

# Planning a Hunt for New Brunswick Woodcock

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ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN STYGA



slice of fat salt pork. In skittering, you wade along the shore, casting beyond the weeds, and give the bait a darting motion by rhythmic jerking of the pole.

As I later learned, there are more sophisticated methods that provide more sport. A 7½-foot, 4-ounce rod with a balanced line and reel enables a pickerel to spend more time in the water doing its thing, rather than flying helplessly through the air. Since heaving a large shiner on a fly rod is impractical, such light-tackle pickerel fishing is best conducted from a boat. This, too, opens up new possibilities.

The cod line of my cane-pole days was proof against the pickerel's needle-sharp teeth, but I found the fish could easily cut through a fly line. So I began using a 4-foot monofilament leader. First I tried heavy leaders in the 15- to 20-pound-test range and the fish clipped them with ease. Then I went down to 2-pound-test, and these gossamer strands seemed to slide between the fish's teeth. The two-pound-test also adds sport to playing a good-sized fish, but if a tooth happens to get in the way—goodbye fish and lure.

The only fail-safe leader is a short wire trace. In certain types of fishing, such as live-lining shiners or trolling, wire works well, for it helps to keep the bait down where it belongs. In other fishing, it can detract from the action of your lure. It's a choice you have to make.

The main staple of a pickerel's diet is other fish of a swallowable size. Shiners and small panfish are among the top baits. Pickerel generally grab baitfish crosswise and then return to the weeds to juggle them lengthwise and swallow them. If you set the hook on this initial run, you'll yank it out of the fish's mouth. When the swallowing process begins and the pickerel feels the barb, it will make another quick rush. Now is the time to set the hook—hard.

High on the list of artificials are bucktail and streamer flies. When I first started using them, I chose a red-and-white bucktail as a rough imitation of a perch belly. Tied on a long-shanked No. 8 hook, I found that it handled more deftly than a natural perch belly. I could cast it into pockets in the pads or close beside weed clumps and give it a darting crippled-minnow action. I also tried white marabou streamers, but then I found I didn't have to be so choosy—the pickerel weren't. Gray Ghosts, Black Ghosts, 9-3's, Edson Tigers, Supervisors—the pickerel liked these and other patterns just as well. For this kind of fishing, a 7½ to 8-foot fly rod with a fairly stiff action is ideal.

This is one kind of fishing where a wire trace doesn't work. It makes casting difficult and detracts from the action of the fly. You have to use a fine monofilament leader and hope for the best.

Plugs are equally efficient attractors

when cast or trolled on a 7-foot bait-casting outfit. Pickerel will often take surface lures splashed noisily off the weed beds, but I've had better success with minnow-shaped underwater plugs, both the floating-diving kind and, for deeper waters, deep-running plugs.

Green plugs and yellow ones in scale or frog finish usually produce well, and so do combinations of red-and-white, black-and-white, and red-and-yellow. Solid black plugs are occasional killers, too. Cast them to the edge of the weeds and retrieve them at various speeds and depths with jerks and twitches.

It's the metal lures, though—spoons and spinners—that are the most consistently productive of all artificials. Gold, silver, and copper, hammered or plain, are all excellent. An added advantage with spoons is that some of them can be of the so-called weedless variety. They can be hauled through thick vegetation about four times out of five.

One summer day on Cobbosseecontee Lake—abbreviated to Cobbossee by those who live near it, around Gardiner, Maine—John Webster and I were casting copper wobblers along the edge of a weed-choked cove when a miniature tidal wave erupted from its center. It was obvious that a large fish was feeding there, and I flung my lure into the ripples caused by the disturbance. Before I had retrieved the wobbler 2 feet the hook was stuck in a mass of lilies.

John started to paddle into the cove so I could release my hook but I stopped him. "Before we spoil this spot, toss a weedless lure in there," I suggested.

He cast a silver spoon close to shore and we watched it slither over the pads and drop into little openings as he reeled rapidly, holding his rod tip high. Suddenly a wide V-wave came streaking through the weeds. The spoon disappeared in a flurry of spray and John's rod bowed sharply.

In the end, we had to paddle into the cove to net the fish, festooned with lily pads, but John wouldn't have hooked it at all without a weedless lure. It weighed 5¼ pounds, and that's a king-size pickerel.

Trolling is an excellent way to catch pickerel, and a stiff-action bait-casting rod is a good tool for this, as well as for casting plugs and spoons. Trolling a shiner alone is good, but trolling a shiner attached to a spinner more than doubles its effectiveness.

I like a spinner with a single hook rather than a treble. I think it hooks better and is less likely to be thrown by a pickerel. Spinners dressed with bucktail have given me good results.

In pickerel fishing you don't need to wait for dawn or dusk. Even in August, when other action is slow, they'll be lying in the shade of the pads, just waiting for prey. You don't need an electronic fishfinder. They're going to be in the weedy shallows.

One exception is an offshore, submerged weed bed, which can be a bonanza—a bed like the one Tom Ashe and I found by accident on Lake Champlain.

We were proceeding along the Otter Creek section, on the Vermont side, when my outboard motor conked. A fairly stiff breeze carried us some distance offshore while I dithered with the engine. Tom sat in the bow, dragging a shiner-baited spinner, and all of a sudden he hooked a pickerel. This seemed surprising so far from shore but when he netted it there was a strand of weed on the leader.

We took shore bearings and when I got the motor perking, we went back there and trolled. The weeds lay about 10 feet below our keel and when we trolled our lures slowly some 3 feet above their tips, we began catching pickerel with gratifying regularity. The bed yielded a half-dozen pickerel up to 4 pounds in weight.

This is a relaxed kind of fishing—until you hook a fish. Pickerel frequently come out of water, sometimes cartwheeling, but mostly they rely on short, sharp runs—into the weeds if they can get there—shaking lunges, and determined attempts to roll up in your line. When you get them into the boat they can clamp down on thumb or finger so it's wise to use a hook disgorgor.

Pickerel are great lure-followers, often easing along behind a spoon or plug until you lift it from the water. Sometimes if you trace a quick figure 8 with your rod tip, it will goad the fish into a strike.

A great boon to pickerel fishing has been the development of spinning tackle with its array of bite-size plugs, spoons, spinners, and weighted streamers. And a spinning rod can deliver them with pinpoint accuracy and delicacy to hard-to-reach pad pockets and openings. It was a spinning outfit that gave me a chance to renew my acquaintance with the overgrown pickerel in a certain small Cape pond.

The pond's shoreline is completely bordered by a wide bed of pads and there is no way to launch a boat. In the old cane-pole days we used to wade in and loft our baits over the pads. With a spinning outfit, I was able to sail a ¼-ounce spoon far out into clear water.

I let it sink and then began retrieving it with a few jerks and twitches. As it neared the pads, something jerked back and line began to skirl from the reel. Minutes later I netted a 3-pound pickerel. Wandering slowly around the shore beneath a hot August sun, I took four more sizable fish.

Pickerel flesh is white, flaky, and delicious, but held together by numerous fine Y-shaped bones. As with shad, if you fillet them and bake the fillets in milk in a 250-degree oven for four hours or so, these fine bones will completely dissolve.





■ For more years than a guy my age will usually admit, I have hunted woodcock over most of the Eastern states. Nearly everyone who hunts migratory birds will sooner or later get to thinking about hunting the Maritime Province of New Brunswick. It's famous for the long-beaked bird. About 15 years ago, an old friend invited me to hunt with him there and I became addicted to New Brunswick. It is a rare fall when you don't find me headed north about the first week of October to renew my quest for what a few of us call the grandest game bird of all.

Many gunners are dedicated woodcock hunters, yet they never venture north of the border. What I'm about to do is give these hunters a nudge that may start them on their way to some unforgettable hunting experiences.

Are there more birds in New Brunswick? Well, maybe, but as any woodcock hunter worth a spot of chalking knows, birds are where you find them and it is a here-today-gone-tomorrow game. More birds? Probably not, but possibly more concentrated. At any rate, New Brunswick has a special aura with regard to woodcock.

This is country where, until a few years ago, many hunters thought all woodcock went to nest. This is just as farfetched as saying all woodcock winter in Louisiana. Facts about woodcock have been so shrouded in mystery that only in recent years have we come to know much about its reclusive lifestyle. We know that the birds nest across the Eastern and Central states plus the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes—yet New Brunswick remains the Mecca of the woodcock hunter.

My home is in New England, but New Brunswick is where my fall begins. When the night air at home crisps with its promise of fall, it awakes my fever to hunt. By the September 20 opener, the season in the upper parts of New Brunswick has already changed: Leaves are not only colored but they are falling. The hunter's moon is upon us, and while New England covers are still green my favorite covers in New Brunswick are ideal for hunting.

To me, a perfect fall would be to start hunting the upper part of New Brunswick at the end of September and migrate with the woodcock as they move ahead of the cold weather, ending up in Georgia in time to quit and go home for a New England Christmas with my family. A fantasy unlikely I'll ever attain, but I have had the pleasure of intercepting woodcock at various points along this migration route.

The covers in New Brunswick are very diversified. There is an abundance of good habitat—hillsides with birch and poplar and small evergreens, streams with rich bottom soil,

alder runs with new expanding growth along their edges and earthworm-rich soil on the bottom.

As in New England, there are unlikely covers that only an experienced hunter or bird-wise guide would know of. I recall one such cover in the lower part of the province. I was hunting with the late Lloyd ("Maggie") MacDonald, who guided out of McAdam. The day had been slow and by three in the afternoon I had bagged only four birds. I wasn't disturbed over this, as a full limit is no way to measure a good or bad day. However, guides are often quite competitive and Maggie never liked to see other hunters come in with more birds than the hunter he was guiding.

We had been working back toward McAdam and I could see that Maggie was doing a lot of thinking about ways to fatten my bag of birds. In fact, he had a spot in mind. He was well aware I knew what to look for in classic bird cover, and the one he was thinking of didn't have the attributes I would expect. Hoping to soften me, he told me he knew a spot that didn't look "birdy" but often produced—and as it was hardly out of our way to camp, why not give it a try? Naturally I agreed.

He was partly right. That little bit out of the way turned out to be 5 miles in the opposite direction over a well-worn logging road. That part of his story was pretty bad. On the other two counts, he was right on. It sure didn't look like bird cover. It was an area of about 5 acres, nearly surrounded by deep woods. However, a stream bordered one side. Once this had been a barn lot for some long-gone hardscrabble farmer. Brush and scrub trees, some 30 feet high, intermingled with old rotted apple trees. It was a near jungle. The second thing he was right about were the birds. In the short bit of shooting time left that day, I filled my eight-bird limit and flushed as many more. I guess the moral of this would be, never underestimate the value of a New Brunswick bird guide.

As most woodcock hunters know, hunting without a dog is a dismal affair. A great percentage of the birds are never flushed and finding a dead woodcock without the help of a dog's nose is a study in frustration. To a woodcock hunter, a dog is as important as his gun. This is just as true in New Brunswick covers as anywhere else and you can easily take your dog or dogs along.

When you cross into Canada, you need a health certificate from your vet, stating that your dog is free from infectious or contagious diseases, including rabies. The rabies vaccination certification must have been within thirty-six months before your entry to Canada. These papers are needed again on re-entry to The States, and the time limit on vaccination may vary. To insure against problems, I

have my dogs vaccinated every twenty-four months and I get a health certificate in the weeks before I'm going to cross the border. It's also a good idea to carry your dogs' license papers in case you have to prove ownership.

Some outfitters have kennel space for hunting dogs; others merely have tie-outs at dog houses. I have yet to see a good setup. I take my dogs in a box that is their home away from home. The box with straw for a bed provides warmth and security, making both the trip and the time away from home easy on the animals. I travel in a pickup truck with a covered rear section, but boxes or crates for station wagons and even cars can be rigged for the needs of your dogs.

A few outfitters have bird dogs and others sometimes have guides who own dogs. Expect to pay extra for the dog, but usually it is money well spent.

Suitable guns for woodcock in New Brunswick are the same as needed Stateside. I prefer a light 20 gauge, open-choked, and either No. 8 or No. 9 skeet loads. Of course, don't stay home if the only gun you hunt with is a 12 or 16 gauge, but don't take a gun with a tight choke. Grouse are a bonus after October 1, and No. 8 field loads are the best bet for both birds.

Most guns are no problem at the border, but handguns are forbidden. A handgun could be checked at customs, but I recommend that you leave yours at home.

Canada has a new gun-control law, but it does not apply to sporting guns. All types of shotguns—pumps, autoloaders, and doubles—are okay. Before entering Canada, stop at the American customs and get a certificate of registration on your guns. This is very important. If you fail to do it, you may find yourself leaving your pet shotgun at the border on the way back into the States. If you carry any expensive camera equipment, I recommend that you register this, as well. These registrations are permanent, so retain the slips for future border crossings. This will save having to register the same guns the next time.

Automobile insurance in Canada is compulsory, and minimum coverage is \$100,000 liability and property damage. This sounds easy and it is, but just because you have this coverage doesn't mean you are all set. Contact your agent. He will furnish you with a special card stating that your policy is in effect and that it covers you while in Canada. These cards are not permanent; a new one is needed each time you travel across the border. An accident in Canada without this card could cost you the car.

Of course, planning ahead is necessary. In reality, there are only a few outfitters who truly know woodcock hunting. It is easy to print "Woodcock" in a hunting brochure, but guides who know the game and how





to hunt the long-beaked bird are few and far between. I have compiled a list of half a dozen camps and outfitters spread across the province. Although I have hunted with some of these outfitters, I am depending on information from friends concerning others. These outfitters are in areas with plenty of woodcock cover and should be able to show you good hunting.

In the Tobique Valley and northwest section, Fred Webb & Sons are at Nictau. The mailing address is Plaster Rock, N.B., Canada EOJ IWO. The phone is (506) 356-8312.

As you move down the western side of the province, the Governors Table Camps are in the Juniper area. Write to Hugh ("Hoot") Smith, Box 282, Hartland, N.B., Canada EOJ 1NO. Phone (506) 246-5333.

One of the best-known woodcock camps in the province was operated by the late George Wheelock. It's Loon Bay Lodge, located near St. Stephen, and it has been re-opened by Peter Garnet. Write Loon Bay Lodge, St. Stephen, N.B., Canada. The phone is (506) 466-4553 or 466-1240.

Moving up into the center of the province, there are two camps specializing in woodcock. One outfitter is Charles Pond, Box 8, Ludlow, N.B.,

Canada. The phone is (506) 369-2228. The second is Wilson Sporting Camps Ltd.; write Karl Wilson, McNamee, N. B., Canada EOC IPO. The phone is (506) 365-7962.

The northeast section has the Myles Wishart Hunting & Fishing Camps. Write Myles Wishart, Box 124, Tabusintac, N.B., Canada EOC 2AO. The phone is (506) 779-9230.

Of course, there are more outfitters in the province than I'm able to list here. A booklet called *New Brunswick Accommodations* is available from Tourism New Brunswick, Box 12345, Fredericton, N.B., Canada E3B 5C3. While much of this booklet is devoted to travel information, starting on page 62 you will find plenty of the needed information on hunting and fishing camps. When writing, also request the booklet called *Canada Travel Information*. This covers everything you need to know about crossing the border and traveling in Canada. An excellent road map is also available.

For information on hunting laws, write the Fish and Wildlife Branch, Department of Natural Resources, Box 6000, Fredericton, N. B., Canada E3B 5C3. Ask for the Summary of Game Laws and a copy of Migratory Bird Regulations. Speaking of mi-

gratory birds reminds me—you need a Migratory Game Bird Permit to hunt woodcock in Canada. It's available in Canadian post offices and the fee is \$3.50.

For years, a nonresident hunter in New Brunswick was required to have a licensed guide. One guide could serve two hunters. For the 1978 season, the law was changed and a structured license system was inaugurated. A nonresident could hunt without a guide, but the license fee was a whopping \$175. If you hunted with a licensed guide, the fee dropped to \$100—and when you were registered at a licensed outfitter it dropped to \$35.

Hunting laws are similar to those encountered at home. A shotgun must be plugged to hold no more than three shells, and a garment, such as a vest, of hunter's orange is mandatory.

New Brunswick bag limits are generous. The daily limit of woodcock is eight and you can have sixteen in possession. The ruffed grouse is a bonus bird you are bound to pick up while hunting woodcock as their covers overlap; the limit is six a day and twelve in possession.

It is possible that the structured license system I mentioned will be changed back to the mandatory guide and only one nonresident license fee. Whichever way it goes, I advise you to book your hunt with an outfitter. Full-time guides know the country and the game. A pleasant and memorable hunt is usually the result. Outfitter rates vary, but a good outfitter will charge between \$300 and \$400 for a week of woodcock hunting. The license, of course, is extra. A week usually starts with your arrival Sunday afternoon. You're on your way down the road next Saturday morning.

For years, I hunted a big triangle formed by Woodstock on the north, Fredericton on the east, and St. Stephen to the south. I also experienced good hunting north of Fredericton, around Stanley. The last few seasons I've hunted the Tobique River Valley, from the Fred Webb & Sons outfit at Nictau. The fact is, I have found woodcock in all areas of New Brunswick. I suppose you might like it if I marked my favorite covers on a road map of New Brunswick. Well, think again, because you are dealing with the wrong guy. The one thing I failed to tell you earlier is that woodcock hunters are a secretive lot, and I'm no exception. However, the guides I know in New Brunswick are not secretive at all and they can show you plenty of birds. If you look sharp the first week of October, you will probably find me and a pair of Brittany spaniels in a woodcock cover about halfway between Perth-Andover and Riley Brook. See you there.