

Golden Browns

Graham Herbert travels to Norway's Hemsila River in search of its legendary, hard-fighting, golden brownies.

Recently a good friend of mine asked me if I would like to test my skills against some of the fittest brown trout that live in the famous Hemsila River in Norway. Well an opportunity like this simply cannot be turned down; it meant a lot of rearranging of schedules, but plans were made and flights were duly booked.

Most of my fly fishing is done on the Midlands' reservoirs with a lot of competition stuff taking up the bulk of the season, so this river fishing is a totally new experience for me, but boy I just couldn't wait.

My companion on this adventure was TFF editor Steve Cullen, a guy who knows a thing or two about how to fish this very challenging and often pretty daunting river. So I was hoping I'd be in good hands.

As we drove down to Stansted Airport the excited conversation was all about what I could expect from the Hemsila's jet-

propelled spotties that we, hopefully, would be doing battle with.

Having arrived and downed a hearty breakfast, we boarded our plane heading for Oslo. As we flew over the coastline of Norway I could see numerous rivers and fjords, and all this water filled my mind with thoughts of rod-bending action with some serious brown trout.

Bjorn Knutslid, a representative of DinTur, the company we were over there with, met us at Oslo Airport. Scandinavian fly fishers all seem to be pretty young and terribly trendy, and Bjorn is no exception! Bjorn regaled us with tales of stunning charr and huge pike that can be caught on the fly in the many lakes and rivers we passed as we headed up to our destination.

Arriving at Hemsedal we were greeted by our guide for the trip, Tor Grothe.

What Tor doesn't know about this stretch of river

could be written on the back of a postage stamp. He's also a seasoned Norwegian river international.

After unloading our gear and dumping our luggage at the stunningly pretty log cabin, built, believe it or not, back in 1819 but with all the mod cons you could ask for, including Wi-Fi, it was back in the car.

Soon we were being introduced to some of the local fishermen, along with some visiting anglers down by the river. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed and we were all laughing and joking, utilising broken English, garbled Norwegian and frantic hand gestures. Not only was the company good but there were one or two nice trout rising out in the main flow of the river. And what a river – its character changes dramatically from stretch to stretch. The Hemsila is part of 'Fishing Norway's' top five list of fly fishing rivers for mountain trout. It's crystal clear; think of the Test or the like but 10 times the width. At times it's gently flowing, speckled with a few class-one rapids, making its way down the beautiful valley, clothed in spruce shores, between mountains drizzling with waterfalls.

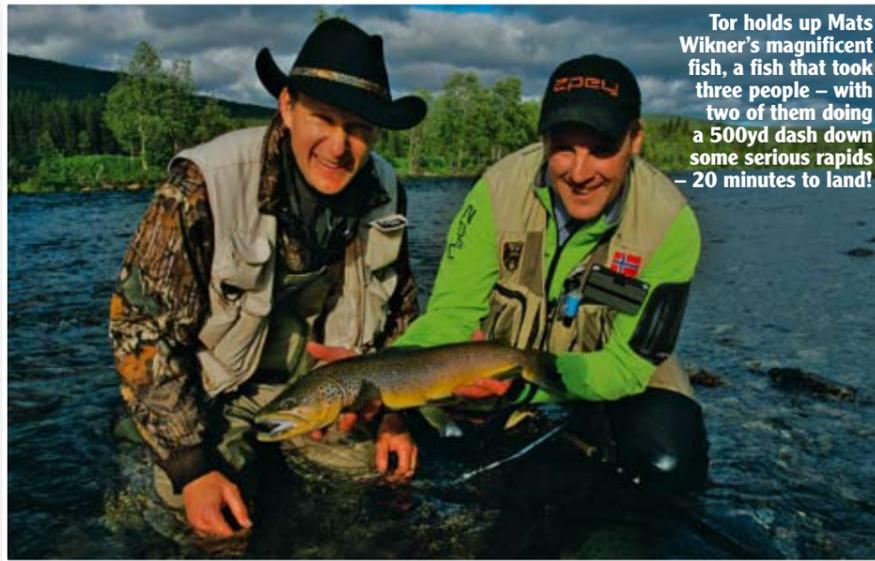
There are also little side streams that come off the main river only to join it again 300 or 400 yards further downstream. In places these are no more than a rod's length wide. Some of these side streams have deep gouges in them where boulders the size of Ford Fiestas once nestled. At first glance these deep holes look lifeless but if you're quiet you'll spot fish.

The quality of Hemsila fish is plain to see. A fish of this size – 3lb plus – is probably about 12 years old!



With the help of Graham's guide Tor Grothe, a serious brown trout – fooled by an olive imitation on the end of a 2ft leader – is finally netted.





Tor holds up Mats Wikner's magnificent fish, a fish that took three people – with two of them doing a 500yd dash down some serious rapids – 20 minutes to land!

These Hemsila trout are also masters of camouflage, but if you're sneaky you'll see them move out of their lies to intercept food items. Steve had forewarned me about these trout and Tor had also chipped in, telling me that they are ultra-spooky!

After we'd walked the river and talked fishing for a few hours, it was time to get back to the cabin to change our clothes before going out for some food, then hitting the hay early for our eight o'clock start the following day.

I awoke bright and early and Steve and I headed outside to get geared up with the rest of the lads – the visitors from Sweden would be sharing our journey down to the river in Tor's van.

When we arrived, Tor sent Steve and I off downstream, while he headed upstream with the guys from Sweden,

The type of olive imitations used in the UK are just as effective in Norway.

telling us to meet him back at the van at one o'clock. After some advice from Steve – he'd been relegated to photographer for our few days here – I waded into the river towards a couple of rising fish. I was surprised at just how powerful the flow was; keeping my footing was harder than I'd imagined.

I made goodness knows how many attempts at covering these fish – ever heard of drag and micro-drag? There were little seams and currents of water that you couldn't even see but which would drag your line and fly ever so slightly, in fact so slightly that you couldn't notice it but the fish could. They were a pain!

The water there was very shallow and every run the fish made created huge bow waves, like the Pacific salmon you see in all those wildlife documentaries.

Steve put me right and showed me how best to mend the line to rectify the situation. After covering one of the risers several times, a small trout came up and sucked down my size 16 Olive. I lifted into it to see a very small fish by Hemsila standards, probably half a pound. No matter – I was as pleased as punch! This was followed by another two of similar proportions before we headed back to meet the guys.

After lunch we headed upstream in the van, with everyone on board, to one of Tor's favourite hotspots, a long glide interspersed with some seriously large boulders.

Tor sat us all down and told us to keep our eyes peeled for any activity. After what seemed like an eternity, a fish was spotted as it rose to take a small olive – all olives in Norway are called mayflies by the way – from the surface, slightly upstream of us. It was a good trout but I knew that I was going to struggle to catch it. It was rising in a very awkward position upstream of us and just in front of a large boulder. Steve suggested that Tor should have a go for it due to the tricky position it was in. Before Tor got in the water, though, he lengthened his tapered leader... to a massive 25 feet! The reasoning behind such a long leader – the tippet was only 3lb – was that these trout

were exceptionally wary and if the fly line was to go over the fish's head then that would be it, game over, it would be spooked.

Tor false casts to get the distance right then, when he's happy, he tests the water below the fish to see how the fly behaves. Once

he has an idea of how everything will fish and the distance that's required he then makes his cast. It took three casts before the trout came up and inhaled his small CDC Olive pattern, and it was a big one right enough! Steve shouted over to Tor to pass the rod to me, so that I could get an idea of the power of the thing, while he also took some photos. I waded into the river gingerly and as I took the rod from Tor's grip I immediately lost my footing and received a soaking... all of which was captured on film! The fight – with Tor talking me through things – was incredible. The brute power of the thing really surprised me. For a man who's more



The Hemsila brown trout have very powerful jaws, probably due to the amount of small fish they prey on.

used to catching reservoir rainbows on powerful gear, playing a 2lb-plus wild brown trout on a 5-wt in fast water is a feeling I'm never going to forget.

The thing did everything it could to evade capture, jumping and thrashing at the surface, going on long powerful downstream runs and even attempting to go around one of the large boulders! After an exhilarating 10 minutes – I'm not joking, 10 minutes – the stunning-looking creature was guided into the landing net in Tor's outstretched hand.

I can honestly say that this was one of the most incredible fishing experiences I've had. Afterwards I just wanted to sit on the bank and take it all in; I was shaking like a leaf.

Tor then headed upstream to search for more fish for his clients, leaving Steve and me with one of his young trainee guides.

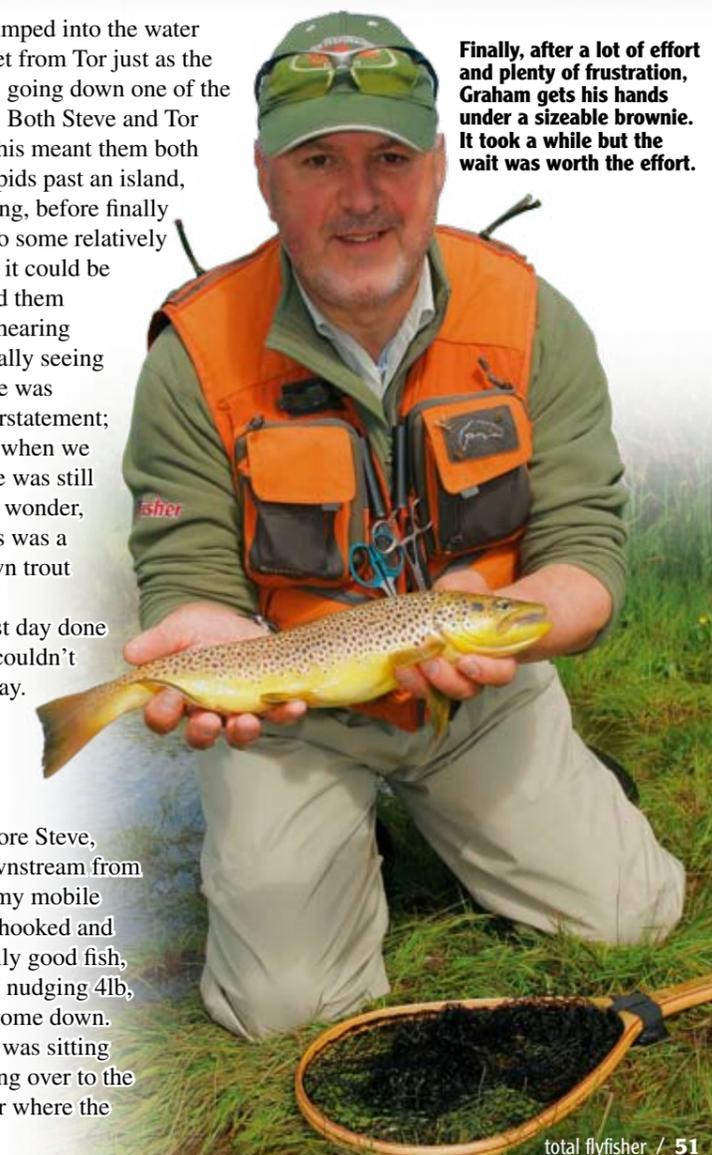
Half an hour later, while we were enjoying a coffee, the guide received a phone call on his mobile from Tor. One of his clients, Mats Wikner, was playing a good fish and he wanted Steve to come and take some photos. Steve headed off with the guide. I found out about an hour later – when everyone had returned – that Steve had done himself proud. By the time he'd run up to where Mats was playing the fish, things had been getting tricky. The fish was in deep, fast water and the wading was terrible. Mats had to give the rod to Tor and Steve gave the camera to Mats, who headed to dry

land. Steve then jumped into the water and grabbed the net from Tor just as the fish decided it was going down one of the 'class-one' rapids! Both Steve and Tor had to follow it. This meant them both bouncing down rapids past an island, some 500 yards long, before finally getting the fish into some relatively slack water before it could be netted. Mats joined them downstream after hearing them shouting, finally seeing his prize. To say he was pleased is an understatement; even an hour later when we all met up again he was still buzzing. It was no wonder, really, because this was a near 4lb wild brown trout – what a fish!

That was the first day done and dusted, and I couldn't wait for the next day.

The following day I managed several small fish, all of which put up great fights before Steve, fishing further downstream from me, called me on my mobile phone to say he'd hooked and landed several really good fish, including a couple nudging 4lb, and that I should come down. When I arrived he was sitting on the bank, looking over to the far side of the river where the

Finally, after a lot of effort and plenty of frustration, Graham gets his hands under a sizeable brownie. It took a while but the wait was worth the effort.



The riverbed can be pretty treacherous in parts, so careful wading is a must. Trust someone to be there with a camera when you fall in!



high bank had collapsed, creating a large back eddy. This back eddy seemed to be collecting every olive that floated down the river and there were two sizeable trout rising. The problem for me, Steve pointed out, was that I needed to cast over fast water into this slack eddy.

I made my way gingerly out into the water, having a small Olive Klinkhammer on the business end of a long, 16ft, tapered leader. I tried to position myself upstream of the fish, rather than downstream or straight across from it, so that I had more chance of putting my fly in the zone for longer without drag affecting it. No matter what I did or tried I couldn't position my fly near the rising fish; to say it was frustrating is an understatement. I was about ready to give up when Steve waded into the water slowly to offer some advice. My leader was taken off and replaced with a very long, heavily tapered one, 20 feet long. The same Klinkhammer was attached to the business end and I was ready to go. Steve showed me the pile cast. By casting

high on the forward cast, letting the line shoot and then quickly pointing the rod tip to the water, I had plenty of slack line on a downstream cast, allowing the fly to behave naturally for some time. I tried it a few times before attempting to target the trout.

The first time I tried it the fly landed about four feet above the rising fish. I was told to leave it – I did. The current took most of my loose line away with it and just as I thought the fly was going to be whipped out of the eddy, it was taken. The trout took with a slow head-and-tail rise. At the same time I felt a pull on the line as the current took up the slack. Unbelievably, the belly of fly line finally caught up with the fly a split second after the trout sipped it down. These two separate incidents coincided in such a way that a strike wasn't even required – the fish was on!

I didn't know what to do. Panic kind of set in at this point. I was playing a big trout in a very, very fast section of the river. After the previous day's escapade involving Steve, Tor and Mats, I was

beginning to worry. With some direction from Steve I finally managed to gain some semblance of control, getting the fish – jeez these things were acrobatic and as fit as fiddles too – into the calmer water near the bank. The water there was very shallow and every run the fish made created huge bow waves, like the Pacific salmon you see in all those wildlife documentaries. It was amazing!

After what seemed like an eternity, Steve slipped the net under the trout. Photos were taken and I was spent – I'd done it. This was totally different to the day before; I'd done it all myself and the feeling was overwhelming.

I shall take home that memory, along with the memories of wonderful scenery, crystal-clear waters and all the new friends I made.

If you fancy a challenge and a taste of brown trout heaven, you must try the place.

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A stunningly marked and very colourful female that fell for Steve's Olive pattern in some very deep, powerful water.

