

# RECIPE FOR

# SUCCESS

WHEN IT COMES TO TACKLING GIANT LAKERS—AND ENJOYING A HEALTHY TASTE OF THE FAR NORTH—THE N.W.T.'S REMOTE GREAT BEAR LAKE LODGE OFFERS THE FULL-MEAL DEAL

BY  
PATRICK  
WALSH



MICHAEL HUNTER GOT HIS FILL WITH A NEW PERSONAL-BEST LAKE TROUT

**THE DISTINCT ODOUR** of surfacing baitfish fills the still morning air as we finally begin trolling after a 34-kilometre run north from camp. All around us, Arctic terns dive and skim the surface of the dead-calm water, gorging on insects. It's a good sign, I'm thinking. Surely the big fish will also be on the feed, and hungry for our enticingly wobbly Hawg Nose plugs running just 21 feet down.

Our guide is certainly confident. Reid Stoyberg has been scoping out the area, what he refers to as "The Bluffs," all season long already, putting his lucky guests on fish in the process. But not just any fish. We're on the hunt for lake trout, or more precisely, the so-called grey morphs, the largest of the four laker types found here on the N.W.T.'s Great Bear Lake. They are the piscivorous apex predators of this vast northern lake, filling their ample gullets with whitefish, Arctic grayling, ciscoes and hapless smaller trout. You won't catch great numbers of these fish, but the ones you do land will typically be large.

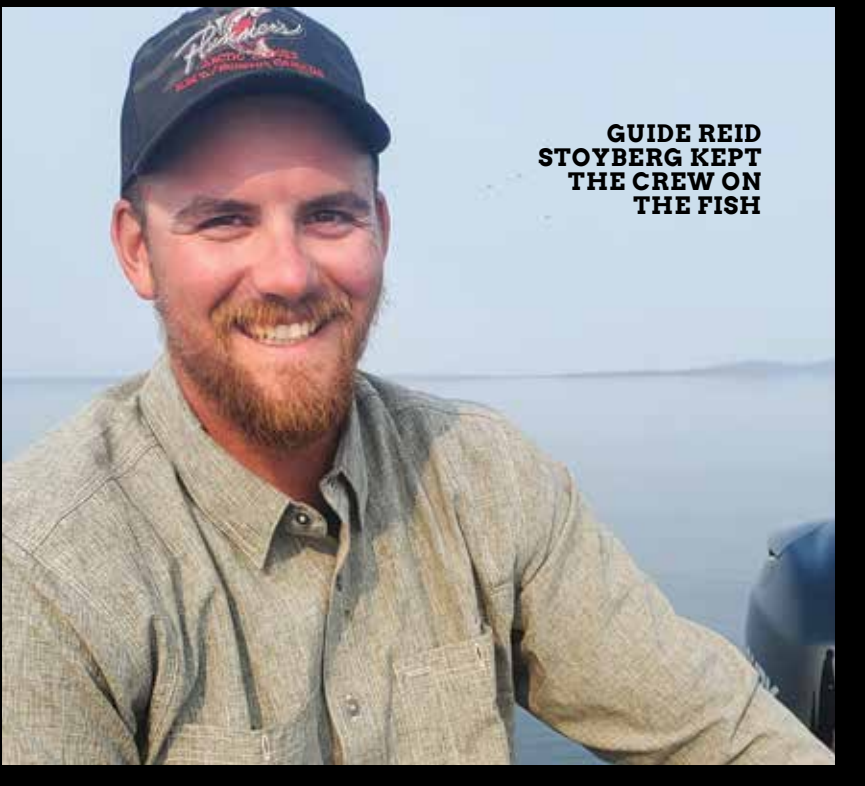
The boat ride out from our cabins at

Plummer's Great Bear Lake Lodge was chilly, but we're soon shedding layers as the sun beams down through the cloudless mid-July sky. It's around 9 A.M., and already the surface temperature of the water is a relatively balmy 64°F, well above the seasonal norm in the 40s. The fish down in the much cooler water where our baits are running don't seem to mind, though, and soon the action heats up, too.

In short order, I reel in two decent lakers in the 20-pound range, which we quickly release boatside. The other guest in our 18-foot custom-built Lund is Michael Hunter, my appointed fishing buddy for the week. Not to be outdone, he soon tightens up on a fish. Judging by the healthy bend in his rod, the head shakes and the peeling of line, it's no 20-pounder this time.

Now, Michael is a big guy, the imposing head chef and owner of Antler, a popular Toronto bar and restaurant famed for its game-heavy menu (pan-roasted venison rack, anyone?). But even still, once he has his catch hoisted free of the net and held close for the obligatory quick photos, it's clear this is one monster of a fish—all 45 pounds of it, according to Reid's trusty scale. With that, the Hunter Chef, as he's known on social media, declared he now had a new personal-best laker to his credit—"by far."

If you're after a trophy lake trout, and a bonus legitimate shot at catching a record-book fish, Great Bear Lake Lodge has all the key ingredients to make it happen. Just ask the Hunter Chef. As for me, this was my first return to Bear since my initial visit in 2008, giving me another crack at besting my own PB laker, a 37-pounder I caught even earlier back in 2005 on northern Saskatchewan's Milton Lake. And despite my limited experience on Bear, I'm pretty sure I've got the goods on the legendary lake's recipe for success.



**GUIDE REID STOYBERG KEPT THE CREW ON THE FISH**

**T**here are a few reasons Great Bear's lakers grow so darn big, and it all begins with geography. For starters, this is one giant body of water, spanning some 31,153 square kilometres. It's the largest lake entirely within Canada, in fact, and the eighth largest freshwater lake on the planet. Given that, there's an enormous amount of capacity for producing fish. And while the fish grow slowly here owing to the year-round frigid northern waters and shorter growing season, they also grow to be very old and, as a result, very large.

How old? Up to 60 years in many cases. And how large? Well, the official world record was caught on Bear, a 72-pounder hauled in by the late U.S. laker aficionado Lloyd Bull. That was in 1995. Then in 2000, angler Aivars Slucis pipped that with his unofficial new world record, weighing in at 78.85 pounds and stretching the tape to 53 inches. Imagine seeing that on the end of your line. Those freaks aside, respectably large fish continue to be routinely caught and released. One day during my visit last July, for

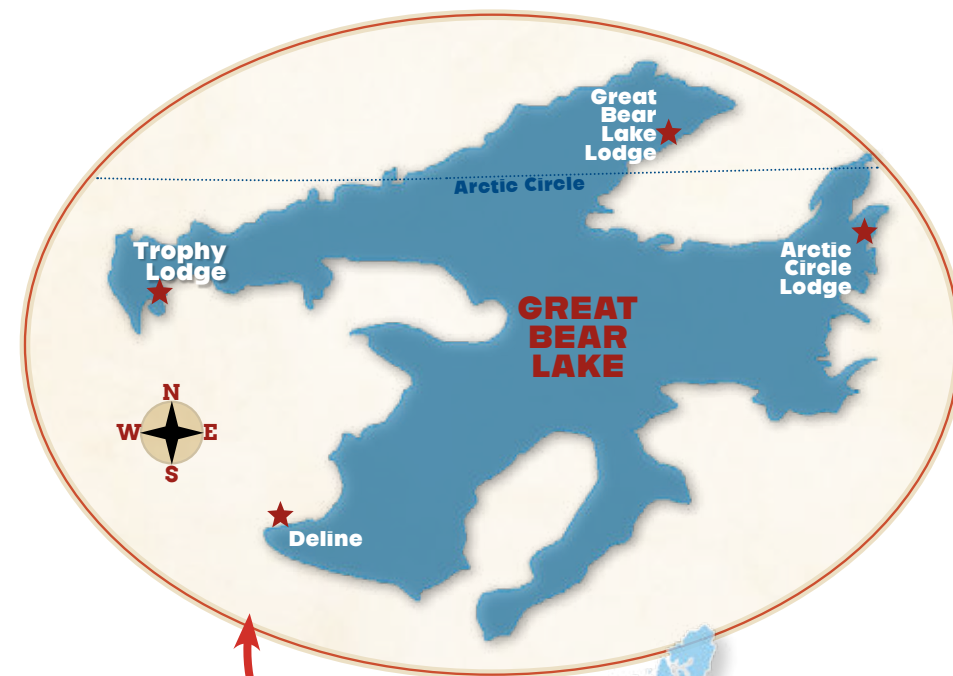
example, guest Garry Eekhoudt of Winnipeg boated a 55-pound beast, while his son, Daniel, recorded a 42. A few days later, Agissiz, B.C.'s Neal Trebink earned bragging rights with a 48-pounder. Awesome genetics are also clearly at play.

Another thing the trout have going for them on Bear is they're largely left alone to slowly grow into giants. The lodge is way up there, on the lake's northeast Dease Arm extending above the Arctic Circle. It's Bear's northernmost section of water, a 250-kilometre boat ride from the nearest (and only) community on the lake. That's the Dene First Nations community of Déline, tucked into the Keith Arm, in the opposite southwest side of the lake. And there are only two other sportfishing operations on the lake, Trophy Lodge and the self-guided Arctic Circle Lodge, which are also run by Plummer's and also accessible by air only. Combined, the three camps host a total of just 475 anglers maximum during the short fishing season running from late June to late August, and they're each nestled in totally different arms of the lake. You must remember, too,

there's a ton of water to cover up there. Fishing pressure? Hardly.

Isolation aside, the one other major factor that allows Bear's lakers to become lunkers is the way Plummer's manages the fishery. Barbless hooks prevail here, as does the mandatory catch-and-release of almost every fish. Only small trout, typically the abundant insect-eating redbfin morphs, are kept for the occasional shorelunch. And the guides are rightfully sticklers in terms of handling the fish, preferring to hold the slippery giants for the more inexperienced guests when it's time to quickly snap hero shots. Ugly gill grabs are strictly verboten. On Great Bear Lake, the trout demand, and receive, nothing less than the utmost respect.

Add it all together, and you can only come to one conclusion. For that, I defer to former long-time guide and now fisheries biologist Craig Blackie, who wrote his PhD thesis at Dalhousie University on Bear's lakers. "Anyone who knows anything about trophy lake trout," he says, "knows that Great Bear Lake produces the largest trout in the world." And there you have it.



**A BIG LAKER FOR SLY TRUDEL AND GUIDE ED LEDIN**

PATRICK WALSH (STOYBERG, ANGLERS); SANDRA CHEUNG (MAP)

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**F**or sure, the unreal fishing is the main course for anglers venturing to Bear—it's virtually impossible *not* to catch trout, even without really trying. The same goes for the lake's super-aggressive northern pike, averaging five to 10 pounds, but sometimes hitting the 30-pound mark. Fishing for them really is a numbers game—expect to catch upwards of 100 in a day. The trick is to avoid wasting time on the sneaky hammer-handles when it's the big gators you've got your sights on. As for Michael and me, we preferred to exclusively chase lakers during our four and a half days on the water (punctuated by a two-day fly-out to fish for Arctic char on the Tree River in neighbouring Nunavut). In particular, I was focused on the hunt for that new PB trout of my own.

Arctic grayling also feature on the fishing menu, and they're equally abundant and aggressive. One day during a shorelunch break at a spot called Limestone Point, Michael and I obligingly grabbed some light

spinning gear to catch a few of these giant-finned beauties to supplement the small trout we'd kept earlier. Fishing from the shoreline, I caught-and-released three dink trout in less than half an hour, as well as 10 or so grayling, keeping a couple for the pan. At one point, what looked to be a 15-pound laker stormed in and T-boned a struggling grayling I'd just released in the shallows. Nature at work.

Nature was also at work above the gin-clear water's calm surface, with squawking herring gulls aggressively competing for the discarded fish remains. All around me throughout my time on Bear, in fact, nature abounded, and to me, just having the opportunity to get a taste of this unique Far North ecosystem was a treat all on its own. Along with the gulls and terns, I also saw long-tailed jaegers, Arctic terns, Bonaparte's gulls, white-winged scoters and Arctic loons. That was just scratching the surface, though.

Fellow guest Greg Seegert, a retired ichthyologist from Wisconsin, has been coming to Bear since 2014 to fish, as well as to birdwatch. Lodge manager Chuk Coulter, who

### ARCTIC GRAYLING MADE FOR GREAT SHORELINE SPORT



MICHAEL HUNTER (ARCTIC GRAYLING), GBL STAFF (GROUP PHOTO)



FISHING FRIENDS (LEFT TO RIGHT) GEORGE WALLACE, SLY TRUDEL, CHUK COULTER, PATRICK WALSH, CHUMMY PLUMMER AND MICHAEL HUNTER

has penchant for assigning everyone a nickname, calls him "Bird-man," and for good reason. Always at the ready with his binos, Seegert has spotted 80 different bird species on Bear over the years, his most prized sightings including three-toed woodpeckers, king eiders, golden eagles, snowy owls and five species of loon. "It has a unique fauna, and includes birds most birders have never seen, or maybe only a time or two," he tells me.

On the ground, meanwhile, guests shouldn't be surprised to see any number of creatures inhabiting this region of the northern boreal forest, known as the Sahtu. Amid the stunted stands of black spruce and tamarack, barren-ground grizzlies, muskox, wolves, moose and more traverse the Precambrian granite, navigating the dwarf birch, willow and peat bogs dotting the stark landscape.

If you're nerdy about all this kind of flora and fauna stuff, like I am, it's a nerdy paradise, right down to the vibrant pinky-purple fireweed just outside my cabin door back at camp. And if you're at Bear in mid-July like I was, the sun never sinks below the horizon, giving you ample time to get your fill. At a certain point, the line blurs between whether the unreal fishing or simply experiencing this part of the world is the entrée or the starter.



**T**he first time I visited Great Bear Lake Lodge, I knew no one. On this trip, however, I was lucky enough to have teamed up with Michael, as well as George Wallace and his buddy Sly Trudel, an ex-military man with our shared passion for fishing. They shared a boat with guide Ed Ledin. Throughout our time on Bear, our two boats largely plied the water within sight of one another, and we dined, had cocktails and compared notes together back at the lodge at the end of each day. I first met George 20 years ago when he was general manager of the first-ever Bass Pro Shops outlet in Canada, the Outdoor World in Vaughan, Ontario, and we've been friends ever since. Now the GM of the Beretta-brand distributor Stoeger Canada, he's fished at the lodge eight times, twice with his dad and two younger brothers. For George, the outstanding fishing is just one of the main ingredients that keeps luring him back.

So, what else is in the mix? I put that question to George one evening on the deck back at the lodge. "Honestly, I would say the isolation. I like my alone time. No phone," he tells

me. "It's also the peace and tranquility. No sirens. No people yammering. No hum of traffic." George lives in hectic midtown Toronto, so I get it, having worked down there myself back in the day. As we continued talking, a pair of loons cried out in the distance, as if on cue.

When it comes to chasing lakers on Bear, meanwhile, George has a rather philosophical take. "It's world-class fishing, but there are so many variables. Indeed, luck. Do I come here to catch a big fish?" he says. "No, but knowing I could is great."

Inside the lodge, meanwhile, the weekly wine-and-cheese mixer for staff and guests was getting underway, featuring some tasty bites assembled by Michael and the kitchen's Red Seal chef, Tony Glasgow. And that brings us to the most important ingredient in Bear's recipe for success: the 35 folks who keep the place running.

During my visit, that included everyone from support staff manager Maureen "Mama Mo" McNeillage, who prepared fresh-baked pastries every morning, to nine-season vet Kate Bollum behind the bar (she is a school teacher during the

**PATRICK WALSH  
AND HIS NEW PB,  
A 41-POUNDER**



off-season) to the attentive dining room servers and the shop guys keeping the 40-horse Mercs purring. And managing it all, often with a clipboard in hand and a sly quip or two at the ready, was Chuk, who also oversees Plummer's other operations on Bear, the Tree River and Great Slave Lake to the south.

As George says, "The people are great up there. They look after you." And perhaps no one takes better care of you at Bear than the fishing guides. That was unquestionably the case with our guide. An environmental scientist back home in Lloyminster, Alberta, Reid has been guiding at Bear for 11 years now. And as head guide, he definitely knows where to find the trophies, and how to catch them. Unlike George, I wasn't so Zen about the angling prospects at Bear. No, I *wanted* to catch big fish. More importantly, I really wanted to catch that new personal-best, and Reid seemed

MICHAEL HUNTER (WALSH & LAKERY); CHUK COULTER (GREAT BEAR LAKE LODGE)

quite confident we could make it happen.

And happen it did, on just our second full day of fishing. Plying an area the guides call the "Fish Tank," Reid determinedly put Mike and me on the fish. Remember, hunting for the giant grey morphs is not a numbers proposition, but by the time we headed back to camp, we had put a respectable 21 lakers in the boat. Along with several 20-pound-plus beauties and three double-headers, that included my new PB, a 41-pound silver beast I enticed with a pink Hawg Nose in 50 feet of water. Recipe for success, indeed.

In the end, I'd like to say I had my fill. But the truth is, by the time I climbed aboard the ATR twin turboprop for the flight back to Yellowknife, then home, I was only left craving more. ☺

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF PATRICK WALSH HAS AN INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR CATCHING AND RELEASING BIG FISH.**

**LODGE LEGACY**

**FULL DISCLOSURE:** I am good friends with Chuk Coulter, the overall general manager of Plummer's Arctic Lodges, who also serves as lodge manager at Great Bear. Then again, everyone who meets Chuk believes they are good friends with Chuk. He's just that type of gregarious guy. We originally met during my first visit to Bear in 2008, when he was assigned to be my guide. He had been guiding for four seasons already at the time, and would continue guiding until 2011, when he was promoted to lodge manager. At any rate, I learned a lot about fishing for big lakers from Chuk—he calls it hunting—and had a blast in the process. In the story I wrote back then, I described him as "gung ho." He still is, and that's a good thing.

This past April, the owner of Plummer's Arctic Lodges, 81-year-old Chummy Plummer, announced it was time for him to step back and sell the operation. Among the group of four new owners? Chuk Coulter. The other three partners include former Plummer's GM Shane Jonker, former veteran guide Bobby Richardson and long-time regular guest Herb Fritch. Was it



difficult for Chummy to let go of an enterprise that had been in his family since day one back in 1949? Not with this new team in place, he says.

"The lodges will remain in good hands with folks who truly love the place, and who have built careers and families around it," Chummy wrote in the Plummer's newsletter. "I feel good knowing what myself, my dad and my grandfather have built will continue to operate and offer the same high level of service we have been offering for over 75 years. The Plummer's name will live on as the finest fly-in fishing operation in the North." If I know Chuk, he will make sure of that.

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