

TUNDRA TROUT

AYLMER LAKE LODGE

by Jim Gebhart

Some places have changed little since the last glaciers receded, leaving vast areas nearly untouched and unaltered by humans.

Herd of muskoxen and caribou roam as they follow the seasons, avoiding grizzly bears and wolf packs as best they can. Flocks of ptarmigan dart through the low vegetation along with arctic hares and squirrels, evading wolverines and foxes. I savored the moment, lighting my cigar and relaxing with a glass of bourbon. The setting was perfect for reflecting on my day at Aylmer Lake Lodge in Canada's Northwest Territories.

It's called the Barren Grounds or the Barren Lands, names given by European explorers who visited the area in the late 18th century. Either way, they got it wrong. Hardly barren, it was and still is rich in wildlife, beauty, and mineral resources. Located in the Northwest Territories of Canada, it covers an immense area of tundra landscape characterized by sparse vegetation, rocky outcrops, and countless lakes and rivers. Generally flat due to glaciation, it does have hills and, in some areas, *eskers* — long, narrow deposits of sand and gravel left by receding glaciers. Remoteness and harsh winter conditions have kept this area undisturbed and pristine.

In late July 2025, I departed from AHMIC Air Base near Old Town Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, on a DHC-2 Beaver de Havilland float plane with my close friend David Radcliffe. David grew up in Yellowknife and is very familiar with the area. The two-and-a-half-hour flight is a spectacular way to grasp the vastness and isolation of the Barrens. Civilization is quickly left behind as the aircraft heads northeast to cover the 250 or so miles (400km) to Aylmer Lake Lodge. Barely thirty minutes into the flight, the tree line is crossed, revealing the rolling features of the tundra. A frozen layer of permafrost prevents the growth of trees this far north, resulting in mostly moss, lichens, and shrub growth where the rocky ground allows. This verdant landscape is dominated by lakes and rivers stretching to the horizon in every direction. Those lakes and rivers are teeming with lake trout (*Salvelinus namaycush*) and Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*), both of which will eagerly take streamers and dry flies.

Our pilot landed gently in Rocknest Bay, a protected corner of Aylmer Lake. On our approach we could see whitecaps on the main body the lake, but being more sheltered from the wind, the bay was smooth and presented an easy landing for our Beaver. We taxied to the sandy beach at the base of the rocky hill on which the lodge is located. Kevin McNeil, co-owner of the lodge with his wife, Patty, greeted us, accompanied by Joel Schneebeli, his assistant, and his 10-year-old grandson.

Muskoxen | Photo by David Z.

Kevin and Joel familiarized us with the lodge's layout. It consists of the main lodge building, four guest cabins, and two outhouses. The main lodge includes a large kitchen, dining area, spacious living room, and two showers. Spotting scopes and binoculars in the living room encourage guests to scan the surrounding landscapes for muskox, wolves, caribou, barren-land grizzly bear, foxes, and wolverines. The heated lodge and cabins are powered by a generator, and Starlink provides reliable Wi-Fi throughout the encampment. David and I dropped our gear in our respective cabins. He'd asked for a cabin separate from mine because, he claims, I snore.

While lunch was prepared, I quickly rigged my Orvis Helios 8WT rod with a sink-tip line, a 16LB leader, and a #2 red-and-white Seaducer. Kevin suggested that I stay within sight of the lodge for safety – grizzlies and wolf packs frequent the area. Bear spray is positioned in every building, including the gear shed at the beach. It is wise to be aware of your surroundings in such a remote area teeming with wildlife.

Stripping line from my reel, I shot a 60FT (18.3m) cast into the clear water, expecting little but hoping for a fish. Wait . . . was that a hit, or did I bump a rock on my first cast? I quickly recast to the same spot and immediately connected to a strong fish. The fish struggled against my drag as I fought the colorful lake trout to the shallow water at my feet. My first lake trout taken on the fly was a beautiful bronze-green with golden spots, a typical pattern for Aylmer's lakereels. I quickly released the 19IN (48.3cm) fish, eager to catch another – hopefully one even larger.

As I worked my way down the beach, I did not connect to another fish until casting past the rocks at the far end of the sandy stretch of shore. I set the hook after a savage strike, and this trout was much larger – it quickly ran deep into my backing. Suddenly, the rod jerked as a knot in my backing came tight! It had apparently been some time since that much line and backing had been stripped from this reel. I scrambled into the water, trying to recover enough line to prevent a break-off or pulled hook, and with a bit of effort, I regained enough backing to be confident that the fish would be landed. As the fish came to my feet, I was delighted to see a lake trout over 30IN (76cm) floating above the colorful gravel. I realized that if trout like this could be caught from the beach, it was going to be an exciting week.

When I returned to the lodge for lunch, Kevin commented on my success. "That second fish looked pretty nice, Jim! What do you think so far?" My big smile and thumbs up answered his question.

David and I devoured our meatball soup and homemade bread. Kate Blackmore, Kevin and Patty's daughter, handled most of the dinner meals during our visit. Challenging weather on our first afternoon and evening provided a chance to prepare equipment for the next day, and I made sure there would be no more issues with tangled backing.

The porches on the front of our cabins were perfect perches for us to glass for muskoxen as we enjoyed cigars and bourbon. The view was dramatic in every direction: the bay, a distant unnamed river, and endless tundra stretching to the horizon. Wolves howled in the distance, and a young arctic hare emerged from under my cabin. Patty delivered a plate of smoked lake trout, cheese, crackers, and pickles to tide us over until dinner. Kevin had smoked the lake trout on his brand new smoker – a curious grizzly had destroyed the last one. A delicious dinner of grilled lake trout accompanied by sides and Kate's homemade bread sated our hunger. After dessert and "some time for reflection on our journey" (that's code for a few more bourbons), we retired to our cozy cabins for the evening, eager to chase trout on the main lake the next morning.

It had been a cloudy, stormy day, and rough weather had kept us mostly pinned to the lodge. The wind finally settled down in the evening, and a rainbow appeared with the parting clouds and setting sun – both ends clearly visible. As I sat on my porch, lit another cigar, and enjoyed the chilly breeze – just strong enough to keep the black flies and mosquitos away – memories of that rainbow came back to me, and I decided that it had been a portent of great things to come. Everyone else was in bed; I was kept company by a family of wolves howling from over the ridge behind the lodge. I sat on my porch until nearly midnight, entranced by the vista stretching before me.

Waking early the next day, I headed over to the main lodge for coffee and breakfast. Kevin and Patty were already there, and appetizing aromas of bacon and pancakes filled the lodge as I sipped my coffee. The wind was calm, and the sky was blue. Kevin and I discussed his experiences with duck and goose hunting way south in Alberta. Although he sold his waterfowl operation, Kevin and Patty own four other lodges besides the Aylmer Lake Lodge: Jolly Lake, Courageous Lake, Lac De Gras, and Copper Mine River. All are operated as Canadian Wildlife Adventures. They have been in the business for 26 years, and their experience and expertise are evident from the efficiency with which they run their operations. In addition to the fishing, Aylmer Lake Lodge is renowned for its hunting opportunities; muskoxen can be taken by rifle or bow, and wolf and wolverine hunts are also popular.

Opposite, Top Left: colors of a typical lake trout

Opposite, Top Right: caribou herd

Opposite, Middle Left: a pink streamer was the ticket

Opposite, Middle Right: lodge happy hour

Opposite, Bottom Left: drinking from Aylmer Lake

Opposite, Bottom Right: grayling from an unnamed river

All photos by Jim Gebhart except caribou by David Z.





Top: Arctic grayling; photo by David Radcliffe

Above: Barren Ground grizzly; photo by David Z.

Right: Arctic hare; photo by Jim Gebhart

We left the beach at 8AM sharp in one of the aluminum Lund boats that are so popular across the north. This became the normal schedule for our week at Aylmer Lodge. Kevin installs a “casting floor” in the bow of his boats to provide a stable platform, and David insisted that I take the first turn on the stage. Being a greedy “bow-hound”, I barely protested. We each brought two rods on this excursion, one rigged for grayling with a floating line and the other with a sink tip or full sink line for the trout. David brought a two-handed Spey rod to cast from the center position and was adept at making long, graceful casts from the crowded center of the Lund.

Aylmer Lake is substantial; sitting at an elevation of 1,230FT (375m) above sea level, it covers approximately 327mi² (847km²). The Lockhart River is the primary inflow and outflow of the lake, and a number of other unnamed rivers flow into the lake. This is unsettled wilderness. Except for occasional canoeists, it is rarely visited by parties not staying in the lodge. The lakera are plentiful, and there are numerous diverse fishing experiences available. We never ventured more than 45 minutes from the lodge, but within that range we had multiple rivers, rocky islands, drop-offs, and reefs to explore.

Aylmer's depth varies greatly, with deep holes of 75FT+ transitioning into sunken plateaus, rocky ridges, islands, sand shoals, and rocky shorelines. Interestingly, most fish are caught within 15FT of the surface, something Kevin has learned from his non-fly visitors, who most often troll. The rivers feeding the lake offer a mix of gravel and rocky rapids, some resembling freestone streams. The striking clarity of the water allows for sight fishing opportunities for both trout and grayling.

Our first stop was a rocky reef that transitioned from a depth of 8FT down to 40FT (2.4-12.2m). I was casting a #2 Clouser in green and white; David was using a white streamer of similar size. Working the transition zone from the shallower water to the drop-off, we quickly hooked multiple trout in the 6-10LB (2.7-4.5kg) range. The takes were solid, and the fish fought above their weight class.

A large bull muskox wandered down a hill on the nearby shore. I had never seen a muskox and was impressed not only by its size but also with its shaggy coat. Similar in shape to a plains bison, though smaller, the longer shaggy guard hairs cover an insulating coat called *qiviut*. A thick mantle of hair resembling a lion's mane covers the upper shoulders behind the head and curved horns. These impressive, almost prehistoric-looking creatures can weigh from 400 to 900LBS (181-408kg).

We fished hard through lunch, which we ate on the boat as we moved between spots. The afternoon was spent exploring different areas where previous parties had caught bigger lakera weighing 30-45LBS (13.6-18.1kg). Ten-pound trout are incredibly fun, but we were after larger fish. By late afternoon, our shoulders and backs were aching; it

was time to head back. For lake trout, this is mainly a blind-casting destination. Many casts are needed, but those casts yield a lot of fish.

During our run back to the lodge, we saw a large Barren Ground grizzly (*Ursus arctos richardsoni*) walking along a ridge line. Reddish-blond fur covered its massive body; it was hunting small game among the ground cover. Although Barren Ground grizzlies are usually smaller than their relatives in more southern regions because of the limited food supply, they're still an impressively large predator. Before arriving at the lodge, I had been warned to scan my surroundings before leaving any building to make sure there were no grizzlies or wolves nearby. Seeing this bear reinforced that caution.

The lodge and each cabin have required repairs due to bear and wolverine incursions during the winter months when no one is present. Occasionally, Kevin has had to encourage bears to leave the lodge area. I collected bear hair from the corners of the cabins, left from their habit of scratching their backs – perfect for tying flies!

The next morning David suggested that we check out a small set of rapids just 15 minutes away where an unnamed river flows into the bay; grayling were on the morning's agenda. Kevin guided the bow to the shore, and we headed across the beautiful tundra toward the river. Walking across tundra is a curious experience. Thick moss and lichens cushion each step. Bright flowers break up the different shades of green and yellow mosses. Wild cranberry bushes, full of berries, are mixed with other plants. These berries, actually lingonberries, are a crucial source of nutrition for both animals and people in the NWT. Unfortunately, they weren't ripe during this trip. We had barely walked 50YDS (46m) before we found a caribou shed. Further along, there was some hide still covered in white hair, left from a wolf kill of a caribou – more fly-tying material!

We chose a spot on the river that would allow us to fish pocket water before working the longer seams. I made a short cast to float through an eddy, and an 11IN (28cm) grayling immediately engulfed my fly. I brought it to hand and admired its shiny gray body accented by the billowing, colorful dorsal fin. That was almost too easy! Working through the current was challenging because of the sharp, jagged rocks on the streambed, so I cast upstream along the seam's edge. A small grayling lunged at the fly and missed. Continuing the drift after the miss, another grayling hit the fly and raced into stronger current when it felt the hook. It quickly came to hand. David was working water upstream from me, and he was experiencing similar good luck. Unfortunately, he took a spill and got wet – a sharp rock bruised his hip, and he started back to the boat. After catching a few more grayling, we followed him back to the boat and returned to the lodge for lunch and dry clothes.

Returning to the river's mouth, we cast dries for grayling in a large eddy. David caught some beautiful fish before we

were interrupted by several muskoxen descending the slope on the opposite bank. This narrower section, about 70yds (64m) wide, is a traditional crossing point for muskoxen and caribou. We could hear the bulls “growling” in displeasure at our presence. Drifting away from their path, we watched as the largest bull, accompanied by cows and calves, waded in and started swimming across the river toward the boulder-strewn shallows.

They carefully navigated the submerged rocks before wading onto land. It was a privilege to witness this crossing, surely something that’s been happening here for thousands of years. The herd easily numbered twenty muskoxen, with more visible on the horizon. A lone Arctic wolf appeared behind the herd; another observer, like us, but likely with other intentions.

One morning, caribou appeared behind the lodge. The fall migration had begun, and the lodge sits along their route as the scattered herd moves south before winter arrives. Caribou hunting is banned in this area for everyone except members of the First Nations. Large bulls, sometimes alone, other times with cows and smaller bulls, wandered past the lodge.

Kevin described another set of rapids upstream from the one we previously fished while observing the muskoxen. It required a short 2km (1.25mi) hike over a hill and down to the top of the rapids. Compared to the lower set of rapids we explored earlier, these are more robust and narrower. They hold some large grayling.

The largest grayling of our trip took my fly and, upon feeling the hook-set, bolted upstream. It stripped line from my reel before the tippet (5X) broke. That was a beast of a grayling!

“Jim, look up, across the river!” A white Arctic wolf, perhaps the same one we saw earlier, was trotting up the opposite bank. I let out my rendition of a wolf howl. It immediately stopped and stared at me, not 60yds (55m) away. I wondered whether it considered me a threat or a potential meal. Continuing along the bank, the wolf suddenly slowed and began following a scent. As it approached some low brush, a covey of ptarmigan flushed, probably twelve birds. The wolf lunged into the air in pursuit! Some flew upstream. Others flushed downstream, and one flew across the river right over us. As I turned to follow its flight, I noticed another herd of caribou watching me from the gentle slope behind me.

This trip, originally planned to explore the lake trout and grayling fisheries, turned out to be far more than expected. The fishing is fantastic, and the Arctic offers a fresh experience compared to chasing the usual rainbow, brown, and cutthroat trout farther south. The tundra, beautiful, remote, and full of life, observed while staying in the comfort of Aylmer Lake Lodge, continues to excite me every time I reminisce. Would I return? Absolutely. There's a 40lb lake trout swimming in Aylmer Lake with my name on it. 🐟✈️

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Top: Steve and Betty Mckenzie with a nice lake trout caught from the rocky shore; photo by Kevin McNeil

Bottom: cabin interior; photo by Jim Gebhart

Opposite: Aylmer Lake Lodge cabins perched on the edge of Rocknest Bay; photo by David Z.

