

Fly Rod Lake Trout

By Scott Earl Smith



Lake trout on a fly rod are not the dogs-of-the-deep that most people associate with the more traditional, deep water methods of pursuing these giant char. Few fresh water game fish are less associated with fly fishing than lake trout, but with proper timing and equipment these big, voracious fish can be caught on the fly with regularity in the right places.

I tripped onto fly fishing for lakers while flogging the waters of the Nipigon River and the northern shore of Lake Superior in pursuit of giant brook trout and steelhead during the spring and fall. Inevitably I duped a lot of lake trout at the same time. I've come to learn that they are a worthy adversary even in the absence of those more delectable species. They might not jump and tail-walk like a rainbow, and lack the brilliant colors of a brookie, but they can give your rod arm a darn good beating and reach substantial sizes.

During the spring and fall when water temperature regimes are naturally cooler, lake trout move out of the depths and forage near rocky points, sunken reefs and narrows in relatively shallow water (five- to twenty-feet). They gorge themselves on bait fish in these areas and can be caught quite readily on large streamers swung on a sink-tip line.

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In my travels throughout laker range in North America, I've found this phenomenon to be quite consistent. When surface water temperatures are sustained below fifty-two degrees (or thereabouts) lake trout can be found in the shallows. In fact, I have even encountered lake trout rising for surface insects during these periods. When hooked in shallow water lake trout inevitably sound for the deep, and leave your reel screaming in the process. If they're hooked on a large reef where cover is scarce they'll even get into your backing. This depth-sounding fight is what makes them fun to catch. Generally they won't surface like other trout but dig down into the depths and make you work for every crank on your reel.

Gear and fly considerations:

Because the lake trout's primary purpose in the shallows is to feed, getting them to eat streamers takes little coaxing. Twenty-fish days are not uncommon on the right waters and at times it seems like any large pattern will suffice. But I do have a few favorites:

Most, if not all, of my lake trout streamers are Strip Leaches, or some other pattern with a rabbit-strip wing. Rabbit-strip has an excellent undulating quality that makes streamers come alive underwater. Additionally, rabbit-strip is great for constructing long-bodies; and even the longest rabbit-strip pattern casts with relative ease – without the wind-resistance inherent with deer hair.

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The Strip Leaches I tie for lake trout are anywhere from 3 ½- to 5-inches long with lead underbodies, tinsel bodies, and tails incorporating jazzy-colored marabou. White rabbit strip works exceptionally well for lake trout; but I've had great luck on olive, black, natural and rusty brown as well. Lake trout often spew drab-colored baitfish from their mouths when netted so obviously added flash is not a necessity; however perhaps a flashy streamer helps your pattern stand out amongst the masses. Chartreuse, orange, pink, yellow or cerise marabou tails incorporating several strands of Krystal flash or Flashabou are commonly found on my patterns.

Even though I have mentioned that lake trout are commonly found in relatively shallow water at certain opportune times, heavy sink-tips lines are a must for this kind of angling. This is because you will be either swinging your streamer in current, stripping your pattern over a sunken reef – or both dealing with current and underwater structure.

Initially I constructed my own custom heads using varying lengths of Deep Water Express and cast them on a shooting line. However most fly line manufacturers now make specialized deep-water sink-tip lines in various sink rates and tip lengths, and line systems with interchangeable heads for a variety of fishing conditions. While I still utilize my custom heads at times, the one-piece factory lines cast flawlessly because of their seamless design. In the right hands (with a good rod and a nice tailwind) 90- to 100-foot casts are possible with these lines. That's a substantial distance to launch a large streamer – but it can be done – and the sink-tip can allow you to fish effectively

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even in 12-feet of current and double that depth in still water. Full sinking lines will work as well, but keep your stripped line in the boat – otherwise it will end up in the prop.

Needless to say this is not a job for your antique bamboo. You'll need a high-modulus graphite rod in at least a seven-weight and preferably an eight- or nine-weight for this kind of fishing. I suggest attaching a six-foot length of 0x leader to the fly line with a braided leader loop, which provides a secure system for big game fish. Secure the leader loop with a Super Glue-reinforced nail knot (over and above the manufacturer's recommendations) for extra security measures. Cold water, big fish and stout rods put big demands on your tackle. This is not the time for wispy tippetts and wimpy rods. A good quality large arbor reel with a solid, dependable drag and lots of backing capacity is also in order for pursuing big lakera.

Systems for lake trout:

Because fly fishing for lake trout is primarily done on lakes, and river systems adjacent to deep bodies of water, your angling will usually be done from a motorized boat. Although some purists disdain trolling a fly, this is a productive way to find lakera. Trolling a deeply sunken fly off the stern (with all the fly line out on the water), while the bow angler casts to obvious structure is one of my favorite searching systems. This is a great way to locate fish along points, reefs and other high-percentage places in lakes and large



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rivers. When you hook a fish, turn the motor off, drift or anchor, and work that area diligently. Shallow-water lake trout will be concentrated – and hungry. When trolling, also try swinging your boat in wide circles. This action drops the fly down to the depths and then lifts it up again as the craft straightens. A series of turns – or even a zigzag pattern in current – will make your fly lift and dive erratically and cover water not disturbed by the prop. Also, impart action to the fly with your wrist to make that rabbit-strip come alive in the water. Resist the temptation to get too technical with fish-finders and all the rest of the electronics. I find that unless there's a tug on the end of my line, it does me little good to know there are several blips (apparent fish) below my boat. Staring at a fish finder can turn a pleasurable pastime into a frustrating game of computer battleship.

Sunken reefs adjacent to deep water are often the most productive locations for lake trout. One of my favorite spring lake trout spots on Lake Superior is a sunken reef about 100 yards off the mouth of a stream where schools of smelt (a large baitfish) congregate for night-time spawning runs. Casting onto and around this reef is very productive throughout the day for lake trout.

Although I've caught a few lake trout in the ten- to fifteen-pound range on the fly, I have my sights set on fish at least double that size. And there are lots of places in North America where that kind of fish is possible.

