

**“Have you ever heard of the Land of Beyond,
That dream at the gates of the day?
Alluring it lies at the skirts of the skies,
And ever so far away;”**

**“The Land of Beyond”
Robert Service**

Victoria island in Canada’s Arctic is just about as satisfyingly remote as one could wish for. Shared administratively between the Northwest and Nunavut territories the island parallels the barren grounds of the high tundra and is coursed through by the fabled North West Passage, the holy grail of Arctic exploration. The island is about the same size as Great Britain with a population of less than two thousand people primarily located in the hamlet of Ikaluktutiak (Cambridge Bay) , governmental, administrative and logistical centre for Victoria and it’s surrounding islands.

The native Inuit people of the region have an ancient and honourable culture of nomadic hunting and fishing in an environment where mere survival is a testament in itself. Since 1999 “the people” as the English translation of Inuit literally means have taken responsibility for a vast swath of Northern Canada and are the proud stewards of one of the last great tracts of true wilderness left on earth called in Inuktitut Nunavut (“Our Land”).

The High Arctic is an unforgiving environment and while there are undoubted climatic changes from the current cycle of global warming the austerity of the post glacial landscape belies a millennia of ceaseless wind and cold and the constant and all pervading influence of the ice. Summer lasts from the beginning of July until the end of August but demands that your understanding of this season allows for flurries of snow and nighttime temperatures below zero!

Despite the demanding environment the island contains a wealth of wildlife conditioned for survival. The barren ground caribou of the Bathurst and Dolphin/Union herds move across the sea ice to join the indigenous Peary caribou and that survivor from the age of the mammoth the shaggy coated and intemperate Musk Oxen. The barren ground grizzly has progressively extended its range in recent years and is now reckoned amongst the permanent predators on the island along with the mighty Polar Bear and ghostly Arctic Wolf. The opportunistic wolverine is another recent arrival over the ice and undoubtedly a source of concern for the mischievous attendant at every mealtime, the redoubtable and flighty Arctic fox. The bird life of the tundra is enough to satisfy the most ardent ‘twitcher’ from the ptarmigan hunting Gyrfalcon to the archetypal Northern Diver or Loon of the lonely tarns and dark lochans, the vast summering flocks of geese and vocal Sandhill Cranes add a fitting cacophony to the post glacial landscape of esker, till and outwash.

Victoria Island also happens to contain a gamefish of almost legendary repute and a fitting denizen of the waterways in a land where extreme is a byword and extraordinary a subtly distilled background note. The Arctic Char is the beauty queen of the salmonid family and no more so than when it comes in the searun form a little like putting a Lamborghini engine in the normal version with the addition of silver bodywork by Pininfarina.

Greenland and Iceland contain the searun form as does the Kola peninsula of Russia but nowhere else on earth does it occur in the numbers or the size of the Victoria Island race and nowhere so specifically as in the heart achingly fishable pools and runs of the air clear Ekaluk river...

The Ekaluk is a short but substantial river often between 50-100 yards wide and flowing with steady power from it's outlet draining the 46 mile long Ferguson Lake some 2 and a half miles to it's estuary in the Coronation Gulf of the Northwest Passage.

Every inch of the river is fishable and from "The Rapids" pool through "Big Bend" the "Two Thousands" (Upper and Lower), "The Canyon", "Canyon South", "Rocky Run", "Red Cliff", "Devil's Run", "Roberts Pool" and "Camp Run" and "Home Pool" the fly fisher see one of the world's great fishing locations unrolling before them. The ice out occurs in the first week of July and from this point some 85,000 char leave their wintering area in the lake and head for the prolific marine feeding grounds just offshore. The fish spend around 6 weeks in the sea gorging on polar shrimp and packing on so much weight and muscle that they positively vibrate with the life force contained within.

Towards the end of the third week in August the first scouts appear in the river followed in quick succession by the main run of fish all of whom arrive over two to three short weeks before the ice forms again in mid-late September.

This prolific fishery has long been harvested by the Inuit and evidence of "The people" is all around from the tumble down walls of their food caches to the funnel shaped fox traps and graduated walls of the caribou dykes where the herds were driven to their deaths by spear and club. The char are still harvested commercially and according to a strict quota and perhaps uniquely in the world of salmonid exploitation this occurs above the river *after* the fish have left the angling area.

The Angling operation on the Ekaluk exists solely due to the visionary activities of an Inuit senior statesman and a Swedish Canadian adventurer united by a love of wild places and a fierce belief in the integrity of "The Land" and it's history. Bill Lyall and Jan-Eric "Jack" Eloffson had long dreamed of allowing like-minded people an opportunity to experience the true spirit of the Ekaluk and it's unique and magnificent char. By combining their momentum, acumen and local clout they realized their vision through building a small collection of wooden huts and specialist shelters on a bluff overlooking the "Camp Run" and the "Home Pool" where the Ekaluk empties into it's winding estuary.

The Ekaluk camp is a ruggedly straightforward operation from its basic three-man huts to the dead drop lavatory and utilitarian mess tent. The food is well prepared solid fare befitting the nature of the location. There is no luxury in Ekaluk, no indoor plumbing and no lodge or toasty fireplace. What there is however is an experience of pure integrity absorbed in the ways of the river and separated from the other world of civilization. Those who choose to fish here must be hardy and self-reliant individuals neither adverse to sharing nor given to discomfort through cold or physical exertion. Each year 24 fly fishers in total get the opportunity to share in the comradeship of the Ekaluk experience, it's a lucky ticket and distinctly hard to obtain.

From first arrival by floatplane and the warmest of welcomes from Bill and Jack you quickly realize that the Ekaluk is a special place. It is not a normal fly fishing operation and this sense is heightened by the knowledge that a slim window opens in this land for the two weeks a year when the char are running. You must have your 4-season sleeping bag and be properly geared up for days spent in the wilderness. The best thermal layering and wet weather gear and the right medical kit for blisters and bruises is a pre-requisite inasmuch as you are embarking on a fly-fishing experience like no other. Likewise rods and reels need to be up to the task, 12-13' ft Spey rods and robust salmon reels containing at least 250 yards of backing area must. Slow sinking, Intermediate and floating heads give most flexibility as you are casting heavily weighted marabou flies in the much loved char colour range of violent pink to luminous green.

Char like a bit of movement in the fly and a key tactic is to work the fly by a steady tugging motion as it traverses its arc waiting for the heavy deep thump of big char in interceptory mode. A typical fish of 10-12lbs will hit hard and run out a little way before heading downstream at a fair rate of knots. The bigger they are the badder they get and once the fish is in the 14-15lbs range (it could be 20lbs) you are in for a battle that will leave you gasping for breathe. A big fish will motor 50 yards upstream in a mighty flow before turning and running hundreds (yes hundreds) of yards downstream against the full drag of your reel. Superlatives fall away at this display of power that often results in trips, falls and epic runs along the riverbank. Even when the fish are brought to hand they burn with the energy of a yellowfin tuna and you *will* cut your hands and their spray *will* soak you as they bounce and twist and flee back to the depths. What you catch depends on your ability to cover the water, walk, wade and read nuances of the pools and runs but when the run is in you catch as many as you could wish for and perhaps more than you can handle....

You will return home firstly by floatplane and then progressively bigger planes via Kuglugtuk (Coppermine), Yellowknife, sometimes Hay River for fun and Edmonton. You are sore, tired and not a little bemused. Your first shower for a week is a religious experience and slowly but surely a warm feeling settles over you that you just may have had the best fly fishing experience of your life

The Ekaluk is in it's own unique league in the world series of freshwater fly fishing .I respectfully suggest you try it at least once before you die. That is if you are up to the challenge of a very special place run by very special people truly up there in the "Land of Beyond That dream at the gates of the day"