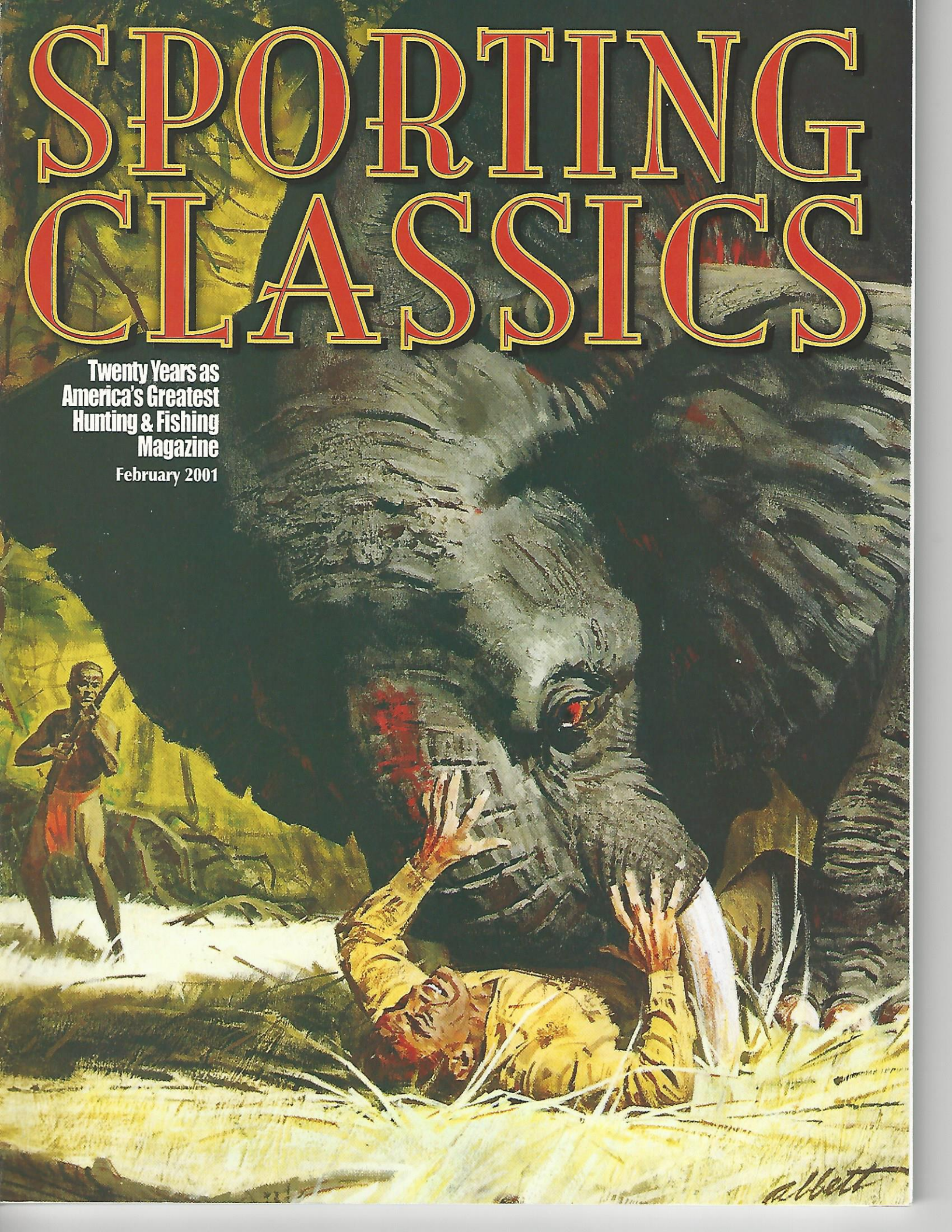


SPORTING CLASSICS

Twenty Years as
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Hunting & Fishing
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T r a v e l

By John Ross



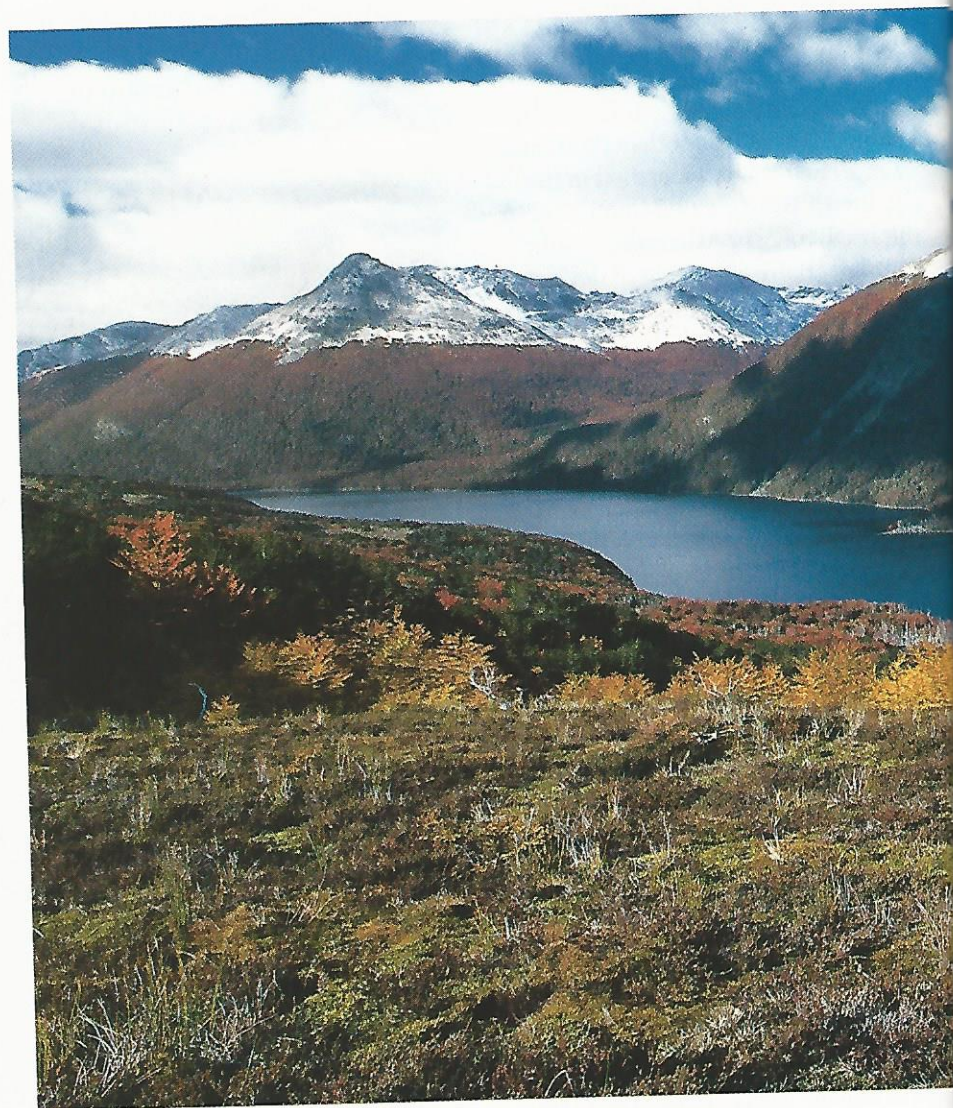
We had been two days in the saddle, a pelt of soft lamb fleece cinched across a deep wooden frame and around the horse's barrel belly by a strap of thick leather. The horse, a steady roan known as Elvis, had carried me across two ranges of the mountains of southernmost Tierra del Fuego. Below us now stretched Lago Fagnano, hugging the north flank of Cordillera Darwin and holding the five-pound brook trout and bigger browns we'd come to fish.

Our party of thirteen had climbed through forests of *lenga*, a local species of birch with leaves the size of quail feathers and as orange as any maple Vermont cares to grow. Their trunks

So what if there's no running water where you stay. In Terra del Fuego, there's plenty of it outside and all of it filled with big trout.

were black, twisted and gnarled like bonsai run wild. Above the trees had been sheets of lush grass, tawny in early fall and hiding below a swamp of muck, knee deep to our mounts. *Guanaco*, those llama cousins that inhabit Chile's high steppe, laughed as we struggled up slopes of fine gray shale talus.

There was, however, little humor in our eyes. The trip was not going well. I'd been elated when Pat Beck and Steve Smith of Tightline Destinations had flown me down to check out a fishery seldom visited by U.S. anglers. As planned, I met up with Jeremy Freymoyer of Sweetwater Expeditions and Rafael Gonzalez who holds the lease on more than forty kilometers of



the Rio Grande well above the famed Maria Beheti mileage in Argentina. Jeremy was brokering Rafael's services to the U.S. market.

We set off, then, for a week's fishing on the headwaters of the Rio Grande, caught sea-run browns of thirteen to fourteen pounds and ate lamb and cabbage roasted in a wood stove which stood no higher than mid-thigh. We had drunk the country's *malbec*, a rich and mellow red wine, and talked

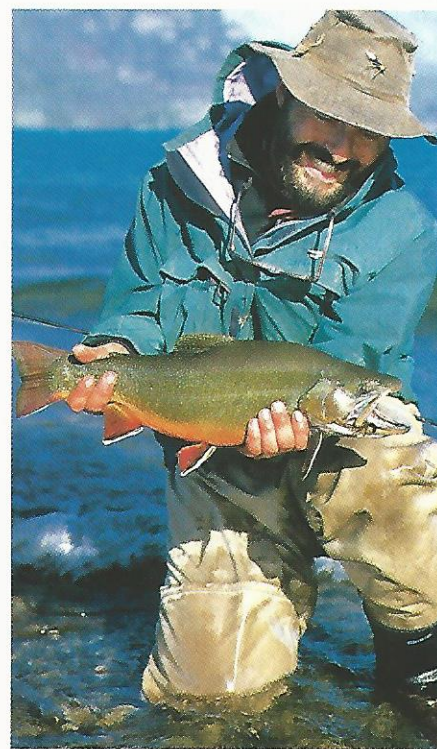
of *estancias*, failing now that there is market neither for their wool nor the meat of their sheep.

We had motored north along endless roads of potholed gravel, past fenced fields I first thought were corrals but were labeled with triangles of red carrying one stark word in white: *Mina!* a remnant of the days a quarter-century ago when Argentina thought it would be cool to annex the western two-thirds of Tierra del Fuego. We

had fished a little river in the shadow of the glacier-carved aretes of Torres del Paine where the browns were long and as skinny as mackerel. I had been reading Haig-Brown's *Fisherman's Winter*, and I felt, save the advantage of fifty years' development of auto and airplane, this might be his Patagonia.

truck over largely gravel roads.

Rafael and I and three others left Punta Arenas for the lodge late one afternoon to fish the Rio Grande the next morning. A flat delayed us for an hour at the gas station at Cerro Sombrero, forty kilometers south of the ferry across the Straits of Magellan at



Beyond these snow-capped peaks lies Lago Fagnano where, come April, the brook trout don the colors of the land itself.

hitched a ride back to Punta Arenas, a five-hour trip with no food and nothing to drink. There, Jeremy arranged for new transport – a similar vehicle but with a busted front passenger seat which we would discover later. We grabbed a couple hour's nap in the hotel and headed off the next morning. The fiasco cost us a day's fishing and an unbudgeted extra night in the city.

I was trying hard not to judge the shoddy transportation and poor logistics by U.S. standards. This was not Montana, but the tail of Chile. Travel is an adventure, and its vicissitudes are taken in stride. I gripped this in my mind as we made yet again the long drive from Punta Arenas up along the straits to the ferry and thence to the estancia on the Rio Grande. (I also gripped the back of my seat to keep it from reclining into the lap of the angler sitting behind me.)

Two days on the trail with sweeping vistas punctuated by intimate glades had mellowed my frustration. How

It certainly was mine.

That was last week and now the trip was falling apart. It began when Jeremy added his college roommate, the roommate's girlfriend and his own sister – all nice 20-something folks but not serious anglers – to our group. We were now too many to fly from our base in Punta Arenas to Porvenir, a town close to the lodge on the Rio Grande. Instead, we were forced to make a seven-hour trek by

Punta Delgada. An hour-and-a-half later, we were banging down the unpaved highway when the truck sloughed to a grinding halt. The left rear wheel bounded on unchecked. The pounding had worked loose the ill-fitting spare and sheared the lugs that secured it to the brake drum. We were stranded ninety kilometers south of the gas station. Night had fallen and not a single light glimmered on any horizon.

On the first north-bound truck, we

could it not? We were, all of us, eagerly looking forward to arriving at the estancia on Lago Fagnano. On Jeremy's web page, we'd read that the *estancia* contained "several guest rooms that have been renovated." He'd told us of showers and electricity. We pictured a large rambling country house with many refurbished bedrooms. Breaking from the woods, we found not an *estancia* of faded elegance like those we had passed while driving to the trailhead, but a simple four-room farm house.

Two guests were quartered in bunks in a recently papered six-by-ten-foot bedroom. Two more guests slept beneath a dormer in the attic upstairs. There, beds had been placed on a square of varnished floor. Mice scampered under the eaves. The other members of our party camped in a cabin with a wood stove.

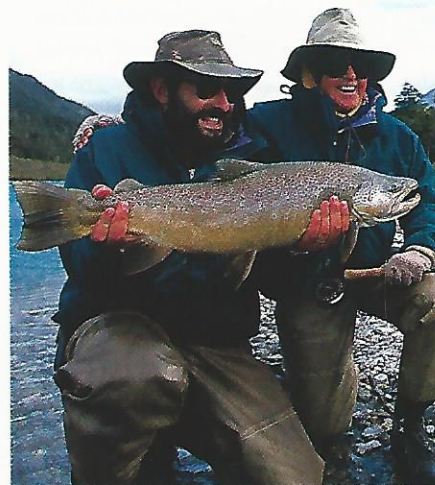
Running water was in absence. To shower, you poured water heated on the wood stove into a plastic bag and drizzled it over your body. Or you chose the quicker and colder route: one quart of icy water dipped from the ubiquitous

five-gallon pail and dumped over your head got things started. A second rinsed away the soap. Nobody shaved. The toilet – inside at least – was flushed with a slosh from the five-gallon pail.

Had the accommodations been accurately represented when we booked the trip, there would have been no problem. But they were not, nor could I lay the difference between expectation and reality on translation from one language to another. Jeremy had simply embellished the facts.

The disappointment for one member of our party, a 30-something woman traveling with her mother, was intense. She had but one week to fish, and had been wooed into making the trip by talking to people who had never set foot on the *estancia*. She expected hot showers and a clean bedroom – not a bunk in the attic. She'd shelled out \$3,500, plus at least another grand for airfare, meals and lodging in Punta Arenas, and she felt she'd been had.

That, indeed, was the case. Only the woman and her mom had paid full fare. Jeremy's buddies were along for a deeply



Tierra del Fuego's ten-pound browns bring smiles all around.

discounted ride. The disparity in interests and price between those who came to fish and those who tagged along to trek fueled discontent like kerosene on a brush fire. Rafael, solicitous and professional to the core, refunded half the cost of their trip to each of the

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women anglers. It was the right thing to do.

I don't want to leave you with the wrong impression of this place. While as primitive as a hunting cabin in the north woods, the farm house was warm, dry and spotless. Hernan and Maricella, who own the *estancia*, went out of their way to make us comfortable. Maricella's trout *empanada* and spinach lasagna were as welcome as the snatches from *Carmen* she sang as she rode horseback through the woods. There was much laughter and commiseration, the way new friends do when they've

been through it and see eye-to-eye.

Fishing here was good. You'll find bigger browns and brook trout elsewhere in the world. But how many places can you fish where there's naught but one mountain range – and that capped by glaciers glowing blue in the dawn – between you and the Antarctic? We did catch fish – lovely brookies with bellies red, browns of golden hue and rainbows all silver having come fresh from the sea. We fished only the head of the river that drains the lake and the delta of the

stream to the west of the ranch. There is the entire river and hundreds of miles of shoreline. Would I return? In a trice! 

Note: Tightline Destinations (248 Spring Street, Hope Valley RI 02832; 800-933-4742; www.tightlinedestinations.com) is booking trips to the upper Rio Grande and Lago Fagnano. Fare runs about \$4,000 with air transportation additional. If you prefer, contact Rafael Gonzalez directly at rgsearun@ctcinternet.cl. He is as fine and honorable as they come.

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