



Thymallus Arcticus

While the aforementioned *Thymallus Arcticus*, or Arctic Grayling, clearly bears no resemblance to a salmon whatsoever, these scrappy little guys are actually members of the salmon, or for you fishing geeks, *Salmonidae* family. For the “ultra geeky,” I am certain that you are just dying to know that they are also native to the *Nearctic* and *Palaearctic* ecozones – so there – now you know. I remember once reading an article which explained why the word *Thymallus* was included in their scientific name as a descriptor. It went on to say that if you pressed your nose against a fresh caught Grayling, it smelled very much like the herb thyme. Although I have caught more than my share of Grayling, as for how they smell, I will be more than happy to take the authors word for it.

Their range once included much of central and western Canada and parts of the northern United States, but the good old *Thymallus* is now, for the most part restricted to the far north. The main reason being that they are great barometers of water quality, so if you have clean, cold water you might find a Grayling or two, mess it up, and they will leave town.

For a fresh water fish they can be stunning in both appearance and colour. Many have long flowing dorsal fins, which explains why some refer to them as the “Sailfish of the North”, and they boast such colours as gold, azure, electric blue, silver and iridescent pink.

They also tend to be rather sociable, so if you see or catch one, it’s a very good bet that several hundred of his or her closest friends will not be too far away. Grayling love cool, well oxygenated water which is why you will find good size populations in many northern rivers. In lakes they tend to hang close to shore where there is a bit of cover. Otherwise, particularly on Great Bear Lake, they might just as well have a big bull’s-eye painted on them, because you can take it to the bank that a hungry Lake Trout will be lurking nearby, as a 2 or 3 pound thyme flavoured Grayling makes an excellent afternoon snack. This probably explains why they always appear to have an anxious, worried look on their face.

I recall watching a rather impatient 20 plus pound trout run so hard and fast at a pod of Grayling, that it overshot its mark and found itself high and dry, well up on the sandy shore. It was truly a sight to see as Grayling were shooting out of the water in every direction as the trout made its charge. Fortunately the big grey managed to flip itself back into the water without our assistance.

Immediately following this incident, my fishing partner and I did discuss whether it would be appropriate to include that particular fish in our weekly catch and release total in the event duty called, and we had to assist it back into the water. Our guide wisely chose not join in the discussion, but I did notice him roll his eyes several times as we enthusiastically debated the matter.

My first of many encounters with this unique fish was on Great Bear Lake, but I have also caught them in Alaska and throughout the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Fishing for *Thymallus* can be very frustrating at times because they have this annoying habit of either being overly compliant – they will at times attack a soggy old cigar butt with great enthusiasm – or developing an advanced case of lock jaw and will only hit one very obscure fly pattern - which you can bet you will not have - and only if presented in a very particular way.

I have been in areas where there were so many – hundreds if not thousands of them - rising after floating bugs, that it looked like rain dimpling the surface of the water, and true to their nature, I could not catch a single fish. At other times no matter what I tossed at them, flies, small spoons or spinners, they would attack it with a vengeance. Because they will try – and at times succeed - to outwit you, if you want to get the better of them, you are going to have to be very patient. Don't let it get you down that your first 2 or 3 thousand casts, right into the middle of a large school, went completely unnoticed, just keep trying because eventually they will get over being finicky and begin to feed like a school of hungry Piranha. That's when the old cigar butt will come in handy if you either run out of lures, or just want to see if I was pulling your leg.

Life can present some real challenges if you happen to fall into the category of prey. Being prey is not something *Thymallus* is likely all that enthusiastic about, but when prey transitions into bait, it can be very entertaining for the angler. I know of at least 2 instances where a very large Lake Trout was landed after it slammed a Grayling that was being reeled in on ultra-lite tackle. Those battles went on for well over an hour because the big trout was unwilling to relinquish its prize.

There are also other surprises waiting for you when you get onto a school of Grayling. While a big trout will occasionally jump into the fray, there are also numerous small trout (3 to 12 pounds), that swim along in the midst of the schools. Although some of these interlopers will snack on a Grayling or 2, most are just content to hang out, as there

is safety in numbers, because even a 12 pound trout is prey on Great Bear. These trout tend to bully the Grayling out of the way when you drop your lure into the water, with the result that you are in for a much longer fight than would likely have been the case had the Grayling arrived there first.

To illustrate the point, early one afternoon I was using my ultra-lite rig and tossing a small jig into the shallows, hoping to catching a few Grayling before lunch. I got a light hit on my second cast, set the hook and began to reel in. It didn't seem like much of a fish, and at that point I was not sure if it was a small Trout or a Grayling. My guide leaned over for a look and, with a huge grin said, "we are going to be here for a while." Taking a look myself, I saw a very large Trout casually swimming past the boat with my jig just visible in its mouth. An hour and three quarters later we landed and released what turned out to be a 23 pound laker. During the entire time, I was on the receiving end of all manner of abuse and uncomplimentary remarks from both my fishing partner and the guys in another boat who we had planned to have lunch with. They made it very clear that they wanted their lunch now, and were not all that enamoured with having to wait around forever for me to land my fish. If I heard someone yell, "cut the line" once, I heard it 50 times.

Now I don't want to leave you with the impression that *Thymallus Arcticus* doesn't give a good account of itself when it comes to putting up a fight. On the contrary, pound for pound they can hold their own with anything that swims in those waters, and they are capable of long runs and spectacular aerobatics. If you happen to catch them in fast water, they use their long dorsal fin much to their advantage. While a 2 pound Grayling is considered a good size fish in most waters, when it comes to Great Bear, it does not even warrant a second glance. It's not uncommon to find yourself casting into a school of fish where the average size is 3 pounds or better. Catching fish of that size on virtually every cast, using light tackle, should be enough for even the most voracious angler. Throw in half a dozen 10 pound trout and you're going to need some A535 to soothe your tired old worn out arm at the end of the day.



For those of you who think that it's not that big of a deal to catch a mess of 3 pound fish that are merely the runts of the salmon family, just remember one thing – at least one Sturgeon Class attack submarine has carried the name USS Grayling. Have you ever heard tell of a submarine named the USS King Salmon?