

Return to Whitewater Lake

By Gord Ellis

Fly In fishing trips are something my family and I have enjoyed several times over the years. For the first couple of fly-ins we did, my boys Devin, 13, and Austin, 11, were quite small, and we spent as much time catching frogs and gathering wood as we did fishing. This year, both boys were anticipating the fishing as much as Cheryl and I. The fact that we were heading to a lake that's long been famous for excellent walleye fishing had us all anticipating the trip.



We left Thunder Bay before noon and drove north up the Spruce River Road, to Wilderness North's sea plane base located on Waweig Lake, near the town of Armstrong. We made no stops, except to look at a black bear begging for food. We were met by Alan Cheeseman, Wilderness North owner, and after some friendly chit chat and fishing talk, we joined up with another group of gentlemen and were loaded into a de Havilland turbo Otter. They told us the flight would be 40 minutes by air, but we had to drop the 4 man group off at an outpost cabin on D'alton Lake. Once that party was unloaded, Devin climbed up into the



cockpit to enjoy a close up view of the last leg of our journey. He slipped on the head phones and took his seat next to Guy Cannon, the pilot. As we took off, Devin looked back and cracked a huge grin. His trip was already made. Austin, on the other hand, occasionally suffers from motion sickness and basically laid back, letting cool air blow on his face. Luckily, the flight was smooth and he was fine.

As we approached Whitewater Lake, I was once again struck by the size of the thing. At 26,000 acres, Whitewater is an extraordinary lake in a region that already has its fair share of them. The lake is dotted with islands and reefs, and has the tea stained colouration that screams walleye. It had been a dozen year a since I'd been to Whitewater, and I was looking forward to seeing how the lake's fishery was holding up after all these years.

The plane touched down on the lake, and the full time staff at Striker Point Lodge welcomed us at the dock like family. It didn't take long for the boys to start inspecting the 16 foot Lund boats and 4 stroke Yamaha motors Wilderness North provided. They liked what they saw.

We got settled into our cabin, the Loons Nest, and Cheryl looked pleased. It was a beauty. There were two sleeping rooms, with several beds in each one. The kitchen and living area had an open design, with a fabulous view of Whitewater Lake. We even had a full bathroom with flush toilet and shower. Roughing it we weren't. Once we got settled in, we walked down to the main lodge and had a bite to eat. It was home cooking at its finest. We spent the evening setting up fishing rods, playing cards and enjoying the silence of the Northern Canadian wilderness. After all we were in the heart of the Wabikimi Park, a 2.5 million acre wildlife preserve. None of us stayed up too late that night.



The next morning, we were all chomping at the bit to go fishing. After breakfast, Cheryl and Devin jumped in one boat, with Cheryl sitting in the captain's seat. My youngest son Austin and myself took the other boat. Cheryl often complains that I always run the boat when the whole family goes fishing, so she really enjoyed having her own ship. She is no slouch on an outboard, that's for sure. I'd looked over a lake map the night before and picked out a few spots to fish. One of them happened to be a point within sight of the lodge. This rocky point had a few boulders sticking out and looked fishy, so I suggested we head there. Our two boats got up on plane, and in just a matter of minutes, we were at our first fishing spot.

The morning was perfect for walleye: a bit warm, a little windy and not too bright. I'd dropped a good supply of Berkley Power Grubs and Berkley Gulp in each boat, and could see the brightly coloured bodies being threaded onto jigs. On "fly Ins", we rarely use live bait, and I've become convinced in remote situations the stuff is more trouble than it's worth. My theory was borne out on the second cast, when a fat walleye crushed my pink Gulp jig in about 5 feet of water. "There he is Austin," I said, my rod bowed over in a tight C shape. "Feels like a good one." The walleye made a couple hard runs, and then decided it had fought enough. "I'll scoop him up Dad," Austin said, and out came the net.



Seconds later a wriggling walleye was deposited on the bottom of the boat. "Nice one," said Austin. We got a quick measure of the fish and the tape read 20 inches. "A good start Mini," I said to my youngest son, using his pet name.

As I released the fish, I could here Cheryl kicking in.

"Woo hoo," she cried, her teeth gleaming as she set the hook. My wife loves walleye fishing. It's something Cheryl did as a girl growing up in Thunder Bay, and she still rarely turns down a chance to go after them. "This is fun," she said, her rod bucking. She was clearly having a ball. Devin scooped that walleye up, and it was an 18 inch fish. As the morning wore on, we just stayed at the point, catching fish after fish in less than 10 feet of water.

At some points both kids had fish on. They would heckle each other about who's fish was bigger. The walleye were so aggressive they were ripping tails off our twisters.

The largest walleye caught was just short of 24 inches. Not a bad start. I'd kept a couple smaller fish for shore lunch, and at about noon, we decided to enjoy our reward. Whitewater

Lake is home to many white sand beaches, and we just picked one we like and went up on shore. With the hot sun over head, and the beach sparkling, it felt more like Bermuda than Ontario. Cheryl and the boys got a driftwood fire going, as I cleaned the fish. The folks at Strikers had packed all the fixings for our shore lunch, so all we had to do was fry the fish, boil a few potatoes and heat up some beans. The popping of fresh walleye fillets in smoking hot oil is about the best sound you can hear on a northern Ontario lake.

Over the next 4 days, we had shore lunch at a different spot every afternoon.

We were amazed to see almost no sign of other people using the shore lunch spots we were on. That gives you an idea of just how big Whitewater Lake is.

While fishing was the focus of our trip, we did some exploring as well. We spent a couple of hours one morning checking out Wendell Beckwith's cabins on Best Island.

Beckwith was something of a genius hermit, who spent several decades living in a couple of amazing cabins he constructed by hand.

These are not your average cabins, as he was not your average guy. He was both eccentric and brilliant, and used the remote area to ponder and study everything from the mass movement of man to advanced mathematics.

I'd first seen the Beckwith cabins years earlier, and despite some rot in the wood, it was pretty much how I remembered it.



And how was the fishing on Whitewater Lake 12 years after my last visit? After 4 days of hard fishing, I can honestly say the walleye fishing in the lake has vastly improved. Conservation policies by Wilderness North can take some of the credit for the great fishing. Despite the fact we were fishing in July - often considered a slow period - we caught lots of fish, and many of good size. We found a couple little humps in deeper water that were just crawling with walleye. Fish weren't absolutely everywhere in the lake, but on all the classic stuff - from reefs to points, - we caught all the fish we wanted. We didn't get any monster pike on our trip, but another party at the camp got several over 40 inches. Again, July is not usually considered that good for big pike, so getting a 40 inch fish is something. My largest pike was just shy of 36 inches, and provided a lot of excitement on a 6 foot jigging rod. When our trip finally concluded, we were all sad to be leaving Strikers.

In only 4 days, we'd made new friends, explored amazing water and had grown as a family. As the turbo Otter hit the air and Whitewater Lake spread out below us, I quietly promised myself it would not be another 12 years before the next visit.

Gord Ellis is an award winning outdoor writer from Thunder Bay Ontario. His voice can be heard on the CBC (Public Radio for Canada) as well. He has agreed to write a series of articles for Wilderness North...that are a free download for our visitors here at the website.

