



# THE CROWN

# PRINCE

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY RAYMOND PLOURDE

ON A QUEST TO FIND OUT IF LANDLOCKED  
SALMON BELONG IN FISHING'S ROYAL FAMILY.



“NO PROBLEM,” PAUL REPLIED, WHEN I SUGGESTED HE GO first to show me how it was done. On his third cast—wham!—a nice male salmon of around eight pounds was on his line and in the air. And what an acrobat! This fish was out of the water more than in it. These landlocked salmon seemed to jump even more than sea-running salmon do, if that’s possible. “Salmon, the Leaper” to be sure. The other thing I noticed is how much they look like brown trout, especially the males. And it stands to reason. Genetically the brown trout—*Salmo trutta*—is the closest living relative of *Salmo salar*. Wearing their adaptive freshwater coat, *salar* and *trutta*’s common ancestry is strikingly obvious.

**B**UT ARE LANDLOCKED SALMON TRULY salmon or are they somehow a “lesser” fish? Are they more akin to trout than they are to mighty salar? Some anglers prize them like no other fish, while others refuse to even consider them a true salmon. Scientists have long ago established that they are exactly the same genetically. But does their lack of access to the marine environment somehow diminish them as a member of the species or, given the right conditions, can they live up to their noble pedigree?

Over the years I'd heard strong and divergent opinions on the subject, at times even heated arguments. Late last summer, I made it my mission to confirm or deny the exceptional fighting qualities of landlocked Atlantic salmon. To accomplish this mission there is perhaps no better place on earth than on the McKenzie River in northwestern Labrador.

The McKenzie is all but virgin water. The only fishing camp, The Mackenzie River Lodge was built 12 years ago as a base camp for big game hunting, sitting as it does along the southern edge of the famous George River caribou herd's migratory path. A little fishing was done on the side, but angling forays were minimal. Enter energetic Montreal businessman Paul Ostiguy, a dedicated fly fisher and a committed conservationist with a passion for wilderness and wild fish. As a long-time ASF member, he understood firsthand the value of live release. In a part of the world often more famous for producing trophy wall mounts and overflowing coolers, he instituted a camp policy of fly-fishing only and 100%

live release of all salmon and trout. And thus the McKenzie River Fly Fishing Lodge was born.

It was the perfect laboratory for my “experiment.” Joining me in my quest was my old friend Colin McKeown, producer and host of television's “The New Fly Fisher” along with new friends Jon Babulic and lodge owner Paul Ostiguy. No finer crew of “lab rats” had ever been assembled (at least not by me).

McKenzie River is located 125 miles northeast of the twin iron ore mining towns of Wabush and Labrador City. Lab City serves as the jumping off point for hunters, anglers, miners and prospectors from around the world. You can drive there on the Trans Labrador Highway or fly in through one of two regional airlines. For expediency, we chose the latter. From there we flew out aboard floatplanes provided by Air Saguenay. The flight to McKenzie River Lodge took a little bit more than an hour and provided a rolling panorama of the vast boreal forest of interior Labrador. Spruce, tamarack, mosses and lichen covered the land in a living blanket. Rivers, lakes and wetlands coursed out in every direction through twisting folds in the great Precambrian Shield. At 1,000 feet it is indeed a very big and impressive land. Total wilderness as far as the eye could see.

The lodge is situated at the foot of Andre Lake at the head of the McKenzie River. The lodge has exclusive rights and access to over 30 miles of prime water

Master guide Danny Winsor surveys his domain. Caribou antlers and Labrador tea beneath a rare “sun-bow.” Below, a landlocked salmon is about to be released.



encompassing three rivers and three lakes which form the headwaters of the Murray Lake watershed that ultimately drains into the massive Smallwood Reservoir. There are five species of native sport fish present in the river drainage. At the top of the list are the landlocked salmon and giant Labrador brook trout. There are also lake trout, whitefish and northern pike, each occupying its own ecological niche in the system.

Landlocked Atlantic salmon, or Ouananiche (for “little salmon”) as it was named by the native Montagnais people, is a testament to adaptive evolution. Natural populations occur in inland areas ringing the North Atlantic basin, from Eastern Russia and Scandinavia to New England, Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces. Most landlocked populations, as their name suggests, have been



Lodge owner Paul Ostiguy helps Danny Winsor launch a sturdy freighter canoe. At days end, a warm welcome awaits anglers at the lodge.

cut off from access to the sea by either ancient geological upheavals or more recent man-made obstructions like dams. Surprisingly, there are also some populations which, despite unobstructed access to the sea (often at great distance), have apparently chosen to remain in their freshwater environment. Although generally smaller than their sea-running kin, those populations which became trapped in large aquatic systems with plentiful forage, can and often do, reach impressive size.

Fly-fishing for landlocked salmon has been popular throughout the northeastern United States and Eastern Canada for well over a century. It was, and to a large degree still is, a near-religion in parts of New England, especially so in Maine where the legendary Carrie Stevens developed her famous series of landlocked salmon and brook trout streamers in the early 1900s, including the venerable Grey Ghost.

Although much diminished in both size and quantity in their southern range today, landlocked Atlantic salmon are still abundant in Labrador’s vast wilderness. Here, they grow large—very large—in food-rich, freshwater ecosystems. The world record landlocked salmon came from the Smallwood Reservoir in Labrador and weighed a stunning 22 pounds, 11 ounces.



IT TOOK US A COUPLE OF DAYS TO GET TUNED into the salmon. Concentrating on the upper river at first, we hooked some large brook trout in the three to six pound range, a couple of nice pike, a twelve pound lake trout, and even a few whitefish—but the salmon were elusive. Colin was the first to finally find them on the third day, downriver at Elbow Pool, the last in a chain of mid-river rapids and deep pools. Using a local muddler pattern called the Cat’s Ass, Colin hit the jackpot using a fast, stripping retrieve. In less than an hour, he released five salmon all between six and eight pounds. The takes were savage and the battles explosive. These fish simply refused to give up, fighting hard all the way to the net. Jon was next to connect a little further down the pool, and was quickly deep into his backing as the fish tore off downstream. After several long runs and a whole lot of jumps, he managed to release what would turn out to be the largest salmon of the trip—a deep, hook-jawed male just a shade over 10 pounds. It was as big as any two-sea winter fish I’d ever seen. Paul and I were next with a couple of twin seven-pound hens to cap off a most excellent day.

The next days brought increasing success as the fall run started to show itself in earnest. We had deliberately targeted the last week of the Labrador fishing season in



order to coincide with the fall run, which in Labrador is late August. We noticed that fishing was generally better on cool overcast days and less productive on warm, sunny days. On such a day at the end of our week, guide Danny Winsor loaded a freighter canoe and took Paul and I all the way down to the third rapids, where the McKenzie empties into the next lake.

As we neared our destination we paused at a deep, wide run aptly named "The Rocks". "Watch out for the boulders Ray," Paul said. "That's real Labrador gravel under your feet there." Gravel indeed. The bottom was a massive tumble of large boulders that you had to walk across with great caution. Some would actually rock back and forth as you stepped on them. That's where I let Paul go first and he hooked a lively salmon.

Now it was my turn.

Choosing a muddler pattern called the DW Special, conceived by Danny and tied by fellow guide and resident vice-master Burt Gillis, I began to carefully work the water. Just upstream from a large boulder protruding above the surface, I drew a big boil but no hook-up. Several more sweeps through the same spot drew a blank. This was a pattern I was coming to recognize. Generally, you were more likely to hook a salmon on the first cast than you were on the next cast and less likely by half again on the third. There

seemed to be a law of diminishing returns at play. I chalked this up to the fact that landlocked salmon are feeders. Unlike sea-runners, whose feeding instinct and digestive apparatus shut down in fresh water, the landlocks eat full-time. In this respect they were more like trout. So I carefully moved down the run, re-positioning myself above the next big boulder across and to my right. This time there was no mistake. Halfway through the first drift, on the inside of the boulder seam, my line drew tight and suddenly there was silver in the air. It was a large hen of around nine pounds. She fought hard, running me into my backing twice and putting on

If these tired rods (bottom) could talk, they would speak of hard battles with powerful salmon. Below, a boil-up of bush tea is just what is needed when a pool (and an angler) needs to be rested.



a magnificent aerial show before coming grudgingly to the net. She was a real beauty, thick and strong. The females were quite a bit brighter than the males with a faint blue-green tinge on their gill plate. As I held her, briefly, in the current before release, I half expected to find sea lice on her tail.

Finally we arrived at the bottom of the river. It was much wider here with big gravel bars and a series of



bedrock ledges creating deep, V-shaped chutes and long tailing runs. This was big water that probably hadn't seen half a dozen flies all year. I took the top of the largest chute, while Paul fished the fast water run below. My salmon senses were tingling. Keeping the DW Special on, I made a long cast to the top of the far seam. As the fly swung into middle of the slot a large salmon grabbed it and took off straight downstream. One glorious leap over the ledge, and he spit the hook and was free. Nicely done, I thought. He was easily the biggest salmon I'd hooked so far and maybe bigger than Jon's. Like an afterimage, I could still see him in my mind's eye shaking his head and throwing the fly in mid-air. It's funny how the most memorable fish are often the ones that get away. As I reeled in slack line, I looked below and saw Paul was already tight to another fish. Moving down towards the deeper belly of the chute, I launched one high to the other side, about five feet above the lip of the ledge. The fly probably didn't make it three feet before it was hammered by another salmon. Like the others, this one jumped right away and then took off hard for the other side of the river, about a football field away. He didn't make it all the way but man, what a run. I was way into my backing. Eventually I was able to turn him and bring him back and into Danny's waiting net. Over the next few hours we hooked, lost, played and

Danny Winsor holds a hefty Ouananiche. He can't help but argue that these landlocked salmon belong in fishing's royal family.

released enough salmon to lose count somewhere in the high teens. It was spectacular angling by any measure.

That night there was much rejoicing in camp. We had found the salmon. And they, us. We regaled the day's events over roast Cornish hen and several fine bottles of wine. As the moon rose overhead we heard a pack of wolves howling in the distance, their serenade lasting several minutes. We had the feeling we weren't the only ones celebrating a successful hunt that day.

So is a salmon by any other name still a salmon? While others may continue to debate that question, for us the matter had been settled beyond any doubt. It is as long as its last name is Salar! Out came some hand-rolled Cuban cigars and a bottle of well-aged single malt. We all agreed that if the sea-running salmon is the king of sportfish, then its landlocked variation is indeed the crown prince, and worthy in every way of its peerage. All that was left was to raise our glasses in a toast: "Long live the Royal Family."

---

Raymond Plourde is a regular contributor to the *Journal*. For more information on McKenzie Lodge visit [mckenzie.lodge](http://mckenzie.lodge). For more information on fishing in Newfoundland and Labrador visit [newfoundlandlabrador.com](http://newfoundlandlabrador.com). 🐟