

Lace Moth Madness

Danny Spelic enjoys fruit-picking's fringe benefits in New Zealand's Bay of Plenty.

Picking passionfruit on the first morning of our 10-day New Zealand fly fishing adventure was not something advertised in the brochures. Come to think of it, there were no brochures.

My first trip to New Zealand's eastern Bay of Plenty in 2003 (FL#35) came about through word-of-mouth recommendations to Mark Draper and his fly fishing operation based in Opotiki. Nowadays Mark has moved on from full-time guiding, spending most of his time tending to his passionfruit crop overlooking Waiotahi Beach. Every year in late summer however, he hangs up the buckets and secateurs and heads for the rivers and streams of Urewera National Park for what has to be some of the best dry fly fishing of its kind.

Having visited Mark before, Andy McGovern and I knew what to expect. Neither of us objected to the fruit picking as we knew it would help free up our guide for the fishing that lay ahead. As we systematically made our way through the endless rows of vines, I couldn't help but notice the vast number of insects clinging to the surrounding vegetation. We were here for the late season lace moth fishing, and judging by their numbers, we had arrived right on time.

LACE MOTH IDENTIFICATION

Like possums, the lace moth or passion vine hopper (*Scolytopa australis*) is an Australian import, introduced to New Zealand more than 100 years ago. The adults are moth-like in appearance and are able to jump as well as fly. Their delta shaped wings are translucent and mottled brown in colour and their short stubby body is



Lace moths, or passion vine hoppers, clustered on the vines.

around 5–6 mm in length. Spending most of their time clinging to vegetation, they are well equipped to pierce plant tissue and extract sap with their customised elongated mouthparts.

Despite their name, passion vine hoppers feed on a variety of native and exotic plants as well as the passionfruit vine. These include New Zealand flax, hydrangeas, privet, wil-

low, tutu (*Coriaria arborea*), kiwifruit and various ferns, to name just a few. Of these, the willow and tutu, commonly known by New Zealanders as 'tut' (pronounced toot) are the most important from an angler's perspective, as both these plants are common around the water's edge and provide the trout with an abundant supply of lace moth each year.

Lace Moth Madness... continued

DISTRIBUTION

The lace moth is especially prevalent in warmer areas of the North Island including Taranaki, King Country, Northland and Gisborne. They are also found in the northernmost provinces of the South Island including Nelson, Marlborough and Buller. According to Mark, few anglers in the Bay of Plenty take advantage of the lace moth fall each year despite the insect's abundance, possibly due to the fact that the fishing can become quite difficult as the season progresses.

Despite their national origins, lace moths are virtually unknown as a trout food in Australia. The only incident I have heard about took place on an overgrown anabranch of Victoria's Goulburn River in the early 1990s, where Mike Griffiths and friends—and a number of trout—discovered a local infestation on the overhanging black-

LACE MOTH LIFE CYCLE

The annual life cycle of the lace moth starts in the winter, with an egg stage lasting six months or more. Nymphs usually emerge between October and December each year and take almost three months to fully develop. The adult stage runs from January to March in most areas, but may start as early as December and can extend into late May, particularly in the warmer northernmost parts of their New Zealand range. The most prolific hatches occur in late February and early March, when windy days usually signal increased feeding activity by the trout as the insects are blown into the water from the surrounding vegetation.

LACE MOTH FISHING

When the hatch is in full swing, the fishing can be sensational to say the



Danny plays a lively fish in a likely run. Small hooks and light tippetts always made things interesting.



This wilderness rainbow was tempted by a lace moth imitation.

berries. Many of the insects were accidentally finding their way onto the slow currents, where the fish were intercepting them at two-second intervals, seemingly showing most interest in those specimens that struggled and exhibited signs of life. Mike's party took several browns and a rainbow, all in the 2–3 lb range. In Tasmania the closest equivalent would probably be the episodic jassid fishing on certain lakes.

least. As described so eloquently by Mark, the trout go 'absolutely nuts' on lace moths and can be found feeding in bubble lanes all day if left undisturbed. The trouble is getting to them. The other reason few anglers venture into the backcountry to experience the lace moth fall each year is the fact that the terrain is rough and unrelenting, and access can be difficult.

One of Mark's longstanding clients, a 73-year old American by the name

of Brian, was asked one day whether the almost vertical drop that lay ahead was a bit much for his liking. He replied: "I should know by now that where Draper says to go, you go. It's always been worth it, so now I just follow."

This is certainly the case. Both Andy and I were nursing bruised backsides after traversing some seriously rough terrain, and for the record, yes, it was worth it. Well, for us at least—Brian is still in traction.

The first pool we reached contained no fewer than half a dozen trout of 4–6 lb feeding voraciously in the slow flowing current. Lined up like kids at the school tuckshop, they would keep their position within the narrow bubble lane where the lace moths accumulated after being funnelled down the river into the main current.

The trick was to get the fly in the bubble lane, directly above a feeding fish and delay the strike. Lace moth feeders rise very slowly and deliberately and it is easy to pre-empt the take and strike too soon. It's not often that you get 6 lb trout rising to your fly in clear view, so a touch of trigger happiness was something that both Andy and I had to deal with. Fortunately for us, the fish were abundant and so were the lace moths, which meant that we had plenty of time and further opportunities to rectify this problem. Being relegated to the



out of the main current and into the backwaters for landing.

Although the majority of fish in this particular section of the Urewera catchment were well-conditioned rainbows, the odds of crossing paths with a trophy-sized brown were more than likely. In fact, as predicted by Mark prior to our trip, we spotted a trophy brown for approximately every kilometre of river that we fished. On this trip we landed countless rainbows, two browns of around 9 lb, and spotted several others, some of which would have tipped the scales to 12 pound plus!

LACE MOTH PATTERNS

Although lace moths form a substantial part of trout diet in the Bay of Plenty area from January through to March, very little information can be found on these insects and the flies that imitate them. Do a search on the Web and you will get plenty of hits on lacewings, but these are a very

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sidelines after stuffing it up, and having to watch Mark demonstrate how it should be done, was the best incentive to fix our mistakes quickly.

Once hooked, the next problem was to stay connected. We used size 14 and 16 hooks and 4–6 lb tippet, which doesn't allow for a heavy-handed approach, particularly in fast flowing sections of water. Despite it being late summer, the water was quite cold which meant that the fish were invigorated and full of life. Trying to land fish prematurely would invariably lead to disaster. A gentle approach and soft rod helped overcome this problem, and steady sidestrain ensured that the turbo-charged rainbows could be led



Mark Draper releasing a Urewera rainbow.



LACE MOTH

HOOK: #12–16

BODY: A dubbing of rabbit fur—not too large as the abdomen of the lace moth is very small in comparison with its wingspan

WING: A nicely-veined mallard drake breast feather is given a coating of thin lacquer, the delta-shaped wing is cut from it, and laid on top of the fly and secured by binding over the stem

HACKLE: A couple of turns, usually ginger, but I prefer it to be tied with a nice stiff grizzle hackle



different insect. A quick post on the *FlyLife* Forum resulted in some information on the insects and recipes for a pattern, and provided some valuable information on wing design.

According to Mark, the shape and size of the wing is the most important feature when tying this pattern. The fish lock onto the delta-shaped silhouette cast by the wing, usually tied from partridge or mallard breast feather.

The proven pattern included in this article was designed by the late Jimmy Morris of Whakatane and published in Mark's father Keith Draper's book *New Zealand Trout Flies: Traditional*

This is lovely water to contemplate, and to fish.

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and Modern. A similar fly, but with a trimmed cock pheasant 'church window' feather tied in by a slightly different procedure so it sits absolutely flat, was devised by Norman Marsh and described in *Norman Marsh's Fly-box* (1995). Back home on Australia's Goulburn, Mike Griffiths had success with a small Hare's Ear with the dubbing picked out to form a hackle, though in this case the fibres served to suggest the insect's splayed wings.

FLY FISHING HEAVEN

The dry fly river fishing in the eastern Bay of Plenty is the best I have yet experienced anywhere. But despite its elevated status in the Spelic and McGovern households, don't be fooled into thinking that it's going to be a walk in the park. Part of the reason that the fishing is so good is that it can be difficult, both on the fishing and access fronts.

Hard, tough and unrelenting are apt descriptors for the terrain in this area, and just as appropriate for the man best equipped to take you there. There are none better than the wiry figure of Mark Draper to show you some of the North Island's best kept

secrets. All you need are your rod and reel, a few flies and a real sense of adventure. Mark will get you to the fish. All you have to do is pick some passionfruit, and then decide on which fish you are going to cast to first. As they say, the rest is history. **FI**



Mark with one of the local browns.