



## Tree River Char



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**Back in the '90s, I arranged a trip to Plummer's Arctic Lodges on Great Bear Lake to film our cable fishing show, Hunt for Big Fish. We were mainly interested in sight fishing for monster lake trout, instead of the trolling the lake is most noted for. Great Bear is partially above the Arctic Circle and just below the tree line. The tree line in Canada forms almost a 45 degree angle; starting in the east near Churchill Manitoba on Hudson Bay and rising northwest until it hits the Arctic Ocean at the northern tip of the Yukon.**

To reach Great Bear, we flew from Edmonton, Alberta to Yellowknife N.W.T., where we boarded the Plummer's chartered Air Canada Boeing 737. We were excited to again venture into the Northwest Territories in search of fish. These flights are always fun when the visibility is good and you can see all the rivers and lakes of the north. Many of these waters have never been fished.

After a couple hour flight, we started our descent. Knowing the adventurous nature of the passengers and trying to have a little fun at the stick, the pilot did a couple of low passes over the camp and the lake and made turns that would not endear regular passengers to urban destinations. The fishermen onboard, including me, loved it.

The pilot landed the plane on the bumpy sand strip that looked inadequate from the air. The wings just cleared the small pines on either side. Once we landed and taxied in, the pilot shut off the motors and the attendants took a break on the runway. There was a surreal contrast seeing uniformed female flight attendants in pillbox hats, tight shirts and high heels in this wilderness. The pilot did an external check of the plane and used the built-in electric starters to spin the turbines back up. Off flew our connection with the world we left.

The accommodations were great and we found lakers hunting for food over shallow white sand bays adjacent to deep water. After we had our star big fish filmed, chummy Plummer, the lodge owner, offered us a fly-out to film the fabulous Arctic char fishing at Tree River.

Arctic char share the same family as lake trout, brook trout, bull trout and Dolly Varden. Char take 15-20 years to sexually mature and only spawn every 2-3 years. They live up to around 40 years and some individuals have reached over thirty pounds. Many char populations are landlocked in freshwater. There is an interesting distinction between sea-run Arctic char and many other anadromous salmonids. They winter-over in their natal rivers to survive subfreezing temperatures. They lack the natural anti-freeze proteins in their blood that Arctic fish like cod have to prevent their blood from freezing. Char are not able to survive under the ice where the water temperature is below 32F. Sea-run Arctic Char only make a short trip into saltwater to take advantage of the rich food source.

We were game to try fishing for char, so the next day we hopped a ride in a twin engine plane with other guests for an overnight trip. Our show Host Larry Dahlberg, didn't plan on sleeping, since we had adequate light to film in the night of the Arctic summer. I wish we had today's cameras then twenty years ago, which are even more light sensitive.

When we flew northeast from the airstrip at Great Bear, which was the only private Canadian airstrip above the Arctic Circle, the terrain grew more and more desolate. The sound of the internal combustion engines was deafening. As we approached, we could see about a dozen small wooden shacks near the first big pool in the river. There is a wider estuary toward the bay with less current. To the north we could see where the Tree River flows into Coronation Bay and the Arctic Ocean. I wish I had time to explore it all.

Larry, a camera man named Otteau and I walked past the main building and a guide showed us a monster char in a freezer someone harvested for a taxidermy mount. He also said former U.S. President Carter had recently visited.

We had limited time, so we got rigged-up and started fishing. We were there in July and most of the fish were chrome bright with white spots. I did however photograph a male char a guest had harvested on a streamer that had a significant amount of spawning colors. A month later, starting in August, all of them would have bright orange bellies bark backs and white fins. The white spots really contrast against the darkened color then.

Larry's go-to fly was the Flash Dancer he originated as a smallmouth fly. It's a streamer winged with silver Flashabou. It's the next best thing to a metal spinner! I think Larry was using a seven or eight weight outfit. Larry cast across current and stripped while making large swings through the pools. I don't think the river was full of fish yet, but they were hungry and grabbed well. A few even jumped. We caught fish at every pool.

Larry and Otteau fished and filmed upstream along the west bank to a waterfall until around midnight while I took some still photos downstream in the eerie twilight. I took over filming when Larry crossed the river to fish the east bank downstream toward camp. Otteau went back to camp to rest after carrying and shooting the 22lb camera.

While I was walking along the rock bank with the leather camera sling over my shoulder, the heavy monofilament Larry attached it with broke. We lacked the factory metal mount. I dropped down and caught the camera with my right hand, landing on rock with that elbow. The rock cut my elbow and I could feel a small bone chip under the skin. I sucked it up and continued working like usual and we fished and filmed until breakfast. The lodge crew gave us notice of our imminent departure for Great Bear and so we wrapped up.

After we repacked our equipment, two of the guests, elated by their great trip, invited Larry and me for a morning toast with Scotch they had brought in for a special occasion. After the obligatory ceremony, which did produce a little buzz, the plane landed once more to take us back to Great Bear.

We had everything in hand as the plane taxied-in and when the airstairs

were lowered, an Inuit mother carrying her baby and leading a pet wolf, walked down the steps. This was a family visit to her husband who was guiding. She was wearing a hooded and embroidered suede coat, with wolf trimmings. The baby was swaddled in a caribou hide. Despite the affects of the Scotch, I instantly shouldered the TV camera and filmed her coming off. The shot made the edit into our Tree River show. What a dichotomy between her world and ours.