

Travelers' Tales



Mark Sweetingham is too exhausted to lift the mighty 250lb white sturgeon from the Fraser River after his two-hour fight to land it.

The mighty white!

AS a lifelong angler I've always devoured stories of catching huge, strange looking fish from wild waters in far-flung corners of the planet.

In my younger days such adventures were only for the fortunate few – a trip to the Norfolk Broads was about as exotic as it got for most of us.

But, as I've grown older, the world has apparently become smaller. Anglers now routinely travel the globe to tangle with fish they could only previously dream of – and on a recent Canadian holiday so did I!

British Columbia is an angler's paradise. There are so many magnificent lakes and rivers you would need several lifetimes to do them justice.

Take the Fraser River for example. More than 900 miles long, unspoilt and untamed it drains a third of B.C. before emptying into the Pacific Ocean.

It is famous for magnificent runs of salmon – and rightly so. At certain times of the year the river is alive with them.

But I was after another of this wonderful waterway's inhabitants, one that until just a few years ago was a well kept secret – white sturgeon – the largest freshwater fish in North America.

These fish are so prehistoric in appearance they are like aquatic dinosaurs, and nearly as big. They grow to more than 1,000lbs and there are huge numbers in the 100lbs to 200lbs range.

I had one day to try and tangle with these monsters and placed myself in the hands of Marc Laynes of Cascade Fishing Charters.

Marc has been guiding on the river for 10 years and his list of big fish is nearly

as long as the river itself.

Marc cares deeply for the river and its fish. When he is not angling for them he is taking part in studies to conserve and preserve the extensive stocks.

Half an hour after launching Marc's 21ft jet boat we were riding at anchor in a huge eddy on the edge of fast water.

The first bite when it came was very gentle, but the fish that I became attached to over the next two hours was anything but.

I was the angler but it felt as though the sturgeon was playing me. It rocketed up from almost 40 feet of water to hurl itself out of its element in a fury of spray.

"Hundred and twenty pounds," said Marc. "Good fish."

Good? It was magnificent! It was even more magnificent when the sturgeon jumped again, closer this time and Marc upped his estimate to 150lb.

Deciding it had an urgent appointment downstream the fish stripped twenty, thirty, fifty yards of line from the reel again and again.

Each time I managed to get line back on the reel, I lost it and more as this streamlined fighting machine made yet another muscle-wrenching run.

With swirling white

Our Editor MARK SWEETINGHAM with the one that didn't get away



water close by, Marc was forced to up anchor and follow as I hung on to the hooped rod.

Up she came again looking huge. I swear I could feel the spray from eighty yards away although it could have been the sweat flooding off my brow.

Marc duly upped his estimate to 190lb and the sturgeon set off again for Vancouver.

After an hour the fish was taking us anywhere it wanted. Half an arm-aching hour later and I would have been happy to cut the line.

Slowly, so slowly, it allowed itself to be brought to the boat.

We had been battling for two hours, towed two kilo-

metres and I was completely and utterly knackered.

But what a fish!

Getting into the water with it, Marc and I took the vital statistics: Seven feet four inches long and almost three feet in girth.

"That's around 250 pounds," said Marc pumping my hand in congratulation.

YESSSSSS!!!!

A few pictures later and the huge creature swam leisurely back into the depths with a flick of its massive tail.

The remainder of the day was just as good.

After a short rest to recover some feeling in my arm muscles we went on to take another four fish to 100 pounds.

All this amid scenery that would have made the day a success even had I caught nothing.

Pine-forested slopes, heavily populated by bears and other wildlife, sweep down to the water's edge. Salmon were all around us pushing their way upstream to spawn.

We watched buzzards and bald eagles soaring on the thermal up-drafts, and all this is framed by a back drop of cloud-capped peaks.

Magical.

Did I enjoy myself? It took a fortnight to wipe the smile off my face.

Fishy facts

- Cascade Fishing Charters are based at Chilliwack just one hour east of Vancouver.
- Contact Marc on: Phone - (001) 604 793 2244; e-mail - info@Bcsturgeon.com
- To whet your appetite even more visit Marc's web site: www.Bcsturgeon.com
- The west coast of British Columbia enjoys warm summers and mild winters giving year-round fishing for a variety of species.
- Best times are: Sturgeon - March to November; salmon - June to November; Steelhead - December to April.
- All bait and tackle supplied.



Expert boatman Marc Laynes holds up the seven-foot-four denizen of the deep, before it was allowed to swim free again.