

Collecting at the 57th Parallel North

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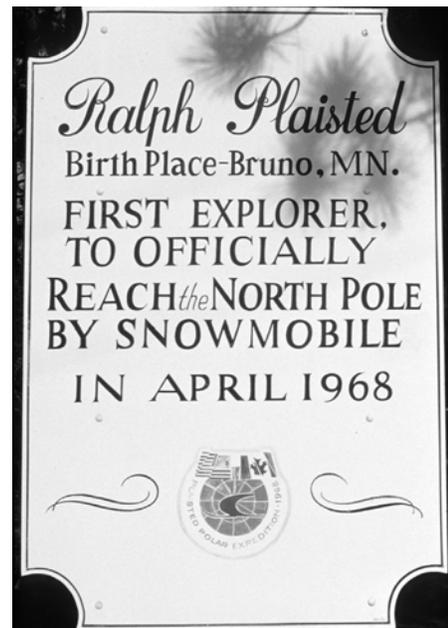
In the summer of 2000, my wife, Mary, and I decided to treat my then ten-year-old son, Bryan, to a fly-in fishing trip to northern Saskatchewan. We had long heard the fishing tales of trophy Northern Pike from a patron of Plaisted's Camp on Russell Lake. He promised a pike on almost every cast, and sometimes, exceeding 15-20 pounds. Lake Trout were equally sought here, but the quarry I sought was to catch my symbol of "pristine wilderness," Arctic Grayling, and also, see what little fish lurked at this northern latitude.



We first had a 1200-mile road trip from St. Paul, Minnesota to La Ronge, Saskatchewan, which is far from one of the most scenic drives in North America. After miles and miles of endless flat land, the boreal forest was a welcomed change as we neared the town of La Ronge. The last leg of our journey was an awesome 150-mile float plane ride over forest, lakes, and rivers studded with bare granite knolls to our final destination on Russell Lake.

We weren't expecting, but welcomed the wonderful home-cooked meals at the lodge and met the fish camp's owner and founder, Ralph Plaisted, who proved to be a master story teller. I was aware of his feat being the first person to snowmobile to the North Pole in 1968. Since then, he has also been accepted as the first person to lead a surface expedition to the North Pole (Kuralt 1968; Ramstad and Pickering 2011). After decades of scrutiny, the consensus is that Admiral Peary never made it all the way to the pole in 1909. I had a ton of questions for him remembering Charles Kuralt's reporting of Ralph's first attempt in 1967 in the CBS News documentary, *Destination: North Pole*. He coyly and humbly evaded all my questions about his role as the expedition's leader insisting he was merely the camp cook, but credited in detail his companions' talents and teamwork for their success.

Historical marker in Bruno, MN



During our week long stay, Ralph mesmerized his guests at breakfasts and dinners with tale after tale of Russell Lake's fish, wildlife, and history; and the long winter his family stayed at the lodge just to see if they could do it (Plaisted 1975). Perhaps one of the most interesting topics was the search for uranium. A geologist came knocking one day and filled in Ralph about prospecting surveys around Russell Lake. Ralph was skeptical, but soon

became a believer when the geologist's Geiger counter went off as he waved it over the lodge's fireplace made from area rocks. The geologist assured him it contained low-grade ore and was not a health hazard. Ralph confirmed the prospectors did eventually find high-grade ore north of Russell Lake, but it was so hot that humans could not safely enter the mine and extraction was restricted to remote-controlled vehicles. Sadly, the discovery of uranium was also the beginning of the end of the wilderness. You can't hear or see the mine from the fish camp, but you can boat over to the west end of Russell Lake, where a bridge now spans the Wheeler River, and lofty power lines hug a road going to the mine.



One of many Northern Pike caught in Russell Lake

On our first day of fishing, I had to get used to the luxury of having a guide show us Russell Lake's hot spots where stalking the notorious Northern Pike proved fast and furious. "Fish on!" ringed through the air over and over. There was hardly a lull in the action and Bryan was having a blast. When his rod tip shot deep below the surface and we asked how big, his giddy reply was, "Man, just take a look at my pole!"

The second day was my opportunity to try my luck for the wily Arctic Grayling. The guides chauffeured us 24 miles from the fish camp to the Wheeler River at the outlet of Russell Lake (see map: Site 4). I had brought my ultra-light gear specifically for my quarry. The river was high and fast, which made wading difficult, but just after a few casts with a spinner, I caught my first grayling. I admired the sleek body, and even though its colors were subdued, this was still a very handsome fish. I've long held a fascination for this species because of its hyper-sensitivity to pollution and habitat degradation. In the lower 48 states, indigenous populations of Arctic Grayling have been extirpated in Michigan since the 1930s (Scott and Crossman 1973), and now barely hold on in the headwaters of the Missouri River in Montana. After snapping several photos, I returned it to the water. I easily caught several more and preserved the smallest specimen as a "souvenir." I retrieved my kick net from the boat and began sampling, where I could wade among the minefield of boulders. In very short order, I collected six additional species. This included Lake Chub, Longnose Suck-

er, and Ninespine Stickleback (see photo pages 14 and 15). All three are at the southern edge of the range in Minnesota, where I had collected them before, but this was just way too easy. We headed back to camp, but southwest winds had been building all day and were funneling straight down the length of lake. Three to four-foot waves beat us relentlessly until we finally turned into the shelter of Taylor Bay. Calm water was ever so welcomed!



Wheeler River (Arctic Grayling habitat)

After the anglers cleaned their daily catch and produced a huge refuse pile, we learned of a long-practiced camp chore. Black Bears were in the area, and to prevent them from turning into nuisance bears, all edible garbage was ferried across the bay to a dump site. From the boat docks using binoculars, we watched bears come to feed, while Ravens tried to sneak away with a loose morsel here and there. The highlight of the week was a lone Timber Wolf making a couple of appearances, but was constantly on guard scanning his surroundings and never ever lingered.

Ralph's stories included a population of a dark, blue-phase Northern Pike that occurred in a nearby lake (Site 2). I asked a guide to take me there, but he was not confident we'd have success since they had removed their boats years ago because guests showed little interest in these much smaller Northern Pike. We beached the boat and hiked through muskeg to the lake's edge. Cast after cast yielded nary a nibble, but I was also packing my kick net, which revealed a second location for Ninespine Sticklebacks. Before returning to camp, the guide swung by the mining road and bridge that seemed out of synch slicing through our otherwise, beautiful and panoramic view of the wide river valley.

After a few days of Northern Pike and Russell Lake, Bryan was in the mood for something different and the guides suggested Lake Trout. This required a mini-expedition overland using four-wheeler ATVs to Big Sandy Lake (Site 1). The trail ended where the fish camp's boats and outboards were stashed. Downriggers are used to reach a preferred trolling depth. However, a large, lead weight is required for this and really takes the sport out of catching fish. While Mary and Bryan fished, I was giving the lake's outlet a try with my kick net. With the exception of Spottail Shiners, I saw

the same faces as before, but so enjoyed every minute just being there under sunny, blue skies and spectacular scenery.

On our last full day, I headed out solo for Mystery Bay (Site 3) since I felt fairly comfortable with Russell Lake landmarks. I found the bay and beached the boat at the mouth of stream. The catch was the same except one specimen which I knew was coregonid by its adipose fin. I guessed either Cisco or Lake Whitefish, but I pickled it for an ichthyologist to determine. This was the end of my collections. The northern latitudes cannot support a great diversity, but can boast of some very interesting species.

After returning home, I deposited my collections at the James Ford Bell Museum of Natural History. Dr. Andrew Simons cataloged the specimens. The mystery fish from Mystery Bay turned out to be a juvenile Round Whitefish (see photo page 14). However, he was very puzzled with the Lake Chubs after using every key available to him. He said the meristics of my specimens did not fit any key and added, “But they can’t be anything else.” If this peaks the interest of our readers, I encourage others to take another look. The JFBM numbers are: 35169, 35175, and 35179. Who knows, this may be a seed for a future *American Currents* article?

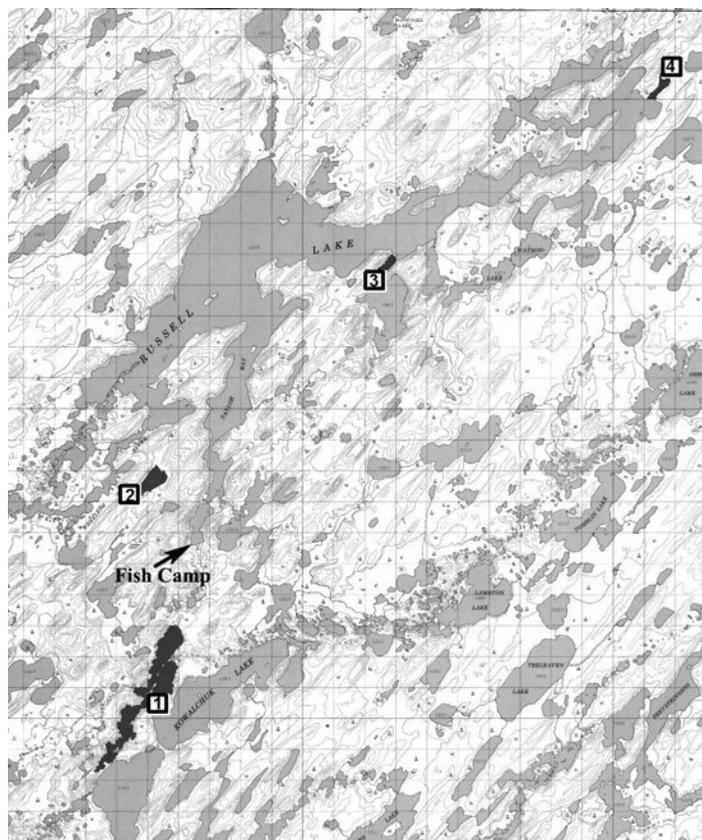
Reference

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Plaisted, R. 1975. *Wilderness Adventure: The Best years of Our Lives.* Dillon Press. 192 pp.

Ramstad, C. J. and K. Pickering. 2011. *First to the Pole.* North Star Press. St. Cloud, Minnesota. 256 pp.

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Collecting Sites

Species presence at collecting sites

| Common Name | Scientific Name | Station 1: Big Sandy Lake Outlet | Station 2: Unnamed Lake | Station 3: Russell Lake Mystery Bay | Station 4: Wheeler River |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Longnose Sucker | <i>Catostomus catostomus</i> | | | | X |
| White Sucker | <i>Catostomus commersonii</i> | X | | | X |
| Slimy Sculpin | <i>Cottus cognatus</i> | | | | X |
| Lake Chub | <i>Couesius plumbeus</i> | X | | X | X |
| Northern Pike | <i>Esox lucius</i> | X | | | |
| Spottail Shiner | <i>Notropis hudsonius</i> | X | | X | |
| Yellow Perch | <i>Perca flavescens</i> | | | | X |
| Round Whitefish | <i>Prosopium cylindraceum</i> | | | X | |
| Ninespine Stickleback | <i>Pungitius pungitius</i> | X | X | | X |
| Arctic Grayling | <i>Thymallus arcticus</i> | X | | X | X |





Arctic Grayling: Wheeler River - Saskatchewan



Longnose Sucker: Temperance River - Cook County, MN



Lake Chub: Skunk River - Lake County, MN



Ninespine Stickleback: Lake Superior - Ashland County, WI



Round Whitefish (left)/Slimy Sculpin (right): Lake Superior - Ashland County, WI

