

# *Wild River Guides* 2011 Season Report



August 23rd - 30th, 2011

South Fork, Dick Fulton & Al Baldrige



From the log of August 23, 2011: Dick Fulton, Al Baldrige and I awoke to frost in Dillingham and discovered autumn had arrived. Flying outbound we looked down at the changes in the color of the tundra plants as they cured from green of summer toward yellow and orange. The weather was fair for flying, with a forecast cold front approaching with moisture later tonight. We portaged and made a secure camp in the lee of a small island with shelter from the wind. Travelling light and fast we had made terrific overland progress and got into the fishing right away.

From the log: "Water level is high and color is clear. Willow leaves are turning gold. White Fronted Geese are feeding on blueberries on the tundra out in front of camp. Arctic Grayling, Dolly Varden Char, and Coho caught and released as the sky turned overcast and the cold front arrived bringing a cold rain. Dick and Al have known each other for several decades. They've shared many, many Elk hunting, Steelhead fishing, and river rafting camps together. They own drift boats and rafts and know the rhythm of river travel and I was happy to let their cheerful banter fill the airwaves as we shared the work of bush travel.

The following morning we awoke to wind and rain and carefully broke camp with a special emphasis on keeping the tents dry. The water level had come up six inches from the rain overnight and was

more olive in color. We floated, dragged the raft a bit across shoals, fished and watched the alpine landscape scroll across the horizon as the raft moved by. A Brown Bear was grazing blueberries mid-slope on the small mountain range called the Tetons.



The river fished well with two dozen Char released along with some Rainbow, Grayling, and Coho. At one point, near the evening camp “Dollies & Grayling began rising like mad” when the weather turned fair. Both streamers and egg imitations fished well, with beads as the most productive option. 2 sea bright Char were set aside for dinner.”

It’s worth noting that the summer salmon spawn is over for the upper river. There were no mature salmon seen for the first three days and yet beads/ egg imitations were really the most outstanding fly. When beads are working it’s hard to argue about whether they “should” be working because they don’t match the hatch. It will be weeks before the Coho spawn but the fishery remains revved up on spawn. We would see some late spawning Chum in the lower river. The Kings, Sockeye, and most of the Chums other salmon are gone. Their bodies are reduced to flesh now, joined with all the leaf matter, woody debris, and other detritus in the biomass.

The adult Char that will spawn later this autumn (in October) were exquisitely pigmented. For the next several days the catch records recorded the Dolly Varden Char far outnumbering other species but the Coho numbers would build in subsequent days to eventually dominate the lower river catch. Grayling are an upper river species. Mid river through the lower river, ever greater densities of Rainbow are recorded in the log.



From the log of August 25, 2011: “Barometer 29.35 and rising. Very cold last night with clear skies. In the large salmon pool at our third camp Dick & Al took turns rowing the empty raft and casting to rising fish. “Al took his first fish ever on a dry fly; a very fine 19 inch Arctic Grayling. We had some nice conversations with local Yupik Eskimo villagers who were picking Blueberries and hunting Caribou.” Also noted: For the first time all summer we put up the “Bug

Net” for our dining area. The wind and cool temperatures which minimized the biting insects all summer gave way to a warm, calm evening notable for the no-see-um hatch!”



We passed through the mountain pass that gives access to the lower river along the Bering Sea coastal plain. As we did the family of 4 Merlins who reside there raised a territorial challenge and gave a fairly spectacular flight show. They engaged a neighbor family of Magpies in what looked like aerial combat, something like a “dog fight” alternating with “Tag. You are it!” during which, (honestly I know this is anthropomorphic but I also know ‘fun’ when I see it) the Magpies seemed to be having a great deal of fun. The “play” amounted to Magpie harassment by the Merlins But. Whether it was play, or war, or territorial aggression, it was done in great spirit as we passed by. Looking downriver to the west and north the horizon seemed endless and flat. Nothing showing besides a river fringe of golden willow and flocks of geese in a vast sky.

From the log of August 26, 2011: “ Al began to fish the “Mouse”. Once one starts to have success on Rainbows with the mouse it’s hard to change flies, even though the man next to you is catching 2/1 two fish on beads for every one you hook on the mouse. But we know mouse fishing is not a “reasonable” pursuit. We do it because it is fun!

We took a lunch break at a “staging area” on the lower river where dozens, perhaps hundreds of sea bright Char hold in the drop off below an extensive riffle. The area was discovered many years ago by Pete Speer and looks unremarkable. This afternoon, Dick casting beads, demonstrated that the staging area held enormous numbers of Char plus an enormous Rainbow. Casting the mouse at the same water was not so spectacular, yet Al did take a couple Dolly’s on the mouse. All day geese moved urgently between various feeding grounds in the tundra. We moved down river.



August 28, 2011: “Fair weather, lovely, hardly a breeze. No-see-ums a bit ‘pesky’ ...Tons of Char...many Rainbow & every mile more Coho.” Eighteen Coho released by Dick & Al and one retained for dinner.



Two men who loved the outdoors and who really know how to 'live the dream' would return home to prepare for Elk and Steelhead season tomorrow. We loaded the floatplane for the final flight off the river and looked beyond the flocks of geese at the golden tundra landscape we were leaving.