

For those who live for fishing, a fly-in fishing trip in northern Ontario is more than a vacation, it's a life-long dream.

A full moon illuminates a Cessna 185 float plane owned by North Caribou Lake Camps and used to fly passengers and supplies to the northern Ontario fishing camp.



One stop south of Heaven

By LARRY PORTER
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

NORTH CARIBOU LAKE, Ont.—It was nearly 11 p.m. and the reflection of a full moon cast a golden glow as it shimmered on the surface of the lake.

No matter the time, this wilderness area of northern Ontario seems to be bathed in gold. The walleyes, their sides peppered with golden flecks, sparkle in the sun as they splash on the surface while being reeled in.

Two seasons
The real staff might be a boat scuff or two below ground. About 25 miles southeast of North Caribou, along the southern shore of Lake Opinimiskian, a gold mine is in full production.

My first Canadian fly-in fishing trip was to Lake Opinimiskian in 1985. Several workers housed in tents were core drilling for gold then. Tests proved promising, and the mine finally opened in 1997. During the first four years of operation, the mine produced 1 million ounces of gold. Mining is expected to continue until 2011.

North Caribou Lake contains a treasure as well. Fishermen place a high value on its walleyes and northern pike. In fact, it ranks among the best lakes in Canada for those two species.

All fly-in lakes seem to have high walleye populations. But many contain large numbers of smaller walleyes in the 14- to 16-inch range.

It's different at North Caribou, where 24-inch walleyes are common.

"It's an unbelievable walleye fishery," said Dusty Brodhagen, whose family operates North Caribou Lake Camp. "Until you experience it, you have no idea how good it is. Try to tell someone about catching 100 walleyes before lunch. You can't really fathom that until you actually drop your line."

"It takes longer to get the fish off your hook than it does to catch another one."

The average walleye is between 20 and 22 inches. Those larger than 25 inches are scarce, but they can be caught. My largest in six days was 26½ inches. The largest taken by anyone in camp that week was 27½ inches.

I made the trip with Jim McDonnell of Royal, Iowa, who guides on Iowa's Great Lakes. We targeted



LARRY PORTER
THE WORLD-HERALD
Jim McDonnell of Royal, Iowa, above, admires a 42-inch northern pike. A bald eagle, left, perches on the crown of a spruce tree along the lake's shoreline. A walleye, below, glimmers in the sunlight as it is reeled in toward the boat.



walleyes much of the time, but sight other anglers in camp were on a quest for trophy northern pike.

Steve Craney, who lives south of Winona, Minn., has led this group for 30 years. The men have fished nearly 40 lakes in Ontario and have made repeat visits to only three lakes.

For Craney, the search is over. He considers North Caribou the ultimate fishing lake.

"This has the most structure of any lake we've been on," Craney

said. "Gorgeous fishing. Day in and day out, this is the best fishing we've had on any lake. We're going to try to come back here each year from now on."

Most in Craney's group caught northern pike longer than 40 inches. But the walleyes attacked their spoons and other pike baits as well.

"We'll probably catch between 300 and 400 fish a day," Craney said at mid-week. "We caught northern today from 12 inches to 43 inches. The average northern was 30-plus inches."

McDonnell, a retired high school teacher and coach, is known as the Fishing Professor. He, too, considers North Caribou the best walleye and northern pike lake he has ever fished.

"How many walleyes a day do you want to catch?" McDonnell asked. "Set your goal. Two hundred? How about 500? You can do it. And if you ever get tired of catching walleyes, you can always go after big northern."

It didn't take a professional angler to catch these fish. A quar-

ter-ounce jig—color was not a factor—tipped with Gulp—any kind, any shape, any length—caught more fish than any plastic bait.

The success rate of jigs and Gulp was so great that there is no need to endure the hassle of bringing in live bait.

Although McDonnell and I brought a few crankbaits along, we never threw one for northern pike. There was no need to risk getting speared by a treble hook as long as our Northland Forage Mimow spoons were so effective. For some reason, those spoons perform better than any other type of spoon on this lake.

North Caribou is a 104-mile flight by float plane from Pickle Lake, the farthest north of any town in Ontario to which one can drive.

The lake covers 82,000 acres, contains hundreds of islands and is virtually untapped as a fishery. Only two fly-in camps operate there. The Brodhagens can handle a maximum of 12 anglers a week; the other camp is limited to six fishermen each week.

"It's a massive lake that sees maybe 18 fishermen a week," Dusty Brodhagen said. "There is no fishing pressure."

The Brodhagens book only one group each week. Most are corporate groups. Whether there are six, eight or 12 in the group, the cost is \$14,000 for the week. There are no openings this year—and few ever. Those who come here always want to return.

The Brodhagens, however, are considering an expansion. They would like to build another camp that would accommodate six more anglers, but those plans have not yet been finalized.

Flash jackets, hot showers and water for kitchen needs are provided by a solar panel. Solar energy is stored into three 12-volt batteries that power a water pump. Propane is used to run hot water heaters, refrigerators and freezers.

Gasoline, propane and other supplies must be brought to camp by float planes. Each boat uses about five gallons of gas each day. The initial price of gas, along with the cost of delivering it by air, brings the total cost to about \$10 a gallon.

A satellite telephone allows Brodhagen to keep in touch with the camp's headquarters in Pickle Lake.

Fly-in Tips

Pack light: Planes are limited as to what they can carry. Instead of a heavy snowmobile suit, bring several items of lighter clothing that you can wear in layers. But be prepared for cold weather.

Pack compactly: A foam mattress or a large, unrolled sleeping bag don't weigh much, but they take up valuable cargo space.

Electronics: A GPS unit is almost essential, especially on a larger lake. A satellite telephone offers the security of being able to call for help in case of an emergency.

Rain gear: Don't scrimp. Purchase a set of quality rain gear. Don't let rain keep you off the lake during this once-in-a-lifetime fishing trip.

Tackle: Carry rods in rod cases to keep them from breaking. One tackle box will do. Put in a dozen spoons, a few crankbaits and other northern pike favorites, a good supply of quarter-ounce jigs and attractants—Gulp, Power Baits, Twister Baits or other classics. Wire or nylon leaders or leader material such as TyGler is a necessity.

Lake map: Laminated a lake map so it will be useful if wet.