

When To Fish Spoons—Bill Herzog

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Salmon Trout Steelheader

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5 JET BOAT TIPS, 68

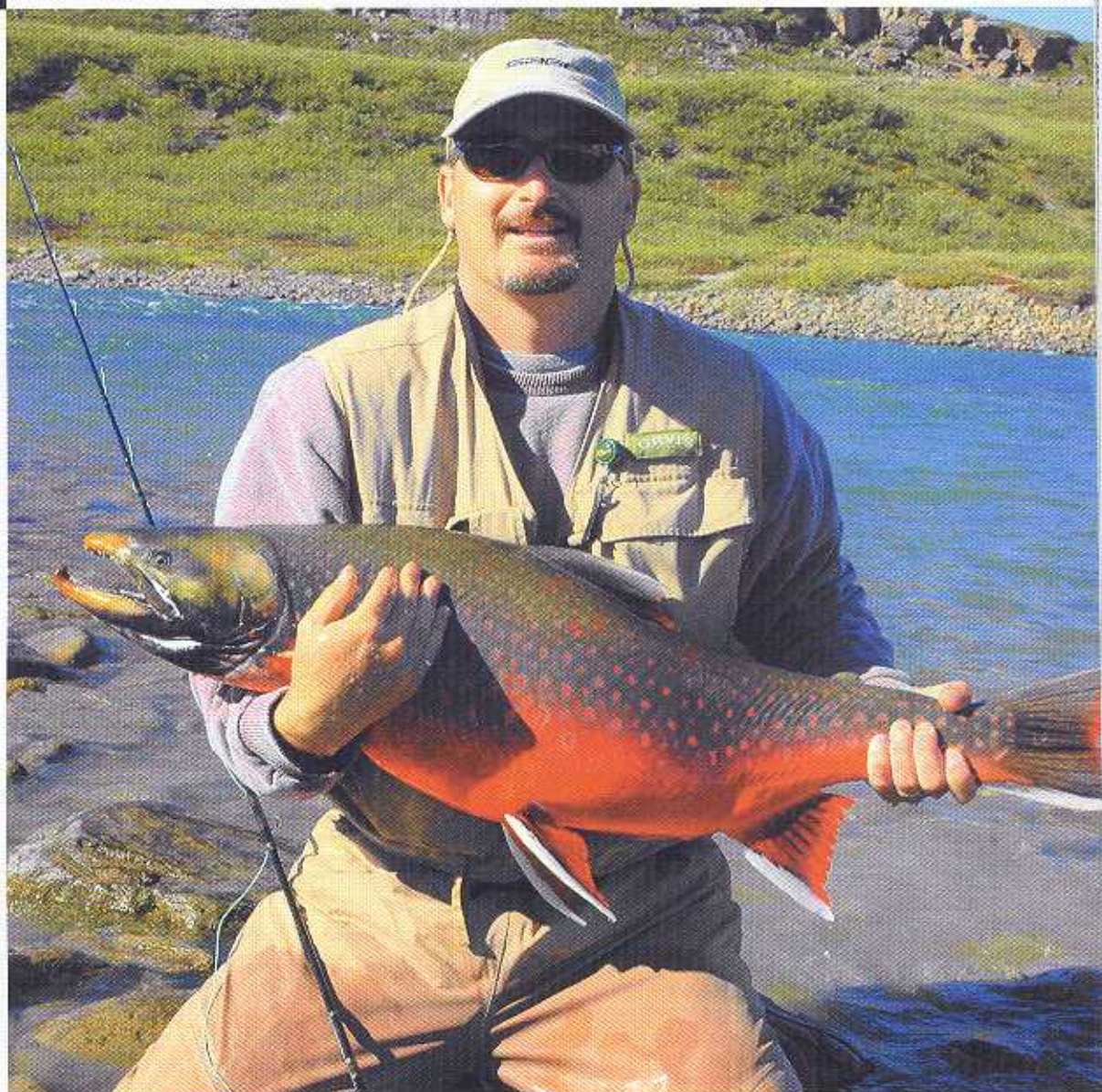
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9 TACTICS FOR MORE TROUT



TREE RIVER'S Giant Arctic Char



"Arctic char are northern cousins to the more familiar brook trout, lake trout, Dolly Varden and bull trout."

PAUL SMITH

Salvelinus alpinus, or Arctic char, is the world's most northerly freshwater game fish; in fact they have been found north of the 80th parallel.

They are indeed an exotic species to hunt with a fly-rod, but are acutely under represented in fly-fishing magazines and journals. This is not because they are unworthy. They just happen to inhabit the most remote, wild and under-populated places on Earth. Arctic char are a challenge to tempt with fur and feather; from my experience not unlike sulky Atlantic salmon or fussy browns. Once hooked, they muster a noble fight, including aerobatics and blistering runs that clear reels of backing in a big hurry. They are very adept at using a river's current to their full advantage, utilizing their enormous energy for unstoppable downriver forays at every opportunity. Imagine an overgrown brook trout on steroids.

Arctic char are northern cousins to the more familiar brook

Plummer's Great Bear Lake lodge for their first annual fly fishing week. The adventure included a 2-night stay at their Tree River outpost camp, the only fishing camp on Tree River. The flight from Great Bear Lake to Tree River onboard Plummer's single-engine Turbo Otter was a spectacle in itself. It was my first flight over the Arctic Tundra and finding adjectives that do justice to the experience is challenging. Magnificent, vast, massive, wild, and unspoiled come to mind. There were no trees, just rock, water, and caribou moss as far as the eye could see in every direction. The flight passed quickly with my nose pressed to my window. Finally the Arctic Ocean appeared as a flat expanse of blue to the north. I knew we were due for awesome fishing.

trout, lake trout, Dolly Varden and bull trout. Some scientists have argued that Arctic char and Dolly Varden are actually forms of the same species. Arctic char are circumpolar, inhabiting and often dominating northern waters from Alaska, through Canada, to Greenland and Iceland, on to Scandinavia and Russia. This prolific Arctic fish has been instrumental in the sustenance of nomadic and indigenous peoples since Homo-Sapiens migrated north. Although not overly popular on the fly-fishing circuit, they are well represented in the diet of residents north of 60. I consider them a culinary delight far superior to salmon.

Arctic char have utilized two distinct survival strategies. Some populations remain in freshwater lakes or rivers all year round. Others are anadromous and migrate into the ocean during the summer months to gorge themselves in the protein-rich salt-water environment. Naturally, the anadromous variety grow much

HERE WE ARE ARRIVING at Tree River. I booked my fishing buddy, Rod Hale, and myself into

Tree River flows into Coronation Gulf, an arm of the Arctic Ocean, 370 miles northeast of Yellowknife, capital and hub of the North West Territories. The water is colored a brilliant aqua blue, in stark contrast to the drab tundra carpet that surrounds it. The river runs wild and fast over a rocky, boulder-strewn bottom forcing char to seek rest and refuge in pools and backwaters. Rod and I, along with our guide Mike Harrison and new fishing comrade Dave

Liukiewicz, head up river in search of the renowned Tree River monsters. Dave (foreground) is from Arizona and chases trophy fish far and near. He's very keen on wetting waders and line in the renowned Tree.



Dave is the first to connect with a giant Tree River char. He tried bouncing a black rabbit-strip, weighted Muddler along the bottom and it worked. I'm told that sometimes Arctic char will take dry flies but it has never worked for

me either in Tree River or elsewhere. I have taken char on floating lines in Labrador but at Tree River we just had to get down deep to entice hook ups. Rod and I were using Air Flo multi-tip systems connected to our Sage XP 9-weights. I consider this the Swiss Army knife approach. Ideal for exploring new waters. Dave stuck with a Teeny shooting-head system and his 7-weight Sage RPLXi.

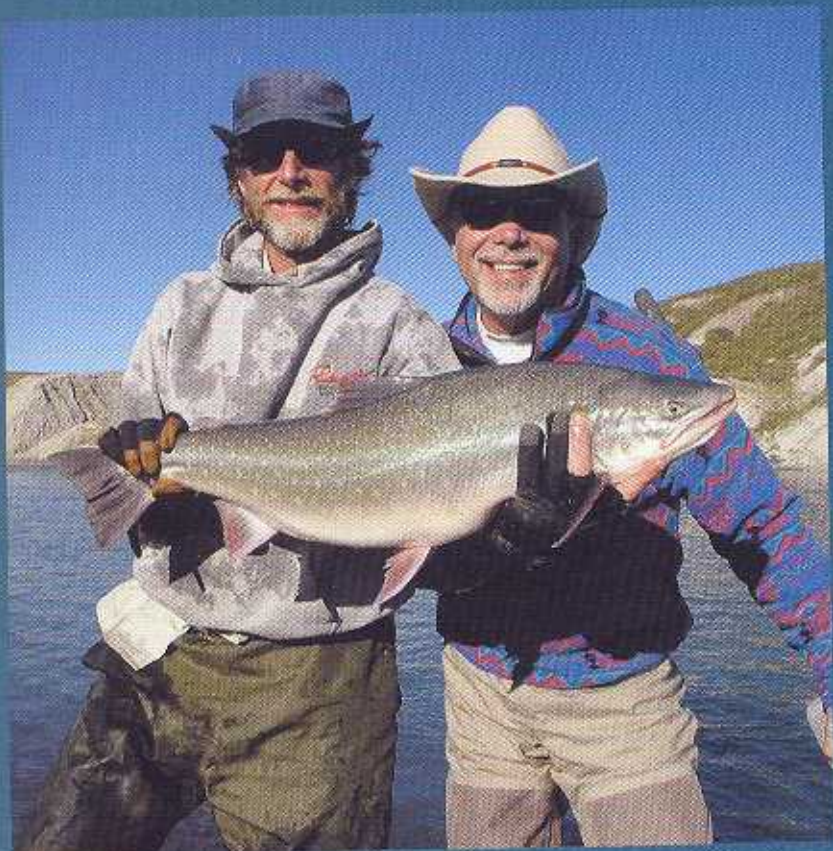


bigger and make for fine angling upon their return to fresh water. While in fresh water, char feed on a diet typical of trout; chironomids, caddis, snails, sticklebacks, etc. In salt water, they grow rapidly on capelin, sculpin, Arctic cod, lance, and amphipods. Unlike salmon, Arctic char only reside in the salt during summer. They lack the "antifreeze" proteins in their blood that other Arctic fishes utilize to stop their blood from freezing when the ocean temperature drops below 32 Fahrenheit. In spite of this, they are the Arctic's most successful fish species.

Spawning takes place from September through to November with females laying from 3000 to 5000 eggs. Preferred locations include rocky shorelines with heavy wave action and gravel-bottomed, slow-moving pools. From my experience, char will invariably congregate for spawning where a tributary runs into a main river. As spawning time approaches the males (jacks) develop

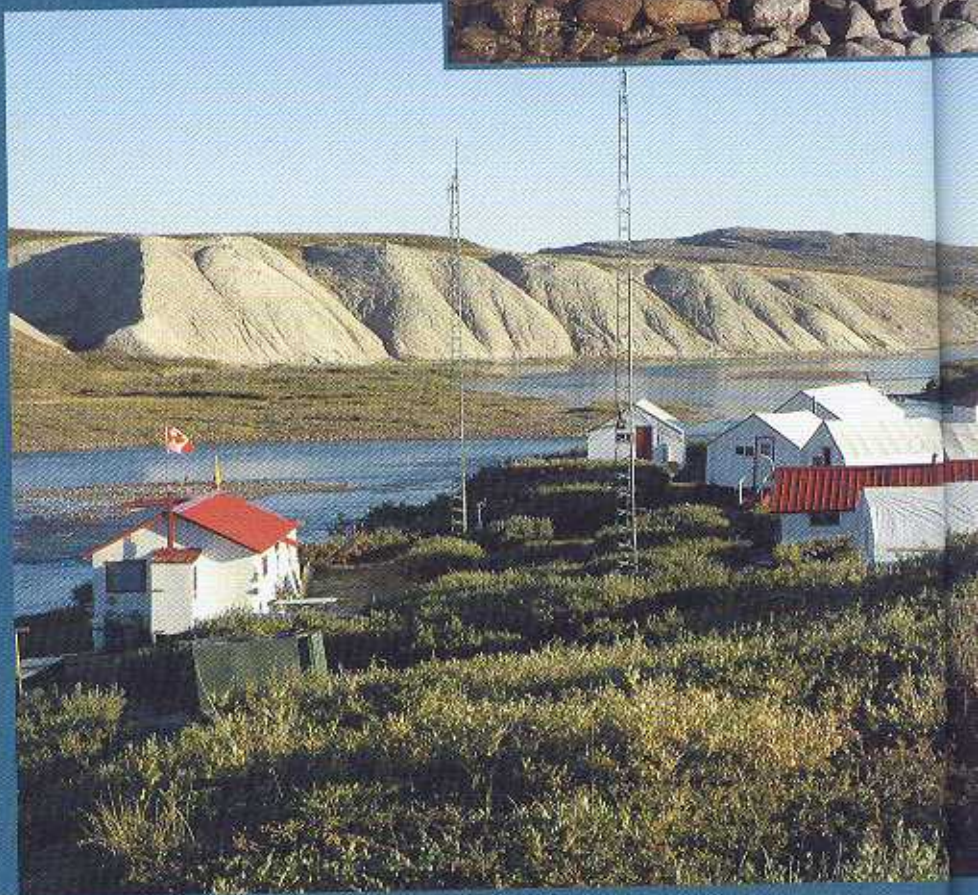
hooked jaws (kypes) and take on a deep red coloration. These are truly beautiful fish. The females remain silver, but while drab in appearance (compared to males), they are far superior table fare.

Arctic char grow to very impressive proportions, albeit at a typically slow rate. They don't reach maturity until 15-20 years of age, so big fish are indeed old fish. Some individuals have been scientifically aged at 40 years. The all-tackle weight record is 32 pounds taken at Tree River in Nunavut Territory. Fish over 30 pounds have also been caught in northern Russia. In Labrador, my home-water, Arctic char are very plentiful but smaller, averaging only about 5 pounds. Tree River consistently produces fish over 15 pounds and is with no doubt the world's premier location for big Arctic char. Prior to summer 2006, I'd chased Arctic char all over the north without hitting double digits. I bit the bullet and planned a trip to Tree River.



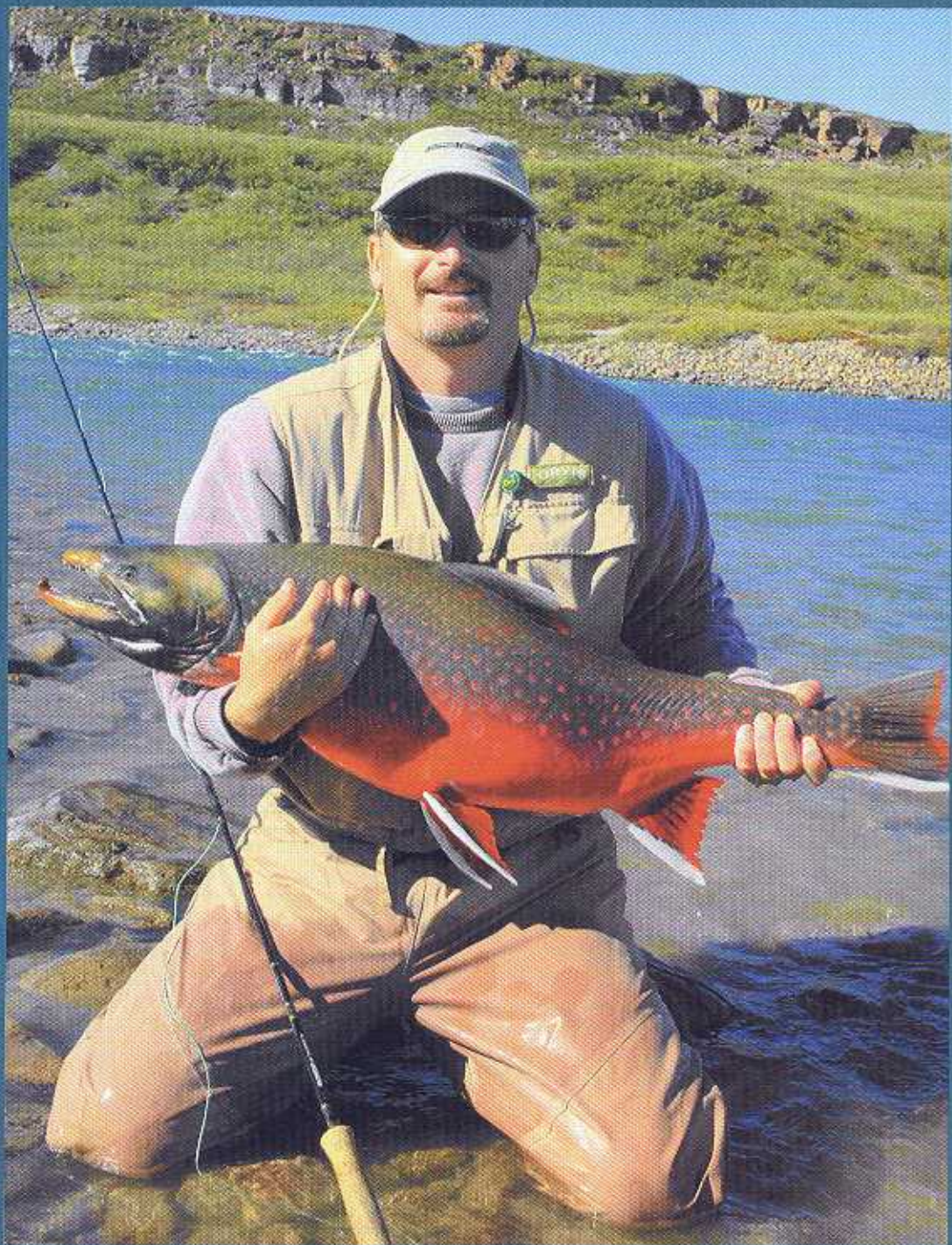
Dave's very first Tree River char turned out to be an IGFA 6-pound-tippet world record. Dave and Mike pose for a photo before releasing this fine silver jack specimen back into the cool Arctic waters. This 15-pound male was fresh from the salt and hadn't taken on its deep-red spawning colors. Dave was ecstatic and Rod and I were filled with optimism as Dave dug out a few more of those Muddlers. Even the grizzly bear tracks on the muddy beach didn't dampen our spirits.

No more big fish for the afternoon, just a few small ones. Although on lesser rivers they might be considered whoppers. We headed back to Plummer's outpost camp for supper and what a meal it was; an appetizer of Arctic char chowder followed by a main course of pork ribs and vegetables. It's a wonder we had the energy to fish after such a hearty and tasty meal. But we're in the Arctic and the sun would be up till nearly midnight. The four of us headed upriver from the camp to Third Island. This was to be my finest hour. I hooked into six big char in less than an hour and one broke the IGFA 12-pound-tippet class record at 15 pounds, 4 ounces. I went to sleep on the northern edge of our continent with giant Arctic char swimming through my dreams. Cool stuff.





My old fishing buddy Rod is anything but a quitter. I may have outfished him last night, but this morning he is out for revenge. I've seen this happen many times before and kind of expected it. His intensity and experimentation with pattern and presentation pays off. After releasing a few smaller specimens Rod is into a huge char. Looks like my world record might be in trouble. Rod's also fishing 12-pound tippet. The fish fights gallantly forcing a deep bend into Rod's XP, but he manages to keep the char out of the fast water and under some measure of control.

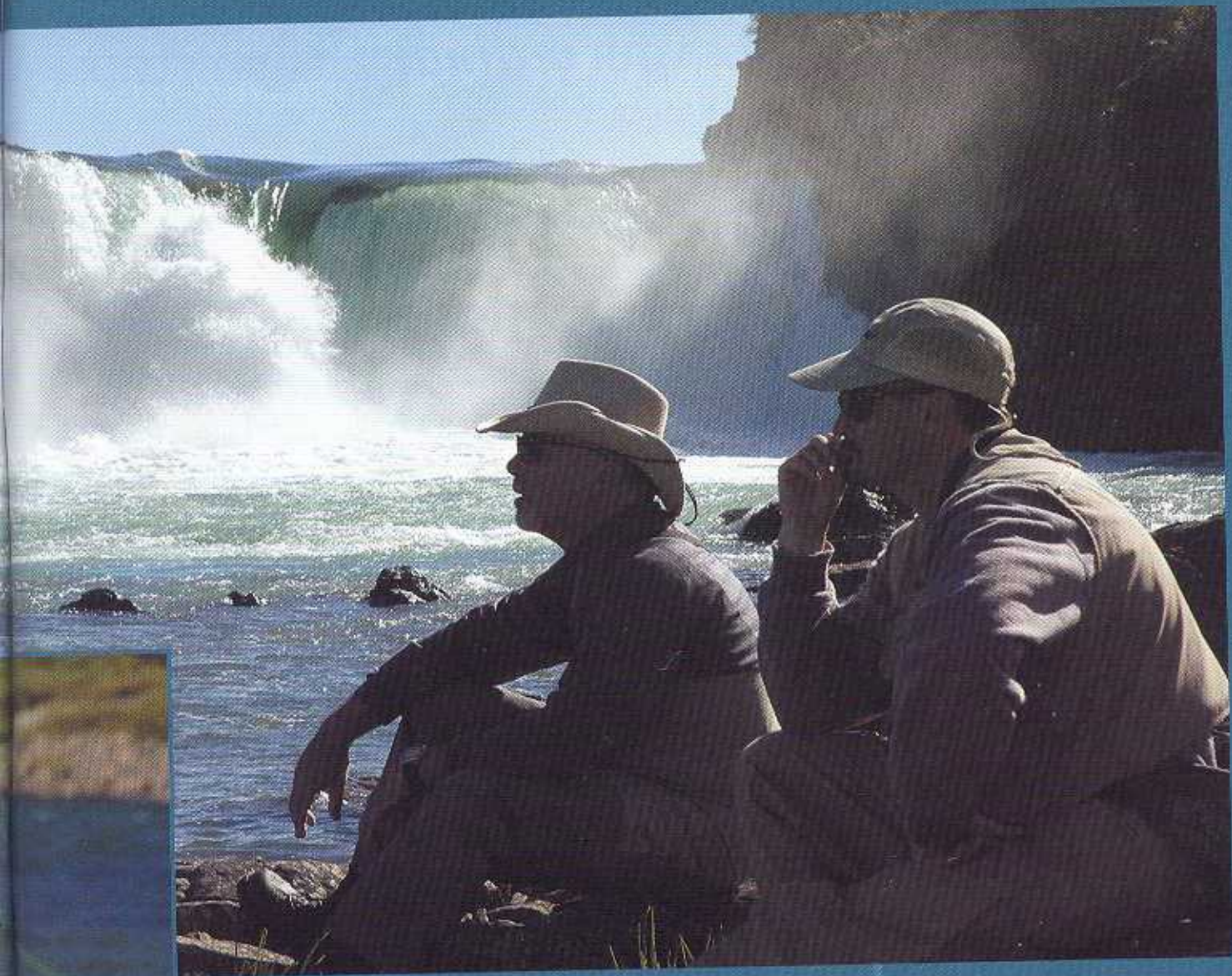


After a ferocious 20-minute battle, Rod wins and ties my IGFA 12-pound-tippet record. What a buddy! Well, I did hold the record myself for 13 hours. Rod's fish was actually 1 ounce heavier than mine at 15 pounds, 5 ounces, but by IGFA rules you have to do 2 ounces better to beat a record. Lucky me, we're tied. Anyway it's a great story for both of us to tell our children and grandchildren. Rod's and my fish were "almost" identical, both in full spawning splendor. Both were released, none the worse for the ordeal.



Men can't go about breaking world records on an empty stomach. Mike, or "Pike Mike" as he's known around Yellowknife, prepares a shore lunch fit for a fly-fishing king. Mike has gained celebrity status in the North for his antics with huge pike on a fly-rod. We gathered some dry alders which burned down to a fine bed of coals for grilling freshly-caught char and lake trout. Yes indeed, there are lake trout in Tree River. Mike served up his fish entree with fresh bread, tomatoes, onion and cheese.





Arctic char seem to have a preference for brightly colored fur and feather; with the exception of Dave's black Muddler, Pink was really hot. Rod and I both took our record fish on pink Popsicles; essentially a pink-and-white Maribou pattern. I hooked quite a few fish on a pink rabbit-strip Muddler in size one. I had just one and broke it off in a huge char making one of those unstoppable downstream runs. I'm sticking to my story that he would have topped 20 pounds and settled this tied-for-the record business. Brightly colored Lefty Deceivers produced fish as well.

Rod and Dave are taking a well-deserved break below Tree River falls after hours of fighting heavy powerful fish. I'm busy taking pictures and Mike is on a hilltop scouting for bears. The falls is impassible and is the end of the road for Tree River's giant Arctic char. It's been a huge two days of fishing. Just before this picture was taken, Dave broke another IGFA world record in the 4-pound-tippet class with a 15-pound, 8 ounce female. Now that's going to be a tough one to beat.

If you are interested in a northern fly-fishing adventure check out Plummer's Arctic Lodges at www.plummerslodges.com. Also take a look at the North West Territories tourism site at www.explorenwt.com. Also feel free to drop me a line at fly-fishtherock@hotmail.com