

Wild River Guides 2013 Season Report



July 29th - August 7th, 2013

Disabled Fly Casters and Army Veterans on the Togiak River

A week with Warren MacDonald, who fly fishes from his wheelchair, and with Nick Watson - disabled Army Ranger / founder of Veterans Expeditions, and Dick Watson, his father - a Vietnam Veteran.



From the trip log: "Some hours we passed through schools of salmon and Dolly Varden Char and other hours we fished through a pristine river devoid of fish but full of beauty. We travelled in all kinds of weather and that felt like we were earning our place among the wildlife on the landscape, as only those who live exposed out in the elements, can earn their passage. Some days we saw a

powerboat from a fishing lodge or from Togiak Village and they gazed at the wheelchair lashed on our raft and raised a hand of greeting.

I knew within seconds of meeting former Army Ranger Nick Watson that his outlook on life and his good attitude about challenges would help make our fly-fishing expedition a success. As he deplaned in Dillingham I reached out to shake





his hand and was amazed at what he handed me! Oops I should have remembered that it was his right hand that had been re-shaped by 6 surgeries.

The partial hand that returned my handshake was strong and calloused and the human face above it smiled saying that he was pleased to meet me. His father, Dick Watson, reached out and crushed my hand saying that he'd fished for Striped Bass all his life in New England and was excited to learn to fly fish with his son for salmon and trout.

Down the hall rolled our third angler, Warren MacDonald on an all terrain wheelchair. Warren is a "double- below the knee- amputee". He had a big grin upon arrival and while we headed to the baggage claim I told him that I was surprised at how he'd deplaned

so quickly. I couldn't mentally grasp how he'd descended Dillingham's old-fashioned aircraft stairs, which are like those used on DC 3's in the 1950's, as fast as the other passengers. He explained in a very understated manner that he appreciated the flight crew's offers of assistance to transfer him to an aisle wheel chair and help him down the stairs but that he'd maneuvered down the aisle and then the stairs using his arms, torso, and the stumps of legs. He said it takes him more time explaining to various airport agents how he could manage it by himself -than it takes just launching down the stairs.

I wondered how well would Nick do fly fishing with one good hand and how Warren would manage with no legs and how would Dick Watson learn to fly fish after a lifetime of bait



fishing in the salt? None of those answers were clear at first but as the week passed the group's fly-fishing and wilderness travel success built upon ten thousand bits of technique. The other question I pondered is: will fly-fishing grow and evolve with the participation of these disabled anglers and Army veterans? By participating will they change the sport?

Dick Watson returned from his tour in Vietnam while I was still in high school in the early 1970's and he spent the next 30 years building a steel fabricating business in New England.



Within an hour of landing in Dillingham we found ourselves asking Dick if he could repair Warren's wheelchair where metal fatigue had caused the chair seat to fail? His answer was "Of course I can fix it. Have I got access to some materials and tools?" So to keep the expedition moving forward Dick went to work on repairs that will probably last the life of the chair. That was just the first instance where Dick and the other participants "welded" the trip together using technique brought from their life experience and adapted to the challenges of Togiak River travel.



Our fly-fishing objective was the Togiak Wildlife Refuge where we'd raft and fly-fish 60 miles, nearly the entire Togiak River. We planned to camp using alpine mountaineering tents for shelter and we would share the workload among the group. We had a strong team. In addition to Warren, Nick, & Dick: three of my experienced Alaska fishing instructor / guides had volunteered for the trip plus Patagonia Fly fishing Ambassador Dave McCoy. All eight of us were eager to pack up and get underway. We discussed the challenges that Alaskan weather, and floatplane flying through the mountains, plus changing river water levels might pose for our group. We felt prepared for the challenges. However there was one element still not addressed.

Warren's legs were amputated from a backcountry accident in Hinchinbrook Island several decades ago leaving him with very short leg stumps so that no fly fishing waders could fit. Team members Brian Malchoff and Dave McCoy looked at my collection of Patagonia waders and selected a pair that Warren proposed to radically alter for a custom fit.

After trial fitting, then by trimming part of the wader legs off with scissors, and working with various waterproof tape products Warren put on re-purposed waders which he felt would keep him dry and were tough enough that he might be able to "walk" using them to protect his stumps on gravel bars.

At Togiak Lake, in the heart of the 2 million acre Togiak Wilderness, we began the adventure. Our weather was spectacular. From the floatplane we saw Brown Bears, Moose and Bald Eagles as we neared Togiak Lake. We unloaded the plane, rigged rafts, strung up fly rods, built a camp, and caught



a Coho salmon and an Arctic Char for dinner. Beer was cooled to river temperature sipped while Loons were laughing on the lake. We had arrived.

Nick, the former Army Ranger, is probably “constitutionally incapable of complaining”. He has full use of his left hand and partial use of right hand. Nick learned a “serviceable” fly-cast through hours of practice at Togiak alongside his father. But fly line management was a challenge for him with only one functional hand. Think about fly-fishing one handed and try your own experiments next time you are casting. Embracing the challenge, by week’s end Nick had figured out how to make the casting and line management process work and took the largest Salmon of his life and countless sea run Dolly Varden Char.

Dick Watson talked of retiring soon from a lifetime of lifting and welding heavy steel. He spoke reverently of gathering with old buddies each week to surf cast chunks of bait into the Atlantic. Dick was the angler who I thought would have the toughest time learning to fly fish. Indeed Nick and I had considered the



prospect that he might not be able to master the elements of fly-fishing! We wondered if we should pack a spinning rod as back up? We were so wrong! Dick was resolute. He learned steadily building on each day’s experience. In fact he was so passionate about the sport that he fished from dawn to dark, from the day we arrived at Togiak Lake until moments before the floatplane picked us up at the end.

Warren MacDonald’s amputated legs might seem like a barrier to expeditionary fly-fishing but when you hang out with outdoorsmen of Warren’s caliber you come to understand that they’ve already excelled at so many challenges that they just take it “in stride” and create solutions as challenges arise. So he began his fly-fishing career by redesigning his waders and rebuilding his wheelchair and then he pushed out into the current and began to cast.





There were fish caught. Lovely fish! Rainbows Trout, Arctic Grayling, and Dolly Varden Char. There were Chum Salmon, Coho, and Sockeye.

As the Togiak river unfurled before us there were bald eagle chicks on the nest and mink scampering along the shore with fish in their jaws. Arctic Terns screeched when we rowed past their island nesting territories. A mother brown bear and her cub stripped the

flesh off a salmon while we passed the binoculars back & forth. One afternoon when the wind was fierce and we were searching for a camp in the lee of a sheltering bluff a Gyrfalcon swept past us hunting sandpipers on the wing.

Fly-fishing evolved over the centuries because it's been infused with the genius of creative individuals who adapted new materials and techniques to an ancient sport. This week Warren, & Nick, & Dick took up Alaska's Wilderness fly-fishing's challenges.

Perhaps when Dick Watson is back home in New England he'll consider the fly rod for native Brook Trout or his beloved Striped Bass. Nick and Warren who live in the Rocky Mountains have thousands of miles of creeks, rivers, and alpine lakes in their back yards. I have no doubt that they'll each take the techniques learned on the Togiak and adapt to the fly-fishing challenges ahead of them.

We want to thank John Merritt and Jamie Ferry for their generosity. Without those two passionate fly fishermen this type of experience for disabled anglers would never, ever happen. This program, funded entirely from John & Jamie's generosity, is five years old and inspires anglers to dream about Alaska. We also thank the lodges and guides in Bristol Bay who meet disabled anglers on the river and stop to chat and share fly patterns. All of us thank the disabled anglers who've participated and supported this program with suggestions and advice. You are an inspiration for everyone in the fly-fishing & outdoors community. Thank you Veterans



Expeditions <http://vetexpeditions.com/> , Paradox Sports <http://paradoxsports.org/> , Warren MacDonald <http://www.warren-macdonald.com/> , Patagonia <http://www.patagonia.com/us/ambassadors> , for inspiring us to go on expeditions into the unknown. Thank you Dave McCoy for the photography and fly fishing expertise <http://www.emeraldwateranglers.com/>

