

Kwagama Lake Lodge

If you like wild brook trout this place is Heaven on Earth

I first became acquainted with Kwagama Lake Lodge at a local fly - fishing show. The display of five vividly colored male brook trout caught my eye first. Then I saw the table that displayed hundreds of pictures of large brook trout in their full spawning colors. Pictures had Canadian Shield - type mountains in the background; many had beautiful sunsets and incredible rainbows, not to mention the trout. Like I usually do at outdoor shows, I picked up a brochure and stuck it in my plastic shopping bag. Again, like I usually do after attending an outdoor show, I put the bag of brochures in my closet along with the others from past shows. I could never quite get Kwagama Lake out of my mind, wild Brook Trout, a reasonable distance from home and at a price I could afford. I knew I had to give it a try. A year or so later while doing a little sorting of clutter from the closet I came across the brochure that I had picked up at the fly show. Reading the brochure reinforced my desire to fish at Kwagama. As fate would have it, the next month I attended a general outdoor show in Detroit. There they were again, the same display of gorgeous Brook Trout and all those pictures that intrigued me the year before. This time I decided to talk with the proprietors of Kwagama Lake Lodge. Pat and Ann - Marie Henry told me a little about their place. It is the only camp on the lake. No other public or private camps exist here they told me.

Kwagama is one mile wide by three miles long and one hundred forty feet deep. It is a secluded place. They spoke about the unique geographic location of their little hideaway. Protected by Lake Superior Provincial Park on the west and Agawa Canyon on the east, it will be generations before development encroaches on this paradise. Kwagama is a natural lake at the highest point of the Algoma District watershed. They explained that no rivers connect their lake with any other body of water. No rivers carry silt, debris or pollution into Kwagama. That unique setting at the top of the watershed explains the purity of the water and of the fish population. The lake has only one species of fish - brook trout - wild brook trout and lots of them. These are not your small everyday put and take specks that are common in so many Ontario lakes. The fish in Kwagama grow large because of a lack of fishing pressure. Even though Kwagama is close to many large cities, it is not that easy to get there. I was told that the lake is chocked full of thirteen to seventeen inch Brook Trout. That did it; I set the wheels in motion to organize a trip to Kwagama Lake Lodge.

I left the show, went home and got on the phone. I told some friends about my discussion with the Henrys and that I was planning a trip for the last week of June or the first week of September of that year. I don't think of myself as much of a salesman but something I said struck a cord with them. All three of my usual fishing crew said yes to the Kwagama trip. September ended up as the preferred time. I could hardly wait and started to prepare early in the summer.

September took forever to arrive. The four of us loaded up our gear and headed to Ontario. Our destination was Hawk Junction, Ontario the home of Hawk Air. They are the airbase that serves Kwagama. We chose to fly; others in camp had come by train. The train is a little cheaper and gives you a chance to see the countryside from a four wheel ATV as Pat takes you from the train stop to the lake. It is about a 45 minute ride over the mountains. The drive north was incredible. Highway 17 is bordered by Lake Superior most of the way so the scenery and vistas are fantastic. We spent the first night in Wawa, Ontario a small city just west of Hawk Junction. Wawa has a dozen or more motels and plenty of restaurants. It is a great place to stay prior to the flight to Kwagama. We ate dinner that night at a place three miles south of Wawa called Kinniwabi Pines Restaurant. It sits on a bluff three hundred feet above the Michipicoten River. The sunset over the river was breathtaking. Kinniwabi Pines is a very interesting place to say the least and the dinner is fabulous. The family who runs the place has a unique heritage. The dad was born in China, the mom in Trinidad. The eldest son was a chef at a famous Austrian restaurant for many years. This history gives Kinniwabi Pines a very unusual cuisine. On the menu is a variety of dishes from China, Trinidad, Austria and of course Canada. Our meal started with a bottle of fine wine. We had a salad and soup before the main courses were served. We chose a fine Chinese pepper steak stir - fry, sautéed chicken with peaches and cream sauce (a popular recipe from the Austrian restaurant), a jerked pork dish which is a family recipe of the mom's and finally sautéed Walleye caught from Lake Superior. On the side we had a special treat - Roti, a bread that finds its roots in Trinidad, served there during special celebrations. The Roti is a mound of flaky, buttery, soft thin bread right out of the pan, piping hot and delicious. I could have made a meal of Roti alone. The food is so good at Kinnawabi Pines that I plan my travels so I can enjoy a meal there every time I am in the vicinity.

The next morning we filled up on pancakes and peameal bacon at the Magpie Truck Stop and headed to Hawk Junction to board a well cared for D'Haviland Beaver for our flight into Kwagama Lake. Hawk

Air was ready for us. They loaded the plane and off we flew. It was a short twenty - minute flight to Kwagama Lake. After a smooth landing and a short taxi to the dock, we unloaded, met our hosts and were shown to our cabin and boats. The island resort is comfortable but rustic. You know, no electricity, out - houses and no running water except at the dining lodge and shower buildings. There are two new cabins, two a bit older and two that are original to the camp's founding. The dining lodge is comfortable but older as well. It has windows on three sides and a huge stone fireplace so the views of the lake are great. Linens, towels and comfortable mattresses are included with the stay. About the time we were unpacked and had our fishing gear assembled, Ann - Marie called us for lunch. What a lunch it was, homemade chicken noodle soup and Brook Trout salad sandwiches made with homemade bread. The sandwiches were like tuna salad except made with fresh brook trout. They were delicious and the soup was the best I have ever eaten. In another life, Ann - Marie cooked for 93 lumberjacks so she really knows her way around the kitchen. I knew after lunch that my diet was out the window on this trip especially when Ann - Marie dished up a Blackberry pie that she made that morning from wild blackberries picked the previous afternoon. Yum!! Ann - Marie told us to be back at six p.m. for roast turkey dinner with bread dressing and gravy. No way was I going to be late for that. The homemade butter tarts served for dessert that night just melted in your mouth.

After lunch it was game on! Us against the fish! Pat gave us a few pointers and suggested a couple of likely spots to fish. We slipped into our waders, climbed into the boats and were off. The 14 - foot, deep - V aluminum boats with 9.9 horsepower motors were well cared for and had plenty of power. We headed for a couple of spots where springs flowed into the lake. Pat told us that the cool spring water creates a gathering spot for pre - spawn fish. He suggested they would be good places to start fishing. Things were a little slow until we figured out the bite. Once we were on our game, the fishing was consistent to fantastic. I think the Henrys downplayed the fishing a bit. They said there were lots of thirteen - inch fish but we caught very few. Most were in the fifteen to seventeen - inch range. We caught plenty of larger fish, too. Eighteen - and nineteen - inch fish are common and we all caught fish over twenty inches. Like the Henrys promised, every one of them was a brook trout. The males were really colored up and ready to spawn. They were so bright; it is almost like they were dressed in Hunter Orange colored coats.

We fished with five - weight rods most of the time. Occasionally we'd switch to a seven - weight if casting a heavy clouser into the wind. Since Kwagama is close to the east shore of Lake Superior and high in the mountains, wind can be an issue but we were able to manage it without much difficulty. Floating line with long leaders or intermediate sinking lines are the ticket for Kwagama. The water is gin - clear so fluorocarbon tippet seems to help. There were several flies that produced well. Some of the good flies were weighted woolly buggers, olive chenille, black hackle with a cooper wire wrap down the body and a few stands of cooper tinsel in the tail were tops as was an Umpqua pattern called a Mack's Bugger in black with red wire wrap and a tungsten bead head. Beck's Super Bugger was also a hot fly, especially in tan. Zug Bugs, Griffith's Gnats with a red tail and Elk Hair Caddis all fished well. My personal favorite was a Lafontaine pattern called a Rollover Scud in burnt orange or olive. Orange was always best for everyone that fished it. Rollover scuds are found at www.thebookmailer.com. The pattern directions are available on the web or in Lafontaine's books. Rollover scuds are oddly weighted to produce a weird action that triggers a strike. Buggers in size 8 and 10 worked for us and the other flies in 14 - 16 were hot. The flies we used successfully are all common patterns in many parts of Canada and the U.S. We were told that most any pattern that has a touch of red in it seems to work well on Kwagama Brook Trout. Kwagama's website has a list of flies that others have used successfully too!

There were two techniques that produced most consistently. The first was to cast a bugger or scud out over a drop off, allow the fly to sink for a long time, maybe a minute or more. Then, retrieve the fly slowly up the drop - off toward shore giving it an occasional twitch. The other was to row the boat or float tube to the vicinity of rising fish and cast to the rise. It takes a good eye and a quick hand to get your fly to the rise before the ring dissipates, but when we accomplished the task, we caught fish. The strikes were immediate and violent with that technique. Trolling a bugger while paddling a float tube also produced well for Todd, a guy in camp from Chicago. It was his seventh year at Kwagama. The Henrys told us that repeat guests book most of the openings but they have always been able to accommodate new guests as well. There is a limit to the number of guests they will allow to fish Kwagama each year.

Like most fishing, the key to consistent double - digit numbers at Kwagama is to have your fly in the water, working for you, most of the time. Fly in the water means just that - not motoring up the middle of the lake to try that next hot spot and not sitting in the dining lodge talking and drinking coffee. We

produced fish most consistently when we would fish one section of shore for a prolonged period of time. My best afternoon came one day when I skipped lunch to keep fishing. I fished some woody debris not far from the lodge. A spring added fresh cool water at the spot where the woody debris collected on the bottom. That afternoon I had landed seven fish but also lost that many when the hooked fish would run into the wood and tangle the line. I finally started to outsmart them. I found that I could walk down the shore to the other side of the wood and with a little finesse and a bit of brut force could land the fish and the stick that the fish was wrapped on at the same time. I scored a twenty - two inch trout and a three - foot stick as my grand trophy that afternoon. I had to up - size my tippet to a 3X fluorocarbon to accomplish that.

At a time in history when catch and release is the standard for most fly fishermen, we had a fresh caught Brook Trout dinner twice that week. As you read on, you'll understand why. These Brook Trout are truly my favorite fish. The flesh of these trout is similar in color to sockeye salmon, a deep ruby red, because of an abundant diet of carotene rich scuds. It is quiet a treat to stay at a lodge that enjoys serving their guests fresh caught fish. Kwagama is one of the few lodges that have this luxury because of the limited number of guests and the abundance of fish. In fact, when the Ministry of Wildlife did a fish survey last year, it was suggested that Kwagama fishermen should harvest more fish in the fifteen to seventeen - inch range to promote more fish over twenty - two inches. Can you believe it? There are too many seventeen - inch trout!

So much about Kwagama is unique: the privacy while just two hours north of Sault St. Marie, the single species fishery, the color of the fish's flesh, and the interesting hosts full of stories about their years working in lumber, bear and moose camps and 25 years running the most enjoyable fishing lodge that I have found. It is said that Ann - Marie can skin four bears in an hour and that Pat enjoys the ballet. They are truly unique and enjoyable people. The season at Kwagama is short. The lodge opens around May 10th and closes the last day of September. The first six weeks and the last four weeks of the season are prime for fly fishermen. July and August tend to be tops with the spin fishermen, those who fish with worms and anyone who likes to troll with a portable downrigger or deep diving lures.

I knew Kwagama wasn't going to be a trip of a lifetime. It wasn't far enough away from my home in Ohio and it wasn't expensive enough. Five nights at Kwagama, including flight, three meals a day,

towels and linens will cost less than one thousand dollars. I have been to Kwagama Lake Lodge four years running and look forward to my annual trip this fall. Kwagama has become many trips of my lifetime and I enjoy every one of them. If you would like to explore the adventure offered at Kwagama Lake Lodge, visit their website at www.kwagamalakelodge.com or call Pat and Ann - Marie Henry at 1-269 - 694 - 6571.

About the Author

John Robie is an avid fly fisherman from northern Ohio. He first started fly - fishing for smallmouth bass on the Maumee River almost 35 years ago. John prefers Ontario to other fishing destinations because of the proximity to home, the abundance of fish and the incredible scenery. From October to March he can be found wading the tributaries of Lake Erie in search of large Steelhead Trout.