

# Suspended in mid-air.

PAUL PROCTER fishes for grayling and three species of trout in the ethereal rivers of alpine Slovenia



Returning a good fish to the cold, clear water.



## ← SUSPENDED IN MID-AIR CONTINUED

I CAN THINK of few places where you can stand on a rock and spook a 4 ft trout. But it's happened to me in Slovenia. It has arguably the finest rivers in Europe, one of which I'd rank as good as any in the world.

From its lofty source in the lee of the Austrian and Italian Alps, the Soca's intensely blue waters flow south over limestone that is so white it would not be out of place on a Cuban flat. Add unspoiled grass meadows, abundant wild flowers and the constant hum of insects and it's no wonder I've returned here every year – I'm already planning two trips this summer.

The fish like it, too, because although it is classified as rainfed, snow-melt is a major contributor and water temperatures remain stable, if not chilly, even in the height of summer. With air temperatures nosing 35 deg C, I have recorded the Soca at a nippy 9 deg C. Trout and grayling thrive and remain active even during a heatwave. Here, in deep, clear pools, you will find specimen fish that will test your mental steel.

But before discussing familiar fish, I don't want to overlook *Salmo marmorata* – the marbled trout. Existing primarily on a high-protein diet of grayling, this salmonid can attain an incredible weight. Fish of 20 lb are not uncommon in Slovenia and I'm told the current record stands at an amazing 57 lb. When hunting, this fish moves with a purpose that has been likened to that of a stalking leopard. With markings to match the cat, these elusive creatures easily capture the imagination – if you're not careful, a whole week can slip by in search of a specimen.

However, the introduction of brown trout into the Adriatic

system many years ago nearly led to their demise. Interbreeding caused hybridisation, which heavily affected the marbled species' genetic integrity. Thankfully, the discovery of a few isolated pockets in the upper Soca saved the day and the Ribiska Druzina Tolmin angling club's rearing programme has helped them establish an even surer place in the stream. Meanwhile, hybrids continue to survive and provide cracking sport – they are among the prettiest trout I have seen.

With the prospect of catching four species of fish in one day, and with the mountains towering overhead, the upper reaches of the Soca are as appealing a place as you could wish to fish. Where the River Lepena joins, the water is so clear you'd almost swear fish were suspended in mid-air.

Of course, seeing them is one thing; persuading them to take a fly is quite another. This demands skill, patience and lateral thinking. On a recent trip, two visitors, whose nationality I couldn't quite place, were studiously trying to prize a rainbow or two from a

OLIVE CDC

Hook Size 12-16

Mustad R30

Thread Tan 8/0

Tail Coq de Leon

Body Golden-olive Superfine Wing Natural CDC.

A length of black floss helps part the wing – a style that I saw demonstrated by Marc Petitjean many years ago and which has served me well since.



Paul hangs on to a powerful rainbow on the River Soca.

sizable shoal. We got chatting and they invited me to have a couple of casts. After trying all my "specials" and catching only two fish, I asked what flies they were using. Their exact imitations were similar to my own and had also yielded little. Yet the fish weren't easily spooked – they continued to quarter the current, harvesting nymphs.

My fingers rummaged through my fly-box and settled on a size 16 Waterhen Bloa. Slovenia has a single-fly policy, so to get the fly down I needed to add a split-shot to the leader. This wouldn't be traditional spider-fishing. But the stubborn rainbows responded – and not just the trout. There, among them, were the gilded flanks of grayling, which melted into the riverbed until hooked.

Another change, this time to conventional nymphs, drew another blank. Then I tried a size 18 Black Spider and it was relished by the fish. I had to question my initial tactic of using realistic

patterns, which, given that the water was as clear as Gordon's, I thought had been a sensible ploy. Who would have thought a simple turn of thread and hackle would fool these fish? Along with my guide, Kevin Smith, and the friendly visitors I had met, I think we all learned something that day.

Further downstream lay a very different prospect. In the type of thundering pool found usually in only the deepest gorge was a shoal of large rainbows. I had to break down my rod and clamber over the rocks, but it was well worth the effort – the pool's "undisturbed" occupants shouldered the heavy currents, eagerly awaiting their next meal and pouncing on a carefully presented Stonefly nymph. Once hooked, they made for the underside of large boulders and then, if I succeeded in getting them clear, powered downstream on paddle-sized fins. I had one on that must have been 8 lb, which dragged my rod-tip under the

water before rocketing through an underground arch and throwing the hook. On average, one in three graced my net, but what trout!

A word of warning, though: the Soca is powerful and commands respect when wading. It's not that the current knocks you over – the gravel is literally washed from under your feet and you can be quickly carried to deep water...

Despite the Soca's magic, other rivers were beckoning me. With the notable exception of water clarity, I think the Idrijca shares similarities with the Wharfe. I felt at home in its rocky runs, surrounded by deciduous trees, with the valley sides rising above me. Here, in turquoise pools, grayling congregated in numbers. The opportunities for sight-fishing were endless and I armed myself with a Bead-head Hare's Ear. For me, there are few greater pleasures in fly-fishing than watching a good grayling inhale a drifting nymph.

**BEAD-HEAD HARE'S EAR**

**Hook** Size 10-14  
Mustad R50 **Thread**  
Primrose 8/0  
**Tail** Light dun hackle fibres  
**Rib** Copper wire  
**Body** 50:50 hare's ear and grey squirrel dubbing  
**Bead** Black  
In clear water I found a black bead more acceptable, though a dull copper bead can be equally deadly.



Markings on this grayling are caused by a thickening of pigments.



A brown trout/marbled trout hybrid.

**SUSPENDED IN MID-AIR** CONTINUED

← My most recent visit coincided with the height of the blue-winged olive season. No prizes, then, for guessing how many of my evenings were spent. And just when I thought it couldn't get better, returning female spinners joined emerging duns to intensify the action. With fish guzzling all around, a beginner might find it difficult to know where to cast in the melee – the key is to keep a cool head and target individual rise forms. The grayling responded best to a delicately placed CDC dry-fly.

It's hard to imagine a more handsome fish than these Slovenian grayling, their golden flanks embellished with black freckles and their dorsal fins topped with a sapphire-blue crest (which is more conspicuous underwater). There is also a distinctive pinkish imprint behind the pelvic fin, rear of the belly, and sometimes extending to the caudal fin. This is not disease: it's caused by a thickening of natural pigments. Although much depends on age, sex, habitat, latitude and other variations, it generally becomes more marked towards and during spawning. My thanks to Dr Sabaddini of the Grayling Society (Italy) for enlightening me.

To my mind, the rivers Baca and Tolminka are like miniature Socas. Renowned for its sedge hatches, the Tolminka's pebbly bottom was carpeted in cased caddis when I fished, and a slender, grubby



Paul fishes "Indian-style" upstream on the Baca.

looking Hare's Ear tempted several good trout. The Baca required a stealthier approach. A series of weirs are known hotspots, just a stone's throw upstream of where it connects with the Idrijca. Here, rising fish were stationed in all the pools. Treading cautiously through the thin water, I tried first with a dry-fly, but rather than use searching casts, it was profitable to target individual trout, obvious in the translucent water.

Be warned, though: clear water can be deceptive when it comes to identifying the subtle creases and folds of an apparently innocent glide. Drag alarmed the first two trout I targeted, and they instantly nailed themselves to the bottom. The solution? A pile cast created ample slack at the business end, and on my third cast I saw a fish pivot upwards to meet my fly.

Where the river became more spirited, fish gathered in numbers. They hugged the riverbed and were barely perceptible at first, but I gradually became aware of them nipping this way and that – they were clearly feeding. With the animated current masking my presence, it was straightforward to guide a nymph down to their mouths. Spotting a fly in braided currents is virtually impossible, so I had to watch the fish carefully to see if one broke ranks with its brethren. With this type of sight-fishing, it is important to deliver a nymph to one side of a shoal, then you can more confidently spot when a fish moves to take your fly.

Amazingly, I even duped a 2 lb marbled trout. A known trait of *marmorata* is to coil up on the

**FactFile**

Accommodation and Guided Trips are available through Kevin Smith at Slovenia Fly Fishing. He Runs the Baca Lodge in Slovenia.

kevin@sloveniaflyfishing.com  
www.sloveniaflyfishing.com  
Tel +44 (0)773 023 0934  
US +1 210 415 2790  
Slov +386 (0) 512 09849

leader section, like a crocodile executing a death-roll. In fact, this is how many large marbled trout are caught on fine tackle: given enough slack when hooked, they'll even become entangled in fly-line.

Further upstream, the river narrows considerably, which requires an "Indian-style" of fishing. So I crept about on my hands and knees and used fine tippets and dry-flies that landed like thistle-down. It's not for everyone, but with sweat running off my brow and with fish as flighty as wild ponies, I had a real sense of achievement when the rod finally kicked into action. Little wonder, then, that such authorities as Fratnik, Petitjean and Links keep returning to Most na Soci, a patronage that has influenced the development of many CDC flies.

In contrast, a boisterous stretch on the Soca will enable you to approach fish within a rod's length, which is, I think, the beauty of Slovenia: there's fishing here for all levels of ability.



Under the alps and into a fish on the Baca, near its confluence with the Idrijca.