



Re-entry

Returning From Labrador

My mind is racing, which is not unusual, it often races. But this time it seems a bit more frantic. I'm thinking about getting outside to look around at the Creek House, to take inventory, getting out to the barn and surrounding myself with my own space, looking at the garden and checking out the status of the outdoor projects I left 11 days ago. I need to do some banking, check on a change in insurance, and double check my schedule for performances. Maybe my mind is racing because I need to get some ibuprofen to abate the returning tendinitis in my left Achilles Tendon, or maybe from processing the mental and emotional assessment of the experience I just shared with a handful of people in Labrador. After six days in the most remote location I have ever been, I am back in North East Ohio, with 3.5 million people within a 45 minute drive and all of the associated hustle and bustle that comes with that.

Since I was about twelve years old, I have been fascinated with the boreal forest and the north country. My older brother Bob, had brought boxes of paperback books home from college, including two that were collections of American folk song lyrics and poems. There were several about Alaska and the Yukon Territory that I read and re read. This was also the age that I became enamored with Jack Londons' "White Fang, Call of the Wild", and the incredible short story, "To Build a Fire". So when my buddy Jerry Darkes asked if I was interested in making this

trip in spring of 2016, I didn't hesitate for a second. Especially when Jerry told me that this camp, the McKenzie River Lodge, was consistently booked out 2 years ahead.

The lodge is located about 130 miles north of Labrador City where nearly one third of the population of Labrador call home. That is about 9,500 people, living in the 113,641 square mile mainland portion of the province. So when I say remote, I am really talking remote. By comparison, Ohio is 44,825 square miles. It was a two day journey to get there. Jerry and I left my house and drove for eight and a half hours to Montreal where we spent the night. At 5:45 AM we were off to the airport for rides on a couple Air Canada turbo prop commuter planes, first, from Montreal to Sainte Iles, then on to Wabush. In Wabush, we rendezvoused with the other half of our group, Jim and Doug, and happen to meet Chris and Maria, a couple anglers from Maine, who were also going to the McKenzie. They were returning for their third time. At 9:30 AM the following morning we were all waiting for a Labrador Air float plane to complete the final leg of our journey.



There are two common pontoon float planes in use in the north country: the Beaver, and the Otter. These planes haven't been made for over 60 years and they are still in service. They are the work horses of the lake country. We flew on to the McKenzie River Lodge on an "Otter", which is the larger of the two. It

easily accommodated our crew plus several hundreds of pounds of supplies being flown into the camp with us. We quickly left the most northern vestiges of civilization and I was mesmerized by the vast amount of open space under us. The landscape was dominated by forest and large light green patches, which proved to be sphagnum moss and lichens. Lakes dotted the landscape, and were often connected by braided water ways. The topography was remarkably flat with the occasional ridge line or the erratic hill. I was looking at the boreal.

Landing on the lake in the Otter, was certainly cool, albeit uneventful, still I was sort of giddy from the experience! After touching down on Andre Lake, the pilot taxied a bit and



smoothly swung the plane around and brought it to rest within inches of the dock. Anyone who has docked a boat would have been amazed. There isn't a reverse on a plane and there wasn't as much as a bump when the plan came to rest next to the floating pier. The lodge currently consists of one main building, with a kitchen, dining/common area, utility room and sleeping quarters and a bathroom. There are three other modest cabins, one for the four guides and two cabins for the guests. There is a yurt for communal gathering and several utility

buildings, housing fuel, a generator, various pumps and equipment. A "T" shaped floating pier accommodates the float planes and several square stern, 20 foot freighter canoes that are essential for the operation of the camp. There is also a small aluminum boat and a NRS pontoon raft. It appears that everything has to be flown in.

After being greeted by the staff, and stowing our gear, we enjoyed a very solid dinner and talked about the the drill for the week. Breakfast at 7:00, on the water by 8:00, lunch on the stream, back to the lodge between five and six, dinner at 7:00. Repeat for 6 days, going to different sections of the McKenzie, or two other accessible rivers, the Quartzite or Comeback. We would rotate locations and guides through the week.



The guide's were excellent. They were each unique, engaging, straightforward and very hard working. JP was incredibly energetic and passionate and Patrick was philosophical. Burt was a high school biology teacher and very insightful and David had started guiding when he was 18 , and this was his 20th season, he was very self assured. All of them were a bit reserved, taking everything in and waiting for the coming week to unfold with this new batch of clients. Julie, was charged with providing solid meals for the clients and the guides. She was also very self assured, a young lady who seemed to be enjoying her experience in the north woods. As the week passed, we enjoyed time with each of these individuals and came to appreciate the depth of their personalities.

After dinner Jerry and I made our way out to an accessible section of the river, where could tag a landlocked salmon. Landlocked Atlantic salmon were one of the three fish we were targeting on this trip, in addition to big Labrador brook trout and lake trout. They each have different life history's and they each occupy different, but seasonally overlapping aquatic habitats

within the waters we would be fishing. Our destination was a short distance from the camp. We hiked a few hundred yard and then waded out toward the central channel of the river. This provided the perfect opportunity to check out my gear and begin to shakeout my fly fishing cob webs as I hadn't touched a fly rod in months.

I don't know if we hiked through a cloud of black flies or we attracted a cloud of black flies, irregardless we were got a clear idea of what the insect situation would be throughout the week, and more importantly, we got an idea just how tough the wading was going to be.

The Canadian Shield is a huge expanse of ancient metamorphic bedrock. It is thinly covered in some areas with mineral soil and sphagnum moss. The McKenzie River stream bed holds very little gravel and very little cobble sized rocks for that matter. For the most part, the stream bed was covered with large, angular blacks of stone ranging in size from cinder blocks to small cars. The flat, angled surface of the slippery rocks, combined with the current made for treacherous wading. I have never use a wading staff, but the web site said this was essential as well as studded wading boots. I was glad I had it! In addition to the challenging footing, the Mckenzie is a large, powerful river. This was not an experience for the faint of heart angler.



For anglers going downstream, the day started with a short boat ride to the end of the lake and then a walk down to the first or second “beat”. Going to the third beat, required another boat ride on a freighter canoe that was tethered at the end of the second beat. A trip to the Quartzite or Comeback rivers required a much longer canoe trip toward the upstream end of the lake. Regardless of the destination, once we got out of the canoes, and out of the river, we followed trails that had been used for decades by caribou. Actually the McKenzie River Lodge had previously been a caribou hunting lodge, and converted into a fishing outpost over 15 years ago.

The caribou population across much of the boreal forest has been rapidly declining for several decades and biologists are unsure what is

actually occurring. I had heard about the Brook's Range heard collapsing while I was in Alaska but did not realized this was a widespread phenomena affecting caribou across their entire global range. I asked Burt about this and other general questions about the ecology of the region. Add like most good educators, he was hesitate to give a definitive answer but felt there were many factors effecting the situation. But one of the many fascinating things he shared was that the lichens grow approximately one inch over the course of a decade. Perhaps there is a bio accumulation of pollutants in the lichens that is contributing to this problem? It was very unusual to spend six days outside from eight in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon each day and see nothing but a few birds and fish.



The fishing by the way was a bit slow by McKenzie River standards. We rode in on a cold front and this seemed to shut the fish off, but by the end of the week we all had caught brook trout 18 inches or bigger, probably hundreds of small brookies and land-locked salmon. Jerry and

Doug both caught decent land-locks, and I caught three lake trout. We didn't keep track of the pike we caught.

We enjoyed the company of our guides through the day and into the evening. We had great conversations about a myriad of subjects including folk music. They were all familiar with John Prine and very appreciative that I knew some of Stan Rodgers' tunes. I extended an open invitation to each of them to stay at the Creek House should they ever be passing through Northeast Ohio.

So after two days of travel, I am back in Ohio, adjusting to the buzz of life I left just over a week ago. Needless to say, it was a remarkable trip to a landscape that was very different, dramatic and stark. On the flight out, we were in the air nearly 50 minutes before we crossed the first dirt road, and now I sit on my porch, in a very beautiful setting, yet with the constant hum of the interstate in the distance. I enjoy a coffee, orange juice, the internet and a host of other luxuries. Two weeks ago I may not have had so much as a second thought to the privileged status I enjoy, but today I'm not taking these things for granted. My racing mind, however makes me keenly aware of their cost.



