

Deep in the Yukon Wilderness

Story and photos: Hans van Klinken

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few Pacific salmon and steelhead in this part of North America and maybe that's one of the reasons why I love the fly fishing in the Yukon so much. You will find hardly any fishing pressure and the fly fishing is relatively new. Most fly fishers who fished the Yukon over the years came from abroad. For local people, lake fishing

is the most popular way to catch fish and that is probably why it is so well reviewed in fishing guides, stories and reports. There is not much information about the river fishing available in the Yukon and there is much to explore and discover.

The opportunity of fishing unknown waters is what I love most of all and the Yukon Territory offers the fly fishermen hundreds of wonderful streams, brooks, and rivers that are still peaceful and unspoiled.

When we travel by car in the Yukon we mainly fish the easy access waters but even then we don't see any fly fishermen. You can float for hours in your belly-boat without seeing a

soul. Unfortunately I get older with serious back problems so cannot make long hikes in the wilderness with heavy backpacks anymore. A good hike is no problem for me, or my wife but it is all the equipment and clothing that we need for a serious trip and our safety of course. In the past I used to walk heavy packed for days beside riverbanks and through valleys and I loved every single minute

of it. It is still hard to miss all those exciting trips and wonderful campouts and to get over it found the best alternative by staying at fishing lodges so that I still can be as close as possible to the wild. Most lodges are located in untamed fishing areas anyway and therefore long hikes are not necessary to reach the hot spots and enjoy nature and wildlife. The places I like the best are the lodges

where most travelling is in boats because we taught ourselves to handle our photo equipment without a tripod and to approach wildlife much closer too. On those days that we fish on our own, or when a little hike is required, we travel light and just keep a radio in our backpack. When you are older and more fragile it is nice to know that there are people nearby just in case of an emergency. I often fish with fish-

ing guides and native people and love to share our knowledge and experiences and for me it is an excellent way to make new friends for life.

How sparse the fly fishers really are in the Yukon is hard to say because of the enormous distances, but the last 5 years in which we visited I met only a handful of them. In the year 2000 I met three people in the entire province that exclusively fished for

grayling with fly. Maybe now you can imagine that there is a lot of space left in an area that is almost as big as Spain. Fly fishing in the Yukon is completely different from all my other fishing trips and experiences and that's another reason why I like it so much.



What makes the Yukon so special for the fly fisher

My experience is based on fly fishing in more than 50 lakes and river systems in the Yukon over a period of several years, so let me try to explain why fly fishing there is so special for me. First, there is a real challenge to fish for six species of whitefish, by which I mean that fishing for whitefish by fly is not easy and maybe that's why so few people try it. Many people still believe that whitefish only exist in lakes but they don't; it depends on the species. There are some that just

stay in the lakes during the wintertime but as soon the rivers start to flow again they move up or downstream. I also know about whitefish that stay in rivers all year round in Scandinavia or Russia and you just have to review the catch reports about ice fishing in those countries. Some species of whitefish like rivers and this actually means a lot for a fly fisherman because in running water, including feeders and outlets of lakes, they are easier to catch and more aggressive with flies. In some of the Yukon lakes the whitefish catches seem easier than in other lakes but there are several such as Dogpack, Wolf Lake and Tincup where it seemed

impossible to hook them by flies at first. Many people underestimate the whitefish as a game fish, but they do readily take dry flies and nymphs. For me it is a wonderful fish to pursue. I can assure you that if you like to fish for grayling, you will love to catch a nice whitefish as well.

Whitefish all over the world are an important species in the food chain. In the Yukon they are food for lake trout, pike and even other whitefish. If you find a place with a lot of them you can be sure there is an excellent fishing for other species as well. Because the whitefish feed most of the time in the shallows of the lakes

during summertime you can select one fish and try to catch it on sight, one of the most beautiful ways of fly fishing. I caught many fish sight casting and it always makes my day. When you finally hook one you will discover that they fight much stronger than grayling, but the risk of losing them during your play is pretty high too. Depending on the species and the force you use while playing the fish, the landing chances easily can be only 40%. This is because of their small and very soft mouths. You will need some tricky flies to prevent them slipping off the hook. With curved hooks I finally increased the landing percentage up to 80% and for big fish even up to 90%.

The most spectacular experience was the catching of my first Inconnu or Sheefish. This species is the biggest of all whitefish and is better known as the Tarpon of the North or Freshwater Tarpon. They can reach more than one meter in length. Why the inconnu grow so big in the Yukon is still unknown. There is still a lot to learn about this wonderful whitefish and people are discovering them at more locations over the past 10 years. The inconnu seem to like big, silty rivers and associated lakes and the Yukon has plenty of them. Some people have told me they live in the big lakes and spawn in the rivers that feed the lakes. Other stories say that they come from the Arctic Ocean and follow the drainages to the south. However, one thing is striking: the fight of the inconnu is the most amazing I have ever seen from a freshwater fish and because we use light tackle and flies the fish surely can play more freely than when hooked with a big heavy spoon on a stiff powerful rod. Inconnu is hardly fished by fly fishers while locals net them just for dog food. The unbeliev-



able satisfaction lies in the fact that some of the bigger fish will walk on their tails for quite some time.

Grayling

One of the Yukon's favourite game fish, of course, is the Arctic grayling.

Grayling fishing in North America is completely different from what we know in Europe. In my opinion there are two groups of Arctic grayling in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Alaska. The first group can be considered as the insect feeders. After my experiences at so many





places in the Yukon we mainly catch them in rivers or feeders and outlets from the lakes. You fish for them with light tackle and large dry flies or you use some realistic nymph imitations. In central Yukon's Wolf River that runs out Wolf lake we recorded one Arctic grayling jumping 17 times in just one fight. Some leap over a meter straight in the air. Those leaping fish at Wolf Lake are the main reason why I estimate Wolf River as one of the best places in the world to catch the lady of the stream!

The second group of grayling I have labelled as "the aggressors or cannibals". These fish take everything, even mice or small whitefish and many of them have been caught while we were fishing with big nymphs or streamers for lake trout. To be honest I don't like this latter group so much especially when I hook them on the heavier equipment I need to use for landing lake trout. However, their aggressive strike and strong fight is much more powerful than we are used to in Northern Europe. The reason for this must be because they have more volume and aren't as slim as the fish that we used to catch in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Not all rivers in the Yukon have grayling or have grayling all year round and it surely has to do with the strong and long wintertime and depth of the river. Some rivers only hold grayling during summer and these are fish that stayed behind after spawning. Most grayling will be found in the Yukon lakes and the rivers that connect lakes.

Lake Trout

The species that surely makes the Yukon so interesting for fly fishermen is the lake trout (savelinus namaycush).

It's a member of the char family but not many people like it when you call them char. They grow big, (up to 40-50 pounds), and they surely are the most powerful fish in the Yukon. The biggest fish usually take the biggest flies but I often caught them around 2-3kg on nymphs and with light tackle while fishing for grayling. It's a very risky action playing a big lake trout on a light Arctic grayling rig, and you need at least a six weight rod to be able to land them decently without damaging the fish. Night fishing or fly-fishing on dull and dark days are the prime times for catching the biggest specimens. The most exclusive lake trout fishing in my life I did at Wolf lake when the lakers

were feeding on the surface on sedges and beetles in the shallows under the eyes of the midnight sun and when the wind died down after 11pm. Remember Yukon's latitude is very high up north so you have to deal with the midnight sun as well. This is the prime time for me. Those fish usually are between 2 and 4kg and give an excellent fight on a 6 weight rod. If you want to go after the real monsters you will need at least a stiff #8 rod and long heavy sinktip lines. With a soft rod it will take ages to land the fish and they could be damaged too easily by too intensive playing and the forces needed to pull them up. I am talking about fish from over 15 kg here. There is amazing fishing in September when

the lake trout shoal up and prepare for spawning on gravel beaches around little islands and feeders. I do not care to fish while fish are spawning for foul hooking can happen too easily. My most spectacular lake trout catches by far, (over 1 meter), are those fish caught at night, especially after a stormy day with floating lines and using big buoyant mice tied on tubes with a single hook.

Feeding and fighting behaviour of the lake trout

The average lake trout feed heavily on snails, nymphs, shrimp (scuds), and smaller fish. Since they have only a



few months to store necessary fat for the long winter months, they eat prolifically, taking any available protein; they are even willing to scavenge. Flies can catch enormous lakereels but you will need to go out when weather conditions are most unpleasant for us. In a boat it is not so enjoyable because mountain winds can be unpredictable. But everything has a good side too and while a lake in the Yukon can get stormy in minutes, you just need to go ashore for a while and let it blow over. I have never had to wait longer than an hour.

Let's go back to the big monster fish. They usually stay deep and feed on the bottom. The best way to catch a big lake trout by fly is at night when they come up from the depths and feed on the steep drop offs or even hunt whitefish and grayling on the shallows. They can handle enormous flies and need extremely strong hooks. I use mainly saltwater hooks when fishing for lake trout.

Lake trout also have a unique way of fighting. Frequently when hooked they provide only token resistance – until they see you or the boat or belly boat. Then all politeness disappears and a strong fight begins. My biggest lake trout ever (113cm), took almost 400 meters of backing, I had to let him go first because I hooked him on a 7 weight. It took me more than 30 minutes to land him. Although they rarely become airborne, lake trout do make strong runs. A long backing will be indispensable. People who don't fish often will smash a brand new 5 lb. tippet in seconds when a lake trout starts its run. Once they are brought closer to the boat or float tube, they change tactics. Frequently they begin gyrations around a fixed point. As a result they



either wind themselves up completely with coils from the leader, or they pull the fly out of their mouth and get away. I have seen often lakereels pulling doubles or treble hooks out of their mouths using this method. I fish single, barbless hooks and of course lose

fish now and then but I really don't mind. As long you keep the line under tension you have a good chance to land your lake trout safely but forget it for one second and the fish will be gone. Because of these powerful fighting methods I highly recommend people



NOT use big barbed hooks or doubles and trebles because the damage can be enormous. Another tactic used by lake trout when brought towards shore, is to dive nose first into weeds or sand to try to rub the fly out of their mouths. They are expert at this trick.

Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge

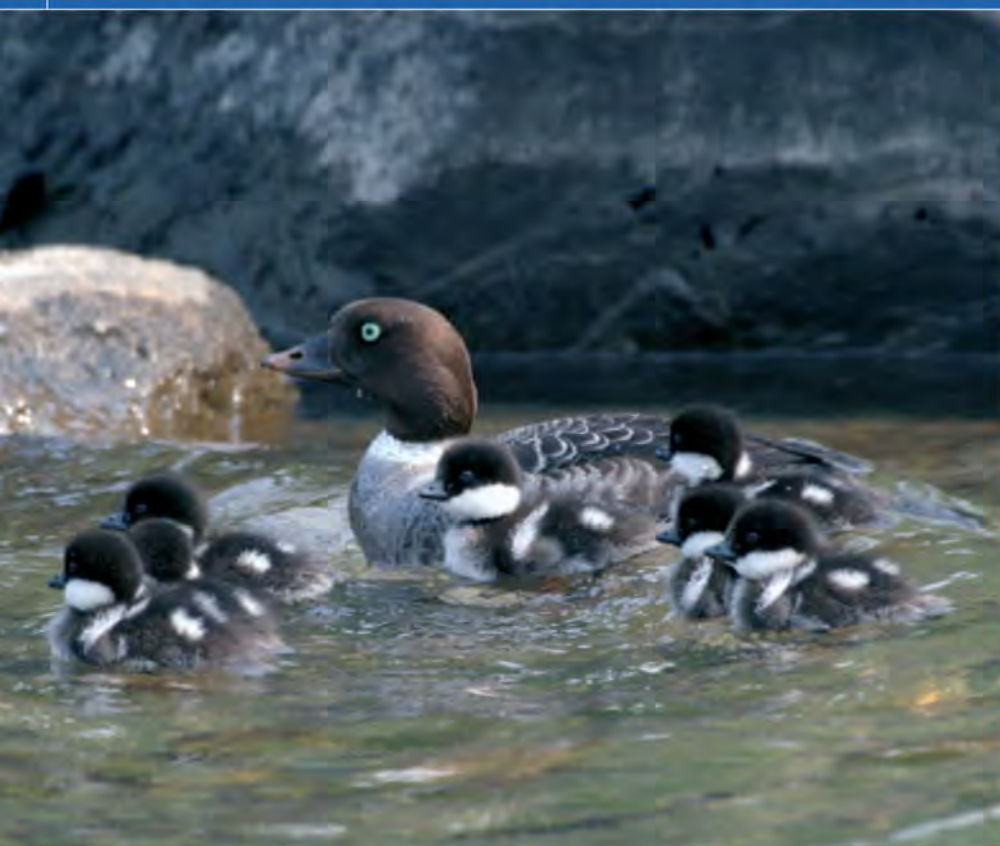
One of my favourite fly fishing spots in the Yukon is Wolf Lake and Wolf River. Wolf Lake is located approximately 120 miles east of Whitehorse deep in the wilderness of Canada's Yukon Territories. There is only one accommodation, Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge, and the only way to get there is by air. To view Yukon by air is a spectacle. Your flight by floatplane

into Wolf Lake will introduce you to the real scenic and rugged beauty of the true Yukon wilderness. It also will provide an exciting transition into a wonderful environment of peace, serenity and spectacular outdoor adventure. Wolf Lake is 14 miles long, 3.5 mile wide and the deepest spot is about 275ft. The Lake has a high number of shallows and steep drop-offs. Those are the hot spots for the fly fishermen. There are also many sandbanks on which the lake trout feed as soon the ice disappears.

The lodge itself is surrounded by breathtaking scenery with an abundance of wildlife that matches the incredible fishing. I have been at many lodges in the Yukon but when it comes to wildlife viewing Wolf Lake is unbeatable. Twenty to 30 pound (+)

lake trout are caught, photographed and released on a regular basis with many trophies up in the 50 pound range every season. Catch and release fishing is highly promoted, which makes the fishing better each year. The average lake trout are between 4 and 18lbs and easy to catch on fly as soon you find the magic touch and right flies. From the beginning of July Wolf River seems stuffed with the highest population of Arctic Grayling I have ever seen in the world.

While staying at Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge it is also well worth a visit to May Lake and Trout Lake. May Lake is four miles from the lodge. A boat brings you across and then it's only a half-mile walk through the wilderness on a good trail. Here you can try your luck with the red-fin



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trout and Arctic grayling found here as well. The red fin trout as the locals named them we usual call red bellies, their colour is brighter and much more beautiful and they often have an orange red belly. Their fins are much larger so they fight 3 times stronger than the normal white belly Namaycush. Trout Lake offers an exciting challenge for the athletic wilderness angler. A seven-mile uphill hike on a rugged trail will take you to one of the most prolific trout spots in the Yukon. Trout Lake is above the tree line and offers an incredible view for nature lovers and photographers.

Grayling fishing at Wolf River

If you want to fish for lake grayling in the Yukon you have to go early or late. There is no long spring at this latitude so a week after the ice breaks is the prime time for the real big fish. From mid July up to the end of August the lake fishing for grayling slows but the

last weeks of August and September are great. Some of the rivers in the Yukon are teeming with grayling and if the water level does not rise too high you can have excellent sport through whole summer. There are too many good places to tell you about. My experience so far is that high water is the only enemy of a fly fisher in the Yukon.

At Tincup Lake we had the best lake fishing for grayling in the Yukon but after we fished Wolf River I knew that this place was very special. The grayling run to a good size of 40 + cm and we caught them up to 50 +. For us it was almost impossible to get any grayling smaller then 40cm. At the Wolf River outflow until the first big rapids we hardly caught a grayling that didn't jump after it was hooked. Wolf River certainly is our most famous grayling river. Some people say it holds some of the largest grayling in North America but you surely need to search for them. My wife Ina caught her biggest grayling ever.

Why we love to stay at Wolf Lake Wilderness Lodge

I like well-organised places but too organised. When I travel a long way I want to be as flexible as possible. Wolf Lake is just perfect for people who love to experiment and like to do something completely different. Each couple of fly fishers gets their own boat and they may change their plans at any time. The owners and hosts of Wolf Lake, Wes and Michelle, are indeed very flexible and that is something that makes life easier for the guests. Perhaps it is so easy for them because it is a small and family-owned lodge that strives to provide the most enjoyable and relaxing fishing vacation you have ever experienced. Wes and Michelle keep their facility small in order to cater to

the smaller groups and to maintain minimum human pressure in pristine surroundings. The fireweed is the Yukon's territorial flower. It features on the Yukon flag and is a symbol of the beauty of the area. The fireweed grows throughout the territory during summer months and is so named because it is the first plant to grow back after a forest fire.

On request there is an excellent guiding service at the lodge but you are free to do your own thing and explore. I prefer the latter because

it is so nice to go your own way and discover the ways of fishing in different world. Especially for skilful anglers this place is a paradise to relax and experiment and having a good adventure while hooking into some exceptional fly fishing possibilities. The accommodation is not 5 star but good and clean and the food is excellent. Wes and Michelle do a really great job and they try to please everybody. Of course they cannot change the weather but there is always a good atmosphere at the lodge when boats

can't go out. We had such a good time that we returned many times and surely will return in the future. The area is so big that you can't explore everything in just one single trip. The wildlife is incredible making photographic opportunities easy and with just a little luck you will make the shots of a lifetime. ■

