

# Tickled pink by salmon

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Veteran bush pilot Jim Burton picked us up in his float plane at Goose Bay for our flight north to Igloo Lake and Flowers River, my favorite salmon river.

We passed hundreds of lakes along the way, mostly melt-water of an ice-out that typically occurs around the first week of June. Some are shallow and barren; others have brook trout but remain unfished because of their remoteness and only caribou and wolves regularly visit them. They're insurance, too, for bush pilots who lose an engine. There are emergency places to land everywhere you look.

Jim landed his plane lodge-side, and we were promptly greeted by the local mosquitoes, black flies, guides, and cooks — in that order. It was time to settle in, have dinner, and fish. Darkness waits until 10 p.m. this far north, so salmon fishing is dessert every evening.

Labrador has other great rivers; Eagle River attracts 30,000 salmon a year. But few are big (24- and 25-pounders are record fish), and its shores are rocky, posing a challenge to the less stealthy. Big River has a prolific fishery, too, but most of its fish, maybe 80 to 90 percent, are grilse (small salmon). Some rivers, for mysterious reasons, are 100 percent grilse rivers. Adlatok River is little known, controlled mostly by a private businessman. In the early years, it was the fishing playground for American officers stationed in Labrador. The Sand Hill is productive, and the Pinware and Forteau Rivers in the far south are accessible by road and near communities.

But I've fallen in love with Flowers River because of its pristine remoteness, exclusivity, and extraordinary proportion of large fish. Each time I've fished it, I've taken a salmon of 20 pounds. Every year more big fish are being taken because of Burton's catch-and-release policy. Six or seven 30-pounders have been taken here recently, and larger fish have been seen. A 40-pounder is only a matter of time. I want to be on the river to chronicle that event.

The Flowers has the largest salmon in Labrador, and an off-the-charts success rate. (Only the Humber River in Newfoundland seems to have the same frequency of bigger fish.) The government keeps statistics on rod-day success on each of the 186 salmon rivers of Newfoundland and Labrador. Some rivers have a rating as low as .05, meaning it would take, on average, 20 days to realistically catch one salmon.

The Flowers success rating is over two salmon a day. I deeply wanted my wife to succeed on her first efforts. Nothing succeeds like success. If you want your mate or your child to be your fishing partner, make sure they have a great chance to land some fish.

Because of its sandy bottom, the Flowers is, unlike many other rocky salmon rivers, easily wade-able, almost throughout. Early on, when salmon first enter the river like clockwork on July 15, Maxi's Pool and Top Pool, two of 24 outstanding pools where salmon traditionally lie, dependably shine. But when the salmon are in, during a one-month frenetic surge, every pool on the Flowers holds fish. I prefer to fish the river early, when the salmon are fresh from the sea, still sporting sea lice, strongest and most willing to strike. I also like fishing when it's overcast, early morning or evening; bright sunlight can make salmon feel vulnerable and shy.

On my first day out, I hooked a huge 20-pound, hook-jawed male, a great fish that took me 50 minutes to land. It first held deep without budging, then leaped wildly and repeatedly, jeopardizing our connection as it raced downstream through the rocky, line-snapping rapids below Top Pool.

My guide, Doug Wentzell, expertly tailed my fish, grabbing it with a glove, rather than netting it, to avoid gill or scale damage, and helped me carefully photograph and release it. For most salmon fishermen, it would be the fish of a lifetime. But for me, the fish that made my trip was the five-pound that my bride hooked and released in Maxi's Pool.

You never forget your first salmon or that of your best fishing partner.

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