

Dream Big: Bucket-list Brook Trout on Gods River in Manitoba



John Cleveland casts a Devle Dog Spoon into a deep pool filled with brook trout.

by John Cleveland

Mike and I were relaxing on the deck of our cabin at Elk Island Lodge in the cool evening breeze after our first day on the river. We were contemplating the fact that we had just caught two-dozen brook trout, and every one of them was bigger than any we had caught in our lifetimes.

The fiery globe of the evening sun sat suspended on the horizon, its light like a beacon slicing across the flat calm waters of the lake. The prehistoric cackle of a squadron of sandhill cranes flying high in formation through the evening sky added to the feeling of adventure, and the

remoteness of Gods Lake. This morning, Gods River had given us our first delicious taste of trophy-brook trout fishing.

The following is a journal entry I made after our first day on Gods River in northern Manitoba, Canada:

Brook trout were my “gateway” fish to a lifelong addiction to trout and to the magical adventures I’ve found while chasing them. My fondness for them began in my youth while fishing with my best friend Robin Lacy in northern Michigan. We would fill our pockets full of nightcrawlers and sneak into a little creek called Roaring Brook near a small town



Elk Island Lodge is perched high on a rocky bluff overlooking Gods Lake.

called Harbor Springs. Several sections of the creek may or may not have been located marginally close to private property as I recall. This thin ribbon of icy water was full of handsome brook trout from 7 to 10 inches, which negated any perceived risk or feelings of guilt we may have experienced while violating local ordinances at our young age. We soaked worms in deep dark pools and undercuts with the result being that these beautiful little creatures would emerge like colorful jewels from a pirate’s treasure chest. These magical creatures and the wonderfully wild places they live became a passion.

I had the good fortune of meeting Greg Dick, owner of Elk Island Lodge located 300 miles northeast of Winnipeg. This was several years ago while attending a fishing show as marketing director for Eppinger. Last year at the All Canada show in Chicago I took note of the 25-inch gorgeous trophy brook trout replica on display in Greg’s booth. He explained it was caught on a fly out to Gods River in northern Manitoba by one of his guests. It didn’t take any arm-twisting for my friend and fellow Trout Unlimited member, Mike Mouradian, to book a four-day trip with Greg. This would be Mike’s first trip to a Canadian fly-out lodge and I was looking forward to introducing him to the unique kind of adventure only a wilderness lodge can offer.

Gods Lake is a pristine 1,300-square-mile fish factory that holds prolific quantities of trophy lake trout, pike and walleyes. Every trip develops its own special character as it unfolds, and this one would be an awesome blend of classic big-water pike on wide scalloped bays and world-class brook trout on Gods River.

Upon our arrival, we were given a comprehensive orientation to the fishing program and introduction to the staff at the lodge, and then we’re shown to our cabins. As soon as Mike and I had unpacked our gear, we headed down to the dock to spend the afternoon pike fishing. Our guide Byron knew the lake well, and after searching several shallow bays, he told us they have most likely moved to deeper water due to the unseasonably warm temperatures and early ice-out this season. That’s exactly where we found them. We navigated through a short, rocky channel to a secluded flat basin of dark marbled water that was 5 to 8 feet deep with a sparse immersing weed bed typical of early summer. I tossed my favorite hammered copper Dardevle with the chartreuse stripe toward the shoreline. A feisty 10-pound pike immediately attacked it. Mike is an expert fly fisherman with most of his experience in rivers catching trout with featherweight fly rods. He was now launching big flies at pike with a heavy 8-weight fly rod and the pike were enthusiastically crushing his streamers on just about every cast. The huge smile on his face needed no interpretation; he was having lots of fun. We caught over 30 pike in this classic pike bay and called it a day before heading back to the lodge for a delicious dinner.

Gods River

There are only a handful of “holy waters,” where native brook trout are measured in pounds, not inches. Gods River is one of those, holding approximately 90 percent of the Brook Trout Master Angler records every year in Manitoba. This remote water runs 250 miles from Gods Lake to Hudson Bay, resulting in an unpressured, exceptionally healthy aquatic ecosystem that contains a plethora of

insects, baitfish and sculpins that fortify this exceptional genepool of fish. Elk Island Lodge has proprietary access to a remote section of the best brook trout water on Gods River, via daily fly-outs in their floatplane. The average trout is 16 to 18 inches with 20 to 22 being common. A few 24-inch or larger fish are usually caught each season. The record on Gods River is 9 1/2 pounds.

Jurassic trout

The venerable pumpkin orange 1953 DE Havilland Beaver floatplane soared over the breathtakingly beautiful panorama of tundra interspersed with small pothole lakes, glacial rock and skinny clumps of black spruce, while its 450-hp Radial engine kept its cadence to the passing landscape like a movie score.

In about 35 minutes, the crisp blue waters of Gods River stretched across the vast tundra landscape that came into view. The floatplane came to rest on a broad flat stretch of the river and taxied to shore.



Byron's first brook trout.

Elk Island keeps two boats on the shore of this remote section of river, and we wasted no time getting out into the river as Byron took us to the best runs and pools for big trout. We headed downstream to the first rapids to begin. Byron knows the river like the back of his hand and his coaching and boat-handling skills were invaluable. I had tried several different colors and sizes of Dardevle spoons without getting a strike when Byron told me to give him my spoon box. He selected a 1/2-ounce hammered Copper Devle Dog Spoon with an orange stripe confidently telling me, “This will catch a big brook trout.” I cast it upstream and wobbled it through a deep trough flowing between two large boulders. I felt a heavy thump and set the hook on a slab-sided 22-inch trophy brook trout with a tail that looked like a canoe paddle. It put up an awesome fight.

A few moments later, Mike stripped a large streamer fly through a deep run at the edge of a rocky shelf and connected with a gorgeous 19 1/2-inch brook trout handsomely splashed with a mossy green-marbled back, brilliant red belly and deep emerald blue and neon red spots that radiated like jewels in the rays of the morning sunshine—a beautiful creature. With Byron’s guidance, we continued to have a truly spectacular day of trophy-brook trout fishing. By the end of the day, we had landed over 20 brook trout between 16 and 22 inches with two fish at 21 and 22 inches qualifying for Manitoba Master Angler awards. We had both set personal bests for brook trout and could not imagine it getting any better, but it did. It was as if we were fishing in a Jurassic Park-like area as we were catching world-class brook trout measured in pounds.

The next day we headed out to go pike fishing on the lake. It took Byron a while to locate good quantities of pike by running and gunning until we found a submerged weed bed in 8 to 10 feet that was full of



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Cleveland casts his favorite copper, chartreuse-striped Dardevle along a submerged weed bed for pike.

pike that averaged 8 to 14 pounds. We spent several hours drifting along the perimeter of the bed and absolutely hammered them with spoons and flies all afternoon. By changing spoons frequently, I was able to decipher that they were looking for bright shiny offerings retrieved at a slow and steady cadence with a few flicks of the rod tip to trigger the strike. Mike put that same mantra to work with his fly rod and a long silver streamer he had tied with lots of silver flash. He proceeded to have a wonderful day hooking pike on the fly.

At midday we took a break for shore lunch on a scalloped rocky outcropping that offered a cool breeze and panoramic view of the lake. This would be Mike's first experience dining on fresh sizzled pike fillets served in Mother Nature's kitchen. Byron promptly filleted the pike on a nearby slab of Precambrian granite while we gathered tinder and wood for the fire. In short order Byron heated a couple of cans of beans and corn on the edge of the cooking fire while he flash-fried the fresh fillets, sliced potatoes and onions for the shore lunch. There is nothing on earth like the taste of fresh sizzled pike fillets seasoned with fresh air and a bit of wood smoke while relaxing on a remote lakeshore in the wilderness to enhance the feeling of participation and empowerment in the food



Mike Mouradian with his first Canadian fly-caught pike.

chain. Byron had us back-chasing pike and fed in less than an hour.

Day two on the river

We explored the upper regions of the Gods River on the second day. Two bald eagles were soaring above the spruce-lined banks of the river, keeping an eye on our progress as Byron deftly maneuvered the boat through tumbling wild water. The damp, chilly wind cutting across the surface of the river made us appreciate the GOR-TEX coats we were wrapped in as we progressed upriver to the first runs we would fish. Mike and I both landed two or three thick-bodied trout, ranging 17 to 19 inches. We were pretty happy with the action as fished our way up stream.

About two miles upriver, Byron positioned the boat so we could cast into a deep pool below a shallow-rock dam. I tossed my Copper Devle Dog with the orange stripe to the far side of the pool and a huge brook trout immediately hit it like a piece of red meat, and just took off running. We played tug-of-war for several minutes before I was able to bring him into the boat. I had just landed a 24-inch, colorfully adorned monster trout, weighing in at 8 pounds. Byron excitedly informed me that in addition to being a Master Angler Award fish, this was one of the largest brookies he had ever seen and it would probably place in the top 2 or 3 largest in Manitoba for 2016.

Once we settled down from the excitement, we continued our journey several miles upriver to a wide section that was a maze of channels full of fallen timber and boulders within the rapids. The logistics of casting and retrieving through the massive logjams made for a challenge. But the rewards were worth the frequency of lost lures and flies. We experienced snags as we caught some beautiful fish here, including a thick, 21 1/2-inch trout that weighed 5 pounds using my fly rod and an Olive Matuka streamer tied by my lifelong friend Robin Lacy. By late afternoon, Mike and I had landed about 18 or 20 trout with two qualifying as Manitoba Master Angler fish. The special time we spent experiencing these world-class fish was simply incredible. The run downriver to our pick-up point was almost as exciting as the morning climb as Byron ran the rapids with abandon. We were now carrying a bucket list full of amazing trophy trout and memories.



A beautiful 19-inch Gods River brookie.



Unloading at Gods River for the day's brook trout adventure.

Elk Island Lodge a wilderness classic

The main lodge is a comfortable affair handsomely decorated with rustic and wilderness-inspired décor, including a small library of books, a pool table, a tackle shop and bar with a huge stone fireplace to gather around for food and storytelling. The fully equipped log-sided guest cabins are perched along a high granite promenade with a panoramic western view that brought the amazing sunsets to our doorstep each evening. It was evident as soon as we set foot on the lodge's runway and were greeted by Greg that he and his family had taken care to ensure their guests' expectations were exceeded. The hospitality exhibited by Greg's staff showed they sincerely cared, making sure visitors felt special while visiting the lodge. Elk Island is the kind of place you will experience the classic, quintessential, Canadian fly-in wilderness adventure that includes excellent fishing, great people and amazing scenery.

If we are lucky enough we will ultimately find more than just fish on a wilderness adventure. The scenery, wildlife and the people we share it with are the pigments that color the canvas of memories that an epic fishing adventure are painted on. It would be difficult to paint a better picture than the trophy Brook Trout adventures and wonderful hospitality Mike and I experienced at Elk Island Lodge.

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