

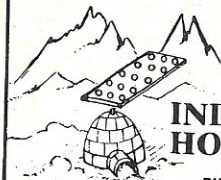
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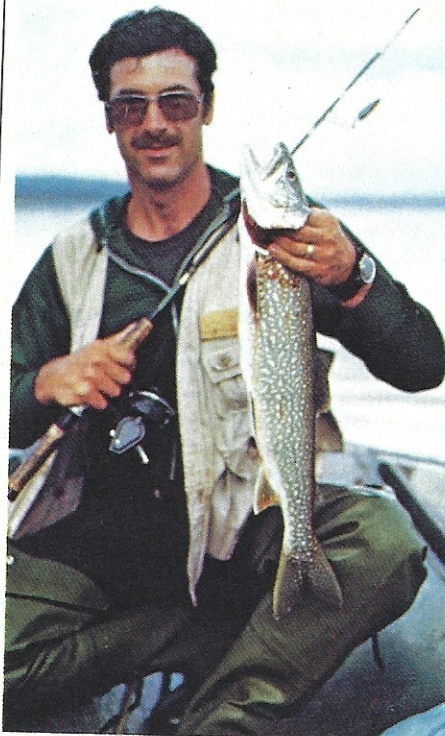


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Alaska Lake Trout Adventures

Story and photos by Don Vachini



I had a longtime ambition to battle North America's largest char, the lake trout, on light tackle. In the Lower 48, lake trout usually exist at depths of 150 to 350 feet and must be fished with heavy rods, lead-core line, and heavy sinkers, which diminish the fish's fighting qualities. Alaska, however, has many wilderness waters where surface temperatures are cool enough so that lake trout are at or near the surface year-round.

To satisfy my ambition, during the summer of 1980 George DiRuscio and I, both from California, made a 2½-week journey to Old John and Telaquana lakes, both fly-in wilderness lakes in Alaska.

I found myself methodically casting and retrieving a spoon from deep to shallow water in Telaquana

Neither lake we visited was noted for its trophy-size fish but, caught on ultra-light tackle, lake trout of this size tested tackle as well as nerves.

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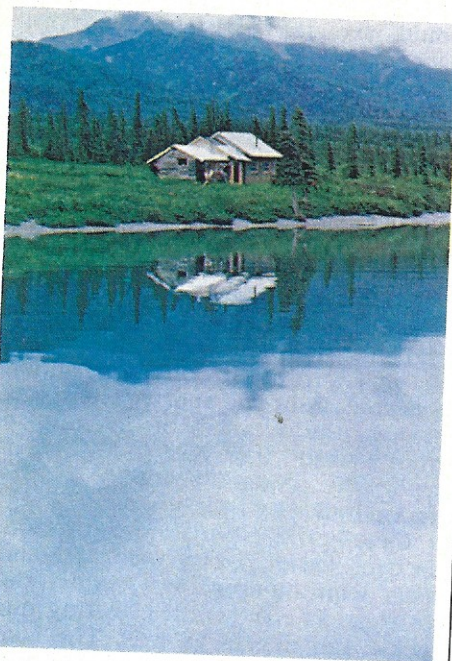
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Lake, which lies at 1,219 feet in the Alaska Range. It is a vast intermountain jewel, and 8,050-foot Mount Telaquana and other snow-covered peaks towered above as I considered events of the previous 12 days.

Telaquana Lake, 75 miles north-east of the village of Nondalton at Lake Clark, lies in a glaciated valley with peaks on three sides, giving it an alpine setting and making it appear smaller than its 3- by 10-mile dimensions. It is primarily glacier-fed. Like Old John Lake, the ice goes out around mid-June.



Both air taxi services provided cabins, boats, and motors as part of their deals. This cabin on Lake Telaquana proved very cozy as well as aesthetically pleasing.

Old John Lake, at 2,229 feet, is about 200 miles north of Fairbanks on the south slope of the Brooks Range, is 2 by 5 miles in size, and lies among the rolling tundra-covered foothills, and has a fairly open appearance. It is fed by snow melt and seepage from the rain-soaked tundra.

Although the surroundings of the two lakes differ, both have ideal lake trout habitat — rocky shoals, steep dropoffs, and wind-oxygenated waters. Grayling are abundant in both lakes.

Both lakes are accessible only by floatplane. Elliot's Wilderness Flying, Fairbanks, took us to Old John; Ketchum Air Service, Anchorage, took us to Telaquana: both deals included use of cabin, boat, and outboard motor.

Our tackle consisted of 6½-foot ultra-light spinning rods and matching reels loaded with 4- to 6-pound monofilament line and plenty of good backing. Small to medium

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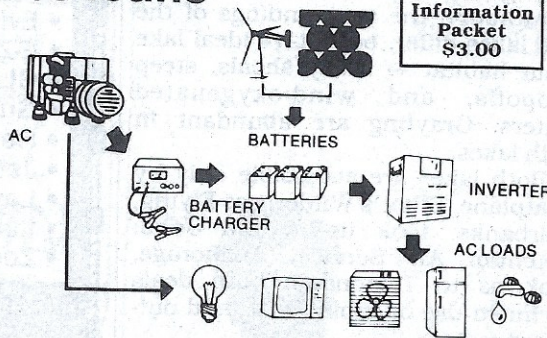
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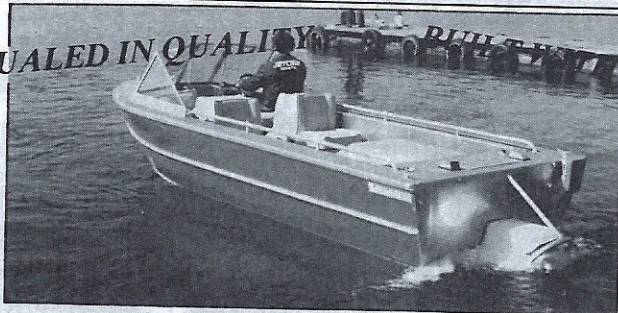
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My first encounter with a lake trout, which proved typical, was at Old John Lake. While trolling a Hot Rod spoon about 25 feet deep along a rocky shoal my rod bent sharply, much as if I had hooked a snag, and I stopped rowing. After about half my line was reeled in, the "snag" violently came to life as the line melted from the spool and my rod telegraphed signs of heavy action. Several bottom-seeking surges ensued, pulling my rod tip into the water each time. In the clear water I could see the mottled laker roll repeatedly in a freedom-seeking effort.

After a give-and-take battle which involved sweaty palms and an increased heart rate, I boated a 24-inch, 7¼-pound fork-tailed lake trout. Admiring it against the background of wilderness and distant peaks was a moment I won't soon forget.

During our stay we caught and released numerous lakers between 5 and 8 pounds at both lakes. Although the fish were not trophy size, action was consistent and sporty. There was always the chance of hooking a trophy-sized fish, as both lakes reportedly produce a few 22- to 25-pound lunkers annually.

Usually the fish made several runs for deep water, and the rods' arch and reels' whining drag were characteristic signs of our scuffles, testing our tackle and nerves as well. The lake trout were worthy fighters, especially when matched with ultra-light gear.

We kept a few for the skillet — and they were delicious — but released most, exchanging a good fight for their freedom.

Fantastic angling was not the only reward in this wonderland. Even though boats with outboard motors were at our disposal, and necessary for the amount of water travel we did, we were more satisfied when we could row and enjoy the quiet. In the Bush, harsh sounds of civilization are replaced by the splendid natural sounds of waves washing on rocks and beaches, wind whispering through spruces, raven wing beats cutting air, and the lonely call of a grebe.

Even slight movements were more noticeable to us: a beaver cutting a v-shaped swath across a lake outlet, grayling dimpling the glass-like surface, a surfacing duck.

The long hours of summer daylight at these far north lakes add to the timelessness of a visit. With around 20 hours of daylight, several catnaps of one and two hours replaced lengthy sleep, for we wished to make use of every moment.

The weather was mostly sunny and warm, but, typical of mountainous country in summer, it often changed abruptly to thunder, wind, and rain, driving us from the lake for short periods. Extremes in weather are part of this country and must be prepared for. In addition to woolen clothing necessary for warmth, rain gear and hip boots are a must.

By choosing two different fly-in lakes, well apart, we were given a kaleidoscopic view of some of Alaska's majestic wilderness. The more we saw the more we realized that most of this land will stay wild; it is so vast that it is mind-boggling.

Alaska was billed to us as a land of super fishing, and in the areas we fished it was certainly that. The light-gear lake trout successes were outstanding both from action and sporting viewpoints.

And my longtime angling quest for battling lake trout on light tackle was truly fulfilled. □

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