

Wild River Guides 2010 Season Report



June 26th - July 3rd, 2010

South Fork with Kenny Gangloff and Matt Bain



Without a breath of wind our float plane lifted off Aleknagik Lake and we flew west for 20 minutes. Upon emerging from a mountain pass we were looking down at Pungokebuk Lake in the photograph. We continued another forty minutes where we found the landward edge of the Bering Sea fog bank parked precisely over the pond we wanted to land the float plane in. We circled, the fog lifted and we darted in, unloaded the Beaver and said goodbye to Rick.

The portage to the South Fork was smooth. We made camp, rested, and then we strung our fly rods, Matt for the first time ever. Matt Bain would learn to fly-fish in Kenny Gangloff's experienced company over the course of 60 miles and ten thousand casts.



Some miles down the South Fork a pool forms at the bedrock bluff outcropping of Island Mountain. A large raptor nest was seen above the pool occupied by 3 large nestlings who seemed well cared for although there was no adult ever seen in the vicinity of the nest.



From well above the nest on the bluff Kenny & I got a peak view into the nest and could see an entire ptarmigan, unplucked. I have puzzled over the identity of this nest for many years. It is nearly always in use and never have I seen an adult in the vicinity? The chicks are large, surely rough legged hawk or eagle size at least, they are not mere Redtails.

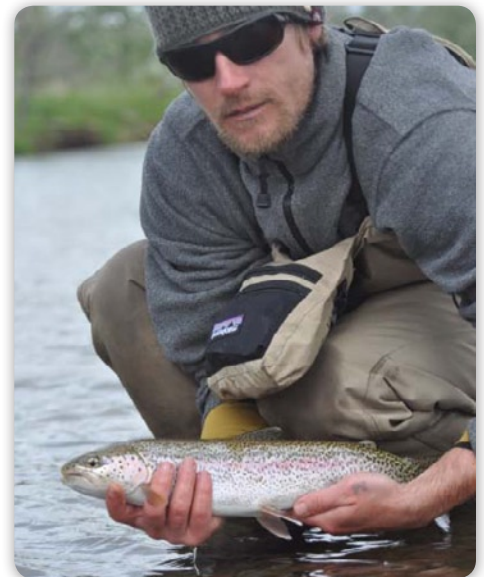


They young birds have oversize beaks, all the better to tear ptarmigan flesh with I suppose, but what species are they? Kenny and I carefully collected some photographs that later in the winter we could analyse and compare to life histories of Bering Sea region raptors.



From our second camp we watched and photographed 2 juvenile coastal Brown Bears graze in the uplands. 4 weeks from now the tundra blueberry shrubs will have ripe blueberries but now the forage makes lean grazing on sedges and grass for the young bears. They were not particularly happy looking bears, for whatever that observation is worth. Their heads hung a bit low, they were lean, seemed disconsolate. They were presumably weaned just 2-3 months past and were, we supposed, trying to figure life out without adult guidance. Still they have each other, and the companionship might be useful in this lonely land. Plus if they can eke out another few weeks of grazing then the first Chum Salmon will begin spawning and life will be swell.

Here on June 28, 2010 in the reach just below the twin bears our fishing really turned on and the daily logs became lopsided with Rainbow trout outnumbering Grayling, and Dolly Varden by a large margin, a ratio that would be maintained all the way to the tidelands.





We hoped, that by descending the river day by day we'd eventually intercept the leading edge of the King Salmon migration, as well as Sockeye and Chum. The first Sockeye of the season was spotted later today at a staging area where a major tributary enters on river left.

The chorus of songbirds from morning to night is almost deafening. Kenny and Matt and I stalked for hours with our telephoto lenses documenting tundra birdlife.



From the first through third day the "Fishing was good everywhere that we found deep river water for cover." If you consider that the higher reaches of many Bering Sea salmon and rainbow trout streams are above timberline and there is no woody debris for cover from Bald Eagles, then it follows that the fishing can be scant except where "in river" structure like deep channels, and flood scoured holes provide cover.



Natural insect feed is less abundant in the headwaters. Until salmon begin to spawn up stream one hunts for the big trout which themselves came to spawn in May with heavily weighted leeches, sculpin, and smolt patterns.

From the log of June 28: "We've come 20 miles so far and passed through the mountains onto the coastal plain. A red fox was seen from camp and a

Merlin falcon later along the river. Kenny is dialed into the trout fishery and Matt is working on his cast".

Can you imagine learning to cast a fly rod with a weighted Conehead leech size 2? Most of us learned to cast with a dry fly and then had to "un-learn" that in order to really begin to catch large predatory trout on streamers. Still most of our casting was learned under more ideal conditions. Matt is learning on big fish by throwing big flies.





The first salmon of the 2010 season was landed by Kenny Gangloff on June 29. It was a fine bright male Sockeye of eight to ten pounds among a pod of salmon in some minor holding water. He hooked it on his five weight fly rod and then all hell broke loose while it ran and jumped and porpoised and in all ways the fish really had the upper hand. Matt & I watched entranced at the thought of fresh salmon for dinner. Indeed we ate Sockeye that night prepared with fresh Ginger! Again from the log of June 29: "There were a lot of trout caught but no grayling!"

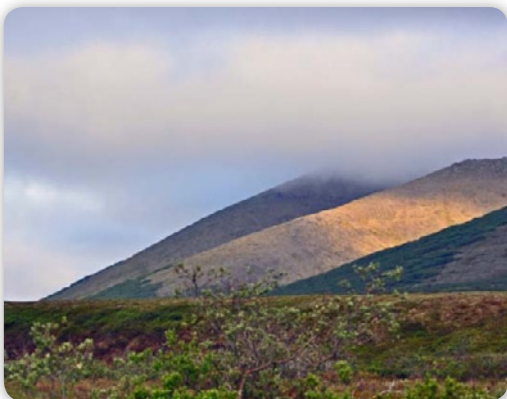


Now in the second one half of the trip, the lower river meanders like vast loops of tangled fly line across the flood plain. One casts from the raft watching the surroundings pass while mending and retrieving. We were watching the Cranes and Swans, White Fronted Geese, Green Wing Teal, and shore birds, warblers, Jaegers and terns, the list goes on. Comes as a shock, while one is casting and quietly appreciating the

beauty and the wildlife riches of the Bering Sea coastal plain that a savage Chum salmon fresh from the salt, smashes the fly. After a battle which generally runs in the salmon's favor the strong Chum were released with "thanks" that our fly rods were still unbroken by their peculiar savagery.



From the journal "Rainbow Trout being taken and released both in the common 14 inch size class and the rare 24 inch and above class. I read the journal entry for June 30, 2010 and was reminded that as we released a large Rainbow Trout it regurgitated 2 salmon fry about one and one half inches long. Kenny released trout in the 26-28 inch class and Matt as well". Kenny, the provider, continued to feed us fresh Sockeye.



Camps in the lower river are notable for the Beaver lodges nearby and the shocking rifle shot "Crack" as the Beaver slaps its tale at mid night. It is pretty humorous to see the young beaver of the year try this same tale slapping with great vigor for such a small creature. This can go on all night as does the winnowing of Snipe while they perform their aerial courtship displays. There is a small slough in the lower river, which if your not looking closely you will pass by. Here Matt & Kenny waded ashore and sight cast to dozens, perhaps hundreds of staging Sockeye, Chum, and now Pink Salmon!



Swans traded across the sky as we finished our fishing on a lazy layover day just upstream of the estuary. The birdlife was now truly coastal. Shorebirds worked the sand bars. Greenwing Teal raised broods in sloughs while Parasitic Jaegers and Arctic terns dominated the sky.

Kenny Gangloff and Matt Bain were terrific company this past summer. I'm looking forward to seeing them throwing the big streamers and hunting for carnivorous trout in Alaska again some day!