

Words:
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GROWING UP IN MINNESOTA, you generally had two choices for TV fishing personalities: Babe Winkleman or Al Linder. It really didn't matter which way you went. They both repeatedly said "jeepers!" and "holy crapes!" on camera and seemed to be walleye magnets. Back then I lived in a gear-and-tackle world and didn't have much use for a fly rod.

After loading up on Labatts, Crown Royal whiskey, and fine tobaccos in Winnipeg, we boarded a 10-seat charter plane bound for a dirt airstrip in far Northern Manitoba. We ended up sitting across the aisle from "The Babe Winkleman Chevy Truck Sweepstakes Winner" and Babe himself. Go figure.

You'd think Midwesterners would be proud of their fishing. But even as far north as Minnesota, the local angling wisdom is that the good fishing, and freedom, is always farther north. If you live in, say, St. Paul, you pack up and drive to Lake Mille Lacs. And if you live on Mille Lacs you drive north to Vermillion where you fish the Rainy River.

Of course, if it was their choice, they simply would pass it all up and cross the border into Manitoba or Ontario and be done with it. Admit it: If you have wall-eye in your lake, Canadians have legion in theirs. If you have big pike, theirs would eat yours. Your lake trout are few and far between, and you don't even have grayling.

And that's why a few old Minnesotan friends, now scattered across the globe, get together to flyfish the far north every summer. Not north like Alaska with salmon and rainbows—but true north, with big pike and wall-eye and lakers and, yes, even the mystical grayling.

Flying past the plains of southern Manitoba, over muskeg bogs and boreal forest, I was reminded that this region's early inhabitants—known as the Taltheilei Shale Tradition people—called this the "Land of Little Sticks," where deep green forests succumb to the long winter with stunted and windswept trees, and finally give way to tundra. The caribou graze the dwarf shrubs, sedges, and grasses in the summer and retreat to the trees in winter.

The roar of the turbo-props made conversation difficult. But we learned that our camouflage-clad fellow travelers included the winner of the "Babe Winkleman Chevy Trucks Dream Trip Fishing Sweepstakes" and his buddies. And the Babe didn't include booze—it was BYOB—clarifying why we were smiling and they weren't. Still, as Babe said, "I like big pike," and they would find a few for certain. Eventually, the plane landed on the North Seal River that empties into Hudson Bay.

They got off the plane. We kept going. North.

The de Havilland Otter settled her floats down on Maria Lake, which is actually a river, but not as you know one—here, the streams connect lake after lake after lake in 7,200 square miles of roadless isolation. It was, and is, the winter caribou hunting grounds of the Cree and Dene nations, and the waters are loaded with armies of northern pike, lake trout, walleye, and grayling. After nine months under the ice, all of them were starving.

Maria Lake is primarily a trophy-sized pike incubator. The toothy critters are truly large and wildly aggressive, both on top and subsurface, with battalions prowling every river inflow and shallow bay. You only have to feel the breeze on your face, turn around and head toward the far shore where hapless baitfish are blown, tie on a zombie-eyed lemming or duckling pattern, and then pitch it to the first predator you see cruising the shallows—and there are many.

These outpost camps generally have a camp host—part guide, part handyman, and part camp cook. Ours went by the name Ken; he was wiry, about five-and-a-half-feet tall, roughly 50 years old, and could kick your ass if he so decided, but his Labrador demeanor wouldn't allow it. He guided caribou- and bear-hunting trips in the far north during winter. His summer job ended at the dock, where he handed us each a map of the lake in a Ziploc bag. Self-guided indeed.

About a hundred pike later, we decided to mix it up and fish the whitewater inflow. "Take an extra gas line for the boat," Ken said. "A bear chewed my last one.

I had to throw my hatchet at him.”

Pounding rains had made the traditional portage to the river inaccessible, so we bushwhacked across the tundra to a game trail littered with caribou antlers, berry-filled moose and bear scat, and the crushed bones and hair left-over from marauding wolves. We rigged up 5-weight trout rods

for grayling and did the commando crawl through the nearly impenetrable river edge to the first hole. And it was the only hole we explored, holding too many fish to leave. Even here, you don't leave fish to find fish.

The lake trout still confounded us. Back at camp Ken shared a tip: Where you find gulls, you will find fish. I thought he was referring to the bait-crashing herring gulls off Orient Point or Montauk during a fall striper blitz, but these birds were different. They just laid back and huddled in one spot on the surface, waiting for the lakers to push up bait.

As we idled up close to the gulls with the electronics on, a question arose: How do you catch a lake trout in 50 feet of water with a fly? Several beers and a bottle of Crown Royal were passed around to steady hands and minds while we tried to solve the conundrum.

It was collectively deduced that if we couldn't get down to the trout, we needed to bring them to the surface. The whiskey ignited a spark of ingenuity for the steelheader in the group, who lanced a treble-free Pixie spoon to his 8-weight fly line and free spooled it into the abyss until hitting bottom. He jiggled the copper attractor back from the depths, getting whacks the entire retrieve. A school of greedy char torpedoed hit



the Pixie all the way to the edge of the boat, at which point the trout bum on the platform fired a white streamer into the frenzy.

Lake trout on. And another. And another.

With the teaser man positioned directly over the school of lakers, and surrounded by the rest of our group firing streamers into the froth, we finally had their number.

And so it went for a full week. The weather was slate gray, blending the sky and water into an endless and oppressing twilight. What time was it? Which way was north? Where's Babe? Whatever—the fish were happy.

We did see Babe and the Chevy Truck Sweepstakes Winner at the main lodge on the way to the airstrip. The fishing hadn't been all that great they said. The best spots were “weathered out,” according to Babe. But they did get enough footage for a TV program, which we watched months later—featuring obligatory bearded men in flannel shirts cranking Banjo Minnows and hollering “jeeppers!” and “holy cripes!” to the delight of any outdoor enthusiast.

The Minnesota Fly Corps awaits another Canadian summer siren, where the river systems connect lake after lake after lake, where pike and walleye and lakers and grayling run rogue, where deep green forests succumb to the long winter with stunted and windswept trees, where the lodges are BYOB, and where the slate gray sky becomes an endless twilight. ☞

In the spirit of Lac de Crown Royale collaboration, much of this story was recounted to Horatio by S. Bean Nyphem of Matadors Fishing Club fame.

«ABOVE»

Traditional fuels of the north country—Crown Royal and Labatts—led to creative tech for teasing up lakers in Maria Lake, Manitoba. Photo: Stephen Bauer.