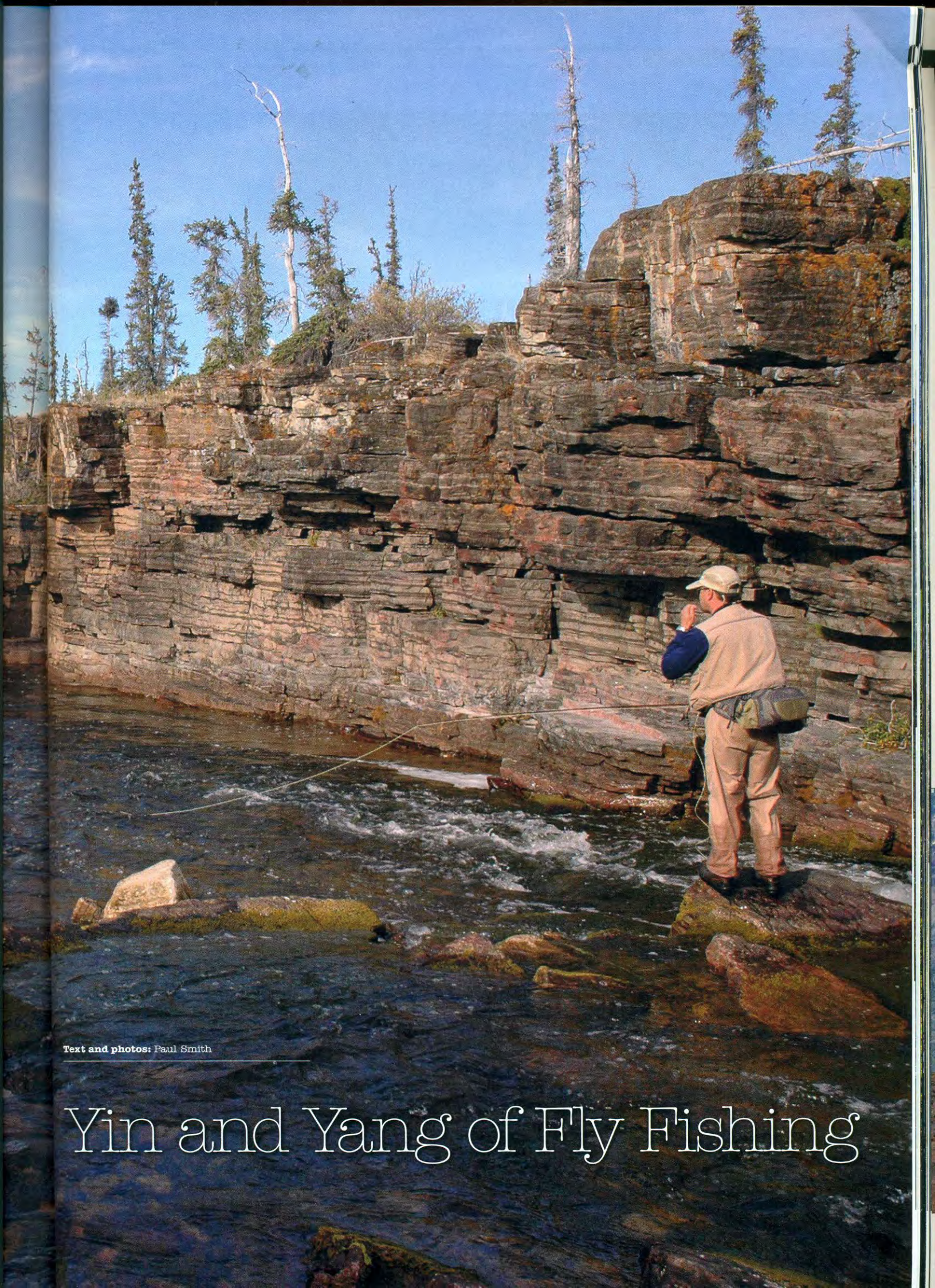


A man in a brown shirt, light-colored pants, and a cap stands on a rocky outcrop, fishing in a lake. The lake is surrounded by steep, layered rock cliffs and dense evergreen forests. The sky is blue with some clouds. The text "Great Bear Lake" is overlaid in a white serif font at the bottom of the image.

Great Bear Lake



Text and photos: Paul Smith

Yin and Yang of Fly Fishing



Great Bear Lake, in Canada's **majestic North West Territories**, is home to the biggest lake trout on the planet. Rod Hale and I journeyed to this massive arctic watershed to tackle gargantuan trout on the fly. **The lake trout**, *Salvelinus namaycush*, is the biggest member of the char family; the largest ever caught weighed 102-lbs. They grow slowly, but to enormous proportions in the isolated lakes of Northern Canada.

LAKE TROUT ARE not easy pickings with a fly; they spend most of their life in deep, cold water and come to the shoals, within range for long rodders, only twice during the year.

When the ice melts off in springtime, these monsters of the deep swim to the shallows to warm themselves, and soak in some sunlight after a long winter in the murky depths. Their basking is brief and they return to deeper water as soon as



the temperature warms above their comfort range. This window of opportunity is fleeting and planning a trip around it is very risky. There is no fixed time for Canadian Lakes to shed their ice; it is becoming even more unpredictable in recent years, with climate change on a global scale affecting local weather patterns dramatically, particularly in the arctic. The safer bet for encountering a 50-lb trout is in spawning season; typically late August on most northern lakes. The trout come onto the shoals to procreate and unlike salmon, they do not stop eating. Spawning lasts for

a couple of weeks and is somewhat more predictable than the brief period of spring sunbathing.

Rod and I chose the last week of August for our first foray into the world of giant trout catching. It was the season's final fishing week for Plummers, who have been operating a lodge on Great Bear Lake for more than 50 years. Chummy Plummer, the owner of the lodge, is an icon in the Canadian sports fishing and aviation worlds. Each year, Plummers dedicate the last week of their fishing schedule to fly anglers and cater to their specific needs. It is

no coincidence that fly fishing week coincides with the big lakers coming up from the depths to spawn.

On the evening of our arrival Terry Grant from Kamloops, British Columbia, our guide for the week, scurried us off to a location near an Island about 3 kilometers from camp. He called it the nursery, explaining that lots of smaller fish frequent the area, which would give us a chance to cut our teeth on some smaller specimens before chasing after the big fellas. It was our introductory lesson so to speak; 'Lake trout 101'. Naturally, lake trout eat smaller fish, and the drill was casting and retrieving baitfish patterns, mostly Lefty Deceivers and Clouser Minnows. Olive or green over white seemed to be most effective. Fast sinking lines are absolutely essential; shallow water lake trout fishing is a relative term and you have to get the fly down thirty feet or so before beginning your retrieve.

On my third cast, I caught a glimpse of a very big shadow following my fly. My heart raced as I doubled hauled for the next cast; flinging my weighted Clouser as far as I could, taking care not to hook myself with the razor sharp #1 hook. The wind was brisk and challenged even our heavy duty gear. After only three short, aggressive strips, I felt a vicious strike. I responded with a strip strike of my own and lifted my rod for the ensuing battle. My adversary was not in the least bit happy about being pulled forcefully to the surface. She launched a spirited resistance. I'd heard that lake trout were sluggish fighters but nobody had informed this fish. It took me a solid, sweaty, ten minutes before I landed my very first laker on the fly; a fine 3-kg specimen.



By the trout standards I'd been accustomed to, this was a very fine trout. Terry's standards were very different. "Only a baby", he said as he gingerly released my trout back into the cold, crystal clear waters of Great Bear Lake.

I'd never before seen water so clear. We could see at least forty feet down; essentially, we were sight fishing. We could often see the fish before casting, but at other times our senses would go into shock as gigantic shadows pursued our fly from the depths. It was challenging

when you can dip your cup and drink from the very same lake that your boat is floating in. Amazing. Rod and I drank in the experience, literally and figuratively, continuously catching trout after trout up to 4 kilos. We grew tired and the sun hung low over the distant mountains. "Well boys, tomorrow we go after the big ones", says Terry. He wasn't joking. "It's time for dinner". He started the motor and we headed to camp for a well-deserved evening meal. It had been a long day of travel and fishing. After our spectacular introduction,



not to react too quickly, as waiting for the tug is essential for a solid hook-up. This was trout fishing beyond my expectations and vastly different to anything I had experienced previously.

You know you are in the wild

both Rod and I had sweetly optimistic dreams of what lay ahead.

Great Bear Lake is gigantic by any standard. Distant shorelines stretch beyond the horizon; mountains and barren tundra guard its northern boundary,



while coniferous forests line its southern shore. It sprawls across the Arctic Circle, an imaginary line that dictates both the behavior of the sun and growth of trees. There are musk ox, caribou, wolves, and bears all along Great Bear's 2719-km shoreline. Hawks and eagles soar in the clear blue skies above the lake's shimmering surface. It's a most visual and inspiring place.

As our plane approached Great Bear Lake, I was flabbergasted by its size; 320 km long, up to 175 km wide and very deep, 413 m at one point: an ocean in the middle of



a vast arctic wilderness. It is the largest lake entirely within Canada; in North America only Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, and Lake Superior are larger. Along with Great Slave Lake it feeds the famous Mackenzie River, the longest river in Canada. A guy across the aisle said "It's the eighth largest lake in the world". A lake this big, surrounded by the most remote wilderness on the continent - you just know there are big fish in it, and Rod and I would be giving it our best for a full week. Incidentally, only four hundred anglers per year fish this Lake. To put this in perspective,



that's one angler for every seventy eight square kilometers of water.

But fishing is fishing and always subject to Mother Nature's whimsical ways. Autumn was late arriving; the cool winds that whip across Great Bear Lake in late August stayed away, a reprieve to animals bent on fattening up on summer's bounty. Winter is long and lean in the far north. But to fly anglers rolling the dice to intercept spawning Lake Trout, a late autumn was not a good thing. Dropping mercury is what signals the big fish to swim onto the shoals for their annual breeding ritual. We had to work hard just to



snag a few fish over 5 kilos. The 20 kilo lunkers stayed in deep water, accessible only to those slinging hardware and utilizing heavy down riggers. As purists of fur and feather, we would not consider stooping to such tactics.

But Terry had tricks up the sleeve of his fishing shirt. The next morning we opted to fish once again near an Island. Terry explained that throughout the summer some bigger lake trout hang around the edge of shoals and wait for smaller fish that venture a little too deep. The smaller fish tend to congregate in the shallowest water; these were the



ones we were hard into the day before. Imagine a trout that eats a 4-kg trout. Terry positioned the boat and I threw the anchor. Rod and I began fishing opposite sides of the boat in hopes of locating some fish. There was quite a breeze coming down the lake that challenged our casting of bulky flies and heavy sinking lines. Both of us were probing the depths with Lefty's Deceivers. Rod hooked up solid on his fifth cast. His Sage rod bowed deep and there was no doubt he was into a bigger fish. It turned out to be around 8 kilos; quite a catch, and certainly the biggest trout Rod had ever tangled with.

Then it was my turn. I cast about 100 ft towards the island's rocky shoreline. Yes, 100 ft. Those weighted shooting heads are like rockets and I was getting the hang of it. It's simple: aerialize the 35-ft head, double haul it, and let her rip. Coils of running line would shoot from the deck, hissing though the rod eyes. Tangles were the only fly in

in our blood. After an epic tug of war I pulled in a lovely deep fish of about 10 kilos. My arms were aching not only from fighting the fish but casting that heavy line. Rod and I fished continuously and methodically throughout the morning, hooking several fish each around the 10 to 11 kilo mark. We sat in the boat, looked at each other and agreed that we were



the ointment. Stripping feverishly, I struck something solid about 20-ft from the boat. Instinctively, I raised my rod violently to set the hook, and from the sheer weight I knew I was into a serious fish. I've learned that a strip set is best in this sort of fishing, but it's difficult for us salmon anglers not to set with the rod – it's

wiped out and starved.

"Well boys, let's try some sushi," says Terry, as he leaned over the side of the boat to clean a smaller fish that we had kept for eating. He then expertly sliced off a fillet and cut a section into bite size cubes. From his pocket he produce a bottle of wasabi sauce and proclaimed,



"this is the stuff, boys". As we ate Terry explained to us that unless the weather changed in a hurry this was as good as we were likely to do. The really big fish were still down too deep for fly rodding. He suggested we spend the afternoon hunting down some grayling along Great Bear's endless shorelines. Terry told us of a world class grayling fishery, overshadowed by the lure of monster trout. We had brought along our 4 wt rigs just as Terry had suggested; a reprieve from throwing gwts loaded with heavy streamers.

We beached the boat and opted to wade- fish along a rocky stretch of island shoreline. Terry knotted one of his favorite nymphs to my delicate 4-lb tippet. I was fishing no time when my line went tight. Terry seemed pretty excited, quite

a contrast to how calm and cool his demeanor remained while I battled the biggest trout of my life. "Did you see that take?" "I didn't, but he hit pretty hard", I responded as I coolly played the fish off my reel's disc drag. "My boy, that is one whopper of a grayling", Terry stammered, fumbling for his landing net. "We don't want to lose that one." I guess all in life, fishing and physics, is relative, or so said Einstein. I pulled the frantically rolling and tumbling fish towards the net and Terry gently lifted it from the water. Its colors were kaleidoscopic and absolutely beautiful. The oversized, erect dorsal fin endows a grayling with a majestic ambiance. Relatively speaking, my very first grayling was indeed a very big fish, tipping the scales at almost 2 kilos. Considering that the all tackle world

record is around 2.7 kilos, my fish was quite a prize. Now I understood why Terry was a bit worked up. He told me that if I had been geared with certified tippet and proper scales I might have broken an IGFA fly fishing record with that fish. As it turns out many of the existing IGFA records come from the shores of Great Bear Lake.

The arctic grayling, *Thymallus arcticus*, is of the salmon family and swims freshwater drainages, both Atlantic and Pacific. It is found throughout northern latitudes from Alaska, through Canada and in Russia and Siberia. It is one of the most



aesthetically pleasing freshwater fish on the planet. They are somewhat trout like in overall appearance, with rather abbreviated olive-green heads and oversized dark green and gold eyes. The mouth is small and lined with sharp teeth. Their backs typically range from a hue of dark purple through to a grayish blue, depending on the environment. The fish's sides are covered in scales that reflect sunlight in a spectacular blue green iridescence. A most distinguishing feature is the odd v-shaped or diamond markings along the grayling's sides. In contrast the



belly is pure white. The crowning feature of the grayling's renowned beauty is its unique, disproportionately large, dorsal fin. The coloration is amazing, overall black with a thin edge of wine or mauve. There are vertically repetitive spots that vary in color, row by row: orange, red, mauve, blue, green and emerald. The gifted artistic hand with oil or watercolor could not possibly do justice to this wonderful fish.

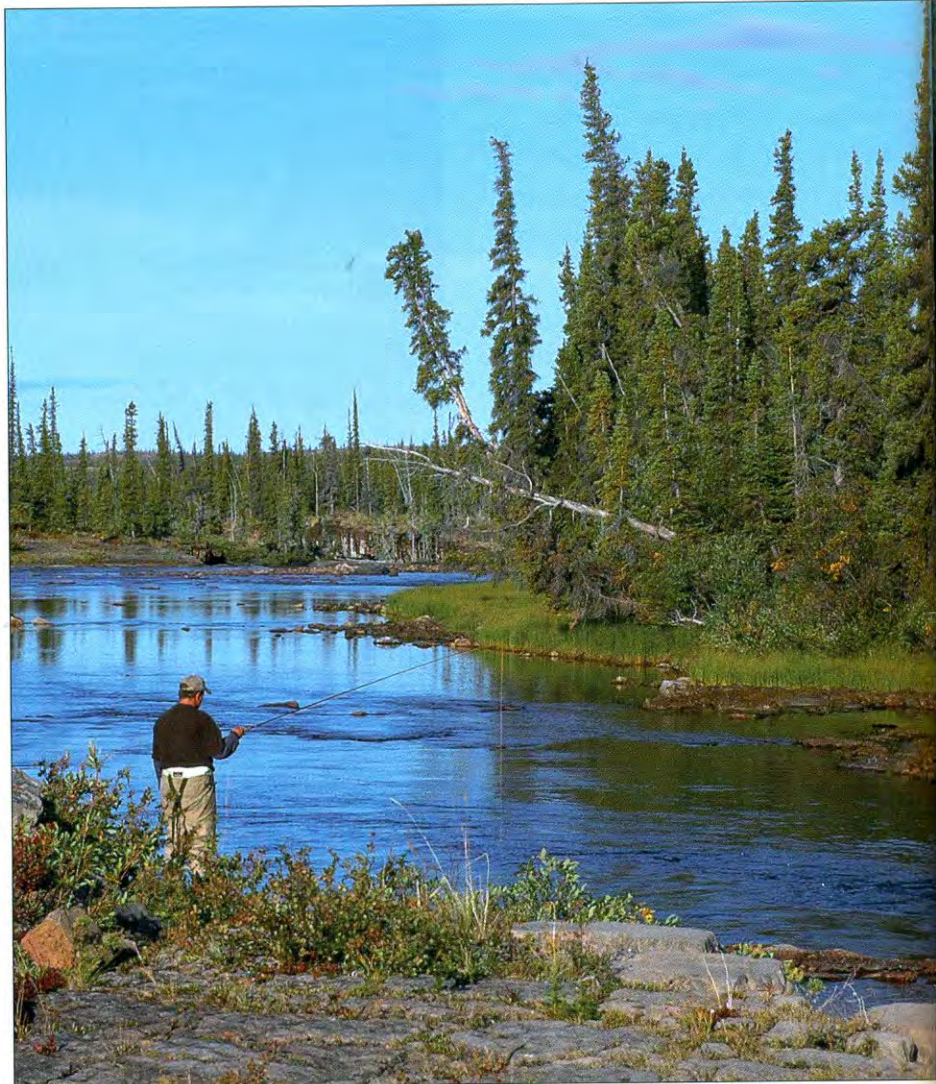
Arctic grayling are not massive and powerful like the lake trout, but petit, pretty, and deeply spirited. What do I mean by spirited? An arctic



grayling, like a fearless gladiator of the Roman era, will fight to the death. They will literally kill themselves, convulsing in all manners of struggle to avoid being captured. You must be quick and agile to release these fishes unharmed. Barbless hooks are essential.

The arctic grayling is a quintessential quarry for the appreciative fly angler. They devour mayflies and caddis flies, as well as terrestrial critters such as bees, wasps, hoppers, and ants. I discovered they also have a voracious appetite for nymphs of all sorts. What more could an aficionado of fur and feather ask for? They eat what you love to tie, fight with gutsy determination, and look so pleasing to the eye before being released to fight another day.

Rod and I, under Terry's expert tutelage, did quite well with grayling that afternoon. We caught at least



a dozen fish, most over a kilogram. The finesse required to capture these magnificent creatures using small realistic fly patterns on the lightest rods, contrasted starkly with our sweaty morning of laker fishing. It was a pleasant change of pace. The next morning we were back on the hunt for deep swimming lunkers, and Terry had a special treat in mind for us. On our last day we were being flown across Great Bear Lake to the Sulky River, and were to be dropped off for an entire day of grayling fishing. Sulky is rumored to be arctic grayling fishing heaven. Some rumors have merit and this was certainly one of them.

At about 9-am Plummer's Turbo Otter dropped off six of us at a small

floating dock, where a lovely river emptied into a small lake. The crew included myself, Rod and Terry, along with Dave Linkewitz from Arizona and his guide Mike. The river had cut a steep canyon deep into the Canadian Shield; although on this sunny August day it seemed overtly passive and tranquil, belying, I suspect, its more violent temperament at times of snowmelt and spring runoff. The plan was to hike to the top of the river and fish our way down. I should say section of river, as we were working a half kilometer stretch, with a rather steep gradient, between two small lakes; all part of the Sulky system flowing into Great Bear Lake.

The river was full of grayling, not big ones like we caught in Great



Bear, but prolific nonetheless. I fished a bead head nymph of black rabbit fur, flash, and soft brown hen hackle. It is one of my favorite sea-trout offerings back at home in Newfoundland. The grayling loved its lively pulsations, darting from every direction to inhale it. The fish ran to about a half kilo average and put up the typical grayling passionate fight to the finish. It wasn't the only fly they loved; we managed to take fish on dries, wets and nymphs of all sorts. It was unbelievable fishing; I'd imagined nothing like it. We caught at least fifty fish each by noon.

There's also a rumor that grayling make delicious table fare, so we kept just a few for our mid-day fish fry. There appeared to be a

culinary contest developing. Terry prepared a spicy dish of pan seared Cajun style grayling fillets, while Mike executed his specialty - fish kabobs. I dare not say which my palate fancied most. I take the diplomatic route in these situations and always declare a tie. We rested and chatted with satisfied bellies before partaking in an afternoon crack at the grayling. This was certainly one of the most memorable days fishing I will ever experience.

Great Bear Lake is known throughout the angling world as 'the' hot spot for trophy lake trout. It's brute force down and dirty fly fishing at its finest. If that's the game you seek, you're certainly heading in the right direction. I like to tell

everyone that there's a more delicate, thoughtful side to this mighty northern lake, akin to presenting tiny nymphs or dries on gurgling mountain streams. Grayling and lake trout are like the yin and yang of angling. Personally I love both. Doing both on the same adventure, same day even, is surely an angler's dream come true.

If you have an interest in trying your luck on Great Bear Lake check out Plummer's Arctic Lodges online at www.plummerslodges.com. Or check out the North West Territories website at www.spectacularnwt.com. ■