

DESTINATION:



TROUT LAKE
ONTARIO

ON TROUT LAKE

BY RILEY LOVE, M.D.

Past the end of the roads of men, planes such as these are the workhorses of travel.

The light perspiration and feeling like the carbon atoms in my cells had transmuted into lead crept up on my awareness. Yeah, my fever was rising again. Time for another palm full of ibuprofen. This would make the third round of flu this year. T'was my usually quip, "The viruses have got to eat, too," but I was becoming a walking smorgasbord for the influenza.

The lights were low and the hectic, buzzing office was ghostly quiet now, more like a Twilight Zone than the pointed reality of the enterprise machine that had roared and backfired all day. The nurses and secretaries were gone and I was alone in this gray netherworld. My wife would now be moving gracefully about the kitchen at home, starting on another all organic dinner. But the pile of charts on the desk were like a hourglass sentencing me to another...let's see, hmm at that height...about two more hours to finish.

The weather outside was stinkin' lousy. It was darkening and the rain was freezing into something like sleet, or ice darts. They smacked the big window surface by my desk with a noise like an airplane engine and the cold outside tried to reach through the glass to touch me with its thin blue hand. The banks of lights across the parking lot oscillated in waves and coronas though the icy atmosphere. The funky light made your eyelids narrow down to try to correct the perception. Then it was too easy to close the eyes. Yes, it was too easy...to just float away.



There are only planes and boats to park at Cat Island Lodge.

The big DeHavilland Otter's engine made a hellish noise and nobody on board had hesitated to pull on huge ear protectors that made them look like pro level nerds, just up from their parent's basement. Beneath the floatplane's broad wing, the wide expanse of Ontario passing below was half water and half spruce forests. Extending westward, back towards Winnipeg, the land became flatter than a billiards table but ahead the terrain erupted skyward 800 feet into a long rugged ridge of escarpment.

But we're too low! From the back of the plane I focused the beam of my best mental command ray at the pilot's head. It would be easier for him to pick up than attempting a shout in this noise.

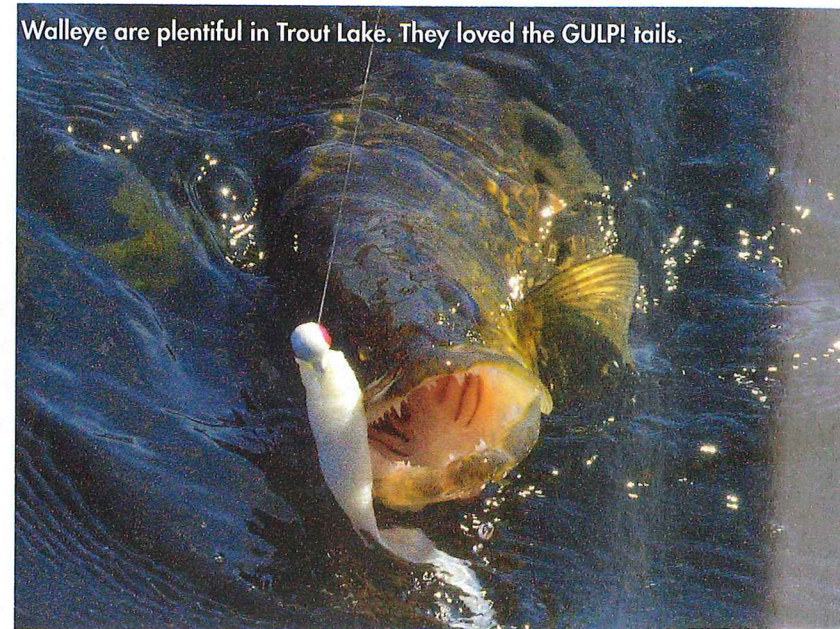
Tooooo low! Usually it's all happiness flashing back into one of my fishing trips. *But, those spruce trees on the ridge are toooo high! Can't this pontooned pterodactyl fly any higher?* The trees on the ridge loomed eye-poppingly closer... almost, maybe... maybe not...

"Thirty-seven!" I tried to call to the pilot. There had been 37 needles on the upper branch of the last tree on the ridge, which just swooshed by the window. From my spinal cord up to the frontal lobes, the nerve cells ratcheted down one notch to DEFCON 4.

Then Trout Lake dazzled before us. The heart-stopping geology lesson we had just experienced was not wasted. We had encountered the edge of the Canadian Shield, a gigantic tectonic plate that defined the topography here since Vulcan had pushed it angrily up against its neighboring land mass. It also made Trout Lake what it is today. Unlike other bodies of water to the west, which are the shallow products of glaciers scouring the land during the previous ice age, Trout Lake is deep

and marvelously varied in its submerged terrain. It's filled with rock islands, ledges and valleys plunging more than 200 feet.

Water landings are so smooth, there's no impact; the plane just gently slows down...and then taxis right up to the dock at Cat Island Lodge. Walking up to the lodge, recollections of northern Ontario flow back from boyhood, the air so dry and clean, fragrant with the smell of pine needles and just a hint of a distant cooking fire. Oh yes, it was all coming back now.



Walleye are plentiful in Trout Lake. They loved the GULP! tails.

This is all about the fly-in. There is water everywhere up here. But going to fishing grounds beyond where anyone could drive his car from the city... sets the quality of fishing apart and makes it well worth it.

Lodges up here sort themselves out into several levels. There are the most rustic with a bit of a roof over your head and a go-it-on-your-own absence of services. Then come many lodges which furnish kitchens and boats feathering up to very expensive high-end, all-inclusive resorts. Cat Island Lodge is run by Faron and Joyce Buckler. It features good food, clean accommodations and well-maintained boats with professional guides. They have all the services of the top-notch fishing lodges of Ontario and Manitoba at a true bargain price.

Faron is a pilot and runs "Excellent Adventures," his fly-in service. He is an extraordinarily patient and accommodating fellow. He made several extra trips to round up the 24 anglers of our father/son tournament who discovered once again that scheduling an airline flight and actually going on time was often like... a fishing story.

Red Lake, Ontario is the nerve center for fishing operations in this vicinity. Travelers fan out from its commercial airport to the various lodges on up north. It oper-

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ates even in the -40 degree months of winter. The commerce is fueled by the Campbell gold mine, Canada's largest, having produced around a \$1 billion worth of the yellow metal last year. You can take a tour of its 7,000-foot deep shaft. But then you'd be seven thousand feet further away from going fishing.

Red Lake Travel is the touchstone for voyagers seeking the grail of good fishing hereabouts. It is run by Karen Pace

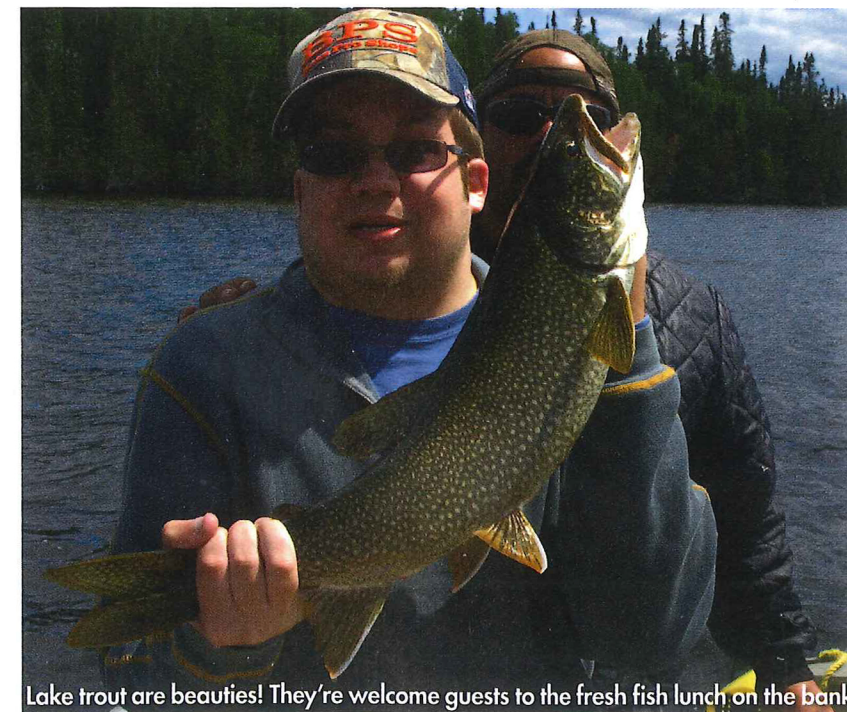
and she is a hands-on purveyor of angling adventures. I've never had such a helpful agent on the receiving end of a moving mass of tournament travelers. Part mama grizzly and part Saint Christopher; she is a rescuer of wayfarers.

And so, there we were. Twenty-four anglers, fathers and sons, old friends up from Kentucky, Texas, Arizona, Wyoming and Utah come together on the shore of beautiful Trout Lake... suddenly a fishing tournament broke out.

Besides the rods, reels and all of the lures and baits you could possibly imagine being loaded into the boats, somebody discovered a big can o' trash talk and pried it open. It has been said that fishermen lie, but this level of crow before the day even started, before a hook even got wet, where the ear-bleeding friction of fiction became understatement... yeah, these were fishermen all right. It was good to get away from the dock and out onto the lake.

For the coastal saltwater angler or mid-western bass fisherman who considers a trip to Trout Lake, much of what you have learned about fishing will serve you well here. Whether you have been occupying yourself casting for redfish or bucket mouths, as always it is a matter of cycles of movement based on spawn and seasons.

The water and land here are covered by ice until mid-May. Then things happen very quickly. The big three up here are



Lake trout are beauties! They're welcome guests to the fresh fish lunch on the bank.



Big Northerns like this are voracious. This one had a 13-inch walleye in its gullet.

lake trout, walleye pike and northern pike. They occupy very shallow water with dramatic prespawn and spawning behavior. Subsequently as the summer approaches all three species move out but most spectacularly, the trout, who go real deep.

Lake trout are something of a rare animal. They exist in about 1 percent of Ontario's waters but this accounts for 25 percent of all the lake trout in the world. They were demonstrating the maddening confusion of changing their orientation from one part of their cycle to another while we were fishing in early June. We picked some up trolling 4 feet under the surface but also saw fish holding on the bottom at 80 feet. It became apparent the fish were still in the process of sorting out their cyclic move and weren't biting our presentations well up near the top. When we changed our tactics and focused on the fish that were holding on structure, we got a lot more productive. This will resonate with fishermen experienced with the patterns of behavior across other species.

A natural target for angling on Trout Lake is a "hundred walleye day." Walleye were everywhere in June. We fished for them off rocky points. We caught 'em in weed-filled bays. They hooked up along side lake trout in 90 feet of water. But a cer-

tain truth began to sink in as the walleye came in on the lines...there were almost no little ones. We were probably 40 fish into the first day when I saw my first 15-inch walleye. All of the others had averaged 18 to 22 inches with the occasional 24.

"This sets our fishery apart from other lakes which are smaller and don't have the depth and underwater structure of Trout Lake," explained Faron Buckler. "The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources actively manages the fishing pressure on a lot of the open water up here. But because of the lake's volume and robust stock of game fish as demonstrated by the average size we catch, they have taken a hands-off attitude every year to fishermen on Trout Lake."

A lot of techniques will catch fish up here and some baits will catch everything. A jig with a grub tail will keep you busy all day. Inline spinners, different than the ones we use for bass in the Midwest will also produce all species. But when you're on a feeding school of walleye, a minnow with a spinner in front is like a dip net... you just put 'em in the boat. What is it with a spinner up here? For a walleye it changes a minnow into something resembling a Victoria's Secret lingerie model

holding a tray of cold beers.

So now the fun starts because you get to try other baits and ideas you brought along. There is a saying that fishing lures are designed to catch fishermen, not fish. I was fatally hooked long ago. I do find them so... alluring. Guys like me are why they put weight limits on the flights up here. You actually don't need to bring anything because the lodge has a small tackle store that stocks what they're usually biting. But I can't stand it.

We caught fish on a number of stick minnows, but Strike King's Bleeding Shad, dialed in the number for walleye when a shallow running minnow bait was needed around foliage. Many bass fishermen have come to believe in bleeding baits and will exchange at least the forward treble hook with a red one in their lures. The walleye thought they were a red-trimmed lollipop. The moderate size of this lure seemed a good match for our game. We also produced fish with spoons, swim baits and inline spinners.

With regard to the universally-employed grub tails, I found the Berkley Gulp! Alive! *Swimming Mullet* to really shine. Although this is a saltwater bait, the impregnated scent stimulated walleye and trout to consider either murder or adultery

when it shook its tail in their face.

In an age of evolving hybrid lures, there are a number of new subsurface prop baits emerging onto the market from several Japanese companies including Tiemco, Lucky Craft, Megabass, Fish Arrow and GanCraft. A small American manufacturer, Buckeye Lake Bait Company sells their version online. These include minnows and even prop-loaded lead heads for swim baits and other soft bodies. When I go back, I intend to add these to the arsenal. I've got the feeling it would be date night for these babies.

One of the nice extras on this trip was the daily shore lunches, cooked over an open fire by the guides. Although we practiced mainly catch and release, as it got close to lunchtime for some of the walleye and trout, it was a fatal attraction... for them. Fresh fish, right out of the water is not to be compared to anything else. It stands on simple character and the unspoiled Canadian environment piques the taste buds.

Like so many, I've fished wide, blue, beautiful waters where during a long day without action the mind has wandered to the myth of Sisyphus. He had enraged the gods by placing death in chains and was sentenced for all eternity to roll a great boulder up a hill. Just before reaching the top, it escapes his grasp and rolls back down, requiring him to begin all over yet again. Fishing should not resemble reps at the gym. It is far wiser to travel where the fish are abundant (and tasty), the weather is fair, and then add good company and stock the cooler.



A nice early morning Northern comes to the boat.

It is easy to become philosophical sitting in a chair along the sandy beach of Trout Lake. The sun is still up at 10 o'clock in the summer. The crackling sound of ice melting in my drink is welcome percussion to the humming ballet of the dragonflies who hold forth in evening time and eliminate the mosquitoes. Henry David Thoreau spent a year of contemplation on Walden Pond. It's a book that re-reads quite well and is downloaded on my cell phone. If he had tried that up here he would have been remembered as a human popsicle instead of an essayist. It freezes back up in October and you could drive a locomotive over the ice.

Across the lake there is a union, a most

simple and wonderful thing. It is where the sky meets the water in the far distance and the elements merge into each other, and become a luminous, brilliant...one. At the nearer shore the tall spruce trees marry their own inverted likeness in their reflections on the absolutely still surface of the lake. There is no way to tell either flawless image apart. The only activity on the glassy perfection is a single loon; its call has not changed since my boyhood, taking me back those many years. In a separate reality somewhere, in a dark lonely office, that towering stack of charts is still waiting. As long as I can focus on the lake, the forest and the sky they can stay at bay. I'll sit here and finish my drink.

A DeHavilland Otter is a passport to a world of fishing in the Far North.

