

Traditions

On some trips, absolutely everything goes perfectly

Story by Perry Munro of
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It has been said that there is more to fishing than fish (though some would argue that this was a philosophy invented by unsuccessful anglers.)

The older I get, and the more fishing I do, the more truth I find in the statement. I remember someone asking Judi, my wife, if she fished, to which she replied "No, but I love the places where fish live!" Fish do live in wonderful places; it's just that at times we are in too much of a hurry to get on the water to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us. I was thinking about this while following my guide, Bill Ensor, down a trail leading to a pool on the Miramichi River for an evening's salmon fishing. I was checked in to Pond's Resort in Ludlow, NB, to attend a conference where time was allocated for fishing. This was our first evening. I have known Bill for years but had never before shared water with him and looked forward to the experience.

We met at Pond's Tackle Shop where Bill checked out the rest of the group for tackle and flies. He recommended 9-foot rods with #8 weight forward floating lines, with 9-foot leaders and 8 lb. tippets. The water temperatures had been high and because of this the flies were small for this time of year; sizes 6, 8 and even 10 flies were recommended, wet and dry. Some among the group rented waders and rods.

Shortly after starting to fish, Russ Helslep from the North West Territories hooked and landed his first-ever Atlantic salmon with the able assistance of Bill. Life was suddenly sweet. As evening fell, we returned to the main lodge for dinner after an enjoyable evening, a fish landed and released, and many observed in the pool unimpressed by our best efforts.

Sitting with my friends in the Fiddlehead Dining Room I noticed a print of one of my favourite watercolours, by John Swan, of a log cabin with wood smoke rising into the trees. I said to no-one in particular how much I admired it and one of my companions commented, "that's the cabin I'm staying in." Indeed it could have been. The bank of the river was lined with log cabins with woodstoves, and all looked like the cabin in the watercolour. When I was talking to Keith Pond later, and mentioned this conversation, he told me that the image was not of the cabins at the resort on the main river, but it was of the cabin at the wilderness camp he owned at McKeil Brook. Small world. I wondered if this was a case of life imitating art! Keith told me that his family had operated the facilities since 1925.

I retired after dinner to my room at the Old Lodge and before sleep considered something my friend Jack Cooper had said, when asked by a writer from National Geographic to describe Labrador: he said, "The way it was, is the way it is!" Jack, a well-respected Labrador fishing outfitter, used the quote for the motto of his outfitting business, Cooper's Minipi Camps, and it certainly applied here as well. The following day promised meetings until dinner.

First, the bad news: the plane carrying members of our committee from western Canada developed engine trouble; I think fire was mentioned. They made an emergency landing in Toronto, and were stuck there 'til later in the day so the proceedings were on hold.

The good news, of course, was that we had nothing else to do but go fishing! We quickly made arrangements and headed to the tackle shop. Our guide for the to the tackle shop. Our guide for the day was Donnie and we were fishing the Home Pool in front of the resort. This is a beautiful, long pool, easy to fish, and salmon were showing from top to bottom. Anticipation was high.

The previous evening, Richard Stieb from Saskatchewan had cheered us on at Harris Brook pool and thought he might give it a try today. Well, he wasn't long in hooking, landing and releasing his first salmon. I don't know who was hooked better, Richard or the fish.

A heavy overnight frost lowered the morning water temperature and encouraged us to increase fly sizes. It worked for Richard, but I was starting to wonder if I would hook one! The previous night I had hit five fish and never landed one. This morning I started off by losing a couple and raising a couple more. I was couple and raising a couple more. I was wondering what I was doing wrong, and questioning fly patterns and size and anything else one could think of on which to lay blame. Sue Roche, who works for DFO in Ottawa, came over to lend a shoulder to cry on; I opened my fly box and said to her, "pick one!" She looked, considered, and said: "That's a pretty one".

I took her selection and tied it on and, a couple of casts later, I was fighting a fish—and landed it. Shortly after I hooked and landed another. So what was the pattern? A Rusty Rat with slight modifications, which I will call from now on "Sue's Choice."

After the successful morning, people began to arrive from Toronto and we left the river to address the business at hand. I must say that although the meeting facilities were excellent and the meetings went well, my mind never completely left the beckoning river. That's what it means to mix business and pleasure.

The following day was taken up by meetings as well, but the agenda was duly completed and we were off for an evening of fishing. Our guide Donnie was taking us back to Harris Brook pool, and once again we walked the trail by the old covered bridge and I stopped to take some images of it. Over the entrance was an images of it. Over the entrance was an old sign that said, "\$20 Fine for Driving on This Bridge Faster Than a Walk". It was now part of a walking trail so I would guess that fine was seldom levied.

I wondered how many wadered feet might have walked this trail to the river through the years. It had to be generations of fishermen, and if you took modern equipment out of the mental image—bearing in mind that the river changes very little, and the pools are the same—it occurred to me that you could easily imagine the turn of the 20th century and a discussion about fly selection and presentation much the same then as now. We geared up and waded in, hoping to do battle with some of the fish that were showing with encouraging regularity in the pool.

Donnie recommended a Silver Down Easter, and when Richard wanted to change flies I tied one on for him—and yes, he hooked and landed another salmon. It was becoming old hat to him now, and he was top rod, having nailed a now, and he was top rod, having nailed a fish every time he stepped into the pool. Even though he was a complete novice, he met my definition of an expert salmon fisherman—that is, the last person to have landed one.

As shadows lengthened and evening approached, geese flying downstream—seemingly just skimming the water—grazed over my head; I think I could have touched one with my rod. This magical moment was rudely interrupted by a hard take—I lifted my rod and set the hook. The fish shook its head and bolted downstream, and I was well into my backing when a large salmon cartwheeled into the air and plummeted back with a splash that might have come from a huge boulder. Damn it felt good!

There was a spirited battle before I eventually brought a beautiful large male hookbill to the net. Donnie released the fish, and I hooked my fly on the rod, signalling I was content to end this fabulous day right then.

The trip was over. I sat with friends old and new on the porch and we shared a toast or two and compared flies and stories into the night. The smell of wood smoke, wet waders drying, and the tinkle of ice swirled in a glass of good single malt—all I would need is the smell of a wet dog to make it a perfect evening. I retired to bed, deferring packing until morning as if trying to stretch the experience another day.

I think sometimes a great trip is like a great meal you prepare yourself. The outfitter provides the ingredients: accommodations, meals, guides; water to fish, guides to assist you and fellow fishers—but it's up to you to combine these ingredients and come up with the great trip. Ponds Resort had provided all the ingredients on this occasion: the log cabin on the riverbank with woodsmoke rising in the pines, or a room in the Old Lodge; meals in the Fiddlehead restaurant, drinks at the Anglers Pub. Put it all together, the ingredients that please you, and enjoy.

Like a great meal, a great trip also ends too soon. It had been a sheer delight to watch complete novices catching fish in a beautiful place. Does it get better? I'll be back on the Miramichi for ice-out and the spring salmon fishery. Maybe I'll check out that wilderness cabin in the watercolour.