

SOMETHING RED OR BLUE

A FALKLAND ISLANDS MEANDER

Words

HENRY HUGHES

Adrian Lowe had a heart attack a month ago, but today the 67-year-old sheep farmer and fishing guide charges his old green Land Rover over a rough grassy hummock that was once a minefield. “They got the last ones up a few years ago—we hope.” He winks and turns sharply to avoid a boulder. He was 26 in 1982 when Argentina acted on its long-disputed territorial claim and invaded the Falkland Islands. “It was a scary time,” Adrian remembers. The fierce 74-day war ended in a British victory, and in a recent referendum Falklanders voted almost unanimously to remain part of the United Kingdom, but our guide acknowledges the ongoing controversy, saying, “Let people be what they want to be. I only hope we can become good neighbors with Argentina.”

Whether you call them *Las islas Malvinas* or the Falklands, this windswept archipelago about 300 miles off the south Patagonian coast is home to 3,700 people, most of whom live in the capital of Stanley and at the nearby Royal Air Force base, leaving an area about the size of Hawaii and Maui largely to sheep—Adrian estimates 500,000 of

them. “That’s 150 for every person,” he boasts. “Got New Zealand beat on that score.” Brown trout and salmon were introduced from Chile and Britain in the 1940s and ’50s—the salmon failed, but the trout flourished, both as river residents and sea trout that enter saltwater, gorge on krill, then run home bigger and brighter. These trout, combined with the native Falklands mullet, provide excellent flyfishing for those willing to make the journey. My longtime friend Eugene and I are here for a week to fish and explore before boarding our ship to Antarctica.

It’s October, the austral spring—elephant and fur seals suckle pups along the beaches, rockhopper penguins guard their cliffside nests, and gorse blooms bright gold. Parking his rig into the wind, *Ady*, as he likes to be called, warns us about opening the doors, “That wind will bend ’em off the hinges.” We snug down our hats and survey the River Pedro flowing into a broad estuary at the north end of East Falkland. Flightless steamer ducks and kelp geese mingle with oyster catchers and plovers—and a bright splash tells us there’s also life underwater.

◀ RIGHT ▶

Eugene Jones and fishing guide Adrian Lowe (front) prospect Weir Creek and the Murrell River on the east coast of the Falkland Islands. Only a month earlier Adrian suffered a heart attack, but the 67-year-old rancher was “feeling great,” fishing again and getting ready to gather and shear his 3,000 head of sheep. Photo: Henry Hughes



“Try a nymph,” Ady suggests with entomological nonchalance. While we contemplate the hundred varieties in our overstuffed boxes, he adds, “Something red or blue.” Wind whips across us, and I ding my shoulder and head a couple times, but a scarlet beadhead draws a sharp strike. Then Eugene hooks a hard-fighting, cobia-colored fish the locals call a mullet. Also known as *róbalo* and rock cod, it’s more properly identified as a Patagonian blenny. “We love a good mullet fry,” Ady says, so we land and toss a few up on the bank that he immediately cleans and skins as one would a catfish.

When the tide rises, we start catching sea trout. They are about a foot long and bright silver with pixilated marks down their backs. These aren’t the salmon-sized trophies we’d heard about—the Falklands record stands at 22 pounds, 12 ounces, caught by Alison Faulkner in 1992. The trout season runs Sept. 1 to April 30 and larger fish typically swim upriver during the second fall run of March and April. But these sterling *Salmo trutta* delight us for hours, and I’m reminded of sea-run cutthroat

fishing at home in the Pacific Northwest. When we ask our guide how long we’ll be fishing today, he strokes his bushy mustache and says, “As long as you like.” He isn’t kidding.

We fish the Pedro for another two hours then head southeast over more rugged grassland and heather to the Malo River, which runs 13 miles to the sea. Nearby is the site of the Top Malo House skirmish where two Argentine soldiers were killed and the house they occupied destroyed. The British commander famously admonished the surrendering Argentine officer, “Never in a house.” Ady retells the story, nodding solemnly. “You can feel the meaning of that with all that’s going on in the world.” We sit quietly for a moment, then push out through the wind.

Our position on the high quartz bank allows us to flip heavy buggers into the swift current, letting them sink and scoot just right. When I lift my rod after the first swing, the pulse of a big sea trout shoots through the fibers, and the troubles of the world, past and present, disappear. We land five trout up to three pounds. “OK,” I say to Ady, “we’ve had enough.”



◀ LEFT ▶

Abandoned after the 1982 Falklands War between Britain and Argentina, this Bandvagn, a Swedish-made armored personnel carrier, rusts in an October field of white grass and blooming gorse above the capital city of Stanley. “It was a scary time,” Adrian says. “I only hope we can become good neighbors with Argentina.”
Photo: Henry Hughes

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Back in Stanley, Eugene and I walk past the ribs of old shipwrecks, English-style cottages, defunct red phone booths, shops selling soft toy penguins, and pubs crowded with dart players and howling rugby fans. At the quieter Waterfront Hotel, we sip gin and tonics mixed in large goblets with the island's own Darwin Gin. This fine spirit uses native botanicals such as diddle dee, teaberry and scurvy grass, the same species Charles Darwin collected during his visit aboard the HMS Beagle in 1834. The Falklands, like the more famously cited Galapagos, had a profound influence on the young naturalist, and we raise a toast to his spirit of discovery and learning.

◀RIGHT▶

"After landing a couple mullet, I watched this sea-run brown trout grab the unkempt white clouser and leap into the blue sky over the Blackburn River. October is still early in the run, and these fish weren't huge, but they were eager and plentiful. The big ones come later," our guide explained. Brown trout, introduced by the British in the 1940s and '50s, flourish throughout the Falkland Islands. Reaching them on open water against the South Atlantic's incessant wind can be a challenge."

Photo: Eugene Jones

The next windy gray morning, we fuel up on a full English breakfast—kippers, fried tomatoes, ham, eggs and baked beans over toast—then join Ady for a drive just north of Stanley. Paying respects to another old battlefield, we cross the Murrell River and bounce through a shaggy field of white grass and sheep to a windy bluff above Weir Creek, which looks more like a fjord. Booting down a steep hill onto a rocky beach glistening with mussels and kelp, we are mercifully out of the worst wind and casting becomes a smooth pleasure. Ady, a short, thickly built

but agile man, slaloms down with his Zebco spinning rod and tosses a yellow Mepps, hungry for more mullet. I ask him how he's feeling. "Great," he says. "We'll start gathering sheep and shearing soon—got about 3,000 head this year." He goes on about the virtues of wool. I pat my Antarctic-bound beanie, assuring him that even with all the modern synthetic fibers available, Merino is still a great choice. He taps his worn knit cap and smiles back.

My Clouser gets chased by a couple mullet, but the bobbing heads of fur seals tell us the area has already been hunted. We lorry up and over a section of Ady's 10,000-acre farm along the Murrell River, beholding wide vistas of rolling, treeless hills grazed by sheep and upland geese. It snows for a bit, then hails, then calms, then is so windy we can hardly push the doors open. It's near impossible to cast and I'm about to ask Ady for his Zebco, but I see something splashing at the boots of Eugene. The mullet are close enough to reach and we take a few more on small shrimp patterns, laugh-

ing through another horizontal snow blast. Then the sky clears and the wind drops off and it's a fine day.

Ady dozes in the Rover, and just when I think we're all ready to quit, he gets out, stretches and shouts, "Hey, you lads want to see some penguins?"

