



CLOSING *the* SEASON

SALMON FISHING IN NEW BRUNSWICK
ON THE MIRAMICHI AND CAINS RIVERS

BRAD BURNS

EDITED BY DUNCAN BARNES



Closing the Season
Salmon Fishing in New Brunswick on The Miramichi and Cains Rivers

Published by Burns Fly Fishing
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*Dedicated to my wife June.
Our lifelong romance has flourished
in spite of my compulsive fishing."*

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BY

BRAD BURNS

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Editor Emeritus of *Field & Stream Magazine*, well-traveled salmon fisher, and one of the author's fishing buddies.

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Remote yet easily reachable by good paved roads, the Miramichi holds fully one-third of the Atlantic salmon in North America rivers. All those salmon and a history rich in angling tradition sold me on the Miramichi.

Campbell's and Keenan's 33

These two salmon pools, once held by Wade's Fishing Lodge in Crown Grants stretching back to the early 1800s, along with a comfortable camp up on a hill overlooking the river, became my home base on the Miramichi.

The Cains 47

This small tannin-stained tributary to the Miramichi fills with very big salmon making their move to the headwaters every fall just as the season closes in October. We fish the Cains in the wake of the early guides who "sailed" down the river from Bantalor in Chestnut canoes.



SALMON FISHING IN NEW BRUNSWICK ON THE MIRAMICHI AND CAINS RIVERS

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At salmon camp the order of the day is fishing. We enrich the experience by “reading” the water, noting the birds and other abundant wildlife, and letting our thoughts flow with the wind and the weather, and the vagaries of the salmon migration. This journal is my record of one year’s fall fishing on the Miramichi and the Cains.

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The fishing at the close of the season in October was still fresh in my mind’s eye when I returned to Mahoney Brook on the Cains the following April.

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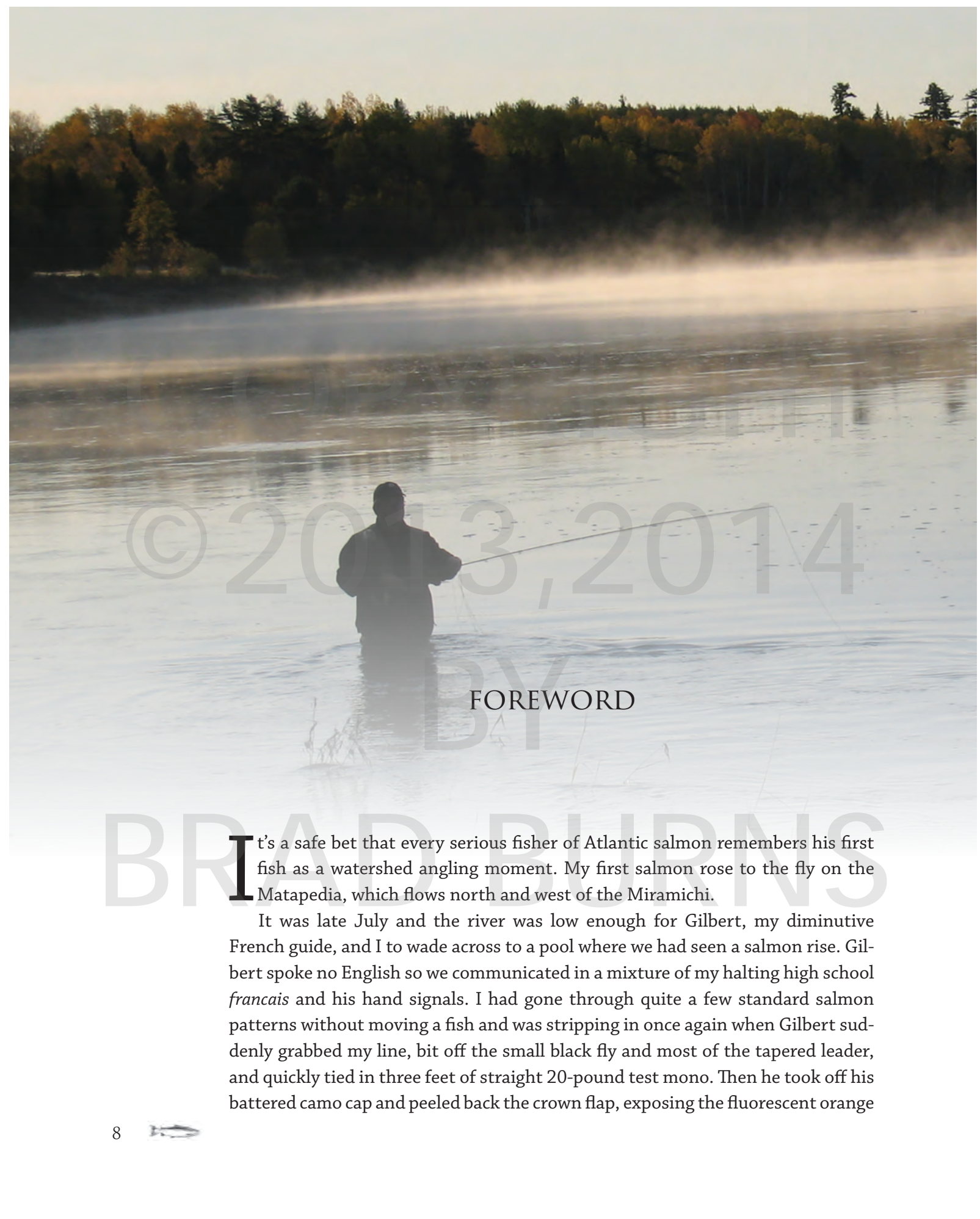
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I’ve spent thousands of hours crotch-deep in the Miramichi and the Cains and am happy to pass on some tips about Atlantic salmon tackle and the flies and fishing techniques that have worked for me from May until the middle of October.

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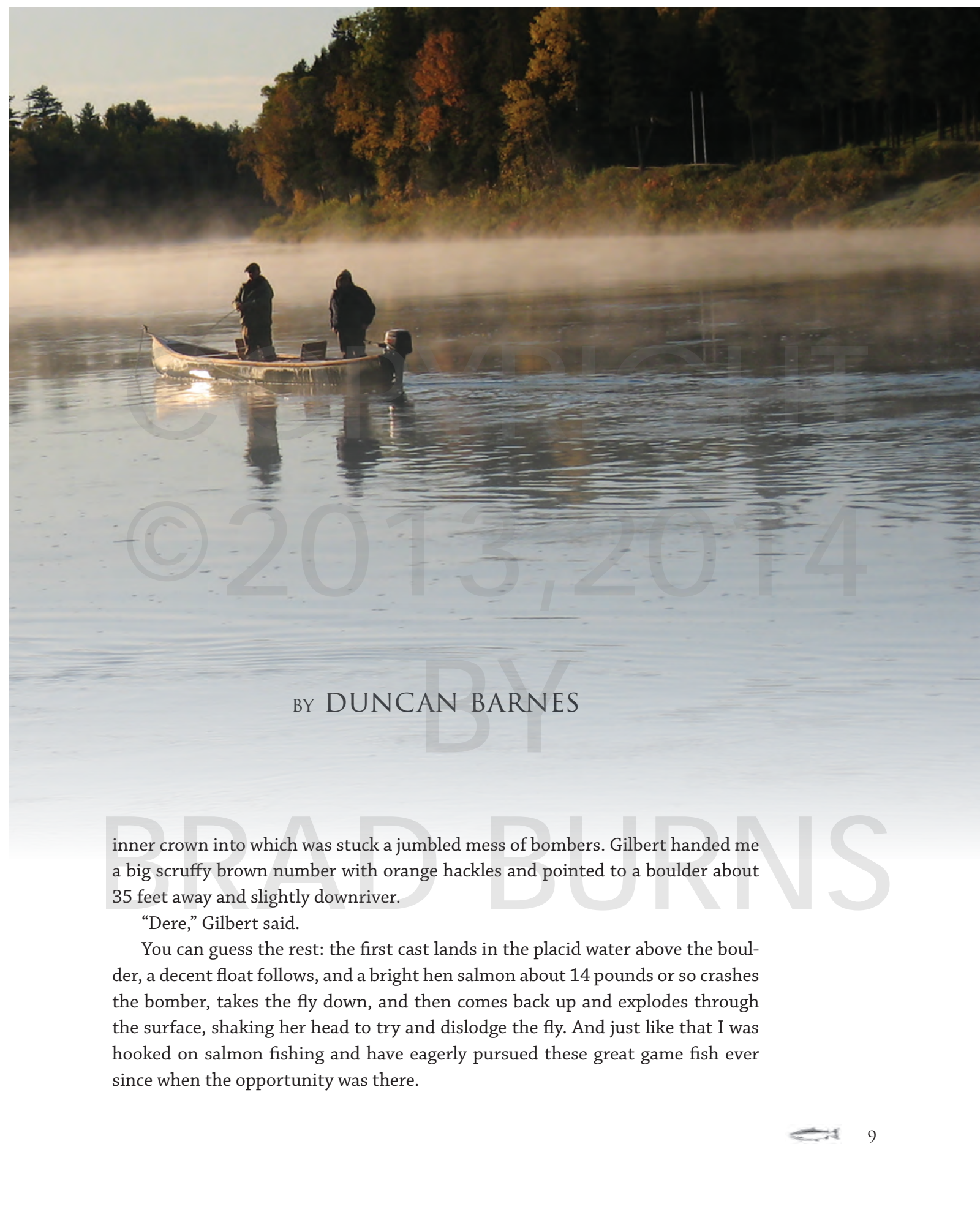


FOREWORD

It's a safe bet that every serious fisher of Atlantic salmon remembers his first fish as a watershed angling moment. My first salmon rose to the fly on the Matapedia, which flows north and west of the Miramichi.

It was late July and the river was low enough for Gilbert, my diminutive French guide, and I to wade across to a pool where we had seen a salmon rise. Gilbert spoke no English so we communicated in a mixture of my halting high school *français* and his hand signals. I had gone through quite a few standard salmon patterns without moving a fish and was stripping in once again when Gilbert suddenly grabbed my line, bit off the small black fly and most of the tapered leader, and quickly tied in three feet of straight 20-pound test mono. Then he took off his battered camo cap and peeled back the crown flap, exposing the fluorescent orange





BY DUNCAN BARNES

inner crown into which was stuck a jumbled mess of bombers. Gilbert handed me a big scruffy brown number with orange hackles and pointed to a boulder about 35 feet away and slightly downriver.

“Dere,” Gilbert said.

You can guess the rest: the first cast lands in the placid water above the boulder, a decent float follows, and a bright hen salmon about 14 pounds or so crashes the bomber, takes the fly down, and then comes back up and explodes through the surface, shaking her head to try and dislodge the fly. And just like that I was hooked on salmon fishing and have eagerly pursued these great game fish ever since when the opportunity was there.



In recent years, that pursuit has been concentrated on the Miramichi and the Cains, fishing with Brad Burns and mutual friends and mentored by two salmon-savvy guides—the late Willy Bacso and Jason Curtis. After reading through Burns’ journal *Closing The Season* over the winter, I’m primed to get back on the river and once again try to con a fish that is not feeding to take my fly.

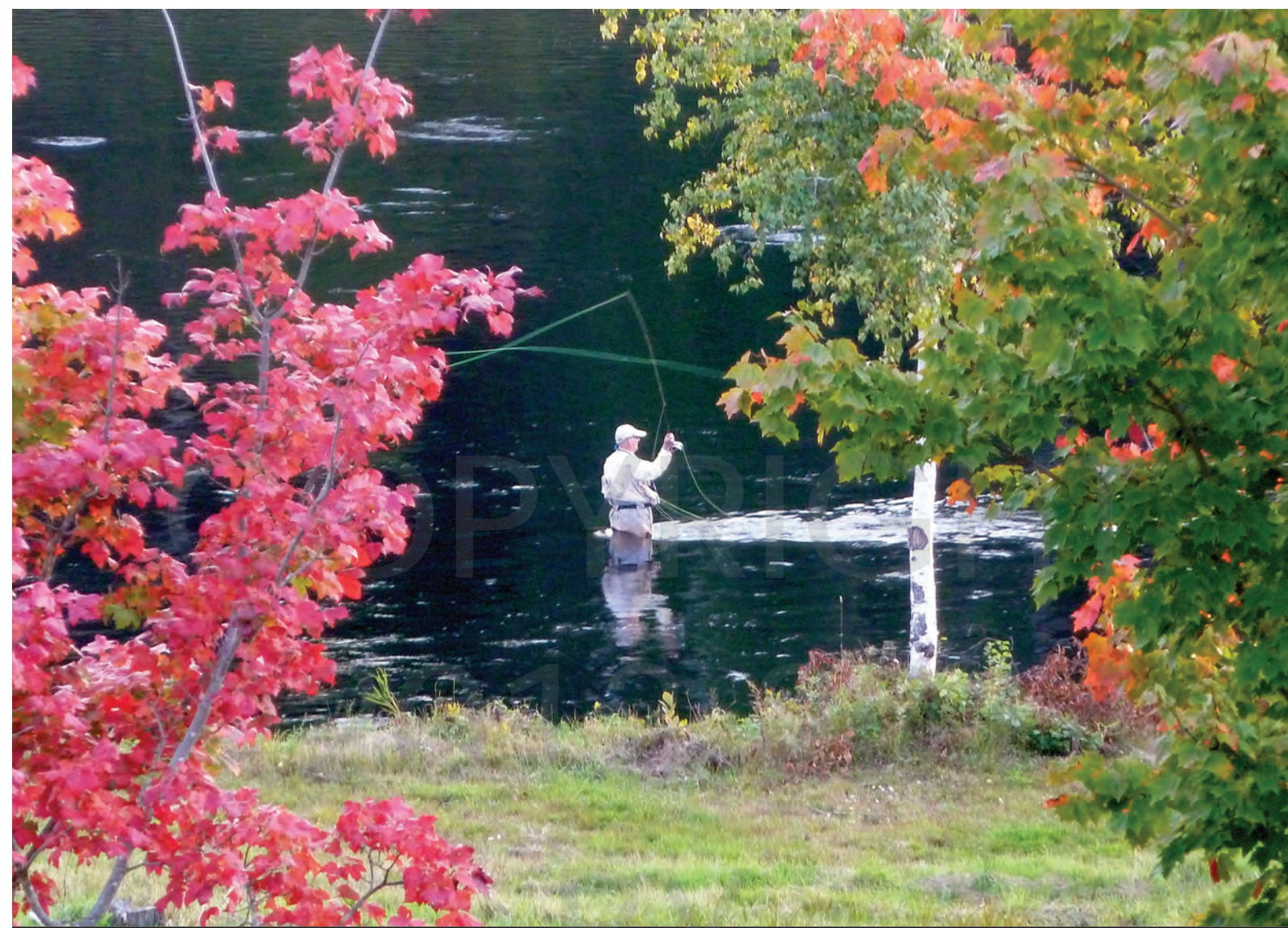
The journal entries in *Closing* highlight the last few weeks of the 2012 angling season and cover not only the pure act of salmon fishing but also the many other pleasures of the sport, like fishing out of a Sharpes, the ultimate in salmon canoes, sitting on the bench and “having a say” with the guides after working one side of the pool, or watching nesting tree swallows soaring over and dipping down to the river for a sip. Burns’ careful research traces the history of the early Miramichi/Cains settlers and the beginning of the salmon fishery. And as a keen observer of nature in the North Country, Burns creates pleasing word images of wildlife sightings: fresh moose tracks in the sand, a black bear splashing across a gravel bar, woodcock and partridge flushing ahead of approaching anglers on a woods trail. The author also makes it abundantly clear that much of his joy in salmon fishing comes from sharing his camp and his water with his friends and fellow anglers.

The late fishing writer Al McClane, a friend and a colleague at *Field & Stream Magazine* who fly fished the world over for virtually every game fish extant, especially loved the challenge and the mystique of Atlantic salmon. McClane worried that the high cost of fishing for salmon made the sport seem to be exclusively reserved for older anglers of means. But McClane would undoubtedly agree that in the fast-paced world we live in today, many young anglers simply don’t have the patience—or won’t make the time—to work at taking a salmon, preferring instead the more “instant” gratification of throwing a fly to striped bass or false albacore, or to tarpon and bonefish that are all on the feed at least some of the time...

McClane was right on the money when he told me once that salmon fishing is not for everyone. “To be a successful fisher of Atlantic salmon,” McClane said, “you need to be seriously devoted.”

As an angler with a persistently optimistic outlook, Brad Burns is certainly devoted to (some would say consumed by) salmon fishing. He caught his first salmon on the Laxa Leirarsveit in Iceland in 1986 and has since fished salmon rivers in Labrador, Newfoundland and Quebec, and in Scotland. He was introduced to the Miramichi in the summer of 2002 and liked what he saw so much that he soon purchased two salmon pools—Campbell’s and Keenan’s—and a camp on the river near Blackville, and eight years later added his camp on the Cains for the fall fishing.





FALL CASTING AT CAMPBELL'S

Sooner or later, every salmon guide worth his wage will remind you that you can't catch a fish if your fly isn't swinging through proven salmon water. To make that happen as often as possible, Burns commutes from his home in Maine to the Miramichi, starting in June when hard-bodied hen salmon as bright as a new dime and still sporting sea lice come into the river; continuing through the summer months when the largest number of salmon and grilse are in the Miramichi system; and finally fishing into mid-October as the dark-colored fall fish, many of them big cock salmon with distinctive kypes in their lower jaws, are pushing up through the Miramichi and into the Cains, and then moving to their spawning grounds high up in the Cains watershed.

To catch salmon with any regularity, as Brad Burns does, it helps to be a skillful angler and an excellent caster with single-handed and Spey tackle. But Burns has gone way beyond that, immersing himself in the literature, comparing notes with



fellow anglers and guides, and fussing with and refining all manner of salmon tackle to find the combinations that work best for him. A longtime tyer of effective saltwater patterns for striped bass, including the deadly “Groceries” fly, Burns now likes to create salmon flies at the kitchen table vise in camp, often making subtle changes in traditional patterns to make them look and swim better. He has zeroed in on (and details in *Closing*) his go to flies—just a few wets, bombers, streamers, and fall shrimp patterns in sizes #2 down to #8 that he insists are all anyone needs from June through the middle of October. But like most of us, Burns admits that to be ready for any eventuality, he does carry several boxes full of flies in his vest...

Closing The Season is presented not as a how-to journal but instead as a celebration of the fall salmon season on the Miramichi and the Cains. Still, even the most experienced salmon hands will benefit from fishing vicariously with the author through the pages of this journal. The term “sight fishing” is synonymous with putting a fly in front of fish plainly visible in clear water, and it’s certainly true that salmon are rarely visible in the tannin-colored waters that Burns fishes. But I’d argue that he (and most knowledgeable salmon anglers) regularly employ sight fishing techniques.

Even when salmon are not “showing” in a lie by bulging or slow rolling on the surface or jumping to provide the angler with a target, it is still necessary to read the water carefully and swim your fly just so along the edge of the current seam, perhaps through a series of “dings” caused by water flowing over a boulder, to make sure the fly passes in front of where a salmon could be holding. If the fish is there, maybe it will take the fly. Or maybe it’s a dour or “stale” fish that has been in the pool for weeks and can’t be enticed to the fly—any fly. As an old-time Miramichi guide once told me at the end of an unproductive morning on the river: “If a salmon don’t want to take, there’s no magic fly will change his mind. But if he’s ready, I believe he’ll take a well-dressed argyle sock.”

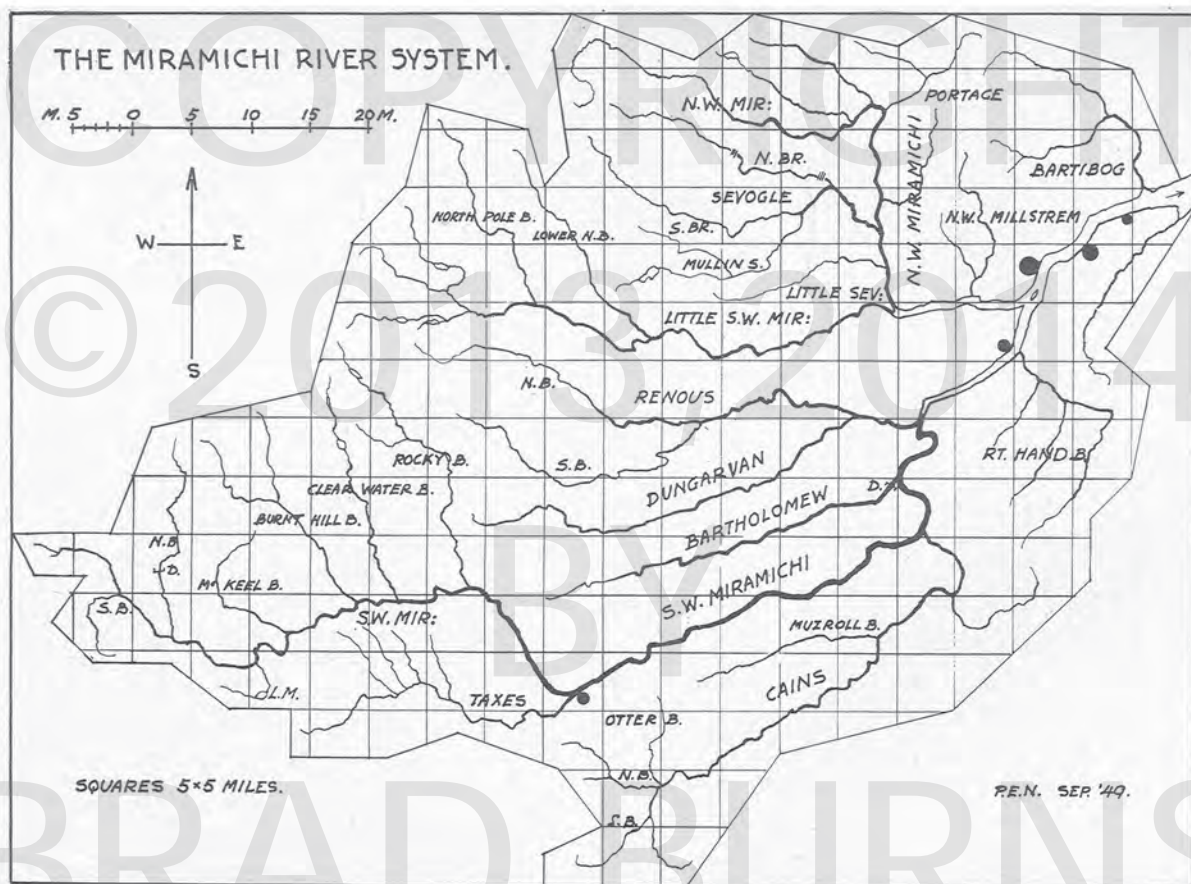
“The salmon is accounted the king of fresh-water fish...” Izaak Walton penned those words in *The Compleat Angler* and it’s hard to argue with that statement. As far as we know, Walton never fished the Miramichi or the Cains, but it’s safe to assume that he would have been as enthralled with these hallowed waters as Brad Burns is. There are other salmon rivers that produce bigger numbers of really large salmon. But no other river in North America can match the Miramichi in the combined numbers of grilse and large salmon. And as is evident in the pages of *Closing The Season*, Burns would be quick to agree with his old friend Willy Bacso who liked to point out that “*All salmon, big and small, are just fine.*”





**HEAD GUIDE JASON CURTIS HOLDS A PERFECT JULY SALMON
TAKEN ON THE KEENAN SIDE OF CAMPBELL'S AND KEENAN'S POOL**





PERCY E. NOBBS MAP OF THE MIRAMICHI RIVER SYSTEM, 1949



CLOSING *the* SEASON

SALMON FISHING IN NEW BRUNSWICK
ON THE MIRAMICHI AND CAINS RIVERS

BRAD BURNS



THE AVERY PORTAGE

CHOOSING THE MIRAMICHI

The North Country holds a special fascination for fishermen. There is a romance that goes along with spending time in places that are locked away for months by the cold, and in angling for fish that are migrating from the frozen fringes of the Arctic oceans into freshly thawed rivers. It is also a great pleasure to spend time in country with a relatively small human footprint.

Northern New Brunswick, Canada, home of the Miramichi and several other salmon rivers of note, is a place that offers plenty of this north woods appeal, but is no more than a day's drive from the population centers of New England. The Main Southwest Miramichi is most often referred to in this book simply as the Miramichi—to the exclusion of the smaller, but still substantial Northwest Miramichi, with which the Main Southwest Miramichi shares a common estuary. Together these rivers and their many tributaries are home to a large percentage of all the Atlantic salmon in mainland North America. And while the Miramichi may not be as remote as the outer reaches of northern Canada, the landscape around the Miramichi is a long way from urban.

As you drive along Route 8, the one major road through the area, there is no congestion or sprawl, and that is even more true of all the other roads in the region. Route 8 between Fredericton and Boiestown is built on the path of one of the province's many ancient Indian portage routes. Even after white people began to move into the area, travel from the Saint John River over to the Miramichi was accomplished via the Avery Portage. This trail ran up the Nashwaak River, off into Cross Creek, up to Redegen Brook, then for 20 miles overland along the path that Route 8 takes today. About two miles outside of Boiestown, it ran a short distance straight down to the river. Just knowing this history makes the drive more interesting. Even today there are relatively few homes along this road, and not many built recently. Most of the land along Route 8 is old, overgrown farm country and it appears little different than driving through a rural area of northern New England. But it is not quite as it seems. The civilization along the Miramichi valley all lies in a very thin border that runs right



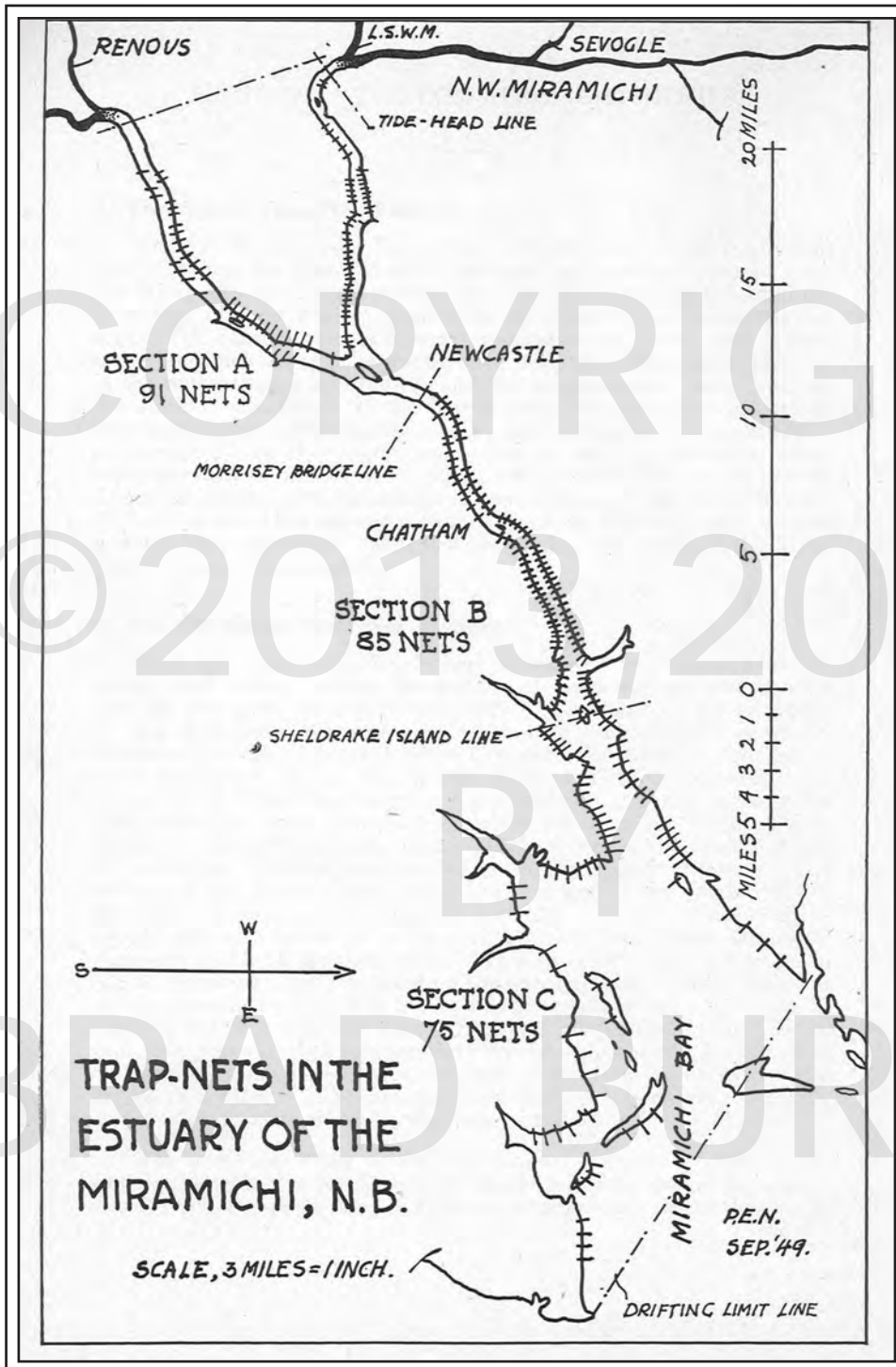
AN OLD FARMSTEAD

along the Route 8 corridor. If you strike off into the woods in either direction, it could easily be 10 to 50 or more miles before you come to anything but a logging road. Thus, thousands of fishermen in the Northeast have a near-wilderness fishing experience relatively close at hand. And as fisheries go, the Miramichi really is a great one.

The Miramichi fishery for Atlantic salmon has been famous among fly fishermen for more than 150 years. British military officers brought fly-fishing to New Brunswick and the Miramichi during the early 19th century. But according to Perley Moses, the New Brunswick authority on the province's salmon fisheries during the 19th century, the Nepisiguit River and not the Miramichi was thought to be the more desirable New Brunswick salmon destination during the 1800s. A number of adventurous English gentry took summer-long vacations on the Nepisiguit, forsaking the great Scottish salmon rivers even though stocks in those rivers were still very abundant at that time.

The Nepisiguit was favored not because it was a more productive fishery, but because the earlier settlement of the Miramichi was more developed. The reasonably accessible reaches of the Miramichi—from Boiestown to the mouth—along with major tributaries like the Cains, are comparatively gentle flowing, and in order to entice settlers, the land was divided up into relatively small private holdings in the form of Crown Grants. Every settler covered his section of the Miramichi with nets for gasperaux, shad and salmon. The river earned a reputation as an aesthetically less pleasing fishery than the more northern rivers like the Nepisiguit and Restigouche, which flowed through what was essentially wilderness. It was this wilderness setting that the European anglers hungered for. People still hunger for it today. While little has been written about it, the nets must have quickly reduced the quality of the fishing. In the middle 20th century there was a demand for salmon fishing coming from the relatively nearby urban areas of the U.S. and Canada, and outfitters began springing up along the Miramichi. The organizations bought the better salmon pools with their private riparian rights copied from the European land system, and made businesses of bringing sports to the area for salmon fishing.

Up until the late 1970s, the commercial net fisheries in Miramichi Bay and around the mouth of the river selectively and thoroughly harvested the larger salmon and decimated the populations. In a paper written in 1949 for the Atlantic Salmon Federation, author Percy E. Nobbs included a map of the trap nets located within the Miramichi estuary at that time. The number totaled a staggering 251



LOCATIONS OF SALMON NETS IN MIRAMICHI ESTUARY CIRCA 1949



bers are reduced in the long gill nets of the drifters beyond what the production of the river can stand. In 1930 188 boats were licenced to drift-net and all operated. In 1948 168 were licenced but only 141 operated.

Broadly speaking there are about half as many boats engaged in drifting as there are shore-nets outside the Miramichi and they take about twice as many fish as the shore-nets get in the aggregate. The shore-net fishermen complain that they get less and less salmon year by year and blame the drifters for most of the loss and also "what goes on up the river" for the remainder, not forgetting the licenced trap-nets within the lower river, and rightly.

10. The Inside Set Trap-Net Fishery:

The state of affairs in the estuary and Miramichi Bay can best be disclosed by a tabular statement:

AREAS	DISTANCE	SHORE LINE	LICENCED TRAPS
A. Bay limit to Sheldrake Island.....	17 miles	37 miles	91
B. Sheldrake Island to Newcastle.....	13 miles	26 miles	85
C. Newcastle to the tide heads.....	18 miles	60 miles	75
TOTALS.....	48 miles	123 miles	251*

*28 not fished, 63 fished.

The table covers the tidal waters above the line from Escuminac to Burnt Church, within which drift-netting is not permitted, up to the point where the Little S.W. Miramichi falls into the N.W. Miramichi and the point where the Renous River falls into the S.W. Miramichi. This area has the most dense concentration of Atlantic salmon nets in the world as also the largest.

11. Expropriation of the Inside Fishery.

For some time past private citizens with the good of the river at heart and the North Shore Salmon Fishermen's Association, N.B., have been considering the necessity of getting rid of these nets by buying them out, so that salmon, once in the river, may receive the treatment they are accorded elsewhere in the matter of passage to the upper waters. The Department of Fisheries, Ottawa, has, it appears, lately extinguished some netting rights in Nova Scotia by the simple expedient of refusing to re-licence them. But most of us who understand salmon problems consider that once a licence is issued there is a vested right and that a net that has been licenced for generations constitutes a very substantial

and as the drawing shows, the nets quite literally lined both banks of the river. In addition, drift netters fished from boats further out in the bay and even outside of it in an area called Miramichi Gully. Describing the scene, Nobbs wrote:

“Broadly speaking there are about half as many boats engaged in drifting as there are shore-nets outside the Miramichi, and they take about twice as many fish as the shore-nets get in the aggregate.” The Miramichi was netted to death and it earned a reputation as a “grilse river”. Only the river’s incredible fecundity allowed it to continue to produce a worthwhile catch for the netters.

The outfitters banded together with the private clubs and property owners during the 1950s, formed the Miramichi Salmon Association, and eventually succeeded in ending the net fisheries that were destroying the river. In the mid 1980s they also succeeded in limiting the recreational harvest of Atlantic salmon to grilse only, thus giving the larger fish a chance to spawn—some of them several times. The result, in spite of the well-recognized problems faced by the salmon at sea, has been a relatively stable population of salmon and a fishery where an angler has an excellent chance of hooking a very large fish. When I first visited a private club on the Miramichi, I looked at the annual recognition plaques lining one wall of the lodge, given out for the biggest salmon of the season. Weights were certain then, because those fish were killed and eaten. During the 1970s a typical annual winner was around 15 to 17 pounds. Years went by without a 20-pounder. Around 2009, the club record was set at 42 pounds, and fish over 30 have been landed each season since. In one recent season a hen fish of 53 inches was taken from the Juniper barrier on the Main Southwest Miramichi. The fish was not weighed, but it had to have been in the vicinity of 50 pounds.

The town of Blackville, about 12 miles above the head of tide in Quarryville, is my home base on the Miramichi. Situated at latitude 47°N, the Miramichi is just a little further north than the southernmost point of the United Kingdom, but unlike the extreme south of England, there are no palm trees in Blackville! A lot has been written about the way that extreme winter weather shifts north and south as it goes around the globe. Places with the same latitude can have very different weather. For most of the year Blackville is a cold place; average daily lows in the heart of the winter are down around -20C. That is a colder average than either Moscow or Helsinki, Finland, even though those places are at a latitude much further north than New Brunswick. But in the summer Blackville is a relatively hot place. From late June through the end of August, daily highs below 24C are relatively rare, and water temperatures constantly flirt with levels too high for





SALMON LOOKING FOR COLD WATER IN MCKENZIE BROOK JULY 2010

good salmon fishing. Sometimes the water temperature becomes a threat to the very lives of the salmon in the river.

Warm summer water produces huge numbers of insects which provide food for parr over a long growing season. Consequently, the Main Southwest Branch of the Miramichi sends over a million smolts to the ocean only two years after many of them emerge from their redds. It generally takes another year on the colder northwest branch for the parr to smolt. It can take six or seven years to grow a smolt 1000 miles further north and west on Ungava's George River. The more smolts that leave the river, the more adult salmon that return, and when conditions are right, it is simply mind boggling how densely the river can be stacked with salmon.

The heat of mid-summer also creates both a summer and a fall run. Salmon begin to enter the Miramichi in late May, and while June fishing is inconsistent, it can be very good. Fresh from a winter of feeding in the North Atlantic, these early salmon are thick bodied with a mirror-like silver coloration. The run builds to a summer peak during early to mid-July. Normally around the 10th of July the Millerton trap will capture 50 to 100 salmon each day. Based on an efficiency rating of about six percent, from 750 to 1,500 salmon and grilse a day enter the Main Southwest Miramichi. Then, usually sometime between mid-July and early September, the Miramichi will be in the doldrums and for several weeks or more

SECTION D—THE ROD FISHERIES

12. The June and July Salmon:

The rod fisheries for Atlantic Salmon in the Miramichi and its tributaries differ very markedly from what we may call general practice in Great Britain, Ireland and the provinces of Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. In these countries and provinces it never occurs to anyone to fish deliberately for 'black salmon' (Kelts, slinks, spent fish), as they have come to be called in New Brunswick. Fishing is restricted to fresh run spring and summer fish in marketable condition with a little 'poor man's fishing' for back-end salmon in September and October. Fishing for grilse is included with fishing for salmon, but the counting of grilse is kept separate.

The normal figure for the Restigouche in recent years has been about 6,500 salmon and for the Miramichi about 20,000. In 1948 the Restigouche figure was down to 5,221 and the Miramichi figure (which I hesitated to accept) was up to 30,511. The breakdown of this figure has now kindly been furnished to me by Mr. Forrest Watson and makes things clear that were obscure.

Break-down of Rod Catch on the Miramichi for 1948.

A	{ April.....	5,202	Black Salmon (Slinks, Kelts).....	9,560
	{ May.....	4,358		
B	{ June.....	3,533	Bright Salmon and Grilse.....	9,957
	{ July.....	4,130		
	{ August.....	2,294		
C	{ Sept.....	10,651	Late Gravid Fish.....	10,994
	{ October.....	343		
		<u>30,511</u>		<u>30,511</u>

A few very early Bright Salmon would be included in Category A and a few grilse in Category C. Category B would probably be made of about 66% grilse and 33% salmon but, not to force the issue, we may say 50%-50%.

This gives us at the most 5,000 proper salmon to compare with the Restigouche 5,000 salmon. By taking normal figures from averages of recent years in both rivers, which I have before me, 4,000 salmon for the Miramichi would be good measure as against 6,000 for the Restigouche, but let us take 5,000 for each river and see how it works out.

Miramichi System.....	500 miles.....	5,000 salmon
Restigouche System.....	150 miles.....	5,000 "
Miramichi.....	10 salmon per mile.	
Restigouche.....	33 " " "	

CLOSING THE SEASON

virtually no salmon will enter the river; the water temperature would be too warm to catch them if they did come.

The fall run typically commences the second week in September and peaks in early October. A few fish with sea lice attached are still entering the river as the season closes on October 15. The fall fish have a bluish, almost purple cast, and towards the end of the season they become very dark, even though they are fresh from the ocean. With red and black spots on their sides, they look very much like huge brown trout. Early summer fish are generally considered by most salmon aficionados to be the highest quality fish of the season, and in firmness of body, aggressiveness at taking a fly, and fighting stamina, they are. The fall fish, though, just like a lovely woman past her youth, have a certain appeal that is second to none. I've come to love both the early and late run fish more or less equally. To

GUIDE JASON CURTIS AND ANGLER TIM POLITIS WITH TYPICAL JUNE SILVER SALMON



me they match the seasons. The early fish arrive on the heels of the spring melt when the year is still young, and the Miramichi valley is overflowing with all sorts of natural abundance. The salmon—and later the grilse—show themselves in dramatic, acrobatic leaps as they push to get upriver before the summer's heat. In the fall, with the turning leaves and shorter days, the biggest salmon of the year move slowly and quietly up the river, rolling and bulging on the surface. The days are cool and short, often windy and rainy, and there is a romantic urging in the air to accomplish it all now, before the Miramichi and its network of tributaries become locked up hard in winter ice.

My introduction to salmon on the Miramichi was in 2002 when I was invited by my friend Rip Cunningham to stay at the Black Brook Salmon Club in the town of Blackville. I had known Rip and his late father Mack through many years of

JASON CURTIS HOLDS A FINE COCK SALMON TAKEN BY GEORGE WATSON, FALL 2011





BLACK BROOK SALMON CLUB

saltwater fly-fishing. Some salmon anglers might say that Black Brook has probably the finest water on the river so of course you fell in love with the Miramichi.

It wasn't that way though. We arrived at Black Brook in late June to find 90 degree heat and 72 degree water. During the next few days it got a lot worse as the air temperature reached nearly 100 and the water zoomed into the 80s. Since fishing was non-existent, we decided to take a canoe trip down the Cains River, the largest tributary of the Miramichi system, which enters the Miramichi just a few hundred yards above the Black Brook Salmon Club home pool. We drove up to the mouth of Salmon Brook to launch two canoes from a special trailer that a guide then drove back to the lodge. Various fishing camps on the Miramichi have accessed the Cains this way since the early part of the 20th century. We "sailed," as local Miramichiers like to say, about six miles or so downriver and pulled out at the club just below the point where the Cains enters the Main Southwest



WILLY BACSO WITH 49-INCH JUNE HEN SALMON 2004

Miramichi. Had we made this trip in the fall—the best time for salmon on the Cains River—we would have stopped and fished at several of the excellent public pools along the way. The spruce-lined walls of the Cains valley had the feeling of a majestic cathedral. I was mesmerized by the enchanting views at every turn in the river. Even though fishing had been terrible on this trip, I got a tiny taste of what the Miramichi region was about, and I found myself attracted to the same things about salmon fishing that still capture my imagination today after spending 40 to 50 days a year on the river for the last 10 years.

The opportunity to catch a large fish in a relatively small body of water is a major attraction. Hauling a big fish out of the ocean is one thing, but getting a 20-pound salmon from a pool in the Miramichi or the Cains is something altogether different. When that first canoe ride down the Cains was almost over, we paddled in the bright afternoon sun over a group of salmon holding in the cool



flow from Black Brook. One big fish caught my eye. I would say this salmon was nearly four feet long and therefore about 35 pounds. For just a second it was completely broadside to me and about 20 feet away. I had a terrific view of the creature. It would be great, I thought, to spend some time trying to hook a fish like that one on an 8-weight floating line and a small fly. I've been fortunate enough to have done so a number of times since that day and those experiences have become some of the finest of my fishing life.

The ambience and the scenery are equally compelling. Salmon fishing is often dismissed by some anglers as being a sport for wealthy old men. I know a great many people who love salmon and don't fit into that slot, though I'll readily admit that there are also a great many who do. I don't see that as the condemnation some think it is. There is certainly something to be said for a sport that has the allegiance of people who can afford good things, and know what quality is.

During my visit to the Miramichi in 2002, I learned that the discontented members of Wade's Fishing Lodge, located next to Black Brook, had decided to split up and sell out. Wade's and Black Brook shared the same deep holding pool—Wade's had the less productive tail portion. Both properties were originally part of a 300-acre 1826 Crown Grant, which according to a history of the Black Brook Salmon Club was made on behalf of the Crown by Sir Howard Douglas to William Babcock, who then settled the property in 1832. The Babcock Grant, or at least part of it, was acquired later by a Thomas Porter, whose three sons each eventually inherited a portion of the property. In 1921 the Allen Brothers bought Black Brook from George Porter, one of the sons, and Charlie Wade acquired the portion that contained the Wade's Fishing Lodge home pool from another of the brothers. Charlie Wade's salmon fishing legend began when he established his camp in 1932. Charlie, and later his son Herb Wade, operated the outfitting lodge for more than 50 years and Wade's became synonymous with Miramichi salmon fishing.

Charlie Wade was a flamboyant promoter who along with a few other men of his era put the Miramichi on the map. According to local writer Wayne Curtis, Wade's guests included rocket scientist Werner Von Braun and famous fishers like Lee and Joan Wulff and the Hardy brothers from England. General James Doolittle, actor Tom Selleck, Vince Edwards, Benny Goodman, and other important personalities like Stillman Rockefeller and distiller Johnnie Walker also fished the Miramichi from Wade's Fishing Lodge. Salmon fishing has always appealed to famous people. In Scotland the better beats and rivers have long been fished by this or that member of the Royal Family. I've noticed that when talking about





WADE'S FISHING LODGE LETTERHEAD

their beats, ghillies who scoff at the monarchy never fail to drop the names of any Royals who may have fished with them.

At one point in the 1970s, a wily Herb Wade sold his property to Atlantic Richfield as a corporate retreat. The corporation later sold it back to Herb at half price when they moved their corporate headquarters from Connecticut to California. In the small world department, Dr. George Babikian, a surgeon who is my neighbor in Falmouth, Maine, is the son of the man who was in charge of the transactions for Atlantic Richfield. George was a boy at the time and fished several times at Wade's.



WERNER VON BRAUN (L) JOAN WULFF & WILLY BACSO (R)
AT WADE'S FISHING LODGE





HERB WADE

“Herb Wade was a magician with a fly rod,” George told me. “It was Herb who showed me what a fly rod could do.” I later learned that in a province-wide fly rod casting competition held in Fredericton, Herb and his wife won the men’s and women’s divisions.

When Herb got old, he sold out to some of his regular customers who formed a club. A few key club members got overly ambitious and acquired (actually financed at considerable expense) additional private water including the opposite side of the river from the Papa’s Rock pool that they owned a couple of miles downriver from their main lodge. That pool was called Campbell’s, named for the Campbell family who had owned it since their original Crown grant in the 1820s. In order to continue a business plan of free fishing for the members, the club tried without sufficient success to sell fishing time to the public, but mounting deficits created infighting that eventually forced them to put the club’s holdings up for sale. Those

two pools—Campbell’s and Keenan’s (nee Papa’s Rock Pool)—now comprise my fishing property on the Main Southwest Miramichi.

Unlike Black Brook or Irving’s Big Hole Brook, Wade’s did not have a highly coveted, cold-water pool with a strong flow of “taking” water at its head. But except in warm, low-water conditions, the lodge did have several good pools on the Miramichi and a lovely stretch on the Cains based around the A. D. Merrill camp, the name of which had morphed over the years into the Admiral Pool Camp. During my visit, Black Brook was in the process of acquiring a stretch of Main Southwest Miramichi water from Wade’s. “The Run,” as Wade’s called it, was adjacent to Black Brook’s property and just across the river from their lodge.

Black Brook was also buying the Admiral Pool property and would eventually sell its Six Mile Brook camp about 15 miles or so further upriver on the Cains. Six Mile is one of the oldest and most famous fishing sites on the Cains, and must have been hard for some of the older members to part with. When they sold Six Mile, club members reportedly used a *sawsall* to remove part of the camp wall on which a Cains River scene had been painted by the great artist Aiden Lassell Ripley. Like the Miramichi, the Cains has been fished by many famous and accomplished people over the years. Ripley and his renowned contemporary Ogden Pleisner (who painted scenes from a camp at the mouth of the Sabbies River owned by Seabury Stanton, the chairman of Berkshire Hathaway Corporation) were frequent guests. Baseball great Ted Williams owned a pool not far above Hell’s Gate on the lower Cains.





WADE'S FISHING LODGE



ADMIRAL POOL CAMP





SIX MILE BROOK CAMP



SEABURY STANTON'S "VALENTINE'S" CAMP

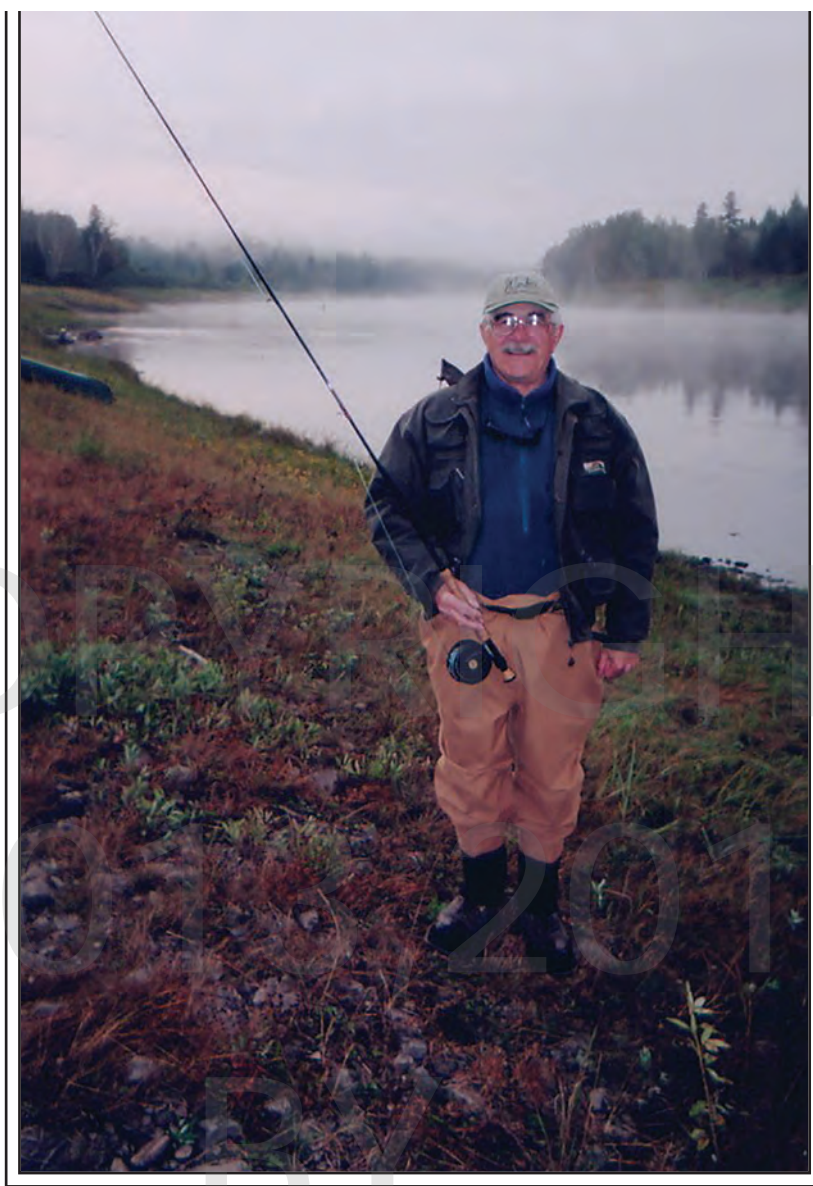
CAMPBELL'S AND KEENAN'S

While I was staying at Black Brook, a man named Lew Smith, who was representing Wade's, dropped by to talk about the sale of that property. I was introduced, and we had a short conversation. Lew told me that the home pool and lodge complex, as well as a stretch about two miles downriver called Keenan's and Campbell's, were still available. Six months later I purchased Keenan's and Campbell's, and hired Willy Bacso, who had retired from Wade's just that fall, to guide my guests. "Scheduled" salmon rivers in New Brunswick require that non-resident anglers hire a guide, even if the water they fish is privately owned; New Brunswick residents can fish public water on those rivers without a guide. An owner from away can fish his private water without a guide if he purchases a guide exemption permit. I have a permit which allows me to start fishing before the guides arrive in the morning, or to fish right through the lunch break on a good day.



**CAMPBELL'S POOL (NEAR SIDE) LOOKING ACROSS TO THE UPPER PART OF KEENAN'S,
TAKEN FROM JUST DOWN RIVER ON CHARLIE'S POINT**





WILLY BACSO

The years with Willy Bacso were good ones. Willy was a Hungarian freedom fighter who had been wounded by the Russian army during the Budapest uprising in 1956. He had relatives in Canada and his family smuggled him out of Hungary. Willy ended up in Moncton, New Brunswick, and after a stint as a trapper—a trade he learned by reading books—in the remote McKenzie Mountains of what was then Canada's Northwest Territories, he began guiding at Wade's and stayed there for 30 years. Willy was a great cook, an excellent fly-tier, a lover of New Brunswick's wildlife during all seasons of the year, an avid vegetable gardener, and a self-proclaimed international news junkie who could intelligently discuss current events with any guest who might show up at Wade's.

Willy accepted my job offer at Campbell's over the phone, never having met me, and with no discussion of pay or of what might be expected of him. Over the



STEVE WILSON LANDS A NICE FALL SALMON WITH WILLY GUIDING

next few summers, together with his much younger friend and eventual successor Jason Curtis, Willy built a beautiful boat shed for the canoes, a screen room addition to the small house that overlooked the pool, an addition to house a new kitchen made available when my wife replaced the one in our Maine home, and completely remodeled and finished off the house itself.

Willy either performed or arranged all the maintenance of the camp, mowed the lawns, put up and took down the swallow and bluebird houses, guided us when we were in camp, and fished the pools daily, keeping an eye on the water and the canoes moored against the shore when we were gone. In winter Willy frequently snowshoed down from the main road to check over the property. Throughout the closed season he would bring his lunch and sit out on the porch overlooking the river, dreaming of days of salmon fishing, both past and yet to come.



CLOSING THE SEASON

Willy and I had almost daily e-mail communications discussing the weather and how it might affect the next season's fishing. We talked about the populations of the various birds and animals in New Brunswick, especially the whitetail deer which were struggling after a string of particularly snowy winters. There was always a report on the river height and what fish he might have seen jumping. We became good friends, and while there was an employer/employee aspect to our dealings, I don't believe that either of us thought of each other that way. Willy trusted me, and I him, and neither of us contemplated changes of any kind. We sometimes joked about helping each other back up the hill to the camp as 90-year-olds, still fishing the Miramichi. Nature had other ideas, though, and a heart attack killed Willy at 72 while he was salting his driveway in March of 2009. We had exchanged e-mails earlier that morning talking about recent bird sightings and how the new season was just around the corner. His ashes are buried on a hill overlooking Campbell's Pool.

WILLY'S VIEW OF THE MIRAMICHI IN WINTER FROM CAMPBELL'S PORCH





THE OLD CAMPBELL'S FARMHOUSE

We call the pools that Willy watched from the porch Campbell's and Keenan's, after the families who originally owned them. The near side of the river is Campbell's. Our camp is built on the site of the original Campbell homestead, provided as a crown grant to the Campbells who emigrated from Scotland in the early 1800s. These early grants were made by authorized representatives of the English monarchy and conveyed ownership of the bottom of the river as well as exclusive fishing rights on the property. Recreational fishing wasn't contemplated in those times; the idea was to attract settlers who could later pay taxes and protect the country from foreign conquest. The fruits of the land and fish of the waters were the resources by which the settlers would provide everything necessary for life in a Canadian countryside that was then still a wilderness.

The first big grant on the Miramichi was to William Davidson in 1765. He started out with 110,000 acres and owned a big stretch of both the Southwest and Northwest Miramichi Rivers. For the early settlers there were two big attractions. One was the dense forests that covered the province and provided a product that was much in demand back home—trees. The other was salmon. Things haven't really changed all that much over the years. The most common professions for Miramichi men today are working in the woods and guiding on the river.

William Davidson and John Cort came over from England and began a salmon fishery on the Miramichi. Cort had learned all about fishing for salmon and curing





BOAT FISHING FOR SALMON ON CAMPBELL'S POOL, CIRCA 1960

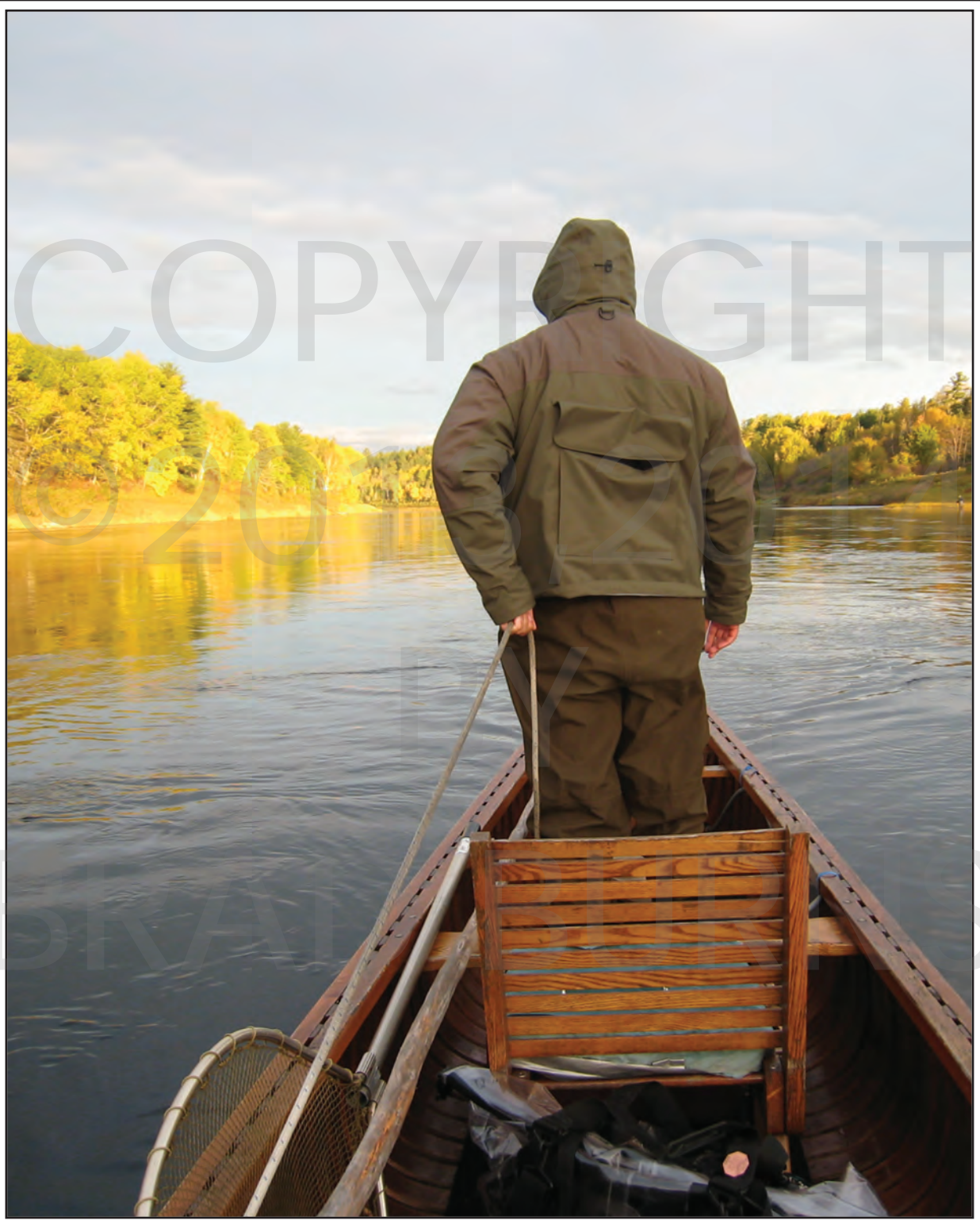
them while working for a firm that leased the salmon fishing rights on a big section of the Spey River in Scotland from the Duke of Gordon. The Gordon Castle Estate still owns fishing on the Spey today. There is very little written about it but many of the early settlers along the Miramichi came from Scotland, a place that abounds in salmon rivers and salmon fishing culture, and some of those Scots must have tried rod and line fishing. At about this same time, another group of Scots began salmon fishing on the Restigouche River, setting up camp near what is today Campbellton. These men were from Aberdeen and doubtless learned their trade around the estuary of the River Dee.

Wade's purchased the Campbell's property in the 1990s. For the previous 150 or so years it had been in Campbell hands. Across the river is Keenan's Pool, more commonly known by Wade's patrons since the 1940s as Papa's Rock, after Flora "Papa" Keenan, the early 20th century patriarch of the large Keenan clan that



PRIMITIVE PAINTING OF KEENAN SIDING

resides across the river along the Howard Road. Papa's Rock itself is a moderately large, egg shaped black rock, perhaps 36 inches long and with about 24 inches sticking up above the bottom just off the outer edge of a gravel bar on the Keenan side. The gravel bar comes out high and dry in normal summer water, and even the top two or three inches of Papa's Rock also show from time to time. The rock is a kind of local landmark for fishermen. There aren't a lot of large rocks in this area, and it makes a good reference point. Until the late 1960s many local people made their livelihoods from farming, working in the woods, and fishing the river. New Brunswick author Wayne Curtis, a neighbor on the Keenan side of the river, says that when he was a boy, men drifted gill nets just outside Papa's Rock for shad in the spring and salmon in the fall. They liked the fall fish, Wayne says, because there was less fat in them, and they salted down better than the early run fish.





CLOSING *the* SEASON

"The Journal"

In the spring of 2012, I decided to keep a daily journal of the events that struck me during the fall fishing season along the Miramichi and the Cains. I hope this record will show you what it's like to be in salmon camp at this enchanting time of the year.

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BY

BRAD BURNS

WEDNESDAY › SEPTEMBER › 5

AIR TEMP:

low 50s

WATER TEMP:

61F

WATER LEVEL:

.48 meters—very low.

I don't often come up here with that forecast! Last weekend was Labor Day, and for years Steve and Susie Bellefleur have come up with June and me. We always have a great time and it killed me to cancel, but there was just no hope of catching a fish. It rained yesterday, though not enough to break the drought or bring up the very low river. The river gauge in Blackville was at only .48 meters. I knew about the rain forecast but I hadn't been here since mid-July when the water turned warm and conditions went downhill. All the recognized cold water pools on the river were closed to fishing, and for a long time you couldn't fish anywhere after 10:00 A.M. We didn't have the fish kills of 2010—thank god—but next to that summer, conditions were the worst in living memory. There was just no summer fishing. But it's fall now, and while the water is low, it's fairly cool, and the season is changing. The big question on everyone's mind is whether the fall run will be huge and make up for the poor summer. I'll tell you now that it didn't work out that way; I had a feeling in my gut that it wouldn't. People who don't understand fishermen claim that we are very patient people. That's not necessarily true, but a lot of us believe that things can and will change for the better if we just persist. It is in part this optimism that brings me back here when my brain tells me that there will be no fish.

I saw one fish roll last night and one this morning—quite pitiful for September on the Miramichi. The fall run has not yet begun.

The weathervane that I made from balsa wood last winter—hand-painted in the likeness of a bright, 36-inch silver salmon—was facing NE across the fields all day today. The weather was overcast and there was a constant drizzle. Hopefully the four coats of clear epoxy over the paint will protect my weathervane! This is sure great fishing weather.



The Miramichi valley is a short cut south for a lot of migratory birds, particularly for those birds that live along the shore. At this time of the season we see more cormorants, black ducks, Canada geese, yellow legs, sandpipers, ospreys, and assorted birds of prey than we do at any other time during the season. In the spring the birds seem to hurry north to their nesting areas, but in the fall they take their time and use up the last of the good feeding as they head south. Today I noticed blackbirds flocking up; the humming birds that entertained us at the feeder during the summer were already gone.

I went to the Cains camp in the rain today. Jason and Lloyd had done a good job clearing the trails along the river and down to the Slow Pool. The new coat of polyurethane they'd put on floors in the camp looked great. We have an application in for rock placement in the Home Pool to improve the holding water there, and we have our fingers crossed about getting everything approved in time for the work to be done later this month.

There is a surprising amount of color already in the trees above John Anderson's ridge. Anderson is my neighbor on the Miramichi. He owns a magnificent old white farmhouse sitting beside a large barn and outbuildings, all situated high on a knoll overlooking the river. John's house at one time belonged to Charlie Campbell, and John's best fishing spot is known locally as Charlie's Point. This is where Wayne Curtis, a neighbor across the river, cast during the 1950s, after crawling out on the fence built there to control cattle that waded in the river.

Just for the hell of it, I fished for a bit late in the day after getting back to Campbell's. The water was terribly low and I caught the smallest parr that I can ever remember taking a fly.

For dinner I made a spaghetti sauce with some peppers from my garden. The peppers looked fine and when I tasted one it didn't seem that hot. But after I put several in the sauce, seeds and all, the heat became unreal. I had to fish a lot of them out so I could eat my pasta.

Owning a salmon camp has made me handier around the house and forced me to learn a little something about cooking. My wife June is a tiny thing and a fierce achiever. In high school she won the Betty Crocker Home Maker of Tomorrow award, as well as the award from the Daughters of the American Revolution. June has fed me grandly over our years together, putting only the tastiest meals on the table, and then clearing everything off and putting it all away, often before I even got up from the table. June doesn't come to camp more than twice a year, and only then under duress. Perhaps it's a good thing, as I often lose a little weight eating my own cooking and spending my days wading and casting in the Miramichi.



THURSDAY · SEPTEMBER · 6

AIR TEMP:

low 50s early, heating up to 70F.

WATER TEMP:

61F to 64F

WATER LEVEL:

Increased to .52 meters.

The long string of showery weather from the northeast turned to the west, becoming partly cloudy and a touch warmer. The trees are definitely coloring prematurely, probably due to the warm, dry summer. We went back up to the Cains today to cut alders along the mainland shore and on the island which forms one side of the Home Pool in front of the camp. At the top of the island, and right at the bottom of the rapids, there is a gap perhaps 25 feet wide at its narrowest point. The water runs quickly through this gap, but in normal flows it is very shallow. This stream of water flows around the back of the island, downstream for about 300 feet or so, and then angles out to rejoin the main channel of the Cains. The volume of water making it through here is just enough to bleed some of the velocity off the Home Pool, and we're hoping that it is in the process of filling in. That is the way it appears; at the top of the island, between the narrow part of the gap and the main flow of the river, a sandy flat has developed that is now beginning to grass over. Our theory is that many years ago a large flood ripped this back channel open. We can see from the grass stuck up in the alders, and from the ice scrapes on the trees along the bank, that at some point during most winters, the river and ice flow right over this island.

In the fall this is a truly beautiful place. I love the look of the very long and thick grass that covers most of the island. The island and its back channel, along with the marshy delta at the mouth of Mahoney Brook, all combine to provide quite a large open view, something that you don't find very often along the Cains. We want to prevent the island grass from being encroached upon by alders. It's hard work, with Lloyd running the clearing saw and Jason and I gathering up the alders. Jason Curtis and Lloyd Curtis, the guides and caretakers of the camp, are each about 20 years my junior. Trying to keep up with them as we pick up alders and carry them over to the shore, I developed quite a sweat. As a reward for our efforts, we drank a couple of Labatt Blues and ate hot dogs off the grill that Jason had slathered up with barbecue sauce. Sitting on the camp deck, we noticed that the sandy, grassy area between the grass island and the shore had grown much larger this summer than last.





BACK CHANNEL AROUND THE GRASS ISLAND AT MAHONEY BROOK HOME POOL

The view from the deck is always very easy to take. We can see birds flitting in and out of the high grass, and watch puffs of wind working down the island, making the grass move in rolling waves. There was a handsome ruffed grouse on the road just beyond the camp gate when we drove in, and yellow legs and sand peeps were pecking on the shore around us as we worked on the island. Several good flocks of black birds traded back and forth across the river. Time always passes very quickly along the banks of the Cains.

There are three mounted photographs hanging in the camp guest bedroom. They came from the brook trout camp on Souderhunk Lake in Maine that George Watson and I have for sale. One photograph is of my first big Labrador brookie, a beautifully colored male of about 7 ½ pounds that I caught in the mid-1980s while fishing with Ladd Heldenbrand, an old friend now gone, and his long-time buddy, Labrador native Dick Budgell. The second photograph shows another brookie



modeled beside an L.L. Bean fly reel made by Hardy. Then there's a photo of Ladd getting into a floatplane up at Border Beacon during an August snow squall. We traveled by visual flight from Moosehead Lake, Maine up to Flower Lake, Labrador, on over Michikamau Lake, up to Border Beacon—once a radar installation on the old cold-war DEW Line—then out to the coast for char and back across the heart of Labrador to a one room cabin at Flower Lake. I remember that Budgell bathed in the 50-degree lake at daybreak every morning. The rest of us used face cloths and a little warm water in a dishpan.

Ladd was a veterinarian and the kind of guy who walked into a room and quickly got to know everyone there. He was especially good at becoming friendly with whoever was in charge. Ladd once attended a conference in Newfoundland back in the 1950s where a fellow vet talked about taking care of pets in a wilderness tent camp which housed workers building a railroad that began at Seven Islands, on the Saint Lawrence Seaway in Quebec and was to run far inland to a new mine built on a mammoth iron deposit in Schefferville, Labrador. The deposit was found when U.S. military planes flying over the area during WW II on their way to Europe encountered a large magnetic disturbance. The railroad workers entertained themselves in their off-time by fishing, and seven pound brook trout, scary-big northern pike, and lake trout up to 40 pounds were not uncommon.

Ladd arranged this Labrador trip with Dick Budgell and a German military aviation history buff named Jack Hofbauer. Jack was a captain for Delta Airlines and he owned a floatplane business on Moosehead Lake in Maine. Leaving for "The Labrador" from his backyard in northern Maine was Jack's idea of a Sunday drive. When we arrived at Flower Lake—about 800 miles straight north of Moosehead Lake—it was late in the day. Dick was already there. He had driven up the dirt road from Northwest River to a place where the gigantic Smallwood Reservoir necks down to form the river that flows into the Churchill Falls power project. Dick had flattened three tires on the rough road towing a 16-foot aluminum boat for us to fish out of. He then had to run the boat several miles over to the camp. Dick piloted the boat all the time when we fished. The river ran fast and furious around us and Dick was constantly on guard for rocks. As a precaution against being swept down this wildest of rivers, he had a spare motor lying on the deck at his feet, ready to be pressed into service should he knock out a lower unit on one of the thousands of submerged boulders that littered the bottom. Dick had guided many visiting dignitaries and investors in the huge Churchill Falls development. Ladd had schmoozed his way into the inner circle of the Churchill Falls



management team and met Dick in the process. In their early days together they were flown in government helicopters and floatplanes to all ends of the Labrador wilderness, and Dick and Ladd became fast friends.

That Labrador trip with Ladd was more than 20 years ago. I had a fine relationship with the man. It's hard to accept that people like Ladd and the times we shared are gone, never to return. I've made many more trips to Labrador, but none was quite like my travels with Ladd; I'm sure I'll never have another adventure to match it in my life. Ladd, Bill Martens and I were mutual friends. Ladd and Bill became quite close and liked and respected each other a great deal. Bill was coming up to camp in a month or so. As I hung the photo on the wall, I wondered if Bill would recognize Ladd all bundled up against the summer snow squall.

I gave the fishing a late day try back at Keenan's and saw a salmon roll at the head of the pool. Then a large cock fish came out of the water right in front of us and a couple of others rose on the Campbell side. For a little while it all looked promising, but then everything went quiet.

Moving those alders up at the Cains camp wore me out. I was so tired that I didn't have the energy to cook, so I ate the salmon salad sandwich I had originally made for lunch before Jason's hot dogs showed up, washed it down with a scotch, and staggered up to bed.

FRIDAY › SEPTEMBER › 7

AIR TEMP:

Warm with a little fog—didn't note temp.

WATER TEMP:

low to mid 60s

WATER LEVEL:

.52 meters

A warm, foggy morning. I didn't note the temp. The air was still. Fishing improved today! I landed a lovely salmon of about 15 pounds on a #12 Little Black Dress, and a nice grilse also. While fishing down through Keenan's with the wet fly, I noticed that there were a bunch of grilse holding around the big rock formation right in the heart of the pool. I hooked three of those fish on Bombers but lost each of them after a jump or two. When a salmon takes a bomber, the connection is often not a solid one. Bombers are relatively fat flies, with their diameter swollen by the spun deer hair body, and salmon frequently fail to get a good enough





BOMBER FLIES ON A FLEECE PATCH

bite on them for a secure hook up. Since I was alone, Lloyd fished a bit and got a grilse on a Green Machine. During the morning we saw an unusual number of eagles trading up and down the river.

In the afternoon, a northeast wind was blowing quite hard across the river. I found the fishing conditions exhilarating. I'm a great believer that salmon love to run the river when there is a combination of wind, overcast skies, and precipitation. It was not pouring that afternoon, but the wind was almost directly in our face and I had the side of my hood pulled in snugly. Still, at the end of the day I was soaked all down my neck to the top of my shoulders.

The lies in the river in front of me were completely obscured by the wind and rain, but I knew where those lies were and where the fish were most likely to take. Casting a #10 Black Ghost into the wind, I hooked and landed a salmon of 18 to 20 pounds in lower Keenan's that was as strong and bright as a June fish. It had plenty of sea lice, and even though the Millerton trap was recording very few new fish, we had one here. It was bittersweet for Jason Curtis and me because we had





A BRIGHT LATE SEASON SURPRISE

both been essentially out of business since early July and had not expected to get another silver fish like this so late in the season. It reminded us of what we had missed when the July run collapsed in the heat.

Scandinavian-style tube flies, introduced to United Kingdom salmon rivers in the 1990s, have become immensely popular. These flies tend to be long and slinky and are tied with materials like goat hair and lots of flash. The tubes are often made of copper or brass so they will sink, but they are almost impossible to cast with a single-handed rod that most Miramichi fishers favor. Tube flies are typically launched with heavy Spey lines or the short, fat-headed Skagit lines used for steelhead on the West Coast that are especially capable of yanking these large, heavy flies out of the water for the next cast. In the cold, swollen, spring rivers of Scotland, or the steep, powerful rivers of Norway, long tube flies are often the top



producers. But on the Miramichi, in the relatively warm, shallow, and gently flowing waters of late summer and early fall, it is a different game. The salmon fishing then is much more subtle than heaving a brass tube on the end of a 700-grain sink tip Skagit line.

The Miramichi is broad, and in low water we are usually wading out to what I call the river within the river—the channel that twists through the wider river bed. The fish hold in these moderate flows along drop offs, in gravel pockets, and in the wake of large rocks. Gentle head and tail rises are normal, and it is not unusual to see grilse actually taking small insects out of the surface flow. We take fish on small dark flies like these shown in the photograph below. I am especially partial to the Black Ghost and a fly named the Little Black Dress, which I was introduced to by Bryant Freeman of Escape Anglers in Moncton, NB. Bryant gave me a copy of the “Dress” on a trip to the Restigouche that he and a couple of his friends took me on one hot day in late July of 2012. Bryant said that an old fisherman from the Miramichi had given him the first “Dress” he had seen



SOME SMALL DARK FLIES THAT WORK





THE VENERABLE BLACK GHOST TIED WITH A FLY FUR WING

while fishing Nelson Hollow Pool many years ago. The pool was stuffed with dour fish and a couple of passes through the pool had produced nothing for Bryant. His friend followed him down the pool and hooked several nice fish on the Little Black Dress. According to the old angler, the Miramichi has a strain of large, dark, caddis that are common at that time in the river, and the salmon will strike them when they will take nothing else. Frankly that's more than I know about Miramichi entomology and the salmon's relationship with it, but I have known for a long time that the smallest, blackest flies are often the only sub-surface ones that will take dour fish.

The famous Black Ghost is perhaps my favorite Miramichi wet fly. The traditional Black Ghost was originated in the 1930s by Herb Welch, a guide from the Rangeley Lakes in Maine. Welch tied the fly with a black floss body topped with a white feather wing, but most Black Ghosts tied today have a white hair wing of calf tail or bucktail. I prefer to use a new synthetic material called fly fur instead.





A FEW FINISHED LITTLE BLACK DRESS FLIES

Fly fur has a nice taper and a natural shine; it is easy to work with in small quantities, and is tough as nails. I add a couple of pieces of Krystal Flash or some other kind of thin flash material to the wing. I also like a slightly fuzzy body of black mohair, and I sometimes add the jungle cock eyes—though I don't know that they make any difference at all. The key is to make everything sparse. Let the fly swim across the current on a long leader with a light tippet like six-pound test.

When we talk about flies that are easy to tie, the Little Black Dress really takes the cake. According to Bryant, you can tie this fly with various additions like a floss body or a green floss tag, but nothing is more effective than wrapping the hackle directly over the bare black hook shank. Use a hackle long enough so you have two or three inches where the hackle barbules are of very similar length. Fold the barbules back into a V, tie the hackle in just above the bend in the hook, and make five or six wraps coming forward before tying off. You don't even need a head.





**ESKAPE ANGLER'S OWNER AND
SALMON FLY-TYING GURU BRYANT FREEMAN**



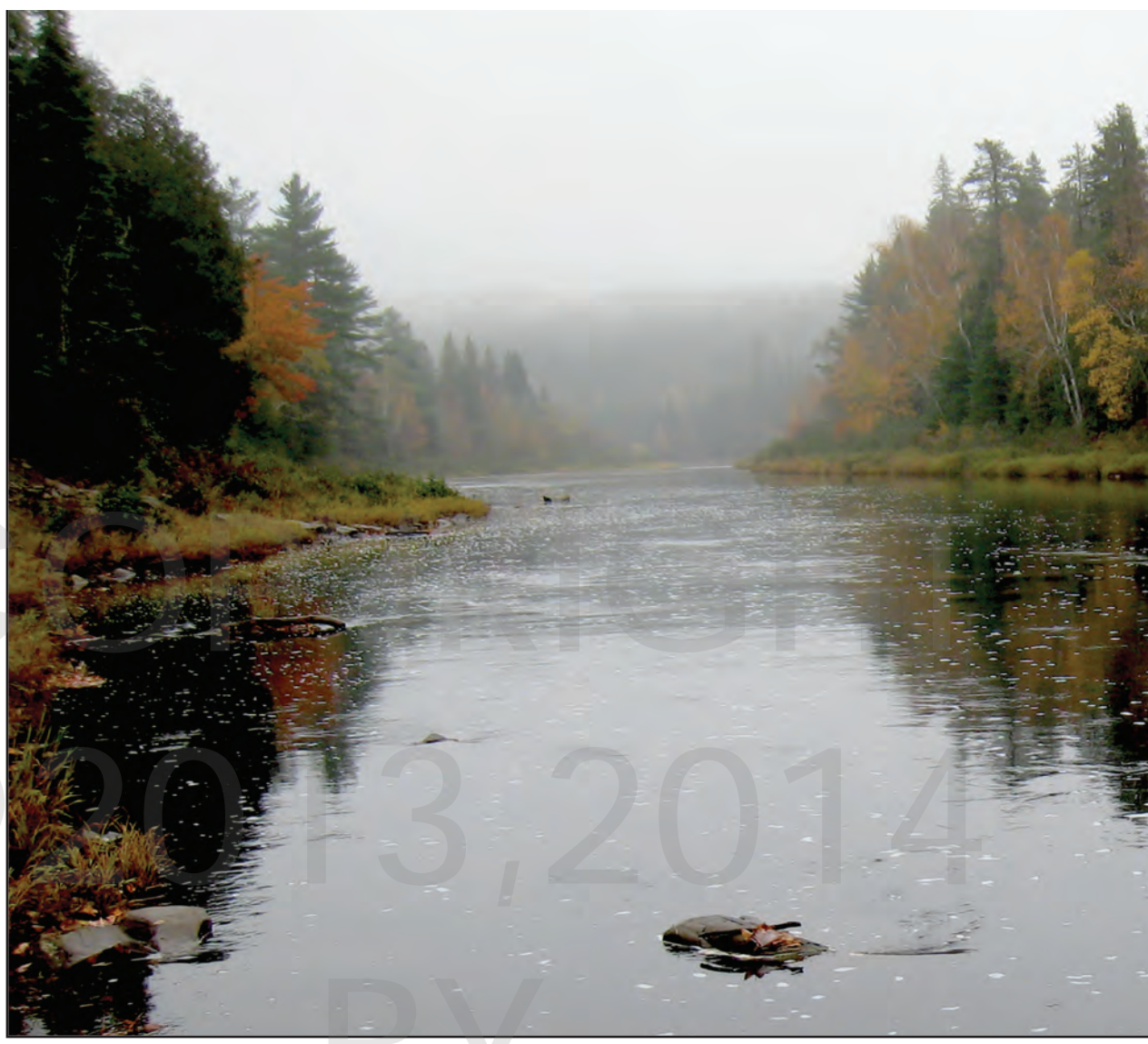


STARTING THE LITTLE BLACK DRESS—BRYANT IS FOLDING BACK THE HACKLE FIBERS SO THEY WILL LAY DOWN LIKE THE LEGS OR WINGS



LITTLE BLACK DRESS HALF FINISHED,—THE HACKLE BEING WOUND ON THE SHANK AFTER BEING FOLDED BACKWARDS





THE WOODS POOL

Back at the top, I worked out the same amount of line and swung the big, wiggly streamer over the lies. Not far from where the grilse had taken 45 minutes ago, I felt the thud of what could only be a big heavy salmon. In a classic jump, heading slightly upstream but mostly just straight up out of the water, a hen salmon of approximately twenty pounds rose to the tip of her tail, and slowly sunk back in as she twisted and shook in the air. This fish took a little longer than usual to land, but several of her jumps at the beginning wore her down. She also sulked a lot in the deep channel out in front of me. It was easy to walk downriver a bit, and standing on the steep shore, I was lifting her back against the current all the time. She could only hold in the pool with great effort. I landed her in the same pocket as the grilse, and when I took the fly out of her lip, she virtually shot back out into the river, stirring up the mud and leaves in the bottom of the still water with beats of her powerful tail, covering my glasses with muddy water in the process.





SEASON'S CLOSING 2012

That was the last salmon that I landed in 2012, but I did hook two more fish during the next hour. One was another powerful creature that followed the fly across the bottom of the pool and hit three times. I'm pretty sure it was the same fish all three times. I could see the bulging wake as the salmon came after the fly, and I tried hard not to pull before I could feel the fish's weight. Still, the salmon apparently wasn't hooked all that well. As Jason Curtis says, a sixteenth of an inch can be the difference between success and failure. I would add that it can also be the difference between jubilation and utter dejection. I did feel the weight and strength of the fish, and enjoyed the deep bend in my small Spey rod. A great fish on the line in the confines of a small river is a feeling that doesn't leave you quickly. Moments like this come back to me on quiet winter evenings, and they make me hunger for the river and salmon fishing. But they also remind me of how fortunate I've been to have met a few of these great fish in such out-of-the-way places as the Woods Pool that I fished on the last day of the 2012 salmon season.



It was now noon. I could have skipped lunch and kept casting, but I had had enough, and I wanted George and Bill to have a chance at these fish. It also appeared to me that the fish had taken a bit of a siesta since I had not seen one roll in a while. I hiked back quickly to the camp, excited with my success and eager to tell my story to my friends.

George and Bill had spent the rest of the morning flogging the Slow Pool and catching only a large brook trout. I had also caught a couple of trout in the Woods Pool that morning; they are truly beautiful creatures, and a big one is fun to catch. But when you are hoping for a 20 pound salmon, even a big brookie is not much consolation.

"They're gone," Bill said, and this time I had to believe him since there had been nothing in the Slow Pool all morning. "I'll bet that the salmon you had upriver this morning were the same fish that we had yesterday in the Slow Pool."

I rolled that one around in my head. The fish must have left the Slow Pool with the raise of water last night. We fished the Home Pool hard enough this morning so that I'm confident that they weren't there. The Woods Pool is the next holding water upriver, and it is about a mile, maybe a mile-and-a-half distant with a fair amount of fast water in between. We had the tiny raise—which seemed to have stopped—so maybe Bill was right. Anyway, we knew where they were now! After quickly devouring Bill's delicious lunch like sea gulls, Bill and George armed themselves with rigs similar to those that had produced for me in the morning and went up the trail to the Woods Pool, accompanied by Lloyd carrying a huge landing net.

I knew that George and Bill would spend most of the afternoon upriver, and I decided to walk off my lunch and make a last, whirlwind tour of the various pools near the camp. The first item on my schedule was a visit to the two bars up around the corner from the camp. I waded upstream rather than messing with the canoe, and this meant slogging a couple of hundred yards against knee-deep current before getting to a spot that allowed me to walk along the shore. I felt less guilty about my large lunch by the time I arrived at the second bar. From here I could see Bill and George fishing upriver at the Woods Pool. I learned later that Lloyd had found a comfortable spot on the bank and promptly fallen asleep.

I worked both bars, then the Home Pool from top to bottom, and then the Slow Pool—nothing. I arrived back at camp almost simultaneously with Bill and George, and I was eager to hear what I was sure would be great stories.

"We never saw a fish," George said.



I thought he was kidding, but after hearing how they had fished up and down the pool using a variety of flies, it was clear to me that they were serious. I felt terribly disappointed for them.

“Those fish were on the move” said Bill, “and you were lucky enough to arrive there this morning just as they did.” I thought about my experience with the salmon rolling around the rocks in the center of the Woods Pool run, and the others showing in the deep water further down in the pool, and how everything had then stopped. I wondered if I had miraculously intercepted a school of salmon moving along; it was certainly possible that they moved up there last night and had decided to leave later this morning.

Last year, on the night before the final day of the 2011 season, we had heavy rain and a decent rise of water was just getting underway when we began fishing. The water came up slowly but constantly all day long. A truly mind-boggling number of fish moved through the home pool at Mahoney Brook. They were so intent on moving upriver that they were nearly impossible to catch, but we saw them jumping and rolling for hours. That day Albert Levesque fished the Woods Pool for several hours. He is an observant outdoorsman and a competent fisherman. We met him coming out of the woods late in the afternoon. He told us that he had not seen a fish all day. We were no more than a mile downriver from him and had seen hundreds if not thousands of fish move through the pool. But he had not seen one! Did they all stop somewhere in between? It is hard to imagine, but perhaps they moved silently through the pool without showing themselves. Such are the mysteries of the salmon migration.

On the way out we stopped at the Moore Pool. There were a couple of anglers fishing there in the last of the light, and Gary Colford, their guide, was leaning on his net having a smoke. I rolled down the window and before I could speak Gary said: “I am awfully glad this season is over.”

“Nothing?” I asked. “Nothing,” he replied, looking down and shaking his head from side to side. I waved, rolled up the window, and we drove away.

That was it. The season was over. There would be no more worry about having the right flies in your box for the next day, whether your leader was long or strong enough, how cold or how rainy it might be, or where you should plan to fish in the morning to take the best advantage of the conditions. The great game was over for yet another season, and tomorrow morning we’d be back to far more mundane and less interesting decisions.



TUESDAY · OCTOBER · 16

Season over, temps and water level not recorded

I had the coffee ready and bacon cooking when the guys came down in the morning. But there was no lingering around the breakfast table after the last mouthful was eaten. Instead of discussing fishing plans for the day, or debating the chances of a particular fly or line type being the sure answer for the conditions, the talk was of packing up and about what time we would be back across the U.S. border. The end of the season magic was already beginning to fade and the responsibilities of daily domestic life were reclaiming top billing.

Years ago, a new fishing friend was headed back to Connecticut after a particularly good weekend of surfcasting for striped bass with me in Maine. I walked over as he got in his car with the idea of exchanging a couple of friendly parting comments and perhaps briefly discussing when we might be able to fish together again. My friend, whose name is Pat, got into his truck, rolled down the window and said: "I don't believe in long goodbyes. I'll give you a call." And he drove away.

It's a good philosophy. I have just spent the last month soaking in everything that comes with being in a salmon camp. There is nothing to add, and I wouldn't feel any better about leaving if I strolled one more time down to the shore, or took another walk around the old fields that surround the camp. Besides, Steve and I are coming back up in two weeks for a non-fishing weekend at the Cains camp with our wives. I planned that trip way back at the beginning of the season.

Bill and George were gone within an hour or so, and Steve and I worked right along at packing gear, hanging blankets and bedding from hooks in the ceiling to keep them away from mice, cleaning out the refrigerator and food pantry, and packing the car. By 10:00 A.M., we too were driving across the bridge over the Miramichi in Blackville, and on our way back to a life where attempting to catch a salmon is not on the agenda. I often think to myself that if salmon fishing is the activity that I love the most, why is it that I spend about 60 days a year doing it and 300 not doing it? But I suppose that it is only natural to do something materially productive with our time—such as work. Probably if we had to fish for salmon to catch enough to feed ourselves or to make money, it would become less exciting. Perhaps looking over financial statements would become an exciting alternative....



WEDNESDAY · OCTOBER · 24

*Not recorded, but colder & noticeably shorter days.
River seems to have risen substantially*

This morning Steve and Susie Bellefleur and my wife June and I headed back to New Brunswick for a weekend at the Cains camp. June likes the Bellefleurs and having their company is almost the only way that I can get her to go to camp. She likes the outdoors well enough, but the tame landscape around our house in Falmouth, Maine is wild enough for her. She is also not fond of mice or rodents in general, or of any house that doesn't measure up to her fanatical concept of cleanliness. Camps in the Cains River back country cannot be kept up like that, though over the next few days, June will do her best to bring mine up to standard. I must admit that although I am more tolerant of mice and dirt than June is, the place is a lot more livable after one of her visits. In addition to just enjoying the New Brunswick bush in late autumn, we have a couple of goals. First, everyone wants to see a moose, as close up as possible, so I purchased a couple of battery-powered game calls for this trip. I'm no expert on moose calls, but Jason Curtis, who has hunted moose his whole life, listened to the calls and said they would work for sure. Our second goal, not surprisingly, involves salmon. We suspect that salmon spawn in the gravel areas below the Home Pool, and Emery Brophy told me that the flat water just above the rapids near camp is another likely spot. Steve and I hope to observe salmon spawning here as I have seen them do in the Admiral Pool far downriver.

With only a week left in October, we didn't expect to see the beautiful fall colors that were everywhere two weeks ago. North of Bangor, the highway passes through more than 100 miles of woods, broken only by a very occasional exit ramp or a bridge carrying a country road over the intruding interstate. The further north you go, the more the tree growth becomes evergreen: pines and spruce, plus the occasional stand of cedar. There is also a lot of birch and maple, but the ever-present oaks of southern Maine begin to thin out. At this time of the year, the landscape takes on a dark green appearance with areas of gray from the bare limbs of the deciduous trees showing here and there. This morning is cold, well below freezing, and the arctic air pouring down out of Canada gave us almost unlimited visibility from the tops of the hills as we drove along.



Just before we reached the exit for the tiny town of Patten, I saw a moose walk out of the woods on the left side of the interstate and head up towards the top of the banking. We were still a half-mile away, and I tried to judge my speed so that I got up near the moose before it crossed the road. Another car was a fair distance in back of us but coming up very rapidly. I moved over into the center of the road and tapped my brakes repeatedly until I saw the other car slow down. People are killed in the North Country by running into moose, and of course the moose don't fare well either. The folks in the other car were just as interested in seeing the moose as we were. Susie was really excited and practically jumping around in the back seat. I was able to slowly pull up very close to the moose so that everyone could have a good look. Like the moose I saw a few weeks ago on the Shinnickburn Road, steam poured from the nostrils of this creature, and his new winter coat was nearly black in color. Like the Shinnickburn animal, this one was a young bull with small antlers, but he was still an awesome animal to look at out of the windows of the Suburban. His condition appeared to be excellent. After eyeing each other for 30 seconds or so, the moose stepped out into the roadway and nonchalantly walked slowly across the interstate and down the embankment, and strode off into some thick woods.

As we pass through New Brunswick, it is my intention to stop at McCloskey's General Store in Boiestown and pick up a copy of Wayne Curtis's new book, *Of Earthly and River Things*. He had told me that I would find it there. The father of Jason Curtis, our head guide at the Campbell's Pool and Mahoney Brook Camps, Wayne is the current patriarch of the large Curtis clan from Keenan's, and writes about life today and yesterday along the Miramichi River valley. He is a great storyteller and I know that I'll enjoy his new book.

I've driven by this store more than a hundred times on my way to and from camp, but have never had a reason to stop in; from the outside, the old building is non-descript and not inviting. But once inside, I am surprised to find a good-sized establishment that like many old country general stores has a little bit of everything. It is hunting season now in New Brunswick, and McCloskey's has all sorts of hunter safety orange clothing, guns, ammo, wool coats, and warm gloves, as well as school supplies, auto parts, and hard to get food like hand-cut bacon and locally made liverwurst. The old wooden floors are thick and dark, and you pass up and down the aisles as if walking on top of a gentle ocean swell. I grew up in places like this, places like Sid's Hardware, which was the first stop for almost everything that we needed in my childhood hometown. The air in Sid's always smelled of the tar used in the nets and ropes that were on hand for the local fishermen.



McCloskey's smell was like that. It was the smell of country things with real utility, unpackaged things made of wood, steel, and wool, instead of the sterile smell of plastic. We were a happy and relaxed group already, but the stop at McCloskey's enhanced our mood. We passed the last 40 minutes or so of our trip eating the homemade molasses cookies Susie had bought at the store and bubbling away about how much fun it was going to be to spend some time in the remote countryside of the Cains River valley.

The next couple of days were a bit of an adventure, which we all enjoyed a great deal. The Cains camp at Mahoney Brook has no regular electrical service, but we have a generator in a shed on the edge of the camp clearing. I woke each morning before the others and made a pot of coffee on the gas stove. At the same time, I lit a fire in the wood stove, easily done by just stirring the coals from last night's fire that still smoldered under the low air intake. I bundled up against the cold temperatures and drank my coffee on the deck, watching the river valley slowly emerge from darkness with the sunrise. As soon as I heard someone else stirring I walked over to the shed and fired up the generator. With the generator running, we have the comforts of home including a flush toilet and electric lights, but the generator consumes a lot of fuel and it is not practical to run it all day. So we turn



MCCLOSKEY'S GENERAL STORE IN BOIESTOWN



it off after breakfast, back on again for a couple of hours around lunchtime, then off for the afternoon, and back on around 5:00 P.M., finally shutting it down when we go to bed. At 7:30 P.M. or so we were sitting around the living room, decorated with antlers and pictures of fish and the river, and watching DVD's of recent movies on a TV with no reception other than the media player—roughing it in the modern sense....

I hadn't been on the deck long during our first morning in camp when Steve came out to enjoy the view with me. The sun was barely up and the river was very quiet. Suddenly a large wake zoomed across the surface of the water at the lower end of the home pool. Then I saw another wake in an area of concentrated activity, with something bobbing and weaving continuously on the surface of the water. I focused my binoculars on the spot some 600 or so feet away. In the middle of the turmoil an otter's head popped into view. My hope that the wakes would be salmon were dashed on the spot, especially when I saw that there were at least three or four otters hunting where we had hoped to find spawning salmon. You can spend a lot of time on the Miramichi and go seasons without spotting an otter, and I had never seen a whole family of them. The otters stayed for only a few minutes, then worked downriver and around the corner into the Slow Pool. We didn't see them again during our stay.

We filled the next two days with a lot of walking around the area. There are trails off through the woods to salmon pools up and downriver. We walked these to show the ladies where we did our fishing, to oooh and ahhh over moose tracks, and to marvel at the beauty of everything from giant old pine trees to colorful little colonies of moss growing on rocks, and the dried remains of the summer's wild flowers. Here and there a ruffed grouse, or "thunder chicken," would explode from the edge of the trail and loop around as they have a way of doing to frustrate bird hunters, quickly putting every available piece of thick bush between us and them. At the Woods Pool, I walked up the shore and stood on the rock where I had hooked the big salmon on the last day of the season. I began to relive the whole thing for June and the Bellefleurs until I realized that Steve was the only one of the three listening. From Albert Levesque's neat cabin, built high on a ridge overlooking the river valley, we saw the entire stretch of river in front of our camp including the Home Pool, the rapids above it, and much further around the bend to the right than we can see from camp. The view is stunning and Susie and June really loved it.

On the second day we launched a canoe and Steve and I paddled the ladies down the river and into the Slow Pool. We paddled in back of the island, and when





RAVEN'S VIEW OF THE MAHONEY BROOK CAMP ON THE CAINS

we emerged into the main stem of the river, we held the boat in position for a long time hoping to see the fins of a salmon break the surface as it worked on its redd. But we had no such luck. We then paddled downstream to where Mahoney Brook enters the top of the Slow Pool. We got out there and walked up the brook a distance with the intention of removing any beaver dams or driftwood that might be interrupting the flow. The brook was clear of beaver dams and ran out into a cove above the pool without any interference—much, I imagined, as it had when Denis and Jeremiah Mahoney had settled on these crown grants back in the 1840s.

On a warm, early July day this past summer, Jason Curtis and I came here looking for parr that might have sought refuge in the cool brook to escape the growing heat of the summer, or to hide under the canopy from predatory kingfishers and mergansers. We found a number of tiny fish with the unmistakable barring of salmon parr in several of the relatively deep pools cut out of the banks in the stream. We walked across the marshy flood plain that has been built up over hundreds of years with deposits from the brook, and walked up the channel into the forest. Here we found even more parr, hiding behind logs and rocks in the flow of the stream. Now, at the end of October, there were no fish in the brook. They had probably gone out into the deeper river to find more food and to seek thermal protection; the shallow brook must get very cold at night. But the brook had done



its job over the summer, and it was good to spend a few minutes there on this late fall day.

After lunch that afternoon, Steve and I walked well up Mahoney Brook from the road until we reached the first beaver dam. We had removed a dam at that spot earlier in the summer and it had clearly been rebuilt. I could tell that the dam was there while driving down the hill above the brook on the road into camp because I could see what looked like a lake out in the woods but is actually just the head-pond of the beaver dam. From previous visits I knew that the first dam that we came to was not the main dam. The river here was so bloated that there was not just one channel but several small ones leading off through alder hummocks. These breaks between the small areas of semi-dry land were plugged with small beaver dams. In the middle channel was the biggest: it was only about three feet across.

Taking apart a beaver dam is a daunting task. The sticks are interlocked together, and the largest ones are ingeniously placed with the spear-like cuttings wedged down into the soft mud bottom so they cannot be pushed backwards with any normal amount of force. But if you patiently take out the sticks one at a time, gradually working your way down into the dam, your progress is magnified by the rush of the water being released. As you open up a small area of passage, the water moves through it at a fast and powerful pace that sweeps the mud carefully placed by the beaver out of the way, and opens up an even larger hole which exposes more branches that you can easily remove to further speed up the water.

When I began working on the beaver dam, the area upstream did certainly look like a small lake. After the water had been running for a while, I stepped carefully over the dam and onto the shore of the pond. I waded in to dig into the mud that had built up in front of the dam with the shovel I had brought along. In less than a half hour the lake had disappeared, leaving a mud-covered wasteland like you might see on television in the aftermath of some huge river flood. It took me a little while to realize what I was seeing, but everywhere you looked, the bottom of the pond was covered with moose shit. Their droppings, very neatly preserved in the ice cold water, are about an inch and a half in diameter and two inches long. Steve and I waded up what we realized was the old bed of the brook. About 200 feet upstream, and around a couple of twists and bends, we came to a much bigger beaver dam and yet another lake in the forest stretching up the valley. We gave this dam the same treatment, and after about an hour's work, we had a roaring torrent heading down stream.



Beaver dams have different effects on fish habitat depending on where you find them, but on the Cains, they block access by salmon parr to the upper reaches of the brook and the protection from predators and heat that the tree canopy affords. In addition, the small impoundments created by the dams are very shallow and warm up quickly in the summer sun. This warm water flowing into the main stem of the Cains deprives the river of the cooling effects that free running streams generate. The larger brooks of the Cains are also important salmon spawning habitat, and breaching the dams at this time of the year allows salmon to utilize the brook. Mahoney Brook is probably too small for salmon spawning; except for the beaver ponds, the brook is no more than three feet wide and shallow in many places during the summer. There is a good flow of cool water out into the Cains, though, and I like to keep these lower reaches as open as possible.

Late in the day, Jason Curtis and his wife Jennifer came up for a visit and Jason gave us a grouse he shot beside the gate on the way into camp. Jason Curtis is a major league bird hunter and dog handler. Shooting a grouse off the edge of the road is not his thing, but he wanted to provide us with one for the pot. Steve cooked it up as an appetizer for that night's meal. Late in the day, while we all enjoyed a beer or two on the deck, I saw an animal swimming across the Home Pool. It was an odd looking creature: we could see a head, then the hump of a body; then a little further back another part of the animal occasionally broke the surface. We glassed it over carefully as it emerged from the far side of the river, perhaps 600 feet away. It was a lynx! I have yet to speak with anyone else who has seen one swimming. The part of the lynx that we saw trailing behind was its tail occasionally breaking the surface. It is rare enough to see a lynx in the woods under any circumstances. The animal got out of the water and walked around the rocky bank for about 15 or 20 seconds before loping off into the brush. We had a perfect look and it was far too large to have been a bobcat.

The next morning we packed up to leave camp. It was warm and raining lightly. We stored the canoe under the deck and tied it in place so that storm winds wouldn't blow it away. Everything was put away with an eye towards keeping the mice at bay. Finally we packed the car and shut off the gas and lights; Jason would be along later in the day to drain the pipes and pickle the traps with RV antifreeze. I took a last long look around. Then I locked the door behind us, closing the book on the 2012 salmon season, knowing that I would certainly miss the quiet routine of life in camp and on the river, and hoping for the good health and fortune to allow us to enjoy it all over again next season.



EPILOGUE · THURSDAY · APRIL 25 · 2013

The Miramichi winter of 2012/2013 was inconsistent. The river froze up for the first time before the end of November, which is early. But in December it broke loose and rose again before freezing solid towards the end of the month—a bit later than usual. There was a decent snowfall, but on several occasions the weather warmed up and most of the snow melted away. Finally, a long bout of below-normal cold drove frost deep into the ground.

There were rumors of late runs of salmon into the river, but the Millerton trap comes out at the end of October and fresh salmon are not typically recorded during the last couple of weeks of the month. That was the case in 2012, when the only fish recorded in the trap were kelts—spawned out salmon dropping back downriver from the headwaters. Those fish did little to diminish the concerns over the season's poor run of salmon.

Miramichi outfitters have long derived a substantial portion of their income from the sports who come in the spring to catch kelts, aka slinks or black salmon. Spring fishing is generally frowned on by traditional salmon highbrows. But the hook and release survival rate for these fish is nearly 100 percent, due in great part to the high oxygen content of the cold water and the single, barbless-hook requirement. So this fishery is essentially harmless. For me and my guests at Campbell's, the spring season is a chance to be back on the Miramichi and lower Cains and get a preview of the good times to come. On opening day in 2013 at a favorite pool on the lower Cains where there is the slight flow and good depth that kelts like, Jason Curtis and an old client landed and released the 10 fish limit in a few hours and had a number of other fish come unhooked along the way. Later in the week, Jason proclaimed that spring fishing on the Cains in 2013 was "normal" with perhaps an above average percentage of salmon compared to grilse. It made me very happy to think that in the final analysis, the Cains apparently had its usual aggregation of spawning fish the previous fall. We know that 2010 was a big spawning year, as was 2011, and that large numbers of smolts will be heading to the ocean this May. We can also hope that the low 2012 grilse count means that a greater percentage of the fish from that year's class will return in 2013 as two multi-sea-winter salmon.

On Thursday, April 18, Jason and I took the jet canoe all the way from Campbell's upriver into the Cains and through about 12 miles of winding watercourse to sit on the deck of the camp at Mahoney Brook and have lunch. The top of the



big boulder in front of the camp was barely breaking the surface of the water and huge, living room-sized ice cakes more than two feet thick were stacked on top of each other along the banks, revealing how violently they had been pushed around at ice out.

The river there was too shallow and had too much current for kelts. The Cains River kelts were already in the lower pools or even out in the main river. We saw two moose and a deer on the way upriver as we passed many of the familiar camps: Admiral Pool, Brophy Pool, Herman Campbell's, the Popples, Valentine's ("Camp Stanton"), Millet's, Doctor's Island, Vaughn Anthony's camp, Six Mile, and finally Mahoney Brook. It was a moderately warm day, and if you got out of the wind and had a little sun on your face, it was very pleasant. I heard a grouse drumming back in the woods as I walked around the yard at Mahoney Brook checking to see how the outbuildings had made it through the winter.

When I was a kid in high school and wishing time away to get to the summer vacation, my grandmother told me that as you get older, the years fly by much faster than you can imagine as a young person. Walking around the camp property, my mind played a trick on me. Jason and I had just been over to inspect the generator shed, and on the way back to the camp I passed by the entrance for the path to the Slow Pool. As I walked back towards the camp I was on the same track as if I had just returned from fishing there. My thoughts weren't very concentrated; I was enjoying the sunny day and just being back up on the Cains again at the start of the new season. As I gazed at the door leading in to the kitchen my mind shifted back to October of last year, and I was again heading into the camp for a meal, thinking about where I might start fishing again after lunch, and what fly I should tie on. The illusion lasted for only a second or two, but in that moment I was revisited by the very pleasant state of mind that comes from being totally absorbed with fishing for Atlantic salmon. As my view shifted from the camp door to the leafless gray trees and the river lined with ice cakes, I came immediately back to the present moment. I had been under the spell of the Cains. The reality was that the fall season was long over, and in spite of the beauty of the river in early spring, there were no big, fresh-run salmon making their way up the pool.

It is now March of 2013, and the last of the winter snow is melting from the lawn that leads down to the river in back of the house where I live in Maine. In a few weeks salmon that began life four years earlier as eggs deposited in a Cains River gravel bar, and that are right now on their ancestral winter feeding grounds off the West Coast of Greenland, will feel the urge to return to the river of their birth. As tag returns over the years have shown, many of these Miramichi system



CLOSING THE SEASON

fish, along with others from the great salmon rivers of the Gaspé, will move south across the Labrador Sea to the Straits of Belle Isle, then down along the Newfoundland shore, arriving in an area off Port Aux Basques in late April. These fish will then cross the Cabot Straits and gather in Miramichi Gully just north of Prince Edward Island in May. Then, as they have for thousands of years, the first of these superbly conditioned specimens, the lucky ones that did not fall prey to a net, or starve from having their forage harvested to make fish paste, will enter the river and the fascinating game will begin again. The first fish of 2012 was a beautiful salmon—a thick-shouldered, silver bullet that Jason Curtis found in one of the good lies at the lower end of Campbell's Pool. The date was May 23. I'm counting the days.....





A CLASSIC MIRAMICHI BRIGHT, ATLANTIC SALMON

BRAD BURNS



