

Valley Angler

Miramichi Road Trip

by Bill Thompson

Opportunity only knocks on your door once in a great while and when it does it is best to take advantage of it. This past week opportunity came knocking and for once I was in a position to seize the moment. Long time friend Bill Franke came by the shop on Monday and asked if I wanted to go salmon fishing sometime. I said, "Of course, when do you want go?" Bill said, "Oh sometime this week." Janet was away and due home late Tuesday and I had an appointment on Wednesday so I hesitated for a moment and weighed all the reasons why I shouldn't go. Bill said we could leave early Thursday morning and be on the river by four that afternoon. Without much more thought I threw caution to the wind and accepted.

Janet called me later that afternoon and I said, "I think I am going salmon fishing with Bill Thursday." Considering that she had just been on a salmon trip of her own she didn't have any objection and in fact encouraged me to take Bill up on his offer. Thursday, at four in the morning, Bill and I left North Conway for the Miramichi River in New Brunswick.

I met Bill at his house and quickly unloaded my gear into his car and after a quick stop for coffee at Dunkin' Donuts we hit the road. In the pitch black of the early morning we navigated the back roads of Maine until we hit the Maine Turnpike below Augusta. I don't think that there is another man in New Hampshire that knows as many back roads as Bill does. With dawn breaking we headed up to Bangor. In Bangor we made our first stop for fuel and breakfast. Bill has made this run for many years and the stop at Dysart's truck stop was a long standing tradition. Bill said that at one time, in September, just about every car in the parking lot would be owned by fishermen either going or coming from the Miramichi. After enjoying a hearty trucker's breakfast we continued on our way. We crossed into Canada in Lincoln.

We made a couple of more stops once we were across the border. Once at Tim Horton's for coffee. Another to visit an old friend of Bill's; this turned out to be profitable as the fellow gave us a couple of flies. A quick stop at a fly shop, in order for me to get my salmon license and last of all a stop at a road side vendor for some fresh vegetables.

After quickly stowing our gear at Bill's camp we drove up the road a few houses to pick up our guide. By four thirty in the afternoon we were rigging up our rods beside the river.

The first thing that any prospective salmon angler should know is that it isn't all that easy to catch one. They don't call the salmon the fish of a thousand casts for nothing. First off these fish don't eat bugs like trout do. They have come back to their home river with just one thing on their minds and that is to re procreate the species. They apparently take this quite seriously as during the time spent in the river, up until they finally complete the mission, they don't eat. Why salmon strike a fly is a great mystery. This might explain why salmon flies are so gaudy. At one time it was believed that the salmon was so regal that it would only eat butterflies. Salmon flies, for the most part, are beautiful things to look at. Selecting the right fly is a bit like practicing voodoo. There is a lot of magic and superstition that goes into the process. After a consult with Bill and a nod of approval from our guide, the fly that I first tied on was an M 1 Killer. A fly developed by Bill for the Miramichi.

On the surface there is not a lot to salmon fishing. By in large you cast the fly about forty- five degrees downstream and let the fly swing down until it comes to a stop. You let the fly hang in the current for a moment and then pick it up and make another cast. It is ridiculously simple. Don't let this fool you there is a lot to learn about salmon fishing.

Which brings up the question if salmon fishing is all that simple why do you need a guide? In New Brunswick you are required by law to have a guide if you are a non resident. On the surface it would seem that the visiting angler is being taken advantage of. However, if one considers the state of the economy in that part of the world then it is not too much to ask of anglers to put something back.

Guides on the Miramichi, by in large, have a rather poor reputation. Sports familiar with American guides, who tie your flies on for you, risk life and limb to retrieve your fly from tree branches, offer encouragement while you play your fish and then net it for you will be sorely disappointed with a salmon guide. Most will set on the bank while you fish and only get up to net a fish should you be lucky enough to catch one. Some have been known to even take a nap. Let's face it there is a lot of down time between hook ups. There are, on the other hand, guides on the river who do carry flies of their own and will tie them on for you should you require this service, know the water and where fish are likely to hold and will net the fish. If you are new at the game and are not accompanied by someone that has the skill and experience of a Bill Franke it is wise to shop around for a good guide.

Another very good reason to have a guide on the Miramichi is that not all of the water is public. Many pools are privately owned and trespassers are not treated lightly. Public pools are known as Crown Water and unless you have permission, or are staying at a camp that owns its own pools, you are restricted to Crown Water. There are maps that have detailed information on the various pools on the river, but having a guide is good insurance.

Like I said salmon fishing requires a certain amount of dumb luck, or as Bill put it, "It is a matter of being at the right place at the right time", which to me sounds a lot like luck. Thursday evening the Salmon Gods must have been smiling on me because less than fifteen minutes of being in the pool I hooked and landed my first salmon. Notice I said "landed" as I was to learn latter it is one thing to hook one and quite another to land one. I should also point out that I landed a grilse not a true salmon. A grilse is a male that is returning for the first time and will not spawn. It is legal to keep two grilse and your salmon license comes with two tags for this purpose. I opted to release the fish as it was early in the trip and we had no way to properly keep it for the return home.

The water level on the river was still a little high from the last hurricane. In higher water the salmon will be on the move. In low water the fish will park themselves and hold in one place. It is generally easier to catch them if they are holding. When they are holding in a pool they will often "show" themselves by porpoising once in a while. Moving fish will often make spectacular jumps and then pass through the pool giving the angler quite the thrill, but little time to put a fly over him.

I made several more passes through without much success. There were a couple more fishermen in the pool so in keeping with salmon river tradition we were rotating through the pool. Rotation is part of proper etiquette on a salmon river. One angler will work the pool by casting a couple of times and then moving a few feet downstream. He will continue this until he has reached the end of the pool at which time the second angler begins the process over again. This is a time honored tradition with salmon anglers all over the world and has over time probably prevented a lot of trouble. Woe be to anyone who should cut in line or dallies.

It was my turn again and Ellory our guide said to me as I stepped into the pool, "Go catch another one lad". And I did. They don't call salmon the "King of Game Fish" without cause. This fish was into my backing within seconds. After several enormous leaps and more runs I was able to beech him. It was another grilse and after a second to admire him he was escorted back into the water.

I didn't know it then, but that was the last fish I would land for the entire trip. What looks seemingly simple and easy is nothing like that at all. I did hook a couple of more fish or as they say on the Miramichi, "I ruint (ruined) them". Salmon anglers feel that once a fish has been hooked he will not take a fly again.

Early Sunday morning Bill and I packed up and headed home. Around one in the afternoon we were having lunch at Dysart's. By four thirty we were back in North Conway loading my gear back into my truck at Bill's place. As Flip Pallot might say, "Another memorable trip etched into our memories". As always a trip with Bill is a pleasurable event. Bill's knowledge of salmon fishing is unsurpassed and his love of the Miramichi is evident. When driving along the river Bill will pass a house and most likely will know the owner and all of his children. At one point we made a quick stop at a convenience store and a truck pulled in as Bill came out of the store. Within seconds Bill was engaged in conversation with the truck owner. Ellory was in the back seat of the car. He leaned over and touched me on the shoulder and said, "What do you bet, hey, that he knows this fellows name before he gets back in the car"? I knew better then to take the bet.

See you on the river.