

# Bountiful Fall Fishing at Cree Lake Lodge

## Wild weather, wild pike and delicious wild berries



Mike McGuire with a big lake trout that pushed the 40-pound mark.



A fine selection of custom spoons painted for lake trout.

by John Cleveland

The province of Saskatchewan is one of my favorite places in Canada to hunt for big pike. It has about 100,000 lakes to choose from, many containing the kind of trophy pike DNA that makes them world class fisheries. The Saskatchewan record for catch-and-release pike is an impressive 55 inches. Anglers boat thousands of toothy trophies between 40 and 50 inches long every season.

My good friend and fishing buddy Mike McGuire and I have heard a lot of fishing stories over the years while working for Eppinger Manufacturing Company, makers of the legendary Dardevle spoon. As we have discovered over the years by trial and error, many of them turned out to be “fake news,” or simply brief snippets of truth expanded exponentially by someone’s imagination. But as luck would have it, sometimes you run into the truly remarkable. That

is just what happened when Mike and I traveled to Cree Lake Lodge in northern Saskatchewan to fish for trophy pike in September. Cree Lake is 445 square miles of pristine wild water with almost 500 islands scattered across it. It’s ideal habitat for pike and lake trout. As the Cessna Caravan approached the lodge in the late afternoon we had a panoramic view of the hundreds of islands and scalloped bays that make Cree Lake a pike factory. I also noted the expansive shallow reefs that made ideal spawning grounds for large lake trout in the fall. The Schreiber family and crew greeted us as the plane eased up to the dock after our scenic one-hour flight from Fort McMurray. The handsome log cabin perched on a tall rocky bluff overlooking the lake would be our home for the next five days. We stowed our gear there and headed to the main lodge for an awesome turkey dinner with all the fixings. Those included cranberry relish made from the native low-bush cranberries that were picked in the forest behind the lodge. The relish had an earthy, delicious flavor only found in foods harvested from wild places. Early fall is berry season in the far north, and throughout the week we would be treated to delicious side dishes and mouthwatering desserts made from fresh-picked wild blueberries, low-bush cranberries and pin cherries.

At midnight I awoke to lights flashing like a disco ball outside my window followed by the rumble of thunder and what sounded like buckshot being poured on the roof of the cabin as a powerful storm blew in from the North. Cold fronts are not a fisherman’s friend, and I knew from experience we would have a challenge triggering strikes tomorrow. The pike would most likely sit out the unstable weather like hungover sailors after shore leave. I was up before dawn sipping my first cup of coffee in the lodge. Nothing beats the smell of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon to bring the senses out of slumber mode. After a hearty breakfast we headed to the dock and our guide Howard

led us on our first day’s adventure in an 18-foot Crestliner Kodiak equipped with a 60-hp Mercury. The weather was more reminiscent of late November than mid-September with air temps in the 40s and a pronounced north wind driving a chilled rain. The fishing had been uneventful all morning; we brought no pike to the boat. Howard led us to bays full of modest weed growth and a water depths of 4 to 5 feet. It looked promising, but we found no pike. Howard suggested we try a couple of submerged weed beds in 10 to 15 feet of water as the pike might have moved deeper with the cold front. He was right!

I decided to try a favorite, large 2-ounce Dardevle Cop E Cat spoon to trigger a strike with an aggressive “retrieve-and-flutter” presentation. On my second cast a solid object slammed my spoon and bolted towards the next bay like an annoyed serpent. Shredded weeds floated to the surface along the path she plowed through the submerged garden of green cabbage. After an impressive fight I boated my first fish of the trip, a lanky 49-inch torpedo and my largest pike ever. We were so excited to see such a big fish we released her—and realized we didn’t think to take a photo. On my next cast I immediately hooked a fat, 25-pound northern measuring 46 inches that fought like a tank before coming to the boat for a brief photo shoot! The jinx had been broken and we were on our way to one of the most incredible weeks of trophy pike fishing I have ever experienced. As the day progressed, we refined our techniques and confirmed that the pike held in submerged weedbeds in 10 to 15 feet of water. The most effective retrieve was to rip our spoons quickly, then let them flutter. The pike almost always hit the spoon aggressively on the flutter. The heavier spoons such as the 2-ounce Dardevle Huskie Jr. and the 2-ounce Dardevle Cop E Cat series in a pearl finish allowed long casts and stayed deep in the water column, giving us more time in the strike zone. By day’s end we were confident we knew where and how to catch the big fish. The weather changed dramatically each day, but the first-day techniques continued to help us be successful all week.

The weather made for challenging fishing, but it also made for some breathtakingly vivid displays of Mother Nature’s beauty on the fall landscape. The next morning began with the horizon painted with tall mountains of icy blue clouds filled with the chill of late fall. The sun’s early morning rays cut through the clouds like shiny light sabers, offering a glimpse of the crisp blue sky. Thousands of honking geese flew south in triangular formations to feast on the grain of picked fields in southern Saskatchewan. The



Brandon Schreiber gets ready to take John Cleveland and Mike McGuire out on the pond.

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Practicing catch and release with a big Cree Lake pike.

scene was breathtaking. Eventually the sun pushed the clouds into the horizon and it turned into a clear, crisp fall day.

As Howard eased our boat over the top of a deep weed bed, a pair of bald eagles overhead rocked their wing tips back and forth in the morning thermals while keeping an eye on us as we approached their fishing hole. We spent the morning casting and trolling along the deep side of the weedlines picking up a couple dozen very respectable pike in the 10- to 18-pound range as well as a half dozen 40-inch-plus tanks. The heavier 2-ounce spoons again effectively got down into the strike zone and triggered strikes all morning. At one point we spotted a large black bear on the shoreline and kept pace with it as it foraged along the beach and we trolled a drop-off parallel to shore. Cree Lake Lodge offers some bear hunts in the fall and this particular bear, in the neighborhood of 400 pounds, would have been a real prize.

Later in the afternoon we had decided to try trolling for lake trout hoping they had moved onto the shallow reefs before spawning. We took a short ride out to Blueberry Reef and trolled in about 25



The water was so clear in Clinton Bay that you could watch the pike attack the spoons.

feet of water. I immediately hooked an 18-pound trout with vivid orange fins then released it after a strong bulldog fight that is typical of a fall lake trout in shallow water. Moments later Mike's favorite Huskie Devle came to an abrupt stop in the water column, then began to swim with authority towards the drop off. He had his hands full for a good 20 minutes before Howard scooped a huge trout into the net. It was gorgeous with its gilded gold and red fins and massive girth. We estimated she weighed between 38 and 40 pounds, a personal best for Mike. We both had set personal best records and it was only our third day on the lake. The lakers had not fully invaded the shallows yet, but we found out from a couple of friends who fished the next week that the trout came up on the reefs in force. They caught dozens between 20 and 30 pounds casting and trolling.

The fishing remained technically difficult, but very rewarding for the remainder of the week. The pike remained imbedded in the deep weed beds and it took patience and effort to catch them. We had discovered the techniques necessary to make them bite and we consistently hooked trophy fish all week.

By week's end, Mike and I had experienced some of the most challenging angling conditions, including cold fronts, high winds and frustratingly unstable weather. With patience and persistence, we figured out where the big fish were holding, and the techniques necessary to trigger them to strike. I have been on trips to northern Canada where I have caught more fish in a week under better weather conditions, but never have I had the quality of fishing we experienced at Cree Lake Lodge. In five days of fishing, the eight of us at the lodge boated hundreds of healthy 10- to 18-pound pike, and more than 85 pike over 40 inches long. These included a spectacular 50-inch trophy, two 49-inches, a 48, two 47-inch pike, two 46 inches and three 45-inch northerns. Plus we landed one lake trout that pushed the 40-pound mark!

I look for two things in a fishing adventure. The first is a lake with the potential to produce lots of big fish. The second is the quality and integrity of the lodge and its staff. The quality of fishing at Cree Lake Lodge is exceptional. The genuine hospitality extended by the Schreiber family, the comfortable



Low-bush cranberries were easy to find right behind the lodge.

facilities and great food made for one of the most enjoyable weeks I have ever had at a wilderness fishing camp chasing exceptionally large trophy pike. **MWO**

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**For more information...**  
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*"Cree Lake is on my short list for being one of the top trophy Pike lakes in Northern Saskatchewan"*

John Cleveland  
Marketing Director  
Eppinger Mfg. Company



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