

# Wild River Guides 2016 Season Report



July 19th - July 26th, 2016

## Main Fork Goodnews River Fly-Fishing.

The peak of the King and Sockeye Salmon runs with Scott Alderman, Mike Preacher, Troy McClelland, Henrick Vermcrantz, Johan Hansson, Peter Wedar, Joe Vacante, and Ben Jones

Late July is known in the Bristol Bay region for great Sea Run Dolly Varden Char and Rainbow Trout fishing with four species of Pacific Salmon in the rivers. The wildflower bloom is erupting around us on gravel bars and the tundra river valleys are rich and verdant at the peak of seasonal productivity. Most of the snow has melted off the peaks and the wildlife viewing can be exceptional.



### From the log of July 19, 2016

The “weather gods” blessed us with good outbound flying weather and we got the floatplanes through the mountain passes into the alpine headwater lake without delay. One’s arrival at Goodnews Lake is always majestic whether you have been there before or it is your first time. The lake is nestled in the Ahklun Mountains, a range of alpine volcanic peaks and the vast landscape can alter your perception of distance and scale.





“We inflated the rafts and navigated our way through shallow low water gravel bars characteristic of the headwaters for about 3 hours and made camp in the early evening. The anglers fished egg imitations (Trout Beads) dead drifted through pods of Sockeye and so began a night of fly-fishing began that can only be described as “Epic”.

Everyone caught and released fish until they were depleted. Henrick released a beautiful Lake Trout taken many miles from Goodnews Lake. Peter Wedar released a massive King Salmon taken on a Trout Bead and also caught the first Chum of the trip. Mike Preacher wrangled up his first Sockeye Salmon and Jack King. Ben Jones and Joe Vacante released a lovely Sockeye each plus lots of aggressive Sea Run Dolly Varden. It seemed that everyone caught enough fish to satisfy their craving for fly-fishing action and now the group craved sustenance. Chef Pete served a big dinner of fettuccini with a nice red sauce, a green salad, paired with a fine (Black Box-ed) wine.

After dinner the Washington State Trio of Scott, Mike, and Troy hiked upstream with their fly rods. We could hear their laughter late into the midnight sun as the old friends explored. Some good Grayling and Rainbow Trout were reported from that excursion.



### **From the log of July 20, 2016**

On our first full morning afield, after a granola breakfast and lots of coffee, we set off by raft to see what the river would offer. The Char fishing proved to be incredible as we cast in and around the beds of spawning Chum and Pink Salmon. We cast from the rafts and progressed down to a big bluff on river left finding good numbers of Char and a huge pod of spawning Sockeye. Troy hooked a big bright Sockeye on his 6wt that danced acrobatically before putting it in the net.



Day two was a strong day for wildlife sightings and we passed two immature bald eagles presided over in the nest by one of the adults. It's incredible how massive these birds are within their first months of life.

Aubrey's boat crossed paths with a cow Caribou. As soon as it got their scent and spotted the raft she trotted briskly off



across the tundra then up the ridge. She was silhouetted on top of a 150' bluff against the canyon walls before departing.

The fishing mid-day exploded! Many large Dolly Varden were released, most over 18" and some over 22". Several Sockeye were hooked and played as well as some large Chum Salmon. Scott brought a nice 20 lb King Salmon to hand after a proper battle. Then we entered the Canyon, knowing we still had a long day ahead of us.

Late afternoon we stowed the fly rods to let the oars-men and oars-women make up some miles as a light rain fell on our wading jackets. After an hour hard rowing, nearing the end of the Canyon, at a rocky bottleneck of richly striated rock we saw two Great Horned Owls roosting in the Cottonwood trees across the river. The lead boats radioed back to Aubrey's boat to alert them of the sighting.



The radio message must have been garbled because what Aubrey thought she heard was "Grayling in the trees". This was the start of the mythical Great Horned Grayling story that changed with each telling! Later in the trip we got more opportunities to see and photograph Great Horned Owls.



We made camp that evening in a rain squall and got the Kitchen wing up for shelter first. Some anglers ventured up stream to explore the thick Char beds ¼ mile above camp. In Joe's succinct report of the Dolly Fishing from up river, "The Fishing definitely didn't suck." We enjoyed several pan-fried Char in fish tacos as everyone sheltered under the wing. Scott spotted a Brown Bear across the river that we viewed for several minutes before it caught our scent and hightailed it into the brush. It was a fine wildlife sighting to put a cap on an incredible day.



### From the log of July 21, 2016

The Characteristic misting and showering Bristol Bay cloud cover stayed with us, but the anglers developed various techniques for drying wet clothing. Some hung socks on internal tent drying lines while others placed wet garments in or on sleeping bags to utilize body heat. In any case we all started off the day dry, and eager for adventure.



We began taking Char in the early morning but as we passed downriver mile on mile we noticed a drop in Dolly Varden Char numbers. We had steady enough fishing but we struggled to put larger fish in the boat. We'd now passed downstream of the main Char "pre-spawn staging habitat". This happens with all the migratory species be they Salmon or Char. One finds them in seemingly limitless abundance and then 2 or 3 days later one passes out of their favored habitat and then we need to adapt to a new fishery. Our anglers changed techniques and found success throwing streamers with their 7-8wt rods to Rainbow Trout.

We moved along watching the Alaskan landscape scroll past at the rivers pace. We reached a large tributary where the incoming flow acted as a spark of life. Just above the confluence with the tributary Mike took a fine Rainbow Trout that was holding deep in some woody debris of collapsed Willows or Cottonwood. From the mouth of the creek, Ben released a beautiful 24" Char. Some hiked up the creek but nothing notable was reported.





We fished downriver and set up camp on a big open bar opposite a Bank Swallow colony of nest tunnels in the clay bluffs. It was early in the day and the Washington gang waded across to explore the Swallow bluff and found impressive numbers of blueberries. With Aubrey's help they collected one-half a gallon in hardly anytime at all.

It was a great night for a campfire. Everyone pitched in collecting firewood while chef Pete prepared a spectacular Pizza dinner. We ate pizza by the fireside and laughed and shared stories.

We had a visitor during dinner. On the opposite bank a Red Fox attempted to make a meal among the Bank Swallow nests.

He bounded up and down the bank as the furious swallows circled around. His or her pursuits seemed unsuccessful but made for a great show of vulpine athleticism.

5 anglers waded over to the Swallow bank after dinner where a small reach of submerged woody debris created a fish holding habitat. It was reported that Rainbows would come up to eat mouse patterns. We went to sleep dreaming of what the next day might bring.



### **From the log of Day 4- July 22, 2016**

The morning was overcast and we rafted downriver while searching for fish and arrived at a slough with good numbers of Sockeye and Pinks. Anglers were targeting Salmon this day but sight fishing was a challenge with overcast skies and we were satisfied picking up a smattering of Salmon including some Jack Kings and Rainbow Trout. After lunch we passed through the Wilderness Boundary of the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. In the pool below





the Wilderness Boundary, we found good numbers Sockeye and Pink Salmon and several double hook up's occurred.

The challenge of that afternoon was to find a "dinner fish". The numbers of Dolly Varden Char were diminished from earlier in the week so that meant we needed a Sockeye, that notoriously fickle "lock-jawed" Salmon. Brian, Aubrey and John's boats were already in camp leaving Pete in the "chase boat" to bring home the bacon. Pete's boat finally hove into view, with a beautiful bright male Sockeye. It was reported that Mike Preacher took the oars "in the clinch" to guide their boat to a successful hook-up.

At camp the Swedish angling group discovered Alaskan "Cloud Berries" which they instantly recognized from their experiences in the Scandinavian northland. They harvested enough for everyone. It was really interesting to consider the many environmental parallels that could be drawn from Sweden to Alaska. So much of the flora and fauna were similar. For experienced birders and outdoorsman like Henrick, Johan and Peter it meant we had some very keen eyes with us. Shortly those keen eyes paid off in ways that none of us would forget.



Peter was scanning the landscape with his binoculars and spotted movement downriver. Mammals were moving on the

next gravel bar downstream. There were several Wolves that had not caught our scent or seen us yet. At first, two grey adults and one black adult were seen but then we realized that there were also three puppies in the pack. We sat and watched them for over 30 minutes as the puppies played and we all shared Peter and Henrick's binoculars. It was a very special- some said "spiritual" experience to see the family of wolves behaving naturally in the wild. In the evening we sat by the fire and watched a double rainbow at the end of an memorable day.



### From the log of Day -5 July 23, 2016

Fresh out of camp the fishing was hot for Chum and Pink Salmon near a little creek outflow below camp that we know as “KoHa” creek. It was a streamer morning for most anglers but never easy fishing. It took focus. Henrick released two kings before lunch. Scott released another healthy king. Joe landed a nice Arctic Grayling during lunch followed by a nice Rainbow Trout and a Pink Salmon.



The afternoon proved fruitful for Rainbows and there were times where your fly couldn't touch the water without being gobbled up by those ravenous residential predators. Fishing for Dolly Varden Char was tough but several migrating fish were caught that were just right for the skillet. Just above Barnum creek we explored a small slough. We fished it with sink tips and Johan came tight to a nice king Salmon.

In camp Mike led the Charge to dig latrines before some stormy weather blew in. The rain came fairly heavy that evening and we hunkered down under the kitchen wing to enjoy dinner and then most of the anglers turned in early. It was a challenging day of fishing in low light conditions that humbled us all a bit. We would see what tomorrow might bring.

### From the log of Day 6 July 24, 2016

By now all of our participants were adept at packing up their gear quickly and efficiently beginning our day on the river. Within the first 100 yards below camp we began to catch Rainbow Trout. We then pulled into a big slough on river left awash with Sockeye and Ben roped into a monster Sockeye that made his drag sing.



The Rainbow fishing remained quite strong. Peter released a lovely trout while fishing in Aubrey's boat and Mike took a nice once as well. Troy caught a beautiful leopard pigmented Rainbow! Just before lunch, Henrick caught a very nice Sockeye.

By this point, most anglers had caught 3 or 4 of the 5 species of Salmon that occur in Alaska. This is not something we see on



every trip. The King Salmon run was notably strong as was the Sockeye run so that gets an angler 2 of the 5. Our Bristol Bay Pink Salmon run up the rivers only on even years north of the Alaska Peninsula so 2016 was a Pink Salmon year. Pinks are a ton of fun when bright from the sea and feisty and are not shy to take a fly. So that gets an angler to 3 species. This year the Chum returns were diminished but with some luck each of our anglers took 4 species of Salmon that week. The 5<sup>th</sup> species, Coho or Silver Salmon don't reliably show up until August so that is where we stood. A great week of fishing with good numbers of Rainbows, vast quantities of sea run Dolly Varden Char plus lots of Salmon.



We targeted a lower river pod of Kings that were rather uncooperative and fishing characteristically slowed after lunch but the afternoon was a beautiful clear sunny Alaskan day and in camp it was warm enough for a swim. At each camp our Swedish friends rigged their long Switch and Spey rods and we enjoyed watching them swing flies in the pools in the evenings.



As we shared stories from the day we watched Peter come tight to an acrobatic Sockeye just as our chef was cooking the Sushi rice so we enjoyed some of the freshest Sockeye Salmon Sushi any of us had ever had. We sat by the fire together as a magical sunset washed over us before we called in a night.

### **From the log of Day 7 July 25, 2016**

Some of us slept-in a bit on day 7 knowing we had a lower mileage day ahead of us and our departure downriver was relaxed. We started down the river with streamer rods in hand and arrived at the "Coho Carousel" named for the roundabout raft circuit we make later in the season when the Coho are thick. One floats while casting down along the bluff on river left and hooks up while the oarsman rows back across to river right lands the Salmon and then in a back eddy rows back up to drift the left bank again. This carousel motion gives us multiple shots at pods of Salmon. Almost any angler who has fished the carousel when it's on fire will remember it for the rest of their life.

In this case the carousel has loaded up with aggressive Pinks, Chum and Sockeye. Brian, Aubrey and John's boats circled through many times with double anglers hooking up on a variety of hot



Salmon. Pete's boat had been delayed upstream scouting a potential new channel and as the rest of us slowly moved out of the carousel to find new water, Peters boat came into view.

A clamor of noise erupted from guide Pete's late arriving raft. Looking upriver we watched Mike Preacher complete his Alaska Grand Slam by catching the first Coho Salmon of the year and his (5/5) fifth of five species of Pacific Salmon! This is always an occasion worth celebrating and while Guide Peter Jaacks hooted and hollered to exclaim the arrival of the season's first Coho, Mr. Preacher was quietly satisfied. Humble but satisfied.

The rafts moved down river to a reach of water where fast moving riffles pour off a gravel bar into a deep trench which can be great holding water for Salmon. Scott stripped streamers across the current and landed a beautiful Sockeye that we enthusiastically retained for dinner. The rest of the gang rotated through catching Chums and Pinks and we took lunch on the bar there. Smoked Salmon and crème cheese and crackers tastes absolutely perfect in a Salmon rich setting like this.





We continued downriver and as the afternoon passed the anglers took the occasional Pink and Chum Salmon. Johan from Sweden summed it up when he commented after the trip " My personal highpoint was sight-fishing for Salmon on the last full day on the river. We drifted over fish and could see the silvery fish go for the flies through the crystal clear water."

We now were just a few miles above the brackish estuary and these torpedo shaped Salmon were strong and bright and full of fight. We made camp in the early afternoon with plenty of daylight for fishing.

Ben and Johan hiked upstream catching bright Sockeye Salmon. For dinner chef Pete served up a delicious Salmon curry served over Jasmine rice. We ate by the fireside savoring the moment and watched a Moose on the opposite bank.

Some sipped beers or had a glass of wine by the fire and traded stories of the week that had just transpired. It was without a doubt a special week for everyone.



### **From the log of Day 8 July 26, 2016**

In the final moments before the floatplane arrived Mike Preacher looked back at the mountains and said, "its like each one of these mountains are my friends, I will remember each of them." We loaded up in the floatplanes and set a course toward civilization while looking at the river below thinking about all the fish and wildlife and landscape that we left behind.

