

# The Big Land

## Last Frontier for Giant Squaretails By Paul Smith

Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, like many other regions of North America, we consider brook trout a lofty and most prestigious gamefish. I wonder why that is so? It is truly a most lovely fish from an aesthetic perspective. Its proportion is pleasing to the eye, as well as its amazing colouration. I've always been fascinated with the pattern on a brook trout's back. With its squiggly greenish yellow markings on a darker background, it blends so well into the strata beneath. They are notoriously difficult to see from above, a trait no doubt owing to millions of evolutionary years. And in autumn, as spawning time approaches, the males take on a most spectacular kaleidoscopic appearance, showing off antics I suppose. The trout's pale belly transforms to a deep orange and red mix, bordered at its deepest extent by defined lines of black and white. Its fins follow suit, as if the gods helped out these watery suitors with brush and palette. Only arctic char come close.

But do we love brook trout just for their beauty? Are we fly fishers and anglers that shallow in our tastes? What of brown trout, pike, and lakers? Are they not worthy? I think we are permitted favorites, and I think the love affair runs deeper, to the essence of wild places and unspoiled wilderness. Brook trout by their nature cannot tolerate unclean water and a tampered environment. They are not muddy water catfish. Like a canary in a coal mine, brook trout are an indicator of land and water that is unspoiled and in pristine condition. Maybe it's the inner environmentalist in us anglers that lure us to the brook trout.

I grew up catching brook trout. Dad bought me rubber boots and a bamboo pole not long after I learned to walk, for sure before I could read. There are many more on this island and in Labrador who I'm sure have the same fond memories. After school in springtime, my buddies and I would ride bikes to local ponds. Some of us had rods and reels, but others managed to lash on bamboo poles with shop twine. Kids could tie knots in those days, a dying art I might add. Maybe we love catching brook trout for nostalgia, a sense of well-being derived from a lifelong continuum of happy pursuit. For whatever reason, there is something special about catching brook trout. These days I am passionate about chasing them with offerings of fur and feather. There are many that share my love of the rise.

To this day I totally enjoy a walk in the woods to my favorite fishing hole, as much as ever, in spite of having fished for all sorts of species all over the world. The brook trout I catch are small by trophy water standards. A nice one is fourteen inches, and the average size is about ten or eleven. They are what I call pan trout in this neck of the woods. I keep just enough for one meal and release the rest, that's if the fishing is good. Brook trout are the tastiest fish I have ever eaten, with arctic char a close second. Is there a correlation here? Why are the most beautiful fish the most pleasing to the palate? It's just another mystery of fishing.

There comes a time in the life of most every trout angler when you feel the urge to do something special. Catching a brook trout over four pounds is indeed something extra special. Where to go? Brookies over four pounds are becoming more and more difficult to catch on the island portion of Newfoundland and Labrador. I've caught a few in my lifetime but those were for the most part decades ago.



Many of our best brook trout waters have been seriously abused. Back in the 70's there were plenty of whoppers in the Indian Bay watershed. Through over fishing and poaching, it's a far different story today. And there are many other similar sad stories, some because of environmental issues, like hydro projects, Star Lake comes to mind, and others depleted by pure greed. We collectively have much to learn about conservation and stewardship.

There are still plenty of big trout in the Big Land. Landing them on the fly over four is not at all difficult. These trophy sized fish swim in many lakes and rivers. Four pounds is generally considered a trophy brook trout in the angling world, a specimen worthy of framed photos and fiberglass replicas. Yes indeed, nowadays you can have a wall mount without killing the fish. You just need a photo and vital dimensions. Great stuff.

What about you want to catch a trout of a lifetime, a brook trout over seven, or even eight pounds. These are monsters, behemoths of the species. There are few places left on our aging planet to catch these prizes. Fortunately for us Labrador is at the top of that very short list. And one of the absolute best shots at a gigantic trout is Igloo Lake, just 70 miles by float plane south of Goose Bay on the Eagle River Plateau. Jim Burton owns a lodge there and I have no hesitation hailing it one of the best fishing camps period. I haven't been to them all but I've certainly been around. This is a fine place to fish and a wonderful location to catch brook trout.

Fishing is not just about catching, and the guides and staff at Igloo Lake make the whole Labrador angling experience absolutely unforgettable, even if you only catch one eight pounder. What am I saying? There are folks who would sell half their soul for an eight pound brook trout. And I was one of them. Any more than one is pure gluttony.

But on Igloo Lake such overindulgence is entirely possible.

There are no guarantees in angling no matter where you swing your rod. For a while now I've been on the trail of special fish, a 20 pound brown, a 30 pound salmon, and an eight pound brookie. I've journeyed to Norway and Russia for the salmon and came close. I managed a 15 pound brown on the Rio Grande in Argentina. I haven't given up. I've been to Igloo Lake twice and both times hit the eight pound mark. This is a very special place.

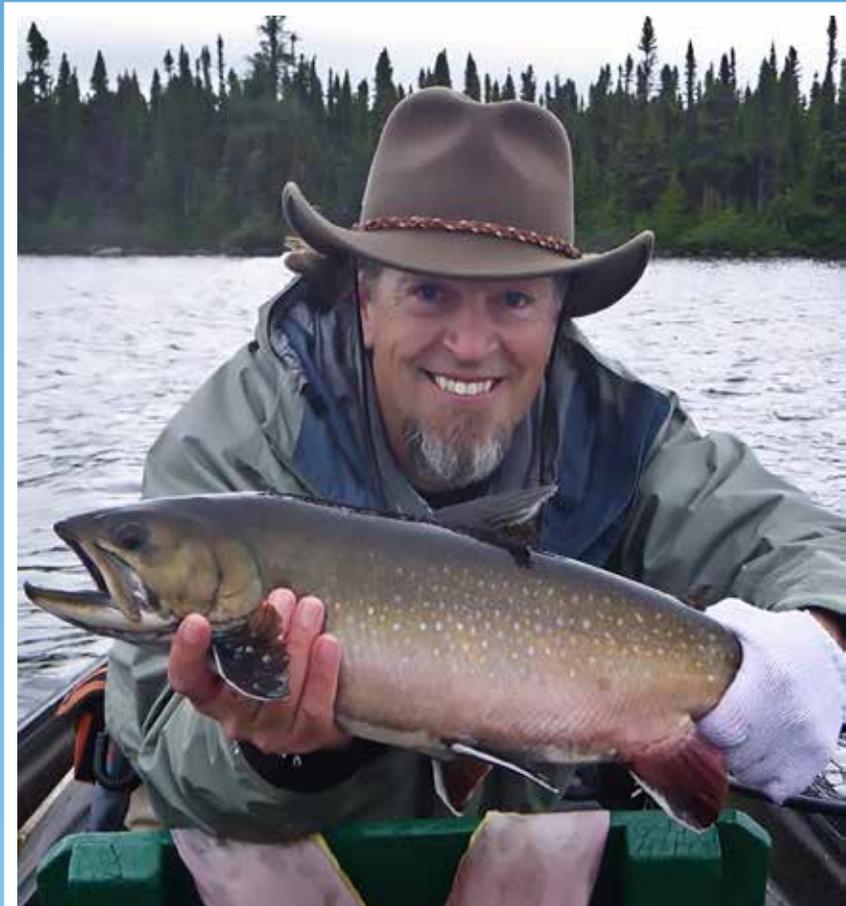
There are choices you will have to make about fishing Igloo. Fishing style and odds of bigger trout vary throughout the season. There's lots of information about this on Jim's website. Rising a giant brookie to a dry fly, amidst a hatch of naturals is quintessential match the hatch fly angling. I wanted it badly. So for my first trip to Igloo during the summer of 2014 I chose the last week of June when the mayflies would be on the water. I was lucky in that it was a fantastic year for flies. There were prolific hatches all over the lake. Hatches depend on weather and water temperatures, and so the density and timing varies from one year to the next. Like I said, certainties in fishing do not exist. We must accept this or take up golf.

It was a beautiful afternoon on the lake. Our Gander River boat cut like a razor sharp knife though the tiny ripples. We were on the hunt for feeding trout along a long Labrador shoreline, typically of spruce and fir, but alders and bushes in abundance at the water's edge. This was the bustling action zone. Mayflies were hatching up to about 100 feet offshore and subsequently landing on those convenient deciduous leaves, drying themselves, and preparing for mating and death. It's the stark cycle of life in action. After years living as swimming nymphs in Igloo Lake, these insects had just a few hours in the Labrador sunshine, to mate, deposit thousands of eggs, and die on the water's surface.



The winters are long in Labrador. There isn't much food to sustain big trout so they take full advantage of this mayfly protein rich extravaganza that was unfolding on the water ahead of us. Trout were breaking the surface. Frank, our guide cut the engine and we glided quietly to a stop. I was fishing with John Lupinetti from Delaware, a very competent fly angler. We were armed with matching the natural offerings of black in size 14, and they weren't that easy to distinguish on the water amidst the real deal. Keeping the eye on the fly at distance was a challenge. Several times I plucked as a trout took a natural, and once I remained motionless while a trout flossed with my fly. Although Igloo has an abundance of giant trout, catching them on a tiny dry fly isn't trivial.

Experienced big trout don't waste energy while feeding. It just wouldn't make sense. They move under a mass of hatching insects and swim slowly beneath in a near straight line, sipping mayflies from the surface as they go. The angler's job is to judge the distance between rises and place the fly the correct distance ahead of the trout and directly in the feeding lane. The cast has to be quite accurate, within inches, the distance varying from 20 feet to however far one can deliver the goods. The game was on, sight casting for brookies. There's nothing better. John and I took turns targeting trout. Sometimes the fish would choose a natural and reject our artificial, but once in a while old squaretail would slurp the wrong one and the hook would find its hold in grizzled flesh. What a rush, fighting deep-bellied lunkers on wispy sticks of graphite. The gods were truly smiling on us, dry fly fishing at its finest for the crown prince of game fish. They say Atlantic salmon is king. Before the hatch ended we had boated and released around five or six trout each, and all over six pounds. We both had one over eight magnificent pounds. This was the Holy Grail, a once in a life time hour of fishing. Maybe it was two hours. Time flies, as you can well imagine. I was at Igloo for a week and caught many trout both by sight casting and blind casting. It was an amazing week. In 2015 I returned, this time in early September to experience autumn fishing and brilliant spawning colours. I caught just as many big trout, but in a totally different region of the lake and by using completely different flies and techniques. It's such an interesting fishery and so much to tell. I'll talk fall fishing another time. And then there are neighbouring lakes that you can visit that have unique charms of their own. The Big Land, every angler should visit at least once, the last frontier for giant squaretails. Maybe we will cross paths there some day.



*Author with a large Igloo Lake Brookie*

