

THE TRUE GEMS OF THE COPPERMINE RIVER

As I reflect on my life-long passion, fly fishing, I consider myself very fortunate—fortunate not so much in terms of the number of fish and their size, but fortunate in that I've lived in places which provided me with the best opportunities to pursue my passion of pursuing all species of the salmonid family.

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ly fishing was practiced that same old way when I first started to fish, just after World War II. Lines braided from horse tail hair, terminating in a single hair for a tippet, limber hazelnut rods and flies hand-tied at the river's edge, were still used to entice the 'prince'—grayling.

Emigrating to Canada in 1966 was the most fortunate event of my life. Apart from giving me the chance to establish a good life, it gave me the opportunity to expand my fly fishing passion with salmonids. My wife, Ghislaine, and I settled in Smithers, B.C., which was a dream place for any steelhead fisherman and the late sixties were a boom time to fish for that acrobat of the West. Later on, in 1970, we moved east and I waded

chest deep in the rivers of that Atlantic salmon paradise—Quebec.

The passion for Atlantic salmon engrossed me so deeply that I counted the rest of my life in terms of my opportunities to pursue the king of rivers. However, as much as the grandeur and power of the salmon enthralled me, I was charmed and gave my heart to the 'princess' of the same waters—*Salvelinus fontinalis*, the beautiful gem of the salmon family. And gradually, my encounters with brook trout grew into a love affair that replaced Atlantic salmon. I went looking for them in their prime habitat from James Bay to Hudson Bay to Ungava Bay. It was there that I met the patriarch of *Salvelinus*, *Salvelinus alpinus*—the Arctic char. Besides having the power of the Atlantic salmon, the Arctic char

also has the beauty of *Salvelinus fontinalis*, as well as a mysterious wildness. As a bonus, the landscape around the rivers where it lives are majestic and challenging.

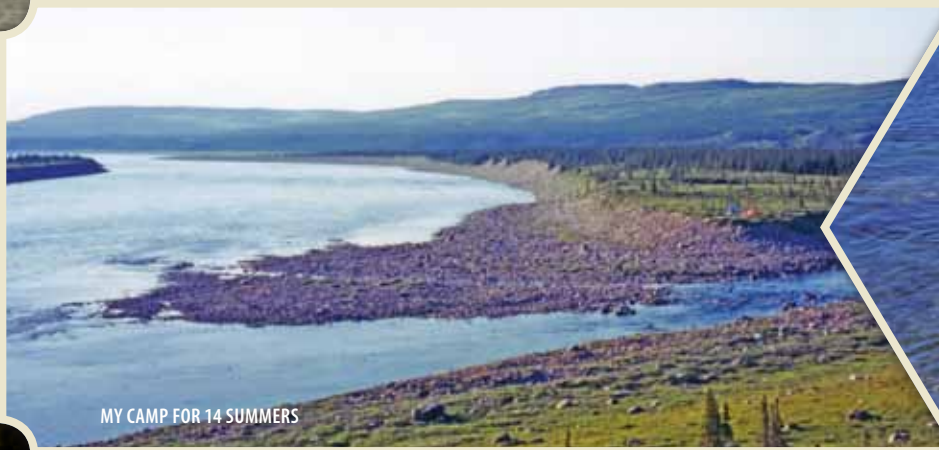
The Beginning

My love affair with Arctic char began in 1988, when I contacted and eventually met with the Johansons of Arctic Waterways, an outfit that ran raft trips in the Canadian Western Arctic. Fishing for Arctic char was one of the features that they advertised as included in a trip on the Coppermine River. In reality, it was mainly a float trip down the river with the occasional opportunity to fish in the evenings. But this did not suit my idea of fishing trip.

I was already equipped with inflatable boats and other necessary gear from previous



COPPERMINE



MY CAMP FOR 14 SUMMERS



A CAREFUL RELEASE



fly-in trips to the Sutton River's sea-run brook trout on the West Coast of Hudsons Bay, so I decided to use these to pursue Arctic char on my own, teaching myself how to take them on the fly. From 1990 to 2004, I spent fifteen Arctic summers fishing for anadromous char, all but one on the Coppermine River.

The River

The Coppermine River flows 850 km from northeast of Yellowknife to the Coronation Gulf in the Arctic Ocean. After my exploratory trip in 1990, which I started some 200 km from the sea, I established my camp at the junction of Melville Creek, located approximately 120 km (by river) upstream from the sea and the village of Kugluktuk (formerly Coppermine).

That section of the river is some 200 to 300 metres wide, with an average depth of between one and two metres and a velocity of six to seven kph. The banks are composed of boulder rubble 20 metres high, witness to the force of water-born ice during break-up. This continues for another 15 km downstream, after which it changes to shale canyons for most of the way to the ocean.

The Coppermine is a unique river, as it generates its own micro-climate, which allows the treeline to extend into the tundra well above the Arctic Circle. Black spruce cling to wind sheltered slopes of the river valley, sculpted by glacial artists through the Coppermine and September Mountains.

The area is rich in history. First Nations people, both Dene and Inuit, used it as a source of pure copper, an important factor in shaping their culture. The river was used as a route to the Arctic Ocean by explorers such as Samuel Hearne, Franklin and others. In the early nineties, it was the location of the world's biggest discovery of diamonds, which may change it forever. But to me, the treasure of the Coppermine River is its pristine, breathtaking wilderness—home to barren ground grizzly, muskox, caribou, and its true gems—Arctic char and grayling.

Getting Ready

As I prepared for that first trip in the late 1980s, I found that little had been written about Arctic char, especially about taking them on the fly, although I did find useful biological

information in Lionel Johnson's *The Arctic Char, Salvelinus Alpinus* (1980).

Here's a brief excerpt:

Melting snow caused by continuous sunshine of May and June, augments the flow, under the ice, of rivers that flow continuously throughout the winter, or causes flow to begin again where the river ice is solid. At this time anadromous Arctic char leave the still frozen lakes and start their migration seaward. Simultaneously, the sea ice begins to melt and a lead develops between the land and the permanent pack ice. Within this lead there is considerable biological activity in spring, and it is upon the briefly abundant food resources developing here that anadromous char depend. After the relatively short period of intensive feeding, the Arctic char return to freshwater.

The timing of return varies from region to region and year to year. The peak is generally between mid August and early September. Lodges in the Arctic Circle, such as Plummers on Great Bear Lake close after the first week of August due to the uncertainty of the weather, so it is wise to be well prepared if you stay past mid August on your own. My own trips were generally from the second week in July when the river sheds its ice, through the second week in August before the cold weather sets in.

Unsupported trips of this kind have to be well planned to be safe and enjoyable. As the final leg of the trip to my camp on the river was a 600 km flight from Yellowknife by small float plane, there was a strict weight and space limit, so that each item of gear for the three week expedition had to be well chosen and minimized.



Gems of the Coppermine River

SANDSTONE RAPIDS



Learning How

In the late eighties, there was a general belief that it would be very difficult if not impossible to take anadromous char on the fly. Knowing that similar beliefs were held about steelhead just thirty years before, I ignored them and used the same approach as steelhead fishermen did. That meant getting down to the fish with appropriate lines.

I used a 9'6" fast action rod for an eight weight line, with an anti-reverse reel, with a capacity approaching 400 yards of line and backing. I also took along a second rod, a six weight for grayling and as a spare. Lines were mainly sinking shooting heads from 275 to 375 grain of various densities, as well as weight forward floating lines for dry fly fishing. I also carried my horse hair line for traditional grayling fishing.

At first, the flies I used for char were a mixture of streamers and steelhead Speys tied on standard salmon hooks that imitated

shrimps and minnows. These traditional hook-mounted patterns worked well enough, but there was a disadvantage to them which encouraged me to diversify. I wrote about the experience at the time:

Staying for three weeks at a time in the land of midnight sun with daylight around the clock, one spends lots of time fishing—sometimes as long as 16 hours per day. With the abundance of feeding fish, anyone can land an embarrassing number of them. The only challenge is how to release them in the best shape possible. Using a strong, heavy leader helped in shortening exhausting fights and quicker releases. But, the char have a problem with coagulation, and the least amount of bleeding can result in a fish's fatality.

The traditional fly, with its long-shank hook has two major disadvantages for fish safety: its long shank and its point-down keeling. In a prolonged fight, the lever of the long shank makes a larger wound, and, with the hook

point down, often lodges in the tongue where the blood vessels are.

There is a third disadvantage that may be of detriment for fish safety: in the pool that has been disturbed with a previous fight, fish lie low, and often, in an attempt to get down to them, there's a tendency to snag a fish's back. The ensuing fight exhausts the fish as well as the angler while trying to revive it prior to release.

Consequently, I gradually developed the concept of a tube-up fly with the fixed, short shank hook held point up. In addition to reducing fish injuries, it offers the following advantages:

- Better holding than the long shank hook due to its shorter lever.
- Better hook-ups, especially on the downstream hanging fly when the fish dives straight down after the rise. With the hook point up, the full width of the fish's jaw is open for hook-up rather than just the tip of the lower jaw with the standard hook point down.



Instructions on how to tie the Tube-Up Fly are available on my Web site:
www.ekichbobbin.com - Page: "Stuff To Tie For".



- Less chance of bottom snagging and broken hooks.
- Allows use of a much lighter hook for the desired gape on large dry flies, and thus a sparsely dressed fly with better floatability.
- Disengages the hook from the fly at the beginning of the fight, keeping the fly itself out of harm's way of the fish teeth.

Memories

On unsupported trips into the wilderness, it's important to choose the right partner. All of the eight people I shared these trips with were great companions, but two stand out: the late Serge Potvin from Lac St-Jean and my friend and companion of seven trips Bill Blatch, the "Franglais" from Bordeaux, France. As a well-known wine merchant and long time Arctic traveler, Bill enhanced the trips with his hands-on teaching about that civilized drink. With the best vintages from Chateau La Tour to Cheval Blanc, we crowned

each stay there. As he put it, "We are now part of it all!"

There are also great memories of hiking through untouched wilderness, and of encounters with all of its inhabitants, from sic-sic (ground squirrels) our camp landlords, grizzlies, caribou, muskox, and wolves. But the most memorable is our snorkeling dives to dance with the char.

Every year, I kept a journal for each day throughout the trip. The last day's entry (July 31, 2004) on the Escape Rapids, reads:

Now, at 21:45, we are sitting at our place on the ledge that offers a view of the rapids. The east side of the canyon is lit by mellow rays of the evening sun, showing all of its many colours: dark gray basalt, whitewash streaks of some minerals brought down with seeping water, and the rusty orange of lichens. We ate gurabija, the sweets that my mother prepared for each trip, and sipped Armagnac. This is most likely the last time that I will sit

here, so I am trying to memorize everything. From the smell of tundra flowers, the sound of rapids, the chirping of swallows feeding their young just beside us and the falls of Sophy's Creek from a 200 foot ledge. Will it be possible to show this to my grandchildren, Adam and Sophie, and will it be the same pure wilderness? ✧

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