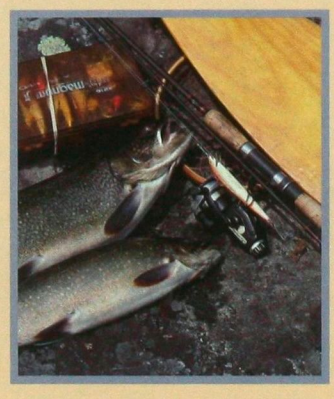
In the North, In the Spring



LAKE TROUT BY MICHAEL FURTMAN

By MICHAEL FURTMAN

A wilderness paddler ponders lake trout.

In the north, in the spring, there lives a little stream.

Come summer, it barely flows; and great, gray granite boulders periscope from what little water remains, making passage by canoe nearly impossible.

But in May, this stream flows buoyantly from lake to lake, fed by melting snow. And with it flows our canoe.

Parts of the Boundary Waters are a bit too well-traveled for our tastes, but this route is seldom used. The portages, barely evident, are

punctuated by moose tracks, not boot prints; and the lakes connected by this stream are rarely visited. It would not be far from the truth to say that by taking this route, we are seeing country that few human eyes have ever scanned. And we like it that way.

For decades my wife, Mary Jo, and I have chosen this route west of the Gunflint Trail for our first canoe trip of the year. Though it is not an easy route—and is growing more difficult as our bodies age—it holds a charm that offsets the effort.

The creek is part of that charm, for when traveling its hidden course, we feel a deep sense of adventure, of exploration. On the ridges along the creek, dark stands of jack pine climb the hills; and on ridges elsewhere, aspen and birch reach toward the sun.

I recall years when we waded through snow on portages and paddled through windswept channels on lakes black with rotting ice. Other years, spring came early, and the leaves—and black flies—had already burst forth by the time we launched our canoe.

But in most years, we find the ice has recently departed, and we must hunt north slopes to find snow—our natural cooler for perishable foods and fresh fish fillets. Cold nights linger, keeping insects at bay. If we are lucky, the days are bright. Aspen and then birch are beginning to bud; and, thanks to those buds, the surrounding hills are awash with a soft gray-green glow, as if rubbed over with artist chalk.

It is as if the land, bound tightly for months, now sighs and breathes under the spring sun, wriggling awake like some beast arising from hibernation. Along the creek a few marsh-marigolds eat light until they are as yellow as the orb that feeds them. Tiny curls of ferns shake off surrounding soil.

Everywhere is the smell of earth—of soil, of water, even; scents contained for months in winter's icy bottle. The granite bedrock of

this land absorbs the sun's warmth into its billion-year-old layers.

Bears emerge from their dens, hunger dressed in black fur. Spawning suckers and pike splash in the creek. Male ruffed grouse fill the air with their drumming. Cow moose move to the safety of islands or lakeshore points to drop their tawny calves.

And, very important, lake trout move toward the water's surface, putting them in easy reach of an angler's offerings. When the aspen buds are the size of mouse ears, lake-trout fishing is at its best.

If all of the other wonderful things happening in the canoe country spring weren't enough to make us paddle and portage our way to these lakes, the lure of lake trout would make sore backs and wet feet worth enduring.

Not a trout at all, *Salvelinus namaycush* is in fact a char, closely related to other northern fish species such as brook trout and arctic char. Though it lacks the red spots and brilliant coloration of these relatives, it is handsome nonetheless. The silvery fish typically has generous vermiculations along its back and irregular light spots along its sides. Some exhibit a beautiful rose-orange tint to their pectoral, pelvic, and anal fins, which may have front edges of white. The tail of the lake trout is profoundly forked.

Like Minnesotans, the lake trout is a creature of the north. It dwells only where winters are long and harsh enough to keep lakes cold despite summer's attempts to warm them. Native only to North America, the lake trout has a vast range that spans glaciated waters from Alaska east to Nova Scotia. In western Canada its range dips south through Alberta and into Montana before swing-

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ing north above the prairie and across through all eastern Canadian mainland provinces. Minnesota is about as far south as it gets.

Though moose and lynx speak to us of the north country, as do black spruce and balsam fir, the lake trout too is an indicator of climate and latitude. While Minnesotans can catch a walleye in Lake Pepin in the southeast as well as Lake Saganaga in the north, or a smallmouth bass in the St. Croix River as surely as Basswood Lake, only in canoe country or Lake Superior can we hope to catch a naturally reproduced lake trout in our state. Like the woodland caribou, now gone but once the dominant deer in the north, the lake trout speaks to me of wildness, of northness.

Ten thousand years ago, as the glaciers receded, leaving a rubble-strewn granite landscape, the waters that backed up behind them served as conduits for fish migrations. Were lake trout deposited in what is now southern Minnesota? No one knows. If they were, they perished as that region warmed.

But where we travel each spring, the lakes, separated by stone ridges, are the guardians of lake-trout evolution. Most of these lakes have never been stocked, so no gene mixing has occurred. Most lack connections, so the fish within them are direct descendants of those surviving glacial times. And the results are clear to see.

I recall one fine spring day 15 years ago, when Mary Jo and I portaged from our campsite lake to a neighboring body of water. We had caught a couple of lake trout for dinner from the first lake, and left them stringered off camp. These trout were dark, almost black, and nearly 5 pounds—large for these small, infertile waters. In the second lake, we caught small, silvery lake trout with bright orange fins. We kept one, more out of curiosity than hunger, to compare with the others at camp; and when we placed them side by side, it was almost as if we were looking at two different species.

The silvery fish was long and bullet-headed, and its flesh was as orange as any salmon's. The dark trout were much stouter, their heads blunt and round, their fillets peach in color.

Diet can explain coloration and shape to some degree, but what we were also seeing was nearly 10,000 years of natural selection, 10,000 years of time and circumstance shaping these fish to fit these lakes. A rock ridge separated them in space. But eons separated them in shape and coloration. Examining those fish, I first realized that thanks to the wilderness designation of the Boundary Waters, here nature could choose its course without tampering.

When we depart, we always leave very early in the morning, so we can make it across the portages and up the creek to another much-loved lake, where we fish one last time before heading home. Drifting over a favorite reef, we might get lucky and catch this lake's distinct trout.

And we pass the spot where once we saw a cow moose standing mere feet from shore, her coat bedraggled with patches of gray and brown, her big ears swiveled in our direction. Remote as this place is, we might have been the first people she had ever seen—and when the buffy calf that had been lying between her legs wobbled to its feet, we knew for sure we were its first humans. As it took what might have been its first steps, we paddled quietly away.

Spring is for birth. For rebirth too of winter-weary and city-tired souls.

And spring reminds me that without our trying winters, without the deep cold, the glistening lakes of canoe country would warm and could not support lake trout.

In the north, in the spring, that little stream still lives.

For now, so do the lovely lake trout, symbols of the north that lure us into the piney wilderness.