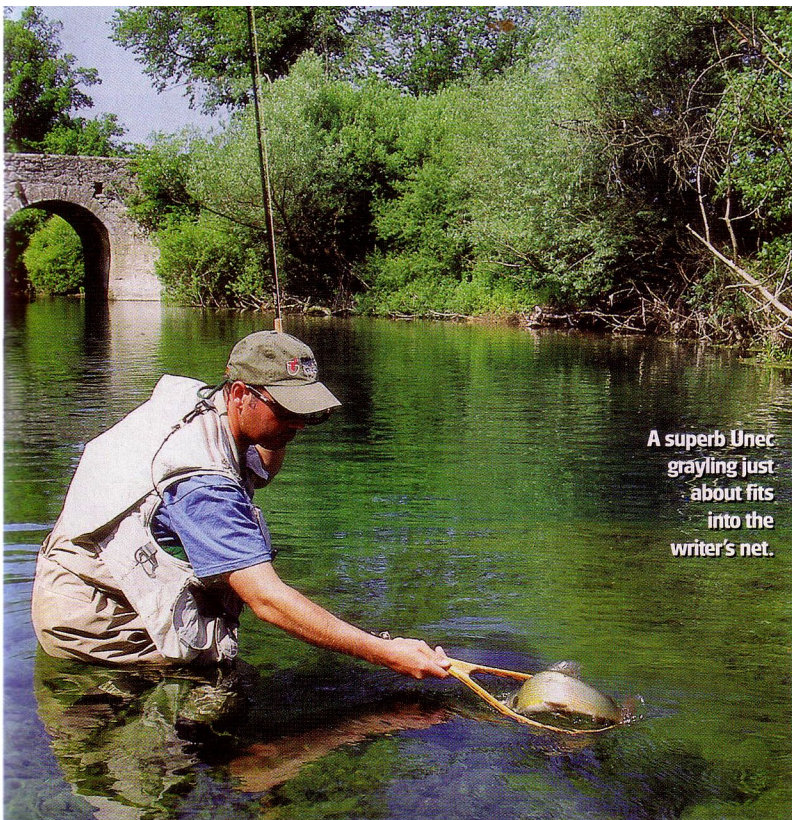
Maintaining tension on the thread, grasp the tips of the CdC plumes. With a positive upward tweak, pull the stems out, leaving the downy fibres of the CdC minus their stalks. This operation may take a few attempts to perfect.



Trim the CdC plumes lying over the body to a square.



Double back the forward-facing plumes to form the upper wing. Form a small head before completing the fly with a whip finish. Finally, trim away any wayward fibres from the upper wing.



A superb Unec grayling just about fits into the writer's net.

of a racing current seam. Some serious side-strain persuaded him to turn into an eddy and I quickly regained the upper hand. Moments later, my net folded around a beautiful cock grayling. Measuring 19½ inches, he was the best of our trip.

By early evening the fish started stirring once more in the smooth glides. Now, with the fading sun, it was possible to wade within easy reach of a shoal. This helped greatly with the presentation side of things. Hatching blue-winged olives needed to be quick off the mark or they would disappear in a blipping rise.

The grayling had plenty of time to scrutinise any offering, so fly choice warranted some thought. My Olive Paradun works a treat on the grayling back home, but it wouldn't wash with their Unec brethren. It was time to try a local favourite created by my host.

exploring many of the country's various other rivers, yet every time I'd find myself searching out the grayling rather than the trout. If New Zealand is the place to go for brown trout, Slovenia must be right at the top where grayling are concerned.



Factfile

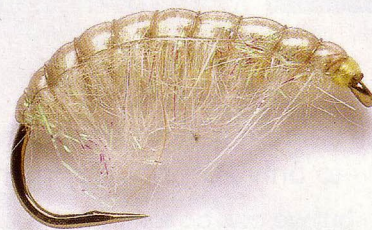
Contact Kevin Smith at Slovenia Fly Fishing for tailor made holidays. Fully guided trips or self guiding with accommodation available at the Bača Lodge. The lodge is located close to 5 rivers and is designed with comfort and relaxation in mind.

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I spent the rest of my visit

Three for Slovenia



LIGHT SHRIMP (GEOFF JOHNSTON)

Hook Size 1-14 Kamasan B-100 **Underbody** Lead wire **Thread** Primrose 8/0
Rib Clear mono **Body** Cream rabbit with a hint of pearly flashabou dubbing
Shellback Pale grey Thinskin or similar

This is one that Eden expert Geoff Johnston developed for bugging the Cumbrian rivers. It is adored by grayling everywhere, and, since it is highly visible to the angler, it is one of my top patterns for Slovenia.



SHRIMP

Hook Size 10-14 Kamasan B-100 **Thread** Tan/grey 8/0 **Rib** 3 lb clear mono
Abdomen and legs Tan Snowscud dubbing and grey squirrel 50/50 **Shellback** Light grey/olive Thinskin, flexibody, latex

This unassuming, simple Shrimp works well in clear water. Its sober colour arouses little suspicion, even from the wariest grayling.



BRASSIE VARIANT

Hook Size 10-14 Kamasan B-980 **Thread** Claret 12/0 **Body** Wapsi Ultra wire (wine shade) **Thorax** Mole's fur **Head** Glass bead

Grayling are great takers of small flies. This little fellow has taken countless fish for me over the past few winters and the Unec fish showed a particular fondness for it.

TROUT AND SALMON