

Pro Advice for Fly Fishing in Payne Bay for Arctic Char

I recently experienced World-Class fly-fishing for Arctic Char at Arctic Adventures' Payne River Fishing Camp in the Ungava Bay region where it was possible to catch 40-50 Char a day with a fly rod. And I'm not talking about small fish. The average fish weighed over five pounds, fish between six and ten pounds were common and the camp record is 18 pounds! At the end of each day my arm and shoulder muscles ached from fighting fish. As there has been very little written about fly-fishing for Arctic Char, I thought it might be useful to pass on my experiences for others who are planning a trip – so here goes.

The water

Except for a day trip to the upper camp on the Payne River for Trout you will be fishing in a long salt-water fjord several kilometers wide. The fjord has 40-foot tides that are amongst the highest in the world. These tides turn the fjord into a fast flowing river that changes direction every six hours! The fjord has islands, points and rocky shoals that concentrate the feeding Char just like a river. Fishing from the banks can sometimes be spectacular, with Char hitting the fly every few casts, but we found the most consistent fishing for the biggest Char was from the 24-foot canoes anchored in the current. The Inuit guides know where the fish are but fly fishermen need to get closer to the fish than spin fishermen and fish in water that is no deeper than about 10 feet or so. Look for water with a good current that is shallow enough to still see the light colored rocks on the bottom. As the tides are constantly changing, you will need to move position regularly. Slack water also holds char but the fish tend to be smaller.

Rods

You probably already have the rods you need. Any rod between 6 and 8 weight and at least 9 feet long will be fine. I did most of my fishing with a 10 ft, 6 weight. You don't need to be a casting champion to catch these fish. You must have a spare rod though as the fish are very strong and any weakness in the rod, such as a nick or scratch, will result in a break and the nearest tackle shop in 1500 km away.

Lines

You will need two lines. The first, and most important, is a full sinking line with a sink rate of at least 6 inches/second. If you are buying a line especially for the trip, get a "uniform sink" line where the tip sinks as fast as the belly. This is the most useful line and casts very well in the wind. The biggest fish are in the faster water and if the line is not getting the fly down quickly you will pass over a lot of fish. Don't go without this line!

The second should be a weight forward floating line. This is used to catch Char on the surface, which is fantastic sport.

Sink tip and slower sinking lines will certainly catch fish under some conditions but the two mentioned are what you really need. Whatever lines you use, 100 yards of backing is the absolute minimum.



Leaders

When fishing with a sinking line I tied a three foot tippet directly to the leader loop on the end of the line. In fast water the Char are not line shy even with as little as a foot of tippet.

A short tippet helps to get the fly down quickly.

With a floating line you don't need a long leader either; a six to eight foot leader is ample. I used 10 pound Trilene spinning line for tippets, which is a lot less expensive than the tippet material sold for fly-fishing. I also found that it's much stronger than ten-pounds.

Flies

The Char feed on a variety of food items including, shrimp, sand eels and a smelt-like fish called a capelin. The capelin are the easiest to imitate, as they are present in the faster water where the Char have less time to examine the fly. We experimented with many styles, sizes and colors of flies. We also tied additional flies in the evenings. Here is my short list:

1. Double Bunny (Black on top and light brown on the bottom)
2. Millbrook
3. Grey Ghost
4. Buck tail streamers (Black/ chartreuse and black/ orange.)
5. Sheep Shagger

We examined the stomach contents of several Char, and the capelin we are trying to imitate are gray or silver; 3-4 inches long and are quite slim. For best results the flies need to be the same size.

The largest flies I could find in my local fly shops were tied on size 2, 4XL hooks and were, at most, 2.5 inches long so you may have to do some searching or tie your own. Occasionally these small flies were the most productive but most of the time flies 3 inches or more in length were better.

If you tie your own flies coat the body material with epoxy or several coats of varnish as the Chars' teeth are very sharp and once a fly loses its body material the fly is less effective. Don't worry about extending the wing well beyond the end of the hook to make the fly long enough – I don't think a Char knows what a short take is! No need to weight the flies as only a fast sinking line will get the fly down properly. Dress the flies lightly. A good hook to start with would be size 2, 6XL. Don't use flies with tandem hooks as they get tangled in the net and make it difficult to release the fish quickly.

Lots of other patterns caught fish, such as Muddlers, Surf Candies and Clouser Minnows so you don't have to limit yourself to the listed patterns. Try your favorites.

Flies that worked poorly for us included some normally very good patterns such as Woolly Buggers and Mickey Finns. Expect the Char to destroy up to 10 flies/ day.

Fishing methods

With a sinking line, fish down and across just as you would fish a streamer in a river. If you don't get a hit on the swing, retrieve the line by fast stripping. Fish will often follow the fly and take it just as it comes to the surface.



You will often see Char feeding just below the surface. They are easy to see as they make a big swirl even in fast water. If you allow a fly to drift over them it will usually be ignored. Cast to these fish with a floating line and a big streamer or Muddler Minnow and start to retrieve the fly immediately. As the Char comes after the fly (you will see the wake), pull it away. Within seconds the Char will come again. This time stop the retrieve as the Char gets close and you will often get a savage take. This is really exciting sport! Shrimp and sand eel imitations fished slowly in slack water can also be effective.

One last point: bend the barbs down on your flies so the fish can be released without harm. This is a special place. Let's help to keep it that way.

Article by John Beaven, who has fished several years at Payne River and Tunulik II fishing camps with Arctic Adventures.

