

Upper Toobally Lake,

YKULO

Fly Angling Expedition

All Image Courtesy of Duane Radford

Duane Radford



Once you've had a taste of fly fishing for lake trout there's no turning back. So, it was that I vowed to return to Grizzly Creek Lodge on the Upper Toobally Lake, Yukon to catch the largest game fish in North America – lake trout - on a fly rod in shallow water. My wife, Adrienne, and I enjoyed the distinction of being the first paying

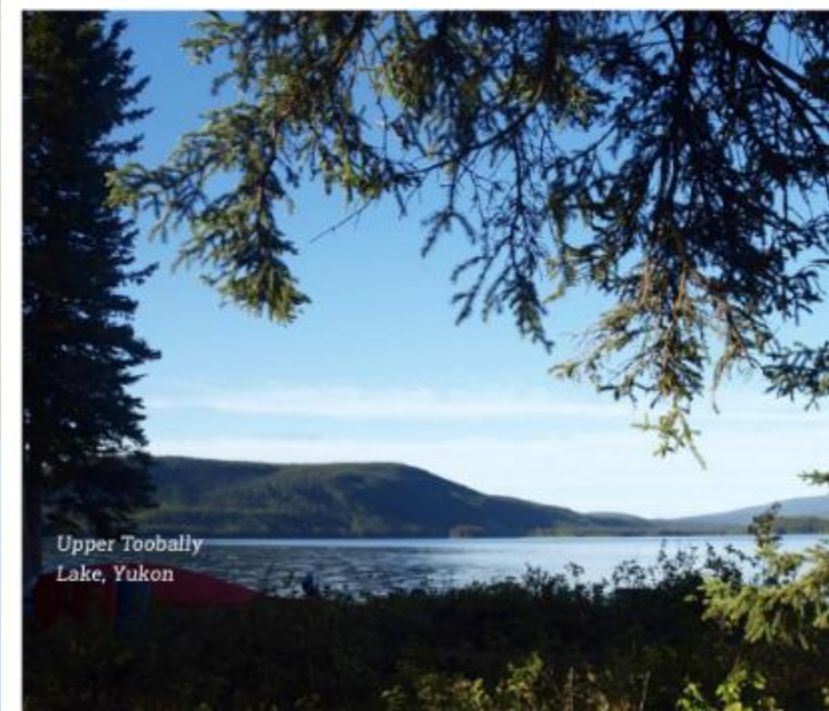
customers at this lodge. Lodge owner, David O'Farrell guided us during a junket from the main lodge on the Lower Toobally Lake on an excursion to his satellite lodge on the Upper Toobally Lake. There, I was the first person to catch a lake trout on a fly rod. We were so enchanted with the Upper Toobally Lake that we just had to make a return visit.



Northern boreal forest near the Upper Toobally Lake, Yukon



Upper Toobally Lake lake trout



Upper Toobally Lake, Yukon

Adrienne Radford with a fine lake trout from the Upper Toobally Lake, Yukon



tourist attractions and camping sites between Dawson Creek and Watson Lake – Muncho Lake Provincial Park, Liard Hot Springs Provincial Park and Summit Lake Provincial Park, for example. A neat attraction is the gaudy Sign Post Forest at Watson Lake.

Rachel Morris – a veteran bush pilot, agile as a cat, who punches above her weight when it comes to loading gear – piloted the Cessna Caravan float plane. She met us at the Black Sheep Aviation float plane dock at 7:15 a.m., briefed us on the flight and safety protocol before weighing all our gear and loading it. Our

plane was unloaded Rachel wasted no time in departing, and was soon airborne.

As our party headed towards the lodge Grant quietly said “I never thought I’d make it back again,” a sentiment I believe all members of our party shared. Hallelujah, we had reached our goal and were rightly a wee bit proud of ourselves after a year of preparation.

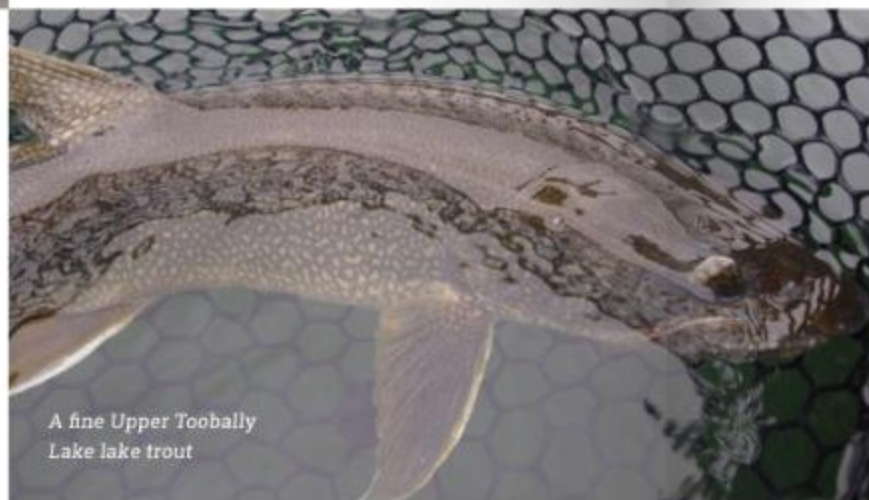
David O’Farrell explained how to use the generator, air tight wood stoves, how the freezer worked as well as a portable pump that supplied water to a cistern for the wash house and lodge. We used the freezer to store perishables while



Serene Upper Toobally Lake, Yukon

As part of the adventure, we wanted to drive the Alaska Highway which starts in Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Watson Lake, Yukon. We’d ferry our groceries and fishing gear by vehicle, and take a chartered float plane from Watson Lake with Black Sheep Aviation in a Cessna Caravan to the lake. Darcy Drinnan, office manager of Black Sheep Aviation & Cattle Co. Ltd., spelled out the charter costs, flight logistics. He said “The payload for your flight in is 2,300 pounds and this weight may not be exceeded.” Aviation rules being what they are it’s imperative to weigh all your cargo in advance because the pilot checks the weight of all gear, groceries and clients on a freight scale before loading the plane.

While some sections of the Alaska Highway were under construction during our foray and either dusty or muddy for the most part it was in good shape, with light traffic. On our way up, we missed a snowstorm which blanketed the highway with more than one foot of snow just before we reached Fort St. John, British Columbia, where we stayed overnight. On our return overnights at Fort Nelson, British Columbia, getting out of Dodge just before torrential rains washed out the road at Dawson Creek. Whew, two close calls! A few weeks prior to our trip the road was closed to traffic because of forest fires. Good Karma was definitely on our side. The Alaska Highway is paved with good sight lines. It’s definitely an underrated scenic highway featuring majestic vistas and wildlife aplenty – we saw dozens of Dall and Stone Sheep, wood bison, black bears to numerous to count, deer and elk. There are lots of



A fine Upper Toobally Lake lake trout



Colorful streamer fly



Lake trout streamer fly patterns

payload was 200 hundred pounds under the limit, as we expected. Rachel said that more than one party had been told they’d have to jettison some gear because of excess baggage. The flight into the Upper Toobally Lake was serene. All heads were craned taking in the solitude and wilderness beauty. In no time Rachel made a smooth landing and taxied to shore by the lodge.

We had finally made it back to the Upper Toobally Lake. Lodge owner O’Farrell, and his son, James, greeted us and helped unload the plane before stowing our gear. Bush pilots are always on the go during the summer so once the

our Yeti and Engel Coolers kept our prepared meals frozen. We cooked our meals and dined in the main lodge which had cooking gear and dinner ware. The boat gas had been mixed, readied for use and three outboard motor boats were on the beach.

I couldn’t wait to hit the water. After a quick lunch we geared up for the afternoon bite. The fishing turned out to be even better than I expected. Adrienne and I had non-stop action from the time we pitched our first streamers until we called it quits. We could not keep the trout off and had one double after another. Our arms ached from landing lake trout with the

biggest topping 34 inches. We enjoyed hot action each and every day thereafter. Fly angling for lake trout is not like rocket science but to catch them in shallow water the temperature must be within their preferred range. When I initially checked the surface water temperature it registered 48 F. It never exceeded 50 F throughout our trip, smack in middle of the preferred temperature range of lake trout (i.e., 40 - 55 F) according to Soucie’s Field Guide of Fishing Facts. All we had to do was search out the shoals and we were into trout. After breakup trout are stacked up on top of and along the edges of the marl shoals, feeding on forage fish and Cisco (freshwater herring) before they retreat to deep water and their preferred habitat once the surface water temperature rises.

You should wear polarized sun glasses to spot cruising lake trout that you can target by sight casting. Look for the white leading edges on their pectoral, pelvic and anal fins. The water is gin clear so they're not hard to spot. If you can't see them, try blind, fan casts. If you get tired of casting, troll (slowly, just above stall speed) across and around the reefs. If the wind is up you can fish a streamer in a dead drift. I had several trout snap up a hot-pink cone head Woolly Bugger as soon as it hit the water. As top predators, lake trout are piscivorous so large cone-heads, deceivers and zonkers are your best options (earth colors, hot pink, orange and white). I used an Orvis Helios 8-weight rod (tip flex) with a large arbor reel, a sink tip line and steelhead leader. (Pack a spare rod.)

Bugs were not an issue. We did not run into any grizzlies which are in the area. We were loaded for bear, with bear spray, two 12-Gauge Shotguns with slugs and bear bangers. Grizzlies are a fact of life in Yukon. On other trips I'd often see several during the course of a week, occasionally three or four in a day. Don rented a satellite phone in case of emergencies and developed a daily sked with the main lodge on the Lower Toobally Lake. I brought three 2-way radios so the parties could stay in touch while on the water.

Angling licenses for Yukon can be obtained online:
www.env.gov.yk.ca/hunting-fishing-trapping/fishinglicences.php
 We had Canadian Boat Operator's Licenses, required by law. There's a limit of 3 trout daily (only one may be longer than 26 inches). Barbless hooks are mandatory.



Peter Brewster (R) and Grant Hopkins at Upper Toobally Lake



Signpost forest at Watson Lake, Yukon



Every item of cargo must be weighed before being loaded on a float plane to stay within limits



Lake trout fillet



Lake trout appetizers

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For the most part the daily drill was similar throughout our stay. Adrienne and I along with Don and Betty would come back to the lodge for lunch. We'd enjoy a comfort break and stretch our legs after a morning on the water. Then we'd do some more fishing in the afternoon, exploring the lake and its many bays, in search of shoals, before returning for dinner to celebrate time spent on the water. Grant and Peter packed a lunch and fished all day long. One evening it rained, a good excuse to light a fire in our air tight stove and listen to it roar as rain splattered the cabin's tin roof. Another day the winds came up so we stayed on shore most of the day, exploring around camp. We enjoyed lake trout appetizers and had a couple of shore lunches but kept our take to a minimum – we only harvested and ate six trout during the trip, to minimize our impact, and put only a small dent in the standing crop of trout. Of the two trout that Adrienne and I harvested one had three ciscoes in its stomach; stomach contents of the other trout were unidentifiable forage fish.

After our trip Peter exclaimed, "I was ruminating this week on what a wonderful adventure we all had at Upper Toobally Lake. I keep looking at photos, reliving memories, and grinning widely." Don echoed "Yes, our trip to Upper Toobally was one of the best we've had, great fishing, good accommodation in wild country and good companionship with good friends. What more do you need?" Perhaps Grant summed up the trip best, however, when he said "If I never catch another lake trout, I'll die happy!"

The famed Alaska Highway



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