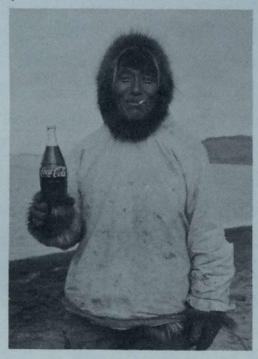
DRINK Coca-Cola REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

The Refresher

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1964

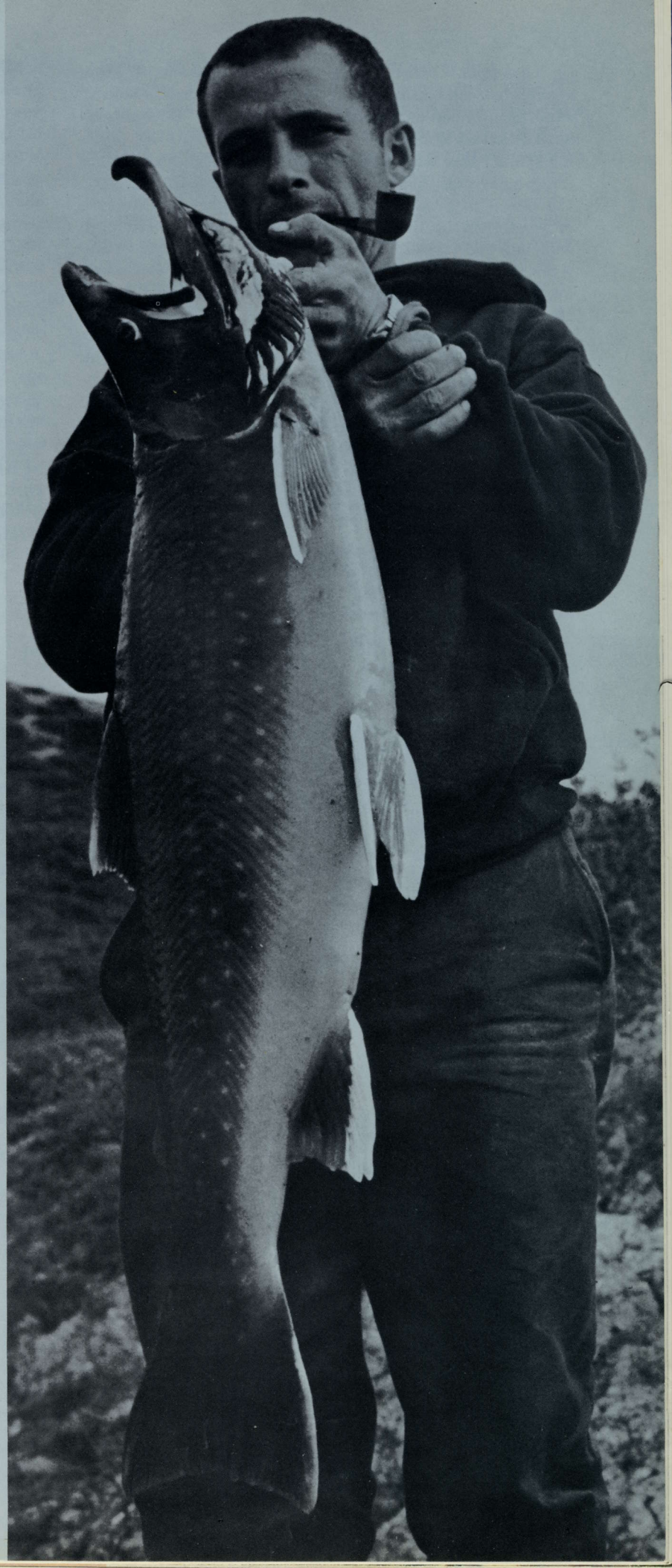
There was only one word between him and his Eskimo companions —'Coca-Cola'



I landed a fighting Char

IN ICY ARCTIC WATERS

by CHARLES ELLIOTT
Field Editor, "Outdoor Life"



A fishing companion holds the 21-pound male char which Charles Elliott caught.

The pilot deftly swung our plane parallel to the gravel bar and cut his engines. As the hull touched sand, he jumped ashore and made the metal bird secure with fore and aft lines.

What I saw when I looked out shouldn't have amazed me, but it did. A little knot of Eskimos had come up the beach to greet us and several of them had bottles of Coca-Cola in their hands. It was almost as though someone had tipped them off in advance that I was from Atlanta, but for a moment my home town did not seem quite so far away. The tall Canadian sitting next to me read my look of disbelief.

"I guess," he said, "the age is past when they lived on blubber, fish and seal steaks."

With the plane properly anchored, a native pulled his boat into the strip of water under one wing, making a bridge to shore. A couple of other natives drained their bottles of Coke to the last drop, and took on the chore of transferring our rods, tackle boxes and other gear from the plane to an Eskimo boat for the five mile ride upstream to the base of the first spectacular falls.

This was the last leg of a journey which had brought us to the rim of the Arctic Ocean in a search for our newest and most exciting game fish on the continent today.

I had crossed North America to add my name to the select list of anglers whose trophies include the Arctic char, that exciting game fish which migrates only in the ice water rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean on the roof of the world. And the first fellow fisherman with whom I shook hands was an Eskimo whose total English vocabulary consisted of one word—"Coca-Cola."

I wanted to belong to the most exclusive club in this hemisphere. It consists of those anglers who have caught Arctic char weighing twenty pounds or more. I even had visions of breaking the world record, which in two years has been shattered five times, with the current champion a 27-pounder. This is rather remarkable when one considers the remoteness and inaccessibility of Arctic char waters, and that for only about five weeks each summer and fall they may be taken by hook and line as they ascend those fresh water rivers around the Arctic Ocean to spawn.

An angler fishes for Arctic char in icy Three River. Char migrate from the salty Arctic Ocean into fresh-water rivers.

To add your name to the Arctic char club is not too much of a problem if you are blessed with the time and the proper cash or credit. If you live, as I have said, in the sunny state of Georgia, you board a plane for Winnipeg, Manitoba, some 1,500 miles north of the red clay hills and peach orchards. You spend the night at Winnipeg, and at daylight next morning board a DC-4 which flies you northwest over Manitoba, Saskatchewan, northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Eight continuous hours of flight after you leave Winnipeg, the plane puts you down on a dirt landing strip which skirts one bay of Great Bear Lake. You spend another hour traveling by boat to reach Plummer's Lodge, which consists of a very isolated but livable group of cabins, perched on a point in one corner of the lake which covers more than 13,000 square miles.

You are now about 3,700 miles from home, as a crow would fly if a crow could find its way and stay in the air that long. But you still have farther to go if you want to shake pectoral fins with an Arctic char.

The final air leg of the journey is by amphibian plane. You take off down an arm of the bay, rise over granite hills, among which the Cracker State's magnificent Stone Mountain would be inconspicuous, if not lost entirely. Below you sprawls an irregular patchwork of lakes, and hills of almost solid rock, covered most scantily by dwarfed spruce trees. You fly and fly and fly, and the country remains the same. You pass over the Arctic Circle and the tree cover grows thin. Then you look down and the trees are gone, and there is only an undulating robe between the lakes, of willows, alders and mountains clad in moss. You are in the barren lands, north of the tree line, and still you fly, wonder-struck that you do not see a house, or boat or even smoke from a man-made fire.

You pass over Coppermine River, famous in history for its massacre of Eskimos by the Indians almost two centuries ago. Then, after another long while, a great body of water appears in the distance and no one has to tell you that you are looking at the Arctic Ocean. The plane loses altitude slowly and underneath is Tree River, which gets its name because its tributaries flow into the main river in such a pattern that they resemble the skeleton of a giant tree laid out on the ground.

You land in an arm of Coronation Bay, 240 miles northeast of Plummer's Lodge on Great Bear, and taxi ashore to an Eskimo village of some 18 souls and 40 dogs, all clad in heavy fur. You step on terra firma, 4,000 miles northwest of such creatures as bream, bass and catfish. And though there is no reason you should be, you actually are amazed to find the Eskimo enjoying Coca-Cola, just as we do. Coke is truly universal.

You are almost there, to that spot where the big, colorful Arctic char migrate out of the salt and into the fresh water rivers. The last lap of your trip is by boat, navigated by a youthful Eskimo, and you plow up the swift current for another hour to the first of many waterfalls on the river. You walk four hundred yards upstream and pause where the big river surges around an island, in a series of fast currents and wide, swirling eddies.

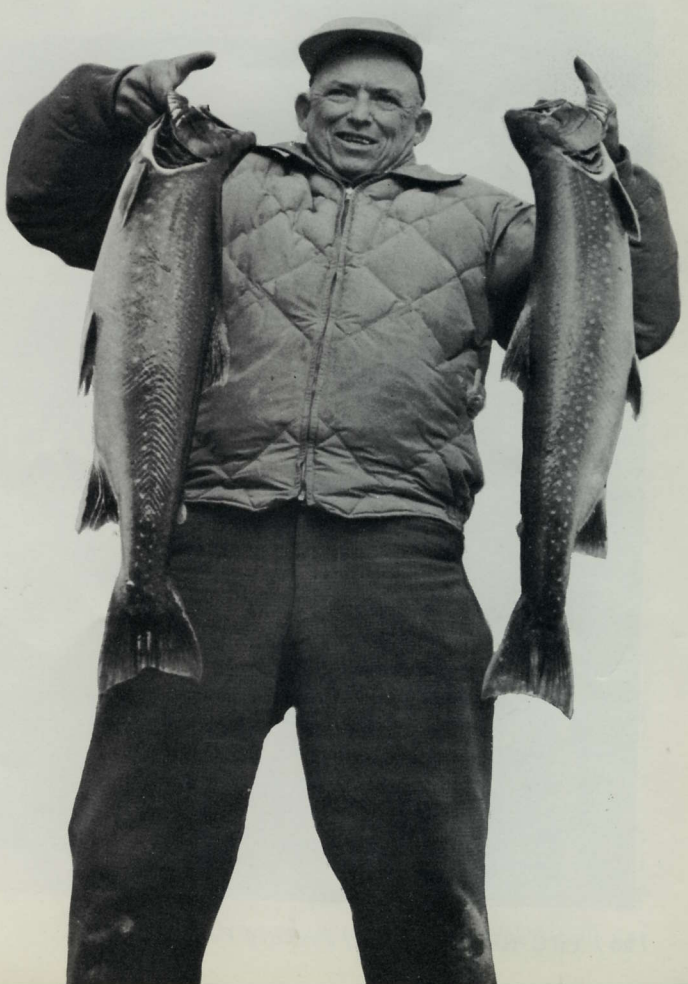
This is a big moment in the life of any fisherman.

I got my first glimpse of an Arctic char when it broke water in the edge of the swift current. My eyes must have practically popped out of their sockets. The fish looked huge in the transparent water. It was blood red and flashed an arc which made me think of a scarlet light.

With at least eleven thumbs I tried to put my tackle together. I had two rods with me—one a heavy duty spinning outfit—the other a sturdy bait casting rod. I had to make my choice of rods and of the variety of lures which had been recommended to me. I pawed through an assortment of spoons—large, small, copper, gold, red and white and crystal—all said to be good. There was also a handful of bladed baits—one a large copper spinner with a bucktail attached. One was about as good as another. These sea-run fish had never seen an artificial lure.

I made my initial assault with the spinning rod, a large reel and 15-pound monofilament. Standing on shore, I put a long cast to the edge of the current,

Charles Elliott displays a distinctly marked male char, left, and a female char. During two days in the Arctic he caught 11 chars over 12 pounds each.



where the char had rolled. The red and white spoon sank and washed with the bright water until the sweep of line indicated that it was in an eddy. I started a slow retrieve, with some rod action to give life to my spoon.

The sliver of metal came to a sudden halt and my first impression was that it had caught on a slab of granite, which often happens. A powerful surge told me that it was not a rock, but that I had achieved the ambition of a lifetime and tied into an Arctic char.

He made a magnificent leap into space, and if I could write the specifications for color, action and drama, I'm sure he would have followed that script to the letter. It was a spectacle worth the 4,000 odd miles over which we had flown to the rim of the Arctic Ocean.

I sensed that I was in for a long, stubborn fight. The fish jumped again and again and I could feel his strength in the sockets of my shoulders. He went down stream with the current and I had to give line, then upstream with the same brute force. I kept on as much pressure as I dared. Time and again I got him almost to shore. Each time I thought he was whipped, but he got a glimpse of me and was gone again in a surge of power which was hard to believe. My hands ached, then my arms and shoulders. But I held on doggedly and after a long time had him finning almost exhausted at my feet.

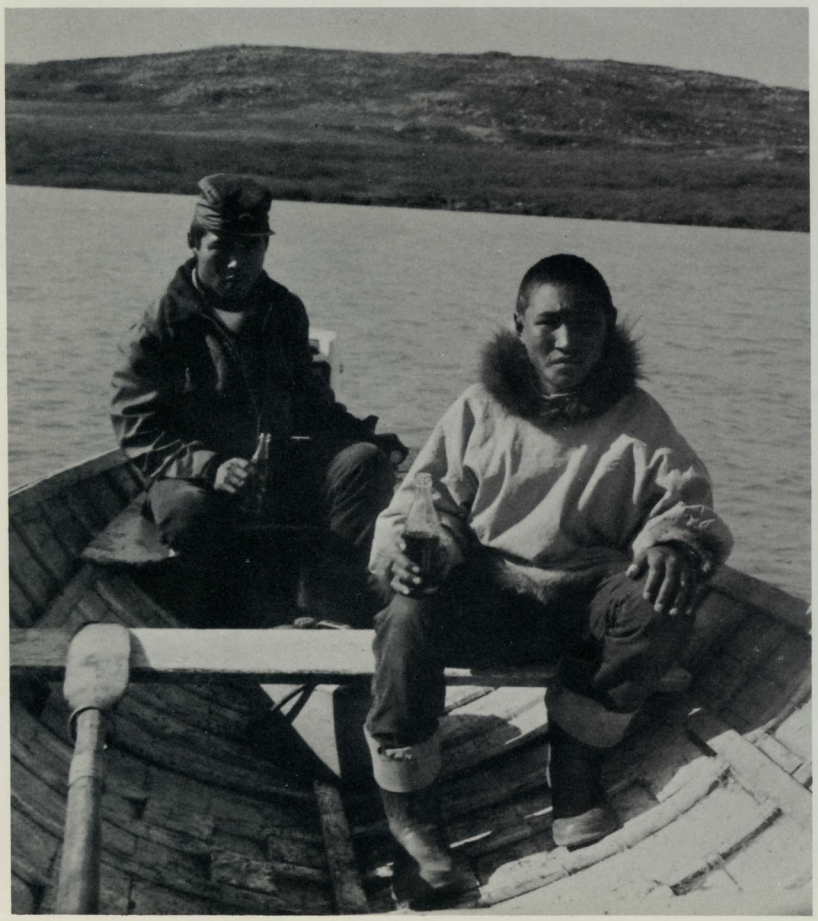
He was ready for the net, but there wasn't any net. I discovered too late that I had followed my fish a hundred yards upriver from where we started. He had a mouth full of sharp teeth, which could cut my fingers to shreds, so after several passes with my fingers, I caught him under the gill plate.

I lifted my first Arctic char out of the water with a sense of something I could never describe. It was an incredibly beautiful fish, worth every minute of that long journey to its raw and rugged home.

The males and females are marked so differently that they may be easily distinguished. The bucks are a striking scarlet on the flanks and have hooked jaws like a large salmon when they come upriver to spawn. Fish fresh out of the salt have a silvery sheen, which fades to delicate color tones, sprinkled on the sides with bright dots of many shades.

We spent two days on Tree River, half of the time walking far up the turbulent current, past waterfall after waterfall. We found huge chars resting in the eddies close to shore, and in the pools at the feet of the falls, preparing for their salmon-like run up the cascade. In the two days I caught eleven chars over 12 pounds each, with the largest at 21 pounds—a brilliantly marked fish with its fins trimmed in white.

At the end of those two days, my arms and legs and neck were so tired and sore that I was ready to ride the river back to the beach where we had landed, and trade some item of fishing gear with an Eskimo for a swig of my favorite drink. I figured I might be able to get across to him. The only English word he knew was "Coca-Cola." And by the same token, on that particular beach, "Coca-Cola" was the only word I knew in Eskimo.



Above, these friendly Eskimos welcomed Charles Elliott on a beach.

Two Eskimos, left, enjoy Coca-Cola on a fishing outing in the Arctic.