



Labrador



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As the U.S. Contributor on the mast of the extinct magazine, Canadian Sportfishing, I had to submit an article on one destination for their travel annual each year. Back in 1992, I decided to visit and write about Labrador and its superlative native brook trout fishery. I could have included Atlantic salmon but I wasn't as interested in fish that don't feed in the rivers. Having grown up fishing the remnants of native and stocked populations of brook trout in the Northeast U.S., seeing this totally intact native population sounded like stepping hundreds of years back in time.

Two things I was told many years ago: places you can drive to in Canada aren't worth fishing and if a Canadian lodge has stringer photos of dead fish in its ads, don't go there either. A lot of the char, pike and muskies take many years to get big and shouldn't be killed. So naturally, I chose to fly-in to Cooper's Minipi Camps and stay at the lodge on Anne Marie Lake, which has a stream inlet and outlet. Jack Cooper was a great host. The commercial flight took a route up to Nova Scotia where it stopped, then up the coast where I saw menacing icebergs below through holes in the clouds. The Air Canada jet landed in Goose Bay, Newfoundland, where guests boarded his floatplane for the last leg of the journey to camp.

The camp is in a perfect spot, a shallow lake with water flowing slowly through it. This section and others are part of a river system with some fast

narrows, tributaries and wide slow areas. This area is very fertile with beautiful evergreens growing in dark loam soil on land and lush lily pads floating on the water. They were in bloom in late June when I arrived. The shoreline rocks have lichen growing on them. The brook trout here average four or five pounds, with individuals up to eight or so. Because of the nutrients in the rivers, large abundant mayflies abound. The emergence of the Labrador Hexagenia is an annual event that is highly anticipated and I hit it right that June. It has an olive and pale yellow body with olive wings and fills a size 6 or 8 hook. Some anglers from the U.S. just bring their biggest Eastern Green Drake patterns.

Jack put me in with a stranger to share a bunk and a guide for the trip. My bunkmate was a reel builder' let's say named Bob, who lived not too far from where I lived in the States. He was about ten years older than I was. The other guests were two men from Colorado, John Gierach, the famous angling writer and his long-time friend A.K. Best, the famous fly tier and writer. In addition, award winning photographer, Richard Olsenius and his wife who were working on the cover story on Labrador for the October 1993 issue of National Geographic Magazine. Wow! What a collection of talented people. After getting to know everyone, getting some nourishment and rest, we all went to load our designated canoes and met our guides. The sixteen foot canoes were square tailed with an outboard and were stable enough for several passengers to stand in.

Bob, my bunkmate, automatically took the bow as his rightful position; quite an advantage, since it's difficult to cast over the canoe and guide in the stern. He did most of the casting to the gulpers the guide pursued by paddle in open water. He couldn't cast very far or defeat the wind, which was unfortunate. I couldn't wait to beach the canoe at the riffled narrows and wade in search of my own fish. I got my photos with fish for my article during these opportunities, with the help of a guide. Ray Best, head guide, is quite renowned, and is a wonderful guide with a great personality and a whimsical sense of humor. He'll try and shock you by snacking on a Hex during a hatch. I've repeated that stunt on occasion. But like oysters, I don't like the big ones. He's also our forensic pathologist and tells what the fish have in their bellies. This can include mice and frogs at different times of the season.

We had the occasion to fish with other guides during the week and one created an uncomfortable situation. His name was Harry Richardson III, an American and known painter of angling water colors. He suggested we get

out of the canoe to pursue brook trout feeding on the big Hexes in open water off a rocky shore, we each took our shots at trout at all distances we could reach. Harry stood next to me and said, "If I knew you could cast this well, I would have had you in the front of the canoe all week!" I looked over to my assigned fishing partner apologetically.

Bob didn't want to fish the spinner falls which started at 10:00pm and I didn't want to wake him if I came back late. Most nights though, I did see John and A.K, who John called Archie, slip off to fish with big grins like school boys playing hooky. They fished under the aurora borealis and the dim midnight sun. A.K would fine tune his fly designs in his vise on the dining table and John would look-on in anticipation. I have a photo I took of them leaving the cabin in the twilight and another during daylight, of John casting a loop toward me with his bamboo rod. When the float plane picked us up, I asked for some extra flyovers so I could photograph some of the beautiful stretches of the waters from the air. I'm in the process of scanning those slides to post on my website. My magazine article was well received and I wanted to return to Labrador again.

Since I was working for **Hunt for Big Fish**, an American cable TV show, in addition to writing, I arranged a trip for the next fall for three of us to film a show and asked for Ray Best to guide us. The theme of this show was catching big brookies using mouse patterns during the day. We heard the far North had a mass lemming migration, but found that to be erroneous. As in many places, rodents in the mouse family fall-in while drinking, or swimming across rivers, and fall prey to carnivorous fish. Ray told us he cleaned a trophy fish that had twenty mice in it! We didn't identify the rodent subspecies, we just played match the hatch. We were able to capture some repetitive surface strikes on camera and landed some up to almost eight pounds. If we didn't have the torrential rains we endured, our fishing would have been better and less restricted. One day we were forced by a downpour to catch some small brook trout in a tributary and cook them on sticks on a campfire under a big blue tarp, held by five of us. As usual, we made good shows, despite hardship.

I saw A.K Best again a few years ago at The Fly Fishing Show in New Jersey and reintroduced myself to reminisce about Labrador. He remembered the trip and suggested another river his fishing partner John Gierach had fished. A.K said, John says there's nine pounders there you can catch on a dry fly! I said, that's one of the reasons I like fishermen,

they're always hopeful.