

Variety is the spice of your angling life at one of North America's top lodges. by Todd Tanner

Mac T&J's EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Back when I was a youngster, staying up way past my bedtime and reading *Field & Stream* and *Sports Afield* under the covers with a flashlight, there were a handful of truly mythic North American destinations for aspiring sportsmen. Labrador. British Columbia. Alaska. The Northwest Territories. While I would have traded my pocketknife and my BB gun for an opportunity to visit

any of them, I never thought I'd get that chance.

Boy, was I wrong.

The vast Chilcotin Plateau sits a couple hundred miles north of Vancouver, B.C. It's a remote area known for its hard-fighting rainbows, which means it's a good place to wet a line. Yet when it comes to angling, "good" isn't always enough. If I'm going to leave Montana, I'd like to experience something special; something different from the cookie-cutter lodges and corporate retreats that dominate the terrain in North America. That's where John Blackwell and Moose Lake Lodge come in.

John, for all his modesty, is the real deal. He's an ace floatplane pilot, as well as a respected outfitter and guide. He's also steeped in the kind of authentic



A Midsummer Flight's Dream: A breathtaking view of B.C.'s mountains from the window of John Blackwell's floatplane.

backwoods self-sufficiency you just don't find much anymore. In fact, I'd wager a pint of Barliman's Best that John has explored more rivers, put more clients on more fish, and flown more miles through more mountains than anyone else in B.C.

Just as importantly, John and his wife Mary Lou are wonderful hosts. Moose Lake Lodge exudes a warmth and an intimacy that most of us don't associate with fishing lodges. It's almost as if you're visiting old friends you haven't seen for a while; friends who bend over backwards to make sure you're having a great time.

As for the rest of it – the delicious food, the tremendous angling, the comfortable cabins and hot showers, the early morning loon calls that rouse you from bed – well, all that other stuff is just icing on the cake.

My friend Mac and I spent a week at Moose Lake last summer. Mac is one of those eclectic individuals who guides fly fishermen when it's warm enough and teaches skiing when it's not. He's also funny, modest, easy-going and generous, and since he rarely snores, he qualifies as the perfect traveling companion. (Now that I think about it, I might have to start renting him out.)

The two of us arrived at Moose Lake late on a Friday evening. We stashed our gear and enjoyed a couple of sinfully delicious chocolate desserts with John and Mary Lou. Then, instead of going to bed like sensible folks, we wandered back to our cabin and talked angling into the wee hours. It made for an awfully late night, but we had too much start-of-the-trip adrenaline to fall asleep at anything approaching a reasonable hour.

When we woke the following morning, we showered – a luxury you don't always have in the wilderness – dressed, and then enjoyed a delicious, button-popping pancake breakfast. Afterwards, we cornered John and asked him the big question. Where were we fishing?

It turns out that we needed to grab our trout gear; we were heading to the Blackwater. The tea-colored little river, which is one of British Columbia's premier trout streams, is interrupted by a series of small lakes that make perfect landing spots for John's floatplanes.

We loaded up, flew half an hour and dropped down to a narrow lake in the middle of an evergreen-laden valley. John was still edging the plane toward the inflow when we spotted the first rising trout. Ten minutes later, Mac and I watched as our sole link to civilization roared off into the distance. Our instructions were simple. Fish the river up to the next lake, which was a mile or so upstream, and then fish our way back down and meet John around 7 p.m.

If you're an overly cautious sort, this particular "Have fun storming the castle, boys!" scenario might seem a wee bit intimidating. We, on the other hand, were giddy. Think about it. No distractions, no demands, no laptops or BlackBerries or cell phones. Nothing but a beautiful wilderness stream to occupy our complete and undivided attention. As far as Mac and I were concerned, John had been kind enough to drop a couple of Br'er Rabbits into the briar patch.

At the risk of sounding like a back-of-the-magazine ad, I'll make a simple statement of fact. The Blackwater was epic. We caught tons of rainbows in the 10- to 13-inch class, as well as a good number of larger fish. And those rainbows ate dry flies, they ate streamers, they ate the living bejazzus out of Mac's little Dorothy Hamill skater, which seemed to trigger some sort of boreal forest-induced

madness in every trout that saw it swing overhead.

Our day started with a bang when Mac landed a dandy rainbow before he'd taken five steps, then moved right into "two kids in a candy store" territory. In fact, it was so good it was silly. When John finally picked us up that evening, we were sated. Completely, utterly sated. In case you're wondering, it's a scientific fact that lots of strong, handsome rainbow trout will do that to a man.

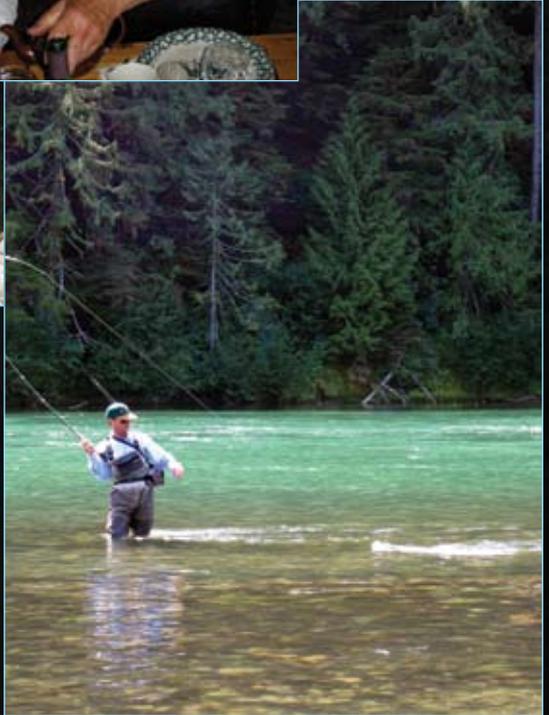
We flew back to the lodge, ate a stellar dinner and did our best to act nonchalant about catching a zillion fish. Then we did it all again the next day. We were on a different stretch of the Blackwater, and we floated rather than waded, but the results came in about the same. Mac caught more nice rainbows in the first hour than he could count on his fingers and toes, while I, largely by accident, perfected the heretofore unthinkable technique of shutting my eyes and then setting the hook when I heard the slurp of a big fish sucking my dry fly from the surface. It was magical.

There's no other word for it.

We paid for it the next day. Come on . . . nothing stays that good forever. You can't eat wonderful food, sleep in a comfortable bed and catch nice trout all day long without putting out the karmic call for balance. That's just the way it works. And so our only day on Moose Lake, which had been giving up prodigious numbers of fish to fellow guests Harold and Lee, was a little slow. Mac landed four or five nice, plump 16- to 20-inch rainbows, while I hooked one big trout that threw my streamer the second time it jumped. That was it.

Not that I'm complaining, mind you. As I've said before, the slow days make the great days even better. Without the potential for a skunking, even spectacular





On these pages, angler Steve "Mac" McFarland prospects for silver and pink salmon amid some of the prettiest scenery in British Columbia. Inset photo above: Bernie serves up another wonderful meal at Moose Lake Lodge.



angling wouldn't seem all that special.

Back at the lodge that evening, Harold and Lee were positively glowing. Or maybe after-glowing. I wasn't quite sure if they'd had an unbelievable day on the water or if John had spirited them away to Canada's finest back-woods bordello. It took a little prodding but we eventually learned there were fly rods and huge fish involved. Mac decided that the mystery river – no one was willing to mention its name – would heretofore be known as “the Harold Lee.”

I think the boys enjoyed having a river named after them. John, bless his heart, just chuckled and kept eating his dinner.

Speaking of dinner, I should offer Bernie, the chef at Moose Lake, the kudos he deserves. I've eaten at a lot of fishing lodges over the years, but I don't know that I've enjoyed my food more or had better meals. Bernie adds a special ingredient and, at the risk of sounding maudlin, I'll call it “love.” You can chuckle all you want but Bernie loves to cook . . . and it shows.

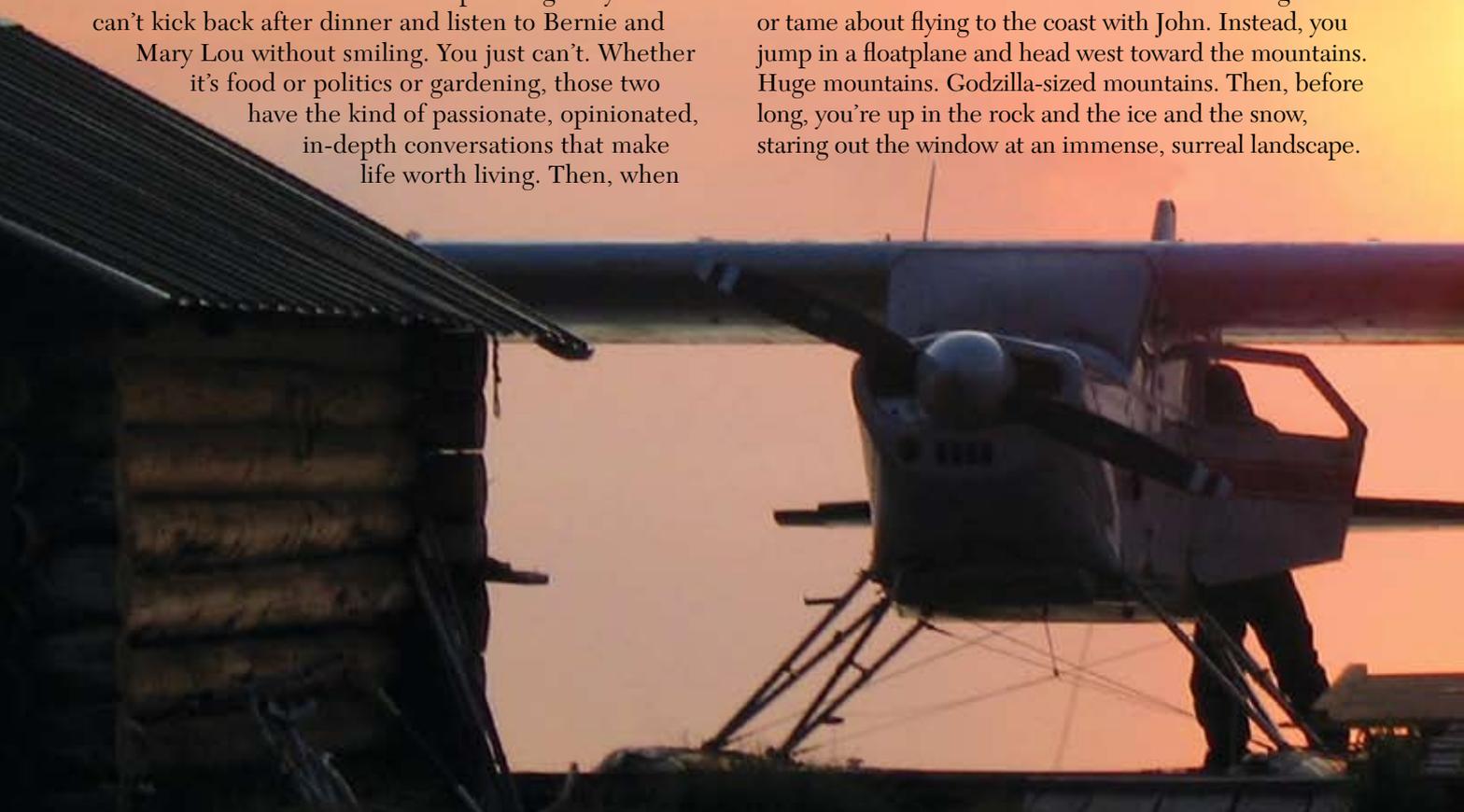
Here's another tidbit from the peanut gallery. You can't kick back after dinner and listen to Bernie and Mary Lou without smiling. You just can't. Whether it's food or politics or gardening, those two have the kind of passionate, opinionated, in-depth conversations that make life worth living. Then, when

you throw someone like Mac into the mix, everything goes off the charts. John and I got to the point where we would just shake our heads and laugh.

One night after dinner Mac gave me his take on the lodge. He looked around, lowered his voice and told me that we were experiencing the very finest in “rustic elegance.” Then he spent ten minutes impressing upon me what wonderful people the Blackwells were, and how they ran one of the finest angling operations he'd ever seen. It was high praise indeed, especially when you consider that Mac has a 20-year history in the industry.

Back to the fishing. On Tuesday morning John informed us we were flying to the coast. We snagged our salmon rods, walked down to the dock and found there were four of us heading out. Mac, John, Charlie – who's John's pilot-in-training – and yours truly.

“Flying to the coast.” It sounds sort of innocuous, almost as if you're driving to town for a cup of coffee. It's not innocuous. Not even close. There's nothing mild or tame about flying to the coast with John. Instead, you jump in a floatplane and head west toward the mountains. Huge mountains. Godzilla-sized mountains. Then, before long, you're up in the rock and the ice and the snow, staring out the window at an immense, surreal landscape.



IF YOU WANT TO GO

Don't cut corners on your equipment. I fished a Winston 9-foot 6-inch, 7-weight Boron IIx rod with an Abel QR reel for salmon and steelhead, and a Winston 9-foot, 5-weight WT with a Ross Evolution for trout. Both setups performed perfectly, as did a trio of Cortland lines: a Precision 7-weight Type III Sink Tip, a WF4F Western

Drifter and a WF5F Platinum.

I also fell in love with Patagonia's Guidewater shirt and Stormfront waterproof pack. In fact, the pack may have been the single handiest piece of gear on the trip. It kept my rain jacket, camera, flies and lunch safe whether we were flying, floating or wading.

This incredible panorama starts just off your wingtip and extends past myriad peaks and glaciers to the very edge of your visual limits. You can't help but realize that, as Dorothy once told Toto, you're not in Kansas anymore. There's no way you could traverse those rocky crags and sheer precipices on foot. If John ever put together a soundtrack for the flight, it would have to be something wild – maybe Jimi Hendrix covering Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries.

As for the fishing . . . well, I'm not even going to talk about it, other than to tell you that the river we visited was pristine and untouched, the scenery spectacular, and the salmon both fresh and plentiful. Oh, and the only other anglers in the area left griz tracks on the gravel bars. The entire experience was, to quote my fishing partner, "way cool."

We did it all again the next day. Different river, different mountains, different glaciers, but the same results. We caught silvers and pinks and dollies on one of the most beautiful stretches of water I've ever seen, and I hooked – hooked being the operative word, since landed was pretty much out of the question – a couple of six-pound rockets that might well have been oversized sea-run cutts. A word to the wise. If you prefer small fish in ugly places, you'll want to steer clear of Mr. Blackwell.

I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention the biggest fish of the trip: Mac's huge, fresh-from-the-salt coho. Both he

and John estimated that it went 20 pounds. When that particular silver finally came to hand, I simply stood and stared. Really, what can you say when your buddy lands a fish with scales minted from translucent luminescence? Words just don't do the experience justice.

Thursday was the very last day of the trip, so after dinner on Wednesday Mac and I went over our imaginary checklist. Trout? Check. Salmon? Check. Steelhead? Sorry, not yet. So we sidled up to John and asked him if he'd help us scratch our steelhead itch. Which, as it turned out, was no problem at all. John told us that he'd fly us to the Dean and drop us off for the day.

Yeah, the Dean.

Now for those of you who don't know, the Dean is the Shangri-La of steelhead rivers. It's a stunning piece of water that flows through incredibly rugged country and its fish are known as the most explosive on the planet.

Long story short, we fished our asses off. Cast and swing, cast and swing, cast and swing, again and again, until we were completely exhausted. We caught nine or ten nice salmon and we covered lots of gorgeous water under towering rock cliffs, but we never touched a steelhead, at least not that we could tell. Not until the very end of the day, when I had a violent take in fast, heavy water; a place where a steelhead might hold but you'd never find a salmon.

I had him for a second, just long enough for a few powerful headshakes, and then my fly came loose.

Now some guys might cuss in frustration. Some might curse the cruel hand of fate. I simply shook my head and laughed. We spent our last day in British Columbia on one of the finest rivers in existence, surrounded by scenery that will steal your breath away, and now we had an excuse to come back and do it all over again. ➔

One final suggestion. Since we had a three-hour layover in Anahim Lake, Mac and I arranged for an early dinner at the Eagle's Nest Resort. It was absolutely wonderful. A fellow by the name of Petrus picked us up at the airport, drove us back to the lodge for a delightful meal and a long conversation on the history of the Chilcotin Plateau, and then dropped us off

at the dock where John was waiting with his floatplane. It was an unexpected treat, and if you can find the time you should definitely schedule a visit to Eagle's Nest.

The best way to contact John Blackwell is via e-mail: mooslk@telus.net. Or call and leave a message at (250) 742-3535. To learn more about the lodge, visit www.moselakelodge.com.

