

A fisherman wearing a red and black plaid shirt, a brown cap with a red logo, and waders is kneeling in a shallow, rocky stream. He is holding a large, silver char fish. The water is clear, revealing the rocks on the bottom. In the background, there is a dense forest of evergreen trees under a clear blue sky.

UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN

*Rasmus Ovesen pursues the world's largest char
in Canada's vast northern wilderness >*

PHOTOGRAPHY: RASMUS OVESEN AND KLAUS BOBERG PEDERSEN



LEFT
Searching the fault lines on one of the world's largest lakes. You absolutely, definitely need a guide.

BELOW
Fast-moving fires threaten to engulf the fishing lodge.

FOREST FIRES RAGE, SPEWING PLUMES OF thick, white smoke into the air. Klaus and I are sitting in a small plane in the veiled airspace between Yellowknife and Great Bear Lake - a giant body of water whose gnarled bed lies in Canada's desolate Northwest Territories, close to the Arctic. The scenery is disturbing and irresistible. It's as if a secretive force of Nature has been angered - there is something disquieting about the way it is trying to conceal its rage by covering everything in thick smoke. The fog soon hems in the plane and for the remainder of the flight the flames are hidden from our eyes.

Great Bear Lake is also shrouded and it isn't until seconds before we hit a rudimentary landing strip on the lake shore that a massive water mirror is revealed. The plane stops, we get off and find tentative footing in the wilderness, where the silence is as deafening as the drone of the propellers. Here - in the middle of absolutely nowhere, in an immense, undulating morass of anorectic pines, slight thickets, tufts, heather and moss - lies Plummer's Great Bear Lodge, the place where we'll be staying for the next week and from which we'll set out in search of lake char.

THE LODGE IS BOOKED to bursting because guests who had intended to stay at Plummer's Great Slave Lake Lodge have been transferred. The lodge on Great Slave, close to the city of Yellowknife, is in imminent danger of burning down. There, too, unmanageable forest fires are raging and the flames of one, driven by a northern wind, are in the process of licking across the lodge property. Firefighters all the way from Alaska have been summoned to contain it, but the situation is grave. For the coming days many of Great Slave Lodge's customers will be fishing with a gnawing fear.



RASMUS OVESEN

began fly-fishing aged eight and he's been a fanatical angler ever since. A globe-trotting journalist and photographer, he often fishes in the tropics but his heart belongs to trout and salmon.



LEFT
Klaus with a double-figure lake char.

CRAIG BLACKIE



LEFT
The midnight sun.

BELOW
A place to relax after fishing.

BOTTOM
There's only one way in or out.

NO LESS THAN AN HOUR after our arrival, we're sitting aboard a spacious Linder aluminium boat that is cutting its way across the bitterly cold and slightly rough waters of the Great Bear Lake. Our guide, Matt Dick, is heading for one of the numerous exciting fishing spots on the Dease Arm - a bay comparable to a mid-sized Norwegian fjord that - unbeknown to us - consists of myriad smaller bays, inlets, reefs, depth curves, fault lines and towering islands.

The lake is shrouded in an illusory mist that the sun is incapable of piercing. It isn't until later in the week, when northern winds finally displace all the smoke further south, that the lake's size becomes remotely comprehensible. Until then, the fact it takes two tanks of gasoline to ferry us across the Dease Arm and back to the camp is an indication of the lake's magnitude. It also serves to prove there is plenty of room for an over-booked lodge with 20 boats and 40 eager fishing guests.

The boat is brought to a halt outside a series of reefs that outline a small bay. Here the bottom drops off dramatically,

100LB SILVERBACKS

*The LAKE CHAR (*Salvelinus namaycush*) belongs to the char family, which also counts brook trout, arctic char, and bull trout. To thrive, it requires clean, cool and well-oxygenated water in combination with a solid prey biomass. When these conditions are met, it can live for 70 years. Lake char are endemically distributed across the north-eastern USA and all of Canada.*

In Great Bear Lake there are three sub-species: silverbacks, red fins and butterfly red fins. Silverbacks are pelagic lake char with a silvery grey gleam and a relatively big head and mouth. They primarily feed on prey fish such as grayling, whitefish, pike and even char. As a result, they grow big - up to 100lb.

Redfins have olive-green flanks and bright red fins. They don't grow as big as the silverbacks - probably no bigger than 30lb - and they live off small baitfish, gammarus, caddis and other aquatic insects.

Butterfly red fins are a similar colour to ordinary red fins, but they differ physiologically. They have oversized fins, a notable overbite and plump lips. They rarely exceed 15lb and are typically found in relatively shallow water, where they specialise in insect-based bottom-feeding.



LEFT
Salad is optional.

and along the fault line Matt - who is to become a great friend over the coming days - expects us to find foraging lake char. These fierce fish, undisputed rulers of the Arctic water realm, are shady predators with insatiable appetites and gory-looking jaws designed to inhale large unsuspecting prey. Typically, they are targeted in 25-100m of water, but here in July, midsummer, when the midnight sun bathes the Arctic in clear and colour-saturated light, they are found in the relative shallows.

With rods in iron grips, we prepared for our first casts. The big, bushy Streamers, tied to 0.4mm tippet, whistle through the air, landing on the water like maimed birds, and find themselves forced irresistibly downward into the icy water by the weight of our sinking lines. When, seconds later, we hitch up the flies and bring them towards the boat with long retrieves, our hearts are racing.

We have no idea what to expect, but we get an indication soon enough. On his third cast, Klaus' ten-weight rod suddenly bows and scrapes under the weight of a powerful fish. A few intense minutes later, it is thrashing in the guide's spacious landing net. Klaus lifts an immaculate lake char of about 10lb for a quick photo - and then the fish quickly frees itself from his hands and catapults its matt-olive and slightly-marbled body towards the bottom. Above, two relieved Danes and a Canadian cheer loudly.

“There are many fish and they are reckless, aggressive and powerful”



A single-handed rod takes the strain of another enormous lake char. If your tackle's faulty, it will fail here.

We must have found the fish, because less than ten minutes after Klaus released the first fish, a heavy tug on my line announces that another lake char has been fooled by our Streamers. This fish, too, manages to send deep convulsions through the fibres of the ten-weight rod. It moves like a mythological creature from the seven seas - deep, unyielding and heavy - and every turn on the reel is laden with excitement. A single surge into the backing and a stint of ill-tempered tug-of-war later, the shadow of a fish appears. Shortly after, another Great Bear char finds itself embraced by mesh.

The broad-shouldered 14-pounder is photographed and released - heading straight for the solace of the depths. It hasn't gotten far, though, before our white Streamers whistle through the air again. Our hearts are still racing, but our souls are infused with a newfound calm.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS, we stubbornly patrol edges, drop-offs, reefs, islands and fault lines - and there are surprisingly few dull moments in the boat. We consistently find fish where the water temperatures are highest; typically, in wind-exposed bays with water depths between 15ft and 45ft. There are many fish and they are reckless, aggressive and powerful. Their average size is impressive - a solid 10lb with the occasional 20-pounder thrown in.

The thick, clingy smoke that enveloped the lake for days has finally lifted and with a deep-blue sky and flickering sun above, it seems as if Great Bear has been brought back to life. The icy water assumes an absorbingly deep cobalt-blue, the wave-crests sparkle among the distorted cliff fragments of the reefs and the dramatic drop-offs are more defined. At the same time, news reaches us that Great Slave Lake Lodge has been rescued from the flames and at dinner later that day there is an atmosphere of relief and gratitude. This good news coincides with rather impressive Great Bear Lake trolling catches, including a massive 45-pounder. We fish on with intense ambition.

Great Bear is also home to giant grayling, 5lb-plus.



CRAIG BLACKIE

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOW are several unforgettable episodes. At one point, we find ourselves in a small, shallow bay where a school of char are on the prowl. With the sun perched at its peak and dead-calm water above, these agitated fish outline themselves against the sandy bottom and we can target individuals.

First cast, one sets off in pursuit of my fly. After a handful of quick retrieves, I pause. The fish stops immediately - trembling with excitement. Shortly afterwards the fly makes a subtle but inciting motion forward, and then it is suddenly gone - hidden between the jagged jaws of the fish, which has scooped up its prey in one lightning-quick and impulsive thrust.

The fight is on and the fish is all over the place. It thrashes with such ferocity that at one point, in an explosion of water and foam, it regurgitates half-digested prey. Another fish in the school sees this. It shoots forward and sucks in the frayed, white meal. Soon, it spots more frayed, white prey. However, when it clamps its jaws around it, a sharp hook anchors in its bony mouth and its freedom of movement is suddenly opposed by a weird, unyielding pull.

Klaus is into a decent fish, too, and for the next few minutes chaos reigns as we simultaneously fight two big and uncooperative 10lb-plus char...

GREAT BEAR LAKE is so big that it generates its own weather - unpredictable and unsettled. We get a taste on the second-to-last day when the lake is in turmoil and crackling flashes of lightning rapture the charcoal sky.

We find shelter from the wind between two islands, when the wind suddenly dies, the sun peaks through the dark ceiling and the lake becomes a recumbent mirror. Bewildered grey-brown sedges swirl across the water and suddenly the surface is breached here, there and everywhere by hungry char.

We find ourselves in a rush. With overly eager hands, dry-fly rods are mounted, lines and leaders are threaded through guides and bulky sedge imitations are tied to tippets. For the next half an hour, we carefully cast at more 8lb-12lb trout than most fly-fishermen see in their entire lives. We even hook a couple before the winds pick up again and the lake turns nasty. Landing these double-digit trout on four-weight rods and 4lb tippets proves an altogether different game, however.

The real monsters of Great Bear Lake also show interest in our flies during the week. I still have nightmares about a massive lake trout that almost pulled the line from my hands when striking. It disappeared irresistibly into the abyss, dragging more than 150ft of fiery-orange backing. It must have stalked an 8lb fish Klaus was fighting because it hit my fly with determination when at one point the lure ended up behind Klaus' fish. In the end, it spat it out and my link to a hauntingly big fish was lost.

Luckily, soon after, another Great Bear monster clamps its jaws around my Streamer outside a big gravel bar, immediately heading for deeper water. I lean back on the fish until the fibres of my ten-weight creaks, but the fish won't budge.

For the next ten minutes I do my best to keep calm and use the power in the rod. In the end, the heavy-handed treatment proves too much for the fish. I gain on it, little by little, and then it finally appears beside the boat. Now my focus narrows - I fall back into myself and the gravity of the task ahead: bringing the fish close and safely netting it. When that finally happens, I re-emerge with a loud and redeeming roar!

We move the boat to the shore; the fish in the net. Klaus shoots a barrage of pictures while I gently lift the 30lb trout briefly out of the water. Afterwards, I take a self-conscious minute to enjoy the sight of this old, broad-shouldered monster from the depths. As it rests in the shallows by my side with its big sail-like fins, soulful eyes and inverted dots like scintillating stars in a dark sky, I suddenly understand and appreciate why we have travelled all this way. And when the fish frees itself from my grasp with a couple of defiant fin strokes that catapult it into deeper water, the feeling intensifies. 



TOP Rasmus admires his 30lb lake trout.

MIDDLE Fishing the drop-off.

RIGHT An aurora adds to the otherworldly experience.



CRAIG BLACKIE

What are you waiting for?

GREAT BEAR LAKE is the world's fourth biggest lake - a massive freshwater reservoir with a surface area of 31,153km² and depths up to 446m. It is in the central part of Canada's vast Northwest Territories, which border the Arctic Ocean to the North. Fifteen different species of fish inhabit the lake including lake char, grayling, pike and whitefish.

Plummer's Arctic Lodges manage the fishing, which over the years has produced one record-breaking lake char after the other: among them the world record of 72lb. There are three lodges (Trophy, Great Bear, and Arctic Circle), all run by Plummer's staff with different fishing options. Visit: plummerslodges.com E-mail: fish@plummerslodges.com.

