



AURORA BOREALIS... BEATS LISTENING TO YOUR FISHING BUDDY SAWING LOGS.

Chasing Shallow-Water Lakers

A different kind of flats fishing BY BRIAN IRWIN

AN EERIE GLOW seeped through my eyelids, slowly waking me up. At first I thought there was a fire outside my cabin, but when I went to look, I saw *aurora borealis* instead. Ribbons of green and purple stretched across the sky, mixing with the Milky Way. A floatplane bobbed on the dock below the celestial lightshow. I was in far northern Manitoba; I went back to bed, dreaming of 40-inch lake trout.

We'd come to fish Nejanilini Lake. It and the associated Wolverine River system is some 30 miles long, and comprises about 350,000 acres of water. The only anglers on the lake are the guests at the Lodge at Little Duck, where I stayed along with nine caribou hunters. It's a faraway place, 150 miles from the nearest road, and only 60 miles from the 60th parallel, marking the border of Nunavut, Canada's largest and most northern territory.

At first glance Nejanilini looks almost featureless, save for a few shoreline landmarks with names like Porkchop Island, Volcano, and The Boot. But beneath the surface are rocky reefs, where the otherwise deep lake becomes shallow, thinning to just a few feet. Like lake trout everywhere, Nejanilini lakers typically spend most of their year in that deep water, making them difficult to reach with fly gear. But trophy lake trout, some more than 40 inches, congregate in these shallows during pre-spawn each fall, making it possible to land many a day on a 10-weight permit or musky rod.

I soon met up with my friend Ryan Suffron, a guide who was the lodge manager here in 1999. We were joined by Wayne Giles, who piloted our aluminum boat up Wolverine Rapids and into the whitecaps of Nejanilini. When we entered the lake proper, Giles used a library of GPS coordinates to find many subsurface shoals in water three- to eight-feet deep,

BRIAN IRWIN (2)



NEJANILINI LAKER. NO RELATION TO LEBRON.

consisting mostly of boulders resting on a bed of gravel—the perfect habitat for lakers to lay their eggs in a few weeks without building much of a redd.

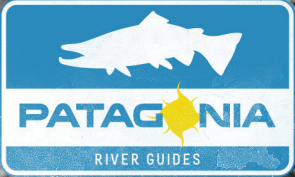
During pre-spawn, lake trout focus on food, eating heavily in the weeks leading up to October and November, when water temps in the shallows drop into the mid-to-low 40s. Within minutes of casting I came tight to my first laker, a 30-incher with two larger fish following in hot pursuit. One looked close to three feet long. This was a healthy fishery; most casts would produce at least one follower. Some would stall for a second, allowing Suffron to sight-cast and occasionally connect. Giles grabbed my fish, and with a quick flip of the barbless hook—required in Manitoba—he was back to the dark, 48-degree water.

We bounced our way from flat to flat throughout the day, pulling out eight or ten fish from each before moving on, eventually settling into a dense collection of reefs in the

northern part of the lake, about a 45-minute ride from the lodge. This area was bountiful. We set up a reverse drift: boat perpendicular to the wind, casting into it and allowing the breeze to push the boat back, hovering our flies just above the shoals. Add a bit of manual retrieve, and the fly's motion would only increase the likelihood of a hook up.

I fished a 2-0 purple bunny-leech every day on an intermediate line, and 25-pound straight mono was enough to muscle even the biggest fish—though the use of barbless hooks required constant pressure. My biggest barely missed the forty-inch mark, but as much as I enjoyed the monster lakers, I had almost as much fun at the end of each day, when we'd swap 10-weights for 6-weights and throw woolly buggers for Arctic grayling up to 19 inches.

The last day at Little Duck we woke to a few inches of snow. Soon, the 450,000-head Qamanirjuaq caribou herd would descend south onto the camp's tundra, with Barren Ground Grizzlies in tow. 🐻



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