In most of the populated Northeast, 12-inch brook trout are rare. In "Gods Country" those fish are merely prey for much bigger brook trout and pike.

BRIAN IRWIN
Text & Photos

GOD'S COUNTRY

Manitoba's brook trout wilderness

LOU DUROCHER IS A RELAXED PILOT. He's been flying bush and float planes into the wilderness of Manitoba, Canada, for 28 years. The 53-year-old confidently eased our citrus orange 1952 de Havilland Beaver over pocket lakes at an altitude of 1,000 feet, the height at which he stated "we could glide into a landing if the engine blew."

As we flew he told me that he had already piloted his way through one such instance: "The engine exploded, and the guests were all screaming, 'We're going to die!' It was so funny!"

Durocher flies for Elk Island Lake Lodge, situated on the 1,300-square-mile Gods Lake. (The lake was named without an apostrophe due to a probable cartographic error that's never been rectified.) Gods is studded with islands and coves which harbor record-breaking northern pike and lake trout, but my focus was different: to angle for trophy brook trout on the storied Gods River, the lake's outlet and home to some of the largest squaretails on the continent.

Manitoba is the western border of the native range of *Salvelinus fontinalis*. Not a member of the *Salmo* genus, Eastern brook trout are actually not trout at all, but part of the char family along with fish like Arctic char, Dolly Varden, and lake trout. Their genetic composition strayed from the other side of the salmonid tree—which comprises rainbow and brown trout—somewhere around 23 million years ago. As the various ice ages ebbed and flowed across North America, brookies settled into their current home waters, which stretch from Georgia north to the waters emptying into Hudson Bay, and west across the Great Lakes. According to Nick Karus, author of *Brook Trout*, "One could say that brook trout rode the melt northward and some rode it upward [into cooler water at higher altitudes]."

GOD'S COUNTRY

Elk Island in 1933 was the site of a major gold mine operation. Now it is the center of operations for the Gods Lake and Gods River recreational fisheries.

Elk Island Lake Lodge

Elk Island Lake Lodge is owned by Greg Dick, the son of Brian Dick who purchased the lodge in 1999. The island itself is seven miles long and has a deep history. In 1933 a gold mine was developed on the island, which brought infrastructure and a workforce that eventually extracted $60 million in gold and silver from the land. In its heyday, the town was home to 400 people and had a movie house, church, and electricity. But boomtowns explode and then die hard, and by 1943 the island was once again devoid of people, its buildings gradually being stripped of building materials by locals.

Eventually the economy of Gods Lake shifted toward recreational fishing, and the now-named Elk Island Lake Lodge opened in the 1960s.

Guests arrive on a charter flight from Winnipeg and land on a 4,300-foot-long crushed-gravel runway. The plane not only delivers guests, but also all of the lodge's perishables.

No roads reach God's Lake—at least during the summer. In the winter, the Ice Road stretches across this system of lakes, which sit just south of the treeless, bony Canadian Shield. All of the lodge's fuel and non-perishable food arrive on trucks via this Ice Road, along with building material and other supplies. If it's too big to fly, and it doesn't make it to the lodge before the ice melts, it doesn't arrive until the following year.

Where I Grew Up

Brook trout are a fragile species with a preferred water temperature of 52 to 56 degrees F. They thrive best in water with a narrow pH range of 5 to 7.5, making them highly susceptible to alterations in water acidity, which is one reason why their existence is threatened by pollutants like acid rain, a foe they've faced since the Industrial Revolution. Gradual increases in the temperature of their native waters are equally deleterious to the survival of native brook trout, which is greatly exacerbated by the overharvest of streamside timber through much of their indigenous range.

Widespread timber harvesting began in earnest in the 1800s. Wood was cleared from the banks of many waterways, leading to increased solar warming of many watersheds. In addition, the removal of trees meant fewer large woody debris structures in the water, robbing trout of their deepest, cool holding pools and protection from predators. The massive timber harvest also led to increased siltation, and wider, shallower streambeds, which impaired the proliferation of the insects that are a crucial food source for brook trout. Without hyperbole, the harvest of Eastern forests forever altered the home waters of the native brookies.

In 2005 the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture—a partnership of NGOs, state and federal organizations, and academic institutions— studied 1,600 watersheds "within the historic range of brook trout." Their data were alarming, revealing that "Intact stream populations of brook trout populations exist in only 5 percent of the watersheds assessed." Genetic pollution from hatchery fish and changes in habitat were major causes of the decline of native brook trout in these waters.

But in northern Manitoba you'd never know brookies are in trouble. On the Gods River and other nearby flows, brookies grow to absurd proportions. A 20-inch fish is common, and bigger fish stretching into the 6- to 8-pound range are always possible. The local record weighed 9 pounds, 8 ounces. The river is remote, with no settlements along its 250-mile course to the Hudson Bay, where only two small outposts exist at the mouth.

We were fishing upstream, 55 miles from the outlet of Gods Lake. Sandhill Cranes and Common Mergansers soared above the boreal forest. Bear tracks pocked up the mud on the water's edge. Moose sipped from feeder brooks.

Daytripping

From the lodge it would take many hours by boat just to reach Gods River, so we relied on Durocher to drop us into a broad stretch of the river. From there, our guides piloted two 16-foot aluminum boats with 20-hp outboards up and down the river, blazing through rock gardens and slick water before running up, and down, Class III white water. The tails of these white-water pools are the primary holding spots for brookies.

Northern pike do make it into the river, but rule the calm water. Local lore is that the pike press the brookies into the fast water, and this indeed was where we caught most of them.

The first day on the river was slow, with only a few fish coming to the boat during a full day of angling—but each one was the largest brookie I'd ever caught. I was raised fishing the hills of western Maryland, where a 12-inch fish generated bragging rights. On Gods such a fish is merely a meal for a bigger brook trout or a pike.

Unlike many other rivers, the brookies on Gods don't head into the tributaries to spawn, or migrate seasonally to or from Gods Lake. The brook trout stay in the river their entire lives, feeding on an abundance of sculpin, baitfish, and insects. They attacked flies indiscriminately during my trip, so mouse patterns and large flies were just as productive, if not more so, than small patterns.

My second day on the river was sunny and calm. The mosquitoes were notified of our arrival and they readily harpooned any unprotected or untreated skin.

My guide for the day was Craig Burton, a confident, yet quiet 29-year-old native of Gods Narrows, a 30-minute boat ride west from the lodge. Burton has been working for the lodge's family since age 13 and his skills show. He navigated thrashing white water with ease, and readily found the deep holes with the biggest trout.

Craig Burton is a Jedi of a guide. He seeps with energy and excitement when you hook into a fish, and exudes more frustration than you do when you miss one. We hooked ten fish for every one landed, due largely in part to the barbless regulations on this swift wilderness river, but also due to my own inexperience with these incredibly powerful trout.

Even with a 10-pound-test tippet I snapped two separate fish off cleanly trying to set the hook. But by the end of day two, I had landed a total of five trophy fish, the plumpest one topping 6 pounds. Burton dashed our boat between pools with names like "Shorty's" and "Boulder Lawn." These pools have been steeped in history for decades, their names transcending generations for the fortunate few sportsmen who have been blessed to cast into their waters.

The Gods River is a regal waterway, literally breathtaking in its scale and grandeur. Ancient forest fires have stripped away portions of the forest, allowing new growth to creep up next to charred old growth. Its a place with little fishing pressure, and pristine habitat—a place where brook trout dreams come true.

Final Cast

One of my final casts into Gods River crossed the seam of a rapid an hour upriver from our landing point. With two strips of line my 6-weight bent and nearly folded under the pressure of a strike unlike anything else I've experienced in fresh water. Burton saw the strike, just under the surface, and let out a yawp. "That's a 27 incher! Biggest one I've seen in a year. Might be a record."

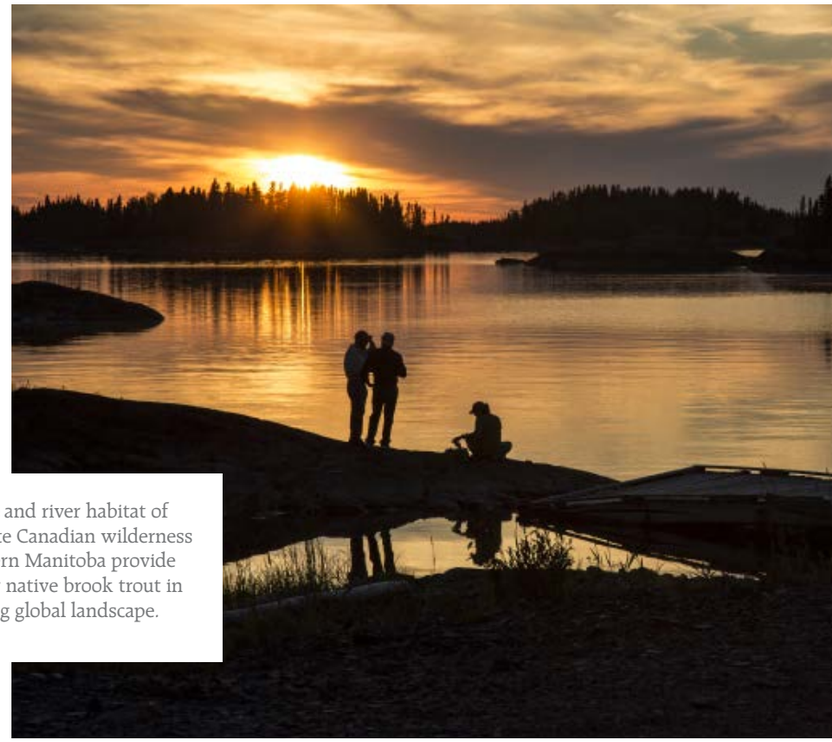
I cocked my wrist briskly, executing a tenuous hook-set and applied generous power trying to move the fish out of the heavy current. The fish's head shook, sending oscillations down my rod as it fought for its life. It didn't run, but rather steadily and firmly held its position in the quick water.

I held tension, patiently, and a minute later, as if rejected by some deity, my tippet snapped, pitching the line up into the air like a cracked whip. The fish was gone.

I collapsed backward onto the casting platform, grabbing my head in disbelief. As I stared at the sky I tracked it to the horizon where it met the shoreline. Trees towered over the river. A beaver dam guarded a granite point. A strainer filtered the river just downstream. Everywhere there was habitat. And likely fish nearby. Burton's words from that morning ran across my mind..

"It's amazing," he said. "We're the only people on this entire river. It's just us and the fish."

Brian Irwin is a family physician, freelance writer, and outdoors photographer (*brianirwinmedia.com*). He lives in Madison, New Hampshire.



The lake and river habitat of the remote Canadian wilderness of Northern Manitoba provide refuge for native brook trout in a changing global landscape.