

## Nigel Stokes and His 29 lb Arctic Char

In 1939 Chummy Plummer's grandfather and his father Warren started Plummer's Arctic Fishing Lodges as a one-cabin operation. Now, 69 years later, the family tradition continues at various sites. One of those sites is the Tree River Camp which dates to 1960. Nigel Stokes of Huntsville once guided for Plummers "about 30 years ago" on Great Slave Lake. His return to Plummers in July of 2008 was sort of a "celebratory return trip". He took three buddies along, Kelly Zweep, Jim Wooder and Greg Dee. They flew to Winnipeg where they stayed overnight and the next day they boarded a First Air jet bound for Plummers.

They spent a couple of days fishing for lake trout on Great Bear Lake. "Those huge lakers spoil you for fishing (lake trout) elsewhere," said Stokes. In all they caught lakers that weighed 40 pounds, 39, twelve in the 30 lb. range and twenty over 20 lbs. "All catch and release." Following that they took a turbo Otter for 1.5 hours further north to the Tree River camp. Following that they took a turbo Otter for 1.5 hours further north to the Tree River camp.

A lot of water flows over the Tree. Stokes was using a Catfish Ugly Stick, 20 lb. test and buck tail jigs, all barbless. "We had to switch to salt water jigs as the hooks on our freshwater jigs were all straightening out." Pork rind rounded out the bait. "We were casting and bouncing the jigs off the rocks in the rapids. It was spectacular to see the char chase the lures," said Stokes. In one afternoon they caught 30 char. "We were fishing the Montreal Pool, downstream from the third falls above the Presidential Pool" so named because former presidents like to fish there.

It was a magical day when Stokes tied into a real attention getter. "It was sunny, warm, and dry." The day started off foggy at 4 degrees Celsius and warmed to 15-18. At the Montreal Pool the river is approximately 100-150 feet wide. Off-shore there is a standing wave of about four feet. "I cast the one ounce white bucktail jig into the wave and let the current take it into the pool eddy," said Stokes who continued to bounce the jig off bottom. Having already landed 6-7 char in the 12-18 pound range he knew he had a bigger fish on when the char hit. "He made three big runs, luckily into the current and upstream." Had the fish headed downstream it would have been more challenging as there are many boulders and footing is treacherous. "This fish was strong enough to strip my line even though it was heading upstream."

After some 20 minutes and three runs the fish was tiring so Stokes and his Inuit guide Terry prepared to net it. Stokes was also conscious that the fish might roll or shake its head and toss the barbless hook at any time. Keeping the rod tip high and slowly retreating across the rock face Stokes slowly worked the reluctant fish towards the waiting net. "After one or two heart stopping near misses Terry netted him but the fish gave a massive head shake and by the time we had him out of the water he had shaken the hook." Stokes was incredulous when Terry said the scale read 29 pounds. "We checked three times," said Stokes. "He (guide Terry) had never seen a char so big." The girth of the tail itself was 10.5 inches. "I couldn't get my hand around it." The char measured 34 by 25 inches. How do you spell "excited?" Following photos and a "short dance of joy" they released the fish back into the wild Tree River, "free to breed the next generation." As it happens, the record char is apparently 33 lbs. "The largest char in the world live in the Tree River," he said. "I wouldn't even kill a world record," he added. Like many Stokes loves the fishing, the experience, the environment – the entire package. Then there are the musk ox, caribou, barren land grizzly and lake trout that weigh in at 100 pounds or more in both Great Bear and Great Slave.

"I fish for fun," said Stokes. "A lot has changed in 30 years. Fishermen used to return home with 20 pounds of filets. Trophies were kept. Not any more. It's all catch/release." Plummer's catch/release rule has spread to other areas and so the fish, which tend to grow more slowly in a northern climate, continue to also grow bigger. Hence the attraction, for many a once in their lifetime experience, to catch record fish, see them released to carry on, to tune into the environment, to see some new territory, to explore, to learn....

