

THE OTHER GREAT LAKE

BY SCOTT GARDNER



GUIDE MARSHALL FORSTER (LEFT) AND LYNN HENNING WITH A 23-POUND LAKE TROUT

OFTEN OVERSHADOWED BY GREAT BEAR LAKE, THE N.W.T.'S GREAT SLAVE OFFERS STUNNING SCENERY, AFFORDABLE ACCESS AND ENDLESS LAKE TROUT

YOU KNOW A fishing trip is about to get interesting when your usually laid-back 19-year-old guide looks at the bend in your fishing rod, sucks in his breath and says, "Uh-oh, this is gonna be a sh*tstorm!" The heaviest spinning rod I own was literally doubled over, thanks to a 20-pound-plus lake trout 100 feet below the boat, wildly peeling line off my reel.

In his six seasons of guiding on Great Slave Lake's East Arm, Marshall Forster has dealt with plenty of formidable N.W.T. trout, so this should have been routine. So why issue a sh*tstorm warning? Because my friend Lynn Henning, sitting next to me, also had a massive fish on the line. With a hundred ways the situation could go sideways, trouble seemed imminent—and it would be all my fault.

It started when Lynn hooked up first directly below the boat, just moments after his heavy jig hit bottom. Instantly, we could tell he had the biggest fish of the trip so far on his line. But instead of letting Lynn have his moment, I stealthily dropped my own bait to the bottom, hoping to pick up a follower. A few cranks of the reel later, I did, giving us a double-header for the ages.

Luckily, the predicted sh*tstorm didn't materialize, and after a pair of heart-pounding fights, Marshall stood up and netted Lynn's fish, then pivoted to the other side of the boat and deftly scooped up mine. For a few magical seconds, the three of us marvelled at the sight of 40-odd pounds of lake trout in one net, glimmering in the midday northern sun. Although we still had several days of fishing to go, this felt like the climax of our trip. Little did we know, the best was yet to come.

It's hard to imagine that the world's 10th-largest lake—a body of water 470 kilometres long and 200 kilometres wide—could ever be an afterthought. Yet Great Slave Lake is often overlooked by anglers seduced instead by Great Bear Lake, farther to the north. Bear



THE AUTHOR CELEBRATES HIS FIRST-EVER LAKER CAUGHT ON A FLY

is the glamour fishing destination. It's bigger and more remote, edging into the Arctic tundra, and it's home to the world-record lake trout. Bear is where you go to try to catch a 50-pound laker. Great Slave is more affordable and easier to get to, and where you go to catch dozens of 15- to 20-pounders, and often a few bigger ones. And one of the best places to do that is literally 500 metres from the front door of Great Slave Lake Lodge.

Operated by Plummer's Arctic Lodges, the camp is located at Taltheilei Narrows, about halfway up Slave's vast East Arm. In 1938, Chummy Plummer and his son, Warren, were exploring the lake by canoe, looking for a fabled fishing spot. After wetting a line at the narrows, they realized they'd found it. Two decades later, Warren's son, also named Chummy, established a lodge at the narrows. Since then, generations of guides and guests have experienced the area's exceptional fishing opportunities, and over the years, the perennial hot spots have earned nicknames ranging from the obvious to the bafflingly obscure. Last August, Lynn and I joined the list of guests to fish those fabled spots.

THE NARROWS

East of the lodge, Slave's McLeod Bay extends for another 130 kilometres, collecting water from an immense drainage area. It all funnels through Taltheilei Narrows, past the lodge en route to the Mackenzie River and eventually the Beaufort Sea. The narrows aren't exactly a rapids, but there's a lot of water moving through, swirling around >>

ALL PHOTOS BY SCOTT GARDNER EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

small islands, creating eddies and riffles, and flowing over holes up to 40 feet deep. This concentrates a huge amount of forage that attracts predators ranging from Arctic grayling to lake trout to birds of prey. As a result, Taltheilei Narrows is arguably the best spot on the entire lake—and maybe the world—to consistently land sizable lake trout. Lynn and I were within shouting distance of the lodge when we caught both the first and last fish of our trip. But as productive as that spot was, we had to see more of the East Arm's stunning landscape, with its towering cliffs and stands of evergreens in between recently burned-over patches.

THE AQUARIUM AND THE PIGPEN

A 40-minute boat ride from the lodge lies Christie Bay, where Great Slave plunges to an astounding 2,014 feet—the deepest water in North America. The Aquarium and the Pigpen are shallow, semi-enclosed basins just inside the bay, and that's where we spent much of our first full day, trolling five-and-a-half-inch Huskie Devles. We nabbed a lot of middling fish in the 10-pound range and quickly learned just how strong these lakers are. When hooked, they just pulled and pulled and never gave up. It didn't take long for us, however, to shift into the ridiculous, but inevitable, lodge mentality, where a trout that would be the fish of the year at home becomes utterly commonplace, leaving you hungering for bigger game.

THE SNAKE PIT AND THE GOLDMINE

On Slave, most anglers focus on trout, but Lynn and I wanted to sample more of the menu. So one calm, sunny day, we travelled 90 minutes east to the Snake Pit, by far the best name I've heard for a pike hole. It was late in the season for northerns, but as we drifted around a broad, lightly weeded bay, I managed to land an energetic 34-inch fish on my 8-weight fly rod, while Lynn hauled in 37- and 38-inch pike on a Johnson Silver Minnow.

After some good, slimy fun, we moved on to the nearby Goldmine. It was an unremarkable, boulder-strewn shoreline, seemingly identical to hundreds of other such areas. For some reason, however, it was home to all the Arctic grayling in the world. Or so it seemed. They were also big—most longer than 20 inches—and hungry, attacking our small spinners and flies with the enthusiastic abandon of a kids' hockey team at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Ever since I first saw pictures of grayling as a boy, I've longed to catch one on a light fly rod and marvel at its sailfish-like fin and shimmering grey, mauve and blue body. At the Goldmine, I finally got to, many times over.



A SANDEEL SWIMBAIT (ABOVE); GUEST BUZZ GRANT WITH HIS 34-POUNDER



HORSESHOE BAY

By the midpoint of our trip, Lynn and I had landed 50 or 60 lake trout, probably averaging better than 10 pounds, plus a few in the teens. Yet thanks to that lodge mentality—and I realize how absurd, even obnoxious this sounds—we felt a little unfulfilled. This was especially the case after seeing other guests' catches, including Winnipegger Buzz Grant's 34-pound laker. Then two things happened: we went to Horseshoe Bay, and we learned how to jig properly for Slave's lakers.

Our fishing strategy was to troll spots that were generally reliable, then stop to jig when Marshall spotted concentrations of fish on his sonar. The jigging, however, had been frustrating. As it turned out, we were doing it wrong. We were fishing the camp's most popular jigs—two-ounce, six-inch-long tubes—but with gentle, wall-eye-style lifts and drops. Plus, in 100 feet of water, even a two-ounce tube takes a patience-trying length of time to spiral down to the bottom.

So, when we cruised into the fjord-like Horseshoe Bay and saw fish stacked up from top to bottom, I pulled out my now-we-mean-business baits. Lynn took a four-ounce bucktail jig dressed with a five-inch Mr. Twister grub, and I tied on a five-and-a-half-ounce, eight-inch Savage Gear Sandeel swimbait in gaudy chartreuse. These baits plummeted to the bottom in seconds, landing with a pleasing thud.

We also adjusted our tactics to trigger the aggressive, predatory lakers by simply reeling our jigs back up at a brisk pace, with only occasional brief pauses. And boy,

BOB THIESSEN (ANGLER WITH LARGE TROUT)

did that fire up the trout. At times they would hit after just a couple of cranks, and others halfway up the water column. I even saw one 15-pounder streak up from the inky depths to T-bone my jig just below the surface. We soon had a dozen good fish, capped off by that sh*tstorm double-header producing a 19-pound fish for Lynn and a 23-pounder for me. It was the second-most interesting experience we had in Horseshoe Bay.

BUSSE BAY

Ordinarily, being paired with a teen-aged fishing guide might be a cause for some concern, but not on this trip. Hailing from Spruce Grove, Alberta, Marshall had been coming to the lodge every summer since he was a kid, thanks to his late grandfather, who was the camp manager for decades. That's why Marshall knows several fishing spots overlooked by the less-seasoned guides, including Busse Bay. There, against the backdrop of a kilometres-long, 20-storey cliff, our winning jigging streak continued. At home in Ontario, I tend to nod off while tip-tapping a quarter-ounce jig along the bottom, but dropping and retrieving these quarter-pound lures was edge-of-your-seat stuff.

We spent the afternoon in Busse after leaving Horseshoe Bay, and never went more than 15 minutes without landing a nice fish, including some fascinating examples of the different trout strains found in the lake. The most remarkable were the so-called butterfly lakers. Typically small, these fish are vividly coloured, with cartoonishly oversized red-orange pectoral, pelvic and tail fins. I was also intrigued by a number of trout with massive, fearsome heads tapering to long, skinny bodies that I nicknamed "anacondas."

HORSESHOE BAY, PART II

After telling tales about our double-header at Horseshoe Bay, we probably shouldn't have been surprised to find three other Plummer's boats there when we returned the next morning at about 9:30. Still, in a 27,000-square-kilometre lake, I was a little taken aback. Then I noticed two things: the other anglers were jigging only on the bottom and, despite the veritable trout convention visible on the sonar, they weren't hooking anything. So Lynn showed them how it was done.



LYNN HENNING AND A BUTTERFLY-STRAIN LAKE TROUT (TOP); THE AUTHOR AND A GRAYLING

Dropping and cranking our jigs, we immediately landed and released a couple of fish while the other anglers drifted by, frowning and furtively trying to see what we were doing. Then halfway through one retrieve, Lynn's rod bowed and his drag began screaming. By then, I'd noticed that Marshall was pretty good at judging the size of fish long before we saw them. Whenever he thought a medium-sized trout was on the line, he'd put on a tailing glove to help grab and quickly release the fish. This time, though, he immediately reached for his big hoop net.

Before long, Lynn had landed and released a thick, powerful 22-pound trout. Not 15 minutes later, his bucktail got struck with a shoulder-separating impact. After another fierce fight, Marshall and Lynn posed for a quick photo with a 23-pound laker. It was a true beast, with a bulging gut and gaping, ferociously kyped jaw—likely the last view ever seen by hundreds of terrified ciscoes.

As we left Horseshoe Bay to the other boats, all our hopes for the trip had been wildly exceeded, so it was time to indulge in a final, more esoteric challenge. And I knew where we had to go.

THE NARROWS, PART II

As life goals go, this isn't exactly curing cancer or even running a marathon, but I really wanted to land a laker on my fly rod. And the best trout hole in the world seemed like the place to do it. Using my tough 10-weight TFO Mangrove rod, a big-game reel spooled with full- >>



sinking line and a nine-inch-long fly, I began casting and letting the line swing in the current. It was a pretty cumbersome operation, especially with two other people on the boat, cringing and ducking every time I waved the nine-foot rod. So, I did what everyone else does in the narrows: I trolled.

I've picked up a few tricks for trolling flies, but honestly, I didn't expect much. Yet after only 15 minutes, as we turned across the current behind a small island, my line swept downstream and went tight to a fish. What followed was one of the most intense and thrilling fish fights of my life—a crash course in managing a powerful trout from a boat in moving water. There were tense moments, but with some team effort, we got the fish in the net. I then hoisted the vibrant, red-finned laker for a quick photo, which perfectly captured that indelible moment of jubilation and relief, along with a little disbelief.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

You know that sense of relaxation you get when you've done everything you wanted to, but still have another 24 hours in paradise? That's how I felt on our final day of fishing. We took it easy, mostly trolling near a long, narrow granite point adorned with a small lighthouse. I used my fly rod exclusively and, with a deepening sense of satisfaction, learned that the fish I'd caught at the narrows wasn't a fluke. In water ranging from 20 to 100 feet deep, I trolled my fly right next to Lynn's spoon and we practically matched each other fish for fish, including a couple of double-headers.

I used the same fly all day, a nameless pattern of my own design based on the classic Seaducer, but super-sized with a three-part articulated body, a stinger hook and a bulky head of plastic, wool and synthetic fur. With flash, vibration and a snaky action, it was simply lethal. For the caper, I hooked a powerful trout in relatively shallow water, but as we drifted into the main channel, the fish sounded, disappearing into the depths with my entire 90-foot fly line, and at least another 100 feet



THE AUTHOR'S STILL-NAMELESS TROLLING FLY (TOP), AND A LAKE TROUT IT FOOLED

of Dacron backing. When lakera are deep, you have to take care not to stress them by pulling them up too quickly. With this fish, that wasn't going to be a problem. But after much lifting and cranking, gaining line and losing it again, I finally landed the fish—a picture-perfect, silvery-grey 15-pounder.

The checklist for a dream fishing trip includes many items: clear weather, good company, plentiful or memorable fish, comfortable lodgings, stunning scenery, excellent food and drink, and the opportunity to challenge yourself and learn new techniques. If I can tick just a few of those boxes, I've had a great trip. But every once in a while, you get incredibly lucky, as Lynn and I did on Great Slave Lake, and tick every single box. I'd say it would be impossible to top, but we're fishermen, so you know we're going to try. **OC**

ALSO READ ASSOCIATE EDITOR **SCOTT GARDNER'S FLY-FISHING COLUMN ON TROLLING WITH FLIES (PAGE 29).**



LEARN MORE ABOUT GREAT SLAVE LAKE LODGE AT WWW.PLUMMERSLODGES.COM.

The Lodge

OPERATED BY THE legendary Plummer's Arctic Lodges, Great Slave Lake Lodge is open in July and August, and can accommodate 44 guests in modern cabins with full amenities. Plummer's offers three- and four-day or week-long trips to Great Slave, complete with meals, lodging, guides, tackle and flights between the lodge and Yellowknife.