

# Charming Nunavut: Land of Pingos, Polar Bears and Giant Arctic Char

Sunsets in the Arctic are spectacular.

by John Cleveland

I travel not to see the familiar, but to experience the new and unknown adventures on the horizons of my dreams. It took two days, five planes and several thousands of miles of travel over the barren lands of the far North to complete our journey to Victoria Island in Nunavut.

Our last flight was in a floatplane from Cambridge Bay on the southern end of Victoria Island to our base camp at High Arctic Lodge. As we deplaned 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, it felt as if we had landed on another planet. My first impression was that of a “timeless arctic prairie” akin to a barren moonscape covered with glacial moraine and a patchwork quilt of lakes.

I soon discovered looks can be deceiving.

My first breath of the crisp arctic air tasted exotic—reminding me of the first time I had opened a spice cabinet when I was young: I was enveloped by the enchanting aromas of new and mysterious flavors kept behind those closed doors. In this case, the mysterious aromas turned out to be the tonic of scattered, tiny clusters of yellow and purple wildflowers

blooming in a garden of crushed rock, soft green mosses and vibrant orange lichens accented by a carpet of stunted arctic willow. This sturdy, yet fragile family of plants had adapted effectively with the harsh arctic environment. Throughout the week, the more I focused, the more I would appreciate the complex matrix of life hugging the rocky surface of this northern desert.

### Sundogs and mock moons

The arctic is both an inspiring and humbling place with its chilling vistas and great open spaces, offering silent immensities to the souls of those lucky enough to enter its domain. It is a land yet still in the process of creation. The constant Arctic winds ply like the cadence of the surf on the ocean taking the edge off the lands fierce beauty. The arctic has a very different rhythm and is full of surprises for those from the southern hemisphere, starting with the behavior of the sun. On my second day at camp I saw a spectacular halo around the sun with bright highlights on the right and left of its circumference as it rested low on the horizon. I discovered later that afternoon I had seen what is known as a “sundog.” As



Muskox graze on the tundra.

the day grew late the sun never really set so much as the light just sort of leaked from behind the horizon before returning to the sky. This exotic land would be our theater of adventure for a week of Arctic char fishing, exploration and inspiration.

After a warm welcome by owner Fred

Hamilton and his staff at the floatplane dock in front of High Arctic lodge, my fishing partner Mike McGuire and I stowed our gear in our cabin and headed back to the main lodge for a delicious grilled char dinner. It was here where we met other guests who would become our friends, as we underwent our communal baptism in the pristine, chilled waters teaming with arctic char. Fred gave us a brief orientation of the adventures that would commence the next morning, beginning with the daily fly-outs.

### Pingos and polar bears

Adventure is where you find it, and in the far North floatplanes are usually a ubiquitous part of the journey. While fishing at High Arctic lodge, floatplane trips to remote river systems were part of the daily routine. We used the planes like I would use a pickup truck or SUV to get to a fishing destination. Floatplanes are literally the SUV of the arctic with the exception that here the SUV’S have wings. Our pilot was a veteran bush pilot and knew the history, geography and wildlife of the Island—and was a wonderful storyteller to boot. He would give us a running commentary on the areas we were over and point out features like pingos (huge mounds of earth heaved up into tall mounds by permafrost), ancient food caches, Inuit hunting camps and caribou drive lanes (kill lanes). One highlight was actually on our last day as we scouted the northern reaches of the island by air hoping to find epic schools of char, and instead had the incredible experience of spotting a polar bear on the shore of the Nanook River as it watched us glide by 200 feet overhead.

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Mike McGuire with a beautiful orange char.

World-class fishing

Many world-record arctic char have been caught in Nunavut, and I have traveled throughout the territory for the past 10 years in pursuit of their charms. The Tree River and Victoria Island in Nunavut are two outstanding places that regularly produce fish well over 12 to 15 pounds. Most of the world records for Arctic char have been caught here, including the IGFA record of 32 pounds caught on the Tree River and the many Catch and Release records of the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame.

‘Oil Pan’

Also on our second day we fished a classic char hole known as “Oil Pan.” It is a wide, shallow-flowing ribbon of gurgling icy blue water that plunges several feet over moss-covered rocks into a crystalline lake. The char had congregated in the pool by the hundreds—the opacity of their orange and red “matrixed” flanks were glistening in the sun as they milled through the clear water in front of us. Within moments, all of us had fish on, line peeling off our reels and fish exploding out of the water like missiles into the sky. Arctic char are one of the strongest, most spectacular fighting fish. They run, jump and play your drag akin to hooking a Brahma bull. After landing several of these beautiful fish with my spinning gear and spoons, I switched to my fly fishing gear and proceeded to catch two line-class world records in three casts. The spectacular quality of fishing continued all week long as we hooked dozens of beautiful char and explored remote honey holes with names like Yellow Bill, Red Belly and Wolverine.

Gearing up for char

A medium-action 6 1/2- to 7-foot spinning rod with 12-pound-test line while casting spoons offers the presentation versatility needed to catch char in the varied fishing conditions on Victoria Island. Spoons can be worked in a variety of ways to add juice to your presentation such as jigging, fast-ripping retrieves, or a slow patient retrieve for less aggressive fish. The Eppinger 3/4-ounce Devle Dog, and 1 1/4-ounce Rocket Dardevlet spoons were very effective on char. We found the best colors to be pink, florescent orange potato bug and black and pearl with red dots. While fly fishing, a 9-foot, 8-weight

fast-action rod with a medium sink tip gives you the power to cast into the constant wind. It was the most effective in setting up a good streamer presentation. The most effective flies were streamers like Deep Clouser Minnows, Deceivers and Dalai Lama’s in Pink, Orange, Black and White Stripped at a steady, medium-paced retrieve.

Caribou lanes and food caches

On day four we awoke to a thick gray vapor hovering just a few feet over the surface of the lake. I knew our flying would be delayed. Our Inuit guide Gibson offered to take us by boat to explore an ancient Inuit Caribou hunting camp on a bluff overlooking the mouth of a nearby river. As with most locations of importance to the Inuit, there was a large stone Inukshuk on the bluff overlooking the lake as a marker for travelers. It was

story continued...



The ancient food caches were always easy to spot on the tundra, as they were covered with bright orange lichen.



Inukshuks mark an ancient hunting camp.



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A man wearing a blue cap and glasses holds a large, vibrant rainbow trout. The fish has a mix of red, orange, and green scales. The background shows a body of water and a rocky shore.

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# Swirls, Boils, Bites: A Fantastic Day in Fish Camp

by Jack Hirt

The fire had gone out in the old potbelly hours earlier. And it had gotten pretty fresh in the old, uninsulated cabin. So, even with daylight burnin’ there was no rush—judging by all the snoring shaking the thin walls—to leave the toasty comfort of the down sleeping bag.

For the most of us, that is. Seems there’s always that one early-rising knucklehead in any camp who’s in a hurry to start rattling the breakfast pots and pans. So we were up and at ‘em, staring another long day of fish wars in the face.

With bellies filled and dishes rinsed, we were off. While half the crew planned to stay on the main lake all day to play with its plentiful ‘eyes and bruiser pike, three of us, my son, Bill, bud Joe and I, volunteered to do the portage to see if the early-season, fish-on-every-cast walleye bite was on in the smaller, upstream body of water.

So, after packing our comfortable base camp boat accordingly, we motored the couple miles to the portage trailhead, unloaded and hauled gear through the bush, up, then over the hill and down to the small hand-cut landing where the portage boat was stashed. After the usual wrestling match, we launched the oft-patched, vintage craft and were off—three men in a leaky tub off to see the walleye wizard.

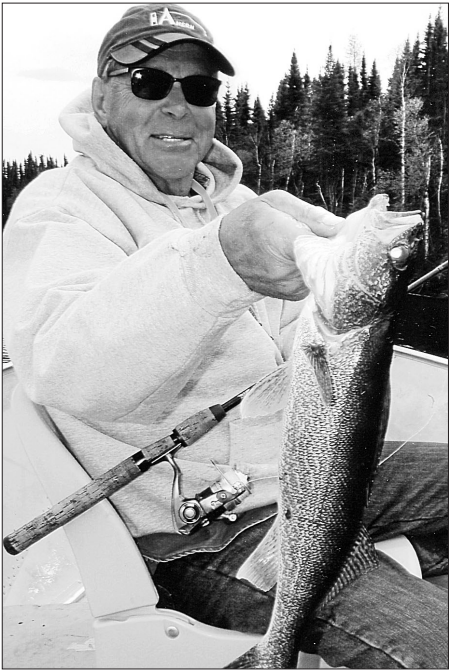
Bill, who was at the helm, took it easy—appropriately enough—on the 4-mile up-lake run before slowing to an idle as he turned into our targeted inlet stream. After picking his way right up to the tail end of the fast-running rapids, we anchored up and flipped our plastic-tipped jigs into the swirling pool. And in less time than it takes to write this sentence we were all hooked up with solid 18- to 19-inch, gold-plated, black-backed beauties. It was on.

That little waterway, as we’d found it in years past, was packed wall-to-wall with

post-spawn walleyes. And they were hungry. No stealthy, light-hitters these, the ‘eyes attacked anything we tossed at ‘em like piranhas. Requiring no skill, this wasn’t fishing. It was catching at its finest. And that’s what we proceeded to do for hours.

Now, we never get tired of catching walleyes, especially in such good company. But we—especially Joe and I being the old-timers—are and do get sore and boat weary. So it was with that good, tired feeling that we dragged our butts back to camp in time for the fish fry.

While we experienced the “big bite,” we were happy to find the other guys who had the “great” mixed-bag day they were looking for. So all was well around the campfire. And that, I thought, was how it was going to stay until Bill, ever the restless one, announced he was goin’ pikin’ for the last hour or so of daylight. It wasn’t with a lot of enthusiasm, I’ll admit,



Joe Liebham with one of the many ‘eyes he caught during the ‘the big bite.’ Photo: Jack Hirt

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## Charming Nunavut...

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Fly rod line-class, world-record char.

an incredibly fascinating place complete with food caches built out of piles of rock covered in bright orange lichen, tent rings, fire pits and a caribou drive lane with pit blinds concealed by a large pile of bleached caribou antlers. The hunters would ambush the animals here as they

funneled toward the blinds. Gibson gave us his personal insights of how his people used these facilities to survive and told us that until only 50 to 60 years ago, the Inuit lived much as they had for thousands of years following the food sources through the seasons. In the summer, they lived on



Arctic char being released.

land-based camps hunting herds of caribou, muskox, waterfowl and in the winter they would set up camps on the ice to hunt seals, whales and fish.

### A remarkable trip

As my friend Mike and I boarded our flight home from the Arctic we both agreed this was the most remarkable fishing adventure we had ever been on. We had experienced spectacular Arctic

char fishing while sharing the tundra with polar bears, muskox, caribou and our new friends at the High Arctic Lodge. The opportunity to explore and immerse ourselves in the magic of a place that is still held by the ancient cadence and rhythm of its creation will be the memories we carry until our next adventure in the land of the midnight sun.

MWO

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### For more information...

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