

# The Old John Experience

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*by Don Vachini*

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Numerous ring-like dimples on the glassy surface of the lake signaled a multitude of feeding fish. Tying on a size 14 mosquito imitation, I waded a short distance off shore and began searching for the likeliest looking dimple that would produce a trophy grayling. I was on the verge of completing a life-long dream.

My partner, George Diruscio, and I were fishing interior Alaska's Old John Lake in early July. We have both long recognized the wonderful bounty of wilderness fishing opportunities Alaska offers, and were happy to sample its wares.

One of my goals in traveling to the 49th State was to pursue arctic grayling on ultralight equipment. Being an avid trout fisherman, grayling were on my catch list for many years. Beyond token populations, Alaska is the only place in the United States where they can be caught readily. Their high dorsal fin, willingness to take a fly and penchant for existing only in the cleanest, coldest, and clearest waters of the great north made them appealing to me.

We made arrangements with Bob Elliott, a licensed hunting and fishing guide and commercial pilot located in Fairbanks, to spend three days and nights at the lake.

"Grayling are numerous in the shallow bays near the feeder and outlet streams," Bob explained. "But," he went on, "It is also known for its lake trout fishing!"

Since we sought both species, (lake trout on ultralight tackle was our other goal), Old John Lake was an easy decision.

To reach the lake, we flew north over the White Mountains, which somewhat resemble a scaled-down version of California's Sierra Nevada, traversed the wide open Yukon Flats, a maze of creeks and lakelets including the silty Yukon River, crossed the invisible Arctic Circle, and finally, two hours later, arrived at our destination.

As part of the fly-in service, a small cabin is provided at the lake, which is located on the southern slope of the Brooks Range, at 2,229 feet above sea level. Since the lake is large, (five miles by two miles), the boat, motor, and gas also provided are not only welcome, but necessary items.

"We only bring clients into this lake  
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Arctic grayling. Chris Batin photo

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for about three to four weeks out of the year," Elliott said, "in order to maintain the excellent fishing."

Wasting no time, we were fishing within half an hour after the plane left. Standing thigh deep in the slow moving current at the lake's outlet I mentioned at the beginning of this article, my fly disappeared in a swirl and I responded by gently lifting my rod tip, which initiated an exciting series of events.

A torpedo-shaped object erupted into the air, violently shattering the water's calm image as it re-entered. With my fly hooked securely in its mouth, the slender battler made several gallant, rod bending runs, each time displaying its wide, fan-shaped dorsal fin. All this activity soon tired the fish, and I led the 14-inch grayling to my hand where it was carefully cradled and admired.

Releasing the brown-hued beauty back into its domain, I now experienced the personal high which accompanies the completion of a long, sought-after goal.

After an action-packed session of catch and release, I slowly began to take note of the surroundings. The lake surface appeared as a mirror as I scanned it from shore to shore. It not only captured the images of some white clouds above, but also the outline of the tundra-covered foothills nearby and some far-away mountain peaks.

Rocky shoals characterize more than half its shoreline, with several shelves dropping steeply to depths of 200 feet or more. According to Elliott, "The lake ices over from about mid-November to early June," keeping the water clear and cold. Frequent summer thunderstorms serve to "turn over" the surface water, thus aerating deeper water. All these factors make for ideal grayling and lake trout habitat. Most lake trout in Old John average between five and eight pounds, but Elliott's wife, Rachele, showed us photos of fish to 25 pounds taken from its waters.

We were equipped with six-foot ultralight spinning rods and reels loaded with four-pound-test monofilament and two-pound leaders. This set up allowed us to utilize both lures and flies with the same outfit.

For fly fishing, we attached a clear plastic bubble three to four feet above the fly. Pinching on a small BB weight a foot or so from the fly enabled us to fish it wet.

For lure fishing, we eliminated the two-pound leaders, tying the lure directly to the four-pound line.

Our fly fishing technique for Old John grayling was simple. Locating the fish

by watching for rises, we would cast the fly/bubble combo beyond the ripple and slowly twitch it back to shore.

Lures, such as size 0 and 1 Mepps, were very successful in the faster water of the feeder and outlet creeks. Casting upstream, allowing it to drift past, and retrieving from downstream proved a very effective technique.

We never knew what size fish, either lake trout or grayling, would hit our offerings, but one thing was certain--either species was extremely willing to take a fly.

As my Brown Hackle vanished for the tenth consecutive time, I anticipated another 14-inch grayling as I softly set the hook. Much to my surprise, a streamlined gray missle launched itself out of the water and upon its return, bore meaningfully toward the middle of the lake, causing a metallic, grating screech in my reel. Several minutes later, I landed a stocky, five-pound-plus lake trout. Indeed, it was a pleasant surprise! I released it back into the lake to fight again another day.

Another interesting aspect of Old John Lake was its exhilarating, yet sobering silence. The only sounds were those of a grebe or seagull.

Adding to the aura of silence was the presence of continual daylight. For only a few hours every 24 does a twilight condition exist, giving a true sense of timelessness to this country during June and July.

The next day, we explored Vanticlese Creek, which was the outlet stream located about a mile from the cabin. The creek presented some classic fishing water: 20 to 25 feet wide, brushy banks, with a few open spots; deep pools and riffles over a moderate gradient. We are stream fishermen at heart and this sight was like home to us.

"Some big grayling can be found there," I remember Elliott saying. "You'll lose gear trying for them, though," he warned us. "So take plenty of lures and flies."

Daydreaming about the pleasant

fishing experiences the past two days, I was rudely jolted back to reality as my rod heaved mightily and the four-pound mono whined from my spool. In the fast current, the fish acted as if it were a fresh-run steelhead, bursting upstream in a flash.

Amid shouts of encouragement from George, I applied pressure, watching it perform several rolls in a freedom-seeking effort in the fast water, continually taxing not only my gear, but nerves too. The steady pressure worked as the fish gradually tired.

Upon lifting it from the stream, its flaring, sail-like dorsal glimmered with rose, yellow, and flame-blue dots and its body, which was definitely much thicker than any of its lake counterparts, exhibited a silver-blue cast.

Measuring 17 inches and tipping the needle of my pocket Deliar at three pounds, five ounces, it was a true trophy, not only in terms of size, but also in the manner in which it battled. Though I will never forget this particular prize, any grayling caught in this great expanse of land is a trophy.

While it was the mystique of the Arctic grayling that brought us here to this mountain jewel, we will always remember Old John Lake for its many varied splendors such as expanses of carpet-like tundra, a pair of inquisitive beavers, swarms of hungry mosquitoes, and the inner knowledge that one is separated from the outside world by what seems to be an eternity of un-walkable miles.

Battling a fish in this type of environment is what the Last Frontier is all about. In this setting, mere fishing becomes an awe-inspiring event--one to be enjoyed and relished. Thanks Old John Lake, for a wonderful wilderness experience!



*Don Vachini is a California-based writer specializing in trout fishing subjects.*

## Trip Facts

A number of fly-in, wilderness waters are available from Fairbanks. They are accessible by floatplane only and good for one-day trips or extended stays of several days and nights. Prepared tent camps or cabins with boats, motors, and gas, as well as stoves and cooking utensils, are included in the wilderness packages which range from \$99 per person to \$280 per person. Price depends upon the location of the water to be fished.

An Alaska non-resident fishing license costs \$30, or a 10-day license costs \$15.

They can be purchased upon your arrival in Fairbanks.

Other items can be rented from the air taxi operators. However, "must" items include: mosquito repellent and head netting; quality rain gear, ankle-fit hip boots, extra rod, reel, and line; plenty of film and compact, easy to prepare food.

For more information contact either Bob Elliott, 5920 Airport Way, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701 or Wright's Air Service, Box 60142, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701