

# Wild River Guides

## 2010 Season Report



July 18th - 25th, 2010

### King Salmon River, a tributary of the Upper Nushagak with Bill and Joyce Miller

Bill and Joyce come from Great Falls Montana and both throw a fly with grace acquired from decades on their lovely Montana rivers. The Smith is their home river. They both have a sense of humor that won't quit, a quality that makes for great conversation and in addition to being fine anglers they love wildlife both large and small. The week we spent together when they weren't casting to a Rainbow trout, or Arctic Grayling we had many fine moments watching birds, in particular warblers as well as watching and photographing Brown Bears, moose and other wildlife.



We left Dillingham behind us in the infamous Bering Sea fog, and flew North East to the headwaters of one of the Nushagak River's primary tributaries, the King Salmon. The landing pond far above the treeline for the King Salmon is quite small. One has a momentary thought that "surely that is not our drop off spot, it is a mere pond." Then there was a short stretch of creek to pull the boat down and we were off on a fishing trip!

From our first minutes on the river until we arrived at camp some hours later Arctic Grayling were feeding on caddis and taking flies presented dry or drowned. We watched 3 species of mature salmon staged getting ready to spawn. They rested in the deeper channels adjacent to spawning habitat. Kings, Chums, and Sockeye were present in the headwaters in very large numbers, perhaps the most salmon I've ever seen so far up the King Salmon river. The water was high and slightly tannic but quite clear nonetheless.





Day two brought fine weather after a night with showers and we rafted, waded, and fished down ten miles of the King Salmon above the tree line. Indeed it was the last day of the fine weather to be had in the Nushagak drainage for many weeks, but that is another story! Again the Grayling fishery was stunning. Fine large specimens taken just often enough to make searching through all the juvenile fish seem productive.

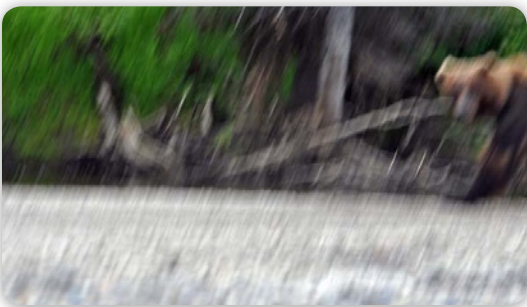
concerned.



The binoculars were consistently in use. We watched a sow Brown bear with two cubs under ideal conditions. They fed on a ridge above the river and were unaware of our presence and we felt quite comfortable from a safety perspective.

By the end of our second day I knew what a stroke

of luck it was for me to have Bill Miller in my boat. The man is an accomplished birder and has traveled the world with his binoculars. He helped me identify a couple species that have frustrated me over the years. In particular he helped me with the Alder Flycatcher. The passerines using the river corridor as we fished were Golden Crowned Sparrows, Water Pipits, Wilson's Warblers and as we passed through thickets of Black Cottonwood and various willows we added Alder Flycatchers and Tree Swallows. A Merlin rocketed past us on a gust of wind, and Bald Eagles and Ospreys soared overhead. The waterfowl on the upper river were primarily Harlequin ducks.



On the third day we awoke to the sound of pebbles clattering from paws in camp. Bill peaked out and they were paws. Large furry paws attached to a Brown Bear which dashed past camp and splashed across the river. We had an opportunity to see that individual again some hours later as we packed our raft and it wanted to pass through our camp retracing it's prior path. The timing was problematic as was

the close range of the second sighting of this bear. Had it waited 10 minutes we'd have been gone down river by raft but unfortunately it wanted to swim directly into the area we were loading the raft leaving us no graceful departure.



Furthermore the animal began tearing at logs and roots while staring at us in a display of aggression and started across the river again despite our large and verbal presence directly in it's path! A warning rifle shot from 15 yards was fired and it gave the bear some pause while biting the log to reconsider. Without any sign of fear or submission the animal slowly sauntered upstream and out of sight. That was the end of our contact with that bear and indeed the remainder of 2010 went peacefully as far as Bears were concerned.



We passed through the Spruce treeline and with that the nature of the river changes dramatically. With the trees comes woody debris like root wads in the river, which creates scour holes and more defined channels from high water flooding. The fishing changes from Grayling predominately with some Rainbow to Rainbow predominating with some Grayling which is how it fishes for the lower two thirds of the river. Along with trees come log jams which create tremendous habitat for fry to rear in and for "Old Growth" trout to remain in deep cover.

The downside of log jams are the challenges to raft navigation involving not a little risk to boats and passengers. We passed through the uppermost jam safely and expeditiously but we wonder how bigger rafts than our 14' boat could make it without completely unloading the raft and portaging in stages.

By day four, July 21, 2010 past the midpoint of the river now while the rainbow fishery was "turned on" still it was clear that something was amiss with the Chum Salmon spawning which on tributaries of the Upper Nushagak is generally is well underway by mid July. We had rafted past thousands of Chum on the upper river without seeing neither active spawning nor any carcasses of spawned of adults. Generally the chronology of the spawn has the peak of spawning in this 3'd and 4'th weeks of July. The Chum carcasses provide a bounty of protein for bears of course but also the salmon and trout fry which are rearing in the rivers sloughs, logjams feed on the flesh.



As we passed down the river we spent time watching Brown Bears and were entertained. We watched a sow with 2 cubs of such divergent size that we considered it likely that one was an adoptee. We watched from a distance but she eventually saw us and the family swam across the river and disappeared into the forest. The single large bear fishing up stream was likely a male. The river depth was unseasonably

high and we believed that from the bear's point of view the salmon fishing was very tough.

Signs of another type of interaction between brown bears and a different prey than salmon were before us as we rafted below towering cut banks of clay, sand, and gravel soils eroding at the riverside. In this case we noticed that without exception every large cut bank had brown bear tracks up the near vertical bluff faces where generally near the top of the bluff we saw the recently excavated nests of bank swallows. It is a surprise to see how big an impact the bears have on swallow reproduction. If I had to guess I'd venture that this year bears have taken more three quarters of the nestlings. In other years the banks are typically full of swallow nests with the head and beak of the nestlings showing.

From the field journal "We arrived at the big log jam in the lower King Salmon river late in the day. It created problems for us because we had just come amid a rich fishery of spawning Chum attended by Rainbow trout that we didn't want to pass while we were searching for a gravel bar to camp on. Complicating things is that the rich salmon fishery above the jam was the focus of intense Brown Bear fishing effort and every gravel bar we examined was crowded with fresh bear tracks and partly eaten carcasses. We passed through the log jam taking the river left channel in the early evening for a fine multi acre gravel bar without active bear use. Again the complexity of the big jam was an issue. Over the years it has grown more complex and one wonders if first time Do It Yourself rafters will know to take the left channel versus some of the other alternatives which could lead to grief.



From the journal "Bill and Joyce are real troopers. It was another hard day of travel again with lots of weather exposure and tired casting arms. A fresh Sockeye Salmon was captured for dinner. It is super nice to be with good naturalists. Today we saw the first dead Chum carcass that was not entirely consumed by bear" The summer is shaping up to be tough on bears!

On our final day, having rafted a full 60 miles since put in we now floated, waded, and fished the rich lower river where the King Salmon were paired up and digging redds. The fishing was quite good for large Rainbow Trout which were released and a fine Dolly Varden Char killed for supper. Cooking over the coals that night I reflected on how adventuresome my guests Bill & Joyce were. I would like to be as active in my 7'th decade as they are!



When 24 hours later, we heard our pilot line up for the approach, we were packed, and ready for the next adventure!