

Yukon Adventure  
Outdoor Canada  
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By Bruce Masterman

George Bahm eased the aluminum boat into a peaceful bay and cut the motor.

With dusk fast approaching night, he strung an eight-weight graphite fly rod, tied on a cigar-sized white and red streamer, and suggested I do the same. Bahm scanned the water, searching for a sign – flash of panicked baitfish, torpedo-like wake of a large fish below the surface – anything that would indicate the presence of lake trout feeding in the shallows. But all we saw were scattered dimples of smaller fish rising for insects.

“Grayling,” observed the seasoned Yukon guide. “But let’s go for lakers. This is a great spot.”

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Where exactly were we?

Well I can tell you we were fishing a gorgeous and remote – heck, everything’s remote here - lake in Yukon’s southern part. Okay, we were somewhere east of the capital city of Whitehorse.

But I would be a dead man if I revealed the name of this magical spot, where few anglers and even fewer guides ever visit. George made me agree to keep it private, even jokingly suggesting a blood pact. At least I think he was joking.

Thankfully, no blood was spilled. George was satisfied to seal the verbal confidentiality clause with a red wine toast at lunch.

Suffice to say, however, that it could have been almost any lake in this magnificent territory, where great fishing is the rule rather than the exception

After preparing my own eight-weight, George and I started casting. Time and again we threw floating lines and stripped back the Deceivers in our quest for a lunker laker. Nada. No strikes. Not even any trout cruising beneath the boat.

Eventually, I had a revelation. Here I was trying to catch lake trout that didn’t seem to be here while dozens of wild Arctic grayling – a species I’d caught only in stocked lakes in southwestern Alberta – were rising within easy casting range.

I promptly rigged a four-weight and tied on a No. 16 Parachute Adams dry fly, then cast where a grayling had just risen. The fly sat unmolested maybe three seconds. Then a grayling had it. Several heart-pounding seconds later, I gently held a handsome male fish and admired its prominent iridescent dorsal fin before releasing it. Then I caught six more grayling in six casts.

“You must like catching those little fish,” deadpanned Bahm.

“I’d rather catch grayling on a dry fly than nothing on a streamer, like some of us are doing,” I replied.

Bahm kept casting his streamer, not frantically but with measured intent, looking very much like a guy who had already caught more fish in 36 years than most people would in 10 lifetimes.

Bahm is a child of the Yukon wilderness. His mother, Doris, is a member of the Teslin Tlingit First Nation in southeastern Yukon and his late father, Pius, was German. Born in the capital city of Whitehorse, George was raised with native traditions, and grew up in the bush - trapping, fishing and hunting moose and caribou.

But the lure of open skies proved irresistible. Bahm earned his wings when he was 18, and works as a pilot for Alkan Air, flying charters and emergency Medevac missions to remote – heck, it’s all remote – corners of the Yukon. When he’s not flying, Bahm guides anglers, teaches fly-casting or fly-fishes by himself. “Fly fishing keeps me real,” he says.

The licence plate on his truck reads 2FLY, a nod to his dual passions of flying and fly-fishing. Co-workers, store clerks and friends regularly address him as “2FLY” instead of his real name.

Bahm’s family owns a log cabin beside a creek overlooked by the Big Salmon mountain range in Yukon’s south end. George uses the cabin as a four-season retreat and as a base for the annual moose hunt with his mother. His Teslin Tlingit grandfather is buried nearby in a sacred site.

As we fished until 11 p.m. on that calm August night, Bahm pointed to the nearby shoreline where he caught his first fish – a grayling – more than three decades ago.

When it finally got so dark we couldn’t see our flies, Bahm steered the boat back up the lake. Supper awaited in the cabin, a 90-minute truck ride away. The cold spray from the wake splashed my face as I sat motionless, staring in awe at the surrounding mountains silhouetted against the night sky. Occasionally, I had to pinch myself to prove I wasn’t dreaming.

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Getting to the Yukon took me almost 50 years. Although I’ve spent time in northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, the Yukon had seemed an elusive dream destination. I’d read about the Gold Rush, and as a kid had devoured Jack London’s books such as *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. I knew about Yukon’s legendary fishing – for lake trout, grayling, northern pike, trout, salmon and inconnu - but didn’t get to experience it for myself until summer 2002.

A day after landing in Whitehorse, which holds more than two-thirds of the people in this territory of 484,450 square kilometres, I headed west on the Alaska Highway towards Haines Junction. The scenery simply overwhelms – miles and miles of unspoiled wilderness, trees, mountains, glaciers and blazing patches of magenta-colored fireweed, Yukon’s official flower.

It was wonderful, but it was my second day in the Yukon and I still hadn’t fished.

That was remedied a few hours later, when I arrived at Dalton Trail Lodge, just outside the eastern boundary of Kluane National Park. This luxurious yet rustic resort sits on the shore of 16-kilometre-long Dezadeash Lake, home to lake trout, grayling, pike, whitefish and burbot.

Eager to cast my first Yukon fly before supper, I grabbed my rod, vest and waders and followed owner Hardy Ruf’s directions to the mouth of a nearby feeder stream. I was surprised to find two spin fishers already fishing the creek. My heart really started to

thump as I watched them catch and release grayling after grayling, all six to 14 inches long and all taken on small spinners.

Kitchener teacher Butch Weiler and Mark Weist, a fishing buddy from Toronto, had stopped here for a few days following a wilderness canoe trip in the North-West Territories. Weist is the vice-president of E.G.B. Canada, which markets a Swiss line of spinners and spoons. Weist couldn't keep the grayling off his tiny green beetle-pattern spinner.

By the time we parted ways, it was late afternoon and grayling were rising all along the creek. My nerves couldn't take it any longer. I had to fish now.

Hands shaking and mind preoccupied with rising grayling, I somehow managed to snap off the leader while uncoiling fly line from the reel. I discovered it's virtually impossible to tie an otherwise simple nail knot to link the two ends while standing mere feet away from your first Yukon grayling.

Finally, after several attempts, I completed the knot and tied on a tiny dry fly. The cast wasn't pretty, but it worked. A grayling sipped the fly and the four-weight bent double. Over the next 90 minutes, I caught and released dozens of grayling – all on dry flies. The Yukon was living up to its reputation, and then some.

The next day dawned cool, damp and overcast. From the lodge, I noticed fresh snow dusting the tops of rocky peaks in the Saint Elias Range in Kluane National Park. I winced, knowing that guide Doug Thomas and I planned to fish in the park that day. Thomas, who has guided in the Yukon for 27 of his 58 years, remained confident.

After breakfast, we hopped into a four-wheel-drive vehicle to travel to Mush Lake, accessible via a 22-kilometre dirt trail. En route, Thomas regaled me with tales of fly-fishing for big lake trout. We drove through spectacular scenery – distant mountains, valleys forests and open meadows pitted with beaver ponds dimpled with rising fish. Although I'd hoped to see a Kluane grizzly bear – at a safe distance – our wildlife viewing was limited to a few ducks.

After loading our gear into a boat, Thomas and I motored across the lake to the mouth of a river, where he'd enjoyed great action just a few days before. But snowmelt and rain from the night before had dirtied the river, creating a silty plume in the lake around the mouth. We spent an unproductive hour standing chest-deep in water, casting large streamers to lakers that either weren't there or just weren't feeding.

Fishing picked up, however, when we moved to a river connecting Mush with another lake. Bear spray in hand, Thomas and I hiked a few hundred metres from the lake into a set of waterfalls tumbling into calmer, clear water. Grayling seemed to be rising everywhere. Sometimes their entire bodies cleared the water, huge dorsal fins slicing the surface when they dove back in.

We caught dozens of fish on dry flies, from Black Gnats to Humpies and Parachute Adams to Elk Hair Caddis. The fishing was just as good as I'd had the day before; the difference was that these fish were several inches larger, with some approaching 18 inches and three pounds. Hooking a grayling like that on a light fly rod is an incomparable thrill.

On the way back to the vehicle, Thomas pulled the boat into a calm bay where he'd caught lake trout before. Even casting with a large spoon failed to produce. Lake trout, it seemed, just weren't to be. It was to be a harbinger for my laker outing with George Bahm the next day.

As it turned out, I didn't encounter lake trout until my last two days in the Yukon. Fishing out of remote Tagish Wilderness Lodge on Tagish Lake, straddling the Yukon-British Columbia border, owner Beat Korner and I caught plenty of lake trout while deep-trolling with heavy tackle using spoons, cisco baits and downriggers. We both had fish on that we couldn't budge off the bottom, but the biggest laker we landed was about six pounds.

I certainly wasn't complaining – especially when I got to stay in a cozy log cabin that Beat and his wife, Jacquie, had named Jack London. Occasional howling from their kennel of 23 sled dogs underscored the wilderness experience.

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It's possible that George "2FLY" Bahm's propensity for fishing where lakes and rivers join is rooted in his Teslin Tlingit heritage.

After all, Teslin in the Tlingit language means *mouth of the river* while Tlingit itself means *people*.

Or it might be that Bahm just knows from experience that river mouths are grayling hot spots.

Whatever the explanation, I certainly wasn't complaining as we started our second day of fishing together. Under a light rain, we boated past the bay where we'd fished the night before. As we entered the fast-moving, shallow river, Bahm suggested I tie on a weighted nymph pattern.

A few seconds later, I flipped out a beadhead Prince nymph below a small foam indicator. A grayling immediately rose and hit the indicator, which was then pulled under by another fish. I lifted the rod tip and was fast onto a 17-inch grayling, the first of more than 20 I would land in the next half-hour.

We proceeded further down the river, stopping every now and then to wade the better water. By now, I'd switched to a dry fly and the fishing never slowed. On a bend in the river, we found dozens of big grayling – four pounders pushing 20 inches – rising to a hatch of mayflies.

As rain fell and we caught fish after fish, it dawned on me that this was the best fishing I'd ever enjoyed. At one point, I stopped fishing to watch Bahm make a perfect cast and hook another fish. Suddenly, I spied movement beyond him on the other side of the river.

A black bear sow and her new cub were crawling over a tangle of tree roots, completely oblivious – or perhaps not caring – that we were just 70 metres away. They disappeared in the trees without once acknowledging our presence. We later saw an osprey, bald eagle and chocolate-brown mink scurrying along the shore.

Later that afternoon, the rain and wind picked up and the fishing slowed. Bahm selected a spot for lunch on a gravel point and busied himself preparing food while I collected firewood.

When I returned, my arms were laden with deadfall. Bahm pointed at my heavy load and laughed.

"Indian make small fire and sit close," he said. "White man make big fire and keep warm collecting wood."

So we made a medium sized fire and called it a day. A very good day in an amazing place.

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