

# GAMBIT IN THE FAR NORTH

by Dr. Riley Love, MD.

Cast your eyes to the northern sky and you will find it. It is cold, white and brilliant, the distilled essence of the north itself. Gleaming at the tail of Ursa Minor, "the little bear," its radiance cannot be mistaken. Polaris, the North Star, has guided ships' captains through dark nights since ancient men first took to the seas. Untold ages prior, they wondered at its faithfulness. All other stars in that part of the heavens rotate around its station, so constant as to provide a simile for Shakespeare in one of his most memorable sonnets.

Metaphor springs easily under the North Star. It pulls our spirit toward the polar whiteness where not a pine needle stirs the cold winter stillness. Surely there is a magnetism in that faraway norwood for men as well as the compass point. So they came north to trade in furs, mine gold from the ground and for some fishing in lakes like mirrors that reflect stands of pine trees back toward the sky. Behind us we would leave the insect bustle of life and follow this light in the sky to a

[gafflife.com](http://gafflife.com)

destiny where the wild always wins in the end. Jack London north, Robert Service north... the stars glisten brightly in the warm humidity of a Kentucky spring night from my back deck. The excitement of contemplating fishing in the far north tingles the spine like energy infused from Polaris into the nervous system. The quiet is like a fine nocturne on these evenings. But not as serene as where we would soon journey.

*Riiing!... Riiing!... Riiing!* Oh man, if Alexander Graham Bell were here right now I'd throttle him. "H'lo."

"Hi, Brock Baynton from Bakers Narrows Lodge in Manitoba. Thought I'd better call before it was the last minute."

"That minute will be here soon."

"You know 'ice out,' where the ice covering the lakes clears, should have been complete over a month ago. But we've had a record cold and snowy season this year. The ice is still covering the lake, even the docks. It might thaw in time. I thought you may want to consider rescheduling."

"What about the boats and the float planes?"

"Not even in the water yet. I'll send you a picture. How many are you now?"

[gafflife.com](http://gafflife.com)

"Nineteen guys,"

I remembered a photo of the distant lodge with a big white birch standing in front. This trip had been my idea. It wasn't hard to imagine another photo of eighteen guys standing around that tree watching me swing neck first from a noose in a light Canadian breeze. Down to zero hour minus seven days. How could you call these things weather "predictions?" They changed all the time! There was no agreement! Crunch time arrived with a vibe like a cracking vertebrae. Then, from the same radar the weather channel uses to show the silhouette of Santa Claus over the pole on the night of December 24th every year, it came... a whole week of above-freezing temperatures at night and better than Christmas - a veritable heat wave of 80 degrees when we arrived. Unbelievable! Could it be true? Would it be enough? "All my life I have been a gambler, and now..." Julius Caesar intoned as he led his army across the Rubicon toward Rome, "the die is cast."

Killing time in Winnipeg between flights becomes productive when one takes the opportunity to sample Canadian barley pops. There's time to watch the river flow from an outdoor cafe at "The Forks," a cultural and

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2014

GAFF

43

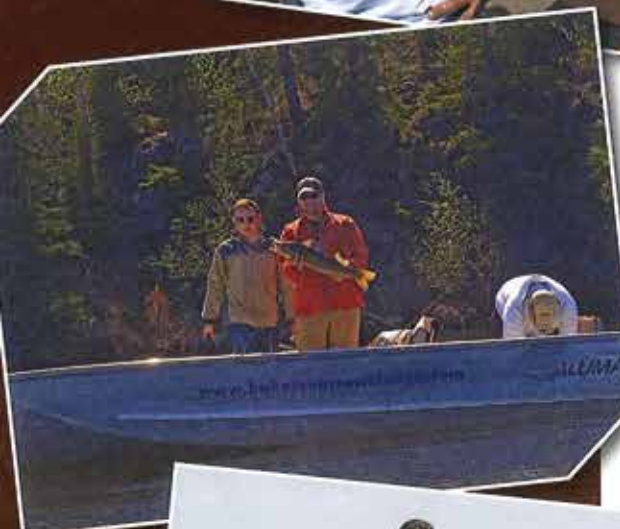




shopping center where 6,000 years ago the first aboriginals in this area came together to trade at this confluence of two watercourses. Commerce in furs brought the French who established the first fort in 1738. Winnipeg means "muddy waters," in Cree. There's 750,000 people now, most of the 1.25 million in the whole province of Manitoba.



The sun was shining and the water was muddy... but no ice. However, our destination lay 400 miles to the north and when the photo from the lodge of the ice-choked bay and frozen docks came up on my iPhone screen, I recalled that hanging tree out front. It was cutting it close for flight time but I ordered another round... just to steady my hand.



Looking down from six miles up, the narrative of the place rapidly expands. This is Canadian Shield country, a huge tectonic plate that provides the entire region its character. Scoured by glacier's movement of ice ages past, its surface is half water. Only minutes out of Winnipeg, the façade of human control of this wilderness began to fade. There are stretches of 50 or 100 miles without habitation, not even a dirt road cutting through the forest. There are communities farther north but they become fewer, smaller, and so distant up past Hudson's Bay. There is a name for that neighborhood, it's "The Top of the World."



In the seat liner was a magazine featuring stories from natives of the far north. They spoke of encountering ancestral spirits in the form of animals - wolves and bears, when lost in the winter ice, who gave them courage and direction. These were stories of survival in a land where winter darkness could swallow a man. It's not easy for a southerner to

grasp living here. Below the throbbing turbo props were so many lakes. The lesser, shallower bodies, quickly warmed by the sun were clear of ice. But the larger, deeper waters, where the sunlight had not warmed the bottom, were still covered. The image of the hanging tree loomed in my mind. The collar of my shirt was getting mighty tight despite pinning the buttons off against the beverage cart.

Landing at the airport in Flin Flon, on Manitoba's border with Saskatchewan, reinforced the fascia of man's grasp on the wilderness. Again, the fur trade extended the grasp of the Hudson Bay Company to this site in 1773, but mining copper, zinc, and gold brought settlement. Men flocked to the mine to find work during the Great Depression. One miner brought a science fiction novel of the day and the town's name originated from a character in that book. However, it was so remote in the north that much of the land waited upon survey until 1902.

We were met by a small fleet of SUVs and hustled just down the road to Bakers Narrows Lodge on the bank of Lake Athapapuskow, home and nerve center for the next four days. Hustling down to the dock... there cold and clear, open water. As far as the eye could see, without ice. And boats floating, ready to go. Hadn't taken a breath that deep in a week. I struck a match on the big birch tree to light my cigar on the way into the lodge. The guys were all there.

"Whoa, I gotta tell you, we were a little worried about the ice ruining the trip."

"No sweat pal, I had this thing in the bag." If ever 'twas a perfect moment for an Elvis sneer lifting the left upper lip... then a towel for the wet across the brow.

Lake Athapapuskow means "rocks on both sides" in Swampy Cree. I envisioned the man who originated this name as having a lisp and obviously not invested in the concept of the cocktail hour during which simpler names gain advantage. As not afflicted with either of these insufficiencies, what burdens I yet carried could be divested over a glass of Canada's finest. The fishing tournament was on full boil and ice came in a bucket for the drinks. Bakers Narrows Lodge is a "drive in," so conveniently near the airport. Preceding trips featured "fly in" destinations for less accessible waters. This lodge highlights "fly out" travel to nearby lakes to target specific fish species with pontoon planes.

One example is Babbe Lake where anglers bag rainbow trout over 10 pounds, which leap two to three times their body length above the surface. It also contains world-record brown trout over 16 pounds. Other lake options include targeting walleye by the hundreds and smallmouth bass. Because the lingering ice conditions had prevented the air travel vendors from opening their base camps on these sites, we would restrict our fishing to the main lake of 104 square miles and the adjoining smaller lakes. The lodge's calling card was the same lack of fishing pressure but better convenience and price than more remote lodges farther north.

The lodge is owned and run by the Baynton family including Rod, Peg, Gen, Brock, and Brett. It is all-inclusive and has comfortable log cabins spread over the hillside. John Wolters is the other principle and head guide. He related coming out with Rod to refurbish the building in 2002 after selling off his bakery.

"We were pounding nails in 50 below weather," he seemed to enjoy the memory.

I smiled and nodded my head, but back where the wheels were turning, I avoided the image. This was another tough concept for a southerner. The world-record lake trout of 63 pounds was caught here in 1937 and stood for decades. John's personal best is 64.5. Currently, this is ninth in the world and number one in Manitoba.

"Twenty years ago, the government changed the catch and release slots. Walleye over 22 inches, northern pike over 30 inches, and lake trout over 26 inches have to be released. This has really paid off. It has become a trophy fish lake," John explained. "But tonight, it's time for some Texas Hold 'Em."

Great and dire, igneous pachyderms loomed up around us from the shores as we motored through the narrows. The lake's name was inspired by these monoliths of stone. I still imagined the lisp, "Athapapuskow." Then further imagined the guy's wig-



Lace on your skates and toss out a hockey puck.

The Canadian Shield characteristics of rolling rocky terrain and woods are reflected to fishermen across this great expanse of the north. This is Targa, boreal or snow forest. This makes up 29% of the world's forest cover and is the world's largest biome. Seven thousand years ago aboriginals of the Canadian Shield Culture hunted caribou here. Two and a half billion years ago this was connected to the Siberian Shield to make up the super continent of Arctica, although now these tectonic plates have pulled away from each other across the pole. The Great Lakes - Eerie, Michigan, Ontario, Superior, and Huron are the largest glacial lakes in the world. Formed by the scouring of glaciers, there are thousands of them here. Most average 10 to 25 feet in depth, but Athapapuskow reaches 233 feet and so can maintain fish stocks through severe changes in climate.

Another effect of glacial movement is seen at my home in Kentucky where we have almost three feet of topsoil that is called loess. This is wind or Aeolian distributed soil, which was scraped into great masses in front of advancing glaciers and then blown southward when the ice receded.

# CHILLING

GLOBAL HISTORY



Forty-pound-class Lakers are world-class trophies.





Out to the ice, an unforgettable setting.

wam decorated with pink flamingos.

The teams, each with a guide, scattered like Transylvanians at daybreak when we hit the lake. It was a northern pike kind of morning; you could tell by the way the rocks looked back at us and winked.

After trying a bunch of spots with only a few bites, we came back to a big bed of reeds and it happened. The principle is identical to hitting an undersea pinnacle 35 miles out in Panama for marlin or a ledge in 24 feet on Kentucky Lake for bass, to be there when THE BITE IS ON!

Northern pike aren't overwhelming fighters, but they are drop dead killer on the attack. When they are turned on they don't just eat, they want to tear their prey from this world leaving a bleeding scar in space and time. They're friggin' nuts. Let's face it, as predators ourselves this is what impresses us - another predator who goes all in like there's no death, no taxes, don't even notice that brick wall... just crush 'em.

Getting fish out of deep cover merits some strategy, so after a while I went Kentucky bass fisherman on them. A spring-time weedless topwater technique is to use a 7-inch soft plastic fluke on a 4/0 worm hook, keeping the hook's tip imbedded in the artificial. No weight added. This can be used to "walk the dog" across the surface of almost any cover. It requires

a roundhouse hook set like other plastic presentations. All fish, no weeds.

We had a 20-inch limit on northerns for our point-scoring system. Thirty pike later we had only boated two, which weren't larger than that and my son went to lunch as the leader in the clubhouse with a 41-inch fish. Fresh northern pike was served.

"That's what does it for me," I told John Wolters over the liquid part of the evening. "When those fish get so turned on

Let's face it, as predators ourselves, this is what impresses us - another predator who goes all in like there's no death, no taxes, don't even notice that brick wall... just crush 'em.

and I get to watch it."

"Lakers," his eyes went distant and he didn't breath for a long moment. "Lakers are what does it for me. We'll go out to the ice."

Out in the center of the big lake, ice still covered the surface. This is the haunt of schools of lake trout in more shallow for their spring cycle. The wind was predicted to blow the flow away from the shore, otherwise it would have been too treacherous.

Destination fishing is experiencing strange things in faraway lands. I'd even forgotten what it was like to breathe the clean air up here. But this... was an ethereal experience.

We came through a pass onto the main body of Athapapuskow and then, white and wide, stretched the flow of ice. We quietly came to its edge and stopped. It moved, stretching and contracting, its many particles singing with the voice of a wind chime unceasingly. Across the miles of hoarfrost danced spirit waves of mirage like white sandstorms. It was Lawrence of Arabia grade... I was mesmerized.

Then, above the song of the rime, I heard a voice in the air behind me. I held my breath to listen and understand its words. There was the sky above me, the water beneath me, and the rhythm of the world within me. It was, it was... Larry the Cable Guy speaking to me from the Olympus of

my son's iPod. Larry had a problem which troubled us both. He had a very fat girlfriend with a really large hind end who had been sitting on his sofa and now his television remote was missing. However, it became revealed to Larry that on every occasion that his girlfriend passed gas, the volume on the TV went up and so he became confident that with time his remote control would reappear. All was well with the world again. Some experiences from our days of fishing will live inside us forever and fashion us into the individuals we will be for the rest of our lives... but, nobody said it was going to be pretty. **G**

**Bass 2 Billfish**  
with Peter Miller

FLORIDA FISHING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD  
FishingCapital.com

WORLD FISHING NETWORK

MERCURY

Bass Pro Shops

LASER SPINE INSTITUTE.COM

GAFF MAGAZINE GAFFLIFE.COM

Raymarine  
...world leaders in marine electronics.

YETI COOLERS  
Wildly stronger! Keep Ice Longer!

MotorGuide

COSTA

PEPBOYS

Mellowfin

SALT LIFE

OUTDOORS

NBC Sports

VISITFLORIDA.COM

www.BASS2BILLFISH.com

bass2billfish

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram icons