

## Northern Ontario Trophy Brookies:

ERIC LUND NAVIGATES THE RAPIDS OF THE ESNAGAMI RIVER IN SEARCH OF THE NEXT BROOK TROUT HOLE.

# Esnagami Brookies

THE SCARS NEAR THIS BROOKIE'S TAIL SUGGEST A LUCKY ENCOUNTER WITH AN OSPREY.



The unmistakable sound of a single engine Cessna pierced the early morning silence. We hurried to down our last warm coffee and packed up our remaining gear before the four-seater arrived at the dock in the tiny northern Ontario community of Nakina. It was a bright June morning, but frost still blanketed everything around us and tendrils of mist rose off the lake. Seeing my breath reminded me of just how far north we'd come already. Now we were about to embark on the final leg—a short flight further north to Esnagami Lodge and a much anticipated brook trout adventure.

Our final destination was the Esnagami River, which flows out of Esnagami Lake and eventually feeds the enormous Albany River system. As we flew over the immense network of interwoven lakes, rivers and streams, I daydreamed about the wide variety of fish which swam there—all of which would readily hit a well-presented fly. However, we were after only one—the trophy brookies of the Esnagami River.

As we disembarked from the float plane, we realized this wasn't going to be easy. Water levels had reached 18 year record highs due to abundant rains in the previous weeks, swelling the Esnagami River well beyond its normal flow. The sky had darkened and a cold wind was blowing—a gloomy contrast to the sunny morning which had greeted us

back in Nakina. It was more like April than June, but somehow appropriate for this remote, northern setting and the monster brookies we pursued.

## White Water and White Knuckles

Brook trout fanatics already know that in any brookie quest, a good canoe is usually involved. The Esnagami River's challenging rapids and the fact that we had to come back upstream at the end of the day to rendezvous with the plane required us to use a comfortably wide, square-back freighter canoe equipped with a 9 hp outboard. With Eric Lund, Esnagami Lake Lodge owner, at the tiller, we started our descent downstream—stern first! With the canoe pointed upstream and the motor at barely over idle to keep us in position, we began our descent. I gripped the gunnels tightly as I adjusted to the feeling of descending rapids in a canoe backwards. I quietly wondered how many wet runs it had taken to develop this technique, but this passed, for Eric was with us and he knew what he was doing. Had I been navigating, we'd have been swimming already!



DRAGON FLIES WERE HATCHING ALL AROUND, DESPITE THE UNSEASONABLY COOL WEATHER.

Mere yards below the first set of rapids, Eric pointed the back of the canoe towards shore and tied the bow to a fallen cedar. We shifted gently to parallel the deep bank, and, although there wasn't much in terms of back casting room, we were in position to tempt our first fish of the trip.

With our hearts racing, I looked to Eric for guidance as we sifted through our flies, settling for black and purple leech patterns. Paired up with a 6' fast sinking tip and a short 3' fluorocarbon leader, these patterns would imitate a variety of leeches commonly found in colder northern waters.

SHALLOW GRAVEL BARS ARE PERFECT FOR GETTING OUT OF THE CANOE TO FISH.



The water had the distinct tannic colour consistent with almost all other northern Ontario fisheries. However, it seemed a touch darker than usual, perhaps due to the runoff from the blown banks. Then, just as we cast across the raging, white water and waited for our flies to sink and swing downstream, I saw the first snowflake, and I knew that finding trophy brookies was going to be a challenge.

## Experimenting

Expecting lower flows and warmer temps, we had spent most of our time preparing dry fly gear. Typically, early June would have been a prime time for topwater brookie action. However, given the raging current and colder temps, hatches were late, and the trout had not yet keyed in on the surface for their forage. Instead, we would have to experiment with various streamer and nymph presentations.

But it didn't take us long to key in to what the fish wanted. After drawing a blank with the first few drifts, I paused at the end of the swing,

letting the fly dangle in the current downstream as I started to gaze through my fly box again. Without warning I felt the unmistakable tug of a strike, but my delayed and clumsy reaction came much too late. However,

even though I'd missed the fish, that strike showed us that, even though we were getting the fly down and were giving it a stripping action,



MIKE VERHOEF AND ERIC LUND WITH AN ESNAGAMI RIVER BRUTE! THE FOOTBALL SHAPED BROOKIE WAS FOOLED BY A HEAVILY-WEIGHTED, WHITE ZONKER.

## GETTING THERE

Getting to Esnagami Lake Lodge is easy! From Thunder Bay, one can either drive five hours north to Nakina or fly in by charter. A float plane will then take you to the lodge from Nakina.

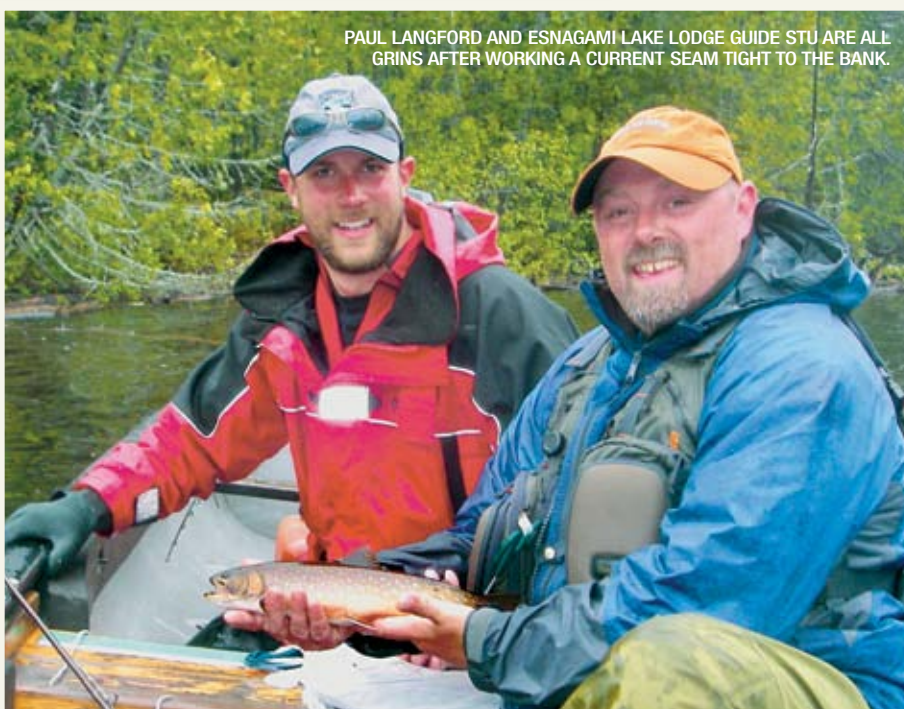
The owners, Eric and Sue Lund, can arrange a custom Esnagami River adventure suitable for all tastes and budgets. Day trips can be booked, and the river can be reached by boat or plane. Canoes with motors are then used to descend the river farther. If you're a true adventurer, Eric and Sue can also arrange for wilderness camping trips, allowing guests to spend a few days exploring farther downstream while camping riverside. For more information about Esnagami Lake Lodge, log on to [www.esnagami.com](http://www.esnagami.com) or give them a ring at (519) 474-6988 in the winter and (807) 329-5209 during the summer.

perhaps the fish wanted a slower approach. Feeling a renewed sense of confidence, I tested this theory, this time giving the fly slack line as it sank heading downstream. Once I was satisfied that the fly had reached at least five feet in depth, I stopped the line, starting the swing across the current. My line straightened next to canoe, and the fly rose slightly as the slack tightened. Two seconds passed and there was that sudden, familiar tug, sending the rod tip towards the water...fish on!


## Reading Water

Not having previous experience with any brook trout water this far north, I was overwhelmed by the urge to cast a fly to nearly every part of the river. Every rock, fallen tree and bend just had a certain "fishiness" to it. However, as the guide quickly pointed out, despite a higher than average brook trout population, the trout were clearly confined to the sections of river with white water or white water access.

During our day-long expedition of the Esnagami River, we navigated through five sets of defined rapids, descending through each as we fished farther and farther downstream. Some sections of rapids would stretch for over a hundred yards, twisting around corners, while others were shorter and straight. Interestingly enough, all 23 of the brook trout we caught that day came within a casting length of rapids, with only river walleye coming from any of the slower sections we felt compelled to fish. This concentration could have been a matter of seasonal brookie behaviour, tied to the higher water flows, or it may have been entirely due to increased oxygen concentration levels found around white water. Regardless of the scientific explanation, one could not deny the association.



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## EQUIPMENT & FLIES

With high water making wading difficult, we spent much of the day fly fishing directly from the canoe. Standing and casting could be done safely at only a few of the locations we stopped to fish, so steeple casting while sitting seemed to be the most feasible approach. Due to our lower center of gravity and decreased elevation off the water while sitting, longer rods such as 9'6" and 10' models helped to make casting easier. Seven weights offered the most backbone and comfort when casting sinking tips. However, had the dry fly action been on, a stiff 6wt paired up with a floating line would have been in order. Don't embark on any true trophy brookie adventure to Esnagami without a few fly boxes full of black, brown, purple and white Zonker patterns, and a selection of traditional streamers such as Mickey Finns and Ghosts. A box of dries and a box of nymphs will round out the collection, ensuring that you're equipped for brookies whatever conditions you encounter.

Last but not least, you'll need bug dope—lots of bug dope! Brook trout thrive in the same surroundings and climates in which black flies thrive, and if you've not yet visited northern Ontario, you'll quickly find out just how big these pests can get! While bug nets can help, the only way to rid yourself (at least temporarily) of the little %\$@#ers is to slap some good ol' 90% DEET on your skin. Just mind your waders and fly line when spraying the goods around.

## Trophies at Last

With constant fishing action throughout the day, it was easy to lose track of time. Before we knew it, we were on our way back upstream in order to rendezvous with the Cessna. As we pushed upstream, we took just enough time to put a fly or two in the holes where we'd caught fish on the way down. It was at one of these that we hooked up with our true trophy—a hefty male brookie which broke the water soon after a solid hook-set on a three-inch white zonker minnow, heavily weighted and dangled at the taylor of the rapids. The fish fought admirably, putting a solid bend in the 7wt rod and giving the large arbour drag a workout. Minutes later, the fish was resting in Eric's

net while the group cheered and high-fived all around. Weighing roughly 4lbs and measuring an impressive 23", the fish gleamed as the weak sunshine burnished its jewelled flank. A few quick pictures, and off it swam back into the depths to fight another day. Losing sunlight with every passing minute, we took a few deep breaths to let the experience sink in, for we had fulfilled our dream of catching a wild trophy brook trout. Not only were we still in awe of its beauty, but also of the ambience of that pristine setting, which seemed so appropriate for this wild, northern fish—a magical moment which will stay with us forever, or at least until we come back! ✨



WITH 19 YEAR HIGH WATER LEVELS, ONCE SHIN DEEP BANKS WERE NEARLY WAIST DEEP. THE BROOK TROUT HOWEVER, DIDN'T SEEM TO MIND.

