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hunting

Bad weather and  
**BIG BROWNS**

**TIPS**  
and  
**TACKLE**  
for salmon  
in low water

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# Low-water lessons in LABRADOR



Some of the tackle and flies our author used during his trip to Flowers River

Photos by Rob Solo

By Rob Solo

**A**s we circled the river in the Beaver float plane for our final descent to the lodge, I could see what I had been told before our arrival - the river was low; one of the lowest levels it had been during August in recent years. I could also see that the river was gin-clear.

Only a month before, Flowers River had been at record height, and with the huge drop in water level, along with with the resultant rise in water temperature, most of the salmon had left the main holding pools and dashed upriver to the spawning pools. With few new fish entering the river, I was expecting this was going to be a tough week of fishing and would test our party's knowledge and ability while angling for Atlantic salmon in low water.

I had been given the option of a trip to Flowers River, Labrador's most northerly scheduled salmon river, during the earlier main run, but I was not interested in huge numbers of fish. According to all reports, there would be fewer but larger fish in the latter part of the run. The salmon would be tougher to take, but I thrive on the challenge of fishing for finicky fish.

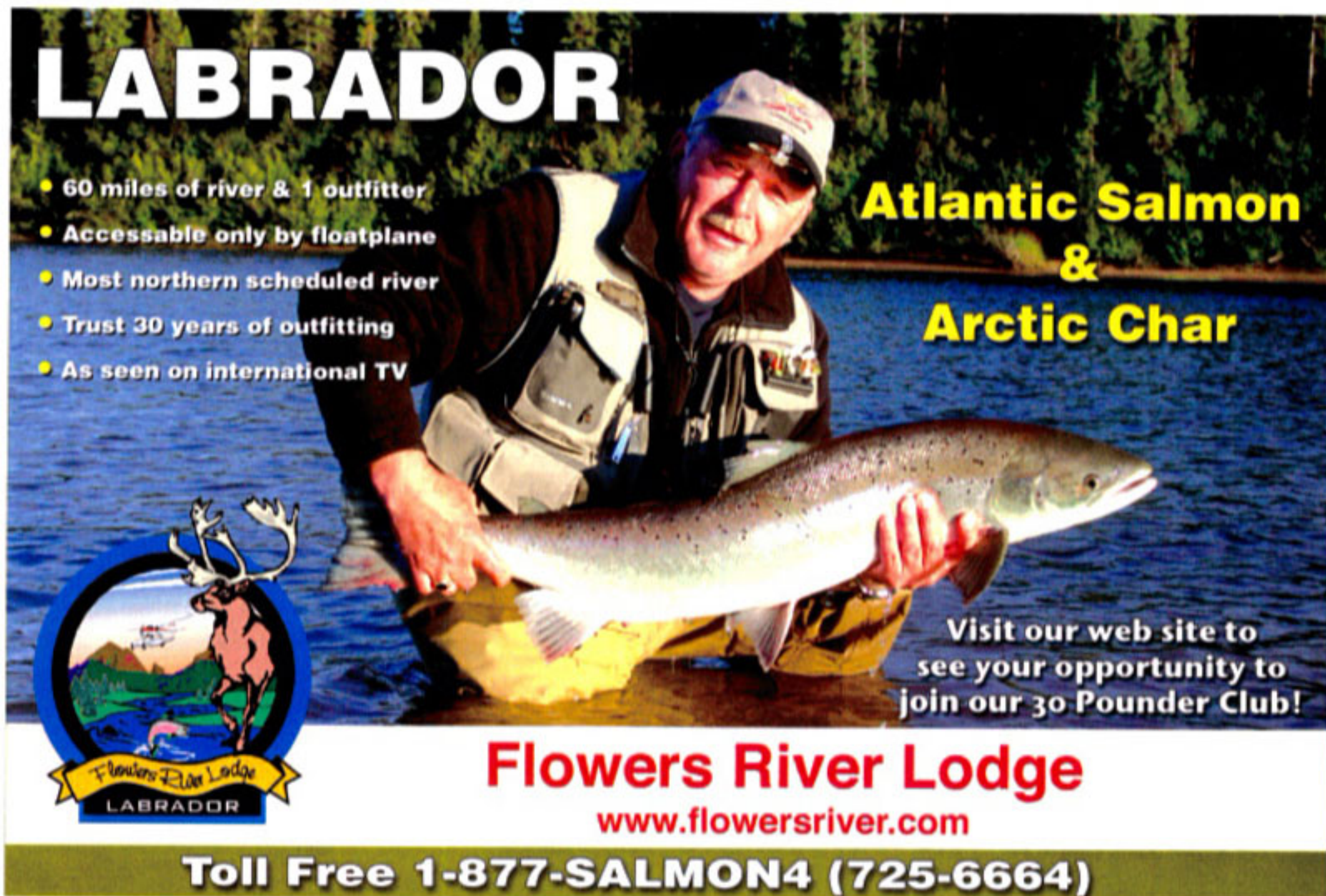
Shortly after our arrival, we were ferried upriver to the furthest

fishable pools the lodge offers. The Falls and Top Pool had been the best producers in the previous week and had given up a couple of 20-pounders as well. Along the way we passed other anglers casting in slow-flowing pools over the most likely lies. I liked the character of the water and I knew I was going to enjoy my stay here. By week's end, I would identify Flowers as the "Jewel" of Labrador rivers

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Since this was late August, I had prepared for the possibility of low-water fishing, so my tackle and flies had been selected for this eventuality. I had collaborated with a Canadian fly rod company, Pieroway, to build me a rod made specifically for low-water Atlantic salmon fishing. The rod was a medium-action, eight-foot, six-inch for a # 6 line.

I learned many years ago that after salmon have been in the river for a while, especially in warm water, their mouths get soft and a full-flexing rod provides a softer, gentler hold on fish. This is in sharp contrast to the commonly used stiff, fast-action rods which tear the fly hook through a fish's soft flesh. The light line model was capable of handling big fish, as I had landed salmon over 35 pounds on six-foot rods in the past. The # 6 clear floating fly line I used would make delicate presentations and be less alarming to the fish while swinging a wet fly through these clear waters.



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Upon reaching the pool, I cautiously waded into position. Being slow-flowing water, I knew that the slightest ripples would telegraph my presence to these wary fish. One of my angling goals has been to land a 20-pound salmon on a # 16 fly, so I knotted on a # 16 Olive Wulff skater for the first attempt. The fly bounced gaily over the most likely lies for 10 minutes without result, so it was time to try other tactics.

My next selection was a Purple Bomber with brown tails and whipped to a # 8 bronze curved-shank hook. This was a smaller bomber than most being fished on the river at that time. The curved shank allowed the hook bend to hang down a little further in the water and the fish would ingest the hook more deeply if it took the fly. This hook also throws the hook bend more in line with the eye, allowing the point to further and more readily imbed in the fish's mouth as it is being played, if I were lucky enough to hook one.

My first cast was greeted with a solid rise. The six-pound fish jumped and ran with enthusiasm before the leader parted upon my attempt to release it. I guess I should have replaced the 4x leader with a more appropriate sized one for the # 8 fly.

I quickly landed another fish of the same size on my floating Salar Stonefly pattern before one of the highlights of my trip occurred. I had put on another bomber and quickly had a real good fish flashing underneath the fly. Over the course of five minutes, the fish showed itself five times and then stopped rising.

I had been dropping the fly about five feet ahead of the fish and decided to cast a little further upstream to allow the fish to get a better look at the fly. No sooner had the fly hit the water, 20 feet above, when a grilse jumped three feet out of the water and took the fly on re-entry like a big Minipi brook trout. I had never had this happen before and it just proved that one should be prepared for anything while salmon fishing.

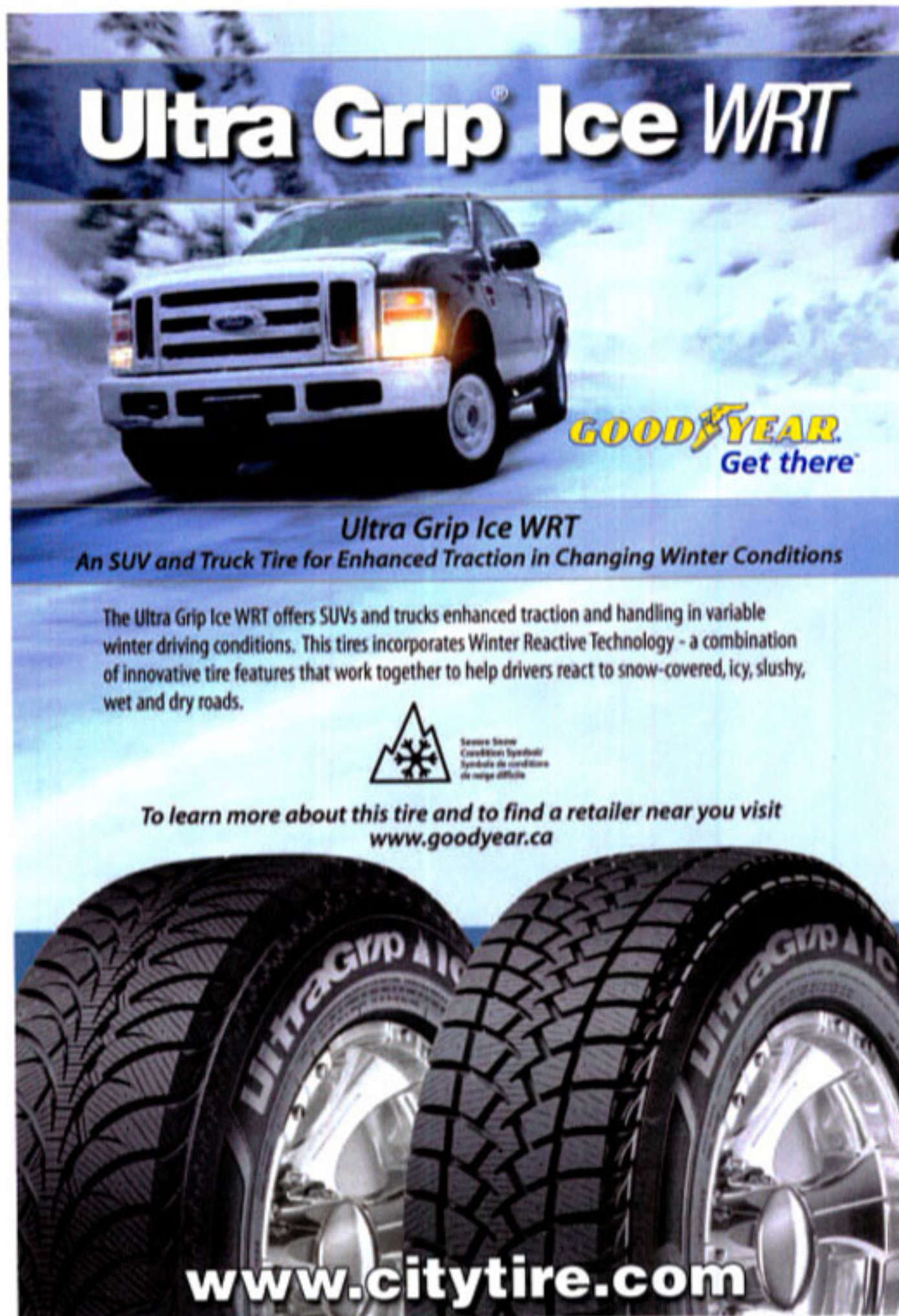
Soon after, fishing partner Steve Outerbridge of St. John's hooked and landed a beautiful 12-pounder that fought better than 20-pound salmon on most other rivers. We hooked a couple of more grilse before deciding to go downriver to Top Pool. Before we left, though, I crawled up on a big rock alongside the pool to see if I could spot the big fish I had risen earlier. He was still there; all 20 pounds of him!

At Top Pool, fishing was tougher than at the previous pool. These salmon had been fished hard early in the morning and the few fish we saw were reluctant to rise. I fished a couple of wet flies without result so I asked veteran guide Doug Wentzell to select a dry fly he thought would take a fish. He quickly spied a # 12 White Wulff in my fly box and said it should do the trick.

I slipped the fly on my leader and curve-cast the fly into the V at the bottom of the pool. After a half-dozen more casts upriver, I had an impressive double rise from a nice fish. The salmon missed the fly on the first rise, turned downriver and missed it again.

I waited 30 seconds before casting again. This time the fish turned and followed the fly underneath the water for a dozen feet before it sipped the Wulff in like a wise, old brown trout. The 15-pound salmon was released after a spunky, 10-minute battle.

Next day, we fished some of the other pools in the near vicinity of the lodge. There were fewer fish and the tried and true flies




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failed to get a rise. Just before returning to the lodge for lunch, I attached a # 16 Black Caddis dry to my leader. I fished it dead-drift without success and then fished the fly as a wet. A couple of swings through the pool and I had a nice fish nip the fly. I missed the rise and it would not come back to the caddis imitation. I then attached a Hairy Mary moose of the same size and cast without any movement from the fish, so we decided to head downriver to try another piece of water on the way to the lodge.

Doug drifted the boat through the pool to see where the salmon were lying. We spotted a few fish throughout the pool and returned to the top to give it a quick flick over. I still had the # 16 Hairy Mary moose on my leader and after about a dozen casts, I was into a small grilse that amazed us with its voracious fight.

After landing that fish, I resumed casting a little further down the pool. As I smoothly stripped the fly through an eddy in the middle of the river, I had a smashing strike. The salmon soon jumped and we estimated it at 15 pounds. After five minutes, the fish was still fresh as a daisy and began a long, blistering run downstream. Doug stated there were snags below and that I should hold him if possible. It was inevitable that the fly pulled out shortly after. It would be the biggest fish I hooked on a # 16 for the week.

We hopped in the boat and coasted downriver. I looked at the snags and figured if the fish did get into them, I could have waded out and freed it. Hindsight is 20/20!

So it went for the week I was there. I had action every day and more so than most of the other clients that week. I don't think I am



**Peter Tucker plays the guide for Dwight Blackwood at Jones' Pool on Flowers River**

a better fisherman; it was due to my having experienced the same conditions on western Newfoundland rivers during my almost 40-year salmon angling career.

The key to success under tough angling circumstances such as this is finesse. One should approach this type of angling as if you were trout fishing. My tackle and flies were more appropriate for the existing conditions. Where other anglers were using standard nine-foot rods for # 8 or # 9 lines, I was able to achieve more subtle pre-



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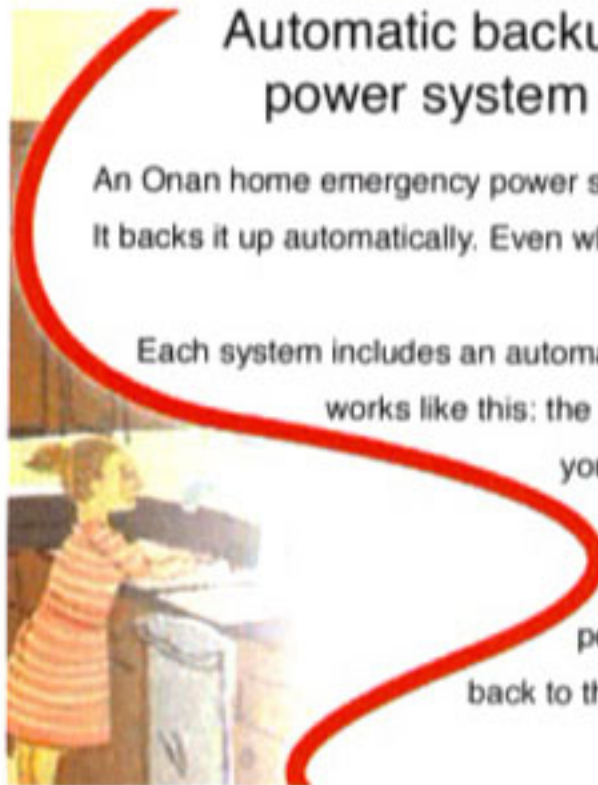
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sentations with my outfit.

The almost-invisible, clear fly line I was using was a major factor in my success. I could re-fish a pool with a wet without disturbing the fish, return to the top and often hook a salmon on the second or third pass down through the pool. Other anglers, with their opaque lines, were not as successful.

My clear leaders were 12 feet in length and sometimes more so that delicate presentations were more easily achieved. On only one pool, Long Beach, did I use bigger tackle, and that was to try out a friend's new switch rod. I hooked three fish due to the 17-foot leader concealing the splash of the heavy fly line further behind it.

My stealthy approach to and in the water offered me another advantage. I stayed as far back as possible and made long casts to present the flies to the fish.

Even when I had to wade a little closer than I would like, my clothing was subdued and blended in with the background. I kept my false casts to a minimum so that my body movements would not alert the fish. Because I waded cautiously while in the water, I did not alarm these wary salmon with the tell-tale ripples of my presence.

Another major advantage I had over the others was my fly selection. I hooked fish on dries ranging in size from # 2 to # 16. They included upright-winged, down-wings, bugs, bombers and bi-visible-styled floaters. Many were standard patterns, but others included my own take on the standbys.

Another angler, John Kelly from St. John's, was having as con-

sistent success as I and he was also using light tackle and similar flies I had dressed for him prior to the trip.

He hooked and lost a 30-pound-plus fish after an hour-long fight early in the week. That fish was hooked on a mini bomber dressed on a # 10 hook. He also had an estimated four-foot long salmon rise up to a number of flies, ranging in size from a # 2 White Wulff to a # 16 North Country Spider trout fly. Unfortunately, it was the last evening of the trip and darkness curtailed him from hooking the fish.

Whereas the normal wet fly size at that time of year would be # 8 to # 10, John and I were getting most of our action with patterns dressed on # 12 to # 16 hooks. With such a slow current flow, I felt the need to strip the fly line as these flies swung through the water, or I cast more square across the river to achieve a faster fly speed. Most anglers that week were content to let the fly swing with the current and had less success.

Under conditions such as we experienced during the week, it was evident that John Kelly's and my willingness to experiment with different flies was key to our success.

My best dry fly for the week was an extended bodied, Wulff-like fly that I call the Light Salmon Dun. Tied on # 4-# 10 curved shank hooks, the reason it did so well was the fish hadn't seen a similar pattern like it.

Only a few other anglers, brothers Peter and John Tucker of Portugal Cove-St. Philips and young Thomas Farrell from St. John's, could boast of similar catches.

Oddly enough, the Tuckers' most successful fly was a mutant Green Machine with a spun forest green, deer hair body, with a spiraled, short grizzly hackle and added flecks of Krystal flash for tail. No doubt, it was another fly the fish had not seen all season.

Having fished most of the major salmon rivers of Labrador, last summer's experience at Flowers River has convinced me that it offers the most exciting salmon fishing that land has to offer. Hard fighting fish in gin-clear, moderately-flowing water is an anomaly for Labrador. Usually, the salmon rivers up there are fast-flowing, boulder-strewn affairs that are peat-stain so one can't see the fish. I could easily see the quarry at Flowers, plus the wading was easy. Even under tough conditions, the fish rose often enough to the fly to keep one ready for a rise at any time. I can only imagine the fantastic fishing that is available on that river during the main run!



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