

FISH IN FOCUS: INCONNU, THE UNKNOWN FISH



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Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

Henri Pilon smoked his pipe and pondered the proposal. It was cold outside his tent and rain had began to fall. But he was bored and curious about what the river had to offer. He was tired of pemmican. It would be nice to have some fresh fish for a change.

He stood up and followed Tahmoh, his Dene host, to the canoe. Sitting in the boat was a roll of babiche netting made from moose sinew tied to a pair of hand-sized rocks. The two men clambered into the birchbark canoe and pushed off into the river.

The year was 1789 and Pilon had been in the north country for 10 months, having paddled and portaged 800 miles from St. Boniface to overwinter at Lake Athabasca. Springtime saw him tasked with a river journey northward to Great Slave Lake to trade for beaver skins with Chipewyan trappers stationed along the lake's southern shore.

At age 25, Pilon was already a boat captain commanding a crew of six other French voyageurs paddling a 25-foot canoe. It was at the mouth of this uncharted river where they had camped with some Dene hunters that talk turned to procuring some fish for dinner.

Alone with Tahmoh, Pilon maneuvered the birchbark canoe over a promising seam of water where they dropped the net and began dragging it behind them. It did not take long. Suddenly, the leather straps in their hands connecting them to the submerged net jerked violently toward the water as something large thrashed just beneath the surface.

Tahmoh urged his companion to steer the boat into the shore, now nearly anchored by the net it was so full of catch. Pilon felt slightly panicked as he drove his paddle hard into the water. "Vite, vite!" Tahmoh cried. "Hurry!"

Reaching the shore, Tahmoh leaped on top of the convulsing mess of fish and pushed it up the muddy bank.

Flopping inside the net were several pike and a pile of whitefish—the most widely available food staple in the North. But there was one fish Pilon did not recognize. It looked like a whitefish, but

it was enormous—easily the length of his paddle. It had the over-slung jaw of a predator and the sleek lines of a swimmer. Its colour was silver that tinted to amethyst when the scales on its side found light.

Tahmoh wasted no time subduing the fish. He straddled it like a wrestler and then cracked it over the head with a large stone. Its tail flapped helplessly as he struck it a second time. Finally, the spasming creature lay still.

The tail barely cleared the ground as Tahmoh lifted the great fish by the gills and stared into its eye.

By now a small crowd of voyageurs and Dene had gathered to take in the exciting catch.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" one of the voyageurs asked. "What is that?"

Henri Pilon appraised his companion's impressive catch for a moment and then shook his head. "Inconnu," he replied. "Unknown."

Is there any fish in North America as wild and untamed as the Inconnu? It's a rhetorical question, of course. The name speaks for itself. *Inconnu*. Unknown, remote, a resident of uninhabited waters coursing only the most distant, desolate lands. Like many whitefishes, the Inconnu (*Stenodus leucichthys* or *Stenodus nelma*), sometimes known as Sheefish or—in my area—Coney, presents a perplexing enigma. Biologists ap-

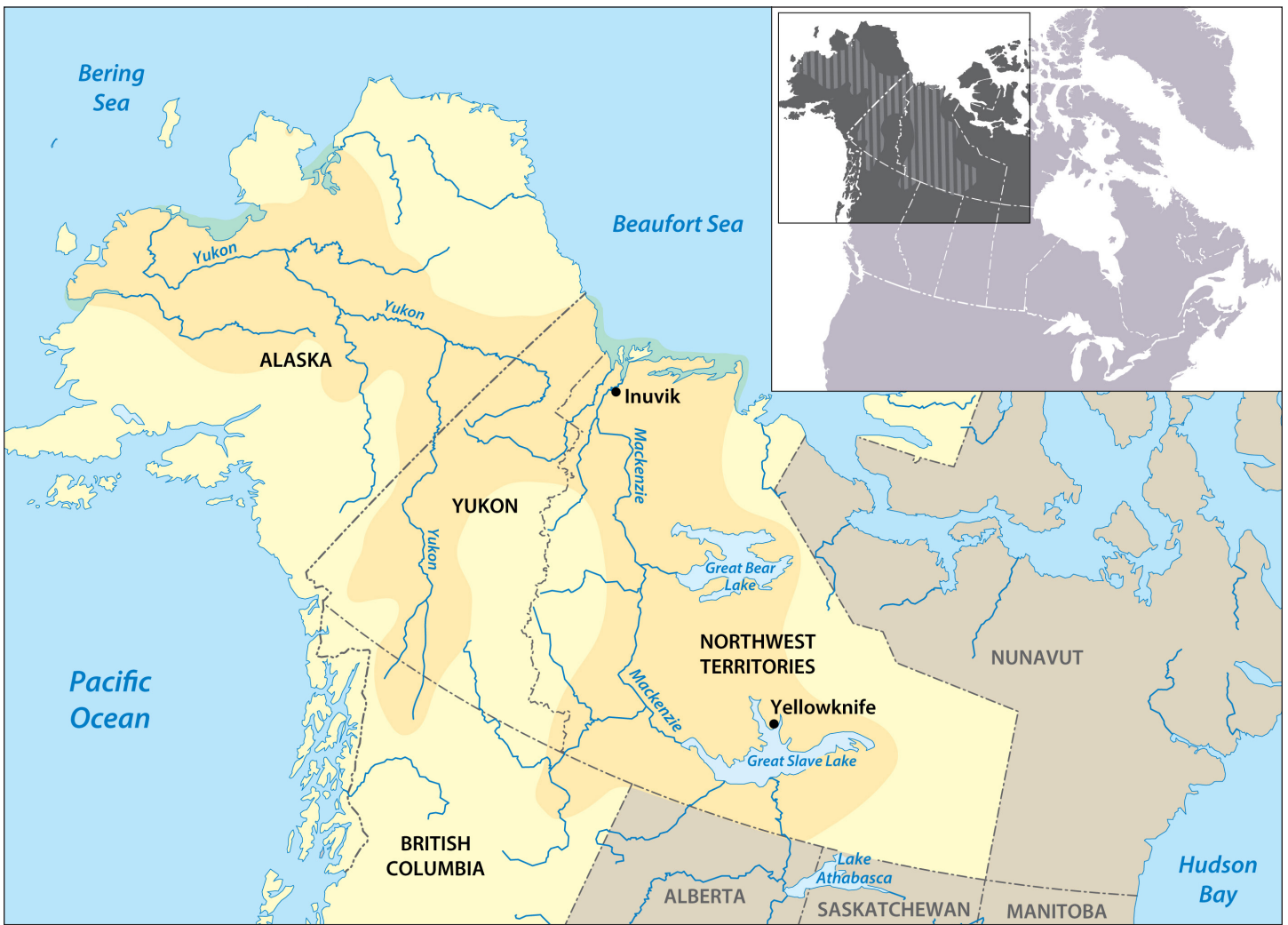


The Inconnu's genus name, *Stenodus*, means "narrow tooth," referring to the small, barely discernable teeth found inside its jaws.

Photos by the author.

The narrative above is a fictional account by the author imagining how the inconnu might have received its name; details in the story, including names, were created by the author.

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The North American range of the Inconnu, including locations and waters mentioned in the article. (Map by Olaf Nelson; see sources at end of article)



Inconnu can be found in clear or muddy water. The Inconnu displayed by the author in this photo was captured in the milk chocolate waters of the Mackenzie River delta in Canada's Northwest Territories, north of Inuvik.



Inconnu become easy prey for black bears while ascending the rapids of a northern tributary of Great Slave Lake.



Angler Gijs Van Straten travelled to the Northwest Territories all the way from the Netherlands to find Inconnu.

pear undecided as to whether the North American Inconnu is one and the same as the virtually indistinguishable Old World variety, the Beloribitsa, a landlocked species, or subspecies, depending who you ask, that once thrived in the Caspian Sea until overfishing and the deleteriousness of industry drove it extinct in the wild. If we dare to designate the Inconnu as something unique, then let it be a noteworthy statement. For it is the most inaccessible of North America's great fishes, having entered discourse, but only passingly, a little more than two centuries ago when a vanguard of early French explorers prescribed its quizzical name after clawing their way into a hidden corner of the continent.

Other northern fishes, say Arctic Grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) and Arctic Char (*Salvelinus alpinus*), be it by bucket or nature, have spread their fins far across the continent. The range of Inconnu, on the other hand, vast though it is, is cut off, largely confined to latitudes north of 60 degrees, and concentrated in North America around two principal rivers, the Yukon and Mackenzie. The Yukon River rises in northern British Columbia and flows over 3,000 km (almost 2,000 miles) through the Yukon and across Alaska to the Bering Sea. The Mackenzie flows from Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Ocean. It is Canada's longest river (over 1,700 km, or 1,000 miles) and has a drainage basin larger than any in North America except the Mississippi, taking in water from Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Saskatchewan, and Yukon. The Inconnu has adfluvial (fishes that spawn in tributaries and where the juveniles remain for several years before migrating to the lakes where they grow to maturity), riverine, and anadromous populations. Those living nearer the ocean in both drainages migrate to sea and return to rivers to spawn; those living further inland may migrate upstream from lakes, such as Great Slave Lake, or live their entire lives in rivers.

The Inconnu is not an especially common fish in most waters it swims. In Yellowknife, on the north shore of Great Slave Lake, stories of five-footers pulled out of gill nets from the North Arm were well-travelled during my childhood, but the Inconnu itself was a ghost. Nearby rivers and lakes were otherwise generous to the aspiring angler. Northern Pike (*Esox lucius*) came to hand



Inconnu are voracious predators, using their large mouths to completely engulf their prey.

readily, Lake Trout (*Salvelinus namaycush*), if you fished deep enough. But I didn't catch any Inconnu nor know anybody who had. The Inconnu of my youth was an apparition often talked about but seldom seen.

The traditional knowledge of the Yellowknives Dene, the indigenous descendants of the area's original inhabitants, recalls a time when Inconnu were extremely plentiful. *Wiilideh*, the Yellowknives' name for the Yellowknife River, the body of water that supplies the city of Yellowknife with its drinking water, literally means "river of Inconnu," from *wèleh*, the Yellowknives' name for Inconnu, and *deh*, meaning "river." Local elders speak of a time when Coney were so thick in the river one could walk across it on their backs. The Yellowknife River has largely escaped the contamination that occurred downstream at Yellowknife, where gold mining was the main industry for more than 60 years, but for whatever reason, the Inconnu still shy away from it.

AN INCONNU AT LAST!

It was in the summer of 2004—my 33rd year and the same year gold mining at Yellowknife ceased for good—when I, at last, saw my first live Inconnu. A friend and I were casting spinners to Arctic Grayling over a rocky hump at the edge of the Jackfish Islands on Great Slave Lake when a much larger fish grabbed my friend's lure.

The fish was instantly recognizable but entirely alien. It had all the characteristics of the subfamily Coregoninae: protruding, saucer-like eyes; large, silvery scales; the adipose and square dorsal fin of a trout or salmon but tiny, nearly indiscernible teeth. There were some features that marked it as different. There was the fish's impressive size, of course: 17 pounds on my hand-held fish scale. Its scales were tinged with platinum whereas other whitefishes and ciscoes tend toward green or brown. What seemed most impressive was the size of the fish's head. Long, broad and shallow, with a distinctly protruding lower jaw, it was clearly a predator. The spearhead-shaped body suggested a pelagic, active swimmer.

According to Scott and Crossman's essential *Freshwater Fishes of Canada* (1973), the Inconnu is a faster-growing fish than ei-



The Inconnu run thick as summer gives way to fall on a river emptying into the North Arm of Great Slave Lake.

ther Lake Trout or Lake Whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*). Lake Trout in Great Slave need 13 years to reach 10 lbs and 28 inches in length. An Inconnu can attain that size in 11 years, and the largest ones we catch may approach 20 years.

It was the apparent lack of teeth that surprised me most. The Inconnu's genus name, *Stenodus*, somewhat understated I'd say, means "narrow tooth." I've examined the mouths of many Coney since that first encounter, and other than a pair of barely detectable, sandpaper-like pads on the roof of its mouth and another pair on the bottom lip, there is not much inside the Inconnu's jaws that resembles "teeth."

It's since become clear to me that Inconnu won't attack prey unless it can confidently swallow the creature whole in a single gulp. They generally won't touch the giant pike gear we use when angling in water where both species are present and comparably sized, although they will happily bite just about any moderately large spinner, spoon, or swimbait that passes by. Their penchant for subduing prey by quickly gulping it down means they tend to hook deeply, which, unless an effort is made to de-barb hooks and avoid trebles, often translates into a high mortality rate when releasing them.

We kept that first Inconnu back in 2004. I had long known that Coney had a varied reputation as far as table fare goes, but it was such a handsome fish, with such generously sized fillets, we couldn't resist. We rolled one massive fillet in flour and fried it in a cast iron pan. That's when excitement turned to apprehension. After a couple minutes the frying pan filled with foul-smelling oil, threatening to drown the crisping fillet. Needless to say, it was an unsatisfying culinary experience. I have had very limited success since, which, for someone who likes to eat a lot of fish, is deeply disappointing. I'm not the only one.

John Richardson, the British naturalist who nearly starved to death along with mission commander Sir John Franklin on his first quest to find the Northwest Passage through the Arctic Archipelago in 1820–1822, described the flesh of Inconnu as "palling when used as daily food."

At the town of Inuvik, on the other hand, near the mouth of the Mackenzie River, the Inconnu is much prized by the Gwich'in Dene who reside there.



A late season expedition in 2017 produced heavily pigmented male fish with pronounced lateral lines.

A few years ago, I had the good fortune of visiting Inuvik where I had hoped to encounter some unusual Arctic estuarine fishes. Alas, only the Inconnu came to play.

In the chocolate milk waters of the Mackenzie Delta I was instructed to retrieve my lure quickly and keep it on the surface as we prodded creek channels intersecting the main river. Fish were few but every once in a while, an Inconnu would explode from the river depths and smash the lure. Nothing sinking more than a few inches below the surface got bit.

Admiring a fine three-footer that fell victim to a juvenile pike swimbait cast over a swirling pool, my Gwich'in guide spoke enthusiastically about the quality of Inconnu dry fish.

"Best energy food around," he said, before releasing it back into the water. "You can live all winter on that stuff."

WHEN THE ICE BREAKS UP

In my area, where the Canadian Shield (the vast bedrock plateau, sparsely inhabited by humans, that makes up more than half of Canada) touches the shore of Great Slave Lake, Inconnu remain an oddity. In mid-June, a week or two after breakup, they can be found with varying consistency along rocky shoals at the edge of the main basin. Their occurrence is more reliable at the mouth of the Beaulieu River where it meets Great Slave's East Arm. There, the presence of feeding Inconnu is betrayed by frantic schools of ciscoes leaping clear of the water's surface as packs of marauding Coney forage underneath. But come July, they're all gone, back to whatever deeper haunt contents them during the dog days of subarctic summer. In late fall, they head back to the reefs, but all in all, the Inconnu is not an easy fish to find.

The one exception is found on one northern shield river that empties into the North Arm of Great Slave Lake. Here, Inconnu apparently congregate all year round, their numbers peaking in late August/early September when thousands mass in a great pool below a plume of large rapids. Presumably they come to spawn, although I'm not exactly sure what they're feeding on during the many months they spend there. At the Beaulieu, it is obvious, but in this river (which, owing to the easy targeting of Inconnu there, I choose not to name), smaller fish that would make good quarry are mysteriously absent. There are many Lake Whitefish. A visitor to the area



Inconnu are known to leap these rapids on this particularly Inconnu-rich tributary of northern Great Slave Lake.

will find the two species casually intermingling in pools below the rapids. A larger Inconnu would certainly have no trouble consuming one of these fish, but of the few Inconnu I have kept from this location, the stomach contents have been disappointingly unilluminating. Aside from the Inconnu and whitefish, the only other fish we have found there were pike, most of them very large and having a great time making prey of those Inconnu small enough to ingest. Pike aren't the only animals feasting at this place. Several times we arrived to find wolves and bears prowling around the pools below the rapids where the whitefish and Inconnu rest before ascending the river. I recall one bear making short work of half a dozen Inconnu as we watched from the boat.

Two years ago, with ice at the shore and temperatures below freezing, we braved a trip in mid-October to find all the pike

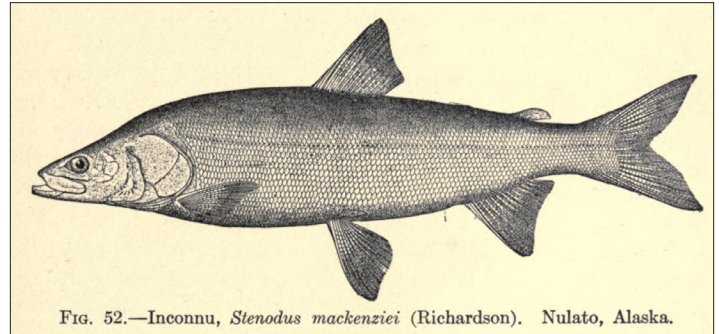


Fig. 52.—Inconnu, *Stenodus mackenziei* (Richardson). Nulato, Alaska.

Inconnu in *A Guide to the Study of Fishes* (Jordan, 1905). (archive.org/details/guidetostudyoffi02jord/page/67)

and whitefish gone and only a scattered number of heavily pigmented (especially along the lateral line) Inconnu present at the pool. Inconnu only spawn every two to four years, in late summer to early fall, according to Scott and Crossman. All these fish had milt, suggesting we had come across a group of males at the tail end of the spawn.

Whatever the case may be, there is a certain delight in not knowing. Mystery feeds the fire of intrigue, and Inconnu have kept that coal burning for more than two centuries. A large, powerful fish, with all the game qualities one might expect from salmon or pike, it is nonetheless a stranger to the wider world. I suspect, if an Inconnu can think of such things, that's just the way it likes it.

Sources for map

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