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COVER / Luke Richards and a chunky Kenai rainbow. © Paul Richards.

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Fish Alaska Magazine
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Toll Free 1-877-220-0787
(907) 345-4337 main
(907) 223-8497 advertising
www.FishAlaskaMagazine.com
ISSN 2475-5710 (print)
ISSN 2475-5729 (online)

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Fish Alaska *magazine is published ten times annually in January-July, Aug/Sept, Oct/Nov and December by Fish Alaska Publications, LLC, P.O. Box 772424, Eagle River, Alaska 99577. Send all address changes to P.O. Box 772424, Eagle River, Alaska 99577. One year subscriptions are $30 U.S. dollars for subscriptions in the U.S., $50 U.S in Canada, and $80 U.S. in all other countries. The single copy price is $6.99 in U.S. dollars. To subscribe by phone please call 907-345-4337.*

Editorial correspondence should be sent to Attn: Editor, Fish Alaska *magazine, P.O. Box 772424, Eagle River, Alaska 99577. Unsolicited manuscripts and photos will be considered, but must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. Although we will take care,* Fish Alaska *is not responsible for the loss or return of unsolicited materials.*

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Alaska Traveler

Little Cowboy

by Melissa Norris

Cade Schlagel was born to fly planes, and so not-surprisingly he has started a new air-taxi service out of his hometown of Dillingham called Bush Hoppers, LLC. He's a fourth-generation pilot born to Janet Armstrong Schlagel and Tom Schlagel who have owned Bay Air for the last 27 years. Tom, of course, is a pilot, and Janet's father and grandfather were pilots. Each made their living in the flying business and now Cade is following in their footsteps at the early age of 21.

Back in the 1930s Cade's great grandfather Ken Armstrong arrived in the Dillingham area having moved from near the Grand Canyon where he gave expeditions by mule. During his tenure as a tour guide in the national landmark he learned many rope skills, which earned him the nickname "Cowboy" by the Native people when he lived here. Later, Janet's father Dick Armstrong was called "Cowboy-ayagaq," which means "Little Cowboy" in the Yup'ik language. Ken, then Dick & JoAnn Armstrong, operated an air-taxi called Armstrong Air Service.

The Schlagels next to Cade's Cherokee 6/300 he uses for his air-taxi business, Bush Hoppers, LLC, out of Dillingham. © Janet Schlagel

As fate would have it Tom moved to Dillingham to fly and was working right next door to the Armstrong's hanger where he and Janet met. Janet had her nursing degree as her mother did and married a pilot, also like her mother. When Janet's parents retired, Tom and Janet bought their DeHavilland Beaver as well as their Cessna 207. Tom had a Supercub at the time. They started Bay Air (and a family; adding sons Cade and Cole) and ran passengers around the region for fishing and hunting, as well as providing a local air-taxi service for the community. They have streamlined their air-taxi business to flying the Beaver on floats and a Maule on tires and they are still plenty busy. It is fitting now that Cade has his stakes in the air-taxi business. Recently a local man that flew with Cade told Janet that he was proud that Cade was flying and that "everyone is calling him Little Cowboy like his Uppa."

You often hear it said that Bristol Bay is the "Salmon Capital of the World." Located on Nushagak Bay, Dillingham is home to roughly 2,300 people and is the hub of the region. The area's economy is fueled by commercial fishing, sport fishing, hunting and eco-tourism and there is access to excellent fishing for salmon, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden and grayling. The sport-fisheries include some wild and remote tributaries and other significant fisheries, such as the Arolik, Goodnews, Kanektok, Koktuli, Kulukak, Nushagak, Nuyakuk, Stuyahok, Tikchik, Togiak, Ongivinuk, Pungokepuk rivers and the Wood-River Lakes system in the Wood-Tikchik State Park, the largest state park in the nation. Bay Air provides drop-off and pick-up services with their float-equipped DeHavilland Beaver along with raft rentals available for folks planning a DIY fishing or hunting trip into the region as well as flying clients to various lodges. Their website, bayair-alaska.com, provides details on some of the most popular float trips.

Beyond sport fishing, many folks live throughout the region in remote villages and need transportation services. Cade says he has flown birthday cakes out to locals a couple of times and dropped off puppies twice and even a little 120cc snowmachine for one lucky child's Christmas gift. It makes you stop and think about how important flight is for this area and for the local's quality of life. Even kids participating in school sports in the area have to fly to other villages to compete. Cade and his younger brother Cole played basketball and wrestled when they were in high school and their families flying lifestyle allowed mom and dad to be spectators and offer support at their games.

Cade says it was awesome growing up in remote Alaska with a father and grandfather (and uncle Curt) who flew. It helped build his love for the outdoors as Cade is a hunting, trapping and fishing enthusiast and loves the life that flying in rural Alaska provides. Cade says he is ready to work hard when there are flights for customers and that when nothing is scheduled he is also ready to go on the next adventure.

Cade has been accruing hours to become a commercial pilot since he turned 16 and his family bought a 150. Tom is a certified flight instructor with a ton of experience so he taught both of his boys to fly. When Cade was a junior in high school he decided he wanted to fly for his profession, as did a couple of his closest friends, so Cade started Bush Hoppers, LLC by saving money he earned commercial fishing and with help from Janet and Tom he found and purchased the Cherokee 6/300 that he uses to taxi people and cargo around the region for his business. Cade thinks his first year is going well. His family has deep roots in this neck of the woods and the community has been very supportive of Cade's business. Janet and Tom conveyed that Cade and his family are grateful for all of the support, and want to express a big thank you to their community.

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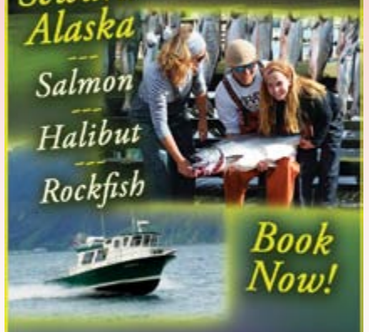

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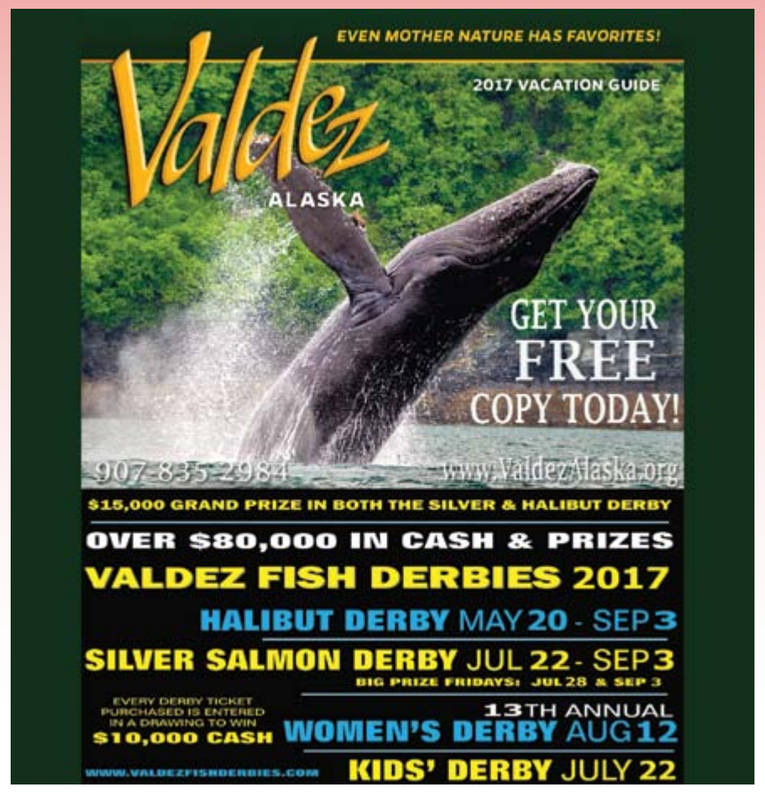

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Homer's Winter Kings

by Melissa Norris

Right now, despite the non-summer chill in the air, you can drop everything you are doing, pack your Xtratufs, Grundéns and perhaps some lunch, and then head down the Sterling Highway for a little saltwater king salmon fishing. Or make it even easier and book a 45-minute flight from Anchorage on Ravn and end up in Homer first thing in the morning. The point is whether you're driving or flying, you can head for Homer, spend a day on the water and be back in your warm and cozy bed that same night—with a limit of fresh-from-the-salt feeder kings packed away in the freezer.

We just made that trip, and all I have to say is that if we had the time, we would have planned to stay a couple additional days to maximize our fun.

This king fishery is vibrant and healthy, and the interesting part, according to ADF&G biologists, is that these fish are coming from California, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia to feed until they are ready to head back to their natal rivers to spawn. The genetic sampling ADF&G has been conducting is well underway and so far results show that over 99 percent of the king salmon sampled over 2014 and 2015 during the winter months are from outside Cook Inlet. Many of these fish are actually hatchery fish identifiable by their clipped adipose fins. Knowing there is a healthy run of feeder kings foraging food in Kachemak Bay and Cook Inlet, my husband and I readily accepted an invitation to fish out of Homer with Homer King Fishing, which is owned by father and son Steve and Eric Tutt.

Steve Tutt is a longtime, multi-generational commercial fisherman out of Homer and his sons are as well. The Tutts are also big-time sport fishermen and outdoor enthusiasts who fish, hunt and ride snowmachines as often as they can get out—and since they live in Homer year-round, they can get out a lot. Steve and his son Eric have found a way to do more of what they love by offering the cool advantage of sport-fishing for winter kings in Homer off their huge 55-foot seiner the F/V *Redemption* that Steve captains during commercial fishing season to harvest pinks and chum salmon in Prince William Sound.

Known as winter kings, these salmon are feeder kings that on average range between 10- to 20 pounds. They get larger as the spring progresses, which Steve's son Joel, who fished with us that day, explained as we worked our gear. That is good reason for the Homer Winter King tournament to have been held on March 18th this year, as the kings have had a chance to feed all winter and grow. This one-day tournament drew a record of over 1,500 fishermen in 2016, and participation has been growing steadily over the past several years. The derby is put on by the Homer Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center and they award tens of thousands of dollars

Captain Steve Tutt took a break to pose with this nice feeder king.

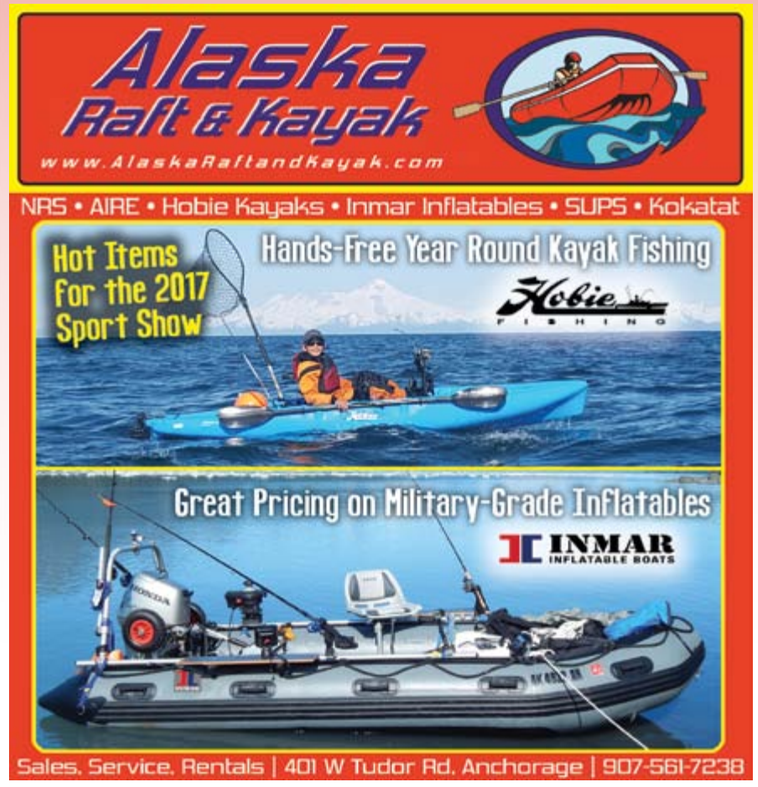
in prizes for the largest kings caught. The 2016 derby winner was local Homer resident Eric Holland, who caught a 26.45-pound feeder king and netted over $31,000 from it, the biggest derby payout statewide. For more information about the Homer Winter King Tournament check out homeralaska.org.

Besides the derby there are many more days of the year to choose from, depending on weather. If you can be flexible with your dates you'll be even better off because they can get a bead on the weather and tides about a week out and from there play it by ear pretty successfully. Steve has been sending pictures of great days on the water since December, enticing us to nail-down dates for our trip.

As mentioned, a feature of Homer fishing is that you can be back in your bed that same night, though you might also choose to overnight at the Best Western, Beluga Lake Lodge or the Driftwood Inn and fish for a couple of days. The 2-per-day feeder king bag and possession limits caught between September 1 and March 31 do not count towards your total king salmon season limits of five kings; plus, these fish are just plain delicious and known for having an extra-high fat content. April and May are still great times to fish for these feeder kings, but after April 1 the kings do apply to your annual limit of five kings. Still, you're likely to see success in catching these quality fish and many charters offer special rates this time of year. And while most of the winter king anglers are Alaska residents, if you are visiting Alaska this time of year for the Sportsman Show or any other reason, it is a great opportunity to go fishing.

The Tutts' primary method for catching

Steve's son Joel was able to join us.



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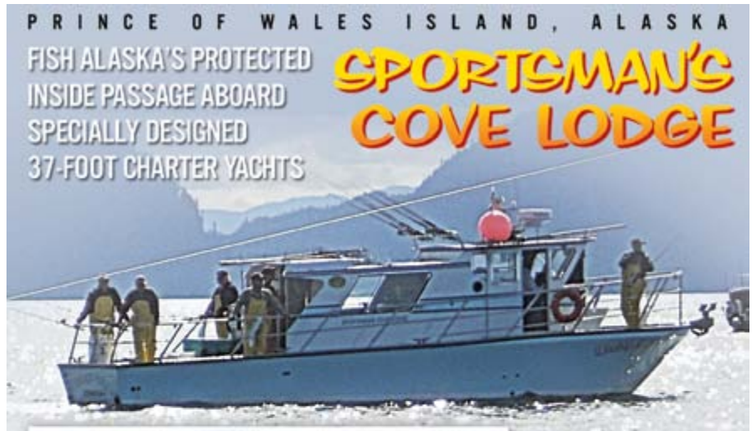

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kings is to troll using downriggers, flashers and bait that is brined in a blue herring formula. Steve diligently logs his fishing information, which helps keep him clued into what's working at any particular time, so he is just as prepared to run one of the rods with a trolling lure such as the Coho Killers by Silverhorde that have proven highly effective out here. These guys are out on the water a lot and have been for a long time so they are aware of the day-to-day nuances of the fishery that help make them good anglers. We kept 7 of 8 possible kings that day and landed a few more that we let go. There was one white king in the bunch that we took home. The meat looks great now, vacuum-sealed and in one-third-pound packages in the freezer. Of course I kept a fresh piece out for consumption the next day. Joel had filleted our fish onboard, and we found it easy to bring a cooler back on Ravn, and stayed up late processing our own fish.

For the do-it-yourself angler looking for winter king options, mooring your own boat out of Homer is the way to go, and kayak fishing in the saltwater year-round is growing in popularity for an affordable and adventurous option that would be pleasantly thrilling as long as you had the right gear.

Fishing in the winter sounds cold, but again with the right gear and a couple trips into a warm cabin, the 25-degree weather we experienced was pretty comfortable. And it is exhilarating to fish for hard-fighting kings, especially in cooler temperatures. And it was extra-rewarding for me because I usually get very seasick and on this trip I did not. I don't know whether it was Steve's huge fishing vessel or the flattish water we had that day fishing near the bluffs, but for a soured salty who loves to ocean fish but cannot often stomach the day, it was surprisingly sweet.

For more information contact:
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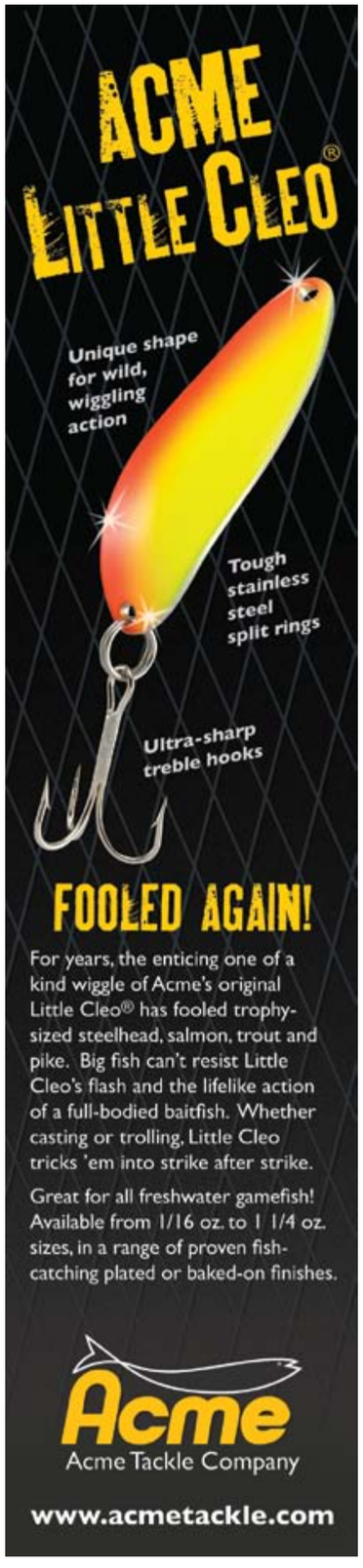

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www.seaeagle.com
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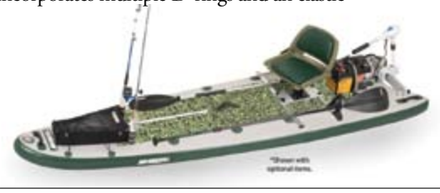

Promar Submersible LED Strobe Lights
www.promarnets.com
Water-activated, submersible deep-drop strobe lights attract interest from baitfish, gamefish and squid. These work well when fishing for deep-water halibut, black cod and rockfish and they are even productive when trolling for salmon. The self-contained lithium battery provides over 300 hours of use (100 hours for the Disco model). Attach these lights on squid jigs, bait rigs, deep-water rigs and even on life jackets for safety purposes. They are available in six colors: Blue, Disco, Green, Red, Ultra Violet (UV) and White.

Hardy Ultralite CADD Reel
www.hardyfishing.com
This reel is very light, offers fast line pick-up and high-end performance in a large arbor fly reel. It's constructed from 6061 aluminum bar stock, and features a 360-degree color-coded disc drag system, two-tone anodizing, and captive spool release. Models are available from 3/4/5 all the way to 10/11/12.

EGO Kryptek Mini Grip
www.adventureproducts.com
The EGO Kryptek Mini Grip is a compact grip tool that now features the Kryptek camo pattern and can be used in many fishing situations. Whether you are an avid kayak angler looking to conserve space or a serious angler needing a grip tool that is well-constructed, compact, efficient and economically priced, the EGO Kryptek Mini Grip has been designed to meet your requirements. The comfortable "T" handle design makes it easy to hold and lift heavy fish. The entire body and jaws are made from aluminum so you never have to worry about corrosion. The product also features a unique breakaway magnetic release design that allows the angler to securely tether the tool when not in use but have it readily accessible without the frustration and hassle of unlatching.

Wheatley Slimline Fly Box
www.rec.com
The Wheatley Slimline is half the height of the standard Wheatley fly box and holds the same amount of flies. The style has not been available since 1950. It's well-suited for many types of trout, salmon and steelhead patterns and would make an excellent stillwater trout box. It's available in Easy Grip, Easy Slot, Flat Foam, Tube Fly and Build Your Own configurations, in silver, black or forest green.

Not a subscriber or didn't see our March 2017 issue? **Check out our Annual Editors' Choice Awards for 2017 online!**

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Also look for our *Hunt Alaska* Editors' Choice Awards in the summer issue of *Hunt Alaska*!

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Fish Alaska Online

The opportunity for the fly-fishing fanatics here at *Fish Alaska* to divulge the finer points of their obsession-driven knowledge makes the April issue a favorite here at the magazine. From testing the latest reels or sharing our favorite time-honored fly-tying recipes, the anglers at *Fish Alaska* are always looking forward to the annual fly-fishing issue. As the season warms in preparation for summer, we're prepping too. Check out the latest videos and more below.

April 2017 Highlights:

- We're excited to show you the coming action in Alaska. Check out some awesome videos on our website.
- As a web companion to his feature article on page 86, Mike Lunde expands his Guide to the Bucktail Deceiver fly with step-by-step photos, as well as a video featuring variations of the fly.

Fish Alaska IN SEASON FISHING REPORT

- Our in-season fishing report is picking up for the early season. Go online to read about Kenai Penninsula spring rainbow and steelhead action in Southeast.

- Check out this month's featured video, Luhr-Jensen TECH TIPS: How to clean your Kwikfish Plugs. Your lures are an investment in your fishing experience. Take care of them and they'll continue to take care of you. This video demonstrates how guide Brandon McGavran cleans his lures after the completion of a fishing trip.
- Haven't you heard? Subscribers now get free access to our all-new digital issue! Go online now and read *Fish Alaska* on your phone, tablet, or computer.

VIEW DIGITAL ISSUE

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Fishing for a Compliment

Lisa Black of Highlands Ranch, CO, with a nice grayling on the Alagnak River in Katmai National Preserve in July 2016.

Pam Holmes and Greg Taylor with a nice halibut in August 2016.

Austin Moser with a solid Nushagak king.

SEND US YOUR FISHING PHOTOS!

E-mail hi-res .jpeg photos to: russell@fishalaskamagazine.com. Subject Line: FFC. Please include vital caption information in the e-mail. You can also mail photos to: FFC, PO Box 772424, Eagle River, AK 99577. Include a SASE if you want it returned. Include a separate caption for the photo. Do not write on the back of the photo. We will let you know when your photo will appear in the magazine.

Brent Bensmiller of Bonita Springs, FL, lands a mature red while fishing for upper Kenai River rainbows in July 2016.

Three generations of the Wilson and Wilson-Scott families presenting their halibut, silver and pink salmon catch while fishing with Alaska's Fish Tales Lodge in Whale Pass, AK.

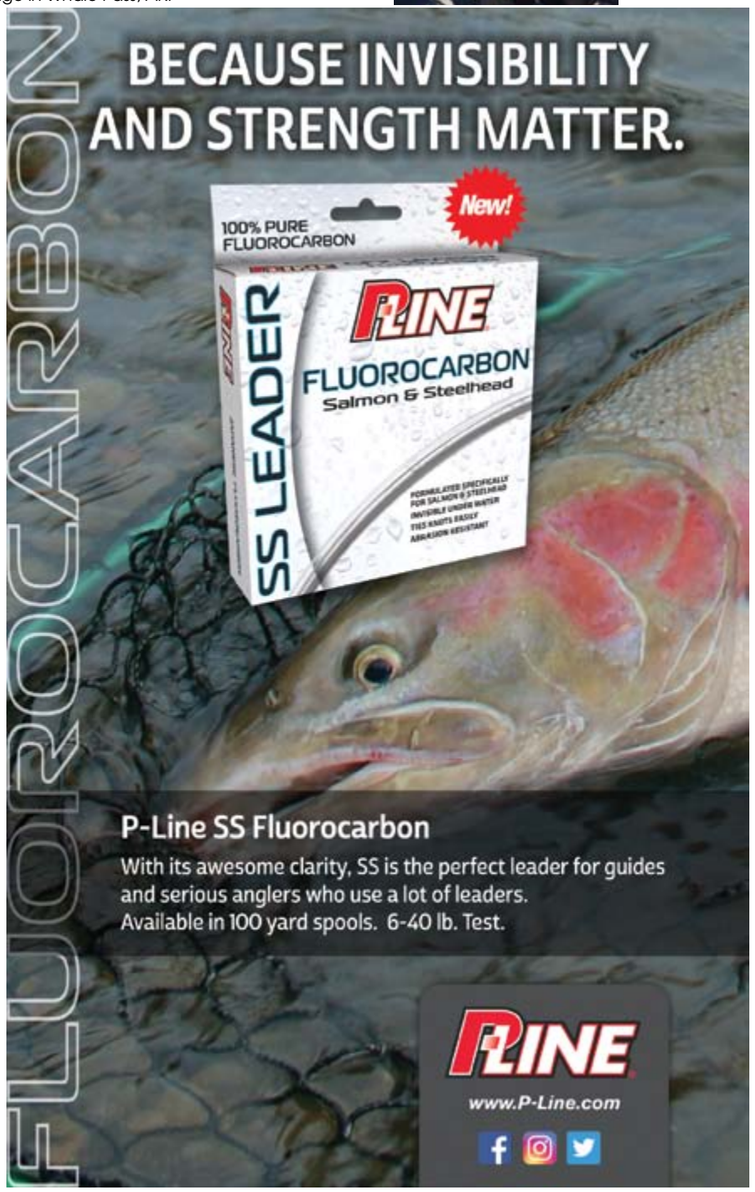
Brent Sugita of Kaneohe, HI, caught this rainbow on the Kenai on one of the last drifts of the day while visiting his brother Matt and nephew Terren.

Jason Greco of Redwood City, CA, with a 65.1-pound king salmon he caught on a guided fishing trip out of Craig, AK, in July 2016 with his dad and brother.

Eric Wallis with a nice red salmon on the Kenai River in August 2016.

Michael Michaud, 7, with an Alaska-sized halibut.

Emma Hughes, 6, of Peters Creek, AK, with a nice Agulowak River rainbow.



Fish Alaska Families

The Five Salmon Family Challenge Program

Story by Troy Letherman

We all like an excuse to go fishing, and getting the entire family out there and involved is even more fun. Having your family beg you to take them out fishing again and again is just about the perfect scenario then.

This summer, why not make it a challenge? As a family, catch all five species of Pacific salmon that return to Alaska waters, and commemorate your achievement with a certificate from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The ADF&G Five Salmon Family certificate program provides recognition to angling families who catch and document the five species of Pacific salmon commonly found in Alaska. Certification in the program requires all salmon must be:

- Legally caught in Alaska waters (fresh- or saltwater) open to the public
- In compliance with current ADF&G sport-fishing regulations

Fish caught out of season, in waters where sport-fishing for that species is closed, or with illegal sport-fishing means and methods, cannot be counted toward the challenge. Just fish within the regulations for species open to sport-fishing at that time (and place), and record your catch.

The program promotes family or group angling participation, proper salmon identification and ethical angling practices. Participants can include members of an immediate family, extended family, "family" groups or any other class of angling partners. The program is open to all anglers (resident and non-resident) who fish in Alaska waters.

Documenting the catch

Photos documenting family members displaying the salmon are required for each fish. The photo(s) should allow easy identification of the salmon species, show responsible angling practices and be taken at or near the fishing site.

If you released the fish, please make sure your photo demonstrates responsible release practices, and young anglers are displaying proper safety considerations such as wearing float coats or life vests when near the water.

Submission Process

Only one submission form and photo release is required per family or group. Forms and photos can be submitted in digital or hard-copy format. Forms are also available by contacting the Five Salmon Family certificate coordinator at ryan.ragan@alaska.gov.

Photo Release

ADF&G wants to share the accomplishment of families who complete the challenge and may opt to use select images to promote the program or sport-fishing in Alaska, such as in flyers, on their website or on their official Facebook page. Whenever possible, ADF&G will credit the photographer and publish the names of individual(s) appearing in the photo(s).

Processing and Approval Process

Each submission will be reviewed by ADF&G staff. If the submission is complete and meets the certificate requirements, an official certificate with the family's name will be mailed to the family household. Most submissions take about two- to three weeks to process.

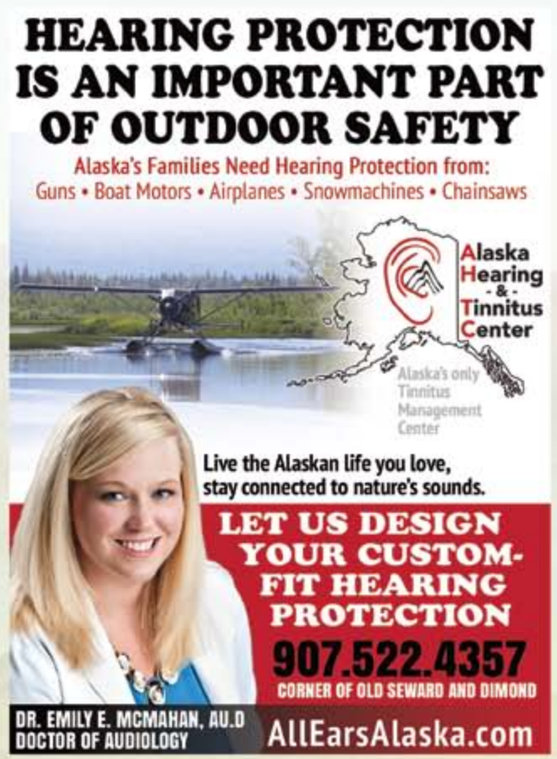
The Five Salmon Family Application can be found here:
http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/sporttrophyfish/5salmonapp.pdf.
The ADF&G model release form is located here:
http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/sport/trophyfish/model_release_adfg.pdf.

Now just get your family out there on the water and start keeping track of your catch. For an extra challenge, make it a "fly-fishing family challenge" and attempt to catch all five species of Alaska's Pacific salmon on the fly this season. Send your results to *Fish Alaska* magazine through our website and maybe your family will be featured in an upcoming photo array in "Fishing for a Compliment."

Troy Letherman is the editor for Fish Alaska *and* Hunt Alaska *magazines.*

Fish Alaska Family Services

Recommended Service Providers for Alaska's Outdoor Families



Salmon Sense

When to Not Match the Hatch

Story and photo by JD Richey

To be a successful fly angler you must match the hatch as closely as possible, right?

Well, not always...

Trying to imitate the natural forage of trout, char and grayling is certainly a good place to start, but there are times when doing just the opposite can pay huge dividends.

Case in point: Last summer I took some fly fishermen up a small Southwest tributary to chase big Dollies. When we got to my favorite flat, it was as I had hoped—packed bank to bank with spawning chums. Standing on a slight rise above the creek, I could make out about a bazillion char hanging behind the salmon and gorging on the epic egg buffet.

I rigged my dudes up with spot-on counterfeit chum eggs—8mm and 10mm light orange beads—and turned them loose on the flat, excited to watch the fireworks. Well, after several drifts apiece, neither angler had hooked a fish, which seemed totally impossible considering the biomass of char out in front of them.

These guys were pretty proficient too—they made good casts and had nice drag-free drifts going. It obviously wasn't operator error. After 10 minutes of casting and not getting bit, I decided to shake things up. I took the nearest guy's tippet and swapped out his bead for a glowing pink 14mm model. It looked like a stupid beach ball in that little creek but the Dollies went absolutely cuckoo for it. I switched my other client to the same massive orb and he too started pounding the fish.

While trout and Dollies have been known to get extremely picky when there are tons of eggs in the water, I think sometimes there's just too much of the real stuff around for them to even notice your imitation. That's clearly what happened on the pink bead day—the 14mm profile and contrasting color stood out against the sea of small light orange chum eggs and the fish really keyed in on them.

I have experienced the same thing in the spring and early summer when there are millions and millions of salmon fry and smolt out-migrating. The predatory fish have so many silvery little targets to choose from that a smolt pattern of the same color and profile often gets lost in the shuffle. That's where I have found bright yellow streamers and Woolly Buggers to really be effective. The bright color makes for easy visibility and I tend to run them a little bit larger than the natural forage, too, for that same reason.

In other words, it's sometimes better to stand out from the crowd than blend seamlessly into it.

I think not matching the hatch also comes in handy on heavily pressured rivers. There are days when the fish have seen a million perfect copies of their natural food go by and you can almost feel it—their eyes glazing over from the monotonous parade of offerings drifting past their lairs. Put something completely different out there, however, and you can light up otherwise stale fish.

I once watched a guy fishing around a bunch of folks drifting egg patterns under indicators absolutely put a smack down on everybody by throwing the fish a change-up. He was stripping a small black leech in and around all boats using faux roe and easily caught twice the amount of trout and char as the rest of the fleet combined!

Off-colored water is another condition in which I don't worry much about having a perfect replica of what the fish are eating. When visibility is reduced, I'll go up in size and use colors with more "pop." In those cases, I want the fish to see my fly first and foremost and then worry about if he's going to eat it or not after. Luckily, fish in murky water generally are a lot less skittish than ones in clear water and thus tend to be more aggressive (and less selective). A fly will disappear quickly in dirty water, prompting an urgency within the fish: eat it before it gets away!

Going counter to what the fish are naturally feeding on doesn't work every day, but it's definitely a nice little concept to keep in your back pocket on those days when fish aren't biting what they are "supposed" to.

JD Richey is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine; he can be reached through his website at www.fishwithjd.com.*

This Dolly Varden went for a big, boldly-hued bead that didn't match in either size or color the eggs that were in the water.

Fish Alaska Fly

Willie Nelson

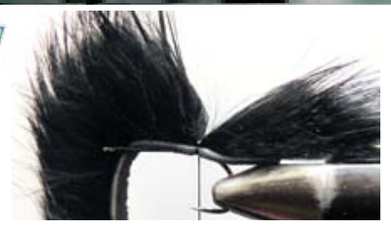
Pattern Originated by
Wally Adams
Text & Photos by Mike Brown

With this month's issue featuring fly fishing in Alaska, and that often meaning big leeches, I thought what better pattern than the Willie Nelson.

This fly was created by a local Alaskan, Wally Adams. Wally has a lifelong history in the fly-fishing industry, from working at Kauffman's Fly Shop to guiding in Washington State and Bristol Bay and on to being a commercial fly-tier. While guiding in Bristol Bay, this fly was conceived. By the early 1990s Spey casting had started to gain popularity. If you have ever taken a spin with a Spey rod, you realize very quickly that fly-size matters. Wally knew that the typical rabbit-wrapped, heavy dumbbell-eyed flies that we so commonly use up here were just too heavy for the Spey rods to effectively cast. Wally set-out to create a leech pattern that had all the attributes of what was being used at the time, but he wanted to downsize it and make it easier to cast. The final result was the Willie Nelson: A super simple and very effective fly, which has proven itself over and over again.

What Wally came up with came to be known as the "Musician Series." Being an avid fan of playing the guitar and holding a deep love for music, the trio of leeches were named after popular musicians. The Willie Nelson (black body with red head), Miles Davis (black body with blue head) and the Al Green (black body with chartreuse head) were born. These three flies are mainstays here in the shop, but this style of fly can be tied in a variety of color combinations that will work for any species of fish in Alaska.

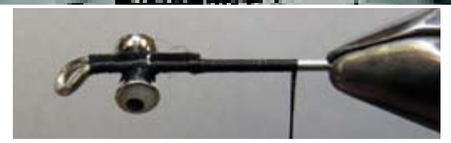
Mike Brown is the owner of Mossy's Fly Shop in Anchorage, AK, and is a lifelong Alaskan with a passion for family, fly-fishing and fly-tying.



Step 1: Using GSP thread (we use this thread on the rear hook only to give the fly some strength and longevity from all the grabs), wrap the shank of the hook back to the start of the bend. Attach your Zonker strip down with 4 or 5 good turns; you want to leave a short tail about ½-inch. Wrap your thread up to about one hook-eye-width from the eye.

Step 2: Now pull your rabbit Zonker tight on top of the shank and tie it in with 4 to 5 good, tight wraps of thread. Lift the Zonker up and wrap a small head, then whip finish. Glue is optional.

Step 3: Cut a piece of your 30-pound braid (we use braid for its strength and smaller diameter; Dacron backing will work but will rot over time after being wet) about 5- to 6 inches long. Cut the ends even and fold in half. Take the loop end and place through the hook-eye and then take the cut ends and go through the loop. Pull it down tight to form a hitch on the hook-eye.



Step 4: Place a shank or cut-off hook shank in your vise with the turned-eye downward. Take your dumbbell eyes and place them about 1½ hook-eye's-width back on the bottom side of the shank. Tie them in good with figure-eight wraps (you can put some glue over your eye wraps for strength and security if you would like); then wrap your thread back approximately one inch from behind the eyes (this should give you enough for 2 to 3 turns of the rabbit).

Step 5: Take your braid and tie-in on top of your shank; make 3 or 4 wraps. At this point you can adjust your rear hook to the desired length you want the fly. The Willie is 3 inches overall length but you can make it longer or shorter if you would like. Keeping your braid on top of the shank, wrap your thread over the braid, lashing in good and tight. Once you get about one hook-eye away from the dumbbells, fold the braid over and tie the tag ends down to the back, again making good, tight wraps. Once you are to the back, trim the tag ends off. (Note: Having a pair of braid scissors on the desk will cut the braid much easier and save your good tying scissors.)

Step 6: While pulling the zonker strip tight, tie your zonker strip down to the top of the shank with 3-4 tight wraps of thread (I use a rubber band to pull the rear hook backwards by hooking the band on the back end of the vise to keep tension on the zonker). Wrap your thread up to about 1 ½ hook-eye's-width from the dumbbells. Next, wrap the rabbit strip up the shank; you should get 2 to 3 wraps of the strip. Wrap each wrap side-by-side with touching but not overlapping turns.

Step 7: Tie-off your rabbit with a few turns of thread. Cut the rabbit strip and then finish securing the Zonker in with tight thread wraps.

MATERIALS:
Rear Hook: Gamakatsu B10s Stinger Hook, Size 6
Thread-Rear Hook: Veevus GSP Black
Tail: Black Rabbit Zonker Strip
Articulation Thread: White Power Pro, 30-pound
Body: Black Rabbit Zonker
Flash: Holographic Flashabou Blue
Dumbbell Eyes: 5/32-inch Nickel/Pearl Dumbbells
Head: STS Trilobal Dubbing Red
Front Hook Shank: OPST shank or any turned-eye hook to cut
Thread Front: Veevus 140 Black

Step 8: Take 2 strands of blue holographic flash and fold over your thread, making sure ends are all even. Slide down thread to the front of your rabbit and place slightly above center. Then secure the flash with a couple of thread wraps. Repeat these steps on the other side.

Step 9: Create a dubbing loop. Take a small but generous clump of red STS Trilobal dubbing. Prepare the dubbing by pulling and stacking a few times in your fingers to even-up the ends. Then, cut the dubbing in half and place both clumps in the dubbing loop, one below the other. Using a bodkin, spread the dubbing out evenly down the loop. You want to have about 2- to 3 inches length of dubbing in the loop. Spin your loop up tight and use your bodkin to pick all the trapped fibers out; this will create a thin rope-like base and give you nice long fibers to fold back as you wrap.

Step10: Time to form the head. Make two turns with your loop while folding the dubbing back after each wrap. Once you are tight to the eyes, you will figure-eight wrap the dubbing around them, finishing with one or two wraps in front of the eyes.

Step11: Tie-off the dubbing and build a small head and whip finish. Use a small comb or toothbrush to brush your head out. Your fly is complete.

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The School of Hard Knocks: *Reading Water*

Story and photos by Troy Buzalsky

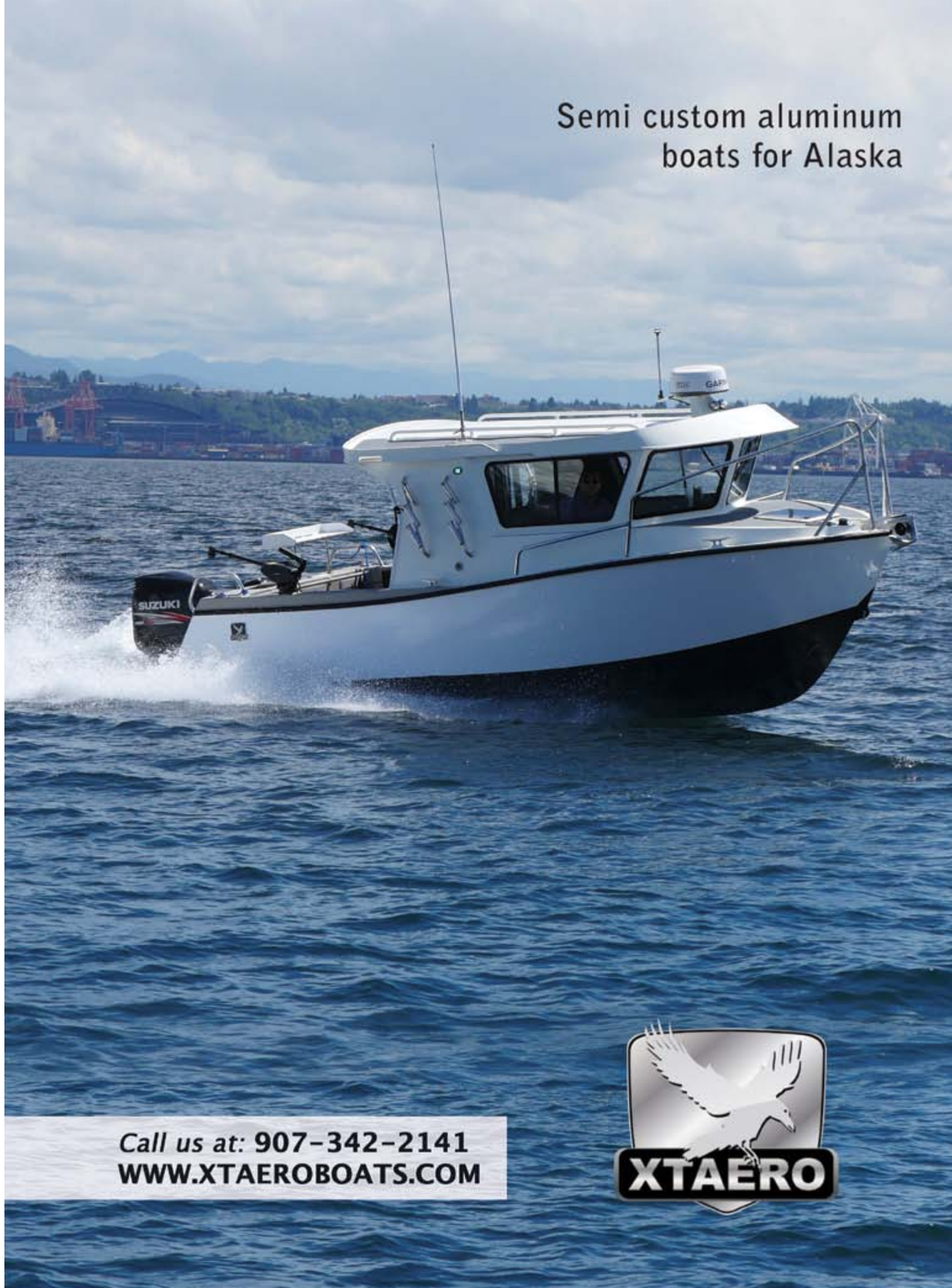
If learning to run your jet boat, having an expert along to help you learn to read water is a great idea.

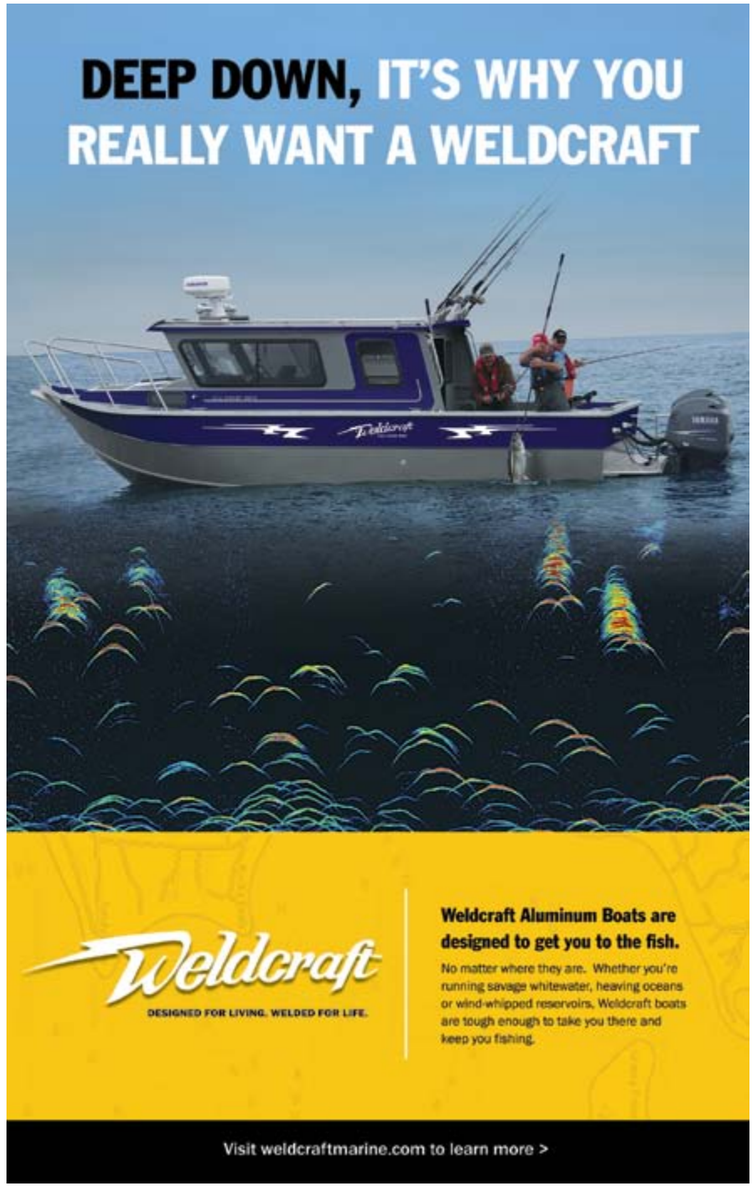
Jet sleds can undoubtedly get you to locations you've always wanted to fish but have never been able to access. But if running a jet boat in low- or boulder-infested water, it's not a matter of if you will hit a rock; it's a matter of when.

The goal for any boating enthusiast is to use the boat for its intended purpose while taking the best care possible to assure trouble-free use and longevity. A great idea is to enroll in some type of a jet-boat education and use class. The next option is to consider hiring a guide to take you out and teach you the ropes. This sounds good in theory, but many guides cannot accept the liability within their insurance-policy provisions. Other guides either will not let you operate their boats, or will not operate your boat, posing a greatly reduced teaching opportunity. Finally, you can search YouTube and watch a host of videos on good and bad jet-boating operation. Regardless, operating a jet boat on the water is a very hands-on and intuitive process that requires "stick time" to master the art.

This column is not designed to make you a great jet-boat operator, but it will attempt to offer some insight or teachable moments to help you navigate "the School of Hard Knocks." Also, no two rivers are identical, and some rivers change behavior with rising and falling waters while others change when running high versus running low. Bottom line, just because you ran this slot or that wave-train last week doesn't mean you can do the same this week.

Since we are going to talk about reading water, it's good to understand the terms published as the International Scale of River Difficulty. This standardized scale reflects the technical difficulty, skill level required and danger associated with the section of river or single rapid.





Just like when playing chess, when running tricky water you want to look beyond your first move.

Class I: Small waves with clear passages and no serious obstacles.

Class II: Rapids moderate in size and difficulty with passages clear. The waters require a suitable watercraft that can withstand hydraulic impact.

Class III: Waves are numerous, high and irregular; the water contains rocks, eddies and rapids with clear but narrow passages. These waters requiring expertise in maneuvering and scouting is usually advised. These waters require a good operator and a quality boat capable of withstanding impact of hydraulic forces and rocks. Coincidently, Class III waves cause more accidents than any other wave-train because the dangers sometimes do not appear as obvious as more violent whitewater.

Class IV: Long rapids; waves high, irregular; dangerous rocks; boiling eddies; best passages difficult to scout; scouting mandatory first time; powerful and precise maneuvering required. These waters demand expert boatmanship, an excellent boat and high-quality equipment.

Class V: Exceedingly difficult, long and violent rapids following each other almost without interruption; riverbed extremely obstructed; big drops; violent current; very steep gradient; close study is essential but often difficult. All possible precautions must be taken and exceptional boatmanship, vessel and equipment are demanded.

Class VI: Unrunnable.

Expert boatmanship, and excellent equipment, is required to run many waters in Alaska.

Lesson number one for the new jet boater, before we get into reading water, is understanding jet-pump dynamics. Before hitting full throttle, spend some time with slow-boat operations, in and around docks, wing-dams, buoys, etc. Run the boat in forward and reverse and master the throttle. Also, understand how the boat steers under low- and no-throttle situations, and how to navigate in reverse with skill. And remember it does no good to read water and see the rock, but then not be able to get your boat around it. A jet pump requires laminar flowing water through the intake, impeller and nozzle to provide for steering control.

Laminar flows are lines of parallel flowing water. Turbulent flows are intertwined streams with complex mixing. Some turbulent water is green, called turbulence; some turbulent water is white, which is called aerated. Helical flows are circular hydraulic flows trending away from the bank. Aerated water can put a jet boater in trouble quickly as it causes loose impeller grip; it hides rocks and obstructions; it doesn't read well, and it leads to a loose bow, causing bow-dive and bow-shear.

When reading water there are several key factors to understand, because sometimes the best you can do is make an educated guess as to where the safest passage lies. And just like when playing chess, you want to look beyond your first move; otherwise you risk navigating into a bad situation by not looking forward and planning your next few moves.

Obstructions form upstream and downstream characteristics that resemble the letter V. Look for the tongue (chutes) in the downstream-pointing Vs as your navigation slot, and avoid upstream-pointing Vs, for the point of the V aims at the obstruction as the water pushes around the object. Pillows are formed when a large flow of water runs into a large obstruction, causing water to "pile up" or "boil" against the face of the obstruction. Obstructions also create frowning and smiling holes. Their names reference the shape of the wave at the downstream edge of the hole as viewed from upstream. "Smiling" holes will tend to throw objects downstream at their edges and "frowning" holes will tend to keep objects forever. If you see water running upstream, it's an ominous sign and should be avoided.

Riffles are small frequency waves. This is a typical situation faced on most braided rivers, and knowing how much draft your boat requires on plane is vital. The width of the riffle defines the depth of the water. If riffles are 12 inches apart in frequency, the water is roughly 12 inches deep. Also, remember, some of these waters are also salmon-spawning redds and should be avoided during the spawn.

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Knowing how much draft your boat requires on plane is vital before running riffles.

Eddies are found immediately downstream of an obstacle in a river where the current is relatively calm or may actually flow upstream. An eddy line is the hydraulic line between the laminar flow and the green water and makes for a great place to hover your boat. Eddies also present risk; as you slow to enter an eddy you are off throttle and sometimes lose steering control. In these circumstances reverse-control can save a bad situation.

Back eddies are eddies with one side and are notorious for catching boaters by surprise, quickly putting the boater in a troubling situation. A dead giveaway of a back eddy is lots of pooling debris.

Boils are caused by swirling upward and downward water. As a general rule, boils offer good green water. Their depth can be judged by their width just like a riffle; if the boil is 6 feet wide, the water can be expected to be 6 feet deep. Oftentimes boiling water is moving faster than it looks, as the water quickly channels, boiling up- and downstream.

Standing waves result from converging currents and are usually associated with deep water. Because of the increased depth required to produce standing waves, they generally provide a good rock-free ride through a rapids. Look for a rhythm or pattern; if you see an irregularity, it is probably a submerged obstruction.

Ledges can be natural or manmade, and can produce typical obstruction features. If you see a perpendicular straight line, it's a dead giveaway to a manmade feature such as a low-head dam or perhaps a submerged beaver dam. Remember, you might be able to scoot over a beaver dam, but can you get back up?

Strainers are formed when an object blocks the passage of larger objects but allows the flow of water to continue just like a big food strainer. These objects can be very dangerous, because the force of the water will pin an object or body against the strainer and then pile up, pushing it down under water. Strainers can be formed by many different objects, including grates, trees, logjams, construction debris (rebar) or even a bridge. Strainers are equally dangerous to swimmers.

Vector is a term used to describe the rebound effect of water currents. When vectoring occurs, the river's channels (slots) transition based on the water's hydraulic force. This is easily seen with sharp turns in the river when the water bounces off the outside corner, and the new direction and slot is formed. Vector currents help create navigational slots and carefully studying the sinus pattern of the water can be a deep-water indicator.

Topography is a great way to evaluate what's happening in the water by examining the topographical indicators out of the water. When creeks or rivers enter the mainstem, oftentimes you will encounter big waves, caused by flushed-out boulders as well as converging waters. Sheer rock walls on one side of the river may indicate deep water, whereas a gravel bar or rock slide may indicate shallow-water situations. Also, remember if boulders are flushed from a stream there may be a continuance of boulders downstream in the vector.

Geology is another great way of knowing what's happening in the water. Simply look at what's on the bank and it will generally tell you what's underwater. If there are boulders, clay, basalt, gravel or sand on the bank, there's a good chance that same geology will be found in the water. Also, look for man-made objects. If you see concrete and rebar on the shoreline, expect that it's in the water, too.

Ledges can be natural or manmade, and can produce typical obstruction features. If you see a perpendicular straight line, it's a dead giveaway.

Color changes are another important characteristic when reading water. In summer flows, green water is usually good, and brown typically shallow. If you get yourself in trouble, throttle up and "go for the green."

Spits are water features where two flows come together, and the faster the water, the longer the tail. These are often encountered around islands, especially on braided streams. Spits, topography and geology should all be considered when looking for the best channel.

Splits are just that—splits in the flow of water, often encountered when an island or sandbar is present. Enter these situations with caution as they are often very hard to read, and again, don't rely on your memory. Last year the safe passage may have been to take the river-right channel around the island, and this year it might be the opposite.

When navigating up- or downstream, make a habit of not only looking forward, but also to look back after running a rapid, riffle or slot. The water reads totally different coming from the opposite direction as gradient, light reflection and other factors change the perspective. Also, I like to use the breadcrumb trail on my chart-plotter to help remind me of my navigational route; oftentimes I will choose an entirely different way home, but it's nice to be reminded how I got there in the first place.

Visibility can also be a key factor when navigating. If you are operating a windshield boat from the helm standing up and looking down on the water is far better than sitting in the seat. If operating from the tiller, certainly stand and consider a spotter up-front. Running from the transom presents a visibility challenge when reading water and a stability concern when standing and running from standing waves or experiencing bow shear. And finally, be ready for big rain. Protect your eyes and consider a pair of driving goggles. Driving, near-freezing rain in the eyes is a recipe for disaster.

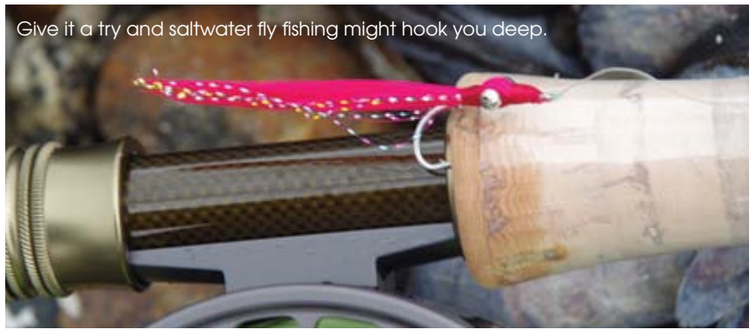
Today we are seeing fewer jet boats sold, which naturally translates into fewer jet boaters on the river. Most of the experienced boaters have learned themselves in the school of hard knocks, and some are happy to share their wisdom. With a little luck, some perseverance and a bunch of quality stick time, you too can climb the ranks as an expert boatman. Now get out there and enjoy that jet boat.

Troy A. Buzalsky is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine and writes the Boat Column monthly.*

Fish Alaska Saltwater

Chicken Coop Magic

Story and photo by
Terry W. Sheely


Give it a try and saltwater fly fishing might hook you deep.

There was a time when I was convinced that saltwater salmon would not eat feathers, foam, foil or glue unless it was offered by a fly-god, a long-casting guru who sprinkled magic on the presentation.

For us merely mortal moochers it was, if not impossible, certainly a waste of valuable fishing time to throw chicken coop feathers at salmon that want to eat herring. Give 'em herring, I said. It's what they want.

And then I hooked a silver, 12 pounds if I remember right, on a cast fly. That fish ripped me bow to stern, cartwheeled, line-fried my fingers and fought the thin rod like a 25-pounder. By the time that fish hit the mesh, I was sweating, breathing like a runner on steeple stairs and vibrating like I'd just popped my first moose.

And there was no magic involved, no guru, no fancy gear, no endless learning curve or pretentious technique. I just read a book, bought a bunch of blue, green and pink streamers, stood in the bow, reared back and hurled a 25-foot shooting head a good 35 feet.

The salmon hooked me shortly thereafter.

Hooked me on saltwater fly fishing. Hooked me deep.

Oh sure, I still offer herring a lot of the time, and a lot of herring. But when the salmon situation presents itself I no longer hesitate to pick up the fly stick, strip a bunch of 300-grain off the reel spool and throw a chicken coop into the 'chuck. It pays off more often than my bets on spring break-up, and the payout is without fail explosive, powerful and memorable.

Snugging a 4/0 wire hook into stone-hard resistance of a king salmon jaw is salmon fishing on a different, or dare I say, higher plane.

There's no feeding the fish, no finesse, no waiting, no downrigger pop, no slack, no mechanical advantage.

Somewhere between splash-down and re-cast the retrieve just stops. Solid resistance; set the hook with a hammer of a rod sweep and power strip a yard of line to drive the hook as deep as possible, clear your fingers and hang-on. Later there will be time to pray for good knots, to not be standing on fly line, and after the first good run there will still be time for a good old-fashioned mental lashing for not investing in a fly reel with space-age composites and a multi-everything drag system.

Cranks me up just thinking about it.

Listen and you'll hear a lot of salmon-flying theories—only fish spawners in the estuary, fish feeders in the rips, don't waste your time until late July…….poppycock.

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SAFE RIDERS! You Make Snowmobiling Safe

Let's start with May.

If you're new to the fly game you'll need the basics: A 9- to 11-foot rod, 8- to 10-weight, with stiff butt and fast-action. Spey or single-handed—it's just choice. Stiff rods handle heavy saltwater lines, buck wind, recover quickly for follow-up casts and will drive a hook home. Nine-foot rods work. 10-foot work better. The longer the rod the more capable it is of handling long lines and controlling big fish.

Reels: Buy the best you can afford. Big arbors for quick line retrieval and smooth drags. Large arbors also reduce line coil and that can be a big plus.

I recommend synthetic, self-lubricating drags, but I've also caught a lot of salmon on less costly cork discs. Good materials (you haven't lived until you've had a $40 fly reel blow up on a running king) that are rated for saltwater—that usually means aluminum, composite or stainless parts. Top-drawer reels are sealed. For awhile. Salmon reels should hold 25- to 30 yards of 7- to 10-weight intermediate or full-sink line, 24 feet of shooting head or 325-grain sink-tip, and 250- to 300 yards of running line/backing. Saltwater salmon are rarely line-shy, but I still prefer a couple of yards of fluorocarbon for leaders and tippets.

Weather permitting late April and May are good times to get your feet (boat) wet.

The salmon du jour of May are usually small feeder kings or even smaller silvers. Most will be under 8 pounds, many even less—but cast like you're expecting a 20-pounder because they'll be showing up, too. These small Chinook are in their second year of saltwater living, feeding aggressively, often running shallow. Silvers are more trout-like than salmon in size and disposition. Both are aggressive, which works in favor of a beginner looking for experience.

Find a decent feeding rip or birds crashing bait-balls and you'll often find these young predators in the top 30 feet. They fight hard, are great sport and a nice introduction to the nuances of handling the equipment and what to expect from the fish—before running into mature spawners later in the season.

June-July will bring spawner kings into estuary situation. In my estimation, these are the toughest fly-rod challenge. They're big, often 50 feet deep and worse—they can be close-mouthed. These fish are transitioning from salt- to freshwater and have more spawning than feeding on their minds. Unless you hit him on the nose with the fly it's very unlikely to provoke a strike. If you really want to whack a king, go out in deeper water where the bait-balls drive the diving birds batty and cast to feeders that have not yet succumbed to spawning distractions. Often, it's a daylight or tide-change bite when the big feeders are in the top 50 feet of water and that's well within range of a good fly. Herky-jerky retrieves (and I like a fly with a tad of weight on its nose to dip and dive) with flies that resemble the baitfish at hand. Herring green, blue with white or pink white for shrimp, crab spawn are always good choices.

In mid-July you'll start to find some larger silvers (5- to 10 pounds) in a mix of chums and pinks. For the chums add a streak or two of fluorescent green or chartreuse to the fly box, and for pinks go with a smaller, shorter pink fly—shrimp or krill imitations. Ask at your fly shop—they'll know what you need. And the best part—silvers will whack both the chum and pink patterns plus the half-zillion patterns tied specifically for silvers.

Find habitat, birds, or bait and you'll find feeders you can cast to. In August it often pays to blind cast to the edges of kelp beds or over eel grass. Silvers and pinks and feeder Chinook patrol the kelp beds picking off food that darts in and out of the jungles, and there's always a good chance of also picking up a fat rockfish or lingcod for the table.

I have one more technique, favored for its production as well as being the ideal fly-rod tactic for the casting challenged.

Bucktailing.

No casting involved.

This is almost exclusively a silver salmon technique. Bucktailing is nothing more than trolling a streamer fly on short-line. And it's sure death if silvers are in the area.

Streamer patterns are preferred, thin-dressed to imitate needlefish or herring. I like an intermediate or floating line tied directly to 10 feet of 30-pound monofilament, something with a bit of stretch to absorb the impact. Fluorocarbon is not necessary but I favor it for the fact that I can use high-breaking strength (50-pound) without adding visibility. The fly dancing in froth and bubbles is hard to see, at best, so line diameter and visibility are not factors. While at trolling speed strip the streamer into the wake, stopping it no more than 10- to 15 feet behind the motor.

The fly should be skittering in and out of the water at the back of the prop-wash. Adjust the trolling speed until you find the kph the silvers want that day—4- to 8 knots is standard. Silvers stick their noses right into the prop-wash (I don't know why) and strikes will be on short-lines and hard—bordering on vicious. Hold your rod tight, keep your fingers off the line or put the rod in a mounted holder.

Bucktailing isn't fly-casting but when the hook goes home, the long-rod bends, line flies off the reel and runs go crazy, does it really matter if the chicken coop was cast or bucktailed?

Terry W. Sheely is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine and can be reached through his website at www.tnscommunications.net.*

Fish Alaska Stillwater

Arctic Char

Story and photos by George Krumm

Several years ago I launched my SuperCat into Matanuska Lake shortly after ice-out. On that day, I'm sure I caught some fish but what I remember most is the gigantic Arctic char I saw swim past me in deep, open water. I would guess it was in the low 30-inch range. Its white-edged pectoral fins looked to be almost as big as my hands. It slowly swam around me in a half-circle and then faded into the depths.

On a different day, I found myself fishing Irene Lake, also in the Kepler-Bradley chain, with a huge dragonfly nymph imitation on a Teeny T-300 line in about 18 feet of water. A fish ate the bug and the ensuing battle last several minutes, during which time the fish stayed deep, bending my six-weight to the cork. Eventually I got a glimpse of the fish 8- or 10 feet beneath my feet. It was an Arctic char, and it looked like it was closer to three feet than 30 inches. I was putting as much pressure as I dared on the 2x tippet and had been doing so for several minutes. I watched the fish shaking its head—and saw and simultaneously felt when the hook pulled out.

On yet a different early-spring day, I bounced around in my SuperCat in Finger Lake with my back to 15 mile-per-hour winds and fished a chironomid pupa imitation nine and a half feet under an indicator in 11 feet of water, watching the indicator disappear and reappear with each wave. I was trying to catch rainbows. Six or seven times on that day the indicator didn't reappear, and I landed six or seven fish. All were Arctic char, and they ranged in size from 19- to 28 inches.

I almost never target Arctic char during the open-water season. All of the fish mentioned above were incidental to fishing for rainbows. Big Arctic char are generally more difficult to find and fish for with fly gear than rainbows are, but it can be done.

Note that I stress 'big.' Little Arctic char can sometimes be caught in shallow water with rainbows. But the big boys and girls that have been around awhile rarely move into shallow water during the open-water season. There are exceptions. For instance, when ADF&G stocks fingerling rainbows into lakes containing big Arctic char, sometimes the big char show up to eat the unsuspecting fingerlings that were just dumped into the lake. This is an unnatural external event and isn't something that you can count on to produce good fishing. Though I've seen them close to shore to chase the fingerlings that were just stocked, and every once in a while I'll see a big one close to the surface in open water, generally they are in water deeper than 15 feet. The example I cited above of catching them in Finger Lake in 11 feet of water was an anomaly. I've tried to reproduce that day several times, but I caught only rainbows.

Big Arctic Char like this 27 incher are possible in some of Southcentral's lakes. Believe it or not, this fish took a size 12 chironomid pupa imitation. The battle with an Arctic Char on fly gear can best be described as deep and heavy.

Location, Location, Location

If you want to catch big Arctic char in lakes, you have to fish lakes that have them. The Alaska Lake Database can tell you the lakes that have been stocked with Arctic char. If the lake has Arctic char in it, is decent-sized with a fair amount of water deeper than 20 feet and has a fish forage base (sticklebacks, juvenile salmon), it will probably have some big Arctic char in it. Additionally, ADF&G stocks brood stock Arctic char in lakes periodically. Some of those fish are huge. They are also pretty easy to catch, though ADF&G doesn't stock many of them. Find a lake that fits the description above, and you'll have a chance to catch a big Arctic char.

Equipment

That fight with a big Arctic char in a lake is easy to recognize. They pull down, hard. They generally don't run toward the horizon or jump—they just pull really hard, down, down towards the bottom. A six-weight rod is good medicine for them. A seven-weight is not overkill. Rods in the 9- to 9 ½-foot range will work. Your typical six- or seven-weight rainbow outfit will work just fine. However, since we're talking about fishing anywhere from 15- to 30 feet deep, a fast-sinking line is necessary. The faster the better. I like Rio's In-Touch Deep 7 for Arctic char. Three- or four feet of 2x mono or fluorocarbon leader is enough. For flies, I've caught them on size 12 chironomid pupa imitations, but that would not be my first choice for big Arctic char. I'd prefer a Bugger, a minnow imitation, a dragonfly nymph or a Booby. Something sizeable, as big Arctic char eat big food. One last thing about equipment—make sure you have a big net. Your average 'trout net' ain't gonna cut it if you have 25- or 30 inches of char wallowing around in front of you.

Presentation

In the January 2017 Stillwater column I wrote about a technique I call Sliding. The presentation for big Arctic char in water from 15- to 30 feet deep is basically Sliding, only in deep water. The difference is that because it is so deep, I don't usually cast and retrieve my fly. Instead, I cast as far as I can comfortably manage and let the line go down to the bottom. I sometimes strip off a bunch of line after I've cast and let that slip through the guides as I slowly troll along, so that the line will lay down on the bottom. I then slowly troll around in the 15- to 30-foot range looking for fish. I prefer buoyant flies for this—they don't hang up or get fouled by weeds or debris often. You can impart extra movement to the fly by wiggling the rod tip or by pulling and releasing line as you move along. I also sometimes 'stab' the rod into the water as if I were trying to stab my fly line. This imparts a weird, stop-and-start movement to the fly that sometimes works well. As you troll along, keep an eye on your fish-finder. If there are big char around, you will see them on it, usually down near the bottom.

Time of Year

Because Arctic char generally move to deep, open water for most of the summer, the best time to try to catch them with a fly rod is spring and fall. During these times, shallower water is cold enough for Arctic char, and they can often be found in fishable numbers in the 15- to 30-foot depth range.

The brute force of a large Arctic char is something that every stillwater fly fisher should experience. It is nothing like the battle with a typical rainbow trout. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to do so here in southcentral Alaska, right on the road system, less than an hour and a half from Anchorage. If you want to do something that is challenging and offers the reward of a super strong, uniquely beautiful, big fish, go out and target Arctic char with your fly rod this spring or fall.

George Krumm is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine and can be reached at george@fishalaskamagazine.com.*

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THIS IS THE KOKTULI

WILD RIVER OF FISH DREAMS AND PEBBLE MINE NIGHTMARES

STORY BY TERRY W. SHEELY
PHOTOS BY
TERRY W. SHEELY
& CHET BENSON

© Chet Benson

If angling in an unspoiled, true wilderness setting is one your to-do list, then the Koktuli River is for you.

Flat-faced, three feet-high, undercut and overhung with shredded stringers of faded grass, the river bank is coming at us in a rush.

All 40 horses of the jet pump are cranking, Ross is pushing hard on the tiller handle and for a split second it feels like the Jon boat is going to dig in and make this sharp left bend. And then it breaks loose, skids, chatters cross-current and we run out of river. I yell "high side," push the judge to the right and hold on as the bow bounces high. We come to rest canted left, with the front half of the boat in bushes on top of the bank. Clear river water is flowing under the stern not over the transom. River-god luck.

A few seconds later the gray boat slides backward into water and we exhale. No harm, no foul, but no one argues when Ross spins the boat and points it back to the main Koktuli River. We've explored enough of this side-channel.

Just another adventure on a gorgeous little river of big fish, at the center of a monstrous Alaska controversy, so remote few anglers fish it, and most anglers have never heard of it, which is odd considering the future of the iconic Bristol Bay salmon fishery flows through it.

Sharp adipose fins raise wake welts when we flush a clutch of kings in the shallows at the confluence turning into the main channel of the Koktuli. Moose tracks on the sand; bear tunnels into the willows; kings, reds and dogs in clear water. No other fishermen for miles. We power upstream, my eyes watering in the wind, rods readied, wild bush flashing past—I've got a fly and a week to fish. I'm home.

Ten minutes later the boat is beached, Ross is upstream showing the judge where to throw a Blue Fox spinner and I'm stumbling through cobbles on a bar, praying the running king salmon turns and comes back before I run out of fly line and backing. And we're still miles below the pool where in a couple of days we'll tangle with a hot load of aggressive reds—sockeye—bright and full of cartwheels.

The Koktuli is a special river, and not just in my estimation. River monitors at Trout Unlimited nominated it as an "Outstanding National Resource Water," a lofty status afforded only rivers with the highest degree of pristine water quality and productive fish habitat.

Remote, crystalline, wadeable, narrow enough to cast across, wide enough to run the lower reaches in a flat-bottom jet boat, lonesome enough for adventurers to pile

If you go...

The Koktuli River is an ideal weeklong raft float through wild Alaska. It's a smallish river with a few mild kick-ups and log jams but mostly it's a downhill drift in Class I or II water through tundra and bush with little technical experience required.

Several Iliamna-area outfitters arrange and/or outfit guided or freelance float trips.

Anchorage-based floatplane services, including Regal Air, Rust's Flying Service, and Trail Ridge Air, shuttle floaters to headwater drop-offs and Mulchatna pickup points.

I round-tripped from Anchorage into The Fishing Lodge, coming in with Lake Clark Air and out with Sportsman's Air. The remote eight-guests lodge is the nearest and only fishing facility close to the Koktuli, located half a dozen miles below the mouth. It accommodates both fly and conventional anglers and is set up for guided jet boat/wade-fishing in the lower river.

© Chet Benson

Above, a happy angler puts another fish in the net. At left, Koktuli salmon arrive mint-bright and fresh, despite their long journey from the sea. Designated an "Outstanding National Resource Water," the Koktuli River provides healthy fishing action for multiple species of Alaska gamefish.

© Chet Benson

The Koktuli presents perfect water for anglers.
Inset: Pristine clear flows make sight-fishing a strong possibility.

5- to 10 days of gear into tough-skinned rafts and float-fish-camp where bear and wolves hunt moose and caribou. Conifers lean over the water from tentative anchors in thin mossy soils; high gravel banks drop stones into strong runs, and it's more common to see eagles and ospreys than planes without floats.

Its skinny pea-gravel flats and black-bottomed pools provide adventuring fishermen with 58 miles of kings, silvers, chums, reds, Dolly Varden char, spotted rainbow trout, grayling and the odd northern pike. There are no lodges, developed camps or landings, and fishing pressure, what there is of it, comes from maybe a dozen pass-through rafters, some commercially-outfitted, some freelancing, and all drifting and pool-picking through mostly sedate Class I-II water. Flat-bottom, low gunwale boats with jet pumps can make it a dozen or so miles up the lower river, stopping just long enough to work a run or pick a pocket.

But power boats first need to run miles of the big Mulchatna River just to reach the mouth of the Koktuli and few do.

Koktuli king salmon are of a healthy average size.

Our runs up the Koktuli are based from Bearfoot Adventures' remote The Fishing Lodge, (www.bearfootadventures.net) seven- or maybe eight river miles down the Mulchatna River below the Koktuli. I hear there is an outfitted tent camp somewhere miles above the Koktuli but never see it. We're a long way into good country. The Fishing Lodge is set up for only eight guests at a time, and they have three rivers to pick from. There is no pressure on the Koktuli.

The river starts as a skinny, fragmented creek 220 miles southwest of Anchorage in tundra near little Koktuli Pond northwest of Iliamna. It slides and winds and slowly widens through tundra and willow to end in a confluence with the remote Mulchatna River. The Mulchatna, itself a wilderness experience, feeds into the famous Nushagak River of kings, which flows into Bristol Bay and hosts one of the last great Chinook runs in defiance of king fisheries that are, from California north, mostly in decline.

When my king finally comes into the shallows bad-eyed, belly down, and holds long enough for me to thank and pop the barbless orange Glo-Bug, I'm not thinking about the controversy that surrounds this pristine place, that flows around our waders, hangs over the hills and threatens our fish. But others are.

The Koktuli River, for all its purity and exceptional qualities, is ground zero in the Pebble Mine firefight. Its glistening headwaters seep from a wilderness basin above Iliamna where mining conglomerates would unearth 7.5 billion metric tons (deep as the Grand Canyon) in search of copper, gold, molybdenum and porphyry deposits. If the mine goes forward, when its pollutants leach, and they always leach, the first spoilage will occur in the pristine source of the wild Koktuli, maybe eventually flowing downhill into the salmon-rich Mulchatna, then the Nushagak, around the pods of beluga whales in Bristol Bay and finally the Bering Sea—threatening the last great king salmon flows in North America and America's most productive fishing grounds.

(Note: At this writing the Pebble Mine project is on hold while Pebble Limited Partnership [PLP] reviews options for advancing the project, despite widespread opposition that includes the World Conservation Congress, representing science-based environmental decision-makers from 170 countries.)

The judge has a salmon on and the fish is winning.

Ross hollers encouragement and backs out of the way. Judge Joel E. August, retired, of Wailuku, HI, points the bucking rod at a thrashing splash of a hole in the river big enough to hide a barrel of molybdenum, and hangs on. Monofilament chugs off the spinning reel and slashes a fine line downriver. At first the judge holds his ground, and then he stumbles after it, sliding his feet around rocks, fighting for balance. Just another gutsy Koktuli king fight. Ross readies the release pliers.

From downriver I can hear the jet whine of our second boat. A few minutes later Dan and Ben slip slide around the bend. Ben Despins needs one more king to fillet and serve with Alaska fish stories back in Hawaii. He'll get it from this run, a solid 33-incher with tight red meat that eats a No. 6 Vibrax spinner.

A dark weather front puffs up behind the Koktuli Hills, turns off the bite and transforms green and blue river colors into black and silver silhouettes. We pull on rain jackets and retreat to the lodge for cornbread dripping honey, a stew with more meat than potatoes and naps in leather recliners while the squall blows through. We'll be back for the reds.

The Koktuli fishing calendar is similar to most upper Bristol Bay fisheries. It starts in mid-June with kings, chums and sockeye. The kings hang in until late July, maybe trickling into August, and the chums and reds bite well into mid- or late August.

As the king fishery tapers off the silver run takes over and from the last week in July through September the river can be wedged with short-fused coho. I'm fishing the second week in July, just ahead of the first silvers but square in the overlap of kings, chums and reds. Lodge owner Chet Benson teases me about what I'll be missing in another week or so—big silvers, bright as Buick chrome, so aggressive you don't want to dangle your fingers in the water! Floating pink Pollywogs. Dry flies. He gets giddy just talking about it. I ink it on my 'gotta-fish' calendar. If you've ever had a dozen pounds of hook-jawed, evil-eyed silver salmon blow up under your drifting dry fly—well, then you understand.

There's more. The Koktuli is not all salmon.

The small river has a reputation for growing big Arctic grayling, bigger than most rivers, thyme-scented sailfish that have a penchant for small, dark flies,

wet or dry, and 4-weight rods. Rainbow trout are also plentiful and there's no shortage of predatory Dolly Varden char, especially during the salmon spawn. The Dollies are quick to nail beads and egg patterns and my all-time favorite, purple Egg-sucking Leeches. Some will shade two feet long and there seems to be no shortage of 15- to 20 inchers. These run-and-slug fighters are a handful on my 6-weight.

After several seasons here Ross recommends stouter stuff for the salmon.

For fly-rod kings he goes with heavy sink-tips and split-shot to get down to where the kings hug bottom. His king rods are 8- and 10-weights with 200- to 700-grain shooting heads, 20- to 40-pound-test leaders and fly boxes loaded with big streamers and Clousers in as many colors as you can pack, plus egg patterns, beads and leeches.

He scales down to 7- and 9-weights for sockeyes and silvers, loads them with shooting heads and sink-tips, adds 12- to 20-pound-test leaders—6-footers. For reds he carries a pattern box of smallish hot-colored streamers, shrimp patterns and leeches. For silvers it's flashy streamers, egg patterns, surface 'wogs, and Clouser Minnows.

Conventional tackle recommendations include 10- to 40-pound monofilament or 30- to 100-pound-test braid, with 7- to 10-foot medium to heavy rods. When I wasn't using my 6- or 8-weight fly rods, I used a three-piece 7-foot, 6-inch St. Croix Tidemaster spinning rod with thin 30-pound braid mainline and 10 feet of 20-pound monofilament leader and it worked beautifully for everything the river threw at me. The Koktuli, however, is just about perfect for fly-rodding.

The Koktuli holds a lot of gorgeous rainbows, some to several pounds that are pretty much ignored. The few fishermen who come here are usually looking for salmon fights and Dolly Varden scraps.

A day later, the squall gone, we come back to hunt reds.

The Jon boat flies up the river, sliding over king water that we had pounded earlier, crossing skinny sheets of gravel, blowing through dark deep troughs and around rocks and jumbled widowmakers. A beaver gives us a hard look and a tail slap. A moose jumps and disappears into a tangle of alders and willows. We ignore the kings and chums that flush away from the boat. Old water behind us, we're several miles above where we stopped before, and ahead is a pool where Ross thinks we'll hit a jackpot of reds. But first we beach on a sweeping sandbar etched with one set each of bear and moose tracks. While Ross heats a camp-stove lunch we fish the slow water off the bar. I manage a 22-inch jack Chinook that eats an unnamed home-tie, a purple body with pink egg head. Ben has a king follow and a trout eat and Joel practices mastering the fly rod.

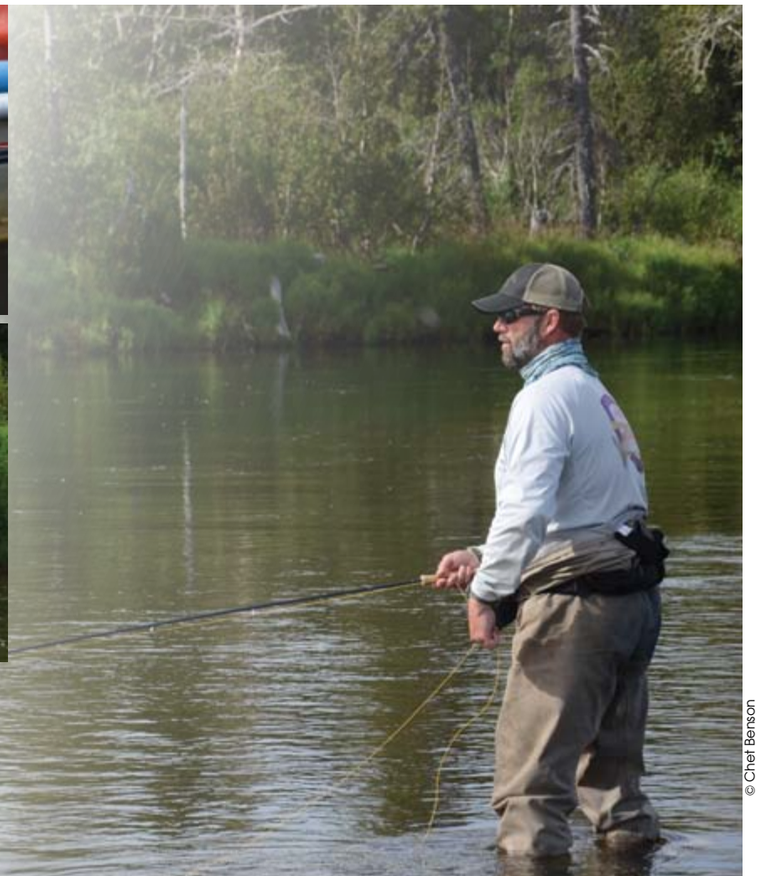
A couple of miles upriver we meet four rafters fishing their way down to a floatplane rendezvous and takeout on a Mulchatna gravel bar. They've had a great five days down-streaming from the headwaters they tell us, mostly with light fly gear and catching grayling and rainbows, camping in the alders, spooking the wolf out of camp. No bears, they say, but some moose and caribou. I share a heads-up about the salmon below and the fly patterns they've been eating and we drift apart—the only other parties we'll see.

Upstream, Ross grinds the boat onto a gravel bar along knee-deep water. There's a dark slot across the river, maybe 20 feet wide, 40 feet long. The bottom is splotched with shuffling reds.

Judge Joel stakes out the top of the slot, Ben the middle and I wade to the tailout. Ross mans the net. The judge and I are throwing flies; Ben sticks with his dependable spinning rod and Blue

© Chet Benson

Top inset: Grayling, the signature fish of the north, can be targeted for a change of pace while fishing the Koktuli. Bottom inset: Jet boats from The Fishing Lodge help access prime waters. At right: An angler works a prime stretch of even-paced Koktuli water.



© Chet Benson

Fox. The judge nails the first sockeye on some sort of nondescript red wet and he's ecstatic. His first-ever fly-caught salmon.

I work out a very abused, tired and tattered purple Egg-sucking Leech with a scraggly pink head. Two micro split-shot are squeezed on 2 feet above the fly and below the sink-tip. It takes five casts to find the drift line, figure out the mend and the current and the take is like a hammer strike. These reds are wild, back-flipping, running, torpedoing, thrashing. I land this one, lose another that doubles back faster than I can strip slack, and then I connect again. These reds, 5- to 10 pounds, are hot on the fly rod, and they gulp on the swing like they've never seen a dancing fly before. And they haven't. These aren't 'flossed' fish; these sockeye are crunching and there's nothing subtle about it.

Judge Joel is into his third-ever salmon, and Ben is grinning and crankin' his next one.

Joel hooks into another, a green-headed speedster that careens across the slot, thrashes down and doubles back to throw a loop around Ben's monofilament which is already tight to another red. Both fish blow through the surface and both lines go slack.

No worries, Ross shouts, there are lots more.

This is the Koktuli.

Terry W. Sheely is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine and can be reached through his website at www.tnscommunications.net.*

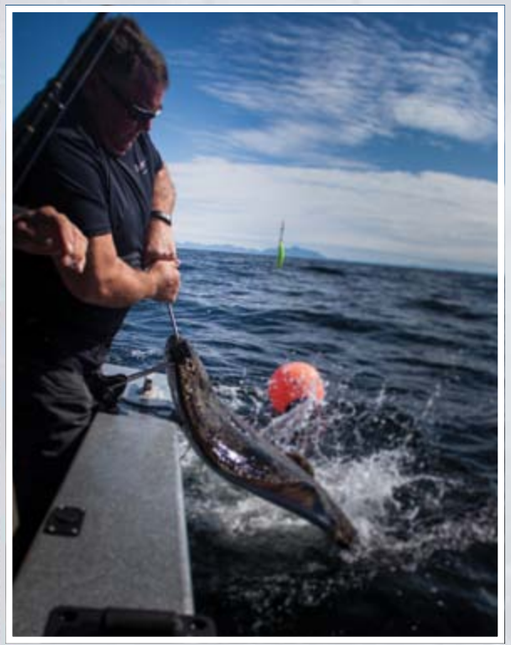
PENNOCK ISLAND

Uniquely Perfect

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TROY BUZALSKY

The sky is vivid and clear, the tide ebbing, and the moon faintly offers the slightest waxing crescent as we quickly unpack, dial-in our rods and reels, and absorb our immediate surroundings, all from our waterfront deck. There's little doubt we are staying in the most uniquely perfect location possible—a true angler's dream. And it's all ours for the next six days.

After months of planning, this year's piscatorial pursuit took us to a remote island situated between Revillagigedo Island, home to Ketchikan, and Gravina Island, home to Ketchikan International Airport. Randy, our boat captain, Erik, MJ and my son Matt made-up our team for this year's angling adventure.



Boating eating-size halibut is a daily goal at this ideally-located DIY retreat.

Succulent seafood on the plate is but one reason to make this your summer angling destination in 2017.

Pennock Island is a small colonized island that serves as domicile for a handful of year-long residents. It is also home to an active ancestral tribal burial ground of the Taan ta Kwaan (Tongass Tribe people) and the Saanya Kwaan (Cape Fox people). The island hosts the annual Pennock Island Challenge, a big-time swimming race that brings enthusiasts from all over the world to accept the 8.2-mile open-water challenge, where distance, cold water and even jellyfish puts swimmers through an exhaustive trial. But what the island might be most famous for is the 315-million dollar mothballed "Gravina Island Bridge Project," colloquially better known as the infamous "Bridge to Nowhere."

We were here to explore the fishing opportunities of early June in true do-it-yourself (DIY) fashion, including our remote Pennock Island lodge that we found on vrbo.com. Appropriately marketed as an "angler's dream," our waterfront paradise is part of Alaska Remote Lodges LLC, and sits in its very own protected cove smack in the middle of the "salmon capital of the world."

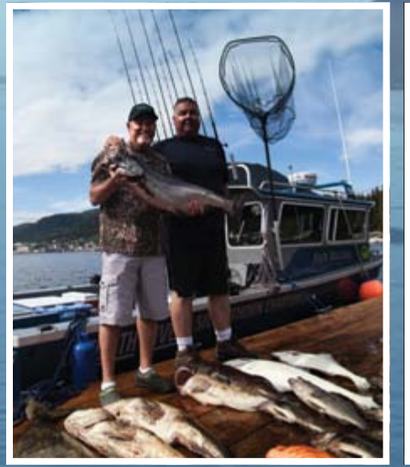
Pennock Island and neighboring Ketchikan are conveniently located in southeast Alaska, a short flight from Seattle and Portland. The location and access is ideal for Pacific Northwest travelers, offering short flight times and economical ticket pricing to Fishtopia.

Part of the Alexander Archipelago and dead center in the fabled Inside Passage, Pennock Island offers an ideal locality for anglers and outdoor enthusiasts, and although you can't see Russia from the front door, you actually can see Canada territories to the south of the island. If you look a little harder you will find rainforests, fjords, glaciers, waterfalls and remote and accessible islands in and around Revillagigedo and Gravina.

Alaska Remote Lodges is owned and operated by Kim Kirby and is located in one of the most unique, functional and accessible locations in the area. Sitting on the north tip of Pennock Island in the old cannery moorage, the property includes Kim's full-time cottage, the four-bedroom 12-guest lodge and an impressive floating dock that functions perfectly even at extreme tidal fluctuations. Expansion plans include two additional cabins in 2017.

Kim hasn't always been a lodge owner. Born in England and becoming an Alaska resident in 1994, Kim spent her early time in Alaska commercial fishing and kayaking the area. In 1991 Kim accepted a challenge few have tackled, a three-month journey kayaking from Juneau to Ketchikan. Although she liked the area, it wasn't until she was "first wheel watch" on a commercial fishing boat and saw the Northern Lights raging that "the hook was set," as she explained. Ketchikan became her homestead and the next life adventure began.

Being a kayak enthusiast, Kim started a kayak company and B&B in Ketchikan, offering scenic kayak tours daily. During these trips she would paddle by the north tip of Pennock Island and admire the timeworn winter storage site of the old cannery boats and boatyard, thinking to herself, "If that home ever comes for sale I'm gonna get it." Sure enough, in 2008 the house of her dreams hit the real-estate market, and Kim became a Pennock Island resident. Since purchasing the double lot, the original home has been repaired, added on to and updated, making it a perfect getaway lodge for the avid angler, eco-tourist or even just somebody looking for peace, quiet and time to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Kim's quest is to provide a vacation rental opportunity that's easy, enjoyable, valuable and memorable…and she has her bases covered.



Clockwise from top left: A varied haul from the day's fishing efforts. A harpoon is sometimes used as a technique to fatigue the fish and make for an easier and safer landing. Big kings make for big smiles. Alaska Remote Lodges provides a location second-to-none.

If fishing is what brings you to Alaska Remote Lodges, you will quickly appreciate that not only can you stay in the most amazing location in the archipelago, but the lodge also has a rental fishing fleet that includes a choice of two Hewescraft boats or a skiff, whichever suits your boating, fishing and exploration requirements. There is also an on-site tackle shop that carries everything you need for the local waters, including high-quality rods and reels, fresh-frozen bait and freezer storage for your catch.

Our group selected the lodge's signature red 20-foot Hewescraft 200 Pro V Hardtop for our fishing excursions. Equipped with an extended transom offshore bracket and 150 HP Honda outboard, it proved to be plenty of boat for five eager anglers. The boat features a walk-through windshield with recessed and railed front bow equipped with anchor. The cabin sports almost six feet of standing height with 270-degree overhead tray storages and well-placed grab bars. Spring seats provide passenger comfort up front, and side-mounted rear seats serve as storage boxes. The wide-open dance floor is made for fishing and trimmed out at the transom with a meaty fish box and integrated bait prep and fish-cleaning table.

Set-up for salmon fishing, the boat is equipped with adjustable trim tabs, dual Cannon downriggers, Scotty Rod Holders and eight hardtop-mounted rocket launchers to stow your rods up and away, yet easily accessible. Add a transom wash-down station and this sparse and efficient design is set-up ideally for fishing southeast Alaska's salty sea.

Once settled into our lodge we were excited to hit the water, but before fishing we needed supplies, so our first stop was to the local market to stock the fridge for a week's worth of food and drink. The nice thing about Pennock Island is how convenient a trip to town is, offering easy dockside moorage and handy access to load and unload supplies. After shopping it was time to hit the water, trekking west towards Bostwick Inlet to drop a few crab pots and try to jig up a few bottomfish before dusk.

While the crab pots soaked we scouted some likely halibut holds and hovered above some 240-foot water during slack tide. We fished with a variety of offerings including herring, octopus and Berkley Gulp Jigs, all to no avail. Our first halibut hole was a bust, so we tried a quick salmon troll around Dall Bay. That, too, delivered a big goose egg in the fish-catching department; however, our quest for Dungeness crabs scored big, in numbers and size!

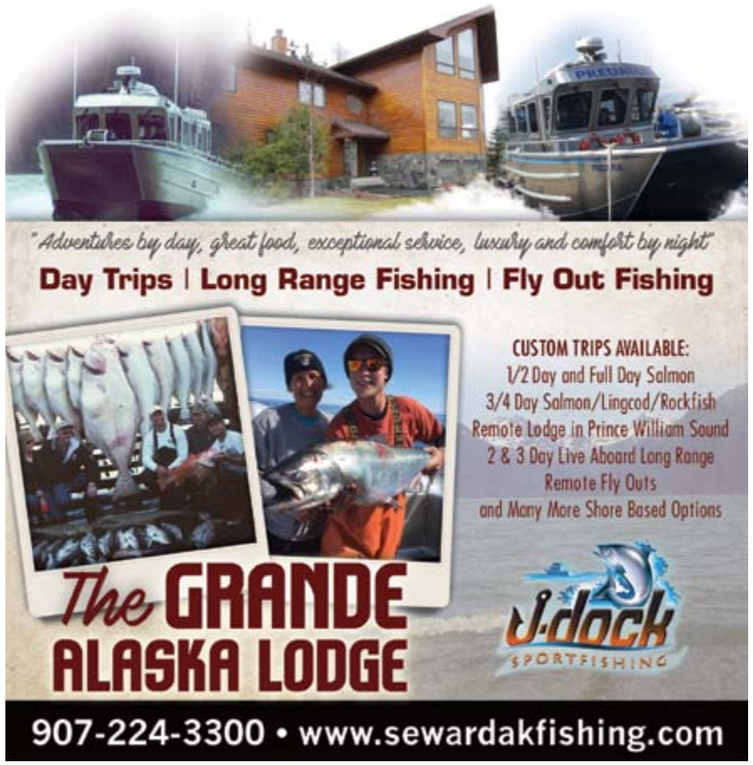
Many of the Chinook salmon targeted in these waters are of hatchery origin, which provides a bountiful fishery.

All hands are on deck to help clean and fillet the day's catch.

The catch of the day made for a successful night's effort and the most succulent seafood celebration on the planet. It's truly special to cook your crab on your private waterfront escape and enjoy your evening cuisine witnessing the most gorgeous sunset imaginable. At one point I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

As night was falling to end the first day, the rain was quick to chase the darkening sky. If you've ever been to southeast Alaska, you know it can rain, and rain hard it did. No wonder the lodge catches rain water as their primary year-round water source. The filtered rain water provides an ample supply of water for drinking, showering and laundry.

After a hearty home-cooked breakfast in the lodge's spacious kitchen, we quickly loaded our supplies for our morning quest—a repeat from the night before. The rain had passed, the skies were blue and the early-morning seas were a bit rough, but nothing the Hewescraft couldn't easily handle. Again, targeting the waters outside of Bostwick Island, we would work hard to scratch out a single halibut. As fishing goes, the other boat fishing in our immediate area was catching halibut seemingly nonstop. Local knowledge obviously comes into play when you are on a true DIY trip,



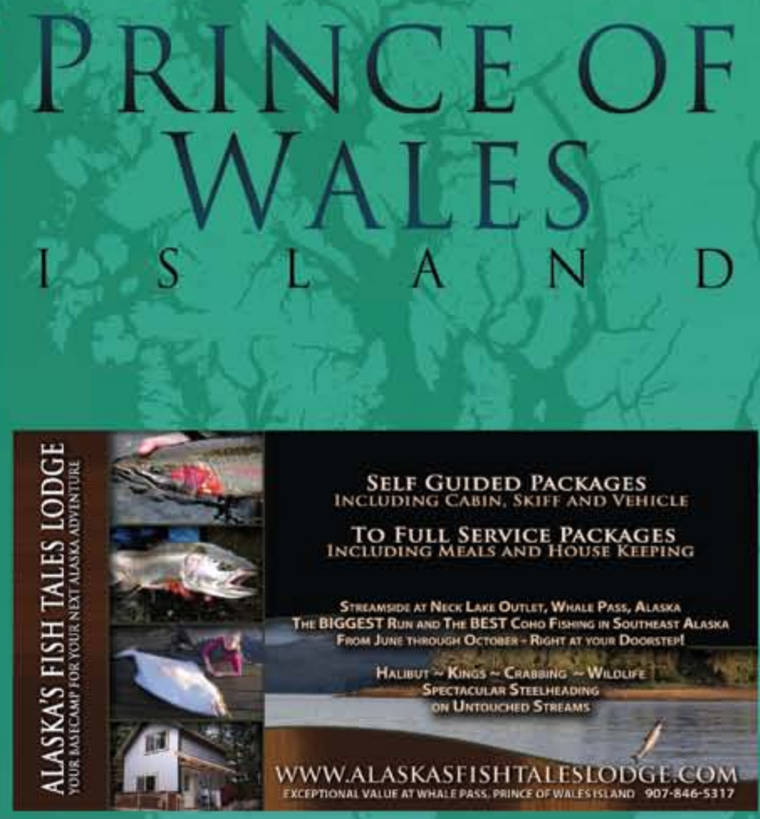
and as we would learn, the art of depth management is key to halibut success in these waters. Although lean on fish, we again took a limit of sizeable Dungeness home for lunch.

Our evening fishery would take us to the nearby area of Mountain Point and the coveted Herring Bay Salmon fishery, where diligent anglers attempt to fill their six-fish daily Chinook limit. The Whitman Lake Hatchery serves as the centrifuge for the Herring Bay terminal fishery. Their goal is to enhance and rehabilitate salmon production in southern southeast Alaska to the optimum social and economic benefit of salmon-users. The hatchery is 100% supported by the commercial fishing industry and the fish that are being processed at the hatchery go to market to help offset the operating budget. The hatchery raises chum, silver and king salmon and releases several million hatchlings each year.

Day three starts with an early and eager wake-up. The skies are perfectly blue, the water calm and I have to wonder if I'm in paradise as I stare off the waterfront deck into our very own protected cove; the fresh coffee absolutely could not have tasted better. The sounds of bald eagles provide a mesmerizing environment as the sight we are waiting for is approaching from afar. Friend and accomplished angler Jim Silverthorn of Silverthorn Charters from Prince of Wales Island arrives from his 45-minute trip to share his knowledge of the area, and of course, show off his brand new 28-foot North River special order Offshore Edition. Gary Anderson, owner of The Tackle Shack in Thorne Bay, also joins our group.

Jim's a big man, and his boat is sizeable, too, but the dock easily accommodates its arrival. We quickly load and start to head southwest towards Cape Chacon. Jim explains that the salmon have not arrived in large numbers yet, but he has had good luck intercepting Chinook in this area. The location is also extremely remote and rarely gets angling pressure.

Our technique for the day will be mooching, using a 6-ounce keel weight and Blue Label Herring tied to a 60-pound leader. "I like heavy leaders because you never know what you are going to catch when mooching," Jim explains with a confident smile. The technique is simple for the angler, he continued. "Cast a short distance from the boat; allow the bait to spin down to the bottom and then quickly reel up. The fish tend to bite on the way down and on the way up. If you get bit on the bottom,



it's likely a bottomfish."

A better day on the water could not be possible, with blue skies, warm weather and a great group of friends gathered to fish Alaska. Speaking of fishing, it was a rare moment if someone on the boat was not hooked up. Black bass, yelloweye, halibut, jumbo lingcod and salmon were all part of the day's reward. Matt claimed the biggest lingcod; MJ nailed a sizeable king and Erik looked ever-so-stylish in his white Grundéns, but the highlight was landing an 82-pound halibut on salmon gear. What a hoot, and a reminder as to why Silverthorn uses 60-pound leader!

After a long day on the water we processed our fish at the dock's fish-cleaning station. Once the fish were cleaned, bagged and placed in the freezer, a night on the town sounded ideal. A quick boat ride took us dockside where we could easily access a couple of our favorite Ketchikan stops, Fat Stan's and Annebelle's Famous Keg and Chowder House. As remote and isolated as Pennock Island is, having access to the city certainly adds value and flexibility to a vacation.

Richard Solorio is a critical part of the Alaska Remote Lodges. Not only is he Kim's partner, he manages the fleet, maintains the tackle and boat shack and also provides guided services as needed for guests. Richard has been fishing his entire life, and his passion for fishing is apparent. So much so, rather than offering to guide us, we asked Rich along on our next day's journey so he too could enjoy a day fishing.

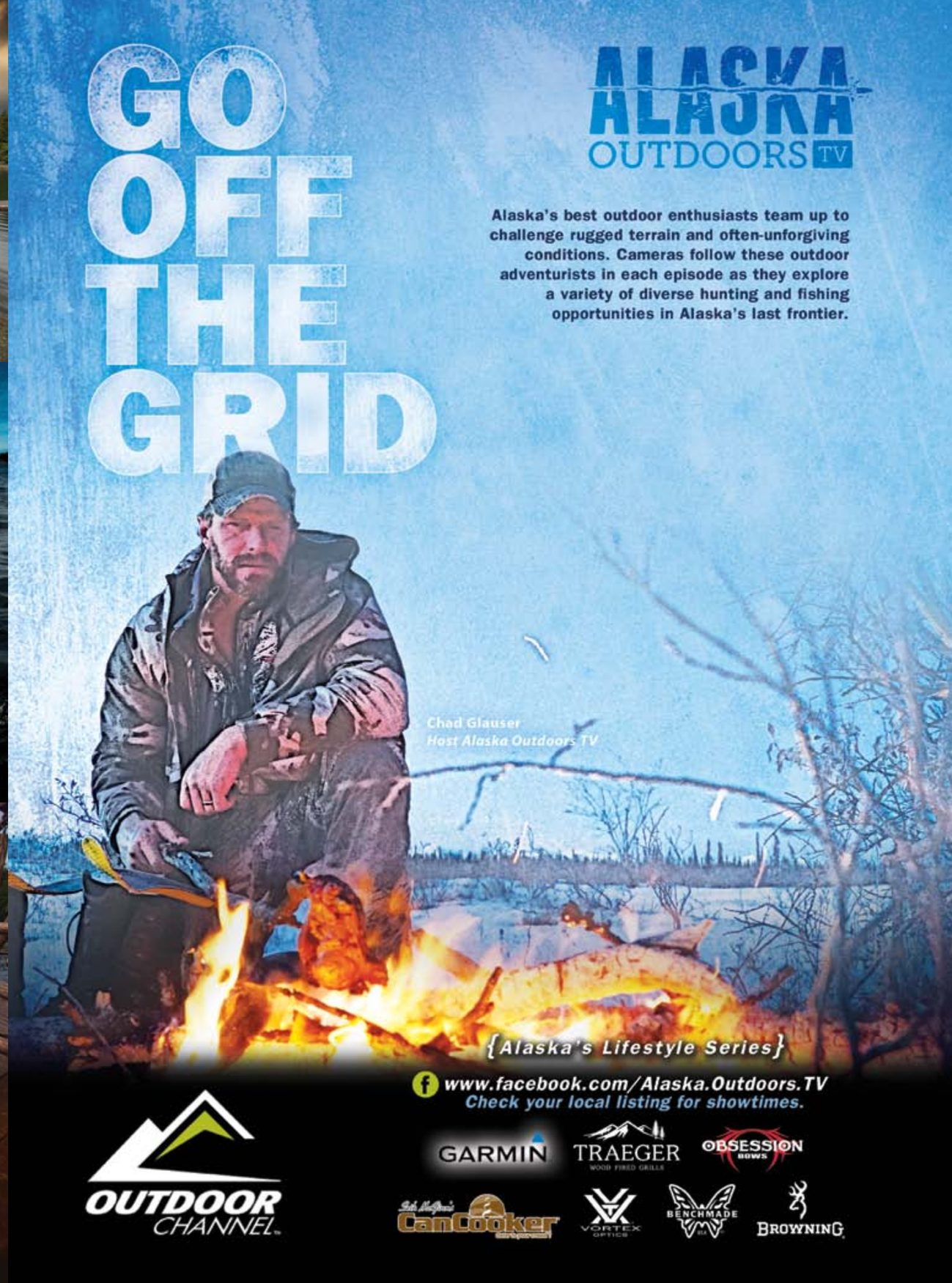
Duke Island is a good 40-mile trek, but Captain Rich, our halibut whisperer, tells us it's a worthy journey. With a full tank of fuel and loaded to the gills, our six eager anglers set sail with Randy at the helm. Our route would use the Revillagigedo Channel and skirt the east side of Annette Island, known as Winter Town to the Tlingit. Staying in the channel we carve past Mary Island and are rewarded with a wonderful view of the historic Mary Island Light Station, a towering concrete lighthouse and fog signal that was erected to guide ships through the treacherous waters of southeast Alaska's Inside Passage. Passing Edge Point we enter the waters of Dangerous Passage and carefully plot our course to the south side of Duke Island near East Island. We select some likely water in the 220-foot-depth range and drop anchor, holding ourselves in the slack tide.

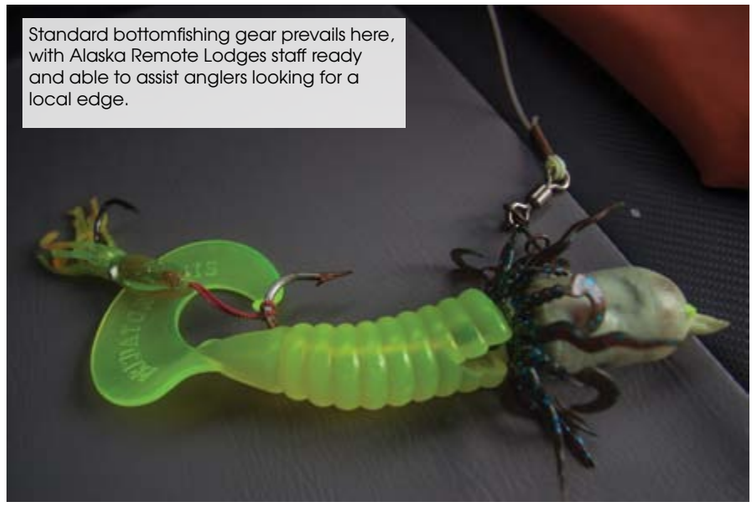
The first bait that hits the bottom gets bit, and it's fish on for Randy. And

Kim Kirby, owner of Alaska Remote Lodges, points out a few productive spots on the map before the boats head out for a day of DIY fishing.

The fishing in this part of Alaska, surrounded by magnificent scenery, can be fast and furious throughout the summer season.

Jim Silverthorn of Silverthorn Charters motored over from Prince of Wales Island to join the group for a productive day on the water.



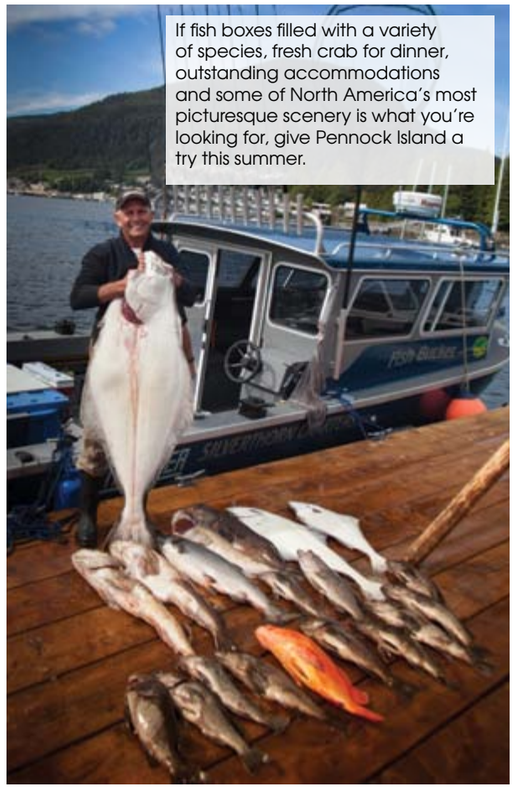


Standard bottomfishing gear prevails here, with Alaska Remote Lodges staff ready and able to assist anglers looking for a local edge.

fish off, just that quick. We are fishing a combination of Circle Hook and Big Water Hook bait rigs, and Jig Headed Berkley Power Bait Grubs. Randy hooks up again, again with a heavy fish, and again quickly loses the fish, both on Circle Hook baits. We manage a few smaller sized 'buts when finally the halibut whisperer hooks up with his Gulp Jig. With the fish next to the boat it was time to try out the harpoon, a technique used to fatigue the fish and make for an easier and safer landing. The fish is 'pooned and within minutes is hauled up and over the gunnel as we claim a perfect-sized southeast Alaska halibut—47 inches and approximately 50 pounds. At day's end we had not hit a home run, but we certainly swung, hitting a few, missing a few, and placing four nice halibut and a handful of other bottomfish in the score box.

Returning from a long boat ride home, the remote lodge was a sight for sore and tired eyes. After we cleaned our catch, we fired up the barbecue and enjoyed fresh-caught halibut with an abundant offering of crab. Feeling a bit spoiled already, it was time to try out the hot tub and soak our weary bodies. It's not uncommon for a lodge to have a hot tub, but this hot tub came by special delivery. A helicopter lifted and placed the hot tub on the front-wrapping deck, sitting proudly waterfront, complete with the same magnificent view we have grown to cherish.

The Sunday morning high slack tide is at 7 a.m., so we are quick to hit the water, keying on the hour before and the hour after the tide swap. Our day will focus on the Herring Bay fishery, trolling Short Bus Flashers coupled to either Blue Label Herring or Brad's Super Cut Plugs. The Hewescraft is set-up perfectly for trolling, with two Cannon downriggers and carefully placed rod holders allowing to easily fish four rods. Our rods include 10-foot, 6-inch Northfork Composites for use with the downriggers and the new Cousins 9-foot, 4-inch Composite Salmon Trolling Rod for trolling the keel-weight applications. We set our baits from 40 feet to 90 feet in the water



If fish boxes filled with a variety of species, fresh crab for dinner, outstanding accommodations and some of North America's most picturesque scenery is what you're looking for, give Pennock Island a try this summer.

column and gave it a whirl.

The bite is brisk, but the problem is we are not catching our pursued prey; instead, we are slaying Alaskan pollock, a relative to the Atlantic cod family. Although considered table fare, the pollock were all quickly released as we continued our salmon quest. Finally the dinner bell rings as the downrigger trips, and a nice 10-pound feeder king comes to the boat. This would be the lone salmon for the day, and although not an impressive day's catch, after speaking with a local guide fishing four anglers, we had managed exactly one fish more than their boat. His response summed up the day, "We live by the tide, the wind, the weather, and the season… and the season isn't here yet."

Returning to another incredible sunset, our last night on Pennock Island would include a waterfront campfire while snacking on a seafood medley of halibut, crab and salmon—a trio you just can't get tired of eating. The campfire allowed us to further enjoy fellowship, sharing many a story with Kim, Captain Rich and family. Hospitality would be an understatement as the laughter outlasted the night-light.

On departure morning the view was again spectacular, with a brilliant blue cloud-scaped sky and flat seas—the perfect setting to reflect on the Pennock Island experience. It was also the first time I walked the property and realized how perfect the location is for anglers as well as travelers looking for a quiet, intimate, high-quality getaway. The back gardens are naturally beautiful, complete with a terraced yard, year-round creek, arched walking bridge and pathways, and plants and flowers everywhere. The more I explored the property, the more I realized this is the perfect place for a family getaway… and now I might be able to convince my wife to finally join me going to Alaska, so I can show her why I love the 49th so much and especially Alaska Remote Lodges.

Troy Buzalsky is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine.*

—ALASKA'S— FLY ROD SLEEPERS

Releasing a bright chum salmon.

A large southwest Alaska grayling that rose to a fly meant for rainbows.

Arctic char in their full pre-spawning coloration can be some of the most strikingly beautiful fish in Alaska.

Fighting a fresh chum in the tidal zone of a Togiak-area river.

STORY BY E. DONNALL THOMAS
PHOTOS BY DON & LORI THOMAS

As with so many Alaska fishing expeditions, this one became more complicated than we'd first imagined. Our destination was the lower Nushagak, and fly-rod kings were our target. We got off to a late start from the Lake Hood strip, but except for some predictably bumpy air in Lake Clark Pass the flight proved largely uneventful. Then we began to encounter patchy fog as we approached the river valley, and soon we were looking at a solid bank of soup rolling inland from Bristol Bay. We were only a few miles away from our planned rendezvous with friends, but with the long northern twilight draining from the western sky we elected to turn back toward Iliamna.

That was clearly the right decision, even though it cost us a morning of fishing. To make matters worse, when we finally reached our friends' camp they told us they'd been having trouble finding kings even with conventional gear. Undeterred, we assembled our 9-weights and headed upstream by skiff toward a side channel where we'd done well in seasons past.

After all the chaos and confusion I really wasn't prepared for the strike that greeted the end of my streamer's swing shortly after our arrival. The fish must have really wanted the fly, for it felt solidly attached despite my late strip-set. Then it went airborne. It obviously wasn't a big king, but after all that flying, an unexpected night in a tent, and a breakfast of instant coffee, I wasn't about to complain.

I honestly didn't ID the fish until it came to rest in the shallows at my feet. It wasn't a king at all, but a mint-bright chum salmon fresh from the tideline, with vertical markings barely visible at all upon the mirrored surface of its flanks. The dozen fish we took from that same run over the next several hours all looked as if they'd come from the same cookie cutter, with nary a king salmon among them. Nonetheless, they ran and jumped and made our reels whine, and we were happy.

We finally caught up to the kings (actually, they caught up to us) the following day, but some of my fondest memories of that trip came from fish we never even planned to catch.

Kings, silvers, steelhead, rainbows—these are Alaska's fly-rod glamour species, the fish anglers focus upon when planning trips. But they come with a catch. Sometimes they're not even around, at least when you are there looking for them. In fact, prime water for each of these species often doesn't contain them. Try looking for silvers in May. Even the big lake-anadromous rainbows for which southwest Alaska is so justifiably famous come and go with the seasons. Local knowledge and good planning will help avoid most of these missed appointments, but not all of them.

Fortunately, Alaska almost always has interesting alternatives to offer for anglers willing to fish outside the box. Some of them turn out to be just as much fun as the initial target. Well, almost…

Chum salmon (or dog salmon, as they are commonly known in Alaska) are a good example. Exceeded in size only by kings, they strike readily in freshwater, jump, and make powerful runs. Part of the chum's lightweight reputation derives from aesthetics. Most experienced salmon anglers soon learn a simple rule: the brighter the fish, the fresher it is likely to be from the ocean, which means more vigor on the end of a line and better eating if the fish is headed for the table. No one who has spent much time on Alaska salmon streams

Chum salmon take on rapid spawning morphology and vibrant coloration when in freshwater.

gets excited about casting to humped up pink salmon or sockeyes dressed in their scarlet spawning colors. The same even applies to kings and silvers.

Fond as I am of fresh, bright salmon, I'm willing to grant chums some leeway. In large drainages that require them to make a long upstream run to the spawning beds, they often remain bright and vigorous well inland from the sea. Even in short streams such as those in southeast Alaska where they undergo pre-spawning changes quickly, they remain powerful fish longer than other salmon. Their vivid maroon and green spawning colors are even beautiful in their own way. Chums are easy to hook on fly tackle, for they will strike a variety of big, bright streamers readily on the swing. Conehead Pink Bunnies are personal favorites.

I'm particular about the salmon I eat, and chums will never be a favorite. However, when I was making exploratory trips into the bush of what was then the Soviet Far East 25 years ago, I acquired a taste for streamside chum caviar when we didn't have much else to eat. All it took was a skein of eggs rolled up in a section of *Pravda* with a little salt and a short wait. The rest of the world has since caught up with that opinion, and chums have become the preferred source of raw material for many red caviar enthusiasts. If you keep a hen, you can smoke the fish or turn it into chowder, but treat the eggs like gold.

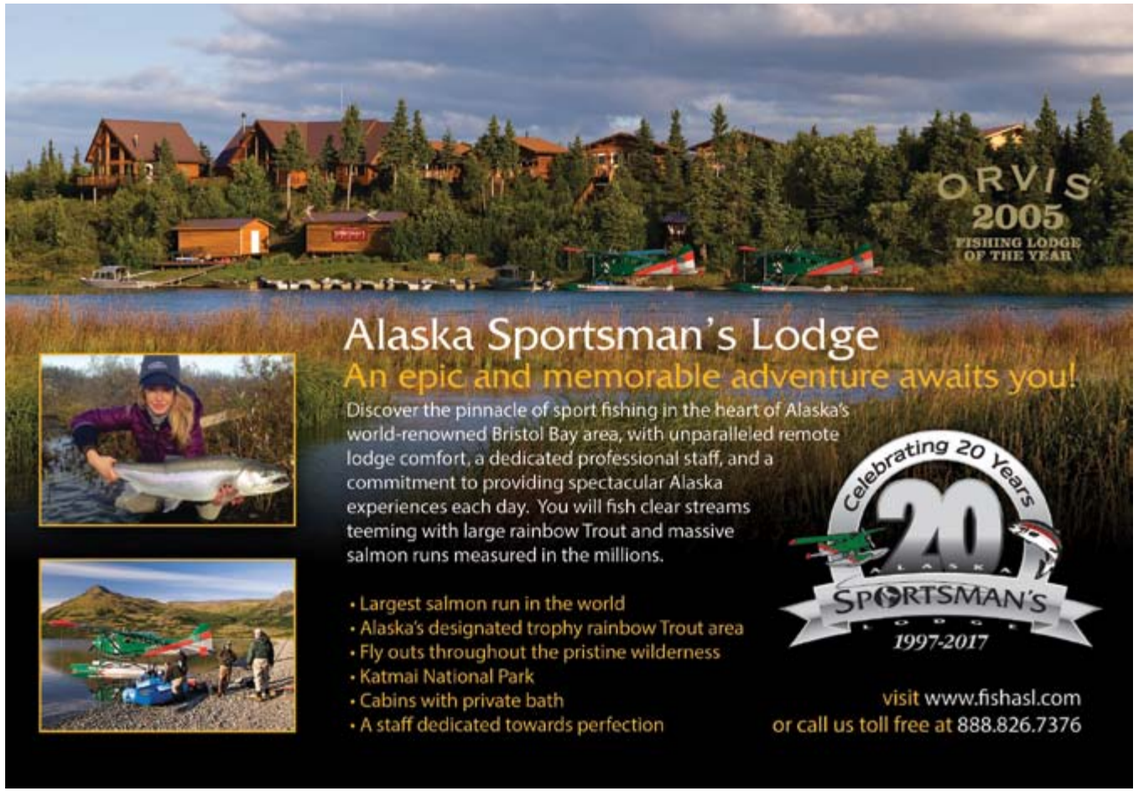
Arctic char and Dolly Varden (another member of the char family) are closely related species that deserve more attention than they get. This is not the place to outline the biological distinctions between them. My rule of thumb is that if the spots on the fish's side are bigger than the pupil of the eye, it's an Arctic char. What matters here is that they are widely distributed throughout Alaska's freshwater (and at times near shore in the salt), that they strike flies readily, and that they're fun to catch. Because of their abundance and good table quality, they are also my preferred "survival" food fish on extended trips in the bush.

Like most of Alaska's predatory gamefish, these char species key on salmon as a food source—eggs, smolt, or flesh from adults decaying after they spawn. However, they are rarely selective and will hit dry flies and surface mouse patterns, which always provides an extra measure of excitement after days spent swinging streamers and the like. One reason for their lightweight reputation is that there are a lot of small ones, and a 10-inch Dolly doesn't put up much of a fight, especially if it's taken on tackle meant for steelhead or silvers. But both Dollies and Arctic char often grow to weights of five pounds or more in some streams from southwest Alaska to the North Slope, and anglers willing to prospect for them can usually find them. Dressed up in their fall colors, Arctic char may be the most beautiful fish in the state.

A third Alaska member of the char family deserves mention. Because of their habitat preferences for deep water, lake trout don't draw much attention from fly rod anglers. However, I have taken them somewhat to my own surprise while camped near lakes throughout the state, especially right after ice-out. Lake trout can move around considerably in the big water they call home based on factors such as water temperature and food sources, but stream outlets and inlets are always good places to prospect with a fly, especially when salmon smolt are present.

Like Dolly Varden, grayling are widely distributed in clear streams and lakes throughout the state. While they aren't challenging to outwit and small specimens don't fight particularly hard, they are beautiful fish in their own unique way and they take dry flies with consistent enthusiasm. They will even strike skated mouse patterns that seem several sizes too large for their tiny mouths. Taken this way, grayling over 20 inches long—which aren't uncommon in some Alaska Peninsula and Togiak Bay drainages—can make up for a lot of trout and salmon that aren't there.

In a land whose angling reputation rightfully belongs to salmonids with adipose fins, northern pike may be the ultimate outliers in freshwater. In contrast to char and grayling, pike are seldom taken incidentally by fly-rod anglers looking for trout and salmon. You have to go looking for them, usually in shallow lakes and quiet backwaters no self-respecting trout would visit. (If one did, the pike would probably eat it.) While I've often heard trout purists describe pike as ugly, that opinion ignores the function-is-beauty theory of design. Pike are highly efficient ambush predators



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Top: Black rockfish taken near the surface on a calm southeast Alaska day.
Bottom: A large southwest Alaska Dolly that rose to a surface fly.

built to do just what they need to do in order to survive in their harsh northern habitat.

Pike are widely distributed around the Interior—just try to count the number of pike lakes on the map. They will eat almost anything alive, from minnows to muskrats, and the bigger the fly, the better. Although they give up the fight quickly when hooked, their surface strikes can be savage and spectacular. Because of their sharp conical teeth, a few inches of wire between fly and leader is essential. I always have some buried somewhere in my vest when I'm visiting pike country, and sometimes I can even find it.

I haven't talked much about Alaska saltwater yet, partly because so few fly-rod anglers pay attention to it in the first place. That's unfortunate, as I've frequently opined before. All Alaska salmon are at their best at sea, and I've spent many memorable days casting to anadromous Dollies and cutthroats in tidal water from Southeast to Kodiak. But sometimes, migratory sea-run fish don't turn out to be where you think they are.

I'm a patient angler, and long ago I became comfortable with the special challenges of finding fish with a fly rod in the vast expanse of the sea. But after wearing my arm out casting a high-density shooting head for kings or halibut with no results, I like to feel something besides kelp on the end of my line. Then it's time for rockfish.

As most Alaska saltwater anglers know, the many species of North Pacific rockfish divide into two basic categories. The bottom-dwelling demersals, including the large and popular yelloweye, are long-lived fish that suffer a high mortality when brought up from depth and are highly susceptible to over-harvest, as newer state regulations recognize. The free-swimming, bass-shaped pelagics, in contrast, move throughout the water column and are more abundant. Especially during the summer, they often feed near the surface within range of fly tackle. Taken at shallow fly-rod depths, they don't suffer the barotrauma that kills so many demersals. Furthermore, if you want to keep a couple for the frying pan, you can do so with a clear conscience.

Black rockfish—the prototype of the pelagics—strike baitfish imitations readily and fight vigorously if briefly for their size, which is usually three- or four pounds. They are common throughout inshore waters from Southeast to Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula, especially near kelp beds and rocky points. My favorite way to fish for them is by sight-casting to the dimples they make while hitting baitfish near kelp on calm days. Finding calm water along the Alaska coast is usually harder than catching the fish. When the weather is less cooperative, blind casting to structure with an intermediate sinking line or teasing fish up to the surface with hookless jigs can also be effective.

I make no secret of my long infatuation with big Bristol Bay rainbows and coastal Alaska steelhead. In season, I also enjoy fly fishing for kings and silvers, especially in saltwater. But I also believe that variety is the spice of life, and over the years I've spent in Alaska I've cast flies at everything from sheefish to flounder while enjoying every minute of it. As Crosby, Stills & Nash once reminded us, if you can't be with the one you love…

…love the one you're with.

A former resident of the Kenai Peninsula and southeast Alaska, Don Thomas now divides his time between rural Montana and Arizona. He writes about the outdoors for numerous publications.

Learning to tie the right knots well will go a long way to ensuring you lose fewer fish.

Quality gear is an important ingredient to angling success.

losing FISH!

TIPS FOR NEW OR RUSTY FLY ANGLERS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CECILIA "PUDGE" KLEINKAUF

Nobody likes to lose a fish, no matter what species you are fishing for, and when it happens, we usually go looking for an explanation. "What did I do wrong?" we ask ourselves, and "What do I have to change to refrain from doing it again?"

Some problems occur just as the fly hits the water and the fish attempts to grab it. There are also a lot of possible reasons for that as well as for having a fish get off the hook while it's being played. Let's look at these two situations a little closer to analyze what may be going on.

Losing a Fish Before it's Even Hooked

Many problems occur just as the fly hits the water or during the first few seconds thereafter. There are a lot of possible reasons why this occurs. Here they are, accompanied by some fix-it solutions that might help. They include:

- A bad knot
- The wrong size or type of hook for the fly
- A dull hook
- Line or tippet break
- A poor set

Let's start with a bad knot, probably the cause of many if not most problems. Fix it by always checking the strength of your knot before casting the fly. Be sure you have tied it correctly and that you have moistened it with a little saliva to help secure it. Pull it tight on the beach before you cast it so that if the knot doesn't hold, it will break on the bank, and not when it's in the water cruising for a fish.

That little curlicue on the end of the tippet always signals a bad knot rather than a line break. There are good videos on YouTube for three of the best knots for tying tippet to butt section of the leader. Those are the double or triple surgeon's knot, the blood knot and the non-slip loop knot. Learn to tie any or all of them at home to make sure you are doing them properly. The triple surgeon's is the easiest of the three to tie, but the blood knot is usually seen as the strongest. (Note: the surgeon's knot is often referred to as the "double" surgeon's knot. In Alaska we make it with triple wraps in order to handle larger fish.)

Incorrect tippet/fly combinations can result in flies that don't cast or that break as soon as a fish bites. Be sure that you have the appropriate tippet size for different sizes or types of flies. Don't think that a small, #14 dry-fly hook can be used for all sizes of fish, or that a #2 hook being used for salmon fishing is correct for the other fish you are after. You're going to have to change tippets from time to time to get the right combinations for different fish.

Checking your leader and tippet for nicks, abrasions and wind knots before casting is a good idea.

There are charts in fly-fishing books and on the back of commercial leader packages that give you guidance for the size of tippet material to use for different types of fish. For instance, 6-pound tippet is a good size to use with hook sizes #12-16 when fishing for pan-sized trout and other smaller fish while an 8-pound tippet or possibly a size 10 tippet might be used with hooks that are size #4 and #2.

Moving on, it is surprising how often the loss of a fish occurs right at the take. After you have checked your knot to see that it is secure and that your fly and tippet size are correct, it's time to see if your hook is sharp. The way to check is to put the tip of the hook on the top of your thumbnail and move it toward you to see if it just barely scratches your nail. If not, it needs sharpening. Many people make it a habit to check the sharpness of their hook as they are checking their leader-fly connection knot. I have a small hook sharpener on my vest and make a few quick swipes of the hook tip frequently just to be sure I have a sharp hook.

Fly anglers are constantly told to be aware of "wind-knots" in their leader. These are small knots in various parts of the tippet that signal a poor casting rhythm. Fly line that is cast so fast that you can hear a "whoosh" creates many such knots. These knots weaken the strength of the leader and often result in breakage. Don't ignore knots like these. Non-intentional knots in your leader need to be cut off and the leader reconstructed as necessary. Then a quick analysis of your casting technique might help you to adjust your cast to avoid them.

Retying leaders and good tippet knots on-stream (above) can take some practice. Taking the time to get your setup right before you hit the water (below) makes sense.

There may be other reasons for losing fish right at the take, but all too often the reason boils down to a poor set. Either an overly-enthusiastic or a tentative set are likely to result in a missed fish and so is a set that pulls the fly right out of the fish's mouth. At times those reactions can be the result of a take that occurs just as the fly lands on the water. We aren't always expecting an immediate take, but try to remember that can happen.

It isn't always easy to decide what kind of set is the best for the situation and the species of fish you are after, but I suggest you read up on the various types of sets for different species of fish. Many saltwater fish require a strip-set, or a set off to the side to be successfully hooked. Generally, anglers are advised to "set when you feel the weight of the fish." That's good advice, but with the exception of sea trout, most fish have mouths that are very difficult to penetrate, so you need to set hard. There's one proviso, though, and that is to set hard but never with the tip of your rod pointing straight up.

Losing a Fish while Playing It

We also lose fish while we are playing them. There's even more reasons why that might happen than there are for the lack of success when presenting the fly. Here are tips and possible fix-it solutions for these scenarios.

- Wear polarized glasses tinted for fishing
- Adjust the tension on the line so it is not too tight or too loose
- Set the hook twice
- Let the fish run
- Keep sideways pressure on the fish
- Always face your fish

Polarized glasses are a must for fly fishing. But it is surprising how many of my clients have glasses without the correct tint. The same glasses that you use for driving aren't usually the glasses you can use successfully for fishing. When trying to put a fly in front of a fish or move it away from a submerged log you need to be able to direct it where you want it to increase your chance of success. Polarized glasses now also have bifocals so there's no reason to be without them when you need them. Many brands have various methods of helping you find the right tint.

Test how tight your line is before you cast by trying to pull a little off the reel. If it is too tight, loosen it a bit, or if it is too loose, tighten it up. Never tighten the drag all the way tight, however. Try to achieve a "half-tight" tension on the line so that you can set the hook, but not so tight that the fish can't play after you hook it.

Most fish have hard, bony mouths and you may think that your fly has penetrated them but it hasn't. Fishing salmon in Alaska and billfish in Mexico has taught me to set the hook at least twice to help ensure that it is tightly in the fish's mouth. If it comes out on the second set, you can bet it wasn't in there solidly to start with.

One of the basic lessons that fly fishers must learn is not to try to reel when the fish is running, and only reel when the fish is resting. Reels with an exposed rim on the spool will help you achieve this because you can "palm" the reel to slow a fish down without using the wind-knob on the reel. Just press the flat of your hand up against the bottom of the spool while the fish runs. Don't use palming to completely stop the fish, just to keep it under control. Companies like Ross Reels have exposed rims on all their reels to help you accomplish this.

Many people keep their rod pointed high when fighting a fish, thinking that is the only way to keep it solidly in the fish's mouth, when the better way of playing a fish is to keep a fly rod low and put sideways pressure on the fly. Keep in mind this well-known saying: "The tip of the rod casts the fly, but the butt of the rod fights the fish." Even in dry-fly fishing, the fly is not always right in the tip of fish's mouth.

Many, many fish are lost during the landing process, whether it is with a net or not. If you're catching a fish to keep, just pulling the fish straight up onto the bank is probably the best way to go because it keeps a straight line between you and your fish. All too often, however, the angler will turn away from the fish, to see their way up the bank or to see if someone is coming to help them. What they don't realize is that they are changing the angle of the fly in the fish's mouth while they are doing so. The result is frequently a lost fish.

You might have other reasons for losing fish, but I hope that this list will prove useful for beginners and fly anglers feeling a bit rusty after a long winter. Tight Lines!

Cecilia "Pudge "Kleinkauf has owned and operated Women's Flyfishing, a Trout Unlimited-endorsed business for 30 of the 45 years she has lived and fished in Alaska. She teaches women to fish with a fly rod and takes women and couples on small-group guided trips to various locations throughout Alaska. Besides being a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine Pudge is the author of five books, the most recent of which is* Rookie No More: The Fly Fishing Novice Gets Guidance from a Pro. *Contact Pudge and find out more about her other books at www.womensflyfishing.net.*

Palming your reel, applying just the right amount of pressure to slow a running fish without breaking off, is an acquired skill.

Top: Rebekka Redd fishing at Angler's Alibi on the Alagnak last summer took this chum on the swing. Inset Photo: A selection of flies for coho, chum and pinks. © Mossy's Fly Shop.

BIG BOLD & UGLY

A GUIDE TO FLIES FOR SWINGING THE 49TH STATE

FLY SELECTION FOR ALASKA, MUCH LIKE FLY FISHING IN ALASKA, IS RARELY COMPLICATED.

STORY BY TROY LETHERMAN

Devon Teeling of Wasilla with a nice Mat-Su Valley rainbow. © Devon Teeling.

It's not exactly a 'go big or go home' state of affairs, but an additional touch of tying-testosterone does go a long way up here—particularly when hunting the biggest and baddest of the state's freshwater fish. The salmon spawn and the resulting deluge of free-floating eggs that bounce, tumble and roll downstream in river systems across the state does dominate a significant section of the angling season each year, but beyond that—and a few brief windows of consistent dry-fly action—Alaska is primarily streamer country. For those who love to fish on the swing, there is probably no better place in the world.

The state's quintessential fly demonstrates this perfectly. The Egg-sucking Leech is easy to tie, works in variety of conditions, mimics many food forms and catches every species that swims in Alaska. Still, it's not ideal for every swinging occasion.

All fly patterns and photos are courtesy of Mossy's Fly Shop, located in Anchorage at 750 W. Dimond Boulevard #114. Mossy's features one of the best selection of flies in Alaska, as well as everything else you'll need to haul in that trophy this season. Visit them online at www.mossysflyshop.com.

A triple-king hookup on Big Creek near the Naknek last summer. © Roy Ferguson. Inset photo: An array of big, bold Spey-style flies for Chinook. © Mossy's Fly Shop.

This rainbow trout was caught on an articulated flesh fly. © Troy Letherman
Inset photo: An assortment of fillies for trout in Alaska. © Mossy's Fly Shop.

Fortunately, while hardly ever complicated, fly fishing in Alaska is still slightly more complex than that.

Rainbow Trout

Much like the majority of the population of the 49th state, Alaska rainbows eschew excessive pomp. The artful presentation means less here than just about any other place in North America. Food is abundant in the waters they inhabit and locating the big 'bows is often the most difficult obstacle an angler will face—next to landing them, of course. A beautiful cast and perfect presentation help, no doubt, but neither seems to be nearly as important as providing the trout a selection of what they're already eating, which in the Last Frontier often means salmon flesh and eggs.

Thus, for Alaska's trophy rainbow trout anglers, the task is to figure out what the prevalent food source is for the area and time of year and then to imitate that food as closely as possible. Anglers should generally choose a fly that closely mimics the size, shape, movement and color of the prey, in that order.

Trout flies are especially abundant, however, and the Alaska neophyte could easily become lost in the maze of choices. To make fly selection for fishing the state's rainbows a tad simpler, it's usually best to think of trout patterns as belonging to a distinct group of flies, each of which will perform better than the other possibilities under certain circumstances.

As the focus of this article is flies for fishing on the swing, we'll ignore one of the Alaska trout's dietary mainstays: salmon eggs. Another product of the salmon life cycle will be of interest to anglers swinging streamers, however, and that's flesh.

Most flesh flies tied for Alaska are simple rabbit-strip creations tied in a scale of colors meant to replicate the varying stages of decomposition. Flesh in its early-season form (late summer and early autumn) is darker in color, often orange or a fuller pink hue. Lighter shades of pink will be more productive as the year wears on, while tans and whites gain prominence later in the fall, during the winter, and again in the spring when rainbows will feed on flesh that's washed into the stream with the higher flows. Flesh flies tied in sizes 2 to 6 on streamer-style, un-weighted hooks are the most popular, though many anglers are experimenting with larger, articulated flies at present. Anglers can also use a few standard streamers to

imitate salmon flesh, most notably white Woolly Buggers, Zonkers and Battle Creek Specials.

Crucially for those who enjoy the jarring take of a bruiser trout stopping a swinging fly mid-drift, the entirety of rainbow trout angling in the Last Frontier doesn't revolve around the Pacific salmon. Sculpins can comprise a large portion of the trout's diet during distinct points of the season in areas of Alaska, and Don Gapen's original masterpiece, the Muddler Minnow, features a clipped deer-hair head that mimics the widely-distributed sculpin. This pattern and a wide variety of other sculpin imitations range in length from three-quarters of an inch to over four inches, and their coloration will vary, often closely matching a river's bottom. Greens, blacks, browns and combinations of all three are the most frequently used colors by fly-tiers. Spun ram's wool or deer hair is typically utilized to construct the sculpin's most prominent feature, the large head, with newer synthetic materials also gaining popularity these days.

Another trout food form in Alaska waters are the freshwater eels predominantly found in the bigger lake systems. For instance, the rainbows of both the Naknek and Iliamna systems feed heavily on the eels in the spring, early-summer and late-fall time periods. Articulated leeches in larger sizes, even up to 8 inches, work quite well in these waters and have become staples of the Alaska fly-fishing scene.

Steelhead

Steelhead and Atlantic salmon share a common heritage, similar life histories and passionate followings, and the tactics used for one species are usually successful with the other. The bond between the two prized sport fish extends deeper than that, though, right to the knot at the end of the tippet in fact, as the very first steelhead flies were traditional Atlantic salmon patterns such as the Lady Caroline and the Carron Fly. And even though the advent of lead-core shooting heads in the 1950s changed much of the thinking about steelhead fly design, the two remain connected, with many of today's most widespread steelhead patterns retaining at least some influence from their birth as Spey- and Dee flies.

Designed to be fished on the swing, many famous Northwest patterns such as the Freight Train, Skykomish Sunrise and Green Butt Skunk are likewise popular for fishing the larger steelhead waters in Alaska, as are patterns modeled after the oft-imitated General Practitioner. Spey-style flies, particularly patterns in the classic Intruder style, are also found in fly-shop bins across the state, while marabou flies ordinarily tied in the style of the Alaskabou series are common as well.

Even with the wide range of patterns available, most anglers would agree that size and presentation remain the most important detail in choosing a steelhead fly. And size considerations are primarily connected to water clarity and depth. When the water is exceedingly clear, a small, sparse fly (down to a size 8) will almost always produce the most consistent results, regardless of color. If the water is turbid, a large fly will often be the best choice. Drab colors (purple and black) are also the way to go when fishing deep, dark, or off-color water, as in those situations steelhead probably won't see much color variation anyway. Hence a big profile is the key. Good sizes for these times can range all the way up to 1/0. Colors for high-water situations usually range towards the brighter end of the scale, with many anglers choosing to utilize pinks, oranges, yellow and fluorescent green. A good percentage of anglers follow the "bright day, bright fly; dark day, dark fly" mantra, but color theory should also take into account proximity to saltwater. A lot of times anglers fishing the tides or near river mouths will find that patterns displaying the same intense colors as those exhibited by favored steelhead food sources—prawns, shrimp, squid—are the most successful.

Chinook Salmon

The vast majority of fly fishing for Chinook salmon in Alaska occurs once the fish have vacated saltwater for their natal rivers and streams, utilizing fly patterns that will either elicit a territorial response from the fish or flies so harmless—or realistic—looking that they will be picked up almost reflexively. Personal preference represents the significant criteria of design, but if there is one certainty when it comes to king salmon flies, it's that effective colors and patterns can change from day-to-day and week-to-week, or even if the sun retreats behind a layer of clouds. Expecting some streamside experimentation to be necessary is the angler's only recourse.

Most Alaska Chinook patterns are large, full-bodied creations tied on heavy-wire salmon hooks in sizes ranging from

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4 to 3/0. Many call for barbell or bead-chain eyes and underbody wraps of lead. Keep in mind that generally speaking, the lighter the fly, the more lifelike it will appear. A lot of weight oftentimes serves only to dampen a pattern's animation. A better strategy is to use a minimum number of wraps or none at all and instead employ sinking lines to get the offering down—this is more and more common as two-handed rods and Skagit casting have grown in stature.

As far as effective colors for your king flies, theories abound. That salmon can be taken consistently on a plain black fly has been proven many times over. Still, when it comes to tying attractor patterns for Alaska's Chinook, most anglers prefer vibrant hues, with red, hot pink and chartreuse leading the way. Mixing colors, especially black and the more garish tints, will often help to evenly distribute the tonal values of a fly, making it appear more lifelike. The last and probably most important thing to keep in mind is that making a successful presentation is almost always furthered when an angler feels good about his fly. Patterns that don't inspire confidence shouldn't even be tied on the end of the tippet, as it's doubtful they'll ever be fished with the kind of methodical, sustained endeavor necessary to encounter success with Chinook salmon.

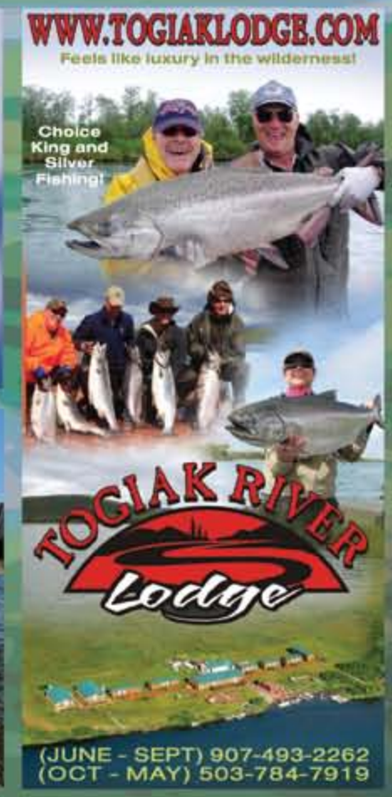
Coho Salmon

Within Alaska, more original effort has probably been extended towards tying new coho flies than patterns designed to entice almost all of the other Pacific salmon combined. Perhaps this is because coho are so prone to reward a tier with a follow and take. Or probably more likely, fly tiers are as attracted to the bright, sometimes gaudy, materials as the fish are. In either case, both traditional patterns and a never-ending array of variations and deviations are tied-up and sent swimming in search of coho. From Flash Flies or Conehead Buggers adorned in kaleidoscopic colors to marabou and rabbit-strip leeches, only one truth seems certain when applied to silver salmon flies, and it's that nearly everyone with some thread and a vise can become a successful innovator.

Most freshwater coho flies are tied on hook sizes from 6 down to 1/0. Like with Chinook flies, many of the most popular patterns include fluorescent colors, especially pink or chartreuse. Another important element prospective coho anglers should keep in mind is movement. A fly that flutters or swims

Bristol Bay

notorious salmon & trout fishing away from the crowds... remote alaska



will be more effective than heavily-weighted patterns. To that end, supple materials such as marabou, rabbit strip and Arctic fox can be used in a wide variety of creations. For fishing faster water, where soft materials lose much of their effectiveness, stiffer, hackled flies will be needed. If weight is required to get down to low-lying fish, patterns tied with barbell or bead-chain eyes will be better than those fashioned with numerous lead wraps beneath the body.

Chum and Pink Salmon

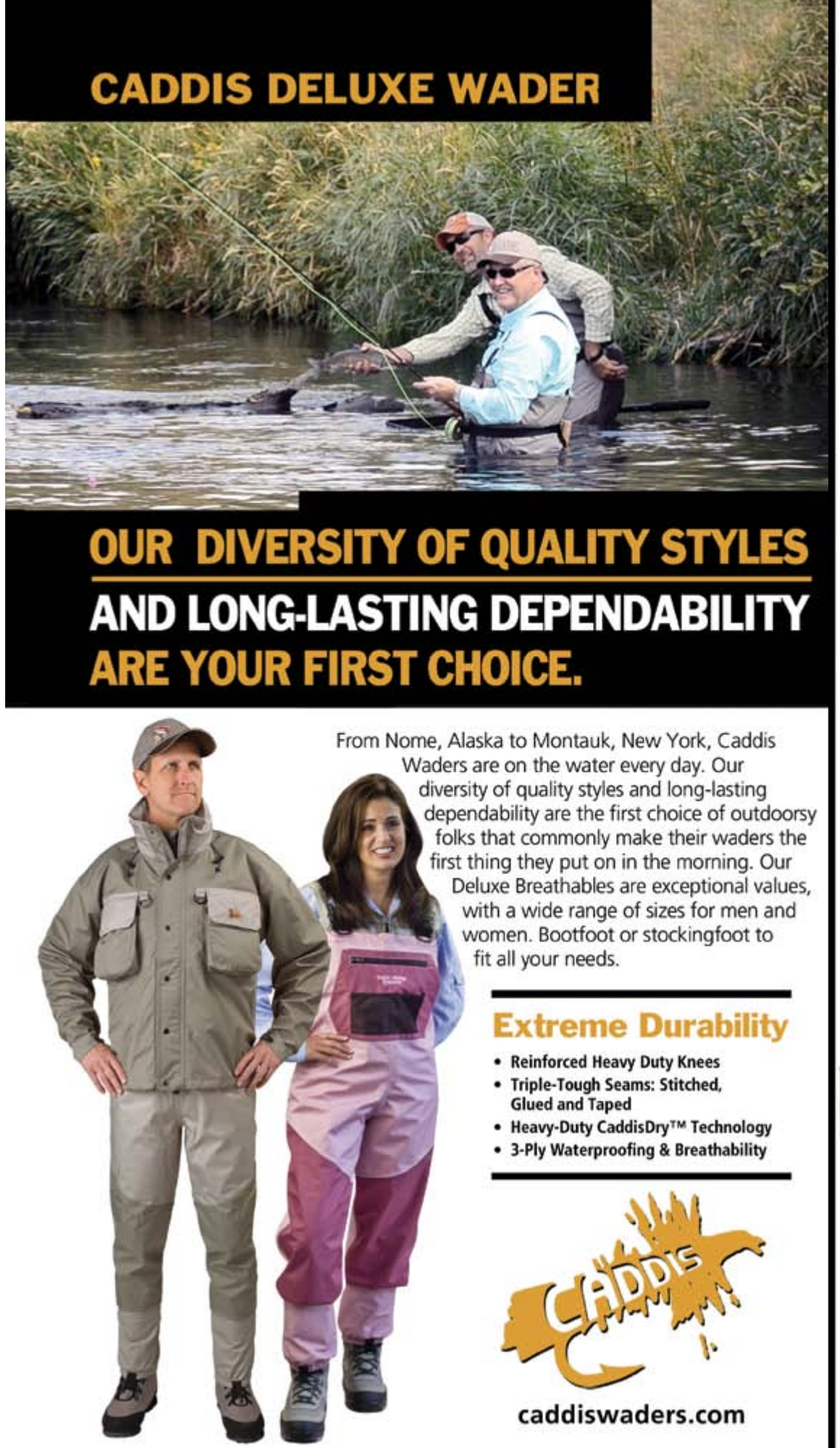
For reasons unknown by anglers, chum salmon will at times become extremely color selective, which for fly-tiers means that far and away the most popular chum salmon flies in Alaska share one common trait—they're pink. While no one's determined the exact cause, whether temperature, light conditions, water clarity or something else entirely, many do believe the way around the phenomenon is to carry a variety of pink-colored flies.

Otherwise, chum flies differ very little from other popular salmon patterns, most including some flash, supple materials that swim well such as marabou and rabbit fur, and usually, weight in the form of bead-chain or barbell eyes.

For pink salmon, flies should be tied with some flash and in sizes 6 through 10, though pinks will eat much larger patterns as well. And that's about as complicated as it gets. Almost any of the standard Pacific salmon fare or traditional streamer patterns in a variety of colors will perform admirably with pinks, even when they're not the intended target. The ubiquitous Egg-sucking Leech produces results worth of its widespread reputation, as does most any other fly with some color contrast in its design.

Regardless of species or time of year, the traditional wet-fly swing is one of the more profitable methods for covering wide swaths of water, which can be critical in vast Alaska, where most of your angling targets will be migratory. Swinging flies is also known to produce some of the most violent, arm-jerking takes possible. But it all starts with the fly—dial-in the right choice for the water, the time of year and the species you're pursuing, and then get to work.

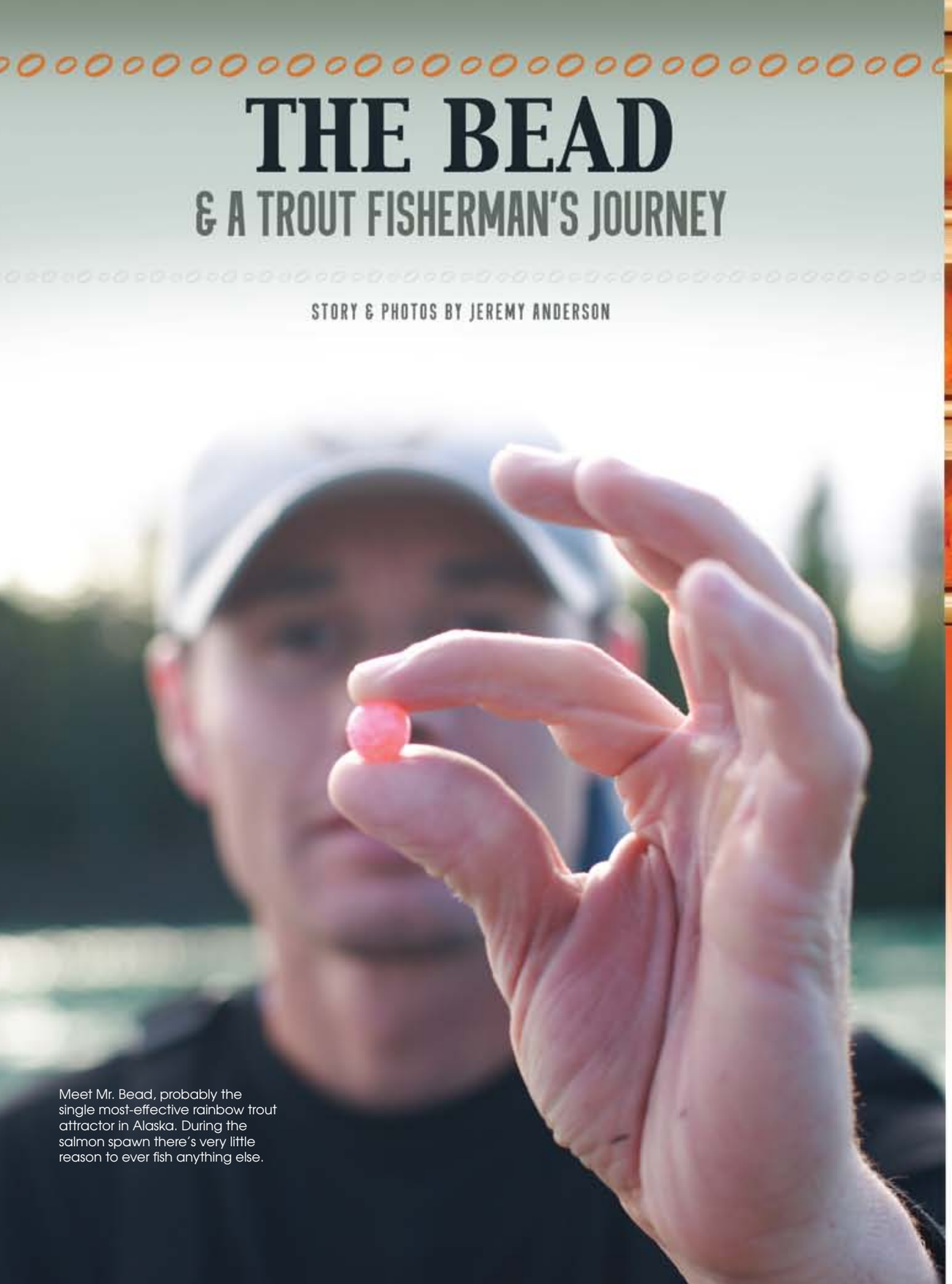
Troy Letherman is editor of Fish Alaska *and* Hunt Alaska *magazines.*



THE BEAD

& A TROUT FISHERMAN'S JOURNEY

STORY & PHOTOS BY JEREMY ANDERSON



Meet Mr. Bead, probably the single most-effective rainbow trout attractor in Alaska. During the salmon spawn there's very little reason to ever fish anything else.

Guides and serious bead anglers will have a large selection of sizes and colors of beads to work from—before getting into all the customization work that makes each bead more closely match the eggs in the water.

In my earliest memories of fishing, I recall rolling a plastic bead in my hands. I grew up fishing for walleye, bass and pike in central Wisconsin with my dad, and we used beads as attractors and as part of the tackle setup. In 2001, my first summer in Cooper Landing, Alaska, my understanding of the bead changed forever. Over 15 years later, I know exactly what bead I want to be in the water on most days, and I know where to find those specific beads in my numerous bead boxes. Of course, there are still occasional unknowns, leaving me to ask myself, "What bead should I use today?" But fishermen will always deal with that; the uncertainty is part of what keeps us coming back day after day.

Cooper Landing was a great place to develop bead-fishing knowledge. Nick Ohlrich, one of my business partners, and I spent countless nights painting beads as we prepared for our next day of fishing. Although we spent much time figuring things out by trial and error, there are two people in particular who pointed us in the right direction: Gary McFadden and the late Curt Trout. These two fishermen loved to see people develop fishing skills, have fun and succeed. They would give us just enough information to get us started and to pique our curiosity, but not so much that we didn't have to experiment and develop our own understanding of what works and what doesn't.

Curt Trout was in a league of his own. I remember the days of grabbing a Philly cheesesteak at the grocery store and popping over to Curt's bead laboratory. Whenever he opened the door and welcomed us in, Curt would ask us how the fishing had been and would show us a few things he had been up to. Curt's creativity with bead painting motivated Nick and I to take ours to the next level. The man didn't mess around—he actually kept Kenai River water in a jar so he could test his painted beads in it. Curt is one of the true pioneers of trout fishing with beads on the Kenai River. If you were lucky enough to ever fish with him, you know exactly what I am talking about.

Gary McFadden is another avid fisherman and a legendary guide in Cooper Landing. The most important concept Gary ever taught me is to have fun, no matter what the fishing conditions are. He still is one of my most impactful mentors on the Kenai fishery. There were plenty of nights where Nick and I would knock on Gary's door with a rack of cold ones and get down on some bead painting. Gary would always remind us that "no two eggs are exactly the same." It took me a while to understand what he was saying because I wanted my beads to be perfect. But in reality, and as Gary showed us, a little imperfection with your beads can pay off big.

Sharing passion and knowledge is an integral part of the continuity of the fishing community—it is a major reason I enjoy writing for *Fish Alaska*—and people like Gary, Curt and a few others taught our fishing crew that.

Why Does the Bead Work so Well?

Quite simply, beads catch more fish, and if you set-up properly, bead-fishing allows for an easy, safe catch-and-release opportunity for anglers. Just as a side-note, 2 inches is the legal distance from the hook to the bead.

There are always eggs in the water, which is a big reason

why the bead works so well. A lot of eggs get trapped in eddies, the gravel of spawning beds, the slow water and even in the ice. When the water levels change, it reloads the main channel of the river with another round of food. Even when the water comes up in the spring there are eggs and flesh floating downriver from the previous fall's salmon spawn.

In the fleshy time of the fishing season, there have been days on the water where I used a bead and the person fishing next to me used a small flesh fly. We both caught fish and there wasn't a huge difference in quantity or quality of the trout. Beads can look a lot like a small piece of flesh floating down river, and if you have the right shade on the results can be awesome. The same concept applies to steelhead fishing. I have thrown on a bead that was the same color as a productive streamer, and next thing you know a steelhead ate the bead.

Beads are super durable most of the time and easy to cast. These factors result in your hook and bead being in the water more of the time. The more you are in the water the more chances you will have to catch fish. There is a difference in durability between hand-painted beads and unpainted stock beads from the store. You can have a painted bead that chips up quickly but that is more of a clear-coat issue. There are dozens of clear-coats out there, from fishing products to exterior paint products, to help finish off the painting of your bead. Each clear-coat gives a different result in a different condition. Believe me, though, some days an unpainted stock bead out-fishes the bead you spent all night making. The important thing is to be mentally ready to fish either.

Another reason the bead can fish so well is because there are many different sizes and colors available for anglers to pick from. The toughest part is deciding when to use what bead. I am going to let you figure that one out on your own, but I will say that you can't always judge a book by its cover. For trout and steelhead fishing, we typically use 6mm to 14mm beads. I do have a few friends that will throw 4mm beads once in a while, but I don't fish much below a 6mm. There are five different species of salmon and their eggs are different sizes and colors, so it is important to get close to the egg size you are trying to replicate. We will up- or downsize beads to try and stand-out from the real ones floating down if needed.

No two salmon eggs look exactly alike, so it makes sense that none of your beads should be perfect matches either. Between new-in-the-bin (at left) to what shows up in your bead box, there's a lot you can do to change the look of your beads.

Salmon eggs can be super fresh and translucent-looking or have a more opaque look if they have been in the water longer. Each salmon species' "fresh" egg has a slightly different shade, so it is important to do your homework. Why do you think there are so many colors at the tackle shop? Each species of salmon also has a different shade of "washed out," such as peachy or creamy. There are also a lot of eggs tumbling down the river that are in-between fresh and old. When I am starting my day, whether guiding or not guiding, I give the fish I am targeting different options. It helps me figure out how to proceed with the rest of the day.

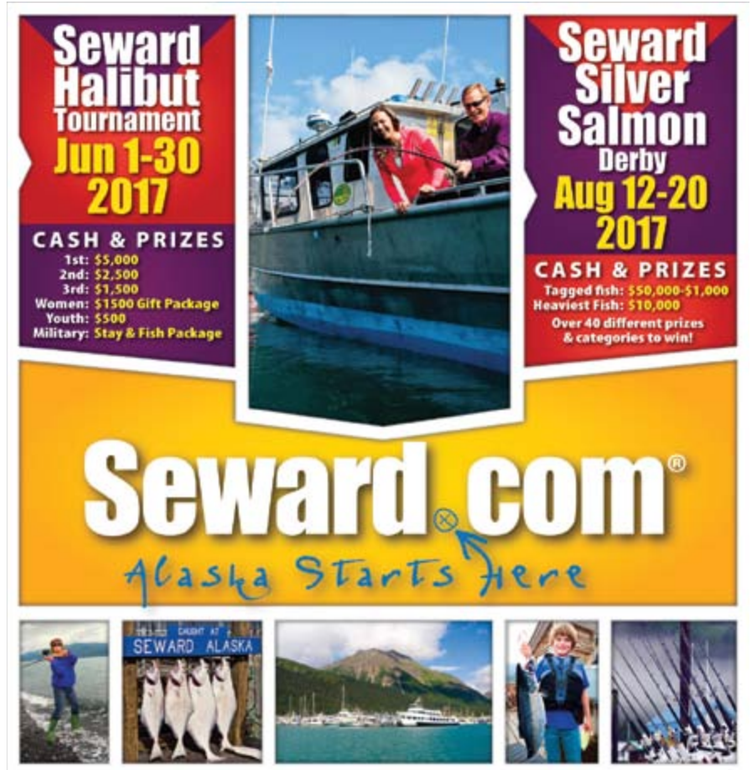
Beads in the right colors can look a lot like small pieces of flesh floating downstream, negating the need to always swap over to fishing flesh flies.

Taking Your Beads to the Next Level

There are countless ways to take your beads to the next level and inspiration can be found in the most unusual places. I have often found myself in a craft store with my wife, Andrea, and all of a sudden I find something to throw in the shopping cart and take to my bead lab. In fact, one of our most recent innovations with bead painting came from an idea that Andrea came up with as we were painting one night. The sky is the limit on what you can use for painting beads, but there are a few things to keep in mind.

Part of being creative in your bead laboratory is documenting your creation. You can very quickly make a bunch of variations of a bead that look almost the same. You would think the trout can't tell the difference but I promise you they can. The process of every bead we make is documented. If it is a killer bead, we want to be able to replicate it exactly. If one is working and one is not, then you can compare what you did differently to get the desired results. This July I pulled a bead out from two years ago. It was out-fishing all the others and naturally I wanted to make more. So, I pulled out my notes and reproduced it with no problem.

Earlier I talked about Gary saying that "no two eggs are exactly the same." When I make a batch of beads I look at them and pick out the ones that are consistently or irregularly painted.



Alaska trout get big by gorging on eggs. Alaska trout anglers catch big fish by offering them egg imitations. It's not a complicated equation.

Trout want different things each day so knowing what beads I have is critical to understanding what a fish wants. Some days the trout want the beads that are painted perfectly like a gumdrop and some days they want that one that sticks out a little.

You can paint your beads in various ways. Without going into too much detail, a few ways you can paint your beads include dipping them, shaking them in a container and painting them with a brush. Having a variety of options in your bead box allows you to be ready for what the fish want. The stage of the real eggs tumbling downriver, the amount of light penetrating into the water column and the fishing pressure are just a few of the reasons a trout may want one over the other. If you are happy with your current setup, great. If you are looking for something else, just start experimenting.

Understanding the salmon spawning cycles in your area is critical to "matching the hatch" with the bead you are tossing in the water. Once you know what salmon is spawning, where they are spawning and what the water levels are doing to the eggs in the water, you can start to narrow your selection. When you are making your next batch of beads, make sure to be methodical enough about it so you have your bases covered, yet creative enough so you can add your own personal twist. Try looking at a real egg in the water, in your hand and then holding it up to the sunlight. Now make your bead look like that.

The Bead-Switching Game

Hitting the jackpot with a bead is one of the best feelings in the world and something you never forget. On the other hand, going out the next day with the same bead and having trouble even hooking a Dolly Varden is very frustrating. You wonder why it worked so well yesterday and what the problem is today. You should ask yourself: "Is it the bead?"

Switching to a different bead may be the answer. Don't be afraid to swap out beads, but my rule is to swap one bead out at a time in the boat. You always start the day with the bead you think is going to catch you the monster on the first drift, right? So don't give up on that bead so quickly. Yes, sometimes a complete bead makeover is necessary. But I caution you to give your beads a chance to work and be careful not to get caught up in the bead-switching game.

If your results don't improve after some swapping out it is a safe bet to go to the bead that you trust and rely on in a pinch. It's a good bead for a reason, so use it if nothing else is working. Maybe you need to change the water you are fishing, your leader setup or the amount of split-shot. Or it could be some other technical issue. Like I mentioned

If you set-up properly, bead-fishing allows for an easy, safe catch-and-release opportunity for anglers. Always remember to use hook-release tools, rubber nets, measuring boards and smaller (preferably barbless) hooks.

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The author (left) and a client show off the rewards of dialing-in your bead game—a trophy Kenai River trout.

earlier in the article, each day of fishing is unique, and solving the mystery is what keeps us fishermen coming back for more.

Putting it Together

Catching fish on the beads you painted comes with great satisfaction, but don't forget that troutbeads.com has all the unpainted colors for a reason. If you want to get more dialed-in with what the egg colors and stages are, do your homework. The pictures, information and stages of salmon eggs are easy to find. It will give you a starting point for your bead fishing. Don't forget to keep a log of what beads are working in what conditions and always have a variety of beads with you to increase your chance at catching more and better fish. Also always remember to use hook-release tools, rubber nets, measuring boards and smaller (preferably barbless) hooks. If you are going to get better at catching fish your ability to take care of the fish you catch needs to grow as well.

All the shops around Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula have beads you can buy and often they can give you pointers about what is working. Some fly shop employees keep their knowledge secret, but if you go somewhere where the staff is more open to talking fishing, they may tell you a few other key details. My advice is to spend your money at the friendlier shops that make it obvious that they want you to succeed. We highly recommend Mossy's Fly Shop in Anchorage.

Most importantly, build a community by sharing information with your fishing friends. Pass down your knowledge and passion to the next generation of fishermen. All these years later, I have so much respect for my mentors and am still grateful for my Cooper Landing roots. They taught me that no one owns the river and that we can all enjoy it. They also taught me that we can all have our fishing secrets, but that we should help each other along. I think about this all the time when I am on the river, but especially now that my home is in Soldotna, 45 minutes away from where I started my journey on the upper Kenai.

Jeremy Anderson is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska *magazine and co-owner of Alaska Drift Away Fishing. His passion for experiencing the Kenai River trout fishery with others is what keeps him on the water. You can find out more about Jeremy and trout fishing the Kenai River at www.guidekenairiver.com.*

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A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO THE

BUCKTAIL DECEIVER

© Keith Jackson

STORY BY MICHAEL LUNDE

Ranging in length from 4- to 12 inches, baitfish cruise the world's oceans, lakes and rivers, predatory gamefish never far behind. The gamefish bring anglers, small streamers and a fly rod in hand.

With great leaps in synthetic tying materials available, anglers can now tie flies to match the shape, morphology and movement of common baitfish known to inhabit specific systems. Still, it's a particular few patterns that have stood the test of time, known far and wide as versatile, productive fish-catching streamers regardless of coast or species. Bob Clouser's Clouser Minnow, Bill Peabody's Rhody Flatwing and Bob Popovics' Surf Candy are three shining examples, but perhaps no streamer pattern is better known or used more widely than Lefty's Deceiver.

Originated by Lefty Kreh for striped bass, the Deceiver has transcended its East Coast roots and made its way into just about every freshwater and marine environment in the world.

© Andrew Warshawer

A Bulkhead Deceiver is designed to lend a fuller profile, and the low-density head gives this fly neutral buoyancy. (Pattern tied by Andrew Warshawer.) Upper right above: The author with an interior Alaska sheefish that fell to a smelt-sized Deceiver.

MATERIAL BREAKDOWN

The original Bucktail Deceiver, as well as its many modifications, is tied with a wide range of simple, natural materials that are widely available. The primary material in all Deceivers is bucktail hair. Bucktail is characterized by a varying magnitude of softness and hollowness, varying tremendously in length of hair, fineness of hair and texture. However, a bucktail characteristic not often mentioned is that the hairs are typically thicker and very hollow at the bottom, while the middle and top regions are less hollow and softer. Deceiver bodies are generally tied with hair selected from the middle and top regions. Another advantage with this pattern is that bucktail is widely available and extremely affordable compared to synthetics.

A second component of Deceiver fly design is dry-fly rooster saddle hackle or Schlappen feather. An application of 3-D holographic eyeballs is used on the original prototype, with jungle-cock eyes used in modified versions. Often nicknamed jungle-cock feathers in fly-tying conversations, the jungle cock is actually red junglefowl, a domesticated chicken from tropical Asia. Male and female birds exhibit high-quality gold and bronze feathers cascading from the neck and lower back. When tied on each side of hook, they represent the operculum or gill flap of a baitfish.

Strands of flash or multi-chromatic flash are used to simulate the lateral line of the baitfish or movement during the act of swimming. Hook size and style varies according to the type of freshwater or saltwater gamefish targeted.

LEFTY KREH'S DECEIVER

In the 1950s, legendary fly fisherman, fly-tier and author Lefty Kreh combined bucktail, saddle hackle and several strands of Flashabou to form one of the greatest baitfish streamers of all time. First used for targeting striped bass out of Chesapeake Bay, the fly was extremely successful and gained widespread popularity throughout other saltwater environments, quickly moving into the freshwater world as well.

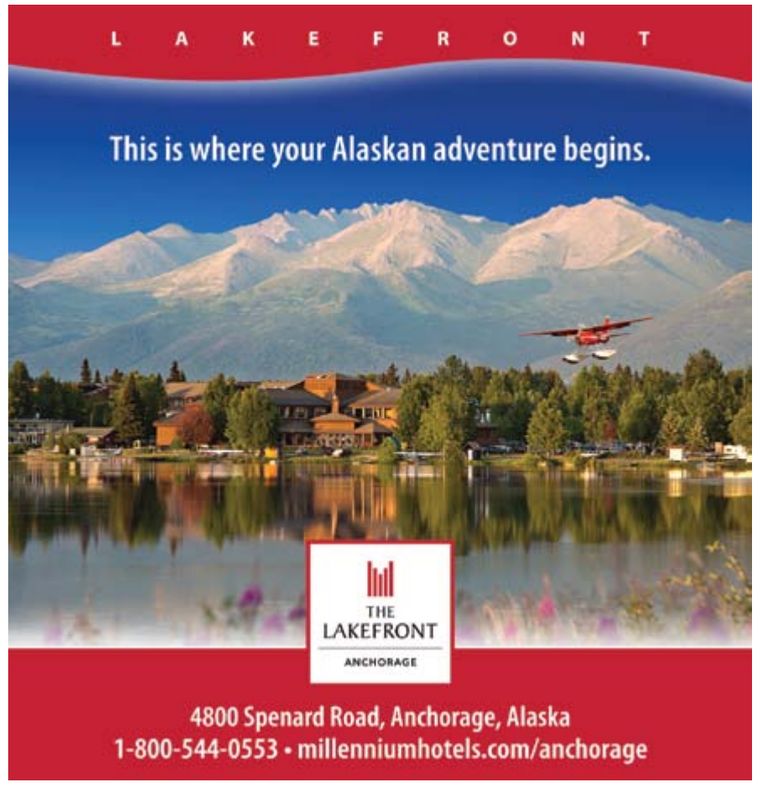
An advantage of the original Deceiver is that it is relatively simple to tie, especially compared to the fancy flat-wing streamers other anglers were experimenting with. Pairs of saddle hackles or schlappen are tied on each side of the hook, positioned near the bend of the hook. A bucktail hair collar forms the body, which is tied in two clumps on top and bottom of the hook-shank in proximity to the hook-eye. As with other saltwater streamers, strands of flash are added to represent the lateral line of a baitfish. The final aesthetic added is 3- to 4 strands of peacock herl tied on top to represent the darker color of the baitfish's back.

Initial modifications to this traditional pattern revolved around simple bucktail-tying fundamentals. For a wider profile, use several loose thread wraps and manipulate the bucktail hair fibers around the hook-shank. Secure the rest of the bucktail with multiple thread wraps until a small thread head is developed. Repeat with each progressive bundle of bucktail until near the front of the hook-eye. As you advance up the hook-shank, the small thread head should not be noticeable as the bucktail hair fibers should have a fairly even distribution around the shank. More recently, modifications include substituting synthetic hair for bucktail, incorporating ostrich or rooster saddle hackles in back or tying in thicker schlappen feathers in flat-wing style.

BULKHEAD DECEIVER

Another modification of the original Bucktail Deceiver, the Bulkhead Deceiver is an innovation from the vise of Bob Popovics, who simply used natural bucktail hair as the only material throughout the entire fly design. Originally designed to simulate peanut bunkers, the Bulkhead Deceiver gained popularity with East Coast striper anglers, moving westward for inshore saltwater angling. The fly is built with an all-bucktail body coupled with a spun bucktail head.

Select a fairly sizeable bundle of bucktail hair from the base located at the bottom of the skin. Hair from this area is thicker and hollower. To form the bucktail head, trap a bundle of hair in a noose of thread wraps. An inch of butt fibers should be facing forward. Similar to spinning deer hair, distribute the hair around the shank by pulling down hard and hold the bundle of bucktail in place so it doesn't spin on



the shank. The forward-facing butt fibers are physically forced backwards by using a straw, empty pen casing or hair-packing tool to push them back. A dam of thread is built in front to flare the hair in all directions, a reverse-tying method similarly explained later for the Hollow Fleye. Repeat the identical technique with a shorter, dense collar of bucktail base fibers. It is frequently common to use a contrasting color on the head of the fly.

ARTICULATED DECEIVER

Articulated flies offer additional movement when retrieved through the water column, which have made them very popular with streamer anglers. Multiple fly-tiers across the Lower 48 have designed articulated Deceivers based on the original pattern to enhance the movement, increase the length of the fly and match baitfish species-specific patterns. In Alaska, depending on hook regulations specified by ADF&G, the articulation can be connected between two hooks or it is recommended to use a Waddington shank in area's with single-hook-only regulations. To increase the length of an articulated Deceiver, multiple Waddington shanks can be utilized to construct multi-articulated flies that range in length from 6- to 12-plus inches. Additional articulations in a fly will result in an S-shaped baitfish-like swimming motion. Multiple tying styles can be used. For multi-articulated flies, use the reverse-tying bucktail method, producing less bulk so that these supersized Deceivers are lightweight and castable.

BOB POPOVICS' HOLLOW FLEYE DECEIVER

East Coast striper pioneer Bob Popovics revolutionized the streamer scene with his modified design to the original Bucktail Deceiver developed by Lefty Kreh. Traditional Bucktail Deceivers are tied with schlappen feathers or saddle hackles in horizontal orientation to the back region of the hook, with bundles of bucktail hair directly tied on the top and bottom of the hook-shank. A common aesthetic detail with the original Bucktail Deceiver was that the distribution of bucktail fibers left gaps of the bare hook-shank visible. With multiple applications of reverse-tied bucktail, a fairly even distribution of fibers will encompass the entire hook-shank, allowing for a maximized volume of material without worrying about making the fly overly bulky.

Select the longest bucktail hair available. Popovics preferred hair fibers up to 7 inches in length. Pencil-sized clumps of bucktail hair are tied in reverse with several loose thread wraps. By manipulating your fingertips, the bucktail hair can be physically forced around the entire shank. Next, the thread is wrapped backwards several times. A straw or empty pen casing is used to force the bucktail hair fibers backwards. While holding all the bucktail as tightly as possible, a conical dam of thread wraps is formulated by slowly wrapping backwards. The farther backwards you wrap, the less flare there is to the bucktail.

THE BEAST

An oversized version of Popovics' Hollow Fleye, The Beast is a supersized Bucktail Deceiver tied specifically on a heavy monofilament extension. A disadvantage with supersized fly patterns nowadays are that the majority of fly-tiers experiment with natural furs and identical materials that make patterns waterlogged once the fly has been repeatedly exposed to water. A solution for this is to incorporate material into the fly design that minimizes water absorption. Bob Popovics' The Beast is a supersized, beefed up version of the original Hollow Fleye, consisting of a heavy monofilament extension that assists in extending additional length to the fly.

Poundage for monofilament varies, with 80- to 150-pound the most ideal, allowing for lifelike movement when stripped or swung through the water column.

The tail region of this fly consists of ostrich plumes, dry-fly saddle hackle or a combination of both. The monofilament extension is secured to the main tying hook with either Kevlar or gel-spun thread. After the extension is secured, reverse-tie bundles of bucktail along the main tying hook until the last bundle is in close proximity to the hook-eye. A key point to keep considerable attention to is the amount of flare. To achieve the natural streamlined pattern and morphology of a baitfish, each corresponding reverse-tied bucktail bundle is required to be tied at various angles. Steeper angles allow for the bucktail to flare more, whereas shallower angles flare less. Typically, the tail region of the fly consists of shallow-angled ties with little flare. The magnitude of flare slightly increases throughout the body of the fly until near the front. Common lengths for The Beast range from 8- to 14 inches long, yet the fly's best characteristic is castability. These streamers can be launched out to 80 feet with ease, giving anglers a big advantage versus those fishing waterlogged flies.

MULTI-SPECIES TARGETED

Alaska is blessed with a combination of freshwater and saltwater gamefish eager to destroy a lifelike fly. And as versatile as the Bucktail Deceiver is, it can be used to target almost if not all freshwater and saltwater gamefish in Alaska. The important point to remember is to use various lengths to match the gamefish you are targeting. For example, a 2.5- to 3-inch Deceiver works well to simulate out-migrating salmon smolt when targeting Arctic grayling, char or rainbow trout. Comparatively, if targeting trophy northern pike on the Yukon or Kuskokwim river drainages, an arsenal of 8- to 13-inch Bucktail Deceivers will work tremendously. Understanding the key predator-prey relationships will allow anglers to tie different types of Deceivers at specific lengths, using varying color combinations.

• Arctic grayling, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden and Arctic char – Use lengths of 2.5- to 3.5 inches. Black/white, olive/white, blue/white to match salmon smolt. Fly patterns: Lefty's Deceiver, Bucktail Deceiver.

• Sheefish – Lengths: 2.5- to 3.5 inches and up to 6- to 10 inches. Key baitfish representing: salmon smolt, round

BUCKTAIL DECEIVER TYING RECIPES

© Mike Lunde

LEFTY'S DECEIVER

Hook: Gamakatsu SL12S #2/0
Thread: White 140-denier Ultra Thread, #6/0 Uni White
Tail: Saddle hackle feathers or schlappen
Body: Pearl Diamond Braid
Collar: Clumps of chartreuse and white bucktail hair
Topping: 4- to 5 strands fine peacock herl
Eyes: Fish Skull 5-6mm 3-D eyes

© Mike Lunde

ARTICULATED DECEIVER

Hook: Gamakatsu SL12S #1/0-#4/0, Owner Aki #1/0 to #4/0
Stinger hook: Same as above; same size or smaller
Thread: Uni Mono or Flat-waxed nylon
Tail: Schlappen, saddle hackle, dry-fly saddle hackle, ostrich plumes
Body: Bucktail hair
Articulation: Wire (pike), braid (other species)
Articulation note: Waddington shank (single-hook only), connect two hooks together with 2-3 beads. Secure with gel-spun thread.
Flash: Flashabou, Krinkle Mirror Flash
Eyes: Jungle-cock eyes, Fish Skull 5-10mm 3-D Eyes

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BULKHEAD DECEIVER

Hook: Gamakatsu SP11-3L3H #4 to #2/0, Gamakatsu SS15 #4 to #2/0
Thread: Uni Mono or Flat-waxed nylon
Tail: Long, sparse bucktail hair
Body: Bucktail hair
Head: Spun bucktail hair (similar to a spun deer-hair head, front-facing fibers forced backwards with pen casing, straw or hair-packing tool)
Note: Each clump gets progressively thicker and shorter.

© Mike Lunde

HOLLOW FLEYE DECEIVER

Hook: Gamakatsu SL12S #1/0 to #8/0, Gamakatsu SP11-3L3H #4 to #2/0, Owner Aki #1/0 to #8/0
Thread: Flat-waxed nylon or fine, clear monofilament (.006-inch). Uni-Mono or Danville
Body: Bucktail hair
Flash: Angel Hair
Topping (optional): 3- to 4 strands Peacock herl
Eyes: Tab prismatic eyes (1/4-inch), jungle-cock eyes or 3-D Fish Skull Eyes
Note: Reverse-tied bucktail. A thread dam assists with flaring bucktail to desired angles. Small thread dam creates more flare, whereas large thread dam creates less flare. Strands of Angel Hair are tied just in front of head dam.

© Andrew Warshawer

THE BEAST

Hook: Gamakatsu SL12S #1/0 to #8/0, Gamakatsu SP11-3L3H #4 to #2/0, Owner Aki #1/0 to #8/0
Thread: Flat-waxed nylon or fine clear monofilament (.006-inch). Uni-Mono or Danville
Mono Extension: 80- to 150-pound hard mono
Body: Bucktail hair
Flash: Angel Hair
Eyes: Tab prismatic eyes (1/4-inch), jungle-cock eyes or 3-D Fish Skull Eyes
Tail: Dry-fly saddle hackle feather, ostrich plume or split combination
Cheeks: Jungle-cock eyes
Note: Same tying fundamentals as for the Hollow Fleye apply. Attach monofilament extension to main hook with Kevlar or gel-spun thread.

whitefish, least cisco, small grayling. Color combinations: black/white, blue/white, olive/white, white, firetiger. Fly patterns: Bucktail Deceiver, Bulkhead Deceiver, Hollow Fleye and The Beast.

• Northern pike – Lengths: 4- to 13 inches. Key baitfish representing: round and humpback whitefish, Bering and least cisco, lake chubs, longnose suckers, rainbow trout, grayling. Color combinations: white, black/white, blue/white, chartreuse/white, black/grey/white, olive/brown/white, blue/pink/white (e.g. cotton candy), firetiger. Fly patterns: All models of Bucktail Deceiver.

• Lake trout: Lengths: 4- to 10 inches. Key baitfish representing: least cisco, round and humpback whitefish, lake chubs. Color combinations: black/white, blue/white, olive/white, white. Fly patterns: Bucktail Deceiver, Lefty's Deceiver, Hollow Fleye and The Beast.

• Saltwater salmon – Lengths of 4- to 8 inches. Key baitfish representing: Pacific herring, Pacific sandlance and candlefish. Blue/black/white, black/white, chartreuse/white, white. Fly patterns: Bucktail Deceiver, Hollow Fleye, Bulkhead Deceiver.

• Halibut and lingcod: Lengths of 6- to 10 inches. Key baitfish representing: Pacific herring and candlefish. Color combinations: blue/white, black/white. Fly patterns: Bucktail Deceiver, Hollow Fleye, The Beast.

Tackle & Rigging

Appropriate tackle and rigging to successfully throw Bucktail Deceivers is first dependent on the length of the fly and the species of gamefish you're targeting. Smaller Bucktail Deceivers that imitate out-migrating salmon smolt can be easily cast on a single-handed 7-weight. Moderately-sized Deceivers in the 5- to 7-inch range can be easily cast with an 8-weight. Oversized Deceivers, such as multi-articulated variants and The Beast, should be cast with a minimum of a 9-weight or 10-weight, regardless of species targeting. In saltwater situations, a 9- or 10-weight is highly recommended, as fishing in the salt typically means connecting to fast-sinking shooting heads. Use 20-pound-test backing for smaller gamefish (e.g. grayling, Dolly Varden) and 30-pound for all other gamefish mentioned above. Appropriate leaders should be in the shorter spectrum, around 6 feet, to minimize wind knots and deliver the fly more efficiently. Use lighter leaders if pursuing smaller gamefish.

Technique & Presentation

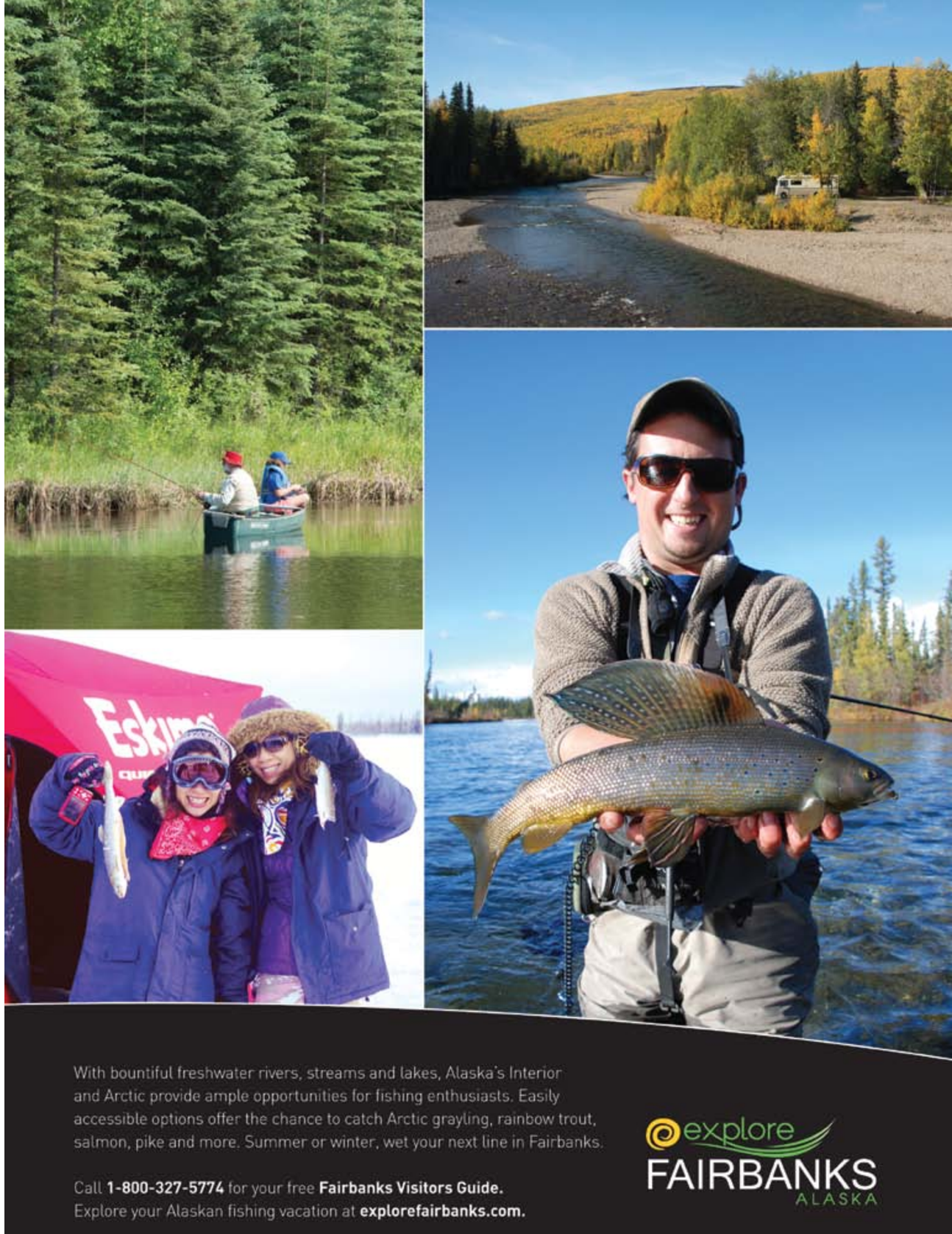
As with most baitfish streamers designed to target fresh- and saltwater gamefish, whether you're stripping or swinging the fly will be dictated by the type of water. In freshwater lakes or in saltwater, a stripping presentation makes the bucktail come to life. In river systems, a combination of the two presentations works extremely well. Given the movement characteristics of bucktail, a traditional wet-fly swing swung broadside through various parts of the stream channel triggers the bucktail's movement characteristics. Additional movement to a Bucktail Deceiver can be incorporated through a simple stripping technique.

After the primary mend is accomplished, let the fly swing broadside for several seconds to increase its depth; then throw in a combination of various strips with focus directed on the length or speed of the strip. The traditional strip length for Bucktail Deceivers is from 8- to 12 inches. Faster strips represent an escaping or fleeing baitfish (especially in lakes or in saltwater fisheries). Slower strips simulate schooling baitfish in an area where they may be foraging on congregations of suspended zooplankton. It is advantageous to use slower strips in deeper water so the fly maintains its depth, as a faster strip brings the fly closer to the surface.

A jerk/strip retrieve can be used in both rivers and stillwater habitats. And although rarely mentioned, a secret technique is the two-handed strip—accomplished by holding the butt section of the rod underneath your armpit and stripping the fly line with both hands. This often unleashes an aggressive feeding or territorial response from predators.

A few fly patterns have remained timeless classics, proving on countless occasions in all sorts of water that they are capable of catching fish. Effective and yet durable and simple to tie as well, the ever-versatile Deceiver is one of these exalted few. With endless ways to tie and modify the original Bucktail Deceiver, an investment in bucktail, feathers and flash will provide eager fly fishermen across Alaska all they need to tie one of the greatest streamers of all time.

Mike Lunde is originally from Pewaukee, WI, and received his B.S. in Fisheries from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Mike works as a fisheries technician for the Alaska Cooperative Fisheries and Wildlife Research Unit and has guided in both Alaska and Patagonia.



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Fish Alaska Recipe

Bang Bang Halibut

by Melissa Norris

If you've eaten at Bonefish Grill and had their signature Bang Bang Shrimp appetizer, then you probably know awesomeness when you taste it. For this dish, we did a take on it using halibut rather than shrimp, after trying the sauce on cauliflower and discovering a whole new world of deliciousness.

Ingredients for Halibut:
1 lb of halibut, cleaned and cut into strips 1-inch wide by a half-inch thick
1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped fine
1 1/2 cup panko
2 eggs
Coconut oil

Ingredients for Bang Bang Sauce:
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/4 cup honey
2 tbs sweet chili sauce
1 tbs Sriracha sauce

Mix all ingredients for Bang Bang sauce and refrigerate until use. Mix the chopped parsley with the panko on a plate. Whisk eggs in a bowl. Melt a quarter cup of coconut oil in a pan. Dredge halibut through egg and then coat it in the panko mix. Place each piece in the pan. Turn after 4 or 5 minutes or when golden brown. Cook on the other side 4 to 5 more minutes. Place on paper-towel-covered plate to drain and serve with a side of Bang Bang sauce for dipping.

Side Note: When we made the cauliflower we baked it in the oven on a parchment paper-lined cookie sheet and it came out nicely when cooked for 20 minutes at 400 degrees. For the halibut version above you could also sauté the halibut without coating it in panko and toss it in the sauce. For some variations you could serve in a flour tortilla with a cabbage and cilantro slaw or on a lettuce wrap with avocado.

Melissa Norris is Publisher of Fish Alaska *magazine and she loves to create food featuring Alaska's fin- and shellfish.*

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Final Drift

The Impossible Hole

Story by Paul Boyce

I was fishing a riffle just above the drift-boat ramp and not doing so well when I saw Les wading downstream toward me.

"You won't believe what I just found," he shouted excitedly. "Let's go back to the lodge and get something to eat and come back out here after dinner."

We were fishing for sockeye in Alaska's Situk River in Yakutat. It was July and the days were long.

We got back a couple of hours later, parked the van and headed upstream on the Forest Service trail. After a few minutes of walking, we left the trail and dropped down into the water. It was an easy wade in the now shallow summer depth.

After a quarter of a mile or so, with Les in the lead, we climbed back up on to the river bank, crawled over a enormous multiple-tree deadfall that took some doing and arrived at his now much talked-about discovery.

It was a secluded pool, a few steps longer than a first down run and about half as wide. It was deep, with fast-moving, clear water that swirled in a counter-clockwise pattern. And it was teeming with fish—all big, and all fat and chrome.

A massive log that must have been there for a while defined the upper boundary and directed the river's flow into a narrow channel that gushed under its far end. A fallen tree at the pool's lower extreme put down a morass of tentacles that as near as I could tell were there only to entangle a wayward line. There was a spruce tree on the other side with a low-hanging branch that had been decorated like a Christmas tree with the lures and leader of previous hopefuls. It stood there in silent testimony to the lopsided odds confronting any fisher with thoughts of capturing a wild Alaska sockeye salmon here in this place.

We quickly realized we couldn't fish the hole from the upper end—the rig won't drift right. We did hook a couple but didn't land them—they just ran up under the log and tangled our line.

The locals call it the "Impossible Hole," and pretty much leave it to the lower 48ers to mess with. They just wade on past—there's plenty of good fishing up above. But I saw it as a challenge that might be doable. Les saw it as a surefire opportunity to limit out. He's a better salmon fisher than me, and much more optimistic.

After a few break-offs and foul-hooked fish, we climbed back over the deadfall and approached the pool from the lower end. Les waded in first, careful not to spook our wary prey. We had to stand directly across from the Christmas tree with our back against a sheer rock face. A quick drop-off allowed room for only one angler and kept us close to the bank. That rock face made it difficult to cast, but since the pool was so small it didn't matter that much; we just worked on getting our line out into the water without a hang-up and let the current do the rest.

Les hooked one with his first cast and just held on as it put on a display that was nothing short of a promotional piece for a sportsman's show. It jumped and twisted. It ran downstream toward the tree-fall while Les applied pressure with a rod that was nearly bent double. It leaped several more times and then got off, pulling the hook out as it exited. His second cast brought up nothing, but he hooked one on the third. This time it was a king, probably 20 pounds or more. It too headed downstream, but suddenly turned, and as we watched, helplessly, cleared the log at the upper end of the pool, easily breaking Les' 12-pound leader as it headed upriver.

My turn. It took several tries, but I hooked a nice sockeye just as my line straightened and rose in the current's swirl. I watched in awe as the big fish jumped and writhed, fighting to get loose. But he was too strong and I didn't have enough water. In my excitement I horsed him and he got away—same with the next two. I was beginning to believe this really was an impossible hole. Les took another turn and managed to land one, but it was foul-hooked and he had to release it. On the next hookup the fish jumped directly into his face, grazing his ear as it passed on to freedom.

We continued for the next few minutes with similar results, and then things began to break our way. We eventually got the drag setting right and learned how to play the fish by applying just enough pressure to keep him away from the log at the upper end and the tree at the lower. The riverbank, at the place where we had entered, offered up nice lima bean-sized gravel that allowed us to beach our fish without taking the pressure off. That was important—there was so little space to let them run we had to land them well before they were played out. Without a net it would have been a tussle to get them into hand.

In a couple hours, just as Les had predicted, we both limited. Did I mention that the locals call it the "Impossible Hole?" Now I do too—because it's IMPOSSIBLE for me not to get excited when I think about it. It might just be worth another trip up to Yakutat to fish that hole exclusively.

Paul Boyce is a retired aerospace engineer who lives with his wife in the Pacific Northwest. He is an accomplished catch-and-release trout fisherman. He fishes for salmon only when he is able to accompany son Les on jaunts to Alaska. He is the author of a fictional mystery series, The Hooks Files. *His also writes non-fiction—his most recent work,* The Call, *is a biographical account of an aged uncle's experiences during the famous Pacific Island-hopping campaign of WWII. All are available online or wherever books are sold. You can also find his work on his website: thehooksfiles.tateauthor.com.*

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