

Wild River Guides 2013 Season Report



August 18th - 26th, 2013

Uncharted Alaska Film with RA Beattie and Crew

I could have said “no!” when filmmaker R.A. Beattie called and asked “ Mark can you help me get footage of trophy Rainbow Trout, Coho Salmon, and Northern Pike taking top-water flies? He added “and we’d like to film on one of the Alaskan rivers that no one but you has access to?” Several mental alarms began firing off. Alarms ring when Alaska bound angler requests “dry flies.” Top-water dry flies for both Rainbow Trout and Coho / Silver salmon could only mean late August when the Coho are in good numbers. In August it can be tough to locate Pike. Late August means stormy weather. Challenging weather equals tough floatplane flying and rugged camping conditions. Supporting filmmakers means carrying huge camera cases, and solar charging panels, plus heavy batteries, tripods, booms, cranes and things that don’t fit in rafts. This would be nearly impossible. No No No No No!



R.A. also asked if we could film on a nameless river that he and I’d pioneered when we were younger and crazier. He wanted a river with complete wilderness solitude, where his sound track would be clean. A place far from jet boats and aircraft. He requested a particular Bristol Bay river which required “a certified portage from hell” to get the rafts & gear in to. And then he dropped the atomic bombshell. The person he wished to film fly fishing, who was the participant at the heart of the film script had never before had a pair of waders on, had never been to Alaska, had never camped in a wilderness, and lived on a tropical island in Mexico. No No No No!



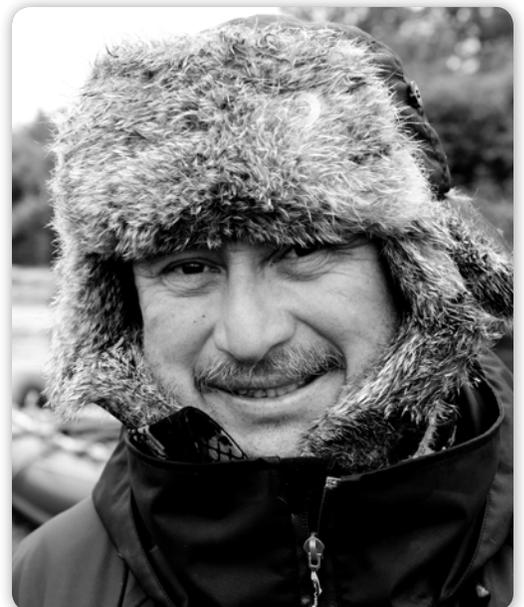
Late August found the Mexican angler and five of us trying to pare the weight down of the camera gear, rafts and fly-fishing equipment into two loads of 525 pounds per load. Floatplane performance would be critical. Floatplane take offs and landings would need to be flawless on a tiny pond deep in the boreal forest. My aircraft load scale showed that we had two hundred pounds more equipment than our pilot was comfortable with. With long faces we removed our favorite fly rods from the load, our personal SLR cameras, and our extra clothing. We took out ½ of the food, much of the kitchen, and all of the beer. We left ½ the tents and ½ the stove fuel. The pilot said

he'd try to get one planeload into the pond but not to count on the other because the weather was very sketchy. We ultimately refined the gear pile and built 2 very, very light Dehavilland Beaver loads to go airborne on an ambitious fly fishing trip with the most uncertain outcome that I'd undertaken this year.

We flew through murky rain showers and low ceilings toward a little landing pond. There we were dropped off and began to portage the awkward, heavy camera gear to the river where maybe, just maybe we had a chance to film a week of top-water angling. The heavens opened up and dumped on the anglers as they slogged through the marsh and forest with mind numbing loads. The enormity of the undertaking "got real" very fast. Afternoon gave way to an evening of suffering under cruel loads carried through thigh deep bogs. Evening darkened to gloaming, misty dusk with the group huddled on the riverbank with anaerobic muscles depleted of glycogen, bodies soaked in sweat and rain, legs cramped with Charlie horses. Gel shots and Gatorade, salami & cheese were some relief. Then fly rods were strung up and at 9:30 pm we pushed off into the current looking for any kind of habitable island or point of land to bivouac upon.



Alejandro Vega Cruz, a broad shouldered man with a fine mustache is well known in Tarpon fishing circles as "Sandflea" but I am not a very worldly Tarpon fisherman and really had no idea who Sandflea was beyond his reputation as a flats guide with a magnificent double haul. What kind of person leaves home on the Yucatan Peninsula where he has spent his entire lifetime wading barelegged to put on long underwear and Gore Tex rain gear in sub arctic Alaska? Knowing the weird stunts that film people were doing these days, in the vein of reality TV shows like "Survivor" I wondered if Sandflea was being



set up to fail? Failure might make good film but my reputation, my life's work, and my business is to undertake expeditions, which I believe, will succeed and have a good margin of safety built into the plan.

What convinced me that Sandflea was going to be able to survive and convinced me to take the risks with the portage and the unknown river was the complete devotion that each of the participants had for Sandflea's welfare. From the moment I reconnected with R.A. and was introduced to the participants Ryan Buccola and Mike Dawes I could see that they adored Alejandro Cruz Vega aka Sandflea. As we spent days in diligent preparation I knew that whatever happened, their team was tightly bonded and they knew each other strengths and weakness.



On the river that first night we worked by headlamp to create a camp and gauged the river water rising up around our little island. We ate pasta and crawled into our sleeping bags at 1:00 am. I'm relatively sure none of us had worked so physically hard to get to fishing for a very long time. I was exhausted. But I also felt at home in this taiga landscape and comfortable in the river landscape among the wildlife, the Brown Bears, Moose, Caribou, and migratory birds. For the others possibly, the all night drumming of rain on the tents, the soaking wet gear, and the large bear tracks could have seemed alien and alarming.



Mike Dawes president of WorldCast Anglers, stepped off the airplane in Dillingham, extended his hand and said "Hi Cuz!" We'd never met but indeed we are cousins who inherited the "fly fishing



adventure gene" from a common Dawes. Some Dawes were notorious centuries back so our common ancestor lived and survived and produced offspring somewhere in America's wilderness. Mike's passion for adventure travel with a fly rod is legendary and is matched by his ability to row rafts on wild rivers of the American West. As he sorted gear it was clear that he'd be a strong participant. We enjoyed each others company and the discovery of a family connection lost several generations ago.

Ryan Buccola, a renowned steelhead spey caster from Bend, Oregon towered over me and grabbed my hand at the airport. My very first impression was "Wow this guy will be able to carry a huge load on the portage!" In that respect he did not disappoint, indeed he overachieved. As the week

progressed I watched him work selflessly supporting R.A. as an accomplished assistant cameraman and supporting Sandflea as Alejandro struggled to adapt to the cold and damp Bristol Bay weather conditions. By trip's end I knew Ryan as an extraordinarily perceptive compassionate hard working man whom I will gladly share a fly fishing camp anywhere on the planet.



R.A. Beattie grew up with video camera in one hand and a fly rod in the other. He's toured three films on the Fly-fishing Film Tour and received 4 film awards from the Drake. As a younger angler he'd pioneered and filmed two never before fished streams in Alaska with me under extremely difficult circumstances so why did he want to come back to the mosquitoes, the windblown rain, the rivers full of doubt with their dark tannic waters, the uncertain bush flying, and furthermore why with me? Why after the torture of our prior trips didn't he just hire a lodge with a fleet of floatplanes and dry cottages for this film?



From the Log of August 21, 2013: "Travelled 7 miles by raft with Mike Dawes & R.A. The river meandered between bluffs and boreal fringed wetlands with off color tannic water. The weather was cool, misting and showery. They fished hard, casting mouse patterns and streamers, and took Arctic Grayling and Dolly Varden Char, enough fish to make it interesting. After dinner several large Rainbow Trout were taken on mice along the bend of the river in front of the kitchen. The river channel, is full of partly submerged and overhanging cottonwood trees. Sandflea caught a very, very large fish, an extraordinary trout, with a red stripe the color of port wine. Screams of joy and huge hilarity ensued and perhaps R. A. captured some of that."

From the log: “The water was so dark with coffee colored tannins and rain runoff, reflecting the dark stormy skies that it looked black. Mike Dawes took a nice Rainbow on his first cast with a deer hair mouse in some very tricky water around a log jam and later Sandflea took a Grayling on the mouse and we filmed a Rainbow make two more attempts at his mouse.” We decided to layover for the day and let our bodies recover from the portage.



That afternoon I felt “beaten” from yesterday’s portage and so I napped and others did too. When we woke the sun had peaked out and a fly tying session got underway. The goal was for each of the 4 participants, Sandflea, Mike, Ryan, and R.A. to each tie a single fly from materials they collected during the trip. Some of the tying materials were new to me. Mustache hair made good wing and tail material but only if you were Ryan Buccola and had enough beard. A .45

caliber cartridge casing, a piece of “Oriental Snack Mix”, and some foam earplug material from the floatplane pilot were used as participants created original flies. But of all the fly tying material I’ve ever seen employed none was as weird as the sleeping pill capsule that Sandflea used for the body of his fly.



As we rafted out of camp on day three Sandflea took a huge Rainbow. I am sure that out of pure excitement I was screaming like a pre-teen girl and I think others were also. In any case I hope that soundtrack of my voice can be deleted. As we passed downriver the fishery grew stronger. From the log of August 23, 2013: ”Mike Dawes, deep wading, netted a great Rainbow Trout out of a complete ‘Hell-hole’ log jam of spruce debris while Sandflea held on to his belt for safety.

Alaskan guide Brian Malchoff captained the second raft and he recorded 2 dozen Grayling, 5 Rainbow Trout, and 4 Dolly Varden Char in his log as they explored. We camped at days end just a few yards away from a very active Sockeye spawning channel full of Char, Grayling, and Rainbows. Large numbers of fish were released. This reach of the river, with spectacular fly-fishing, was worth the epic effort to get here.



Near us was a grizzly bear scarred spruce tree where passing bears have stripped the bark with teeth & claws and scraped their backs leaving behind clumps of bear fur. Biologists know these bear rub trees as scent signposts where passing bears advertise their presence on the landscape. There was enough grizzly fur harvested for several future flies!

The “One Fly” contest was epic! Brian Malchoff was appointed judge and adjudicator. Each contestant was allowed 5 casts. For the full story you will have to see the film. Sandflea’s sleeping pill fly took first place for the number and quality of the fish taken but the competition was incredibly fierce.



I fished with Mike Dawes and Sandflea on August 24. From the log: “They are the two most accomplished anglers that I’ve ever fished with. They cast relentlessly into the thick cover these Rainbows inhabit and vast numbers of streamers were lost, hung up in logjams but equally vast numbers of trout, char, and Grayling were released.” When one watches a true expert “on point” all day long casting side arm under overhanging branches and one realizes what an athletic endeavor these guys are engaged in. They never let up on the pace of firing casts into the wood except when getting out to eat a quick lunch and then wade and cast some more. Alejandro thoughtfully retained a Coho for dinner and then that rarest of salmon was taken. They took a “jack Coho” in a slough across from camp! Jack Coho are so much rarer in Bristol Bay rivers than Jack Kings. I think I’ve only seen a handful in 34 seasons whereas I see Jack Kings every season. This Jack Coho hatched in this river in February 2011 and spent the year drift feeding on midges and plankton and avoided becoming a meal for an Arctic Tern. Then it migrated to sea just months ago in June 2013 and returned this autumn after just 3 months in the salt as a 14” inch fully mature male salmon. Nature is magic! The log notes that. “1 lonely Greater Yellowlegs was seen along with 1



Spotted Sandpiper all day. I wonder if they are weak individuals, which didn't have the energy stores needed to migrate with their family members? All the other sandpipers had departed. Flocks of geese were heard at bedtime"



The following morning Sandflea upstaged all his previous exploits. He stood atop the seat on the bow of the raft to get more height while Mike Dawes positioned the boat in the slough we'd taken the Jack Coho last night. Sandflea spoke enthusiastically to the salmon, "Come on baby you can do it" while casting and skating the pink pollywog. A fine Coho was landed on the "Wog." Stripping the fly and teasing the fish a V wake would rise up and he'd say "I see you!" Sometimes 2, 3, 4 and 5 "V" wakes at a time behind the dry fly were filmed.

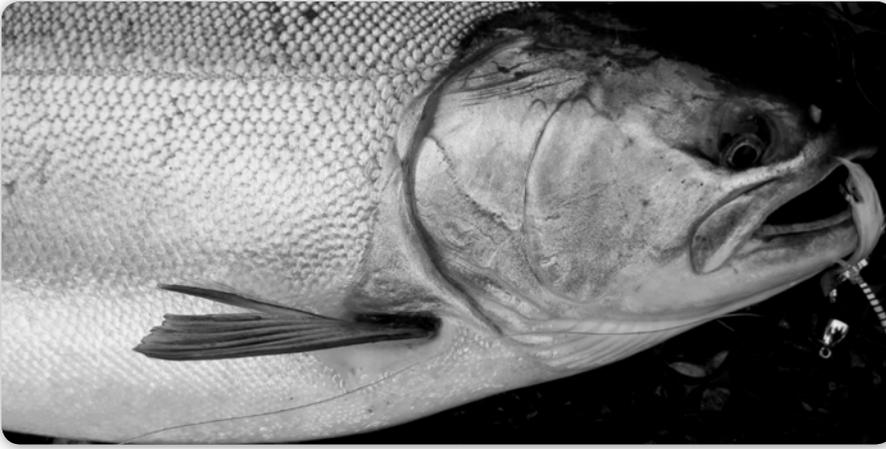


I began to relax with the knowledge that some of our film goals were accomplished. We'd filmed a great many Rainbows on the surface, we'd had some bonus top-water action for Dolly Varden Char, and now with 2 days of filming still ahead we were taking Coho on dry flies. That left only Northern Pike to film. But unlike George W. Bush on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln I wasn't ready fly the "Mission Accomplished" sign until we deplaned safely in Dillingham. There was plenty that could unravel on the remaining wilderness trip if we took our eyes off expedition objectives.



I fished with Ryan Buccola and guide Bryan Malchoff on our last full day of filming. When we passed down the final miles of the river we stopped at the mouth of a slough for R.A.'s boat to catch up. After

this point our boat would depart downriver to search for Coho while R.A. rowed up into the grass flats of a shallow flood channel to try to film Northern Pike taking mouse patterns on the surface. Later when we were reunited at our final camp he reported filming 40 surface takes. That should be entertaining to watch!



Down in the lowest reach of the river we found Coho staged, waiting for their bodies to sexually mature anticipating the spawn in a few weeks. They rested behind logs and in depressions in the river bottom. They were arranged in quiet water inside the river's powerful current. The wading was perfect

and we completed our filming mission. Our final hours were spent releasing as many Coho as one could want, more Grayling than imaginable, and enough Rainbow to keep it interesting.

Autumn was by this point far progressed and the Willow brush was turning yellow and Birch trees beginning to flame red. The blooming Fireweed, Lupine, and wildflowers of summer were long gone while the Cranberries were perfectly ripe. A Caribou bull swam across the river in the evening as we settled down and resigned into our tents. The final log entry reports: "The sound of gentle snoring fills the camp."

If you read this account and have developed the idea that Mark Rutherford might help you gain access to some "unreachable" water in the Bristol Bay region, he recommends that you discard that idea. As he told the pilot, "Never again! That portage was Hell." Still there are some wild rivers that beckon, aren't there?