

This picture: the Restigouche River, New Brunswick, Canada. Below right: anglers line up in a long salmon line on the Miramichi River



LORD OF THE FLIES

Salmon fishing in New Brunswick is an angler's dream for Sebastian Hope, but only after he masters the idiosyncratic vernacular of the local flies

It is said that Father Elmer Smith, a fisher of salmon as well as of men, conceived of a new kind of fly one evening in 1960 when he threw his cigar butt into the Miramichi River, and watched a salmon rise to it repeatedly as it floated downstream. He tied an imitation out of trimmed deer hair and so was born the Bomber (pictured overleaf). It is a pattern that has earned a place in fly boxes worldwide.

They are proud of their salmon fishing heritage in New Brunswick. The first sporting camps date back to the mid-19th century. In contrast to the gaudy "classic" flies of the time, New Brunswick flies were expressions of the vernacular, made of the materials to hand, with names to match. Black Bear Red Butt, Black Bear Green Butt, Black Bear Orange Butt... I have never been convinced such minor colour changes can make a real difference to the fish, but local angler Doug Underhill and his fishing buddy Dave Ingersoll are discussing the matter with some vigour in the back of the SUV and I don't interrupt.

"I asked Herb's boy to tie me up some Killer Whiskers with blue butts and you should try them. We'll go by Herb's shop this afternoon." When we get to the river

Gary Colford, our guide, looks at my flies. "Where d'you get these?" I tell him about the clapboard house on the highway, the sign "Salmon Flies", the old man picking Colorado beetles off his potato plants. "That's Vaughan Arbeau, used to be a guide, but his flies won't work on the Miramichi; they're Cains River flies."

The Miramichi system drains the wild heart of New Brunswick and lays claim to being the most prolific Atlantic salmon fishery in North America. The river is split into two branches, and the larger, the South West Main, has its own network of fishable tributaries, such as the Cains, Renous and Dugarvon Rivers. The lower sections flow through farmland and settlements and the ownership, often on a pool-by-pool basis, is a patchwork of public and private. It is unusual for neighbouring pools to be owned by the same person and although there are a few lodges, such as Wilson's Sporting Camps, which have private access to a longer stretch of water, the best approach is that adopted by Byron Coughlan of Country Haven Lodge & Cottages, who leases pools up and down the river in addition to the ones he owns outright.

Gary puts me into the pool just below the road bridge. I wade out on the smooth gravel bed fringed with



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If the Miramichi is the most accessible of North America's salmon rivers, the Restigouche is the most exclusive. At one point the whole river became private

waving water weed, the current moving at a smooth pace and deceptively strong even in this low water. Gary ties on another Miramichi classic, the Green Machine, and points to where a line of dimples marks the surface. "That's where they lie, that's the very best."

As I work downstream, the others step in behind me until there are four of us fishing down the pool. Most pools are big enough to accommodate multiple anglers, and some are equipped with chairs where fishermen wait their turn in the rotation. There is a shout from upstream; it is Dave, third in line, who has hooked a salmon, and then loses it. Gary goes up to see, and on his way Doug, fourth man in, rolls a fish. Gary beckons me back to the top of the pool. I change to a Killer Whiskers. The Miramichi style is to float the dry fly over the fish in a dead drift, picking it up the moment it starts to drag. It is intense, focusing on the fly in its short drift, expecting it to be engulfed at any moment, but the surface action has stopped. I change back to the Green Machine, and land a small grilse.

Herb's Fly Shop is a shed in his driveway. His son, who drives trucks on the Trans-Canada Highway, ties the flies. Doug points to the wet flies in a cabinet. "You should get some of those. Ask him what they're called." "What're these called, Herb?" "Same Thing, Murray." "Ask him why they are called that." "Why're they called that, Herb?" "Two sports, fishing up here for a week, one catchin' a lot of fish, the other asks his friend what're they biting on. So the first time he tells him it's this new fly he just tied up, don't have a name yet. He keeps on hooking fish, and his friend keeps on asking, and he keeps on saying, 'Same thing, Murray,' so that's what he called it." It is not doing me much good that evening. Dave hooks and lands a 14lb fish on the Killer Whiskers. As the bats come out, a salmon rises to my Bomber, but does not take.

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Clockwise from top left: a selection of Bombers, a salmon fly invented on the Miramichi River. Keith Vanacore, a co-owner of Larry's Gulch Lodge, hooks a 21lb salmon on the Restigouche. Vanacore holds his catch

originally from Quebec. "But we're in Quebec now," he says. The Restigouche forms the border between the two provinces, and two time zones. Anchored at the top of Ledges pool, I am casting to the Quebec shore, and on the first drop a salmon swirls at my

fly. "He didn't feel the hook?" asks Gerry. "Sit down and wait a minute. That's a working fish." It is a long minute. "Now shorten up about a yard and do the same cast." The fish comes again and takes the fly and I lift my rod into it. It jumps twice and stays on. "Looks better than 20lb." He has just pulled up the anchor to go ashore when the line goes slack.

Another fish comes at my fly on the next drop, and we can see it is even bigger. I suggest changing again to a Green Machine, but Jacques says they don't use Miramichi flies up here. We go back to the Restigouche classic, the Rusty Rat. By the time we reach the end of the pool, and the end of my fishing, I have risen five fish, hooked a grilse and lost a good salmon, but put nothing in the net. Over lunch, Keith tells me by way of encouragement about all the 30-pounders they had in 2011, that there are 50- and 60-pounders out there, and I am glad to hear it; it's hard to feel disappointed for long while eating hot lobster with melted butter. +

REEL-GOOD FACTOR

Sebastian Hope travelled as a guest of the **Canadian Tourism Commission** (www.keepexploring.ca) and **Tourism New Brunswick** (www.tourismnewbrunswick.ca). Miramichi salmon season is April 15-Oct 15; Restigouche, May 1-September 30; late June-late July is prime time. UK agents **Aardvark McLeod** (01980-847 389; www.aardvarkmcleod.com) and **Go Fishing Worldwide** (020-8742 1556; www.gofishingworldwide.co.uk) have availability on both rivers. **Country Haven Lodge and Cottages**, +1506-843 9010; www.miramichifish.com, from about £321 per person per night all inclusive. **Larry's Gulch Lodge**, +1506-284 3404/+1506-444 4863; www.larrysgulch.ca, from £1,043 per person for two nights all inclusive. **Restigouche River Lodge**, +1506-759 8112; www.restigouchelodge.com, from about £1,928 per person per week all inclusive. **Wilson's Sporting Camps**, +1506-365 7962; www.wilsonscamps.nb.ca, from about £450 per person per night all inclusive. **Air Canada** (0871-220 1111; www.aircanada.com) flies from Heathrow to Moncton via Halifax, Montreal or Toronto, from £1,160.

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