

ONE FLY

One Lake, Seven Years, Huge Rainbows

By Bob Wagner

Okay, if I read this title I would need the term “huge rainbows” defined. Is this a brag-fest or is there substance worth reading? I don’t pretend to be a great trout fisherman, but when the fish are between 4 and 6 pounds, I call them huge rainbows. The notes I kept on seven trips state that in total, 14 anglers caught more than 120 fish, with 42 each weighing more than 4 pounds. Again, I’m no trout expert, but, to me, that is a lot of big ‘bows. Regarding the question of substance worth reading, in this article you will discover the specific fly and tactics that were so consistently successful.

Flyfisher friends are always sharing stories about flies, streams and lakes, and this is one of the characteristics of this sport that I treasure. Friends talking fishing is where this story started more than 30 years ago. My friend, Peter, isn’t really a fisherman but knew I loved the sport, so he enthusiastically shared pictures he had seen of monstrous rainbows that were caught near the Red Lake Indian Reservation. Some twenty years after hearing the story from Peter, I called Darwin Summer, the Ojibwe guide who had caught the big rainbows in the pictures. Darwin is an avid fisherman and historian of native culture and medicine. He also started the first Red Lake Youth Bass Fishing League, and native cultural youth retreats. Darwin is a tribal chief on the Tribal Council and a great friend.

I have fished the small, isolated, ice block lakes 11 times. However, seven of those times I went to a particular lake, with a particular fly, and always with Darwin. Please note that it is mandatory to hire a native guide and buy a \$10 daily permit to fish on the reservation. Pat Brown is the Red Lake fisheries manager. This is a federal fisheries program that Pat started in the mid-1980s. After research and inventory work, Pat decided five of the 20 ice block lakes qualified for trout stocking. You may be wondering why they are called “ice block” lakes. Roughly 10,500 years ago, the last retreating glacier stalled just south of Lower Red Lake for 500 years. The stalled glacier would freeze and thaw, freeze and thaw, which caused large ice blocks to break off and eventually form lakes. Of the five lakes, three of them were stocked with rainbows and brook trout, one with only rainbows (the lake of this article), and one lake was reserved for lake trout. The name of my favorite big ‘bow lake is Squaw Smith.

My first time on Squaw Smith was in 2010, and it was then that I established two tactics that I never changed. The first was the fly. A few of my friends call it the Squaw Smith Special (go figure). You can see by the picture that it is a modified articulated rabbit strip leech pattern. The fly, paired with a T400 Jim Teeny sinking line on a 9’ 8wt fly rod, dominated in catching the biggest rainbows seven years straight. This fly always competed against some-

other fly anglers trying alternate colors, sizes or designs of streamers. This was hands-down acclaimed by Darwin and five different fly casters as the #1 lure on the lake. I always gave a Squaw Smith special to the other fly casters to compare.

My analysis of the fly identified six characteristics that make it a great pattern. First, the color: a flesh-tone pink to crayfish-orange rabbit strip, as well as two or three orange beads on the PowerPro connection to the stinger hook (a red Gamakatsu Octopus #6). I noticed on the second trip to Squaw Smith while fileting a few of the fish to take home, that they were filled with orange-colored scuds. I would like to say that I matched the hatch on the first try, but the truth of the matter is that it was a perfect accident.

My second tip is to get the line depth right. Darwin used a basic electronic fish indicator that displayed the fish at various depths from 4 to 12 feet. With my T400 Jim Teeny sinking line, combined with waiting 5-10 seconds before stripping, my fly was at the correct depth. The fly also includes medium-weight dumbbell eyes, which help contribute to a deeper run.

The third key aspect of the fly is one-and-a-quarter inch of rabbit strip extending beyond the stinger hook. This provides a great swimming action to the fly. It is critical when connecting the PowerPro line that the hook is not tight, but loose enough to allow the up-and-down swimming motion to occur after each strip-pause of the retrieve. Fourth, I always use UV chenille in copper olive for the collar of three or four wraps. I like the flash and the color that the UV gives and the kaleidoscope-esque display in water.

I believe that there is an important connection between how the fly is tied and how aggressively the rainbows hit, often multiple times on the same retrieve. It became apparent on these trips that it was harder to get a good hookset on Rapalas and similar crankbaits, and that the fly always out-fished other tackle, which astonished our guide Darwin. I believe that the answer goes back to underwater research done by Carl Richards and Doug Swisher on how trout feed in their



THE FABLED FLY OF THIS ARTICLE, KNOWN AS THE “SQUAW SMITH SPECIAL”



THE AUTHOR WITH ONE OF THE IMPRESSIVE ‘BOWS OF SQUAW SMITH LAKE.

book *Selective Trout*. Research indicated that trout have sensitive taste, and can feel if an object is food. I always palmer the rabbit strip around the shank of the front hook. I believe when the big ‘bows grabbed the hard plastic lure, they spit it out as soon as possible. When the fish hit the fly, it felt soft, like it could be something edible. If they didn’t get hooked, they would hit again and again. Multiple strikes by the same fish obviously improves your catch rate. This fly also has worked well for bass and pike.

It was an amazing one fly-one lake-huge rainbows-seven times experience I will

always be thankful for. I hope these tips can be of help in your fly tying, and future fishing adventures.

I wrote the poem below about Squaw Smith Lake and for Mary Oliver, who, as of January 17 is flying with geese. In a world of lies and destructive words, Mary’s words enlighten and inspire all people.

Editor’s note: Bob Wagner is the president of the Headwaters Chapter, and is a devoted contributor to this publication. He resides in Bemidji, MN with his wife, Val. Both have been instrumental in the growth of Trout Unlimited in the Northland.

SQUAW SMITH LAKE

BY BOB WAGNER

Always this mysterious beauty on Squaw Smith:
As if she is there watching with a hidden smile.
As if she knows about sun, rock, wind and ice, 500-year struggle.
As if she knows they agreed the Glacier did not have to die.
As if she knows these Ice block lakes gem stones of glacial sacrifice.
As if she knows it’s small and deep with Rainbows swimming in pristine presence.
As if she knows Darwin, our native guide, talks of mysteries, eagles and healing plants.
She knows somehow the Rainbows connect the sun, rock, wind, Darwin and us on
the waters of Squaw Smith.