

LAKE TROUT IN THE BOUNDARY WATERS

Catching Lake Trout, Appreciating the Wilderness & Conservation Issues

By Lukas Leaf

There was barely time to start setting camp when we heard the classic “fish on!” from across the point that was to be our home for the first two days in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area & Wilderness. I immediately smiled to myself. My friends and I have been taking annual trips for Minnesota spring fishing opener ritually for the last fifteen years and I knew when I heard those words that we were home. As I made my way with excitement to the palisade where Lee was fishing, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of contentment and gratification. I grabbed the net and with one fell swoop our crew had a lake trout for dinner ready for the stringer. It’s moments like these that can be described but only truly understood in that precious moment.

The Boundary Waters is a special place, filled with the wonders of the Northwoods and an awe-inspiring landscape shaped by glacial movements millennia ago. At nearly 1.1 million acres, the Boundary Waters spreads across the northeastern tip of Minnesota. It is a vast boreal forest consisting of interconnected lakes, streams, wetlands and aquifers that provide some of the best fishing the world has to offer. These glacial movements bored out over a thousand lakes. More than a hundred of those lakes are deep, clear, cold, well-oxygenated and hold our native species of lake trout. Anglers from far and wide come to northern Minnesota for a chance to battle one of the most exciting pound-for-pound fish to hit their lure. Although the average size is around 2-3 pounds, there are absolute monsters to be found. A member of our crew on a trip last spring landed a 37-inch, 17lb laker that made the rest of the fish from our trip look like minnows. It is a matter of time of year, strategy and technique. All of which, with a little experience, are quite easy to master.

I absolutely love the Boundary Waters in the spring. Nature is awakening from its winter slumber, the loons have returned to nest, the ice has had its last days on the lake, there are no bugs, and, most importantly, the lake trout are in the shallows. This time of year presents an amazing opportunity for targeting lakers. The water temperature is still low enough that these amazing fish are venturing into shallower waters that would not otherwise hold them throughout the rest of the year. During the spring, anglers even



A WILD 37-INCH BWCAW LAKE TROUT CAUGHT IN THE SPRING

have the luxury of fishing from shore. With a simple setup of a water filled slip bobber, bullet weights, attractors and salted shiners, one can bask in the sun at camp and enjoy catching lake trout all day long. For us, this is a tried and true technique. That’s not to say that it is the only or the best technique, however.

The strategy for targeting lake trout changes with the seasons and the angler’s preference. In the spring, lake trout are hunting in the shallows next to steep drop-offs, flowages off of land points, and round rocky reefs. Find these areas and you will find trout. Trolling and casting during the spring in these areas in water depths of 25-30ft or shallower are your best bet. Our greatest success has come from the bobber setup I previously mentioned and casting crank baits and lures that mimic the forage in the lake you are fishing. Most often that is a golden or silver shiner color. Do not discount a jig tipped with a minnow either.

During the summer months, lake trout move to deeper depths as the water temperature increases. These coldwater fish prefer temperatures in the 40 to 50 degree range. The glaciated bowl lakes of the BWCA create a perfect habitat for lake trout. It’s at this point that shore fishing is no longer possible. During the high points of summer make sure to target deeper areas of the lake where lakers have found the colder water and similar structure to what they prefer in the spring. Make sure to use heavier weights and lures to reach the proper depths. Trolling in the canoe and jigging in the summer months are your best bets. Take your time, move slowly and allow the lure to get into the target zone. Give it some action and if you get a hit, work over the area again. More than likely that trout wasn’t alone.

Fall in the BWCA for lake trout is a unique experience. The season for lakers closes this year on September 30th. The reasoning behind this is that late trout begin spawning late September into October. If the conditions are right, trout will be in the shallows similar to spring time. Although fishing can be great, I truly recommend practicing catch and release during this time of year. There are plenty of other species to catch in the fall. Try taking a trip at the end of September after grouse hunting season has opened in Minnesota. There’s nothing like a fresh walleye in the pan with a ruffed grouse roasting over the fire. You will not be disappointed.

Ice fishing for lake trout in the cold, majestic winter months of the Northwoods may actually be my favorite time to hunt for these amazing fish. There is a level

of control with ice fishing in the BWCA that I feel doesn’t exist during the rest of the year. First, you have to get to the lake that you want to fish, whether it is by cross-country skiing, snowshoeing or simply walking. This involves pulling pulk sleds loaded with the gear you need to withstand the harsh conditions that Lake Superior and the Northwoods will bring. Overnight trips in the BWCA are no joke and you absolutely have to be prepared.

My lure of choice over the last few years has been a 3/8 ounce gold Kastmaster tipped with half of a salted shiner. Having a sonar is also a life saver. During the winter months, lake trout can appear out of nowhere throughout the water column. Having a way to locate and target them makes a world of difference. Pay attention to the bite. It can change from aggressive to extremely subtle in a heartbeat. Every hole drilled in the Boundary Waters is sacred. The BWCA allows no motorized assistance so every hole must be hand drilled. This is no simple task as I experienced on a trip in March with Outdoor Life. The ice was nearly 36 inches thick with 16 inches of snow and hard crust on top. Every hole finished was a reward in and of itself, and the wind was howling.

Our goal for this winter trip was to catch lake trout, and also to show how amazing the Boundary Waters is in the winter. It was a profound experience. Over four days we endured brutal winds blowing off of Lake Superior that created tough fishing conditions. Despite Mother Nature’s best attempts to keep us at bay, we prevailed. After a slow couple of days the trout turned on. For the next day and half we had a blast moving from hole



to hole, laughing out loud as the lakers slammed our lures. In the end, all four of us were able to head home with a couple fillets. This was a nice reward for our hard work. I generally don't take fish home from the Boundary Waters, but this seemed like a special occasion. My wife and I enjoyed a dinner of fresh lake trout the very night that I got home. A reminder of the trip I had just taken and a small way to share the amazing experience with her.

Conservation Issues and Current Mining Threats

The Boundary Waters was first designated as a wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964. In 1978, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area & Wilderness Act expanded the wilderness area to the nearly 1.1 million acres that it is today. The 1978 Act also established a Boundary Waters Canoe Area Mining Protection Area along the access corridors into the wilderness and banned mineral development within the Wilderness and the Mining Protection Area. Today, the Boundary Waters is the most visited wilderness in our nation with over 150,000 annual



FRIENDS AND ANGLERS ON THE WATER IN THE SPRING IN SEARCH OF LAKERS



SOME EATING-SIZED BOUNDARY WATERS LAKE TROUT CAUGHT THROUGH THE ICE IN THE WINTER (LEFT) AND DESTINED FOR THE FRYING PAN (RIGHT)

drainage lowers pH and exposes fish and other aquatic organisms to heavy metals, like copper, lead, mercury, and nickel.

Recently, the Department of the Interior reinstated two expired mineral leases to Twin Metals MN right near the edge of the Boundary Waters. A few weeks later, Twin Metals released a plan to move its proposed mining operations even closer to the Boundary Waters, locating a proposed industrial concentration facility on the banks of Birch Lake. The Forest Service is currently conducting an Environmental Assessment to determine the impacts that copper-nickel mining, including acid mine drainage, would have

ing sent a letter to Secretaries Sonny Perdue and Ryan Zinke calling on them to immediately suspend all mineral development approvals on public lands in the Rainy River Watershed during the Forest Service's ongoing study of a mineral withdrawal. Our nation's hunting and fishing economy, our sporting traditions, and healthy fish and wildlife populations depend on places like the Boundary Waters.

The Boundary Waters is an amazing place. For my friends and me it is a place for reflection and a way to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. These are the true backcountry ex-



visitors seeking the amazing backcountry experience that it has to offer. The three million-acre Superior National Forest, which includes the Boundary Waters, contains 20% of all the freshwater in the 193 million-acre National Forest System. Downstream from the Boundary Waters are Voyageurs National Park, Rainy Lake, and Lake of the Woods, which provide some of Minnesota's best hunting and fishing experiences. The Boundary Waters truly is a public lands and waters success story.

The Boundary Waters is currently under threat from proposed sulfide-ore copper mining at its headwaters by the

Chilean mining company Antofagasta, which owns Twin Metals MN. This type of mining has a terrible track record of polluting, especially in such water-rich environments as the Boundary Waters. Sulfide-ore copper mining on the edge of the Boundary Waters would cause irreparable damage to the very quality that makes these public lands and waters so unique. Acid mine drainage caused by this type of mining would be particularly damaging to the Boundary Waters because of the interconnected lakes, streams, wetlands, and aquifers downstream of the proposed mine sites. This habitat supports world-class recreational fisheries that are sensitive to small changes in the ecosystem. Acid mine

on the public lands, fish, and wildlife of the Boundary Waters and downstream lands and waters. The reinstatement of the leases to Twin Metals MN ignores the Forest Service's decision in 2016 to withhold renewal of these leases and its application for a 20 year mineral withdrawal of lands surrounding the Boundary Waters.

Hunters, anglers and recreational users alike support the study. On May 31st, a coalition of sporting groups and businesses including Sportsmen for the Boundary Waters, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, American Fly Fishing Trade Association, First Lite and Simms Fish-

periences that we all seek as hunters and anglers. Nature has a special way of recharging you and the Boundary Waters is no exception. The Boundary Waters and its watershed must be protected. It is up to us to defend our public lands, waters and sporting heritage.

Editor's Note: Lukas Leaf is the National Sporting Director for Sportsmen for the Boundary Waters, a non-profit group working on conservation issues in and around the BWCAW. For more information, visit www.sportsmenfortheboundarywaters.org or contact Lukas Leaf at lukas@sportsmenfortheboundarywaters.org