



Arctic Pilgrimage in

Nunavut

The De Havilland Otter float plane took off in a roar, lifted from the river, and disappeared behind a hill. A few moments later, the engine roar vanished altogether, and we were left alone in the wilderness, above the Arctic Circle, in Nunavut, Northern Canada. The silence was deafening. Six men, two raft boats, twelve days and a hundred kilometers of river to float and fish. What a prospect!

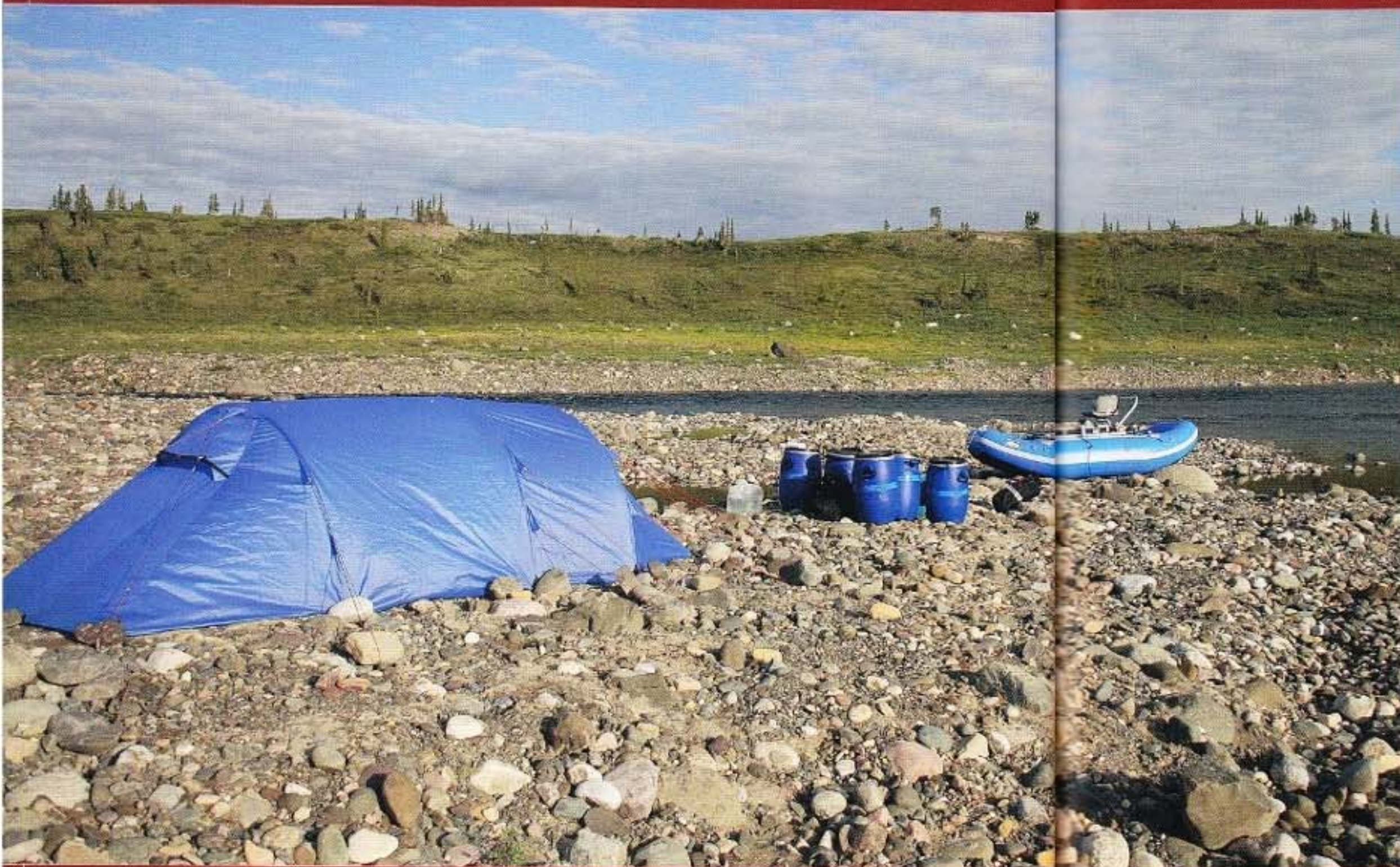
By Nils Binaldi
Photos by Nils Binaldi
and Allan Hofocd

I had flown all this way from Europe, eager to fish for that anadromous fish rarely sought after by adipose aficionados, the majestic arctic char. This exploratory trip was organized by GetAway Tours, a Danish travelling- and -fishing company. It was the first time the company had run the trip, so the tour leader Kim Jørgensen was both anxious and excited about the fishing we were to encounter. We were going primarily for the large char that were said to run up the river, but we expected also to get by-catches of

lake trout and grayling. On the beach where the bush pilot dropped us, we started to build the raft boats, taking our time. Too much time if you ask me, as I was eager

to swing my Spey rod over Home Pool, and get some solid pulls from the fabled arctic char. I had to help my fishing partners in the preparatory stages of the trip, and tried not to think too much about the fishing. We finished assembling the raft boats, and then set up the tents for the night. If you can call it a night for at these latitudes at that time of year, you can read your newspaper at midnight without a flashlight! You can also fish non-stop until you drop...

When we were ready at 9:00 PM having eaten one of the quick dry-food lunches Kim had brought. We quickly agreed that these were practical: no dishes to wash and ready in an eye-blink. Then I headed to the river along with my travel companions, full of expectation. The first half-hour was laborious, as I had to get back in my Skagit casting rhythm after a year's break.



After a while I got decent casts out of my fourteen-foot rod, and could fish efficiently. In the middle of the run I got a pull, but the fish decided not to stay with me, and threw the hook after a few head jerks. Jeeez..., the adrenaline was pumping through my whole body. Unfortunately that was all I felt that night, and my fishing partners went back to camp with the same result: no fish around. We decided to go to bed and save energy for the next day's fishing.

Bothered by bugs in my tent, early the next morning, I awoke and, after a quick breakfast, hit the run close to camp but again without

success. Even though the place was remote and pristine, that first failure to catch a fish indicated that we would have to work hard for every one.

I started to think about the good advice my friend Peter had given me before leaving: "Fish the areas downstream from a tributary, even if this tributary seems small in comparison to the main flow". We had located such a tributary about one kilometer above camp, and decided to walk up there to give it a shot.

Kim was hoping to land a char over 5 kilos on this trip; it would set a new personal record. That feat he achieved quickly, being the first of us

with a bent rod, and after a muscular fight, landed his first arctic of the trip. That fish set a benchmark for the size we might expect in the days to come. It was a beautiful female, measuring 35 inches and weighing an estimated 18 pounds. Wow, what a good start!

The mood in the team lightened with that nice catch. In order to cover the water more efficiently, Leibby, (the only non-Dane of the trip - he was from Iceland), and I crossed the river in order to fish the spot from a different angle. It turned out to be a great idea, as I was lucky to land my first fish, and then quickly added two more. Great feeling and it was

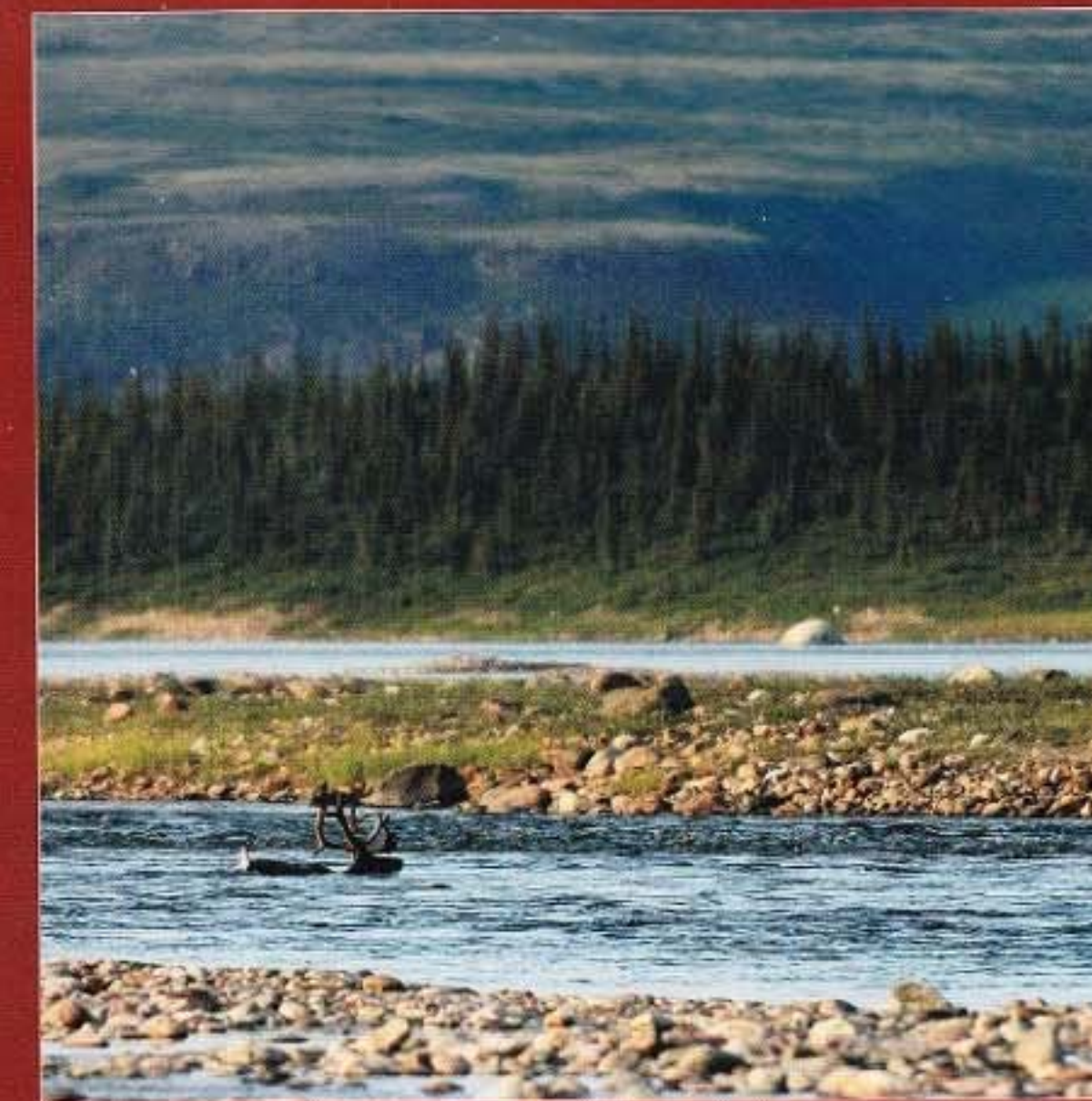
sun, nice temperatures and only a slight breeze. I was relieved to have a good feeling about my companions after that first full day of fishing: no one was egocentric, over-confident or unsocial. The coming ten days of the trip promised to be great.

The next morning we packed the camp and loaded the boats for the first float, which would bring us to the next hot spot where we would set up base. It turned out that there was quite a distance between these good places. We did stop below a few tributaries on our way, but these proved to be fishless.

On our way down, we were hoping to see wildlife, but apparently the animals spotted us first. We saw a large bull moose from a distance, but unfortunately the wind was blowing in the wrong direction so he trotted

away, nostrils pointing upwards to check our scent. We also saw a few isolated reindeer, but it seemed like the main herd had migrated further north. The king of the northern tundra, the musk ox, was another that sadly we missed seeing.

After having floated five miles from our initial camping spot, we passed a narrow part of the river, where the water became fast and furious. The skills of our two oarsmen were tested seriously through that canyon, but in the end we came through without harm, just a little water onboard. This area is not very popular among canoe enthusiasts, most of them preferring to carry their craft around that white-water hell.



good to be back in the game. Leibby unfortunately did not manage to land his first char, but did make contact with two.

During the day, everybody got his first char. All catches happened in a specific area of the river from the tributary's mouth, and some 100 meters downstream. It confirmed the theory we had heard before, namely the fish concentrate in specific areas of the river. Once you have identified these spots, the fishing becomes easier.

We went to bed with a good day of fishing behind us, in ideal conditions for the fisherman, high

After coming through the canyon, we came across a larger tributary, and when we floated past we saw several massive char darting into deeper water. We were quick to jump out and start fishing from the shore. Robin got a beautiful male char within a few casts: it was all red, with perfect fins, and an impressive jaw. Then everything happened quickly for we all caught char within 10 minutes. Often two fishermen would have fish on at the same time. I think that among the 6 of us we

caught about twenty fish within two hours, the smallest measuring at 28 inches, the largest about 34 inches. This was almost too good to be true. We guessed that the fish liked the place because it was the first calm pool they met after a series of rapids downstream.

Despite the good fishing, we decided to move on, as the area did not offer a good campsite. We continued to float until we came to another large tributary. On the banks, there was soft grass just ready for

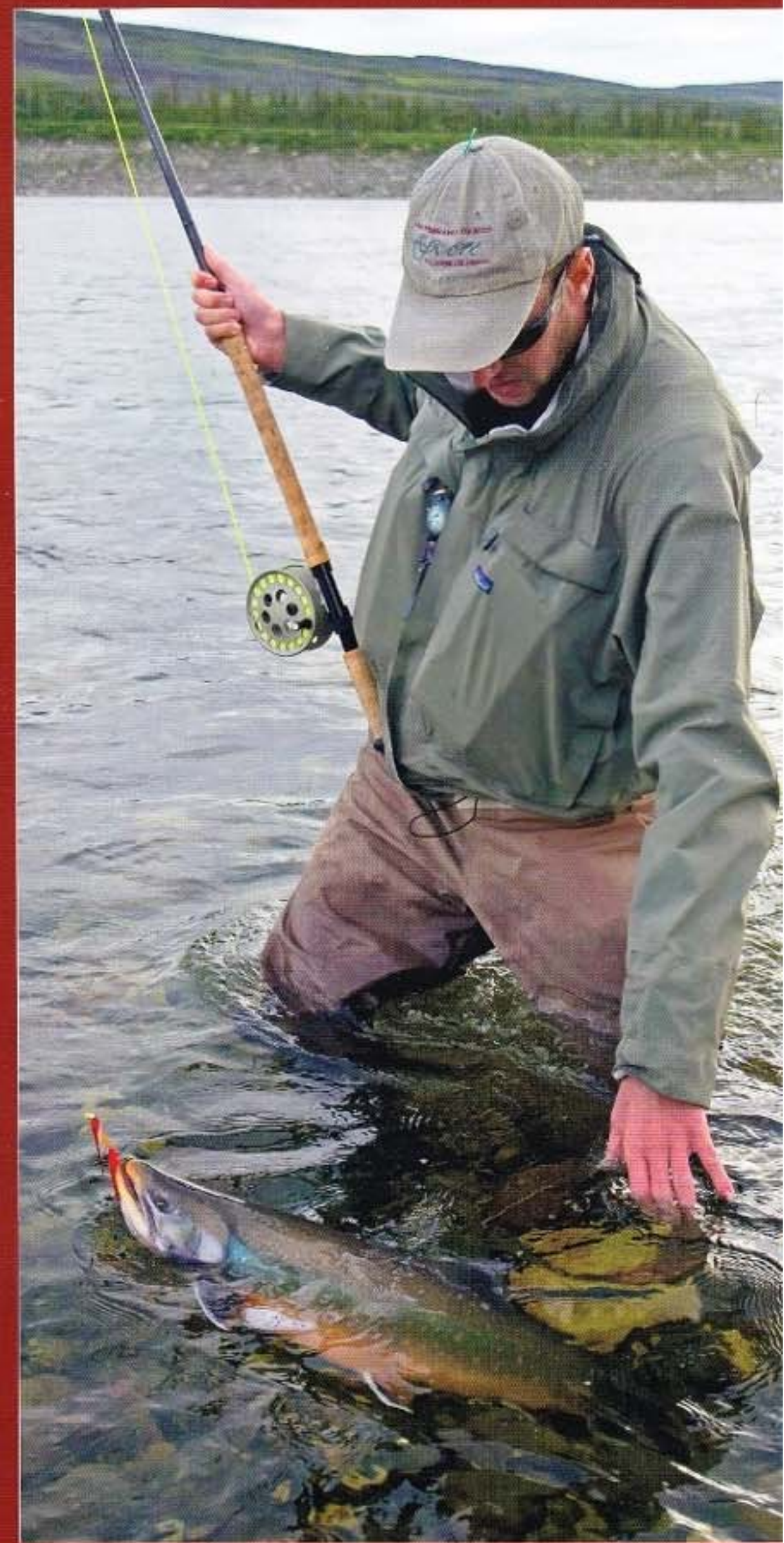
our tents. We made camp and could relax after a full day of discovering new horizons. We had our usual "gourmet" dry food, sitting on the high bank with a pleasant view of the area. There was no breeze to keep the mosquitoes away, but apart from these tundra terrorists we really enjoyed the peace of this faraway place.

As at each stop, we christened the closest pool "home pool", and gave it a try before turning in. A large stone out in the stream proved to be

a fish magnet, and each of us in turn managed to make contact with fish close to it.

I was really enjoying catching these large char, it reminded me of steelhead fishing: big water, long Spey rods, large flies, solid pulls and beautiful fish. I decided to continue fishing while the others crept into their tents. At 11 PM, I lost my fly on the bottom, and seriously considered joining my snoring partners, but decided to tie a new orange Intruder to a fresh leader. This proved a good idea.

I waded quietly into the river, preparing to cover the area behind the large boulder. I was still lengthening my Skagit casts when the deep pull came out of nowhere, at the very end of the swing, just when I was getting ready for a new cast. I set the iron with a firm vertical lift. The fish seemed calm at first, and pulled line from my reel steadily. But as the first run continued unabated, I started to worry and knew something serious was on the other end. This was confirmed when a gigantic fish leapt out in the current, some 80 meters downstream. I waded out of the river, and started running down the bank, as fast as I could among the large cobblestones. Leibby who was fishing below me, started to cast for that large jumping fish, not realising that it had taken my fly already. I yelled and he backed out immediately; it felt good to have somebody with me to help with the landing, should the char stay connected. At last I managed to work my way level with the fish and could play it with the odds on my side. Time had become elastic; it felt as though I had been fighting the monster for an hour. Later Leibby told me it was a matter of fifteen minutes....





I finally beached a beautiful male arctic char, with perfect red fins bordered by a white stripes. In the right corner of its mouth, was my orange Intruder. I could see that the fish was big, but I was astounded when I measured it: 40 inches long, 21 around the middle, and an estimated weight of 27 pounds! What a stunning creature, potentially a new world record!

I was so overwhelmed by my luck at landing this incredible fish, that I stopped fishing and enjoyed a cup of coffee while watching Robin and Lars expending their last energy of the day in the stream. Amazing! Even in my

dreams I had not imagined such large char!

The next day the wind picked up, and the fishing became more difficult. We fished hard all day, and I managed to catch only one fish. The others did better, but in the evening the rain started to settle in. We received a visit in camp from a young grizzly bear that seemed to stumble across us as it wandered over the tundra. Kim welcomed him by throwing stones, and off it bounded into the bushes. I was a little concerned about this episode at bedtime, so I made my pepper spray bottle ready, in case he came back in the night.

Next morning I woke up hearing rain drops on the tent. The sunny days were over, too bad I thought. We were reminded that we were very far up north, for the temperature dropped dramatically. We decided to stay at the same camp today, and fished various places around it. I tried my luck with the large grayling that were constantly feeding on the surface, and managed to catch a few up to 20 inches. These beautiful fish are freshwater's answer to the sailfish! The others fished for char, and landed a few, but it felt as though the fish felt our presence and avoided the area more and more. Accordingly

we decided to move on the next day.

It was not a fun day to pack the camp, as it was still pouring down but by late morning we launched the loaded boats not knowing where our next camping spot would be. The map showed several promising tributaries we could fish downstream. We explored one after another with no success. We were getting worried, as we felt we were floating too far down and risked arriving at the pick up point too early. But as one place after the other proved fishless, we continued our float, getting ever closer to the end. Buckets of water were still falling, and we remembered

that we were closer to the North Pole than the Equator for the temperature was nearing freezing point. The boats glided smoothly northwards.

At the end of this fishless day, we arrived at the pick-up point. We all knew that something was very wrong for we were here five days before the end of the trip. We had been told that there was a hot spot below a significant tributary eight kilometers downstream so we were really counting on that spot. We had tried to convince the pilot to come and pick us up further down, but apparently the river is too wide and shallow for a floatplane to land. What could we do?

We were too cold to think rationally so decided to build a bonfire to warm our frozen bodies, and to think things over during the night. Camp was set up once again, and we all crept into our tents right away.

In the morning, the weather had cleared along with our minds. Kim decided to send a reconnaissance group of three, down to that famous hot spot, to see if it was worth spending several days there. Robin, Leiby and I were sent to check it out, walking hard for two hours across harsh tundra. When we arrived, we



were quite tired, and had to wade the tributary that was running high. With each other's help, we managed to cross without getting too much water onboard.

Then we started fishing. Quickly I got a solid pull, a huge relief as I had gone fishless for the last two days! I landed the average sized char of about 30 inches. This was a huge encouragement for everyone. The place teemed with fish, Leibby and Robin also scored.

I was fishing a pool wading deeply, when a fish took so hard that line screamed off the reel.

Unfortunately the handle got stuck in my fishing jacket, and the fish and I parted company:

the leader had broken. Damn, that was a good one! I fished on, and then a new solid tug on my pink intruder. I fought this one very hard to keep it out of the main current. I managed to land it after a lengthy fight. It was another a large male arctic char, 38.5 inches long by 20 in girth, and an estimated weight of 24 pounds.

What a fish! It was very well shaped, with an impressive jaw and a belly as red as the maple leaf of the Canadian flag. Leibby got some shots of the beast before a quick release, as we had to hurry down to Robin who was struggling with another large fish. We landed this as well, 36.5 inches long! What an amazing day! There was electricity in the air, it seemed as if every fish in the river turned on at once. We landed 15 fish in three hours. We were so happy and relieved and that was probably the best fishing day of my life.

We walked back as quickly as our exhausted bodies let us, with plenty of good memories. We were eager to share the good news with our friends. On the way home, we surprised a large bald eagle that took off just twenty yards from where we stood, and hovered over the river valley. What a magnificent sight!

When we arrived in camp, Kim was eagerly waiting for news. He was relieved to hear about our fantastic fishing day. As tour leader, he had considered all the options, including being picked up by the float plane early. That would have been a catastrophe for him, his employer, and for the fishermen on the trip.

We decided to float down with one boat only, packed with all the gear. We had to keep it as light as

possible, since we knew that the last day we would have to pull the heavy boat back up to the pickup point, eight kilometers against the current. Two rowed, while the rest of us walked down.

When we reached the hot spot, we set up camp on the cobblestones as close to the river as possible. Lars, Allan and Kim, who had not tried the place were allowed to hit it first. While the fish were not as turned on as the previous day, they were still there, and everybody enjoyed bent rods.

We spent another four days on the fishing spot, which proved to hold fish over a distance of more than 3 miles downstream from the tributary. Hence, we never fished on each other's shoulders, and had plenty of water to play with. Robin even managed to land the trip's largest lake trout from a deep hole, a beast 34 inches long.

One day I decided to keep a smaller bright fish, in order to taste fresh arctic char. As I hauled it back in camp, we spotted a bear across the

river. I was not too concerned, until Kim warned me that these animals have a fine sense of smell, capable of detecting the scent of food from miles away. He asked me to butcher the fish well downstream from camp. I nodded, and went down, thinking that the bear would never smell my fish across the river. But... as I walked back to camp with my cleaned fish, the bear had crossed. Fortunately it did not come towards us, but had certainly been attracted by the fishy smell. I washed my hands thoroughly

before going to bed, I can tell you.

The final day had arrived: time to pack camp for the last time, and drag the boat loaded with our gear, up to the pick-up point. We knew it would be a tough haul, and had planned to spend eight hours on it. Fortunately, we found a good technique of hauling the boat that kept its nose in the stream so it did not bounce on the rocky bank. As a result of good teamwork we made our destination within four hours.

Our air-taxi came over the hill, made a first pass, and then landed smoothly on the water. We were happy to see a fresh face, after having spent almost two weeks among animals and our little group, looking themselves a bit like animals with their beards, not to mention the smells...

It was with a blend of regret and immense satisfaction that I boarded the plane. Regret because I didn't know when I would experience such magic fishing again, and

when I might once more fish with my companions. The camaraderie had been great, the landscapes breathtaking, and the fishery kept its promise in terms of fish size, number, and not the least, beauty.

If you should have questions please contact me at: nils@nilsrinaldi.com. If you want to book such a trip with GetAway Tours, contact Kim Jørgensen at: kim@getawaytours.dk. More information at <http://www.nilsrinaldi.com> or <http://www.getawaytours.dk/nwt>. ■