

*An Alberta Borders & Beyond feature
with Duane Radford*



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he Cree River Lodge is located on Wapata Lake (south of Stony Rapids) in northwest Saskatchewan.

It's serviced by Transwest Air, a Saskatchewan regional airline. Last July, my wife Adrienne and I celebrated a memorable trip at this lodge during National Fishing Week where we targeted pike, and to a lesser degree walleye.

Prior to this trip, she had relatively little experience fly-fishing for pike. I saw this as a good opportunity to give Adrienne a crash course in fly-fishing for pike and bring her up to speed relative to what might otherwise take years fly-fishing for pike elsewhere.

We caught hundreds of pike during our trip and she came away an accomplished pike fly-fisher, catching numerous trophy-size fish. We also had some great fly-fishing for walleye, something we hadn't done previously. We gave the grayling a break.

You don't have to fly-fish for pike at the lodge, most anglers use spinning and bait-casting gear; they may have an advantage over fly-fishers because this gear is better suited to land large pike. However, we matched or exceeded the catches of other anglers during our stay and weren't the least disappointed we'd gone the fly-fishing route.



On the first day of our trip (before lunch) Adrienne chuckled, "Well, we could go home now and this would go down as a great trip!"

By the way, the shore lunch was a diet blaster!

We drove from Edmonton on Highway 16 to Saskatoon, the jumping off centre for flights into northern Saskatchewan. The drive was relaxing, traffic was light and in no time we were in Saskatoon. I was pleasantly surprised that Transwest Air permits two baggage items or 75 pounds total weight of checked baggage per person. We had room to spare—no extra baggage charges. They even unloaded our baggage onto a shuttle and packed it on a Turbo Otter floatplane for the last leg of the trip into the lodge.

The Turbo Otter was in the air shortly after our arrival in Stony Rapids, and before long, we were on the dock at the Cree River Lodge.

We were greeted by lodge owner Pat Babcock from White Fox, Saskatchewan and fishing guide Joel Doran and his spouse Erica Baron, the lodge chef, from St. Benedict, Saskatchewan. Both Joel and Erica are certified Red Seal chefs; Joel specializes in baked goods and Erica in main courses.

Pat has been operating the lodge since 2008; he's an all-around outdoorsman who readers might have met at the Canadian National Boat and Sportsmen shows in Calgary and Edmonton, or at the Red Deer Sportsman Show. After a dinner of homemade tomato soup, fresh dinner rolls, tossed salad, grilled pork chops and steamed rice, blueberry pie and ice cream, we settled into our cozy cabin and got our fishing gear ready for the next day.

The Cree River Lodge offers the "Full American Plan": meals, accommodations, full housekeeping every day. The comfortable cabins were built in 2001-2002 and each cabin accommodates four people. They feature a large sitting area, electric heating, hot and cold running water with a sink, toilet and shower.

Breakfast was served at 7:00 am, basically whatever you'd like including French toast, pancakes, fried/poached eggs, sausages and

IF YOU GO!



For reservations and information June through September, call 1-780-669-3599.

For information year round call 1-877-834-5786.

Cree River Lodge

Lodge Owner – Pat Babcock

www.creeriverlodge.ca

There are numerous bays, islands and channels on Wapata Lake, so you don't have to worry about being blown off the water if there's a windy day. There's always some quiet water close to camp. The Cree River flows through Wapata Lake, keeping the water fresh and the bite active. The 16-foot Lund Alaskans boats are powered by 40-horsepower, 4-stroke Yamaha outboards. They have a spacious open floor design, swivel seats and enclosed storage areas to keep items dry and secure. There was little to snag a fly line on which translated into worry free casting for two fly fishers in a boat. If you've got a hankering for some outstanding fishing for northern pike, walleye and Arctic grayling, put the Cree River Lodge on your bucket list, you won't be disappointed. ■

"We had perfect weather. Slender shoots of equisetum had emerged in the shallow bays, water lilies were budding out and water cabbage was providing cover for the pike."



bacon, toasted homemade bread, apple/orange juice, tea or coffee. For dinners we enjoyed lasagna, garlic toast and tossed salad with a delectable oil and vinegar salad dressing, brownies and ice cream; roasted pork loin topped with cranberry dressing and Greek potatoes, with mixed vegetables and carrot cake. We usually opted for shore lunches, although we did take sandwiches for a day trip up the Cree River. Shore lunches were a daily highlight on an island near "The Narrows" in Wapata Lake. The evening meal was served in the main lodge about 6:00 pm. There's also a bar service.

If you check out the lodge's website you'll get all the information you need if you're going to opt for spin-fishing or bait-casting rigs. For fly-fishers, I'd suggest the following tackle: 8 weight rod with a tip flex for pitching large streamers, large arbour reel, floating line w/50 yards backing (min.), 20-pound monofilament leader (approx. 5 feet) off the floating line, with a terminal titanium leader (min. 9 inches, 30 lb. test). While there are many varieties of (pike) terminal leaders on the market the titanium leaders hold up best.

I'd recommend deceiver fly patterns made of synthetic material, not natural fibres. You'll be doing a lot of casting (to get your fly out) and natural fibres are hard to cast if you're on the water all day. Black and chartreuse are go-to colours. While I used several different fly patterns (cone-head Woolly Buggers, rabbit strip Zonkers and Deceivers) in several different colours, black, chartreuse and yellow caught the most fish, hands down.

Expect to catch some large pike, and rig up accordingly. Your terminal leaders must be rated for large fish, as well as any swivels, reels, line and rods. Big pike are very hard on gear and will destroy underrated lines, rods and reels. Expect to catch lots of pike in the 30- to 40-inch range, with a chance of pike up to 50+ inches. I (argh!) lost a monster that would have taped 45+ inches, which threw my single, barbless hook. Barbless hooks are the law in Saskatchewan so pack some pliers to pinch down the barbs. All large pike are released and only small pike and walleye are kept for shore lunches.

The Cree River Lodge is the only fish camp on Wapata Lake in the Cree River drainage between Cree Lake and Black Lake. There's very little fishing pressure, which translates into good fishing year after year. The open season runs from June 1 to September 15.

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