

# Northwest Territories

## Slaying Dragons in the Land of Little Sticks

by John Cleveland

I have heard a lot of fish stories over the years, and with few exceptions, most are simply wishful thinking and tall tales. But every so often, I've found a tale worth telling.

*"As I stand on the front deck of Brabant Lodge overlooking the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories, an ethereal essence of adventure radiates from every element of my view. I watch in awe as a vast magic carpet of water flows before me with curly white tendrils of fog floating into the soft, buttery light of the Arctic sky. I sense the powerful rumble of the river's massive force as it plows like a liquified glacier on its 1,000-mile journey north to the Arctic Ocean."* This is a journal entry I made on my first morning at the lodge.

Peter Fox, the owner of the lodge located 123 miles southwest of Yellowknife on the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories, had invited my good friend Patrick Walsh, editor-in-chief of Outdoor Canada magazine, and myself to his lodge this past July to fish for northern pike, walleyes, and grayling. The lodge was originally built in 1967 and purchased by Peter and his family in 2023. The Mackenzie River is the second-largest drainage in North America and one of the most prolific pike fisheries in the sub-Arctic, also known as the land of little sticks.

The Cessna Caravan's floats touched down on the river at 11 am and taxied up to the dock in front of the lodge. We were enthusiastically greeted by Peter's staff, then headed up to the main lodge for an



A river dragon.

orientation and lunch. Peter mentioned during orientation that if any of us don't catch at least one 40-inch pike (known as a dragon), we would get a free visit to the lodge next year. An interesting offer, but honestly none of us wanted to be that guy.

We headed to our assigned cabins which are handsomely appointed log structures tucked into the surrounding forest overlooking the river, with wood-burning stoves, full bath and comfortable queen size beds.

### A great start

Our first couple of days were an absolute blast as we hooked well over a hundred pike

while guided by Luca Decola in one of the lodge's 18-foot Lund Alaskan boats with 50 hp Honda four-stroke engine and Garmin trolling motor with "Spot-Lock." Luca was very knowledgeable about the river, the pike, and how to best present our flies to them.

### River dragons

On day three, we were hoping to connect with one of the monster river dragons for which the Mackenzie is known. As we stepped into the boat, Luca told us that he was taking us to a hot spot for big pike. He throttled the 50 hp Honda down to idle and "Spot-Locked" the boat just off a rocky point where two bald eagles were soaring overhead



Boat at sunset.

in the morning thermals, then told us to get to work.

On his second cast, Patrick set the hook on a huge river dragon measuring 45.9 inches. He was using a big flash fly that looked like a meteor streaking through the water before the pike smashed it. Moments later, I had a 42-inch pike in the net on a red-and-white Buford fly tied by my friends at Central Lake Fly Company.

Every pike we caught had a bulging belly full of baitfish, and broad, powerful shoulders indicating an excellent forage base—likely the reason there are so many big pike in the

*story continued on page 24*

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Big pike on a topwater frog fly.

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Mackenzie. By midafternoon, we had landed several more dragons over 40 inches and dozens of powerful, 8- to 15-pound pike, all within a short radius of where we had begun that morning.

### Flipped off by a serpent

In late afternoon, I launched a yellow-and-red Murchie minnow fly toward a dark shadow swimming like a giant serpent across a sandy flat, 40 feet from the boat. There was a bright flash as the pike inhaled my fly, then it took off like a Volkswagen stung by a bee. The next 10 minutes were a chaotic mix of skill and luck as I tried to outmaneuver one of the largest pike I have hooked in many years. Finally, when it was within a few feet of the net, it looked me straight in the eye, opened its mouth, spit the fly into the sky, then flipped me off with its tail as it sauntered off into the current.

Each night as we gathered for an excellent, chef-prepared meal and complimentary

cocktails, the banter quickly turned to the quantities of trophy pike that that were being caught. It was truly amazing how many fish over 40 inches were being brought to the nets each day. The largest for the week turned out to be a 48-inch dragon caught by a first-time guest at the lodge.

### Topwater pike

It was a wet, windy and cold morning as we headed out to Beaver Lake (a miles-wide section of the river) to explore the massive matrix of lush weed beds located there. The difficulty of casting large pike flies in strong winds can't be overstated, and after an hour of pounding big flies into the gusting winds, we decided to leave and try more protected waters.

Luca slipped the boat into a sheltered bay with dozens of long, dark shadows laying on the bottom, and we immediately began casting topwater frog flies at them. There is something primal about a topwater bite when a pike crushes your fly on the surface. The adrenaline rush was exhilarating as three or



A fly-caught walleye.

four pike would swarm toward the fly like a pack of wolves, often shooting into the sky like a missile when attacking the fly.

By the end of the day, we were cold, wet, and thankful for a spectacular day on the river. When we opened the cabin door, the push of warm air, and sound of kindling crackling in the wood stove, was a welcome surprise. Peter had anticipated us needing a warm, dry cabin after soaking ourselves in the drizzle and fired up the stove before we came off the river. Nice touch!

### Taking a break from the beast

After several days of nonstop pike action, casting flies the size of a red squirrel, we were ready to take a break and try our hand at fishing for grayling with our diminutive, 5-weight fly rods. Arctic grayling are one of my favorite fish. They can only live in wild places with clear, cold water, and the Mackenzie River offers all those things.

After dinner, Luca took us to a spot 5 minutes from the lodge and set up a drift through a long run, using Prince nymphs

suspended by floats, and we hooked a couple of these scrappy unicorns

on each pass through the run. The biggest challenge with grayling is getting a photo of one resting in your hand, and I think we had as much fun attempting to get a photo as catching them. They are without a doubt the slipperiest fish on the planet. We laughed so hard that evening that we almost ran out of breath, as grayling were squirming and squirting out of our hands on almost every photo attempt.

### The 'In between'

A steady downpour began shortly after we arrived at a beat called "The In Between." Luca said that we should have good opportunities for both pike and walleye here. There was a steady current where he "Spot-Locked" the boat 30 yards from shore.

We began by casting toward shore on



Frog fly.

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Arctic grayling.



Guide Luca and Patrick with a dragon.



Author John Cleveland with a trophy pike.



Guest cabin at the lodge.

making you feel like you are part of the family. Their enthusiasm for taking care of their guests is evident in their attention to detail. This commitment to excellence reflects Peter Fox walking the talk and believing in his staff. It's a wonderful place to connect with trophy northern pike and enjoy the serenity of one of the truly wild places left on the planet.

As the week came to an end, I stood on the dock after dinner, listening to a pair of loons singing a duet of enchanting ballads to the wind, appreciating just how fortunate

I felt to have shared an incredible week in the land of little sticks with my good friend Patrick. **MWO**

*John Cleveland is an award-winning outdoor writer with a passion for chasing big fish in wild places with both fly and conventional tackle. Email: grouseman52@gmail.com.*

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The Mackenzie River is a vast body of moving water.

the right side of the boat and hooked dozens of pike. Patrick landed several over 40 inches despite the periodic squalls that sent raindrops bouncing off the surface of the river like buckshot. Luca suggested that I cast my fly on the left side of the boat if I wanted to catch a walleye, which I did, and sure enough connected with a fat, feisty walleye every few casts. By the end of the day, we had caught dozens of large pike including several dragons, and a dozen spunky walleyes on the fly.

On our last evening at the lodge, as everyone sat enjoying another exceptional meal, the conversation turned to the incredible fishing the group had experienced. I asked everyone to estimate how many pike over 40 inches they had landed this past week. The total came to over 150 pike over 40 inches caught by eight anglers in seven days!

The Mackenzie River is a big-fish factory, like no other I have fished. The largest northern pike caught at the lodge to date is a 53 1/2-inch monster, and Peter told us that four to five pike over 50 inches are landed each season. There are no other lodges on the river, so the only people you will see fishing are the same ones you are having breakfast and dinner with each day.

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