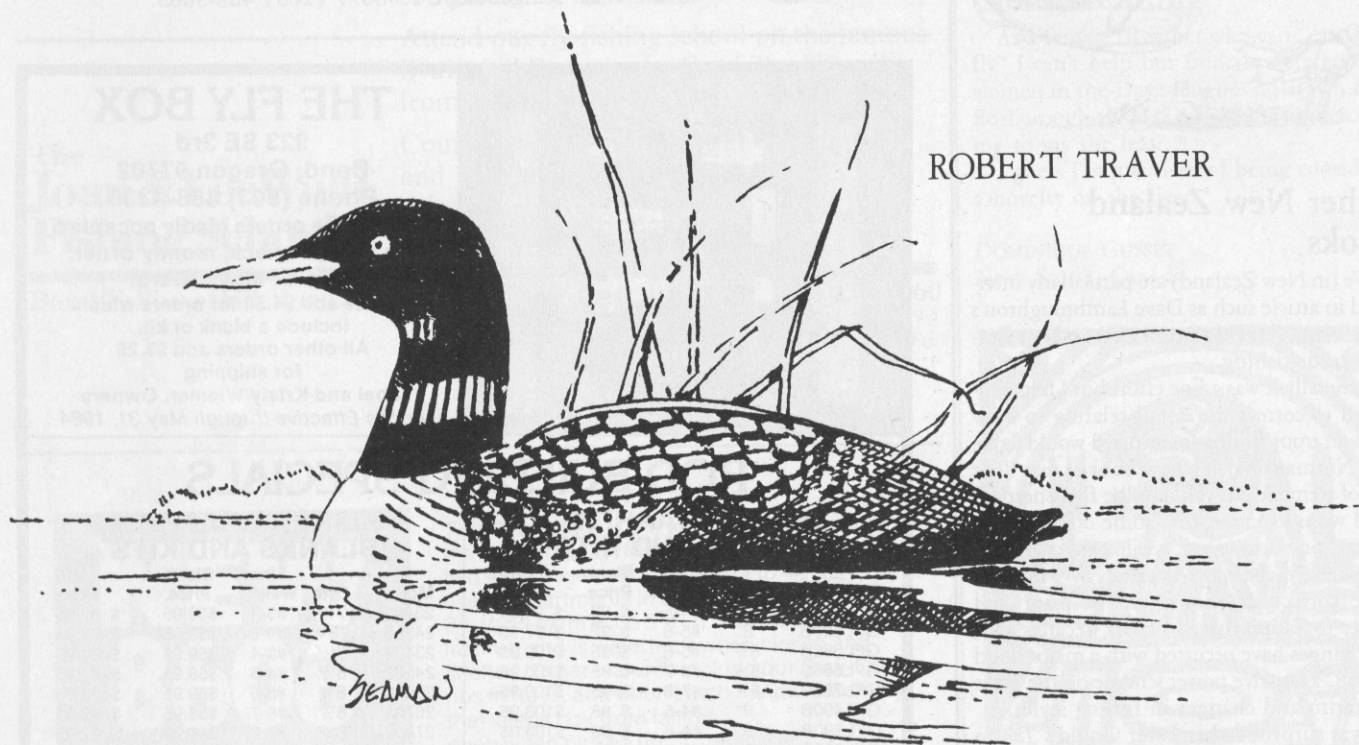


Loon Calls On the Polecat

ROBERT TRAVER



HAL AND I HAVE FISHED together for quite a few years—just over 20, according to my old fishing notes—drawn together by whatever mystic bond it is that turns lone fishermen into fishing pals. In our case part of it doubtless sprang from our shared passion for pursuing the elusive brook trout; that plus our common devotion to the consoling properties of sour mash bourbon.

Our first meeting took place under rather droll circumstances. It happened on one of those deep, cold, serpentine, heavily-wooded, rocky-shored, Canadian-type lakes that still dot the more wildly glaciated crannies of my native Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Luckily for us and for its trout the lake still remains nameless on most maps, but shortly after we met, Hal, an old map collector, finally dredged up an old one that called it Polecat Lake, of all things. Though by now there are probably more Deer Lakes in Michigan than there are deer, this

was the first Polecat I'd ever run across in all my years of fishing—and also the last.

Hal proudly showed me his old map one day as we sat on a log after a long afternoon of fishing, watching the trout rising and the sun setting over Polecat, enjoying our usual post-fishing reward of a few belts of bourbon to fortify ourselves for the long hike out.

"Picked up this treasure at a garage sale," he said, carefully folding away his prized map after I'd finally tracked down Polecat nestling there amidst a maze of lakes and streams. "A guy can sure pick up the damndest things at these garage sales."

"Poe-ole-cat," I said, reverently rolling out the prolonged syllables like a southern colonel presiding over a friendly neighborhood auction. "Real poetic name. Wonder how they ever dreamed it up?"

Hal reflectively rubbed his chin, as he often does. "Probably because any fisherman crazy enough to keep fighting his way in here soon gets to smell like one," he said.

"I see," I said, remembering the dense tangle of cedar swamp we still had to grope our way through to get back

ROBERT TRAVER is the author of several books, among them, *Anatomy of A Murder*, *Trout Madness*, *Anatomy of A Fly Fisherman*, and his most recent, *People vs. Kirk* (St. Martin's Press, Inc.)

to our car. "Damned efficient name," I said. "Combines the romantic with the aromatic."

"Tell me something," Hal said as we finished our drinks and began stashing our gear for the hike out. "Did you ever hear the one about the persistent guy that tried to buy the garage at one of these garage sales?"

"No," I admitted, "but I'll bet the poor guy fainted when the owner said yes."

"Dead wrong. Instead he up and sued the garage owner for false advertising when he wouldn't sell."

"Pooh-ole-cay-at," I said, holding my nose.

This is how Hal and I sometimes carry on under the stress of fishermen's fatigue mixed with bourbon. But getting to that droll first meeting. . . .

On that distant day I'd been fishing alone off of one of Polecat's many submerged rocky points, a trick I'd early been forced to learn in order to make a half-decent backcast without losing still another fly or snagging still another tree. I had just missed the strike of a nice trout when I froze in mid-cast, listening to the haunting faraway call of a loon. I peered out over the lake but couldn't locate it. Then it called again—this time there was no mistake—the same shrill, wavering, lunatic trill.

Now if you've never heard the call of a loon, there's no use in my trying to tell you about it, and if you have I mercifully needn't bother. In either case, whenever I hear the call of a loon I invariably get an attack of the chillblains running up and down my spine. It's not so much a feeling of fear as a sudden sense of the remoteness and solitude of both men and loons mingled with the uneasy feeling that maybe both of us are but fleeting pauses in the immeasurable unraveling of time. Loons, you see, not only give me the chillblains but small attacks of wrestling with destiny.

This particular loon had finally fallen silent, so I quit peering and once again cast my fly just as the loon sent forth another distracting call. Again I peered, teetering and balancing on the slippery rocks, and this time finally spotted it—a dark floating object on the far side of the lake, dwarfed to a speck by the range of low rocky hills with their sparse rows of sentinel pines looming behind it.

Then a good trout rolled right out in front of me so I went back to work, on the first business cast barbing and busting off on a heavy threshing strike. Again I heard the loon call, this time, I could have sworn, with a small overtone of derision. So once again I paused and peered, almost slipping off my slippery rocks when I saw that my loon had drifted much closer and this time looked for all the world less like a loon than a floating hat.

This naturally gave me more chillblains, so after that I merely pretended to fish, all the while keeping a weather eye on this strange apparition, which kept calling all the louder and oftener the closer it got. In my panic I even thought I detected the outlines of a face under the floating hat, so I gave up all pretense of fishing and stood gaping and debating whether to stay and face the music or wade ashore and grab my gear and get the hell out of there.

Then I saw the approaching apparition slowly rising up out of the water—first a man's upper torso, then what seemed a dripping tire or something wrapped around its middle, then a smiling man splashing his way up to me,

holding a fly rod in one hand and the other held straight out toward me.

"Hi," my loon man said.

So that's how Hal and I first met. It was also the first time ever that I'd beheld one of those then new-fangled fishermen's floats I'd lately been hearing about and which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be little more than a pregnant rubber inner tube covered with canvas along with a sort of diaper arrangement across its middle to accommodate the floating fisherman's bewandered legs.

Hal had added one ingenious innovation: He'd tied on a pair of ping-pong paddles, one on each side, the better to propel himself as well as steer. "Lets me go first class full speed ahead and also travel steerage," is the way Hal explained it.

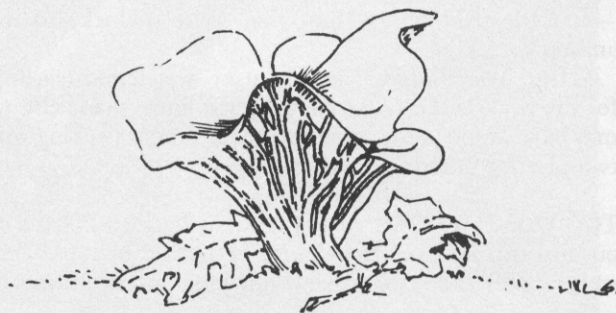
"Did you hear that bloomin' loon calling?" I asked Hal after we'd exchanged names and lodge grips and had recovered a little from the mutual shock of finding an intruding stranger invading the other's favorite secret trout waters. "Loons always give me the willies," I confessed.

"I was the loon," Hal said, giving me a wink, and with that he tilted his head back and opened his mouth as wide as Pavarotti's on the home stretch and let out the looniest lunatic blast I'd ever heard. "Learned to do it as a kid summing up in Minnesota," he explained as I stood gaping. "Wanna try it?"

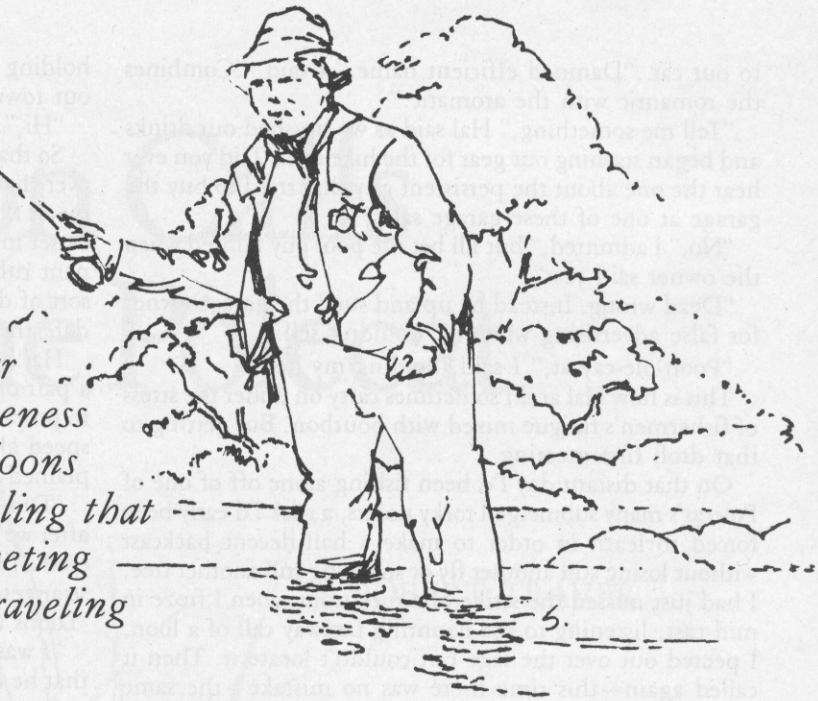
While I never did learn to sound like an authentic loon, Hal and I began "going steady" after that, fishing together every chance we got; this despite the fact that we lived and worked nearly a hundred miles apart. But this still gave us those long northern evenings after work as well as occasional weekends—that's when we didn't find it more expedient to stay home and mend our frayed domestic fences. Another small impediment arose when our needy Arab cousins raised the price of gas to rival bourbon, and for a spell we even discussed going hardhat and switching to motorbikes.

Then late last summer came the magic day when both of us woke up to find ourselves retired. Never again would we have to waste a single day of fishing by having to dress up in the mornings and go to work. We celebrated our parole by spending a long weekend camping on the shores of old Polecat, and fetching along a skillet and, after swallowing hard, for the first time breaking our sacred vows of never keeping any of its trout and instead went on a retirement binge.

That first night we dined on fried trout and wild mushrooms (chanterelles) garnished with wild watercress. Hal, a sort of all-around outdoor Audubon, had gathered the latter two items on our long hike in. All this we washed



'It's not so much a feeling of fear as a sudden sense of the remoteness and solitude of both men and loons mingled with the uneasy feeling that maybe both of us are but fleeting pauses in the immeasurable unraveling of time.'



down with bumpers of bourbon diluted with discreet dashes of Polecat water, a heady mix.

"Just think, Hal," I said after supper as we sat battling mosquitoes and sipping our bedtime bourbon and once again watching the sun slowly sink as the bigger trout started to rise. "Isn't it funny, now that we're both retired and can fish all the more, that the big shots in Lansing up and cut the cost of our fishing licenses to peanuts instead of raising them."

I'd struck a responsive chord and Hal went into one of his declamatory arias. "It's par for the political course," he said, holding one hand up in the air and dolefully wagging his head. "Now that we're deemed to be too old to work and are free to fish *all* the time instead of only on holidays, evenings and weekends—besides having oodles of leisure to vote—the clever bastards up and cut the price instead of doubling it."

"Or maybe even quintupling it," I said.

We sat in silence until Hal reached over and clinked my cup with his. "Here's to three of nature's loveliest creations," he intoned in the voice of a Sunday morning TV preacher once again unveiling his zip code road to salvation, "who will only live—indeed, *can* only live—where beauty dwells."

"Hm," I mused. "And here I thought those three babes jumped bail and fled to Flint after their last raid."

"Babes, hell!" Hal said. "I mean the white-tailed deer, the ruffed grouse—partridge to you untutored U.P. natives—and the wild brook trout that we're so lucky to live among."

"Hear, hear," I said, glancing at my watch and reaching for my pack basket. "Better we get rolling, man, else we may have to spend the night in a cedar swamp sleeping with two of your brand of lovelies."

TWO WEEKS AGO HAL AND I made it back to Polecat on our first trip since our trout binge of the year before. While we probably preferred to view our long absence from the

place as a kind of guilty atonement for the breaking of our no-trout vows of the year before, I also suspect that part of it sprang from our increasing lack of enthusiasm for making the exhausting trip in there and back.

We arrived at old Polecat shortly before noon, this time sans skillet, puffing and blowing like a pair of beached whales. For a long time we just sat on our favorite log, staring out over the water, occasionally congratulating each other like reunioning old grads over how good it was to be back.

Once our rods were rigged, Hal helped me get into my waders and I helped get him into his—both new firsts—and then, reciprocity running rampant, also for the first time I helped Hal unpack and inflate his fisherman's float.

"I'd give you a tip, boy," Hal said with a smile, "if it weren't for these tight waders making it so hard to get at my cache of dimes."

Hal balked a little when I also helped wrestle him into his float—"I feel like a fat lady trying to try on her kid sister's girdle," he said—and we all but shook hands as I finally helped launch him out to sea.

"Thanks, pal," Hal waved and called back, once afloat, cupping his mouth like Captain Bligh. "Don't ketch 'em all."

"Aye, aye, Sir," I hollered back, making a two-fingered salute.

I stood watching Hal paddling himself away until all I saw was the floating cowboy hat, which soon magically looked more and more like a retreating loon. Then I found and trimmed a long tag alder branch to use as a wading staff—another new first—and gingerly waded out on my slippery rocks, teetering and balancing like a drunk walking a line for a skeptical cop. On my very first cast I got a magnificent strike—one of the topmost branches of one of the many tall Norway pines lurking so sneakily there behind me. . . .

Since I am not here spinning one of those gripping sagas

Continued on page 96

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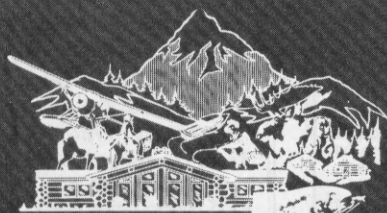
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Loon Calls . . .

Continued from page 32

about how Hal or I caught—or lost—The Big One (though I'll confess I've spun my share), I'll spare the details of how many branches I caught or flies I lost during that long afternoon. I was busily tying on still another fly when I heard the nearby call of a loon and I almost cheered when I looked up and saw Hal paddling himself ashore for our first bourbon reward of the day.

Once unwaded and duly rewarded, we sat on our log and sipped away, gathering ourselves for the hike out. Then I barely stifled a yawn but the ever alert Hal caught me at it in mid-stifle.

"You a little pooped, man?" he inquired ever so pleasantly.

"Just a wee bit," I confessed. "How about you?"

"I'm *real* pooped," Hal in turn confessed, yawning unabashedly. "Chronic pooptitude seems to be the price of—how shall I put it?—overripe maturity."

I shrugged. "Maybe we're both getting a little too stiff in the joints for these long trips."

Hal suddenly giggled a little and held out his cup in front of him, both hands, in an attitude of adoration. Then he daintily dipped his little finger in his drink and, again ever so daintily, sipped the lone bourbon teardrop off his finger, at the same time giving me an elfin sidelong glance. "And then again, pal," he said, "there's always the chance that maybe we're getting stiff a little too often in the wrong joints—like sitting here boozing on this bourbon-soaked log."

"Could be," I said, "but at least we can still enjoy a drink or two and occasionally manage to make a decent cast."

Once again we sat sipping away until Hal lowered his drink and turned and faced me. "Tell me, pal," he finally said, "whether you believe it is possible for any savvy and moderately sane fisherman to stand up to his whizzlestraining in icewater for hours vainly casting flies at the trout he simply *knows* are there before it finally sweeps over him that he might better have stayed home that day and mown the hay on his neglected lawn?"

"Well," I said, after dutifully pondering, "I s'pose it *could* happen at times to even the best fisherman—ahem—maybe even to old masters like us. Seems as though on some days the trout do go into a sort of a sulk—"

"Sulk my foot," Hal broke in. "It happens all the time to any honest fisherman over the age of four. Moreover it's just happened to us, here, this very day." He pointed an accusing finger at me. "Confess," he said. "How many trout did you catch today?"

"Um—well now—let's see,—"

"How many, damn it?"

"None, damn it."

"How many strikes or passes?"

"None, come to think of it."

"How many rising trout did you see?"

"Not a bloomin' one. How about you, Izaak Walton?"

"Same score all the way."

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"Then what's the big deal?" I demanded. "All you're saying is that for once both of us happened to get skunked at Polecat."

"Skunked at Polecat," Hal slowly repeated, savoring each word. "Skunked at Polecat! Did you just dream that up?"

"Blame it on the bourbon," I said. "But you still haven't answered me. What's so new about a fisherman occasionally falling on his prat and getting skunked?"

"That's exactly my point," Hal came back, eyeing me accusingly. "But it seems to take some fishermen I know one hell of a lot of years to get the message."

"What message?"

"That chasing trout and chasing women have one big thing in common — both can be all but impossible to catch when they're not in the mood."

"My, my," I said, blinking. "Really never thought of it *that* way before."

"Except that trout have far more character," Hal pushed on.

"Sh," I whispered, cupping my ear and glancing over both shoulders. "I think I hear the distant tramp of advancing feminist feet. Lower your voice, man, and tell me what the hell you're driving at?"

"By character I mean that trout are far less apt than some ladies to be lured into a change of mood by the piscatorial equivalents of glittering jewels and gold and by the subtle purr of dyed fur and all the other dependable mood-switchers of the past."



"My, my," I said, groping in my pack basket and pulling out a bottle and pouring us another healthy belt of bourbon. "Maybe you got something there," I said as we touched cups. "But what are we going to do about it man, now that we're a couple of old birds free to fish night and day? Consult tea leaves or the Zodiac or something every day before we dare go fishing? Or else donate

Continued on page 98

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Loon Calls . . .

our rods and gear to the Boy Scouts and take up golf? *Tell* me, man?"

"I mean I think it's high time both of us faced up to it," Hal quietly said, momentarily shifting from oratorical high gear.

"But I still don't follow."

"That when we find that the trout aren't in the mood that we find something else to do."

"Like what? Go through our fly boxes for the umpteenth time?"

"No, simply put down our rods and go gather mushrooms," Hal said.

"Mushrooms?" I said in a small voice.

"Mushrooms," Hal repeated like a benediction.

"But where?"

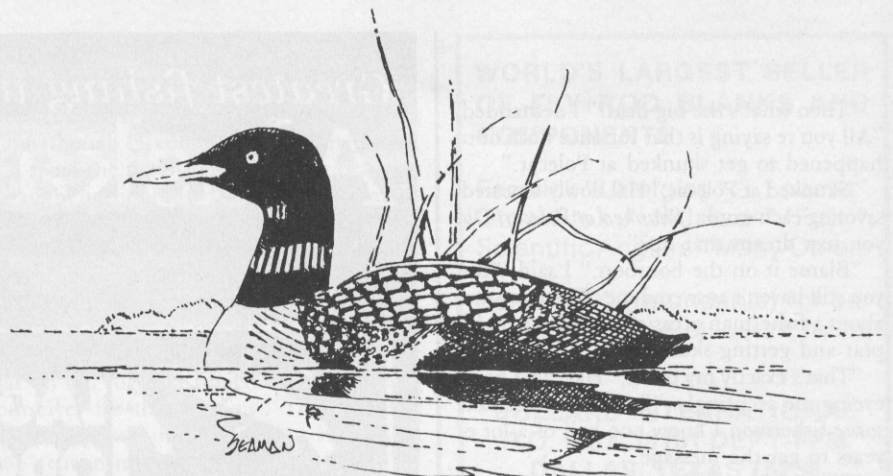
"All around us," Hal said sweeping out his arm in a half moon, once again back in oratorical high gear.

"But wher'?" I repeated.

"Look, man, we're lucky enough to live in one of the best and most varied wild mushroom spots east of the Mississippi. And most of them like the very same places that trout crave. Remember those chanterelles you slavered over when we broke down and banquetted here last year? And that I found and gathered in less than a mile from here?"

"I sure do. But what's the big point?"

"Simply face up to it, as I just said, and when the trout aren't in the mood, quietly put down our rods and go gather mushrooms instead."



"But suppose the mushrooms aren't in the mood?"

"Ah, you finally asked it," Hal said like a gloating D.A. closing in on a witness. "Chasing trout and chasing mushrooms have one vast difference between them."

"What's that?"

"When the mushrooms are there the pursuer can always catch 'em if only he stirs his butt!"

"Yes?"

"While if the trout are there, but not in the mood, his troubles have only begun—as it's taken both of us all these years and once again today to rediscover."

"Well I'll be damned," I finally said, and with that we finished our drinks and arose and shook hands and wrestled ourselves into

our packs and stood taking a long farewell look at the evening mists settling over Polecat.

"Two old fishermen embarking on new careers on the distant shores of Polecat," I heard Hal muttering, as much to himself as to me.

It was then that we heard the loon calling—prolonged and wavering, both gleeful and achingly melancholy, sounding ever so close and yet ever so far away.

"Was that you?" I finally turned and asked Hal in wonderment after the first wave of chillblains had subsided a little.

"Not this time," Hal said, shaking his head. "That, pal, happened to be the real McCoy."



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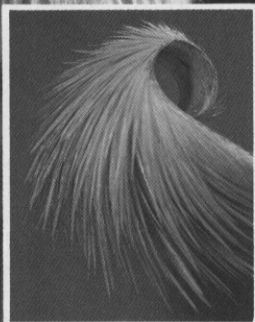
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