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MEGA BROOKIES OF PATAGONIA

Meat is on the Menu for Argentine Trophy Brook Trout

STORY BY CHAD AGY | PHOTOS BY CHAD AGY, JAMAL JONES AND BRIAN GALOVIC



CHAD AGY PRESENTS A GIANT BROOK TROUT
HE CAUGHT IN RIO PICO, ARGENTINA.
PHOTO BY JAMAL JONES



THE AUTHOR'S FATHER PETE AGY
LANDED THE LARGEST BROOK
TROUT OF HIS LIFE NEAR RIO
PICO. PHOTO BY CHAD AGY





AGY AND HIS COMPANIONS DISCOVERED A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND ARGENTINE PATAGONIA: THE INSANE DISCREPANCY IN THE SIZE OF AN AVERAGE TROUT. PHOTOS BY BRIAN GALOVIC

Although I was thousands of miles from home, I found familiarity in the peculiarities of Argentine Patagonia. The fragrant odor of the earth reminded me of the Wyoming steppe after a summer downpour. The bare, scree-filled peaks of the Andes towered above me like the Uinta Mountains in Utah, where I learned to fish for brook trout as a kid. The streams and scenic lakes pockmarked the volcanic foothills, akin to a similar scene in eastern Idaho.

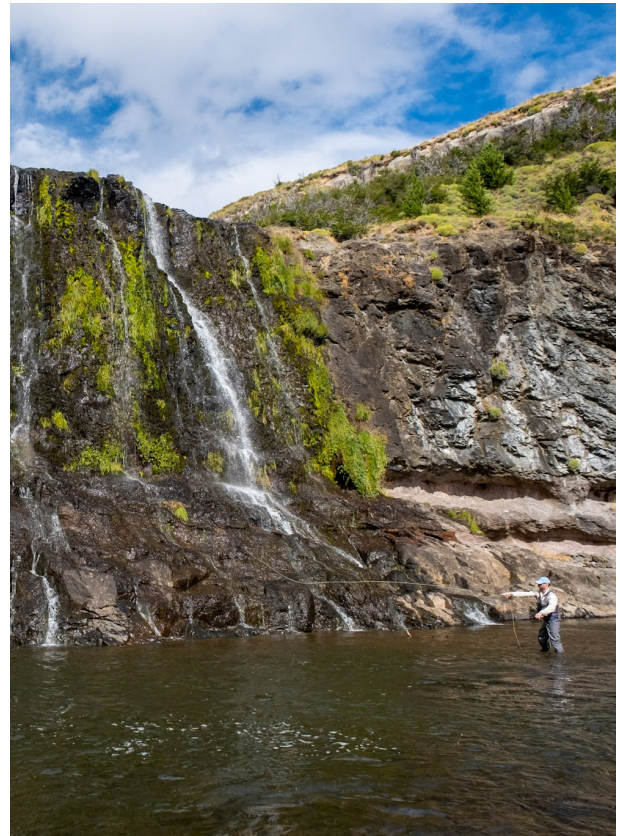
When I travel to Patagonia, I feel like I am in an alternate universe, eerily similar to the western United States where I have spent most of my life, though strangely different. Rather than bald eagles, Andean condors dominate the skies, searching for their next meal from a dying sheep or guanaco. Instead of pronghorn, ostrich-like rheas roam the

countryside, fleeing at impressive speeds whenever we approach. I rarely see herons, but Chilean flamingos feed on crustaceans in the shallows while we cast our flies nearby. My favorite difference between the two regions is the insane discrepancy in the size of an average trout.

The thought of brook trout reminds me of my childhood, casting a fly and bobber into the high mountain lakes of Utah, where hardly a trout surpassed double digits in the inch department. It wasn't long before I heard tales of larger brookies that could reach double digits in pounds. These fish inhabit only a few unique locales on the planet, and as a 10-year-old fisherman, venturing to such far-flung destinations seemed unlikely.

I never stopped thinking about those famous brook trout, so when the opportunity to chase them became a





THE TROUT OF ARGENTINE PATAGONIA TEND TO INHABIT UNUSUALLY SPECTACULAR PLACES. PHOTO BY JAMAL JONES

reality, I jumped at the chance to visit Rio Pico, Argentina. This is one of those special spots where an angler might encounter a gargantuan brookie.

Our group experienced several premier fisheries near Rio Pico. The trip began at a spectacular lake nestled into the mountains near the Chilean border, which boasted many brook trout over 20 inches in length. Some of us fished breathtaking rivers filled to the brim with rainbow and brook trout. The occasional alpha brown trout savagely tried to steal smaller, struggling rainbows off our lines.

We experienced intimate lagunas hosting opportunities for some unreal sight-fishing. I witnessed mayfly hatches on tiny spring creeks holding fish with lengths nearly matching the creeks' widths. A smothering flying ant hatch brought all the region's trout to the surface on one warm, calm day. Though our guides had already outdone themselves, they saved the region's crown jewel for the last part of the trip.

We spent those days on a lake that superseded all superlatives. Our group arrived at the lake to find ideal conditions: mild-to-moderate wind and chop with occasional cloud cover. Spanish fluency was not required to interpret our guides' nervous chatter and knowing smirks. We could tell we were in for a special experience.

Before long, the rafts were ready and we raced to the guides' preferred spots on the lake. My guide, Roge Casal, rowed us to a tempting drop-off on the eastern side. We

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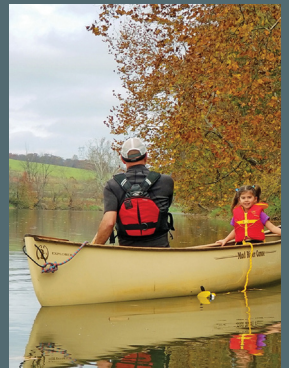
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RIO PICO OFFERS PLENTY OF PRIZED RAINBOW TROUT TOO. PHOTO BY CHAD AGY

could see smaller fish rising between the shallow reeds, but we weren't there for normal-sized fish. As I set up my heaviest sinking line, I attached my favorite olive streamer to the tippet. My casts landed at the edge of the drop-off. I let my fly sink into the abyss before starting an erratic, fast retrieve.

The first strike revealed a brook trout so thick I may have mistaken it for a tire if it hadn't fought back. Its sheer heft made the fish difficult to turn, even with my eight-weight rod, but eventually Casal scooped it into the net. At about two feet long, with rotund dimensions and splendid colors, this brookie was the fish of the trip for me. I chuckled as I pondered how many diminutive Utah brookies it would take to equal the mass of this singular fish.

As the day progressed, I caught one mega brookie after another, occasionally interspersed by voracious rainbow trout. Some of the rainbows were close to 30 inches in length. I stuck with my streamer while others in the group successfully targeted weed lines with hopper/dropper rigs. I had never seen a bunch of happier fishermen when the crew met for a late afternoon rendezvous.

The winds coming off the Andean foothills finally relented as the evening drew near. The water on the lake eased from a wind-strewn boil to a gentle chop, and finally to glassy tranquility. Intermittent rings punctured the calm waters, as a modest chironomid hatch attracted trout to the surface. At this point, we knew these mega brookies preferred meat over tiny hatching insects. Several of us worked a reed-lined bay by foot, tossing large terrestrial patterns that no self-respecting, unpressured brook trout could refuse.

My friend Jamal Jones was the first to hook up after a 22-inch tanker of a brookie darted out from the reeds to consume his Fat Albert. He asked if I could net the fish, and I happily obliged. My line dangled lazily behind me as I walked toward Jones. While in motion, trout attacked my jumbo Chubby Chernobyl Ant not once, not twice, but three times in the 20 steps it took to reach Jones. Although I failed to connect on these strikes, the encounter produced a startling realization. These fish were meat-eaters, and they wanted the meatiest, most proteinaceous snack in the trout world: mice.

After releasing Jones' fish, we quickly tied on mice patterns



with trembling, adrenaline-filled hands. A session of mousing mayhem ensued. The bay was full of murderous brookies, all waiting for a rodent to make a suicidal swim across their lair. We experienced multiple double hook-ups, as the fish did not attempt to hide their affinity for a struggling mammal. As the light faded, we told stories of the massacre that had unfolded before our eyes. Malbec in hand, we basked under the luminous sheen of unfamiliar Southern Hemisphere constellations, before realizing the sun would rise in six hours. Sleep would not come easy after such an experience, but we decided to rest. Soon, we would catch more fish.

Experience Rio Pico

The waters described here are known entities among the guides of Rio Pico; but in a world where almost nothing is secret, I decided to allow them anonymity. Most of these waters would be difficult for an outsider to access anyway. Insanely rutted access roads are interrupted by gaucho gates, many of them locked to all those who do not have permission from the landowner. Even the most intrepid traveling angler would need to mount a herculean effort to access these places unaided.

So, if you want to fish in the best waters here you need a guide.

My preferred outfitter there is Trout Bum Rio Pico, a program run by Hemispheres Unlimited. Led by Justin Witt, a guide who planted roots in central Argentine Patagonia decades ago, this program provides unparalleled access to the waters of the Rio Pico region, for a fraction of the prices charged by nearby luxury lodges.

Even though you must travel by Toyota Hilux and not by helicopter, and anglers will not find hot tubs attached to their rooms, Trout Bum Rio Pico provides a surprisingly comfortable experience given the lower price point. Cozy rooms and beds await exhausted anglers after a long day of fishing, and meals include famous Argentine steak, lamb asados and milanesas. A spacious living area provides a special venue for telling tales from past adventures and tying flies for the coming days. Most importantly, this program provides affordable access to one of the best trout fisheries in the world, with professional guides who work as hard as any in the industry.

Check out hemispheresunlimited.com for more information. ☞

Chad Agy is an avid fly fisherman and traveler who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.