

Birth of a Fly Angler
By Gord Ellis

Fly-fishing is an activity that intimidates many otherwise proficient anglers. Why this is so probably has more to do with its reputation of being difficult, than it actually being so. Truth be told, fly-fishing is one of the most natural and effortless ways to catch fish, and in my opinion among the most satisfying. However, there is a bit of a learning curve, and many first time fly anglers quit when they put a fly in the back of their head or worse. A failed fly fisherman rarely goes back to it.

So it was with all this in mind that I introduced my oldest son to fly fishing for the first time. The introduction took place on the Keezhik River, a daylong fly in out of Miminiska Lodge (www.wildernessnorth.com). The Keezhik is a small tributary to the Albany River, and is a legendary river among brook trout anglers. It is not too big to fish well, but not so small that there is no room to back cast. It also has some big brookies. All in all, it's a pretty good place to try fly-fishing for the first time. Three years ago, I had one of my most memorable fly-fishing days ever on this river, and it seemed like the perfect place for my oldest boy to get his first taste of trout on a fly rod. Pilot Guy Cannon, on an Otter owned by Wilderness North flew in my son Devin, our guide Tyler Lancaster and myself to Keezhik Lake. It was a quick flight to the lake from the lodge and just a short paddle to the outlet of the river and the first rapids. The first pool on the Keezhik nearly broke my heart on a previous trip when I hooked and lost an enormous brookie. Devin and I waded to the edge of the large pool, and I then went through the fundamentals of casting and retrieving a streamer with him. My son, who had done quite well throwing the rod on the Albany the day before, listened with the enthusiasm most teenagers have for parental advice. "I got it Dad," he said and proceeded to strip off a few lengths of line from his 5-weight rod. Tyler, who was standing with the canoe directly behind us, was also watching Devin closely.

"There should be a big one right in that riffle, Devin" he said. "Cast that fly out and let it sink a bit."

Devin started working the fly rod, putting perhaps a bit too much whip action into the back cast, but the fly was getting out there nonetheless. He then stripped the line in, and was rewarded with strike. The long rod bent deeply. "Let it take line son, don't horse it." I coached from the sidelines. The fish slugged it out deep, but soon rolled on the surface and revealed itself.

"Pike," said Devin.

A disappointment, but all far northern rivers have brook trout, walleye and pike living side by side. The presence of pike doesn't mean the others are not around. So Devin kept casting and, in time, I broke out a 5-weight Sage and joined him. After about 20 minutes, neither of us had caught a brookie. "Weird," said Tyler who has done half dozen trips down the Keezhik this year "We usually get a few nice ones here." Despite a reputation for being easy, brook trout can make you work for them. Devin, luckily, was fishing with impressive dedication. He was casting his bead head Woolly Buggar out into the current, letting it drop and then stripping the line back in at a snails pace. Just as our faith in the pool was dwindling, a fish took hold of Devin's fly.

"That's a brookie," said Tyler.

He was right. The fish rolled on top and the flash of a bright orange belly could be seen in the surface foam. The fish was taking line and Tyler was now helping Devin, giving him gentle advice on how to retrieve line while keeping a tight connection to the fish. Devin heeded the instruction and in a few minutes, Tyler was able to tail the wriggling trout with his gloved hand.

“Nice spec Devin!” said Tyler. Devin cracked a toothy smile, showing off his braces and enamel. “It felt like snag at first,” he said. “Then it started to move.” After the requisite pictures were taken, the colour dappled 18-inch trout was revived and released back to the pool. In my mind, the trip was already a success.

We decided to move on and paddled down the river until we reached a set of rapids a bit too swift to run. Tyler lined the canoe down, while Devin and I went through the bush. It was tricky walking, made worse by the fact we were both carrying our fly rods. Yet I’ve rarely seen trophy brook trout fishing on easy to access rivers! It was with much anticipation that we reached the pool at the base of the rapids.

“This spot is something else,” I said to Devin while we looked over the water. “This is where your Dad had some amazing trout fishing last time.” When Tyler arrived with the canoe, we discussed the best way to fish the pool. We concluded that Devin should stand at the top of the pool and cast out into the main flow. He could then strip his weighted olive streamer back against the current. The brook trout would be right in the main current. So Devin waded out and started working his fly line. I should mention that my son was wearing all hand-me-down gear. Despite my height and weight advantage (?) Devin fit into my bare chest waders pretty well. It helps that his feet are like two skateboards. That’s a trait we both share. He looked quite comfortable in the Columbia vest, which was a good thing as nothing is worse than feeling uncomfortable when you try something new.

Anyway, Devin got his cast going and laid out some line. The streamer disappeared into the foam and he once again started to work it back in. Tyler figured the larger specs would be further back in the pool. After a time, Devin was rewarded with another “snag”. This time, the snag rolled and there was the huge splash of a very large trout. The fish made quite a commotion before disappearing back into the pool. “Let him have line if he wants it Dev,” I said, excitedly. “Don’t try to force him in.”

Devin was pumped, but kept his rod high and stayed calm. I looked at Tyler and got the “this is a big one” look. We both knew that this section of the Keezhik could cough up hog-sized brookies. I’d landed a 23-incher here on my previous trip and Tyler had seen his share of trophies as well. The fight was a stalemate for a few moments, but the fish was not even close to tired. Then it bolted, pulling line off Devin’s little fly reel at a disturbing rate. The fish was into the backing when the fly just pulled out. We all kind of groaned, but Devin had done nothing wrong. He’d simply been bested by a very large brook trout. There is no shame in that.

Another lost spec or two, and a few more walleye and pike, were all we could muster after that so on we went. By now Devin was getting rather comfortable with the fly and was even doing a pretty decent roll cast. Tyler was great with Devin, taking over the coaching duties and letting me mostly just be the proud Dad and head photographer. When we left the hole I told Devin he had “unfinished business” in that pool.

As the day wore on, the fish got more active and started splashing on the surface. My sense was the recent mayfly hatches had slowed the morning bite down a little. No

matter, Devin would land several more nice brookies, including one spectacular trout that leaped from the water twice and took him well downstream. Even the old man got into the act. In one wide pool a spec of about 21 inches nailed my Matuka Sculpin just as I was pulling it up for a cast. It was a great fight and an awesome fish. Yet for me, the real joy of the day was to watch this young man - my son - experience the thrill of fly-fishing for the first time ever, on an exquisite northern brook trout river with the sun shining and the air pure. It was a day we'll never forget.