

An embarrassment of fishes



TRIPLE-HEADER: (LEFT TO RIGHT) TED CAWKWELL, THE AUTHOR AND GORD PYZER STRUGGLE TO STRIKE A POSE



On the Yukon's remote and wild Wolf River, expect to tackle as many feisty Arctic grayling as you can possibly handle. And then some

I'm not a great fly fisherman. I know that. I'm okay, at best. I aspire to improve, though. I have a bunch of books about technique for this and that manner of catching fish on the fly, and I have a vise for tying. Oh, to tie flies. How cool would that be? I mean, to catch fish with something you spun up with your very own hands. That's making the connection. All I need, really, is the time to do it. Or so I tell myself. I certainly know the satisfaction of catching fish with my own creation. A couple of years back on the Ganaraska River, I caught my biggest-ever Ontario chinook with a roe bag I tied myself, chock full of eggs I'd harvested the previous year from a rainbow trout. I let that big old beat-up chinook go, too. He'd played his part twice over, having both spewed his milt and fed my ego, and deserved to expire of his own volition.

Such fly-fishing hero moments are few and far between in my patch of southern Ontario, however. For me, at least. Oh yes, I've hunted and caught mid-dling browns with dries on the Grand—very enjoyable—and I've caught small-ies with streamers on the Saugeen, the latter, admittedly, thanks to one of my many fly-fishing mentors, Mike Verhoef. And I know there are other challenges awaiting me, like landing a monster muskie on the fly.

But such challenges require hard work. And time. Late last June, I wasn't looking for hard work. And I didn't have weeks and weeks to pattern my

BY PATRICK WALSH

quarry. But I did want to catch fish. A lot of fish—and on the fly at that. Fortunately, salvation was at hand. Months earlier, my pal Ted Cawkwell urged me and *Outdoor Canada's* fishing editor, Gord Pyzer, to join him up in the Yukon at Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge, about 110 air miles south-east of Whitehorse, up and over the rugged, snow-capped Englishman's Range. "Man, you gotta get up there," he told me over the phone.

Now, I've followed Ted to parts north before on the promise of awesome fishing, and was amply rewarded. Namely, when he ran Milton Lake Lodge in remote northern Saskatchewan a few years back, I caught my personal best fish, a 37-pound lake trout. Naturally, I was all ears.

The promise this time? No end to easy fish on the fly, including Arctic grayling, pike and—once again—lunker lake trout. Ted was particularly jazzed about the lakers. He's friends with the lodge owners, Wes and Michelle Walker, and had joined them the previous fall after their fly-in operation had shut down for the season. The lake trout bite, he said, "was just insane."

And so I signed on.

As it turned out, the laker action when Gord and I visited was okay, but not out-of-this-world fantastic as Ted had described, no doubt largely due to the bouncing barometer. And since I'm not an entirely seasoned fly angler, flinging weightless bits of nothing against hard northern winds and into grey, choppy water seemed distinctly out of the question. So much for catching my first-ever laker on the fly.

Sure, maybe I would have a fighting chance if I were to return during the fall spawn, with the fish congregating on the lake's handful of shoals, but not in late June, with the

trout already scattered and on the move. While Wolf isn't a giant lake—21 kilometres long and five kilometres across at its widest point—it did seem to me that trolling hardware and covering lots of water was the wisest proposition for guaranteeing some fish in the boat. Like, who would even try to catch lakers on the fly at that time of year anyway?

Frank Dale and John Horsey, that's who. The two British guests deep-dunked tiny chironomid patterns to put up a number of trout, including Frank's stated goal of landing a 10-plus-pound fish. And what a sweet moment that was, just minutes past midnight on our fourth evening, the sun hanging on the horizon and the water as though it were glass—a welcome respite from the earlier blustery, grey weather. Gord and I had been trolling nearby in the broad, shallow bay at the south end of the lake, and had just motored up to their 14-foot aluminum when Frank's rod bent. Talk about patience and fish smarts personified—and rewarded, complete with a nice, silver 11-pounder.

In the end, I caught a few trout out on the main lake, too, albeit using my big-ass baitcaster, 30-pound braid and an ever-changing assortment of spoons and swimbaits. The best producer was a modest, glow-coloured #3 Syclops, which I tied on after the Brits figured it was worth downsizing from my hefty Half Waves and Len Thompsons to at least try to match the pin minnows two of their trout had coughed up.



TROPHY CATCH: PYZER AND OUR GANG'S BIGGEST LAKE TROUT PULLED FROM WOLF LAKE

helps, too; the nearest town, the 500-member T'lingit community of Teslin, is 44 air miles to the southwest. And because the Yukon's fishing regulations list Wolf Lake as a so-called conservation water, barbless hooks are mandatory and a slot limit is in place, demanding the release of any fish between 26 and 39 inches in length.

As for my particular visit, though, the bottom line was that I was unable to fly fish for lake trout. And by that I don't mean trolling, but actually casting and working my fly back in,

I also tried trolling big streamers on sink-tip line, the fly tactic favoured by the lodge, but had no luck.

My experience notwithstanding, the potential clearly exists to catch big trout with a fly rod. Some months after returning home, I got in contact with Lars Jessup, a fisheries technician with Environment Yukon. A former fishing guide, he recalls speaking with other guides who boasted of Wolf lakers up to 30 pounds on the fly, putting the lake in the company of the Yukon's other renowned laker destinations such as Wellesley, Tincup and Toobally. "Anecdotally," Jessup told me, "Wolf Lake is known for good lake trout fishing and large lake trout."

The most recent survey conducted by Environment Yukon appears to back up this contention. Of the 21 fish netted, tagged and released in 2005, the average size was nine and a half pounds. Says Jessup: "I think it is safe to say that this is larger than the average from most other lakes."

Since taking over the 32-year-old lodge from the original owner in 1998, Wes and Michelle have themselves caught big trout. And so have their guests, they say, collectively landing a good number of fish topping 40 pounds every season, as well as a few trout tipping the scales at more than 50 pounds. The record so far under their watch is a 58-pound monster, hauled in nine years ago by a visiting angler from California.

The Walkers credit several factors for the health of the fishery, not the least of which is their catch-and-release policy and the low volume of guests: 50 at most make their way to the lodge each season. The fact there's no road access

striving to provoke a strike. That's what I really wanted to do. To me, the laker fishing with hardware, along with sojourns for pike in neighbouring Wolverine and May Lakes, had become the sideshows, the mere warm-ups to what I hoped would be the big event: tossing bits of thread, hair and feather for Arctic grayling on the Wolf River.

Or more specifically, catching them on dries.

My terms of reference for Arctic grayling fishing are slim at best. And perhaps skewed. Actually, my first and only grayling experience prior to fishing the Wolf might well have spoiled me. It was on the Sulky River, a quick fly-out from Plummer's Great Bear Lake Lodge on the Dease Arm of the N.W.T.'s Great Bear Lake. We caught, released and ate grayling at will, almost to the point of routine. Almost. You just can't get bored about that splashing smack on a dry, the quivering bend in the rod and the satisfaction of bringing such a beautiful fish to hand.

Unlike the relatively tiny Sulky, however, the Wolf River is much broader, with a stiffer current and far more fish-holding stretches—at least until it spills over the first set of Class III rapids as it wends its way 140 kilometres south to join the Nisutlin River and empty into Teslin Lake. And unlike the Sulky, the Wolf comes complete with a growing reputation as a top Arctic grayling fishery, offering up fantastic numbers as well as true trophies approaching the four-and-a-half-pound range.

One of the Wolf River's boosters is Dutch angler Hans van



LAKE ACTION: (RIGHT) DALE AND HIS 11-POUNDER; (BELOW) SCENES, WILDLIFE AND FISH OF WOLF LAKE



Klinken, a renowned fly tier, author, photographer and freelance journalist. Perhaps his most famous pattern, the Klinkhamer Special, is said to be just deadly on Arctic grayling. I wrote to van Klinken to verify his contention that the Wolf reigns supreme, but he didn't respond. No mind. I then heard about John Wilson, personified as Mr. Angling on British TV. According to him, the Wolf "is arguably the best place for grayling on the planet." And in the Sept. 11, 2007, issue of the U.K.'s *Angling Times*, he lauds the river as "grayling heaven."

Certainly for an angler like me, it was heaven. Remember my admission that I'm not an entirely efficient fly fisherman, prone to few hero moments? Well, on the Wolf River I was a constant hero, catching grayling almost non-stop, alternating between dries and nymphs depending on the changing mood of the fish. And my catches were not in the dozens, but in the hundreds, which was all the more remarkable considering the grayling had only just begun to enter the river from their winter redoubts on Wolf Lake. According to Michelle, the fishing gets only better throughout the summer.

The grayling were so ravenous, I was a fly-fishing hero even when I didn't want to be, such as when I was dicking around trying to unravel pesky wind knots. Three times this happened: I caught fish as my suspended fly skipped along the water's surface, mere inches away, while I fumbled with chilled fingers to undo the latest intelligence test of a knot. Through the gin-clear water, I could even see the fish hovering in the current just downstream of my submerged lower half, treating me as though I were nothing more than a piece of structure.

In short, I caught so many grayling not because of any particular skill on my part, but by mere dint of geography. These are truly wild fish inhabiting a remote slice of pristine wilderness, completely alien to the concept of fishing pressure. There is a

world of rugged mountain vistas and white spruce forests, a world shared with the likes of beaver, moose, woodland caribou and golden eagle—not man.

All of which, of course, adds to the overall appeal and infectious nature of wading the river, even for guests otherwise determined to catch a lunker laker back out on Wolf Lake. "They come for the lake trout," says Michelle, "but become grayling lovers by the time they leave."

Yes, the Arctic grayling were a big draw for me, in particular the chance to catch them, one after the other, on dry flies. Anticipating, watching and feeling the take was pure fly-fishing bliss. Non-stop bliss. But I'd be lying if I told you that catching upward of 200 fish a day was the highlight of the three days I spent on the Wolf River. Because sometimes, all it takes is just one fish, an off-script interloper, to change the game, if only for a moment. And sometimes, that brief, unexpected change-up can make for the defining catch, the fish that trumps all when it comes to summing up your time on the water, whether it's an afternoon on a local pond or six days at a remote, mountain-cradled Yukon fish camp. And I caught just that fish, on my second-last day, in the last place I would have expected.

Not that I should have been surprised. I mean, why



GRAYLING GALORE: (RIGHT) CAWKWELL AND ONE OF HIS MANY FISH; (BELOW) MORE WOLF RIVER ACTION



WOLF PLANNER

GETTING THERE Air Canada and Air North offer daily flights to Whitehorse from Vancouver and Calgary. Air North also operates flights from Edmonton. From Whitehorse, it's a one-hour float plane jaunt into Wolf Lake; the flight is included with a stay at Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge, the only operation on the lake.

ACCOMMODATION The lodge has four private, comfortable cabins, housing up to three guests each, complete with en suite bathrooms and hot running water. "Five-star wilderness cuisine" is served three times daily in the main lodge (expect to put on weight), while sundowners are enjoyed in the screened-in, heated gazebo bar, which also features a hot tub.

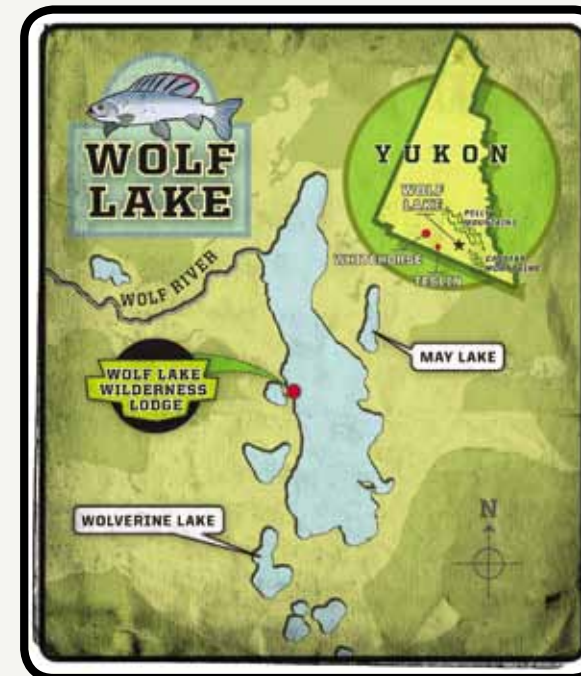
WHEN TO GO Four-, six-, eight- and 10-day stays are offered only in June and July. The lake trout, pike and whitefish action is said to be fairly consistent throughout the two months, but the Arctic grayling opportunities on the Wolf River typically don't kick into high gear until late June when the fish return from their winter vacations in Wolf Lake.

PERMITS Visitors to the Yukon will need a non-resident's fishing licence, available at the lodge.

GEAR Along with four-stroke-equipped 14-foot Lunds, the lodge provides all necessary spinfishing tackle. If you're like me, though, you'll want to bring along your own favourite laker and pike rigs. For lake trout, try #3 Syclops in glow, red-bodied Pixees and big, hollow-bodied swimbaits; the lodge has a decent selection of spoons. For pike, you can't go wrong with #5 Aglias, spinnerbaits and swimbaits. As for the grayling, a five-weight set-up should give you enough backbone for the strong current, while practically any small dry fly or beaded nymph will do the trick. You'll of course also want a camera, as well as insect repellent, sunscreen, lip balm and polarized sunglasses. For those who must remain tethered to the world back home, the lodge provides Internet access via satellite.

CLOTHING Wolf Lake is north of 60, so arrive fully prepared for all manner of weather, especially earlier in the season. Layers are recommended, and don't forget your raingear. Also bring gloves, a hat, a toque and warm, waterproof footwear.

MORE INFO Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge, www.wolflake.ca; (306) 873-7733 (September 15 to June 1); (250) 483-6919 (June 1 to September 15). Tourism Yukon, www.travel yukon.com; 1-800-661-0494.



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wouldn't lake trout abandon their main-lake haunts and venture down the Wolf River chasing grayling? It made total sense afterwards, but when Ted first started freaking out about a giant slashing through the pool in front of me, lake trout was not the fish I envisaged. For sure, I thought he had seen the biggest grayling yet, some four-plus-pound bruiser, so big its girth was evident even through the shimmering current.

"Get it!" I yelled back to Ted.

"But I only have a five-weight..."

Huh?

"...and a box of nymphs!"

Wah?

"It's a big laker!" Ted yelled again, having interpreted my furrowed brow. Suddenly, it all made sense.

Oh.

Ohhh!

The thing is, I was also fishing a five-weight. And an ever-shortening 5x tapered leader. That was cool with the two-pound-max grayling in the stiff current, but a big bad trout on the feed? Not so much.

Screw it, I thought. This fish is mine.

From there, I kind of went on autopilot. All I remember is remembering I had a big saltwater streamer in my vest, a Baja Baitfish I'd bought back in Ontario at Bass Pro Shops, more or less on a whim, thinking it would work a treat on Yukon pike. Hell, it was meant for fooling bonito, dorado, sailfish, yellowtail and other predators of the sea, so why not? I can't tell you how it worked, though, because I plumb neglected to switch over to my nine-weight and tie it on when Gord and I were slaying them with hardware earlier in the week on Wolverine and May. But I can tell you how it fared with the big lake trout.

The first cool thing about this fish story is I couldn't see the fish. I could see that Ted was as excited as all get out, because he actually could see it, slashing through the very pool we'd just started mining for our latest score of gullible grayling. But with the flat light and low sun, all I saw was the day's endless pesky cloud cover shimmering in the current. No mind. As soon as Ted had said he was out of the running, I just had to step up and take my best shot at catching the marauding laker, under-gunned as I was.

As mentioned, it was as though I'd flipped on the autopilot. Without missing a beat (okay, I'm for once romanticizing my angling prowess here, but it really did go down this way), I snipped off my tiny beaded nymph (the grayling had stopped rising at that point), retrieved the Baja Baitfish from the streamer box in my vest, tied it on and unfurled.

Unfurled.

I wish.

Let's back up a tad.

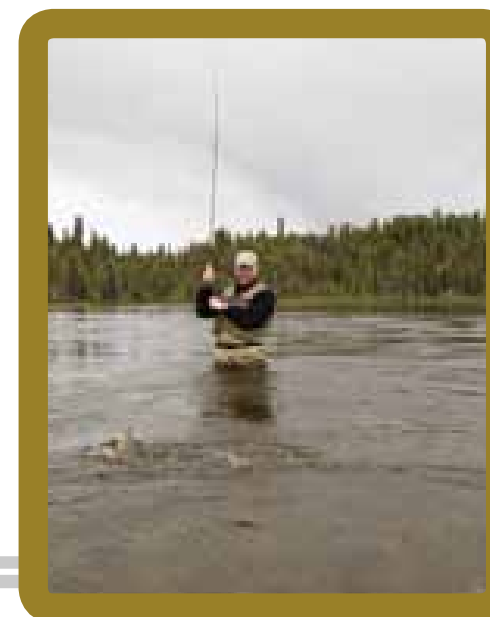
Rather, I excitedly made a sloppy cast, plopped the big Baja in the pool somewhat near where Ted said the laker was merrily feeding, about three metres crosscurrent from my position.

No mind.

Strip, strip, strip, strip.

Nothing. So I cast again,

FISH ON: THE AUTHOR
TACKLES A GRAYLING



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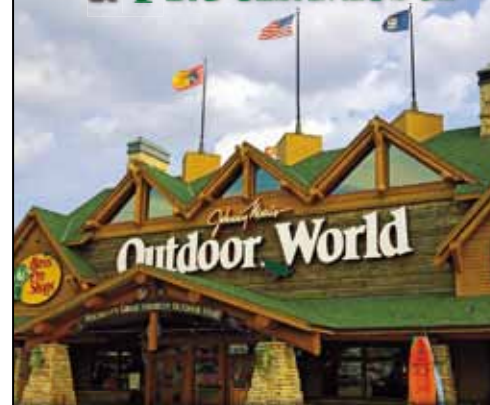
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HERO SHOT: THE AUTHOR AND HIS FIRST-EVER LAKER ON THE FLY

looking a bit better this time.

Strip, strip, strip, strip.

Again, nothing.

Last time lucky (you can say that, in retrospect, when your last cast connects).

And oh yeah, it did. Cast, strip, strip—BOOM!

“You got him!”

Ted was again freaking out, probably because he had never lost sight of the fish, standing as he was opposite me on the pool, the bad light to his advantage, directing my every toss of the line.

Had him I did. Luckily, he was apparently unaware of that rather salient point, and instead swam toward me—and shallower water—nearly beaching himself alongside the submerged foliage of a mid-river island (thank you seasonal high water) as I battled to keep a slight bend in the rod. Perhaps he thought he had nothing more than the sharp dorsal of a hapless grayling sticking in his craw. Who knows? But his solution to the situation was to swim downriver, following the shallow edge of the flooded island. And that’s when Ted and I knew we had him. Rather, that’s when we knew it was our only chance to land the fish before he rounded the tip of the island, got whisked away by the converging river currents and broke off.

Now, I’ve already credited Ted with spotting this fish in the first place, but I also must dispense no end of thanks for his skill as a net man. Namely, he had the wherewithal, while I was coaching the big laker away from the fast water, to grab the cradle out of our moored boat, follow me downstream and slyly scoop up the fish before he even knew he was about to become the subject of my latest angling hero photo.

In the end, he wasn’t a huge trout, weighing somewhere between 15 and 20 pounds, but he was definitely my biggest fish of the trip. And as far as I was concerned, he was a genuine trophy, something I thought had eluded me this trip.

My first-ever lake trout on the fly. **OC**

PATRICK WALSH IS THE (SOMETIMES) SELF-DEPRECATING EDITOR OF *OUTDOOR CANADA*.



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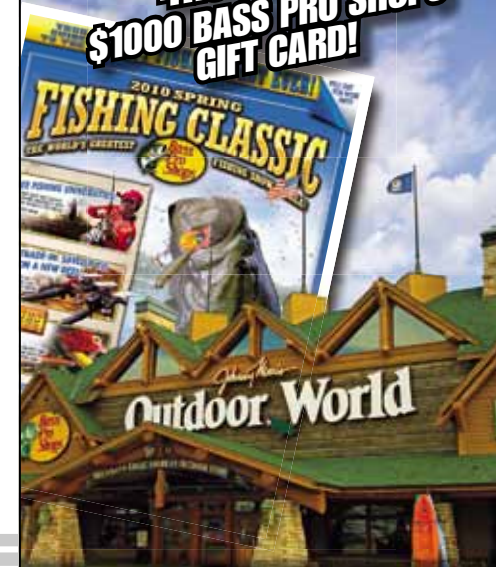
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