

weekend *at* Weatherby's

If only for a few days, a stay at this century-old Maine resort is not just a memorable fishing trip, but a classic experience of historical proportions.

Story & Photography by Cliff Hauptman





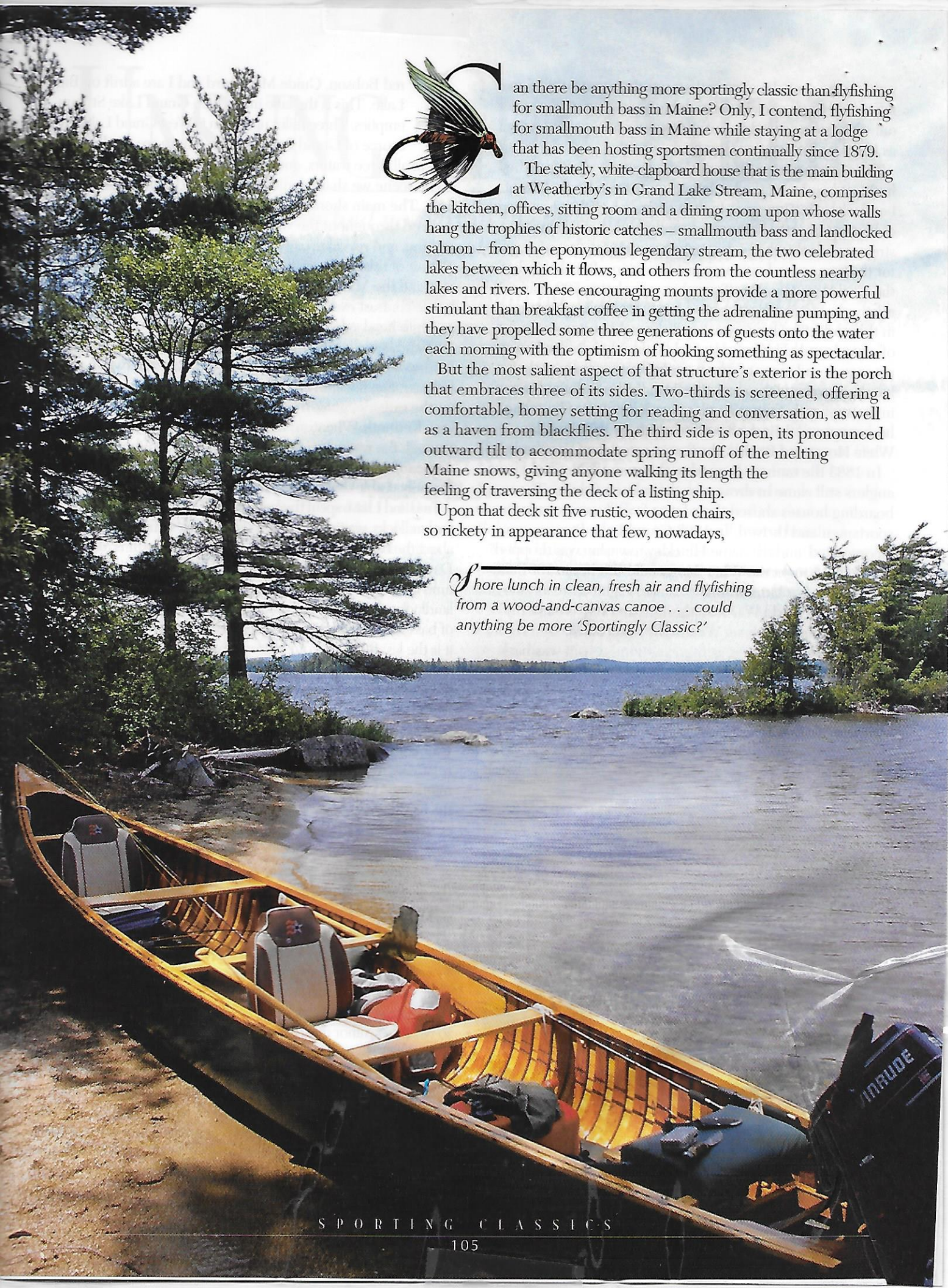
Can there be anything more sportingly classic than flyfishing for smallmouth bass in Maine? Only, I contend, flyfishing for smallmouth bass in Maine while staying at a lodge that has been hosting sportsmen continually since 1879.

The stately, white-clapboard house that is the main building at Weatherby's in Grand Lake Stream, Maine, comprises the kitchen, offices, sitting room and a dining room upon whose walls hang the trophies of historic catches – smallmouth bass and landlocked salmon – from the eponymous legendary stream, the two celebrated lakes between which it flows, and others from the countless nearby lakes and rivers. These encouraging mounts provide a more powerful stimulant than breakfast coffee in getting the adrenaline pumping, and they have propelled some three generations of guests onto the water each morning with the optimism of hooking something as spectacular.

But the most salient aspect of that structure's exterior is the porch that embraces three of its sides. Two-thirds is screened, offering a comfortable, homey setting for reading and conversation, as well as a haven from blackflies. The third side is open, its pronounced outward tilt to accommodate spring runoff of the melting Maine snows, giving anyone walking its length the feeling of traversing the deck of a listing ship.

Upon that deck sit five rustic, wooden chairs, so rickety in appearance that few, nowadays,

Shore lunch in clean, fresh air and flyfishing from a wood-and-canvas canoe . . . could anything be more 'Sportingly Classic?'



would ever consider testing their worth as seats. Still fewer recognize those ancient relics as bearers of the history of not only this esteemed lodge, but of this entire area, once known as Hinckley Township.

The chairs were built more than a century ago from the limbs of hemlocks, the backs and seats from large slabs of hemlock bark. They were built at a time when the abundance of hemlock and the convenient configuration of lakes and stream made this the best spot in the world for a tannery, and for thirteen years, beginning just five years after the end of the Civil War, Hinckley Township, population 500, was a relative boomtown built around just that – the largest tannery in the world. The tannery naturally brought customers, most of whom needed places to stay while their hides were being processed, and many of whom, with plenty of time on their hands, discovered the exceptional landlocked salmon fishing in the stream that ran through town. A number of boarding houses opened their doors, one of which, in 1879, was the White House and Birches, the first incarnation of Weatherby's.

In 1883 the tannery burned to the ground. Nevertheless, anglers still came in droves for the salmon fishing. The boarding houses shifted their focus from businessmen to sportsmen and thrived. In 1898 Grand Lake Stream was incorporated, and the name Hinckley township was dropped. Frank Ball bought the White House and Birches in 1901 and renamed it after himself: Ball's Camps. Eighteen years later, at the end of World War I, Rutherford and Ray Weatherby took over, and it has been Weatherby's ever since.

Grand Lake Stream is as renowned today as it was back then as an outstanding and reliable landlock fishery, but in the 1930s somebody introduced smallmouth bass to the area, and that is when the fish really hit the shan.



Fred Bobson, Guide Mac Hurd and I are adrift on Big Lake. This is the lake into which Grand Lake Stream empties. Three miles upstream is West Grand Lake, the source of Grand Lake Stream. There are smallmouth bass in all three waters, and the fishery is deemed world-class.

The scene we share could be a hundred years back in time. The main shoreline and those of the numerous islands moored throughout the vast expanse of lake are dense with conifers and reveal no dwellings. Not another boat intrudes. The air of this northern clime is as clean and fresh as air ever was, and the Maine light, as sharp as a spruce needle, limns in brittle contrast every boulder, branch and leaf. A bald eagle, its white head aglow, poses with patriotic pride atop a 60-foot snag and launches itself into the breeze as we come into view around an island. Our boat is a Grand Laker, a twenty-foot, square-backed, wood-and-canvas canoe, spruce green on the outside, golden cedar within. Mac Hurd's father-in-law, Kenneth Wheaton, made it right here in town. It cuts through the water like a northern pike. The 9.9-horsepower outboard mounted on its stern and our graphite flyrods are the only visible details that belie the antiquity of the scene.

Fred and I have spent the last couple of days working the stream for landlocks, waiting for Mac to bring back some positive news about the bass from his scouting forays on the lake. It is Memorial Day weekend, and although the salmon have been active for some time and we and several of the other guests have seen plenty of landlock action in the stream, we are here just at the very edge of bass season, and prespawning activity is spotty. Nonetheless, it is the last full day of our stay and, therefore, now or never.

The breakfast of pancakes and sausage we ate at 6:30 will easily hold us until 12 o'clock, but the prospect of a shore lunch of fresh, deep-fried, bass fillets provides a goal: four good smallies by noon. Mac runs us northeast from the landing to White's Island, the largest of a whole fleet of rock islets in an area relatively free of wind. We work the shorelines with clouser minnows, Mac holding the Grand Laker a twenty-foot cast from the banks. In the clear water, we can watch our flies dart over the brown bottom strewn with fallen trees and the glacial rubble discarded by the retreating ice 10,000 years ago. There is no sign at all of any fish, yet, as though by a gust of underwater wind, the clouser suddenly jumps a foot to the right and disappears.

If you do not strike at that moment, it will be too late; you will have lost the fish. To wait for a tug, a bump or anything that feels as though a bass has taken your fly is to wait light-years too long. These fish are fast, they will pounce upon your fly, assess its authenticity, and then, finding it to be a counterfeit, eject it and retreat all the way back to their hidey-hole before you can react to whatever minor disturbance they caused on your line, if any.

This is a sight game; see the lure move: strike. Disregarding my usual rule of not abandoning a fly that is still working, I switch to a crayfish fly I am eager to try, now that I know there are active fish.

Antiques, old photographs and mounts of big fish remind the visitors of the lodge's rich angling tradition, which today focuses on flyfishing for big smallmouth bass.

The weighted crayfish is made of a brown chenille body and red squirrel pincers. It casts a little more gracefully than the clouser, but I notice immediately that it is nowhere near as easy to see. Still, the clarity of this glassy water in the lee of the islands allows me to spot that sudden sideways shift of the fly, and a filling lunch is assured.

We land at a guide-maintained area called Jones's Mistake. Mac builds a perfect cooking fire and puts together a classic shore lunch of fried bass, potatoes and onions. He also makes a steaming pot of guide's coffee — called cowboy coffee if you are out West — the gist of which, as I recall, is that a handful of grounds is dumped right into the boiling water, and then an egg is added to keep the grounds from floating around in the water and getting in your cup when you pour it. When you are out in a stiff, cool breeze, on a lake that looks like the photo on a fantasy calendar, and you have just filled your belly with fish that were still swimming less than an hour ago, and the afternoon promises five more hours of no phones, no meetings, nothing but the possibility of playing more berserk, airborne, smallmouth bass on a flyrod, this coffee, despite its visual similarity to something scooped out of a drainage ditch, tastes like the nectar of the gods.

We tie on popping bugs after lunch, casting again to the edges of the islands, staying in the lee out of absolute necessity now, as the wind has risen to the point where fishing is impossible out in the open. The bass, though, are still cooperative, but now the strike must be timed differently: too fast, and you snatch the bug from the bass' mouth; too slow, and the fish has already spit it out. It takes a few losses to get it right, but it comes down to one beat after you see the take. You cast. The bug lands upon the water, snug up against a boulder in a small niche made by two overhanging shrubs. You let it sit for a second, then give it a twitch; once, twice. There is a mini-explosion under the bug and it disappears beneath the surface. You stifle the impulse to react immediately, even though you are keyed up like an Irish setter and your wrist is on a hair trigger. You pause for a heartbeat — a normal heartbeat, not the paradiddles beating in your chest at the moment. Now you strike, lifting the rod and watching the wondrous creature at the other end of your line perform a series of maneuvers in the air that seem to defy the laws of physics.

Guests have been having days like this under the current management of Weatherby's since 1974. For more than a quarter-of-a-century, Ken and Charlene Sassi have owned this historic lodge. Besides the main house, fifteen rustic cottages, each with a fireplace, bathroom, bedroom and screened porch, provide guests with all the comforts while maintaining the historic aspect of the resort (the Sassis amended the name to Weatherby's, The Fisherman's Resort when they bought it).

Over the years, such celebrities as baseball legend Ted Williams, Buffalo Bob Smith of Howdy Doody fame and U.S. Air Force General James Doolittle have been drawn to this magical place. And no wonder, for Ken and Charlene have dedicated their lives to building a loyal, repeat clientele with their warmth, hospitality and attention to the details that make a stay at Weatherby's not just a memorable fishing trip, but a classic experience of historic proportions. 🐟



If You Want To Go

Weatherby's is located in the town of Grand Lake Stream, Maine, about five hours by car from Boston and two-and-a-half or so from Bangor. Arrangements can also be made through the lodge to be flown by floatplane from Bangor to West Grand Lake.

Grand Lake Stream is flyfishing only. The lakes at each end, however, may be fished with flies or conventional tackle. Live bait may be used for smallmouth bass fishing beginning on June 21.

In addition to the stream, West Grand Lake and Big Lake, world-class smallmouth fishing is also to be found on the nearby St. Croix River, which forms the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick. Although hiring a guide may add to the success and enjoyment of your experience at Weatherby's, it is not required. Aluminum boats with motors are available for rent on both lakes and the St. Croix River.

As is true in all of the north country, especially during late spring and early summer, a good insect repellent is a must. Be sure to wear a hat, as well. A general store in town stocks a fair amount of tackle and necessities, including leaders, bug dope and the favorite flies of the area. Weatherby's can also supply some tackle if necessary, but it is advisable to come well equipped with your own gear and lures.

The flyfisher will find a 5-weight outfit ideal for the stream, but will want an 8-weight for casting bass bugs in the wind on the lakes. Flies for bass include clousers, leeches, woolly buggers, crayfish imitations and other weighted flies, as well as an assortment of deerhair bass bugs.

The best ways to learn about Weatherby's, its rates and accommodations and make a reservation is through their Web site, www.weatherbys.com (note that the apostrophe is omitted), or by calling Ken and Charlene Sassi at 207-796-5558 during the season (May through October) or 207-237-2911 during the winter.