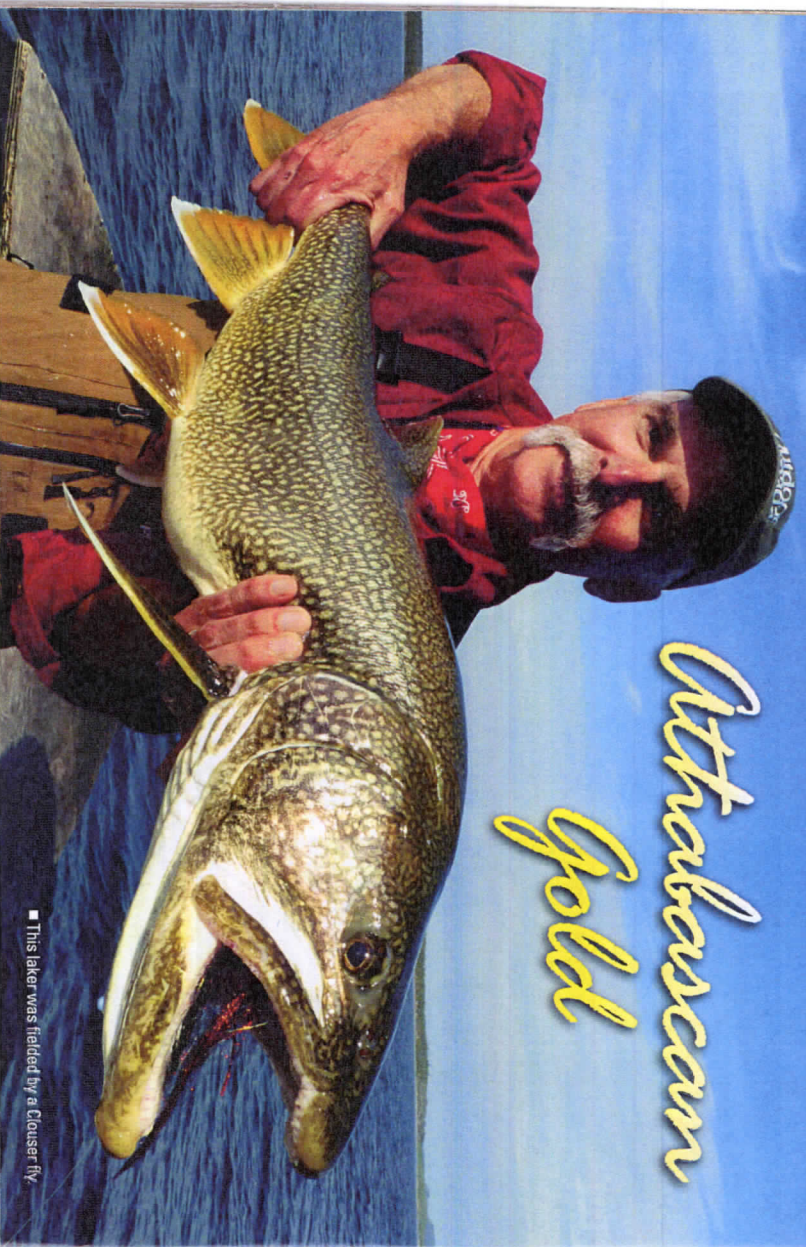


Athabasca Gold



■ This laker was fielded by a Clouser fly.

By John Cleveland

Have you ever dreamt about a place where you can catch more fish than you can count? I don't know that any place like this actually exists but I know of a place that comes close. As Marketing Director of Eppinger Manufacturing Company I spend most of the winter months working at sport shows throughout the Midwest and in the process listen to a lot of "Fish Stories". For years I had heard about the fabulous Lake Trout fishing during September on Lake Athabasca in Northern Saskatchewan and in particular at Laker's Unlimited Lodge. Huge fish and lots of them in shallow water just waiting for a Dardvie to swim past!

In 2008 I made my first trip to Laker's Unlimited Lodge, and I have to say it was better than the stories. I partnered last fall for my fourth visit to Athabasca with Patrick Walsh, editor-in-chief for Outdoor Canada Magazine. Patrick had not fished for lake trout with a fly rod but had heard the same fabulous stories

fished the previous week and they gave me a stellar report of their week on the lake and the awesome hospitality during their stay.

After getting our gear stowed in our cabin and licenses issued, we were served a hearty buffet style breakfast of eggs, pancakes, fruit, bacon, sausage, fresh sticky buns, juice and hot coffee. Then we headed for the lake at 9am with our guide, Bryan, for the first day of our fall lake trout adventure. We have each colored the script of this trip with our imaginations and our dreams of an awesome fishing adventure. We are about to discover if those dreams will come true. Out of the 12 guests this week, only two had not been here before. This created a bit of an issue as several of the guides were requested by multiple guests. To be fair and please everyone, we had all agreed ahead of our arrival to switch guides each day which is not the norm, but turned out to be interesting, educational and just plain fun. Each guide had their special honey holes and offered a different perspective and/or approach to some of the regular spots we would all fish throughout the week. The reefs and bars we would be fishing this week range only 5 to 9 miles from the lodge. The longest boat ride would be only 20-25 minutes in calm water.

Approaching a reef on our first day:

The surface of the water was as smooth and clear as the diamond setting of a new bride's ring and with it we were embraced with the anticipation of great things to come as we approached the mile-long spine of submerged rock jutting out towards the depths of the lake. Looking down through the water we began to

see large trout swimming below us like mermaids dressed in gold bikinis at the enchanted springs of Weekiwachee Florida. Effortlessly gliding through their routines and parting at the bow of the boat as we eased over their layer. Lake trout are at their peak of coloration in the fall and many of them celebrate by adorning gold plated fins that glimmer in the sunlight like sunken treasure on the reefs below. What a great show! We would soon discover these pretty little mermaids would turn out to be some big tough broads when hooked with a fly rod.

Our typical approach when fly fishing the reefs would be to set up a drift upwind of a reef or shallow bar in about 20 to 25 feet of water then slowly drift and cast large streamer flies as we moved into the shallow water where the trout were holding which would be 5 to 15 feet in most areas. Bryan had guided me before and knew exactly how to position the boat and how to set up an effective drift. Patrick made the first several casts on our first morning out using a chartreuse and white clouser fly he had tied himself, and within just a couple of minutes he was battling his first lake trout on a fly rod. The trout put up a fierce fight while putting an impressive bend in Pat's 9wt Sage rod. Patrick was immediately >

■ Saskatchewan

September 2012

Weather Conditions:

Crisp fall air, low 30s-60s



■ (Above) Guide Bryan with his first lake trout on a fly rod.
(Below) Fly rods ready for action on the reef.



■ The surface of the water was as smooth and clear as the diamond on a new bride's ring.



■ The laker crushed this clouser fly.



■ Guide Bob Cottrell holding one of our spoon caught lakers.



■ A delicious shore lunch in the making.



■ A gold plated Athabasca treasure.



■ Lake trout candy.

hooked on fly rod fishing for fall lake trout. With a huge grin he said, "I'm ready to do that again!" All I could do was smile at Pat and say I told you so, my friend. By the end of our first day we had done just that, over and over again bringing over 80 trout to the boat by Patrick's count. The largest was over 20 pounds with most of the fish in the 10 to 18 pound range. From previous experience, I knew it was only going to get better from here as we refined our methods and presentations through the week.

The fall run lake trout are not prima ballerinas like a rainbow trout or Coho salmon jumping and dancing on the surface of the lake, but

street fighting thugs that start by crushing your fly then immediately trying to rip the rod out of your hands before you know what's happening. In previous trips to Athabasca, I have witnessed no fewer than three expensive graphite fly rods

turned to dust as they exploded from the stress of big belligerent lake trout winning a game of tug of war. Patrick's beautiful Sage rod would become one of the casualties later in the week. These are not the lake trout of the deep that have been winched up from 80 to 100 feet and exhausted by their ascent, but fresh fish in skinny water charged up for the spawn, full of juice, and ready to rumble! Fighting these fish in the fall is more akin to hand to hand and or fin to hand combat if you will. Throughout the week we were hooking many male trout in the

10 to 15 pound range that gave us spectacular fights when hooked. They were juiced up for the spawning season and fought like fresh sea run salmon with lots of long runs that took us into our backing and even offered a few jumps. They were not big by Athabasca standards but none the less they were great sport and a blast to catch on a fly rod. I can guarantee you will be exhausted by these fish by the end of the day when using light tackle tactics such as the fly rod or spinning rod. The fly fishing on the reefs was a non-stop circus of action all week long.

and even triple to the tune of 12 to 18 double headers in a day with 4 or 5 triple headers as icing on the cake. This was happening every day, not just once or twice during the week. It seemed every time one of the other boats from the lodge trolled past, one or both of us had a fish on. We had to answer to that every night when we came in for dinner of course, and it was a delicate subject considering my job is to sell the Dardave spoons everyone was trolling with this week. I managed to have fun with it and we organized contests throughout the week for catching the most fish during a certain pre-arranged time frame with Dardaves and gave our prizes to the winners each night.

The next several days were a blur of nonstop lake trout wrestling. The water is gin clear on

the shallow reefs of Athabasca allowing us to watch multiple fish chasing our fly before one of them would take the lead and hammer it with a powerful lunge of its jaws. We often missed these fish because we would set the hook too soon and jerk the fly right out of their mouth, but it didn't matter. There was always another trout waiting to slam the fly when it popped from the jaws of the lead fish. These are truly exceptional fighting fish and certainly some of the most beautiful creatures on earth with their gold accented fins and underbellies the color of golden honey. Each day it seemed like the trout were getting larger and larger with every cast, if that was possible. By the end of the week Patrick and I were shaking off 18 to 20 pound trout as fast as we could bring them to the boat with the hope that we could have an opportunity to hook up with one of the 30-plus-pound goddesses we could see cruising over the reef below us.

On day three we were guided by the camp's owner, Ryan "Capr. Bruce" Lowry. His goal was to fish where he felt we would catch mainly large fish. He said that would mean bringing less fish to the boat but we might get lucky and catch a "Big Pig" in the areas he would take us. That day Bruce was counting fish to the boat and by the end of the day he had released 50 trout. A lot of nice fish were taken this day but we didn't land any trout larger than 20 pounds. Both Patrick and I were ecstatic with the day's result, even if Cape Bruce was a bit disappointed that we didn't catch a Pig. We intentionally fished at a leisurely pace and did a lot of video work with Ryan for his website. It was another awesome day on the water enjoying the company of good friends and gazing at the landscape flush with the golden pallers of the poplar and birch trees in their fall attire.

Our guides for the week, Bryan, Trevor, Kelly, Bob, and Nevin were all well versed in the habits of the trout in the fall and had no problem leading us to some fantastic fishing each day respectively. It was obvious they had all been well trained. They were professional, and about as enthusiastic as I have ever encountered in the North Country. They are all "hunters" and were just as excited as Patrick and I when one of us would hook a big fish. A couple of them had not guided fly fishermen before but were eager to listen to our needs in regards to boat handling, etc. Every one of them did an outstanding job of adapting to how to maneuver the boat across the reefs with two fly fishermen waving long sticks over their heads. They all had interesting stories and perspectives and were eager to help us improve our techniques as we worked over the reefs with our fly rods. As it turned out the youngest guide on staff, Kelly, helped us catch the two largest fish of the trip.

There are several variations and colorations of lake trout throughout Canada, but the one that is my personal favorite to catch is what is referred to as the Red Fin. They are one of Mother Nature's most beautifully decorated creatures. Lake Athabasca holds a plethora of Red Fin's with their flanks mottled in frosted green and splashed with creamy white earthy mosaic patterns, their fins are gilded in 24 karat gold that matches the canyons of golden birch trees blanketing the colorfully spiced hillsides of the lakeshore. The Red Fin fights with incredible tenacity as they prefer to fight deep and hug the bottom while turning your fly rod into a wimpy bent stick. At times it was as if they were able to use their fins as suction cups and scoop up gravel and rocks from the lakebed to make it more sporting for us as we attempted to wrestle them to the surface. They are tough customers and a real challenge on a fly rod. *My minimum recommendation for chasing these powerful fish with a fly rod is a 9wt and my >*



■ We arrived at camp after a short flight from Fort McMurray, Alberta in a Cessna Caravan float plane.



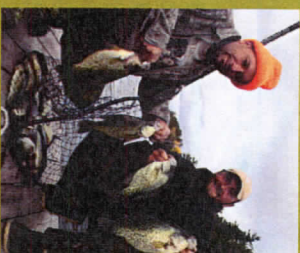
Trophy Fishing
Smallmouth – Walleye
Pike – Crappie



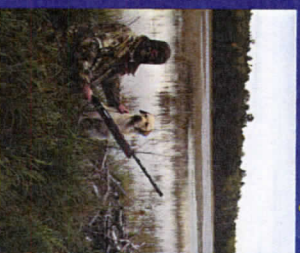
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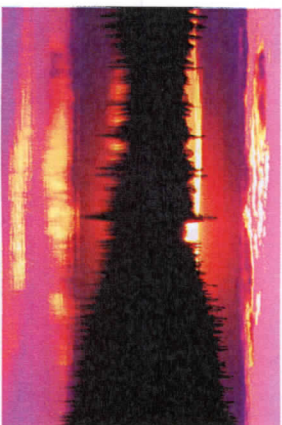
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(telephone) 807-274-2121 (toll-free) 866-294-5067
www.campnarrows.ca or www.ontariohunting.ca
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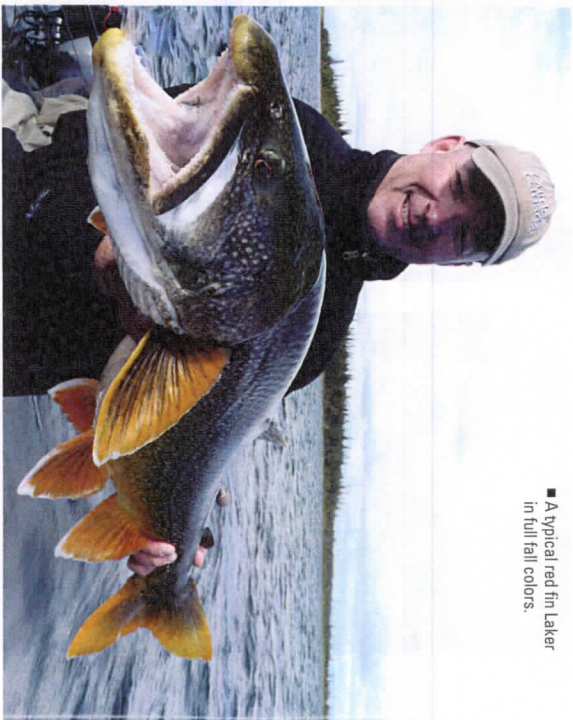


Prime Duck Hunting Area
Great for Deer, Bear
& Grouse Hunting





■ (Above) Sunrise on the bay in front of the lodge.
■ (Below) The main lodge at Lakers Unlimited.



■ A typical red fin Lake
in full fall colors.

favorite fly rod for these fish is a 10wt. Any fly rod less than a 9wt and you will be under gunned.

Lake Athabasca has more catch and release fly fishing line class records for lake trout than any other lake in North America. Patrick and I were lucky enough to contribute several new records this week to the total already on the books. In fact, we set or reset records every day of the trip. At one point I turned to Patrick during one of our daily fly fishing marathons and told him I bet you a hundred bucks we are the only two people on the lake fly fishing for lake trout right now. That is incredible considering Athabasca is the 8th largest lake in Canada, being 175 miles long and 30 miles wide. Fly fishing for lake trout in the fall is an untapped opportunity for the fly fisherman looking for a new frontier and any lodge looking to increase their fall business opportunities.

Other options for catching fall lake trout:

I spent part of each day casting with my mel/heavy spinning rod and 1oz Dardenvles. This method proved to be very effective and just plain fun. I have a hard time sitting still and trolling for hours on end and really enjoyed casting to fish instead of motorizing over them while trolling. My first cast brought a 20 pound trout to the boat. I would recommend anyone coming up to bring a heavy spinning rod so they can take a break from trolling and do some casting with light tackle as well. The preferred method of fishing for hogs on Athabasca is to troll large Eppinger Huskie Deviles or Eppinger Dodgers with hutchie

skirts rigging them to bounce on the bottom of the bars and reefs. Most of the really big fish are taken using one of these two set ups. My largest fish on Athabasca was a 40 pound female Red Fin taken on a Hot Mackerel Huskie Devle in 10 feet of water in September 2008.

He is now one of us:

One of our guides Bryan had mentioned to me that he had a new 8wt rod and reel outfit he brought up to camp to use on lake trout but he had been too busy guiding this summer to try it out. On our last day out we told Bryan to bring his fly rod. He was excited after watching us have so much fun battling these special fish all week. He was ready to get his chance to try fly fishing for them. His sense of anticipation was contagious as we talked the whole way out to the reef about how hard these fish fight on a fly rod and what fun it is to feel the powerful strike when they crush the fly and try to shake the rod out of your hand. His enthusiasm was spilling over as we approached the reef and set up our first drift of the morning. Bryan made the first cast and sure enough he hooked up with a feisty 12 pound juiced up male that made 3 or 4 runs taking him into his backing and headed to the bottom of the rock pile to play tug of war. After 5 minutes he had taken control and brought his first fly caught lake trout to the boat. When he looked up at me as he cradled the trout in his arms for a photo, his expression was priceless and complete. I immediately knew he had become one of us! Now Bryan knows why Patrick and

I were laughing and carrying on all week like a couple of school kids playing hooky.

The weather:

It was always invigorating to be within the energy envelope of the arctic weather cycle. The day would often begin with relatively light winds and fall temperatures in the low 30's early on and would approach 45 to 50 degrees by mid-day. As the day progressed, we would see the sun come out and disappear several times. Rain showers, sleet, and occasional snow are common this time of year. We were fortunate this year and had unusually stable weather for September in northern Canada. You never knew what to expect, other than the weather would be variable and always interesting when you left the dock each morning. It simply added to the sense of adventure. A quality rain suit and warm synthetic base layers are ideal dress in this country. Unpredictably predictable fall weather was the forecast each day.

A typical start to the day:

The camp slowly awakened before sunrise each morning with the rich smell of dark Columbian coffee waiting through the crisp fall air and seeping like smelling salts into our cabins as the camp cook begins preparations for breakfast at 5am in the morning. Wood smoke curls into the morning mist from the camp chimney melting the frost on the old wood shingles of the roof of the lodge. We make our way from our cabins on the walkway leading to the main lodge as a brilliant golden sphere of light rises over the

horizon to the east of the lodge. One by one we begin to assemble in the camp kitchen filled with the aromas of this morning's breakfast. The windows in the dining room were dripping with condensation from the heat of the gathering clan of fishermen in the room. We chat over coffee about what the day will hold as the caffeine takes hold and we enter the new day. We eat at 7am and hurry back to our cabins to gather our gear and dress for the day's adventure. One by one we march down the winding rocky path of jagged cut slabs of red stained glacial stone from our cabins to the dock like gladiators to the sport, dressed in Goretex armor suits with long graphite sabers ready to slay the giant lake trout of Athabasca.

Our guides greeted us with enthusiasm, and they arranged our gear in the floating aluminum charters that carried us to the reefs of Athabasca to wrestle big trout for the next 10 hours. We are all willing soldiers in this quest.

The evening routine:

The guides would have us back at the dock by around 6pm in the evening. The smells of fresh baked pies and something delicious roasting in the oven like turkey, roast beef or maybe barbecue ribs would be welcome aromas as we made our

way up from the docks following the cobble stone path to our cabins. After getting ourselves cleaned up a bit, sipping on cold beer or a cup of hot coffee while relaxing, everyone would gather in the main lodge for dinner at 7pm. Dinner was served buffet style. The camp chef Sue Surton would have a delicious meal ready for us each evening including grilled ribs, steak, chicken parmesan, pot roast, pizza, and even a fresh baked turkey dinner with all the fixings. She would have all kinds of side dishes and salads as well. Sue would spend the day baking pies and making decadent desserts for us to indulge ourselves with at the end of our meal. After dinner, most of us would gather in the lounge and tell stories, read, and play cards. There were a couple of days I was so whipped from fishing I just went back to my cabin and crashed, exhausted from a long day of wrestling these powerful fall run lake trout. After 10 hours standing in a moving boat casting flies, it never took me more than a couple of minutes to fall asleep.

The Ending:

As we headed back to the lodge on our last day, I took a deep breath to fill my lungs with the essence of magic that can only be found in

the unspoiled wilderness of the north. I tasted the flavor of the crisp northern air with its intoxicating aromas of northern spruce, lichen, and caribou moss with a hint of moisture stripped from the surface of the lake by the wind. There is no better elixir for the soul than a week spent letting your mind and body listen to the true rhythm of the earth, wind, and sky that Mother Nature has provided for us. There is a gradual evolution of spirit and maturity from beginning to end in a trip to the northern wilderness. The basic needs we have are brought into perspective as we distance ourselves from the limitations of civilization. We have all accumulated a virtual gold mine of memories this past week to sustain us for another year of living in civilization. The ancient instinctual callings of our creation can be felt and a balance has been reached. At last we are seduced by the mystical charms of this lake trout paradise called Lake Athabasca.

*This story is dedicated to my lifelong friend Robin Lacy who spent 50 years fly fishing, hunting, and being my friend. Robin passed away suddenly in 2009 while fly fishing on his favorite river in Northern Michigan. He would have enjoyed fishing on Lake Athabasca. +

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