

Yukon Fishing
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Beat Korner set the hook and the rod doubled over like an upside-down U.
“Fish on,” he said, smiling.

The co-owner of Tagish Wilderness Lodge grimaced as the fish refused to budge from the bottom of Tagish Lake in southern Yukon. A tense minute later, Korner raised the fish a few feet before it stubbornly returned to the bottom.

At the other end of the boat, my heart was racing. Was this one of those legendary 40 pound-plus lake trout for which Tagish Lake is famous?

Korner and I had caught and released several smaller lakera while trolling in 37 to 61 metres of water, but the really big ones we knew were there had eluded us. At least until now.

Suddenly, the line went slack. The fish was gone.

Korner looked dejected.

“I think that was a very big fish,” he understated.

However, the disappointment didn't last long. We were soon both back to catching lake trout, albeit smaller than the behemoth that had escaped unseen.

As we fished, I pondered how lucky I was to be there, enjoying one of the countless and amazing opportunities awaiting anglers in Canada's magnificently remote northwestern most territory.

Yukon covers 484,450 square kilometres, virtually all rugged and unspoiled wilderness of forests and mountains, rivers and lakes.

Those waters are world-famous for fishing for lake trout, Arctic grayling, northern pike, several kinds of salmon, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden and bull trout, Arctic char and inconnu, a giant whitefish.

The territory boasts a population of just 32,000 people, with two-thirds of them living in the capital city of Whitehorse. Locals like to point out that the Yukon has more moose than people.

The day after flying into Whitehorse, I drove west on the Alaska Highway towards Haines Junction, past spectacular scenery highlighted by blazing patches of magenta-colored fireweed, Yukon's official flower.

I soon 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, Arctic grayling, pike, whitefish and burbot.

Itching to cast my first Yukon fly before supper, I grabbed my gear and followed owner Hardy Ruf's directions to the mouth of a nearby feeder stream. I met two visiting spin fishers from Ontario, who were having the time of their lives catching and releasing Arctic grayling on small spinners.

Finally, I couldn't take it any longer and headed upstream to cast a fly.

My pulse quickened at the sight of ever-widening dimples on the surface as dozens of Arctic grayling rose to sip tiny flies. On my first cast with a Parachute Adams dry fly, a chunky grayling took the fly and the four-weight fly rod throbbed under its weight.

Over the next 90 minutes, I caught and released more than 30 grayling, finally quitting because I knew a gourmet supper was about to be served back at the Dalton Trail Lodge.

The next day, Doug Thomas, the lodge's premier fly fishing guide, and I drove his four-wheel-drive into Mush Lake, in the heart of Kluane National Park. Even though it was mid-August, fresh snow from the night before dusted the mountaintops of the Saint Elias Range. During the drive in, I hoped to spot a grizzly bear – Kluane has the Yukon's highest population of grizzlies – but we didn't see one.

At Mush Lake, Thomas loaded our gear into a boat he had stashed there. We motored across the lake to the mouth of a river, where he had caught big lake trout on flies just a few days earlier. We spent an hour wading and casting in the lake, but failed to entice any lakereels.

However, then we moved to the other end of the lake and hiked into a pretty river connecting Mush and Bates lakes. For the next few hours, we used tiny dry flies to catch dozens of Arctic grayling, most of them much bigger – up to 18 inches - than the ones I'd encountered the day before. I felt like I was in heaven.

Things went from good to even better the next day when I hooked up with George Bahm, a fly fishing guide from Whitehorse.

We spent two days fly-fishing for lake trout and Arctic grayling in lakes and rivers off the South Canol Road east of Whitehorse.

Although lakereels again proved elusive, grayling provided plenty of action. Using dry flies and weighted nymphs, we caught and released grayling pushing 20 inches and four pounds. I lost count how many fish I hooked.

"You'll have to come back when the lake trout fishing is better," Bahm said, rather apologetically, when it was time to leave.

He didn't have to ask twice. The call of the Yukon – as Jack London wrote – is strong.

I will return.

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