

My Early Spring Trip to the Keezhik and Wilderness North's Miminiska Lodge
Scott Earl Smith

Imagine flying into a remote spot in Northern Ontario – and then flying from there into an even more remote spot to fly fish for trophy brook trout! This is exactly what my father and I did this spring at Miminiska Lodge.

Our trip began with a Wasaya Air flight out of Thunder Bay Ontario. An hour later we landed at Miminiska Lodge's private air strip on Miminiska Lake, part of the Albany River system. We came with high expectations, and we weren't disappointed. The food and accommodations were spectacular at the lodge and we enjoyed three great days of fly fishing for pike and walleye on Miminiska Lake and in the Albany River. This is God's country in the truest sense of the word. Northern Ontario has some of the wildest unspoiled wilderness on our globe – and the fishing is as good as one would expect when you travel to ends of the Earth. Basically this is what Northern Ontario is: the ends of the Earth. In most places in Northern Ontario, there are no roads north of the Trans Canada Highway; and in many cases not even a rail line.

While researching my book, *Ontario Blue-Ribbon Fly Fishing Guide* (available at www.scottearlsmith.com), I spoke with some WW2 veterans who told me about a prisoner of war camp in Northern Ontario near the north shore of Lake Superior that housed German POWs. Interesting thing about the camp was that a number of POWs “escaped” from the camp, but after days of clambering around in dense, bug-infested forest, they returned to the camp begging for mercy. Traveling north their next stop would have been Hudson Bay (a distant 500 miles north!); traveling south they'd

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encounter the bone-chilling waters of Lake Superior. There really wasn't anywhere to escape to.

Not much has changed since that day, save for a few logging roads and bush camps. One thing that has changed though is that the wilds of Northern Ontario have been explored enough for us to know that it has some of the best fishing available on the continent.

So when I had the opportunity to fish at Wilderness North's Miminiska Lodge in late May of this year, I knew I'd be in for some good fishing.

My travel companion for this trip was my father, Earl Smith. He'd never done a wilderness fly-in trip so admittedly he was a little more jazzed than I was. As a former pilot, he was just as excited about the flying as he was the fishing. My only concern was could he manage the trip at his age. He's in great shape, but he is 75.

On day four of our trip came the *pièce de résistance*: A short flight north from Miminiska into Keezhik Lake with a canoe strapped onto the pontoons of the turbo Otter float plane. After untying and loading the canoe we began our day-long trek down the Keezhik River with our knowledgeable guide, Tyler Lancaster. A strapping big lad of 26 years, he would ensure our trip was made safely, and of course would us onto some big brookies. Having fished a number of the biggest brookie waters in Northern Canada, I was cautiously optimistic. What some people refer to as big, may not necessarily mean "big" to me.

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After a very short run down the first section of water on the Keezhik River we arrived at the first pool. It looked promising with a good flow forking around a small island into a deep olive pool. I instantly recognized the light tan rocks on the bottom of the river as limestone – and knew immediately why big the brookies had made their home in the Keezhik.

Northern Ontario's rivers are normally quite acidic and tannin-stained due to their spruce bog origins. Subsequently these acidic rivers don't normally support a lot of large resident trout – although they make great nursery streams for spawning fish. Not so with those having a limestone base like the Keezhik. Limestone naturally neutralizes the water and in turn generates prolific plant and insect life – the building blocks for a classic trophy trout stream.

Standing at the edge of the pool in knee deep water with my feet planted firmly on these limestone boulders, I made my first cast, which is always a sweet thing. No strike. I stripped off a few more feet of line and made another. No strike. I made two more casts, still no strike. Maybe the talk was all hype? My fifth cast swung far into the pool and to the left of a nice current tongue. I felt good about how my large streamer pattern plopped nicely into the gently swirling back current. I made two short strips and popped my rod tip. Then came a rock-solid strike. I raised my rod sharply towards the sky and felt the familiar head shake of a big brookie. The fish dogged deep at first but then swirled near the surface. I could see that it was a good fish over twenty inches with a big square red

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tail. Finally, when I brought the fish to hand (Tyler's net was too small!) I estimated it at just over five pounds and 22 inches, and I knew the talk about the Keezhik wasn't just hype.

The rest of the day brought several more big brookies (probably an honest twenty) in the 14- to 20-inch range. No other fish quite equaled the first one. We had some rough weather to deal with: including some rain and sleet, but all in all it was one of the most memorable days I've had on the water. For Dad it was the trip of a lifetime. He still "reels" about the trip. He caught his first brookie on a fly rod, and caught several other fish on spinning gear. The wildness and scenery of the Keezhik is forever etched on our memories – especially some of the exiting moments on the rivers spirited rapids, which Tyler handled expertly. Some water was too rugged to paddle so Dad and I walked through the woods while Tyler waded along the river's edge with the canoe.

I loved the feel of thick green moss under my boots and the lushness of the northern black spruce forest.

One of the most memorable moments came on Dad's first fish of the day, a respectable brook trout that seemed to be coming in sideways. On closer inspection I noticed another long sleek shape in the water. A big pike had Dad's brook trout in its mouth!

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I later recounted this tale to fellow outdoor writer Gord Ellis. He informed me that large pike are almost always synonymous with big brook trout populations. They provide the necessary balance in preventing the system from being overrun with small brook trout.

Our twelve hour trek on the Keezhik ended on Miminiska Lake. Dad and I had to make one last portage around a heavy set of rapids while Tyler waded along the river's edge with our canoe. The sight of the boat at the mouth of the river was a welcomed sight – especially to Dad who said he that his legs felt like lead. It had been a long day for me as well, so for him it was a truly valiant effort.

An effort worthy of a prize, in fact. And that prize came in the form of a hot plate of turkey, stuffing and all the trimmings back at the lodge, complete with Dad's all time favorite dessert: apple crisp!

Today as I write this, Father's Day has just passed, Dad and I are reminiscing about our fabulous trip at Miminiska over yet another serving of apple crisp. While the crisp at home is always the best (and we don't want to offend anyone) the fishing and hospitality at Miminiska is second to none.

To coin the now famous words of Schwarzenegger, "I'll be back."



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