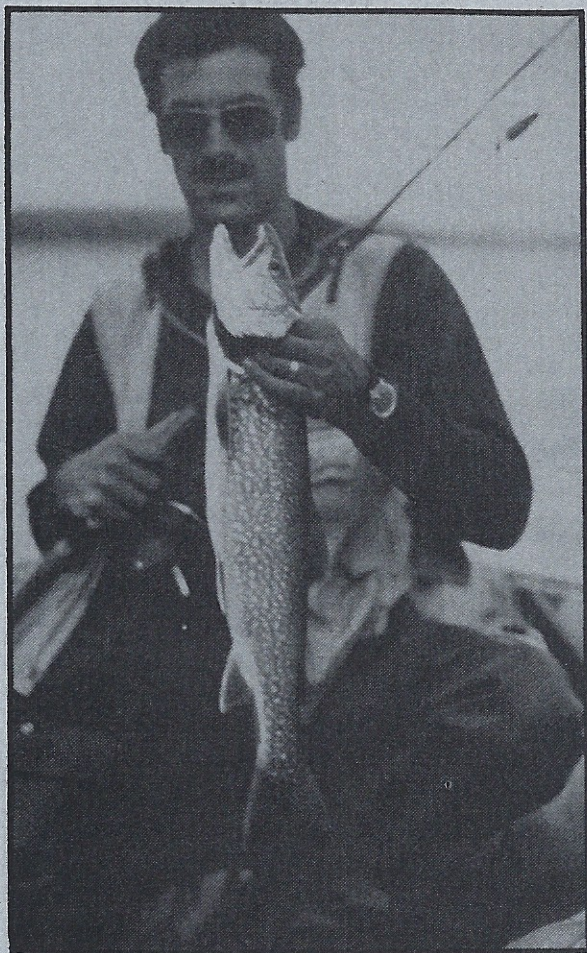


# Ultra-Light Experience

## at Midnight

By DON VACHINI



Most Old John lake trout were between 5-8 pounds and, caught on ultra-light tackle, fought gallantly. Author poses with a colorful 7 pound specimen.

**I** was in the process of rowing our boat while trolling across an underwater shelf. While plying my trade with the oars, my rod suddenly lurched and bent as if the bottom were snagged. However, as I returned pressure, I felt the unmistakable action of a heavy fish. After reeling in about half the line with nothing but a seemingly dead weight on it, the fish suddenly came alive. It bore swiftly toward the bottom, thrashing

mightily, causing a violent throbbing in my rod. Twice it was worked toward the surface and twice it peeled line off my reel, plunging straight down below the boat.

My first glimpse of the lake trout caused my heart to skip a beat. The speckled beauty was highly visible in the crystal water and I could observe it twisting and rolling in a freedom-seeking effort. My rod was bent almost double and its tip was repeatedly pulled into the water with each bottom-seeking surge.

Though a lake trout was on one end of my line and I on the other, the battle was fairly unique, because there was no heavy gear normally associated with laker fishing. I was using an ultra-light rod and reel with 6-pound line and, quite frankly, had my hands full!

My partner George DiRuscio and I were fishing Old John Lake the last

day of June, 1980. We have long recognized Alaska as a fisherman's paradise, offering a variety of fish species in a wilderness setting.

I am an avid trout fisherman and have caught all my trout on ultra-light equipment. The ultra-light approach appeals to me because of the finesse it places on playing the fish carefully, especially the larger specimens.

I had two goals in traveling to the

49th state. One was to try for lake trout, one of North America's largest trout species (the lake trout is actually a char), on ultra-light gear. Goal number two was to try for arctic grayling, a close relative of the trout family, also on ultra-light equipment. Since the lake trout grow to a large size in general, they posed the greatest challenge.

George, a good friend, was to accompany me. He is an excellent photographer with an interest in fishing.

Old John Lake lies on the southern slope of Alaska's Brooks Range at an elevation of 2,229 feet. It is approximately five miles long and two and a half miles wide. The lake is located about 200 miles north of Fairbanks and is accessible by air only.

After much correspondence and research, we made arrangements with Bob Elliott of Elliott's Wilderness Flying, located in Fairbanks, to be flown into the lake for three days and nights. He had recommended the lake for our attempt to take lake trout with light gear. According to Bob, a licensed hunting and fishing guide as well as a commercial pilot, the lake also had an abundant supply of grayling. Since both species we sought were present, Old John was a logical choice.

We would have use of a cabin, boat, motor, and a plentiful supply of gas during our stay.

In Bob's floatplane we flew north across the White Mountains, the Yukon flats and crossed the Arctic Circle before alighting on the lake. The flight took two hours.

The vastness of the tundra we flew over was mind-boggling. Its carpet-like appearance made it seem like it rolled

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"A dream of fishing for grayling and lake trout on ultra-light tackle leads me deep into the Alaskan wilderness in search of my quarry."

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on forever. Obviously, air travel is the only feasible method in this wilderness.

The cabin was small but in excellent condition, equipped with bunkbeds, table, chairs, propane and wood stoves and cooking utensils, plus a wide variety of food staples.

Before leaving, Bob sketched a rough map of the lake. "Troll the points outside the bays and along here for lake trout," he said pointing to a spot where a large dropoff and several shoal areas existed. "Grayling are found near the tributary and outlet creeks," he added. With those instructions, he left us to do battle with the fish for which we had traveled over 2,000 miles. George and I were the only humans on the lake.

Our first attempt to take lake trout took place shortly after the plane took off. We decided to troll an area Bob had suggested, located about two miles from the cabin. Our rigging consisted of 6½-foot ultra-light spinning rods and matching ultra-light spinning reels loaded with 6-pound line and plenty of backing. Half-ounce silver Hot Rod spoons provided the "bait."

We rowed back and forth across a rocky shoal, rather than using the motor, to give the lure a slow and erratic action. We hadn't rowed more than three minutes when I had my first lake trout encounter.

Since I was using light line, I was forced to take my time playing out the mackinaw. Too much pressure and my line could snap, yet the longer the fish was on the greater its chances of breaking off.

The battle seemed endless, but because the lake contained no snags it became a test of patience and smooth reel drag. Ten minutes later the fish tired and I was able to grab it behind the gill-covers and lift it on board (in our haste, we had left the net back in the cabin). The laker had line wrapped around its head several times due to its rolling escape movements. This line tangling technique is fairly common in taking lakers.

With my pulse still racing, I silently admired the 7¼-pound olive-green mottled specimen in my grasp. The pale spots on dark green body together with deeply forked tail firmly identified the fish as a lake trout.

I looked around at the mirror-clear lake, reflecting the surrounding mountains on its glassy surface, and breathed deeply. My first lake trout had been a worthy adversary and the quiet setting further enhanced the moment.

During the next two days, George and I caught and released numerous forktails. Lake trout thrive in the clear, cold waters of Old John Lake. Rocky shoals characterize more than half its shoreline, with several deep shelves falling off abruptly to depths of 300 feet or more. This type of structure not only provides good feeding areas, but suitable spawning habitat for *Salvelinus namaycush*.

The lake is iced over from about November to early June and for the two to three weeks after ice-out lakers are found at or near the surface due to the cold temperature of the surface water (about 39° to 40°F.). During this time, small spinners and streamer flies are the ticket as the fish feed voraciously to make up for a lean winter. Lakers normally prefer an average temperature of about 45°F.

We were about a week late for that type of action, as the surface temperature had soared to 49°F. However, we still had some excellent results fishing at around 40 to 60 feet, where our thermometer read a marrow-chilling 42°F.

We used two different techniques in our attempt to fool mackinaw trout: One was to drift above one of the deep

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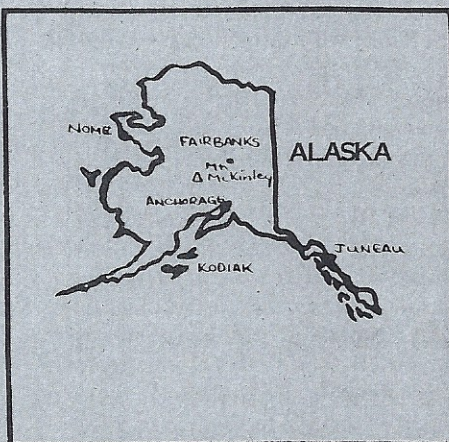
dropoffs and allow either a white- or yellow-skirted mini-jig to sink to the bottom in about 150 to 200 feet of water. We then would bounce or "jig" the lure up and down while we drifted. This method was not very successful as the fish were most likely scattered at shallower depths.

The other technique was to troll back and forth along the rocky shoals, which were visible to about 30 feet, zig-zagging to vary lure depth. We used both 1/4- and 1/2 ounce silver Hot Rod and Glass-eyed spoons, both of which resemble erratic moving baitfish. Sometimes we used the motor and other times the oars. However, we had our best results while rowing, probably due to the fluttering movement of the spoons caused by our herky-jerky oar action.

Sometimes, after locating fish by trolling, we simply drifted while casting and retrieving our spoons. This too proved successful as on three occasions we hooked into doubles.

Unlike most trout, the laker's strike was a light hit, and resembled a dead weight at first, simply bending the rod. However, they soon began offering resistance and at the same time made a beeline for deeper water. They fought with a lot of spirit, and virtually always

chose to search out the bottom. Even when brought near the boat, they always attempted to dive straight down again.



A light and smooth drag was essential, as their final bursts were usually quick and unexpected. Many times they would tear off 50 to 60 yards just when it appeared they were beaten. This would not have been possible on heavy gear.

Most fish caught were between 20 to 24 inches and 5 to 8 pounds, not especially large but extremely challenging and gratifying on ultra-light gear. Bob showed us pictures of lakers to 25 pounds taken from the lake.

Although a few were kept for eating purposes (they were culinary delights), most were released to grow and fight another day. We were aware of the fact that in this land the lakers grow at a slow rate due to the short growing season and to keep too many would be depleting the fishery, even though they are abundant. Since the light-gear challenge was our main incentive, we chose to reward the fish with their lives in return for a gallant battle.

Though the main attraction was lake trout, by no means was it the only action. Arctic grayling were ever-present in the shallow bays and near the creeks. We would usually spend two or three hours chasing lakers and then, after a meal and brief rest, pursue the grayling for several more hours for a pleasant change.

Incidentally, during the summer the sun never sets on this land. Evening hours are as bright as daylight and it is only for a few hours every 24 that a twilight prevails. This allowed us to take brief rests periodically instead of "losing" an evening's fishing due to darkness.

The best area by far was in and near Vanticlese Creek, the outlet stream. In fact, the biggest grayling of the trip came from this creek, which was located about

one mile from the cabin.

Water tumbled in a moderate gradient over a gravel-strewn bed for about 250 yards where it leveled into several huge pools. Brush surrounded the stream in most places, making access difficult. However, it was easily waded downstream to the first pool, where the bottom wouldn't support weight, making it unwise to proceed.

For grayling, our gear consisted of the same 6½-foot ultra-light rod and reel combination used for lake trout. However, we carried a variety of spools, each with different size test line, to easily change from 6- to 4-pound line in a matter of minutes. On the terminal end we used either Mepps spinners (size 0-1) or a fly and bubble arrangement. The grayling is such a delicate fish that using anything over 4-pound line would be a crime. Our choice varied between 2- and 4-pound line.

After wading downstream from the lake about 100 yards, I cast a size 0 silver Mepps spinner upstream and allowed the rushing water to carry it downstream and across current. On one particular cast, my lure stopped abruptly, and I groaned "snag." However, my snag quickly moved and darted downstream. After a spectacular battle, divided between aerial maneuvers and cross-stream runs, I led a 17-inch, 4-pound, one-ounce torpedo-shaped combatant to shore — a trophy grayling. Later I realized it was only 10 ounces shy of the current Alaska state record!

Within minutes, two more purple-gray *Thymallus arcticus* of slightly less size were caught and released — all amid a misty drizzle and constant droning of incalculable numbers of mosquitoes.

Though we caught bigger fish in Vanticlese Creek, most consistent action occurred in the lake, about 40 to 50 feet from shore where the current starts moving toward the outlet. Grayling of all sizes cruised in abundance in this area, dimpling the surface like large raindrops, as insect life was delivered to them by moving water.

Using small dark flies (Royal Coachman, Brown Hackle, and Moquito Imitation, sizes 14-16), 4-pound line, 3-pound leader and a small clear bubble three feet above the fly, we cast out into the lake and slowly twitched it back toward the outlet. Occasionally a BB shot was pinched on a foot or so above the fly to fish it wet.

Various-sized grayling would hit on almost every other cast, and we never knew if it was going to be a 6-incher or a 14-incher. We were confident, how-

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ever, that a scrappy battle would ensue. Once I caught five on five successive casts — all around 8 to 9 inches. As my Brown Hackle disappeared in a swirl for the sixth time, I anticipated another 8-incher. Surprisingly, as I gently set the hook, my rod was turned into a parabolic arch and a gray rocket exploded completely out of the lake, flashing a wide dorsal fin before it shattered the lake's surface upon its return from orbit. After several more leaps and much thrashing about, I landed and released a thick 15-inch grayling, estimated well over 2 pounds.

This was one of our finest thrills in Alaska: fly fishing for these acrobatic fish. The action was near constant as they always seemed to be in a feeding mood, dimpling the surface or soaring completely out of the water while collecting insects. When hooked, they provided an extremely rewarding and challenging tussle, even more enjoyable on ultra-light tackle.

As their abundance would suggest, there is both adequate spawning and feeding opportunity for grayling. Aquatic life is plentiful in the lake and creeks, and good growth is attained. There are many spawning areas available in the creeks, too. Incidentally, grayling also provide good forage for lake trout, especially after ice-out.

Fishing did not account for all our memorable moments. We often shared the lake's outlet with a pair of inquisitive beaver and several gulls. Various species of ducks and grebes often cruised along with us as we trolled.

Moose, caribou, and grizzly bear are present in the area's low rolling hills and brushy tundra. Millions and millions of mosquitoes populate the marshy area around the lake. Mosquito repellent (one with 99% active ingredients is highly recommended) and head netting is absolutely necessary, as their constant picking and droning can wear on one's senses if not prepared.

Though not wholly recommended, there are some game trails along the ridges that offer walking routes when located. They also offer some excellent scenes for the camera buff.

The weather is typical of mountain weather in the summer — sunny and warm most of the time but with occasional thunderstorms. The storms last from 30 minutes to an hour, providing thunder, lightning, and heavy winds which turned the calm lake into choppy whitecaps. This process helps to oxygenate the deeper water by providing a

“turning over” process beneficial to deep-water lake trout. These storms point out the need for adequate rain-gear as well as the importance of taking safety precautions. It would be extremely unwise to venture out onto the lake in a boat during a storm.

Watching Bob's plane approach to pick us up, I recalled a few nostalgic moments on Old John Lake: the cozy cabin, the flora and fauna (especially the two beaver at midnight), and the

magnificent scenery. Joined with the fulfillment of the light-gear battles with lake trout and grayling, the bonus experiences of the past three days made our stay totally gratifying. Many of these memories are etched on film. However, many more are indelibly forged on our minds, ready to be recalled at a moment's notice. I, for one, will always remember Old John Lake as the place where you can fish ultra-light all night. □

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