





The magnificent colors adorning the flanks of a wild brook trout make them one of nature's most beautiful wonders of the wild.

GATEWAY TO THE SOUL

The allure of catching trophy brook trout is not the only draw to Northern Ontario.

By John Cleveland

SHE EMERGED FROM THE CRYSTAL-CLEAR pool like a goddess. Her back splashed with a matrix of mossy green marbling, belly glowing like a Sunkist orange, and deep sapphire blue and bright red spots that flashed like a neon sign in the rays of the early morning sun. As I held her in my hand with wonderment, I had sensed even at the tender age of 7 or 8 that something special had just occurred in my life. I had caught my first brook trout. I would discover as I grew older that brook trout are in many ways Mother Nature's gateway to the soul. Fresh, pure and beautifully wild in character. Many decades later the allure of chasing brook trout with a fly rod continues to lead me on many inspirational adventures in some of North America's most beautifully wild places.

WILDERNESS NORTH, WHICH IS BASED out of Thunder Bay, Ontario, operates three full-service lodges, two housekeeping lodges, and seven outpost cabins that offer a variety of amenities to suit all anglers needs. This past summer, Krista Cheeseman owner of wilderness North invited my son David and I to their full service lodge on Miminiska Lake, located 235 miles north of Thunder Bay, to fly fish for trophy brook trout in the surrounding river systems and in particular the Albany River which is connected to Miminiska lake. Miminiska Lodge is a perfect base camp

DAVID CLEVELAND PHOTO

Guide Dave Phillips with a brookie fresh from the "Ice Box." Below, Wilderness North practices catch and release with all brook trout caught on the Albany watershed to sustain its trophy class fishery for future generations.



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for daily expeditions into the remote home of some of the best brook trout fishing in North America including the Albany, Freestone, Cohen rivers and many others in Northwestern Ontario.

The legendary Albany River is one of the premier wild rivers of Northern Canada hosting large populations of world-class native trophy brook trout that are often measured in pounds not inches. The Albany is also home to generous populations of trophy-sized pike and walleye and it would be our host river for three out of four days in Northern Ontario. It is one of the largest waterways in Ontario flowing over 600 miles northeast from Lake St. Joseph in Northwest Ontario to Hudson Bay; and was used as a trade route by the famed Hudson's Bay Company for almost 200 years. The Albany is big water that hosts lots of very big fish.

The plane ride to the lodge was a breathtaking adventure with a panoramic view of the seemingly infinite landscape we would be immersing ourselves in during the coming days. The lush green velvet quilt of thick boreal forest reaching to the horizon scrolled beneath us like a silent movie.

The wheels of the Cessna Caravan touched down like a windblown leaf on the grass runway of Miminiska Lodge and we were greeted by the lodge staff and walked down a short



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trail to an attractive warren of classic wilderness cabins and main lodge nestled along the shoreline of Miminiska Lake. After a brief orientation at the lodge covering our fishing program for the next few days, we headed to our cabin to get geared up for the day's fishing adventure. As we entered, I couldn't help but notice the outside of our cabin was wallpapered with big beefy mayflies from the previous night's hatch on the lake. I silently wondered if this might affect the enthusiasm of the trout as they would have their bellies full.

We took a short boat ride with our guide Joe, who is one of the many knowledgeable First Nation guides employed by the lodge. We beached the boat on the rocky shoreline of the river where Dave and I enthusiastically fished the boulder strewn runs and pools of

the falls for several hours using a half dozen different dry flies, and streamer patterns such as Chernobyl ants, and sculpins before heading back to the lodge for dinner. We had caught a half dozen walleye, but the brook trout we had hoped for were not cooperating, though we did see some very big trout roll on the surface which was encouraging. We were content to have gotten out on this beautiful river and spent some time tuning up our casting while hoping the trout would be more social tomorrow. We were confident the trout would come.

Miminiska Lodge is a full service, first class operation with a gregarious, focused team of employees that intuitively take care of guest needs, take immaculate care of the cabins and serve delicious chef prepared meals. We feasted on prime rib, steak, barbecued pulled pork, and a full turkey dinner with all the fixings. All meals were followed by freshly prepared desserts.

On our first evening at the lodge our guide took us out on the lake after dinner to try fly fishing for pike at the mouth of the Freestone River. I put on a foam mouse pattern and had some savage takes by a few small pike as we slowly motored through the shallow bays searching for bigger fish. My son Dave put on a foam crease fly and in short order began to get spectacular surface strikes from 3 to 5-pound walleye on almost every cast. What a surprise! Walleye were blowing up on the crease flies and summersaulting back into the lake as they smashed the fly. I had never seen or heard of anyone targeting walleye on a fly, let alone a surface fly. We had an absolute hoot for a couple of hours catching walleye before heading in at dusk. We continued throughout the next four days catching walleye on streamers and topwater flies such as Chernobyl Ants in the same pools and runs we were hooking trophy brook trout in. By the end of the trip we had brought to hand over three dozen walleye that were large enough to sizzle in a fry pan had we had the inclination to do so. They may not have been the trophy brook trout we sought but these guys deserve a little love, and a closer look as a fly fishing target species on my next Northern Ontario adventure.

On our second day it began to rain the prior evening at dusk and continued as a down-pour all night accented with plenty of thunder and lightning. Not typically a good sign for the coming days fishing, as fish will often shut down after a cold front passes through a region. The heavy rain showers continued as we left the dock in the 16-foot Lund headed

Hooking big brook trout in a truly wild and undisturbed place in Northern Canada is the ultimate in bucket list experiences.



DAVID CLEVELAND PHOTO

for the middle falls searching for brook trout. Thirty minutes into our journey the sun came out as we passed below lush green hillsides their flanks covered with spruce. The scenery we were treated to that morning was incredible. Tendrils of swirling fog rose from the slopes bordering the river like the smoke from hundreds of hidden campfires swirling into the sky. There were dozens of mother ducks with broods of ducklings skittering about the surface as we rounded just about every bend in the river; a young bull moose posed briefly at the river's edge allowing us a quick photo op then splashed to safety through the tall grasses that lined the banks of the river; and eagles soared overhead keeping watch over our progress to the falls that morning. We made one short portage with our gear to

a waiting canoe on the other side of Snake Falls, motored a bit farther to the middle falls with root beer colored water spilling the massive shoulders of Precambrian granite and into a deep plunge pool covered with frothy foam.

We fished for several hours along the expanse of the falls catching lots of walleye and a few pike, but the brook trout remained elusive. In the afternoon we moved several hundred yards downstream to a wide-shouldered, rapid-filled pools and runs. We proceeded to strip, float and drag just about every fly we had through the pristine water without hooking a trout. I was beginning to think the brook trout of the Albany had taken the Muskie's moniker of "the fish of a thousand casts" when a nice brook trout

hit the Chernobyl Ant I was drifting through a run and it was game on. Our first trout of the trip was a gorgeous 3-pound brook trout. Though the fishing was slower than I had expected I anticipated that with the severe storm the night before it was going to be tough fishing. As I watched my son Dave expertly cast downstream from where I stood, the rhythm and metronomic arc of his fly line cutting through the afternoon shadows, it made me feel proud as he had apparently paid attention during our casting lessons prior to the trip and was hauling line like a pro. I was hoping tomorrow would be his day to latch onto one of these beautiful fish. We returned to the lodge that afternoon tired, but optimistic that our fly out and canoe trip down the Freestone River the next morning would be an awesome



To have the opportunity to catch and release a brook trout measured in pounds, not inches is why we travel to places like the Albany River in Ontario.

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adventure and we would begin to pin a few more trout to our flies.

I stood sipping my first cup of coffee on the porch of our cabin overlooking the lake as the stillness of a new day arrived like the birth of a campfire, a warm ethereal glow of flickering light licked the horizon as the emerging globe of the new day rose from the serrated treetops on the eastern horizon. As I watched the earth taking its first breath that morning I thought what a way to begin the day? I couldn't help but think this will be a good day to catch big brook trout.

After a short 10-minute flight in a vintage pumpkin orange 1953 De Havilland Beaver float plane with our canoe strapped on the floats, our pilot Lucy, a young New Zealander, deftly eased the plane to the surface of a small lake. Lucy and our guide Joe unstrapped the canoe, loaded our gear, and we hopped in and paddled to the mouth of the Freestone a couple hundred yards distant to begin our float adventure.

We had just entered the mouth of the river and Dave cast a Chernobyl Ant over a deep



David Cleveland landing his long awaited first brook trout on the fly with a net assist from guide Dave Phillips.

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run 20 feet from the canoe. The water exploded with a nice trout taking Dave's fly and he had now pinned to his first trout of the trip. He deftly brought her to the boat and the hook slipped out before he could bring her to hand. We were off to an exciting start.

The Freestone is a modest river offer-

ing miles of rocky braids, deep pools and runs, with an inspirational perspective of the remotely wild nature of the boreal forest that holds its piscatorial treasures within its thick canopy. A very peaceful place. We spent the day slowly wade fishing our way downstream presenting our flies in every good-looking

A typical day on the river in Northern Ontario often includes a menagerie of wildlife sightings, sometimes including a majestic bull moose if you are lucky.



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bit of holding water we found. Shortly after Dave hooked his first trout, he was pinned to another for a short time before it to slipped off and returned to the safety of the river's belly. We had active fish and I was confident this would be a good day on the river.

We progressed another mile or so downstream and I began to work a deep run with several large submerged boulders at the tail end of a long-braided rapids. I almost immediately hooked a big trout using a silver and gray Zonker streamer my lifelong friend Robin Lacy had tied before his untimely death 10 years ago. I proceeded to haul two additional large brook trout from the lairs of the pool using my friend's fly before retiring this little good luck charm in my fly box for safe keeping. We spent the day enjoying the quiet serenity of the river and I felt fortunate to have landed a half dozen beautiful trout on dry flies using Chernobyl Ants, hopper patterns as well as sculpin streamers as we meandered down its course towards the outlet at Miminiska Lake.

About noon we paddled into a large bay and spotted a majestic mature bull moose that gave us a quick look and dashed across the shallows to safety. There was hardly a moment when we didn't have an eagle in sight as they are as common in the North country as robins are in Michigan. By the end of the float, Dave had hooked five or six trout, but as fates fickle hand would have it, he was not able to land a brook trout and a half dozen sizeable walleye on the fly. We had fished hard hooked lots of fish and had a wonderful day exploring the remote waters of the Freestone.

At dinner we discussed the options for our last day of fishing and the camp's co-manager Dave, a gregarious young man from Australia, offered to personally host us on a special adventure. He would take us to a magical place called "God's Ice Box" and a beautiful

The main lodge is nestled along the shoreline of Miminiska Lake giving guests easy access to both lake and riverine adventures during their stay. Below, taking a fly out in the lodge's classic 1953 De Haviland Beaver float plane to a remote river for a day of fly fishing is always at the top of the author's to do list. Bottom, hiking the rocky shoreline of the Albany to a hidden waterfall in this magnificent country gave the author and his son an appreciation for its remote and pristine beauty.



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water fall that contained plentiful plunge pools filled with brook trout. The only caveat is that we would have to complete an hour-long boat ride upriver then perform two strenuous portages around waterfalls, and on the second portage would have to drag an 18-foot canoe and motor several hundred yards through the bush. We didn't hesitate.

We were so excited about the potential of reaching this magical place and the process of portaging and paddling upriver seemed effortless. In fact, it felt like each portage was a portal of passage we transitioned through to another dimension. It took well over two and a half hours to complete our journey to the

remote wilderness oasis. We beached the canoe on a shallow gravel bar in the main channel 30 yards from a beautiful green meadow of waist high grass, and quietly soaked in the awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape. The air laced with the scent of lichen, sweet spruce and the moist fragrance of the tannin's in the mist floating over the rivers surface from the nearby waterfall. The thundering soundtrack of roaring water splashing over the boulders of the waterfall, and the sight of the spire like spruce lining the horizon of the rivers banks like church steeples was humbling as we simply sat in silence and allowed our senses to sync to the rhythm of this undisturbed wilderness paradise.

Squadrons of emerald green dragon flies darted through the air like clever little acrobats in the ether above the river, divebombing the unsuspecting caddis flies as they emerged into the sky, adding to exotic drama unfolding before us. At this point I really didn't care if I caught another fish, as I had been delivered to the kind of place men dream of, yet are never fortunate enough to experience. I quickly changed my mind and decided to fish!

As our guide Dave led us through the lush green stalks of grass adjacent to the river, we were excited as we anticipated the unveiling the delicate little spring creek meandering through the meadow, its path barely visible in the tall grass. Dipping my finger into its crystalline waters, the clear liquors of the stream felt as if had just melted from the core of a glacier.

We approached from upstream of the creeks outlet into the Albany and peeked over the tall grass into the pool. Oh my god! As we "opened the door" of the ice box by pulling a large tuft of tall grass aside 20 feet from the outlet of the spring, there were two dozen

The author was pleasantly surprised to discover that fly fishing for walleye can be great sport on surface flies and streamers in the late afternoon on Miminiska Lake.



DAVID CLEVELAND PHOTO

very large brook trout holding in formation in the super chilled pool with the largest fish in the front claiming first right of refusal to the buffet of nutrients being washed to them by the rivers currents. It was three days since my son Dave landed a brook trout. He was first up at the pool. He floated a big black Chernobyl Ant into the pool, and it was engulfed by a big trout which shook the hook after a brief tug. This happened once again on the second float with the same result. On his third try I held my breath as the fly entered the pool and was pounced on by a 4-pound brook trout! Dave set the hook hard and played the beautiful trout away from the pool, and we quickly netted it. The grin on his face was panoramic, and I remembered to take a deep breath before passing out with joy seeing

how happy he was to finally land a trout. It turned out to be the largest of the trip!

The spell had been broken and Dave continued to land world-class sized Albany brook trout all afternoon like a pro in this magical place. We began taking turns once Dave had landed a few fish and during the morning and early afternoon managed to catch and release 12 to 15 big brook trout out of "God's Ice Box", almost all caught on dry flies. I've been pulling trout out of pools for over 50 years and never even dreamed of anything like this magical pool of trophy brook trout. There is primal wisdom, and magical effervescence in the purling waters that flow through truly wild places on our planet and "God's Ice Box" proved to be loaded with lots of magic and very big brook

trout.

Before heading back to the lodge to we took a short canoe ride upriver to the falls in the afternoon and hooked a half dozen nice fish from the plunge pools under the waterfall, then visited the Ice Box one last time to pluck a couple trout out of its magical pool. As the shadows began to lengthen over the river's edge, I unconsciously became less vocal in the later part of the day and began to reflect on what had been one of the most remarkable adventures I have ever experienced in the wilderness. As we pointed the canoe downriver for the journey to the lodge I knew in my soul we had transitioned from merely being witnesses to the wonder of this wild and exotic place, to becoming part of it, and best of all, I had shared it with my son Dave.