

BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

RIVER OF MEN

A NORTH SHORE SALMON CAMP PROSPERS UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT BASED ON MUTUAL RESPECT AND LIVE RELEASE, ON A RIVER THAT TIME SOMEHOW FORGOT. BEWARE, THE NEXT POOL MAY BE NAMED AFTER YOU.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

There are many mysteries on the Nabisipi. How did it earn its name? And who is responsible for the abandonment of the fish pass (above) at the first falls (top)? Camp co-manager Eric Walsh would like to see it repaired. For Christian Mestokosho and Hervé Malec (facing page), however, there is little mystery to what will keep the Nabisipi salmon (and salmon anglers) returning in large numbers—live release.

WE WERE RETURNING TO MY OLD STOMPING GROUNDS, WHERE I first fell in love with the great leaper. Off to visit a new camp, a joint venture between keen anglers Eric Walsh and his dad, Robert, an ASF (Can) board member and the Innu of Natashquan. It began when I spent a summer in 1980 chasing parr in the rivers between Sept-Iles and Blanc Sablon, and hitchhiking rides on float planes to get to isolated rivers like the Corneille, Natashquan and Mecatina. Progress has come to this region, as Route 138 now connects civilization to the once roadless outports like Baie Johann Beetz and Aguanish, but Charles Cusson, ASF Quebec Program Director, had told me about one river that despite easy access to its lower reaches was as wild and unexplored as much of this continent was before we (Europeans) arrived. I immediately pictured myself on a pool that had never seen a fly. In this dream, on my second or third perfect cast, a salmon rises from the dark depths and I play it Lee Wulff-like, releasing with one hand while my other holds the rod in a tight arc. From that moment I am known in Montagnais (Innu) as “Man who dances with salmon” or this would become known as “Editor’s Pool.”

Of course you have to put a caveat before words like “wild and unexplored” and “civilization” because although we have a powerful penchant for naming places, usually based on our own experiences, views and history, most of this country was settled and named by First Nations thousands of years before we got here. Yet according to Cusson, here was a mid-sized North Shore river which was mostly unexplored, even by locals, including First Nations. You can forgive me for being a bit skeptical. Finally, when I was informed that we would be leaving in mid-July, a date when almost every other North Shore salmon camp has long since closed for the season, I got the feeling maybe he was trying to sell me some swampland in Florida. It didn’t help when he replied to my concerns, with “Trust me, the Nabisipi is an exception to the North Shore rule of early runs.”

Yet here we were, after a quick flight to Sept-Iles, and a four-hour drive to this North Shore river, a brawling torrent that tumbles off the Canadian Shield, meeting the salt 10 minutes west of the Aguanish. Certainly, it had escaped the previous notice of fly fishers, my own queries had uncovered that no one had heard of it among that fraternity.



It's ancient and recent history and geography had also mostly deterred intense angling activity. Giant water falls close to the mouth kept most of its 80 kilometres inaccessible to only the bravest travelers. More recently a government research station and later a private owner ensured the Nabisipi River salmon rarely saw a fly.



All eyes of the camp staff are riveted on Charles Cusson's laptop as he explains the finer points of proper live release technique (top). Guide Hervé Malek is about to put theory into practice as a Nabisipi salmon approaches his net.

Nabisipi UenapeuHipu Outfitter is a live release joint venture co-managed by the Montagnais. The compact, comfortable camp is just a few hundred metres off the main road. As soon as we arrive, it's obvious that Cusson may have hit the proverbial nail on the head. Manager Eric Walsh is a real-life Grizzly Adams, but the camp is more Gustave H. The salmon had only recently begun to arrive in numbers, although it is already mid-July. Walsh along with his Montagnais partner Mario Courtois have been working hard getting the camp ready for his first guests—us! Local artisans from the village of Aguanish are still busy building a guide's quarters and upgrading the guest cabins. Perhaps my dream of naming a pool could come true.

We barely have time to enjoy the view of the Gulf of St. Lawrence before we are on the river heading north, the scent of spruce strong on the light breeze. With us are two young men from Natashquan, Christian Mestokosho, the head guide, and Hervé Malec. Little is said as we pass under the bridge. This last vestige of the modern world behind us, our own modern sensibilities melt away and guides and sports begin to bond. At First Falls, there is a short portage and as we head upstream again in a second boat, I ask about how the river got its name. "Uenapeu-shipu," Christian says. "River of Men." I press Hervé and Christian on whether this was because perhaps the run was mostly male fish (it isn't) or whether ancient settlements were found here (it's possible but unconfirmed) or perhaps it might have referred to the power and size of the first two sets of falls, but why this would make it a man's river is more a sign of my own chauvinistic bias.

We arrive at Brown's Pool—another mark of the Nabisipi's uniqueness. It's more like 6 or 7 pools in one, each with its own flat rocky outcrop where an angler can cast comfortably. Over the next few days it will begin to feel very much like home. Hundreds of salmon hold in a broad curve in the river, just above a powerful rapid. A few locations can also be reached by boat, but there is so much action over the next few days, we never get a chance to try those.

Previous camp owners fished exclusively in one or two spots between here and the camp, never venturing above the second falls. As a matter of fact, no one, including Eric's partner, Mario Courtois, had any idea of the natural history of the river. Not that no one had tried to get a handle on the Nabisipi's salmon run. Smack in the middle of the first falls is a mysterious, abandoned fishway. One that had been blasted out of the granite rock and which ran straight up from the tidal waters to a quiet, secluded and hidden exit above the the waterfall.

As we got to know our guides a little better, and became more familiar with the landmarks, the river's mysteries only seem to grow. Very few places, say the first rapid above the falls, or the various pools and fishing places that made up Home Pool, bore any names. I asked Eric about this one evening as we stood on the deck of the guests' lodge. We listened to a tern's cry as small waves lapped up on the beach, the setting sun lighting up the estuary in a golden glow. "There hasn't been much exploration or human use of the Nabisipi outside of its river mouth," Walsh explains. "A small commercial operation here seemed to be all there really was."

This jived with my own research. A few weeks before we left I contacted Gilles Shooner, one of the biologists that had worked at the research station that operated here from around 1961 to 1965. In those days the commercial fishery was in operation, but Shooner confirmed that other than that, no harvesting was being done—no in-river netting, no recreational fishing. Christian and Hervé also supported this view as they often spoke of their fishing adventures on the Natashquan, but rarely, if ever, was mention



Guide Hervé Malek was taught fly fishing by his father on the Natashquan River. Here, he adds to this knowledge as he performs a picture-perfect live release on the Nabisipi.

made of the Nabisipi. Given its isolated location, the commercial operation and later the research station's activities, few anglers ventured there. As for the fishway, after I returned to Montreal, I telephoned Geoff Power who, with his wife Ann, had spent summers at the research station.

Geoff, who is one of the foremost authorities on fish ladders explained that the Nabisipi pass, in addition to being installed in order to count and mark fish, was also a test of a new design, one in which the fish swam under the baffles instead of leaping over them. When we visit the structure, or what is left of it, we find that time and the forces of nature have left it in ruins. All that remains is the main trench, which was clearly blasted out of the rock, and a jumble of rebar which Eric fears may be causing some of the wounds he has noticed on released salmon. It's difficult to say, but one thing seems certain, even though the fish pass is destroyed, salmon still will use it to move upstream in certain water conditions.

As much as I hate to admit it, Charles was right, this river had somehow escaped intense human pressure. The Nabisipi operation ticks along seamlessly with Mario, a Montagnais, and Eric a non-native Montrealer. They are obviously good friends who have deep respect for each other's backgrounds and culture. And they truly enjoyed each other's company, something that goes back decades when Mario's dad first guided Bob Walsh on the Natashquan. This friendship was passed on to Mario and Eric. Our dinners were beautifully prepared by an Atikamekw First Nation chef, Bradley Jacob, who also worked at the Château Frontenac. He would often join us for lively discussions, which focused on the many tales and releases of the day. Much of this talk centered around the new camp managers' belief that the future lies in live release.

Mario had learned firsthand from his father that the promise of big fish on a fly line attracts clients and also guarantees employment for members of the band and surrounding communities. He has obviously passed this belief onto his guides, because the next afternoon when Charles gives his live release presentation to the camp



During the author's stay, camp life included drying waders in an ocean breeze (top) and dinner guests such as **Chief** Gerald Ishpatao (3rd from right). Also enjoying a delicious meal served by Chef Bradley Jacob is co-manager Mario Courtois, Bob Walsh, Charles Cusson and Eric Walsh.

staff you could hear a pin drop in the packed main room of the lodge. Then, in an informal, but meaningful ceremony ASF's live release flag is raised.

The boat ride to Brown's Pool, which is about 20 minutes and a short stroll on a sturdy boardwalk from camp, was never boring. The first falls are always a spectacular sight and one day, above the falls we spotted a moose with a massive rack, a big enough twig eater for Charles to nickname it "Greyhound," as in the bus. Whales are often spotted from the camp just offshore and bald eagles, beavers, bears and sea birds are sighted regularly.

Bob, Eric, Charles and a few guests that join us on our last day all get into some serious fish. Big and thick-bodied, the river has sculpted these salmon by presenting them with two very challenging sets of falls.

As usual, I leave the fishing to the others and with Hervé set out to see more of the river. Biologist Gilles Shooner had described a location to me, his favourite he said, known as the Grand Portage. Hervé and I walk the trail to the second falls, passing through thick stands of spruce and walking over lush carpets of feather and sphagnum mosses. Every now and then, Hervé stops and points out a plant his mother used to make a tea, or a salve. It's easy to forget that the forest, what we see as "wilderness," for First Nations is really a garden.

Hervé has taught me much during our time together. One windy day he showed me the most wonderful trick for casting in a very powerful wind. He had me holding my rod high to send the fly line out in snake like fashion. Wave, wave the rod, keep the tip high, he said, excited to see me let out line and then let it loose as the wind carried it over the water. The teacher and student roles reversed up at the second falls, however, where we both were mesmerized by the sight of salmon leaping and swimming up the falls. I showed Hervé how to keep his finger lightly pressed on the camera's shutter and to use the rapid fire option in order to catch a fish in mid air. It was apparent this was the "crux" of the Nabisipi salmon's voyage. To





Left: Co-manager Mario Courtois and guides Christian Mestokosho and Hervé Malec proudly display ASF's live release flag. Right: The author's Innu name (man who falls) with the an Innu greeting, Kué Kué.

be successful they had to use the sides of the current to power up over the rocks, actually travelling via land for short bursts. It's not the first place I have seen this. On the Nipissis, a branch of the Moisie, Mitch Campbell had taken hundreds of photos of similarly shaped fish using the wet rocks to make their way upstream.

The days passed much too quickly. From helping release and photograph the salmon hooked by my fishing companions, to exploring the river and spying giant moose and other wildlife, each moment brought a taste of fresh adventure. Even my mishaps were memorable. I've always been a little maladroit on my feet, and one day, coming back from fishing I stumbled and fell to the ground, and lay there laughing at my own clumsiness.

Laughter was the norm during the five memorable days we had spent together. I learned much, but also felt good about sharing what I knew on live release and photography. To be honest, the Nabisipi was everything I'd

BOB WALSH



hoped for, but almost nothing of what I'd expected. It offers some really special angling, but also true adventure for those who like to explore and discover. Eric Walsh and Mario Courtois are truly committed to offering a unique brand of angling. Their partnership brings new hope to a region where opportunity can be limited.

Opportunities for young Montagnais like Hervé and Christian, and for visitors like me who are lucky enough to spend time with them. As I approach the two guides to say my final goodbyes, the sadness of leaving is broken by their hearty laughter. I can't help but ask what is so funny, already suspecting it's probably something I said or did. Hervé points to Christian and tells me his friend has given me a Montagnais name. Really? I can barely believe it, a dream come true. "L'homme qui tombe," Christian says with a broad smile. "The man who falls." Okay, so perhaps it's not, as hoped, an homage to my salmon angling prowess, but I'll take it. 🐟

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