

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROD CALBRADE

The writer fishes a rocky dub on Slovenia's upper Baca river.

Secret. Slovenia

PAUL PROCTER goes off the beaten track and enjoys challenging sport in the upper reaches of the River Baca

← SECRET SLOVENIA CONTINUED

FOR MOST FLY-fishers, Slovenia conjures up visions of the celebrated River Soca with its intriguing pools of turquoise water and mysteriously deep chasms. Here, marbled trout (*Salmo marmoratus*) haunt the depths, harassing unsuspecting shoals of grayling. In fact such is the Soca's fame that it's difficult to imagine any other stream exists hereabouts. Study a map, however, and you will see countless ribbons of blue. Many, of course, are tributaries of the Soca, but big enough both in size and reputation to stand alone as noted trout streams in their own right.

Much as I enjoy the Soca, it's undeniably popular among visiting rods. Perhaps access has a lot to answer for. Easy parking and well-trodden paths are all too obvious along the banks these days. More recently a new breed of angler has arrived who insists on driving right to a run or pool to wade in and fish. The effect is a disturbance that really isn't in keeping with wilderness fishing.

Put in a little leg work, however, and suddenly a whole world of options opens up, especially if you're prepared to explore the lesser-known rivers. A few miles east of Most na Soci is a pristine River Baca joins forces with the Idrijca before spilling into the Soca. As it springs from high mountain passes, snowmelt contributed to the Baca, encouraging invertebrates of one kind or another to flourish in its

cold water. In turn they support a head of grayling, browns and marbled trout.

Marbled/brown trout hybrids, with their exquisite markings, are evident, too, and are among the most tenacious trout I've ever come across. They inadvertently came about with the introductions of brown trout to the Adriatic system many years ago. This hybridisation nearly spelled the end of the magnificent salmonid when the two interbred, but thankfully a few isolated pockets of true marbles discovered in the impassable upper reaches saved the day. Currently, although hybrids are still present, with the help of the Ribiska Druzina Tolmin Angling Club's rearing programme the numbers of marbled trout are being restored.

Marbled trout are ferocious predators and fear little in their watery domain. More than once they've exploded from nearby cover to attack a fish I've been playing. An astonishing thing happened last year. Creeping along the bank one afternoon, I chanced upon a marbled trout of about 5 lb, only ten feet from me and lying in the margins under a willow tree. I later learned that marbled trout are famous for taking a daytime snooze but, as this was the first day of my visit, I couldn't understand why this fish hadn't bolted.

Believing the fish to be ill, I carefully threading my rod tip through the branches and gently poked the trout's nose. Nothing could have prepared me for what followed. The fish awoke with a startled shuddering motion, only to grab the rod tip and shake it furiously, like a terrier worrying a rat. Releasing my rod seconds later, with a defiant tail slap it melted into the shadows, leaving me wide eyed. If only I'd had the sense to dangle a nymph in front of its snout!

Investigating the Baca's lower reaches several times I've enjoyed some amazing sport and sights. One day I spotted a grayling flapping frantically at the surface, before doing a fair impression of a water-skier skipping across the pool. As I crept closer I could see a water snake had the grayling by the tail. It released the

fish as soon as it spotted me. Then there was a biblical ant fall, when every trout and grayling in the river literally came out of the stonework. While fish rising everywhere might seem the answer to our prayers they proved to be some of the most frustrating fish I've ever cast to. Size, proportion and presentation of the imitation needed to be spot-on. A mere hint of drag meant your fly passed through untouched.

Kevin Smith of Slovenia Fly Fishing, who is besotted with the lower Baca, pointed me to the upper reaches. Pat Stevens was my companion and from a roadside grassy verge we wrestled our way through stubborn undergrowth. Although, we cursed it at the time, in hindsight this tangle of shrubs and trees obviously suggested few people had passed this way. We followed a small beck downstream for half a mile, when this winding water led us to the Baca. Judging by it's low, clear water and edgy residents, testing times lay ahead.

The very nature of a small, intimate stream meant these were "one chance" pools: one angler per pool and once you'd carefully been through it, that was it - no second pass.

But as I gazed upstream I knew this was a special place. High moss-clad cliffs stood guard over this little gem, keeping it hidden from the outside world. Water droplets hanging from mossy clumps occasionally sparkled in a shaft of sunlight. This was no place for those who are precious about flies. Littering many pools and bends, log-jams and fallen trees provided a graveyard for nymphs fished a bit too deeply, or swung too close to this natural cover. There was no respite from above, either. Menacing branched draped over much of the stream and I felt slightly over-gunned with my 9 ft rod.

Best described as "dubs", deep pockets punctuated long stretches of thin water. Overall this part of the Baca was shallow enough to pull fish up with a dry-fly, yet sufficiently deep to scratch about with a nymph. The ideal would have been two flies fished New Zealand style- a nymph fished some 2 ft behind a dry-fly - but Slovenia's single-fly policy prevented this.

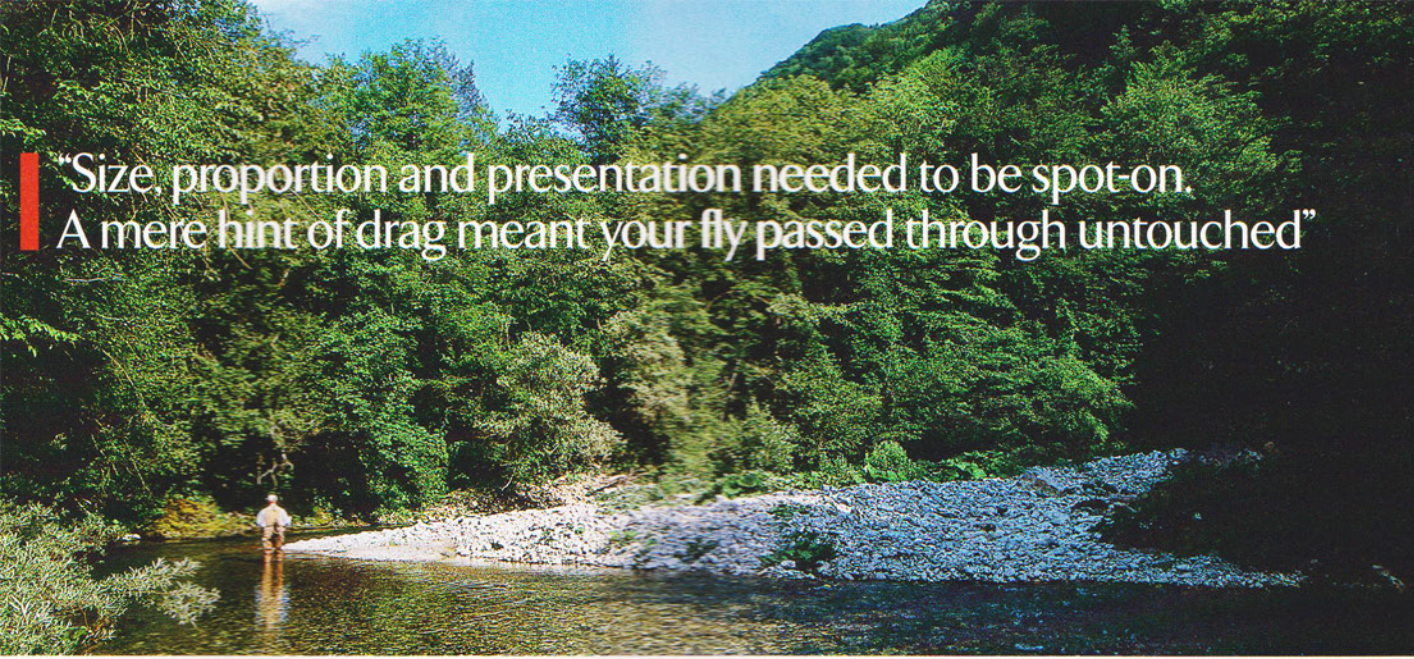
I put on a dry-fly, only



SOFT-BODIED NYMPH
 Hook Size 16 Mustad R50 Thread 14 0 olive Sheer (or to suit abdomen)
 Weight Thin adhesive lead Rib Fine copper wire
 Tail and legs Brown partridge hackle fibres Abdomen Wapsi life-cycle dubbing, light tan Thorax Peacock ice dubbing Head (optional) 2mm black or copper tungsten bead

This unassuming dubbed nymph has always served me well on Slovenian streams

“Size, proportion and presentation needed to be spot-on. A mere hint of drag meant your fly passed through untouched”



Clockwise, from top: Paul moves on up the Baca river, for a one-cast chance in every deeper pocket; a Baca hybrid trout; a smaller fish comes to the net; a Slovenian grayling; another pause on the journey upstream; the nymphs that worked for Paul on this visit; casting into the whitewater at the head of another inviting dub.



← SECRET SLOVENIA CONTINUED



BIOT BEAD-HEAD NYMPH

Hook Size 16 Mustad R50 **Thread** 14/0 olive Sheer (or to suit abdomen)
Weight (optional) Thin adhesive lead **Tail** Coq de leon hackle fibres
Abdomen Olive turkey biot **Thorax** Hare's ear dubbing
Head 1.5mm fluorescent pink tungsten bead

Carefully winding a turkey biot, concave side uppermost, results in this amazing segmented effect. Flat lead adds weight (if required) yet maintains a slender profile. Vary the biot shade or bead colour for a range of attractive nymphs. Use 2mm beads (for size 16-18 hooks), 2.3mm (for size 14-16), 2.8mm and 3mm (for size 12). Surprisingly, a bright bead can work extremely well in clear water. Fluorescent coloured beads are available from Fly Tek.

Tel: 01772 684 003. Website: www.flytek.co.uk

because it's a pleasurable way to cover unknown water.

My size 12 olive Klinkhamer bobbed its way down foamy runs and between boulders. Shafts of sunlight penetrating the canopy created dappled light that often made tracking the fly difficult as it drifted in and out of shadows. A change to a conspicuous orange-winged fly didn't help, either. Having fished my way up two promising runs without so much as a confirmed rise, it was time to try beneath the surface.

Many people shy away from upstream nymphing techniques because they think it difficult, but thin, ultra-clear water begged this method. Approaching fish from an upstream direction usually alerts them way before a cast is ever

The stunning markings of one of Baca's hybrid trout.

made, and while trout can see behind them, their main focus remains in front, looking for potential food.

I put on a small tungsten bead-head nymph and began to explore. A common mistake is that many think the further you cast, the more water you cover. Certainly long drifts will be achieved, but at what cost? For a start, aerialising lots of line might scare fish. Even if it doesn't, unseen fish lying nearby will inadvertently be "lined". Furthermore, a lot of line lying on water makes control, and the detection of takes, difficult.

Where possible, short, precise casts of about two or three rod-lengths are far better, and in this way water can be thoroughly searched. Your rhythm will quickly be found. Line-mending becomes easier and takes register with the fly-line stabbing away positively.

Flicking my size 16 nymph into likely holes and pockets produced some exciting sport. With a careful approach it was rare not to get some form of answer from each little hidey-hole.

Hybrids in the 8 in-12 in bracket were the main quarry – and what stunning fish they were. Clearly evident was the marbling effect interspersed with a splash of red spots caused by the brown trout gene. Surprisingly, grayling were present up here, too. And not just the odd one or two: there were enough to form proper shoals. A good 'un went 12 inches but they were in fine fettle, with razor-sharp fins

and black freckles splashed across their bronzed flanks.

Where the light allowed, I could target fish by sight. So clear is the water here, it's as if the fish were suspended in thin air. A hands-and-knees approach, patience and carefully placed casts paid dividends. As I made my way upstream, there on a gravel spit lay the remains of a large red deer. A rib cage, bleached bones and scraggy patch of fur were all that was left of this magnificent beast. It had lain there for some time, indicating that floods hadn't ravaged these waters for a while.

Some two miles on we came to a deep gorge. Thundering white water and depths we could only guess at formed an impassable barrier, so we made our way back downstream.

I was satisfied, however, for although these weren't the biggest fish I've caught, this valley has a bit of everything and I couldn't help stopping one last time to gaze at this special corner of Slovenia.

FactFile

Trips may be arranged through Slovenia Fly Fishing to include flights, accommodation, meals, travel and guiding. Accommodation is at the comfortable Baca Lodge, ten minutes from Most na Soci, based in the heart of the Soca catchment. Visits can be tailor-made to suit individual needs, fishing and locations. For further details contact Kevin Smith. Slovenia Fly Fishing. Tel: +44 (0) 773 023 0934 US +1 210 415 2790 Slov +386 (0) 512 09849 E-mail: kevin@sloveniaflyfishing.com Website: www.sloveniaflyfishing.com

