

Speck-tacular

James Bay watershed a brookie haven

by Bob McGary

The big speck was making a valiant attempt to work itself free of the Mepps Black Fury lodged in its jaw. Each run that it made toward the alders and safety reminded me of my reason for being on this Northern Ontario river.

As a young boy, I had cut my teeth on small brook trout in local southern Ontario streams. During the first week in May, like many of my friends, I couldn't wait for the opportunity to drift a worm through a slow, deep pool.

As a teenager, my method of transportation had been by means of bicycle and later a small motorcycle. On many of my long trips to small streams, I wondered what it would be like to fly into Northern Ontario and experience angling opportunities I had often read about in fishing magazines.

Despite the fact I was very proud of my 10- to 12-inch stream trout, I longed for the opportunity of matching my skill against the 2- to 5-pound specks of the James Bay frontier.

My interest in speckled trout did not diminish over the intervening years. Many days were spent driving the logging roads and fishing the backwoods of Northern Ontario. Countless portages produced more famine than feast when it came to fish. But there came a point in time when I realized fly-in trips were perhaps the final step in the evolution of my search for speckled trout in Ontario.

The James Bay and Hudson Bay watersheds offer some of the most outstanding speckled trout action in the province. And because roads don't exist in many areas north of Hwy. 11 between Cochrane and Nipigon, fly-in trips are the only way to get to the action.



Although many of Ontario's fly-in operators have set-up camps on excellent walleye and pike lakes, few have outposts on speckled trout lakes and rivers. As most speckled trout fanatics realize, lake fishing can often be a hit and miss experience. Based on past experience, I have found May and September to be the best months for top action.

I have also found after a number of speckled trout expeditions that major river systems gave me the decided advantage of pin-pointing the holding areas in large, deep pools. While fishing these rivers, I have also found mid- to late-August usually provides consistent water levels and concentrated fish in the pools as they move upstream to spawn in the fall.

One of my first fly-in trips for speckled trout was with George Veilleaux, owner of Hearst Air located in Hearst, Ont. Our flight of nearly four hours ended on the Sutton River which flows through Polar Bear Provincial Park into Hudson Bay. It turned out to be the trip of a lifetime, as we landed numerous fish in the 2- to 4-pound range.

The highlight of the trip for me was my massive 25-inch, 5-pound male. Georges took a photo of the fish and made an enlargement which adorns his booth at the annual Canadian National Sportsman's Show in Toronto. Needless to say, this trip hooked me on brook trout fly-ins.

Since that first trip to the Sutton River, I have attempted to track down other trophy hotspots for brookies. Although the sub-arctic appeals to me, I have also been interested in fishing waters that are more accessible. One outfitter whose name kept surfacing was Cochrane Air, owned and operated by Jerry Krahenbuhl. Fortunately, I was able to meet with manager Mark Jones, who gave me an insight into their large operation.

Cochrane Air operates 33 outposts for hunting and fishing. Of the 33, 20 cater to fishermen. Of those 20, only two offer fishing for speckled trout. I was particularly interested in the Verena Lake site, located only a 10-minute walk from the Wakwayowkastic River. The "Wakway" is a typical tea-stained Northern Ontario river which flows north to the Moose River delta at Moosonee. In the upper sections, the river is 100 feet wide with large slow flowing sections interspersed with small sets of rapids.

When I heard a group of fishermen had done very well here in July, I immediately confirmed my flight for mid-August. My plan was to spend two days fishing for specks on the river and spend two more days on a nearby walleye/pike lake.

The driving time from Metropolitan Toronto to Cochrane is about seven hours. The plan was to organize the trip the same as someone would if they were planning a three-day fishing vacation. My fishing buddy Peter Suitso left Toronto at 5 p.m. on a Friday and met me at my home in Whitby at about 6 p.m. After loading

my Chevy Blazer 4 x 4, we were on the road in a matter of minutes. Our decision was to drive north on Hwy. 11 until we reached New Liskard, where we planned to stay overnight. We arrived at New Liskard at about 11 p.m. and got up the next morning at 6 a.m. Three hours later, we were in Cochrane.

The air base was about five miles north of town on Lillabelle Lake. As we pulled into the parking lot, base manager Mark Jones was there to meet us. I was quite impressed with the base itself. One feature that appealed to me was a large, comfortable bunkhouse that could be used by fishermen if there were weather delays. The offer of a shower and shave before we headed for home was also a welcome gesture.

Once inside the main office, we familiarized ourselves with a map of the area we would be flying over. Most of the lakes lie to the northeast of Cochrane and are located within a flight time of less than one hour. Our trip to Verena took about 40 minutes by air. Verena is one of the farthest outposts from camp at about 65 miles.



The James Bay watershed offers some of the best brook trout fishing in Ontario.

Many of the lakes in the area were named by Cochrane Air owner Krahenbuhl. Some of the lakes we flew over were called Yesterday, Today, Monday, Tomorrow and Unknown.

Imagine the scenario of flying into fish Tomorrow Lake Monday then leaving to fish Yesterday Lake on Tuesday. And you thought the International Date Line in the Pacific Ocean was confusing. I even tried to convince my wife, Lois, that fishing Yesterday Lake on our way back to Cochrane would get me home a day earlier.

As we made our way to the dock, we were met by Cochrane resident Bob Pickering who would be our guide for the first couple of days. The 67-year-old has been on a number of fly-in trips over the years and has an excellent knowledge of the lakes in the area.

As we started to climb above the tree line, we could make out a number of different lakes scattered across our flight path. It wasn't long before we did our first fly-over of Verena. From the air, we could see the trail that cut across caribou pastures to the nearby river.

The outpost cabin was capable of sleeping eight men in two bedrooms. A

propane refrigerator and stove were more than enough to meet our needs. All the beds had large foam pads. All we needed were our sleeping bags.

It didn't take long for us to stow our gear and unpack our tackle. By noon, we'd had a sandwich and were on our way across the trail to the river. We carried with us 2 horsepower motors which were to be used on the square stern canoes. After launching the canoes, we drifted about 200 yards to the first deep pool.

Peter made the first cast into the pool with a Mepps Black Fury and was rewarded almost immediately with a hit but no hookup. I made a cast to the same area and began my retrieve but it was not until the spinner was under the boat that the big speck decided to attack. My Berkley Lightning rod smashed into the gunwhale of the canoe as the tip section plunged into the water.

There was no doubt this was a good fish. In the tea-stained water, it was difficult to see the fish as it made a number of runs under the canoe. When it finally surfaced, it looked to be in the 4-pound range. Not bad for the first fish of the trip and a sign of future success.

The part of Wakwayowkastic River we were fishing was about 100 feet across, lined with alders and has a slow current. The average depth was about 5 feet, with some of the deeper turns holding water of 8 to 9 feet. About a mile of the river near the camp is accessible by canoe.

Our strategy was to drift downstream and cast toward the shoreline with small spinners and spoons. Most of the hits occurred near undercut banks or behind submerged boulders. As soon as we entered the deeper sections of the river, we'd anchor and cast or sit on alder branches to stop the canoe from drifting down the shoreline.

Working downstream from the portage to the rapids takes about one to two hours, depending on how thoroughly the water is covered. After about one hour's fishing, we had connected with four specks and landed two. Since it was our first day, we were eager to try the rapids and pools at the end of the first downstream rapids.

After we'd tied up the canoes, we only had to walk about two minutes

until we arrived at the first pool below the rapids. As befits a northern river, the water drops about 10 feet over a 50-foot interval into a major holding pool. Further rapids and pools are easily accessible by walking the shoreline.

The most successful technique for these northern specks was to cast across the pool, allowing the spinner to drift downstream during the retrieve. We lost more fish than we landed in the rapids due to high water and a faster than normal flow.

The average fish is between 1-1/2 to 3 pounds. Our time on the river the first day was cut short by a fairly severe storm which swept through the area.

The next day, we were back on the river fishing upstream toward another set of rapids. Again, we were rewarded with some nice fish. But instead of merely casting, we utilized several other techniques.

Having brought along a number of leadhead walleye jigs, I thought I'd experiment with them in the deeper pools.

On bright sunny days, specks, much like walleye, will hug the bottom

until a source of food presents itself at an opportune time.

Usually, the smaller fish will rush to the food while the larger fish will wait until they literally get bumped on the nose. In the past, I've had my best luck using Berkley Power Grubs and Power Tubes. Preferred colours are black and brown/orange.

My first cast into the pool below the rapids that had previously been fished with spinners produced a solid pick-up within seconds. What I thought was a speck turned out to be a small walleye. I lost another fish before weather conditions caused us to return but I sensed I was moving closer to perfecting this strategy in off-coloured water.

Although we only fished the area for a day-and-a-half, we were able to develop a feel for the potential outpost. The river is accessible enough to provide a three-day trip out of any of the major cities in southern Ontario. The specks are large and aggressive and under low water conditions, are reasonably easy to locate. July and August are the best months to plan your fly in. 