

Arctic char

cheetah of the north

written by Tom Boyd



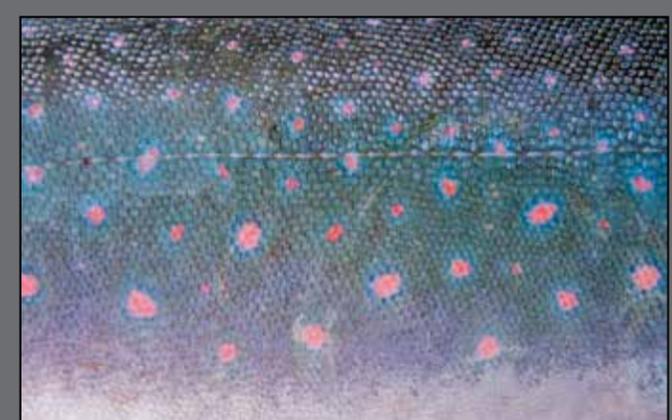
Arctic char are among the strongest, fastest, freshwater gamefish in the world. Their will and endurance when hooked is legendary among those familiar with the species.

One particular landlocked Arctic char clearly stands out in my mind. It was one of my first and by far the largest. It was one of those casts you never forget. Drs. Richard Haedrich and Laurie Thompson and I were researching the remarkable brook trout, and its close cousin the landlocked Arctic char, in the unparalleled Cooper's Minipi Basin in remote Labrador. A pod of char was porpoising on the surface for big drakes near the doctors' canoe. The lead fish was a brute—the largest landlocked char I'd ever seen at that time, and every bit of 15 pounds. In vain, I yelled, trying to get the attention of the doctors who were close to the pod, but had their backs turned to them. Quickly I stripped out all of my fly line and about 10 feet of backing. I cast my 10-foot, 7-weight salmon rod with only two false casts. Somehow, my big green drake pattern landed softly a yard or so in front of the pod leader and the big Arctic char effortlessly sipped in the size-4 dry. Unperturbed, he continued porpoising and the light drag on my reel sang. The powerful char seemed totally unaffected and didn't panic or go into hyper drive. Tightening my drag with a simple twist, I was confident. No worry! I had over 200 yards of backing. Effortlessly, the powerful char continued straight away as my backing came near its end. Now in panic mode, I locked the drag down tight. My line came tight as I rushed to the front of the narrow canoe, arm outstretched. Ping! For only the second time in my career I was spooled!

Arctic Char—Salmonidae Family

THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT designations of Arctic char: Anadromous and Landlocked. All char spawn in fresh water, but the anadromous variety travel out to sea and return to spawn in the river or lake of their birth. However, some char with direct access to the salt choose to remain in fresh water for their entire lives. The landlocked variety were trapped in freshwater systems with no access to the salt during the last ice age. In my opinion, anadromous char are the most underrated fresh water game fish I've ever encountered, especially when bright as a new silver dollar and fresh from the salt. Legendary angler and writer, A. J. McClane, called char the "cheetahs of the north" and held them to be the hardest fighting game fish. The incredibly difficult habitats they are born in help make them super fish.

Recently I sight fished the crystal clear waters of Labrador's Flowers River for Atlantic salmon on dry flies. During the last hour of the last day we saw many char boiling on the surface where a small tributary flowed into the Flowers River. My guide, Rob Solo, quickly tied on a red bead-head, fresh water shrimp pattern. Cast after cast produced strikes. A vicious strike severed my 10-pound tippet. Tying on our second and last shrimp, we were back in action with the first cast. Our canoe was moored in about six feet of water. The char bumped the fly then devoured it and shot under our canoe faster than any Atlantic ever could. In the blink of an eye, my rod bent double under the canoe

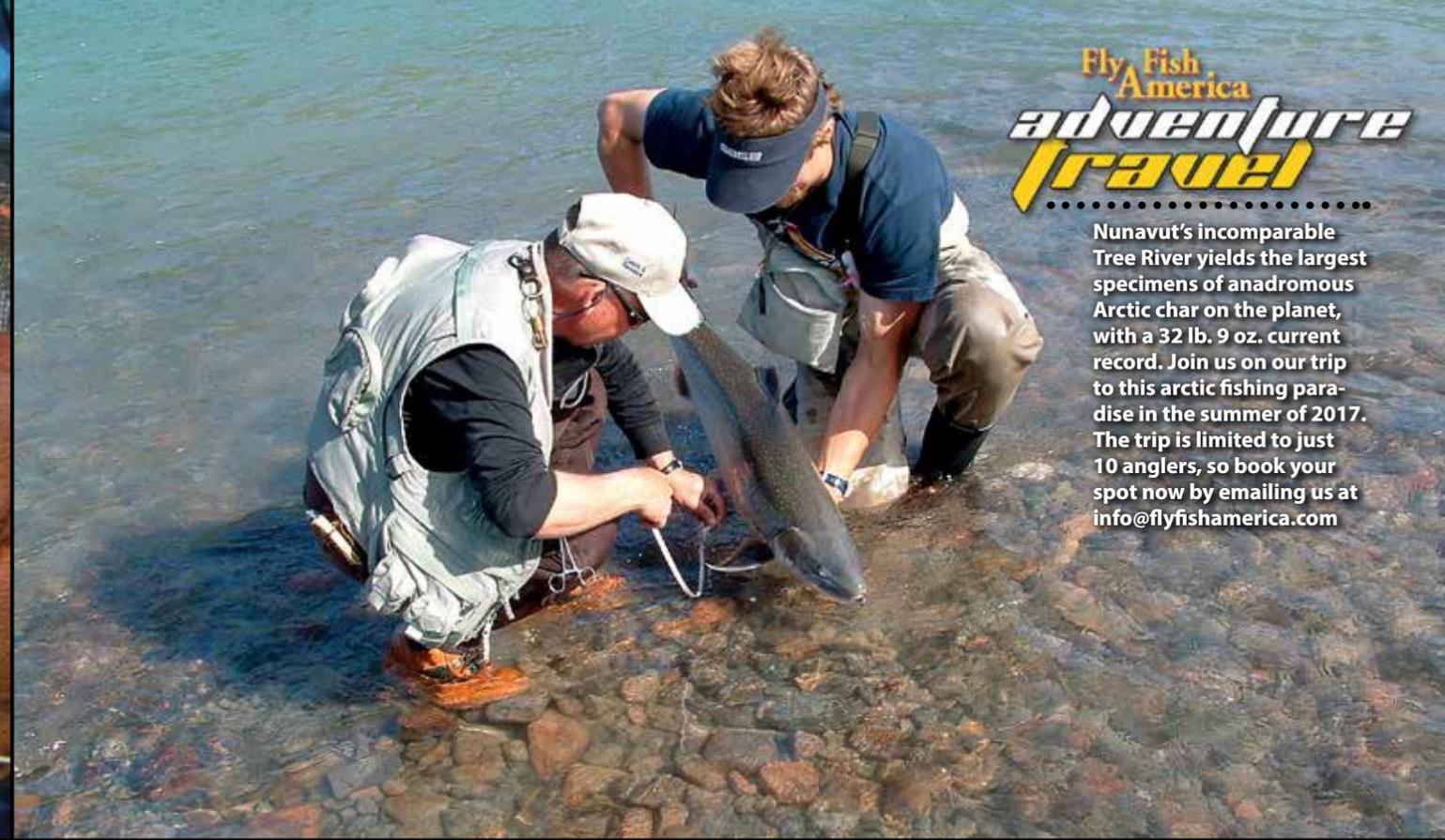


Anadromous char are larger than landlocked char and grow at a faster rate with the greater abundance of nutrition available in brackish and salt water.



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as I couldn't react quickly enough to the char's amazing run. My drag screamed as the incredible char became airborne in the middle of the Flowers. A few sporadic aerial antics severed my tippet . . . again. Pound for pound, char are among the strongest of all fresh water species.

Description

ARCTIC CHAR (*Salvelinus alpinus*) are in the Salmonidae family of salmon and trout. The char family is composed of five species: Arctic char, Dolly Varden, brook trout, bull trout and lake trout. Char are salmon shaped and often a dead ringer for their cousin the Dolly Varden. They are also similar in appearance to brook trout. Upon close inspection, however, it is easy to distinguish between char and brookies. Char have a deeply forked tail while brookies are sometimes called square tails. Char have fewer spots, often none when in bright silver mode and coming in from the salt to spawn. They also have lighter spots than brookies, pink for char, red for trout. Char never have the characteristic blue halo of trout around their spots. Technically, char are differentiated from all true trout by their mouths. The vomerine bone is located in the center of their mouths. All trout have many teeth all along the vomer, while char display only a few near the front. In spawning regalia, Arctic char are nature's most flamboyant and exotic species. Their sides and bellies are a riot of flashy orange or red with pinkish spots and riotously colored pectoral

and pelvic fins whose leading edges are white. Spawning bucks are far more colorful than hens and develop a swollen, protruding extension of their lower jaw called a kype.

Landlocked char vary greatly from each other and anadromous char. In England and Europe char have yellowish flanks and bellies. In the Minipi watershed the char are silvery gray but darken as the spawn approaches. Their pink spots are prominent in females, but as spawn arrives the males are dark green, black on their back to blood red and dark orange on their flanks and belly. The kypes on the bucks are not as pronounced as on anadromous char.

Range

ANADROMOUS ARCTIC CHAR are circumpolar in distribution and are the most northerly of all fresh water game fish. They inhabit the waters of northern Alaska, Canada, Russia, Greenland, Scandinavia, and Iceland. Although anadromous, they spend all but a few months of the year in fresh water. Char are anatomically made up of mostly fresh water that freezes at 32° F. Saltwater freezes below that at 28.4° F. Char must return to their home river or lake or risk freezing in the still liquid salt water. Landlocked char range from Atlantic and northern Canada, New England, Scandinavia, alpine Europe, the British Isles, and Russia.

Landlocked char have a similar distribution as their anadromous

cousins. The closed watersheds must have water deep enough that it does not freeze solid to the bottom over winter and hold sufficient forage for the char to survive. Lake Hazen, on Nunavut's Ellesmere Island, is the northernmost range in the western hemisphere.

Spawn

UNLIKE MOST SALMON that spawn once and die, char live after spawning. Male char arrive at the spawning grounds first to establish and protect their spawning territory. The oldest and largest fish get the best spawning habitat. Female char will dig one or more redds and have buck males fertilize her eggs. Char usually choose gravel bottoms to dig their redds and lay their eggs, but are more adaptive than trout and can also use underwater ledges. Once free of the egg sack, char fry will spend up to five or six years in their most northerly range, before venturing out to sea. Char are not distance migrators as are salmon, but stay close to shore near their birth river's confluence with the sea. The rigors of spawning in one of our planet's most hostile ecosystems, however, dictates a recovery period of a year or two before spawning again.

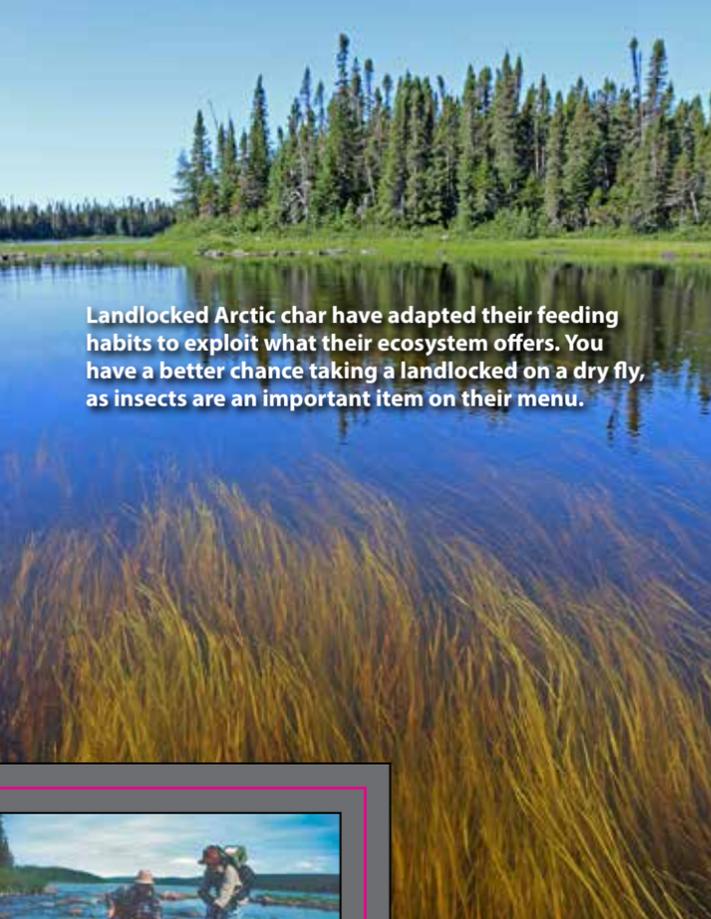
Size and Age

ANADROMOUS CHAR are larger than landlocked char and grow at a faster rate with the greater abundance of nutrition available in brackish and

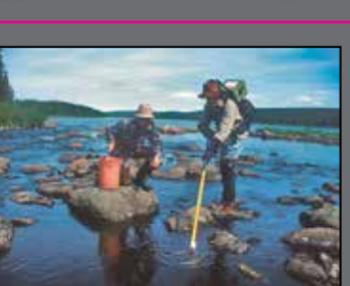
salt water. Nunavut's incomparable Tree River typically yields the largest specimens, with a 32 lb. 9 oz. current record. Fish of over 34 lbs. have been reportedly taken there but not confirmed. Victoria Island also produces large fish with, 20 lb. plus fish taken every year. Russian waters have produced char over 30 lbs. Most fresh water yields smaller fish, with 2- to 10-lb. fish typical. However, much larger specimens are commonly taken.

Landlocked char are usually small, and exhibit slow growth until reaching a suitable size to become cannibalistic and travel to eat other fish. Then their growth rate spikes with larger prey such as mice, lemmings, etc. The notable exception for landlocked char size is Labrador's Minipi Basin and a few Nunavut and Alaskan lakes. It is common to take Minipi char from 5 to 10 lbs. and I've witnessed them to 15 lbs.

Char have been reported to live to age 40, and I personally believe they can and do live longer in certain areas. It may take up to 20 years for a char to reach maturity in their extreme northern range. Char age can be determined through examination of the otolith (ear bones) in their inner ear. Reading the bands on the otolith macrostructure reveals the migratory behavior, age and spawning activity of char. The otolith is sensitive to the earth's gravity and linear acceleration. It yields char information about vertical and horizontal movement. For many years, gill netters in Atlantic Canada placed their nets in peak salmon and char



Landlocked Arctic char have adapted their feeding habits to exploit what their ecosystem offers. You have a better chance taking a landlocked on a dry fly, as insects are an important item on their menu.



spawning rivers at the height of their run. The gill nets spanned the rivers shore to shore and took virtually all of the larger, highest value specimens. I participated in the Newfoundland/Labrador gill netter buy-out program in 1991. The Atlantic salmon have recovered, but since char are so long-lived, it will take longer for them. By taking the largest fish each year, the largest and most genetically fit were removed from the gene pool. However, the news is generally good. I fished the Flowers River this year and the char stocks are well on their way to full recovery.

Behavior

ARCTIC CHAR, whether anadromous or landlocked, are driven by food, temperature and reproduction. Understanding their behavior is paramount for success in catching them. Char always winter in fresh water. They enter from the salt in late June or July to find their spawning areas. Unlike salmon, they can be aggressive feeders. At river mouths they will often hold in schools and upon high water or full moon enter the rivers. In the hottest times they are near the top of the water column, and as temperatures go down, so do they.

Landlocked char will hold in the riffles of streams or rocky shallows of lakes until large enough to venture into larger bodies of water. Char are a slow-growing species; the exception may be at the Minipi Basin where conditions are excellent for producing large fish. The presence of an alpha predator, northern pike, has hastened the growth of brook trout and may have done the same for char. Once a char reaches about 3 lbs. it can enter the system to forage on the relative abundance. At about 5 lbs., char are somewhat safe from northern pike predation. I have seen many char with severe scars from predators like pike, river otters, osprey and bald eagles.

I researched the Minipi watershed in the 1980s and again in the 1990s with noted marine scientists and researchers Doctors Richard Haedrich and Laurie Thompson of St. Johns Memorial University in Newfoundland. We targeted age, spawning locations, diet, feeding habits, and whether they were a separate species. According to noted DNA expert on Salmonidae, Dr. Robert Behnke, char tend to morph more readily than any other member of the trout and salmon family. Char are one of fresh water fish's strongest adherents to Darwinism. A distinct water drainage system can hold several morphs of char that have evolved to exploit specific feeding opportunities within their habitat. Some fish can grow to six inches or so, while others from the exact same gene pool can grow to pounds and survive on a different diet.

Char seek favorable water temperatures. After ice out they are on top. As summer approaches they seek deeper water, but will come up for large insects as evening approaches. In the dog days of summer they are down deep in favorable water climates in the 48° to 55° F. range. Over winter they feed on forage fish, including lake chubs, sticklebacks, burbot, and smaller gamefish of a region, including smaller char. They will also forage on insect larvae, freshwater shrimp, and almost anything edible. Char are truly adaptable and opportunistic feeders

Techniques to Catch

UNDERSTANDING WHEN, where and what char feed on is critical to catching them. The diets of landlocked and anadromous char are very different. Anadromous feed in open areas with access to the sea. The prey species menu is larger and more diverse. Anadromous char are also far more aggressive and opportunistic than their landlocked cousins. They will eat about anything in the garbage can and then try to eat the garbage can. Once fishing the Situk River in Alaska, I caught a fresh sockeye salmon hen, heavy with roe. I kept her for dinner and when cleaning her at water's edge some of the roe was washed downstream. Several rainbow trout and char started feeding on them. I waded into the river and the trout vanished, but not the brazen char. I ended up feeding a half dozen char that had gathered at my feet.

Anadromous Tactics

FEEDING AGGRESSION is especially true of bright fish just returning from the sea to spawn. The bright char are also total tackle busters and, on average, the most aerially inclined. Anadromous char will eat smaller

char, brook trout, grayling, lake trout, or any other species it encounters. In brackish water or at sea, char forage on capelin, shrimp, sand lances, sculpin, small fish like Arctic cod and flounder and crustaceans from crabs to krill. When arriving at the mouth of their birth river, usually in late June or early July, char will usually hold for days to a few weeks in fast riffles or behind structure. They are down in the water column and a sink-tip or full sink line, or a 200- to 400-grain integrated or shooting head line is required, depending on the depth and flow of the river. Long casts are often



necessary and switch or Spey rods are appropriate. Fish shrimp patterns or big flashy streamers with lots of Flashabou and Krystal Flash in pink, orange, purple, white or red. Cast long and directly across stream, then quickly, but irregularly, retrieve your fly. Reel up to the last guide as char will sometimes chase a fly a long way before striking and can strike almost to your rod tip. Depending on fish size, I use hooks from #4 to a 2/0. Many Pacific salmon flies work well including, surface poppers.

Once the char move upstream, the game and tactics change. Moving upriver, char will hold in fast runs, behind structure, and at temporary impediments like a small falls or a confluence of streams. I keep moving and sometimes make exploratory casts to known holding areas or promising lies. Char are a schooling fish and often cluster together. Drift bomber type flies over them, either dead drift with an occasional twitch, or dead drift above holding fish and tighten your line to create drag and let your fly skitter over the surface. Another tactic is to skitter a bomber and then stop it—trailing char will hit it then. Dead drifting dries, like white or Ausable Wulff patterns or a blue charm, tied with a double half-hitch will sometimes take char and is a challenging and rewarding method. The greatest success, however, comes from sending a sculpin pattern deep or fishing a nymph with or without a strike indicator. Red bead-head shrimp patterns are deadly, but brightly colored or traditional patterns also work. Bead-head prince, copper John, hare's ear and pheasant tail are tried and tested nymphs. Lighten your tippet, 4- to 6-lbs., and use fluorocarbon when fishing small nymphs.

When char are in full spawning regalia they are very protective and will readily strike at small predator imitations. Put your fly right on the bottom. Patterns vary around the globe. A local guide will know what's best and most will have their own favorite pattern. However I've had success with the following: Grey Ghost, marabou muddler, Zonkers, Matuka, Sculpin and Lake Chub patterns, Dahlberg Diver, Leech, bunny, and Woolly Bugger patterns. Put some bright colors in your flies such as orange, pink, purple and also white and use fur that undulates. Don't be afraid to use rattles; they work on big water or when searching for char. When char are feeding on salmon eggs, use yarn egg patterns, Glo Bugs and the like, including clusters.

Landlocked Tactics

LANDLOCKED CHAR are often difficult to find in the dark, peat-stained waters of productive lakes and rivers in black spruce and tamarack forests, or the crystal-clear depths of the tundra lakes. Landlocked char are generally more passive than their genetic twins. They have adapted their feeding habits to exploit what their ecosystem offers. You have a better chance taking a landlocked on a dry fly, as insects are an important item on their menu. In spawning time, it's easy, if you know where they

spawn. Many individuals will not participate in the spawning as they skip years, or are immature.

This year fishing Coopers Minipi, I was targeting char. Todd Rumbolt, the head guide at Big Minipi Lodge, told me he'd caught 19 char that averaged 8.5 lbs. last September at "My Place." Years ago, I discovered a great brookie spot and called it "My Place". There, they hit everything and anything that was drifted over them. Sculpin patterns on or near the bottom, and huge mice patterns, were deadly.

The key to finding landlocks is temperature and food. The Minipi produces copious insect hatches. Green and brown drakes can be size-0 to -2. Until high tem-

peratures put them down, char readily feed on the same insects and terrestrials that brookies do, including:

drakes, caddis, dragonflies, chironomids, copepods, freshwater shrimp, plankton, fish eggs, snails, sticklebacks, beetles, ants, mice, lemmings, sculpin, lake chubs, small gamefish, etc.

Char hold in groups in thermal climes around 50° F. or so. Often this puts them below the fly fisherman's depth range, even when employing a sinking line. In normal conditions char will hold in numbers in fast, shallow ripples. They will readily take most offerings. I give char 10 minutes or so to eat, and if no success, move. Most success, even in the shallows, is with a weighted line. Char must be handled with care after being caught. They fight so hard, giving their all, they are in a weakened state. They do not recuperate as quickly as brook trout. Use knotless webbed nets, handle as little as possible using wet gloves, and fully revive.

Sculpin, Lake Chub, bunny matukas and colorful streamers seem to work best. However, there's nothing like the rare rush of a double digit char rising to a dead drifted Wulff under a brilliant star studded sky with the wolves howling. It's happened to me, and I'd rank it as one of my all-time greatest thrills in fly fishing.

Where To Go

Cooper's Minipi Lodges—This watershed offers the finest landlocked char fishing I'm aware of. It is also the planet's best brook trout fishery and offers record size northern pike. There are several lodges to choose from. They also feature fly-outs. Contact them at (877) 266-7377; E-mail: info@minipi.com; Web: www.minipi.com. Weekly pricing runs from \$4,000 to 5,000 U.S.

Flowers River Lodge—Offers a strong annual run of char with an occasional salty brook trout mixed in. Nearby lakes are wall to wall char. In my opinion, this is the best sight fishing with dry flies for Atlantic salmon. Contact Mike Crosby at (902) 830-1643; Email: mikecrosby@eastlink.ca; Web: www.flowersriver.com. Weekly pricing is \$6,750 U.S.

Plummer's Arctic Lodges—The Tree River offers the best anadromous char fishing on earth. There are several lodges to choose from on Great Bear and Great Slave Lakes that offer world class landlocked and anadromous char, lake trout, grayling and northern pike fishing. Contact them at (800) 665-0240; E-mail: fish@plummerslodges.com; Web: www.plummerslodges.com. Pricing runs from \$4,200 to \$5,250 per week U.S., plus fly-outs at \$1,095 per.

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TOM BOYD is *Fly Fish America's* Editor-at-Large. Look for Tom's acclaimed new book, *Salt Water's Greatest Gamefish*, available through Stackpole Books (www.stackpolebooks.com).