A Vital Force

A WILD FISH THAT BROKE FREE AGES AGO CONTINUES TO INFLUNCE HOW THE ARTIST DEPICTS RIVERS, GUIDES AND FLY FISHING ON THE GASPÉ PENINSULA

BY GALEN MERCER

In the Tail of the Pool

The first Atlantic salmon I ever hooked was a bright fish traveling up the Matapedia River on Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula. This was in the early '80s, and I was the guest of friends who'd brought me to the region to experience something they felt was both vital and perhaps already disappearing. That they proved right on both counts is bittersweet.

The region then had a darker, cooler presence, for logging had yet to fully alter the native mix of trees. Black spruce, white pine and cedar still mantled the steepest hillsides, whose pitched and runnelled flanks caught light in dramatic fashion. The air retained — seemed to amplify — aromas of deep forest and hidden spring seeps, issuing forth spiraling fogs and ethereal river mists. The place dripped with moss and mystery, and a brooding quality seemed to hang over it all. Within minutes of reaching the headwaters I saw my first bald eagle.

It was mid-June, and we were fishing in the public sector on a long pool known as Cullen's Rock. This reach of the Matapedia, early in salmon season, is fire-hose compressed and commands an angler's attention. You place your feet carefully, and part of your mind is always factoring the next step. Even lucid, the river runs a distinct ochre-sienna (thanks to its bog origins), and large unseen boulders direct and distort the current in vigorous swells you read with the eye of a gunner calculating leads. It had been a slow week, but despite a frustrating absence of fish, hordes of carnivorous gnats and a preternatural ability to snap flies off on every third backcast, I remained brimming with enthusiasm when the line finally drew taut.

Experienced salmon anglers know this specific humming tightness — it's the whole point for some — but a decade on trout waters had left me unprepared for resistance of this register. It came as a

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In Salmon Camp

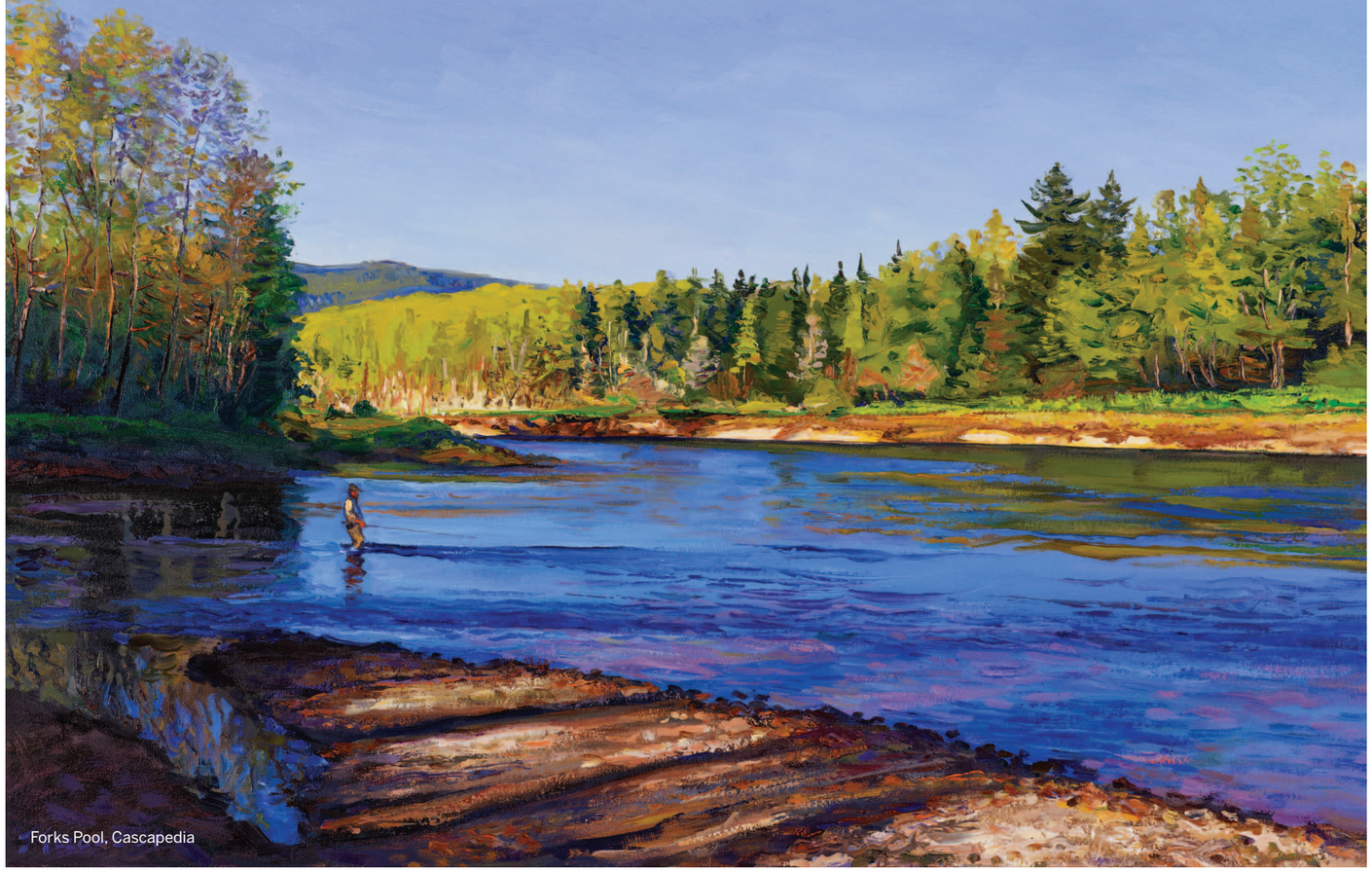
Guide and Salmon

At Richard's Pool

shock. Compounded by the high water, my anticipation and dread intermingled. I inhaled, fussed with the drag knob and braced for what I imagined was going to be an ordeal. In fact, the fight proved quite brief. Facing a powerful 9-foot rod and 20-pound leader, a 6-pound grilse seldom makes much of an account. Still, I was thrilled. Apart from my long-anticipated initiation, the small fish was silver-platter beautiful. It seemed that a challenge had been met and bested, and that I'd measured up. After congratulations, a self-satisfied daze escorted me back upriver to resume fishing.

Remember, this account actually concerns my first salmon, which came shortly after beginning down the run again. Delighted with this piece of déjà vu, and already feeling like a veteran, I responded to this second fish by raising the rod tip and initiating the drill for a scrap. This never actually occurred because, before shore was even contemplated, 110 feet of fly line had sluiced off downriver, and the reel began issuing sounds I wouldn't have associated with any piece of machinery.

The rod tip started bucking so savagely that it seemed possible I'd hooked a drifting tree — it was palpably frightening — and a laser of whirring backing sliced my hand. I stumbled, nearly breaking the rod, then attempted to navigate shoreline boulders without submerging. The reel's awful wail increased steadily, and, deeply alarmed, I noticed its core had become visible, though the fish had yet to. Panic welled. While I processed exactly what I appeared to be attached to, the leader abruptly sheared. This felt much like a head slap and produced an ear-ringing disorientation. Below trailed a vanishing perspective of line and backing, oddly comic, so far away it inscribed a distant bend. The way people recount phantom limbs that remain eerily susceptible to touch, I can still sense the profound mayhem that fish embodied. Literally, I never knew what hit me. This momentous shellacking went a long way toward cementing my lifelong relationship with the Gaspé,



Forks Pool, Cascapedia

The Stand

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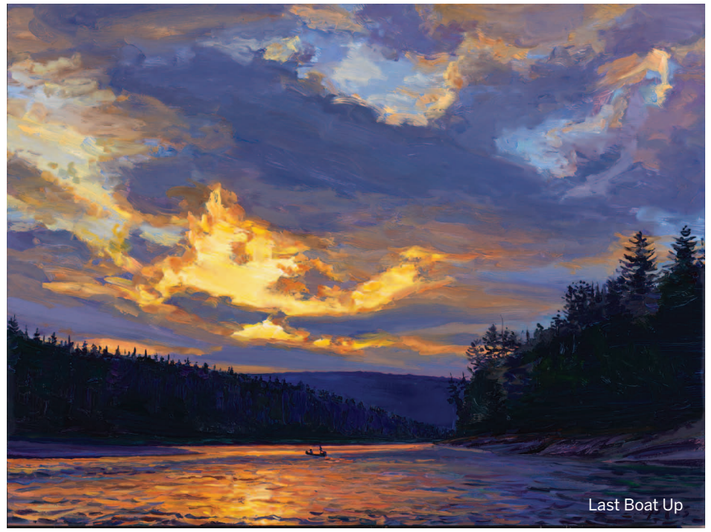

Last Boat Up

one that decades of subsequent pilgrimages have only affirmed.

Asked to render a painter's account of the Gaspé, I found it easy to conjure mornings that develop slowly out of the mists, mountains appearing and disappearing again on the whim of a breeze, that strange azure-green refulgence that characterizes rivers in last light, the rich orange of tannic water stretched in midflight over a falls, intent crowds of herons fanned out on a dawn tidal flat. The beauties of the peninsula are legion, and they crowd the memory.

The Gaspé has been a magnet for painters in general, and sporting artists in particular, for more than a century. On rivers up and down the Baie des Chaleurs, such famous painters as Dodge MacKnight, Frank Benson, Willard Metcalf and Ogden Pleissner made regular pilgrimages, capturing their stays with wonderful images of the rivers, camps and guides they knew. The raw beauty of the valleys has inspired such superb Canadian colorists as Clarence Gagnon and René Richard, among others, and the great American abstract painter Milton Avery once summered on the Gaspé, achieving a breakthrough in his poetic style that would ultimately influence Mark Rothko. Some years ago, forced from the river by high water, I made a pilgrimage up to the village of Rivière-au-Renard, where Avery took a small farmhouse in the '30s to prospect the coast and paint, and was able to locate the settings of several of his Gaspé scenes.

For all this, attempts to distill the precise reason I continue to return always end up recalling that lost fish. First and foremost, the Gaspé is a vital force. In consequence of that episode, I've grown to prefer a remove or distant perspective in painting the rivers, one that emphasizes the area's grand scale and our own insignificance. Although it would be within acceptable traditions of sporting painting to seize on and aggrandize streamside successes, I can't quite get past the mystery, humility and wonder that first salmon suggested.