



# SILVER LINING

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LEN RICH



*Live release means more salmon. For a Labrador Lodge it also means more “trips of a lifetime.” Hint: when anglers’ dreams come true, they tend to come back, and with friends.*



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**I**T BEGAN LIKE MANY TRIPS TO REMOTE NORTHERN RIVERS OFTEN DO.

The weather was superb in Goose Bay, but 166 miles to the north at Flowers River Lodge it was a different story. A massive fog bank obliterated vision along the complete Labrador coastline, which meant we were definitely not flying early Sunday morning as planned.

But for every dark cloud there is one with a silver lining. Three of our party had been stranded in Halifax the previous day when they missed their connection, including my fishing partner Chet

Rock, and as the day progressed it appeared they might be able to join us after all. As it so happened they did; their flight landed, they joined us at the wharf, and we all arrived at the lodge that afternoon once weather lifted—although eight hours later than planned.

So began a week of unbelievable fly-fishing. At first it was in water so warm, nearly 70°F, that most self-respecting salmon should just lay on the bottom and wait for things to cool off a little. But not these fish. Sure, you had to work for them, but when they decided to hammer your fly they were bright, feisty, and serious about the entire thing.

By later in the week, the water temperature had dropped to 57°F as a cold front swept in late on Monday. However, air temperature also dropped, to 53°F during the day and even colder at night. The entire Labrador coast was overcast and nothing had flown VFR (visual flight rules) for five days. But we weren't flying anywhere, we were fishing. And when salmon angling in Labrador, the end of July felt like the end of October.

We were a diverse group in our geography, experience, and ages. Our party included Buck, Natasha, and 11 year-old Had Deane. They were four year repeat guests and for good reason. In 2007, Buck had landed and released a 32-pound salmon that got him into the lodge's exclusive "30+ Club," and son Had set a pending IGFA record for his age category, landing and releasing a 26-pound Atlantic salmon.

Joe Vannier, a worldwide distributor, and John Barrett, a Boston lawyer, were paired to fish together during the week. Dave and Al Bekus are brothers who have fished in several parts of the world and were previous visitors to some parts of Labrador for both salmon and large Eastern brook trout.

Steve Tobi and Mike Chelminski were also seasoned fly fishers who had traveled the world in search of several species. Rounding out the party were myself and partner Chet Rock from Orono, Maine, who had previously fished with me for giant brookies at two Labrador sites.

There were many decades of experience represented at the lodge for the last week of July in 2008, and we compared notes about our past adventures as we prepared to explore the river with our guides. Chet, who pursued steelhead on the West Coast in similar weather, was angling for Atlantic salmon for the first time. He termed it his "trip of a lifetime."

Rounding out the staff were our guides. Head guide Doug Wentzell was an old friend I hadn't seen in more than 20 years, a former big game outfitter in Newfoundland. Chet and I were assigned to Carl Mugford, in his third summer at Flower's River, and quite knowledgeable about the pools we fished that week.

Flowers River received ASF recognition as a total live release lodge back in 2002, a decision not made lightly by owner Jim Burton. Jim had purchased the operation in 1998 from his father, Vince Burton, a veteran outfitter who had operated fishing lodges in Labrador for decades.

The decision was tough because many of Jim's clients liked retaining salmon to take back home with them, in particular the large multi-sea winter fish. But through his marketing Jim learned that the majority of inquiries and bookings were from people who had a strong conservation ethic, one of catch-and-release.

"As the only outfitter on the river," Jim told me, "I felt an obligation to become the steward of the resources that kept me in business. The policy of live release was put into place to protect this precious commodity, the Atlantic salmon that swam by my door. I did permit retention of Arctic char and brook trout, which were so plentiful you, could almost catch them with your hands at times. But with salmon, it was a matter of enforcing the policy of no retention, and ensuring that everyone observed the regulations, limiting the effort to fly fishing with single, barbless hooks."

It took a few years for the policy to bear fruit, but Jim noticed a larger number of multi-sea-winter fish returning to Flowers River and being hooked by his



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*On our arrival we were greeted by Sheila and Aubrey Ralph, our gracious, helpful cook and housekeeping support staff. The couple, from Grand Bank, Newfoundland, made us feel right at home. ??????*



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*Angler and guide on the Flowers River. A new live release ethic has helped balance the needs of outfitters, anglers, and fish.*

clients. It was common to see fish in the 20 to 30 pound range being released, and some, which his guides swore, were 40 pounds or more. The catch-and-release policy was producing results; even more, his clientele was pleased with “no retention” of salmon, and happy to be going home with Arctic char, some of which could weigh 10-pounds or more.

“The hardest part of getting into this was training the guides how to tail a fish and protect it from harm while being able to handle it safely for the guests. All my guides are from Newfoundland, where it is contrary to their upbringing to release a fish, much less handle it with care. It required a complete change of attitude and a new understanding of why it was important to carefully handle the fish and ensure it was released, unharmed, to return on its migration route to spawn far upstream.”

With his clients coming primarily from the United States, it was heartening to see that the bookings were strong and there was acceptance of his conservation directive. Moreover, it was easy to see that the policy was working in the favour of the salmon.

The fact was brought home to Chet and I when we fished together on Tuesday. Carl was still under the weather, so I “borrowed” his boat and guided Chet to the pool nearest the lodge, one they called Max’s Pool. It was a long stretch of gravel bars with some great holding water; clearly, a place salmon should rest in their upstream migration.

I looked through my selection of flies and decided to try a low water Silver Tip, a very basic pattern tied with moose hair wings. I hooked a grilse on the fifth cast, released it, and was into another within 10 minutes of the first. Chet hadn’t connected to this point so I clipped off the hook, gave it to him, and within 20 minutes he had also released two fish.

The grilse were chunky, silver, and full of fight. One would have trouble categorizing them as grilse because they pushed the 63 cm limit to the maximum. They were fresh from the Labrador Current and the river mouth only 20 kilometers downstream, a short distance to travel.

That morning was climaxed by one of the largest salmon I had ever hooked. It felt the sting of a #6 Blue Charm that I had been fishing with a Portland Creek hitch and took off across the pool like a runaway freight train. The fish cleared the surface in three jumps that left my heart racing with an adrenaline rush. About 40 inches in length, at least a foot or more deep to our eyes, its power was amazing.

A couple of runs and it began to turn toward me, but suddenly swerved and I was left with a limp line and the curly end of leader that indicated a wind knot. I cursed myself for not checking my leader more often, but there was little I could do. The fish was back in the river wearing a Blue Charm, a temporary accessory that would soon fall out.

By the end of the day, I had released seven fish. It was elementary fishing, and most of the takes were on the swing as the fly straightened out in the current below me. Chet was not having my measure of luck, but

## Live Release Works

ASF has been recognizing and rewarding outfitter camps for commitment to live release angling since 2005.

To qualify for ASF Live Release Recognition, outfitters are required to:

- Encourage guests to release salmon and grilse
- Promote live release angling in their literature (brochures, web sites, signs, etc.)
- Show only live salmon on their web sites, in their literature and advertisements
- Send guides to ASF's education program where available
- Promote the sale of live release licenses where they are available
- Teach anglers how to safely release salmon and grilse

For more information and a list of outfitter rewards visit [www.asf.ca](http://www.asf.ca)



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An ASF live release flag is only one of many rewards outfitters receive by signing up with the ASF Live Release Recognition Program.

had connected with a couple more as we worked the pool and was satisfied for now.

Carl joined us Wednesday noon and we worked our way upriver to our assigned pool. The schedule was very well organized with guides rotating their guests through the various hot spots on a daily routine. Our assignment was to a pool called Long Beach, named for an obvious reason. The pool was about 100 yards long, with a gravel beach that accessed several holding places.

Chet got into a grilse and so did I, but we had seen two huge salmon lying beside a large boulder and spent more time trying to entice one of them to our flies. Neither one had the magic formula, so we moved further down the pool at the direction of our guide, Carl.

It was there that Chet got into a very large fish, one that measured 39.5 inches. It took him more than 15 minutes to bring it into quiet water where Carl could tail it and pose for a quick photo with the happy angler. The fish revived rapidly and was released unharmed to the river.

The smile on Chet's face said it all, but he excitedly chattered, "This is it. This is what I came here to do! This is my trip of a lifetime!" He was one happy camper.

The next day dawned cold and dull, a mist falling from the grey skies, and we half-heartedly went out to the river to fish. Our pool today was called Ground Hog, and we looked forward to exploring this new piece of water. I hooked five fish on one pass down the pool, including a large fish that would have gone 20 pounds or more. My long distance release was serving me well as three never made it to the guide's gloved hand.

That night I decided I had enough of the "steelhead weather" and stayed inside the warmth of the lodge. Chet and Carl decided to try it for a while, but were back within an hour. Chet was grinning from ear to ear, however, and shouted through the doorway, "I did it again! This one was 38.5 inches, but really thick down through. Man oh man!"

Once he had shed his wet clothing and warmed up with hot coffee he related the story. It was so cold and miserable that both he and Carl were questioning their sanity in being out in such weather. Chet decided to make one final cast before giving up, and that's when the big salmon hit. It was stronger than his other large fish and took longer to land, but he had lost all thoughts about being wet and cold while playing that salmon.

"Thank you for inviting me to join you on this trip!" he enthused between sips of coffee. "This was everything I had hoped for, and more. I learned so much from you and Carl, and after landing this second salmon I can truly say that this was my best trip ever."

Chet had hoped for a trip of a lifetime, and in his opinion he got it twice over. It was a pleasure for me to fish with him and to share in his excitement. The catch-and-release policy initiated by Jim Burton had brought the river back to its full potential, and it was this that made Chet's dream trip come to fruition.

What more can anyone ask than a river full of cooperative salmon in a private, pristine setting that is being protected by a forward thinking outfitter who feels he has an obligation to nurture and preserve his water's resources?

For Chet Rock the answer is obvious.

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*Len Rich travelled to Labrador in the Summer 2008. For more information on fishing in Newfoundland and Labrador, call 1-800-563-NFLD.* 