

# ALASKA'S WILD RIVER GUIDES

## *2019 Season Report*



August 30th - August 30th, 2019

Kanektok River Fly-Fishing Expedition



**A group of experienced Bristol Bay anglers assemble for the “Season Finale” in the last week of August.**

**From the trip log of August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

The day began with a true alpine start and a 6am breakfast. We departed for Shannon’s pond around 8 where our gear was weighed and divided into balanced planeloads. The first planes took off by 9:40am under cloudless skies, but as we approached Pegati Lake a low fog hovered over. The pilots circled to scout the landing and passengers spotted two Bears fishing in the river. Mike was able to land in a small clear patch but Rick was not as lucky with his timing. He circled the lake for several minutes before an opening appeared on the north side of the lake where he was able to land. The group unloaded and the pilots headed east to pick up the rest of the group.

The second planes landed around 12:30pm. After unloading we discovered an interesting fish decaying on the shoreline. Mike had flown for Fish and Wildlife for a

number of years and we deliberated about what it could be. After proper documentation and a post-float visit to Fish and Game, it was identified as a Burbot, a deep dwelling coldwater fish.

John J. headed downriver with Malone and Margaret to secure our first camp. While still in the headwaters they spotted a Harrier and the first Bald Eagle of the trip. Malone couldn't resist throwing a mouse as they rowed past tantalizing water. John told him he would not stop pushing but Malone threw at the shores and picked up some nice Rainbows in transit. They made it to the camp bar in three hours and Malone searched for more species. He switched to a streamer and was able to hunt down and land his first Coho. Margaret rigged a rod promptly and sight cast to several nice dollies before the other boats joined them at camp.



When the other boats arrived, the team made short work of unloading the boats and setting up camp. Almost every angler was a returning guest to WRG and knew what needed to be done. This was the start of Dick's third week in a row with us and he had secured a permanent position as the "pole holder" during the Wing set up. Dick is a smart man and he realized that the sooner the wing was setup, the sooner he would be able to sit under it and enjoy a glass of wine.

Christine joined Margaret and fished by her daughter's side and caught several dollies and a Rainbow. Rich caught multiple dollies and claimed that he had caught



more fish in 30 minutes than he did all of the previous year. John Gormley landed a nice 20 plus inch Rainbow to cap off the first evening. It was a beautiful day with high sun and light winds, which was uncharacteristic for late August in Alaska. John cooked up a pasta and sausage dinner paired with a fine red wine. It had been an early morning and the anglers were ready for bed not long after dinner.

## From the trip log of August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

While most of us were acclimating to the morning chill from a clear night with our first cups of coffee, Brian spotted a 4-5 year old Bear walking out of a dry channel and up the opposite shoreline towards camp. He was close - about 30 yards away. We made sure to make lots of noise to dissuade him from crossing the river to fish on our side. He moved 20 yards up past us and grabbed an expired Chum Salmon before moving back into the brush.

We resumed our breakfast and broke down camp with all guests eager for their first full day on the river. We were still in the headwaters, just 10 miles from the lake and the low water made the river into a proverbial bone yard. We picked our way through the shallow upper sections looking for greener (and deeper) pastures. We passed a large tributary that increased the size and depth of the river, where a private raft party that was camped and cooking breakfast.



After the tributary, the fishing for Char turned on and notes from the captain's log reported that fishing was "reasonably epic". It was estimated that the group caught over two hundred Char during the day. At this point in the season many of the dollies had been in the river for over a month and were exhibiting beautiful spawning colors. Their skin looked like a painted canvas of vibrant oranges, reds, and pinks. Christine also landed a nice Rainbow Trout on a bead before lunch. As an added bonus, we spotted several Bald Eagles and Harriers hunting near to the river. Margaret caught the first Grayling of the trip, a nice 18" fish.



We passed a huge mountain illuminated by the early afternoon sun and stopped for lunch to enjoy the views. Dick, found and caught some nice Coho just below our lunch spot. Malone waded up the side channel and sight cast to char in shallow water. Jim and Michael Curci caught fish at the lower end of the bar.



In a different side channel, we found spawning Sockeye after lunch. Intermixed in the vibrant red bodies lay dozens of char waiting to feast as the Salmon dropped their eggs. Rich and Malone walked up the channel, using the gurgler and got to witness aggressive char breaking through the surface to eat the floating fly. Margaret and Christine targeted char between the Sockeye using beads.

Malone reported catching three Coho and John Gormley caught a huge Dolly on a bead. The day was absolutely perfect with no clouds and a high of 68 degrees. We set up camp at a bar we had called Pete's Peak for the great views of a striking peak which Pete had hiked several years prior. Margaret, Christine and Dick relaxed with glasses of wine and appetizers. Michael Curci set up his 11-foot Euro rod to fish around camp and Charlie gave him some helpful instruction. We enjoyed Sockeye fish tacos for dinner while gazing at the vast landscape that surrounded us.

### **From the trip log of August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

The morning started with the sun reflecting off the river and a few patchy clouds. Because the group was made up of returning anglers it was impressive to watch the precision of everyone working together to get breakfast and break camp. We pushed the rafts off at 9:30am onto a shallow flat. The fishing started off strong for Dollies and Rainbows.

As the lead boat came around the first corner from camp, a Brown Bear was spotted in the river. He saw the descending rafts, grabbed a fish out of the shallows, and disappeared into the brush. The char disappeared as the rafts neared a deepwater bluff and the bead rods were swiftly traded out for heavy streamer rods.

We spotted a big pod of Coho at the head of the pool. John Gormley and Michael Curci doubled up on the first pass. Rich, Malone and Jim hooked Coho out of the same pocket.

John Gormley and Michael Curci had good "mojo" while fishing for Salmon. They both caught three Coho out of the lower whirlpool hole before lunch. Christine and Margaret also pulled several Salmon out of the same hole. Dick caught the biggest



Rainbow of his life while fishing with Charlie in the morning, estimated to be over 24 inches. While the guides set up lunch, the anglers kept fishing and Margaret caught three Coho out of the hole right in front of the group.

On this day, we typically go through a “jungle section” following lunch. The river changes each year and we have to scout our path to make sure we are floating the best channel. At this point in the season the water was lower than it had been all year, which dictated our path through the overhanging vegetation and submerged trees. The guides navigated and Dick stuck another big Rainbow in a woody section. We watched a Rainbow try to eat John Gormley’s fly twice, which was fowled, so the fish eventually found Michael’s fly and also a sharp hook.



While navigating a small channel we spooked a small Brown Bear and spotted a Merlin and Harrier in the same section. The animals were active in the afternoon. John Gormley also caught a nice Rainbow while fishing flesh through the channel. We pioneered a new camp above our traditional Falcon Bluff camp with comfortable sleeping gravel. Michael Curci rigged his Euro rod at camp and caught char. We cooked “Riverside Pizzas” with various toppings, paired with a fresh salad and red wine. It was a long day for the anglers and most went to their tents after dinner. Malone went for an evening hike to look for Salmon and came back with stories of holes that were just out of his reach. We made a plan to target those spots from the boat in the morning!

### **From the trip log of August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

After breaking camp we rowed to check the fish Malone had spotted the night prior but found no action, so we pushed down to Falcon Bluff. Mixed Salmon moved through the hole at the end of the bar and we hooked several Coho. It was becoming clear that we were seeing Coho in different spots without water high enough for them to hold in traditional sloughs. We changed our techniques and the team had success targeting different water. Bright flies with



dark contrast were successful in the morning for Coho and Michael Curci caught a nice Rainbow before lunch. The morning overcast turned to a nice warm 60-degree afternoon with partly cloudy skies. We stopped for lunch and refueled. John Gormley hooked a nice Coho on a bead as the rest of the group ate.



We pushed down river through big woody meanders and Margaret landed a nice Rainbow and a big chrome Dolly while fishing with Brian. After lunch we found a big slough where everyone came tight on Coho. We checked some other non-traditional water and Dick, Christine and Malone caught several Coho out of skinny water. The group continued down river and we came across the spot where the

fish counting Weir spans the river early in the season. When it is in use, anglers are not allowed to fish 300 feet on either side of it. Because it was not in use we found plentiful Coho in the river. Everyone caught fish and Jim hooked one noteworthy large Coho.

The upper section held fish in deeper water but it got shallow so we decided to push downriver. Malone showed off his competitive rowing skills while challenging the guides to a race on open water. We checked a few more spots on our way towards camp and found more fish. We preach to all our guests to always keep your fly in the water and you will catch fish. Dick showed us a prime example of this while he was taking in the landscape and a hungry Rainbow fired out and ate his fly. It was a happy accident in the late afternoon.



We reached camp without a dinner fish so the anglers headed back to the river to catch char for dinner. Malone borrowed Jim's rod and caught five in several minutes that Brian filleted. The morning winds had died in the afternoon and the no-see-ums found our camp. We chowed down on the fresh char with pasta and salad and everyone enjoyed eating their dinner, using the smoke from Greg's fire as a refuge from the bug attack. We saw a young bear up river in the late evening and the no-see-ums gave everyone a good excuse to head to their tents a little early.



## From the trip log of August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019

We woke up to a warm day with light overcast skies and found several good Coho holes in the first miles. Greg and John slid their boats to the edge of a small slough as the sun emerged and illuminated a tight pod of fish in the shallows. The anglers made casts into the school and watched them devour the flies. Michael Curci pulled a few nice fire engine red bucks out of this pocket and Jim got a nice bright hen. Halfway through the morning the group spotted a Brown Bear feeding on a fish in a side channel.



For all the people out there who have misconceptions about brown bears, we are continually reminded that the Bears are on the river for the same reason as us, the fish.

We had less mileage to cover, which allowed us to fish slower and alternate between Coho and Rainbow fishing. The Coho run felt a little late, but the Trout fishing was stronger than average for those throwing flesh and streamers into the woody debris. Just before lunch we passed through the Wilderness Boundary of the refuge, and not far below it we found a pocket for everyone to catch Silvers. After passing through the Boundary we thought we would see more jet boats although most of the operations were shutting down for the season.



At lunch we compared success stories from the morning and got back on the river with full bellies and new ideas to experiment with. Jim and Michael Curci hooked over 20 Rainbows on flesh in the same boat and landed at least a dozen. Malone and Rich did well in Charlie's boat on Coho and Rainbows. They took the majority of their Trout while throwing black and white streamers into the wood. Christine caught a very fat football of a Rainbow on a streamer with Greg. The lead boat saw a Bear in the afternoon inside a dry channel above Camp. We made camp on a protected bar that kept us out of the wind and rain so we could enjoy our fresh Coho Salmon dinner.

John Gormley had the angling bug and his desire to fish was so great that he was the last one on the river that evening. John later shared a highlight from his evening fishing.



He saw a fish jump and moved down the gravel bar to target it. He made one cast and hooked, fought, and landed a nice Coho by himself. It's a great feeling to catch nice fish with a guide's assistance, but to take the tools that you've acquired and apply them on your own can provide great satisfaction. John sang Malone's praises for showing him where to fish. The group heard this story over dessert as we all sat under



the comfort of the wing. Hot chocolate and peppermint schnapps generously donated by Christine and Margaret made for a warm treat to accompany our ginger snap cookies. We shared laughs and stories from the day and took advantage of interludes between the rains to get cozy in our tents.

### **From the trip log of August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019**



Waking up to a chilly morning with a beautiful sunrise set a positive tone for the day. As we warmed our hands with hot tea and coffee and a hot oatmeal breakfast, the sound of jet boats pushing water down stream was present. The majority of the boats were either breaking down for the season or heading for the lower river. One of the nice things about a float this late in the year is that many of the tent camp operations have shut down for the season and it leaves the majority of the fishable water by only our anglers.



The captain's log stated, "Coho fishing was very good throughout the day." On days like this with steady action for big fish, the memories start to blend together and it can be difficult to appreciate each fish we catch.

The day started off on a positive note and the first few sloughs that we hit had Silvers in them ready to eat flies. In the mid morning, the sun came out and illuminated the fish on the river bottom. Rich fished a Mouse pattern and successfully got a few bows to come up for his fly. John J commandeered Margaret's rod and proved that he could fish lefty. He was able to successfully cast, hook, and fight a Coho using his left hand. Michael Curci and John Gormley fished together with Greg and had fun doubling up in side sloughs.



The sun was high by the end of the day. We hit a few spots before looking for a camp and Margaret was able sight cast to a big pod of fish in the deeper hole where we were able to watch the cast, eat, and fight through the gin clear water. She and Rich both pulled several fish from that hole and Rich reported landing at least a dozen Coho throughout the day. Malone and Jim floated past in Brian's boat full of smiles. They

scouted one last slough and discovered a small Pike motionless behind some woody debris. Despite Malone's best efforts, the fish was uninterested in eating. We don't see many Pike in the river although they are a native species.

We made camp with bright skies and light winds. It was "sushi" night and we enjoyed the spoils of another fresh Coho from the river. Everyone ate their fill, finishing off with Joe-Joe oreos for dessert. John Gormley hiked down bar and continued fishing after dinner and when he returned to camp we all enjoyed a beautiful sunset. We still had another full day on the river and we went to our tents eagerly anticipating the morning.

### **From the trip log of August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Late in the season we reach a point where the Coho migration is in full swing and fishing becomes phenomenal. The summer of 2019 was dry overall and the fish were undoubtedly late due to the water levels. We felt as if we had been waiting to reach the big migration of fish we expected at this time of year and on the final day we found numbers we hoped for. Every boat experienced doubles on Coho Salmon and we had our highest numbers caught in a single day all season.

Brian has been an educator at a prep school, outside of his work as a guide for eight years and has had the opportunity to teach a lot of bright young kids. One of his former students took a position guiding at one of the lodges in the Lower River. They had been in touch via social media and finally got the chance to connect on the river that morning and chat about the season. It's always nice to see a familiar face in the middle of the Alaskan bush.

Rich started off the morning red-hot. The fish crushed his fly while Malone experimented with floating flies. It is a goal for a lot of people to catch a Coho on top



water. There's just something exhilarating about watching a V-wake appear behind your fly before jaws breakthrough the surface film and suck the fly into the depths. Malone worked hard at it and was able to get fish to eat his pink wog fly.



Jim and Dick hooked a few nice fish just above the lunch bar while fishing with Brian. Margaret and Christine fishing as a mother-daughter boat had a very productive morning on Coho. The ladies must have pulled a dozen fish out of one pocket. When they hauled off and the guides started to set up lunch, the fishing went to the next level. We were fishing a non descript soft inside deep seam. Everyone was catching fish but the girls were there first and must have doubled up five times during the time John and Greg were preparing lunch.



In the afternoon, we passed by Alaska West who had shut down for the season and Dick smashed a few Coho out of the hole just above their camp. Malone lost count of how many fish he caught during the day but after lunch he put his rod down and rowed the raft for Greg to catch a few fish. We estimated that Margaret and Christine landed over 40 Coho combined during the day. Dick had a great day with Brian and exclaimed that this was the type Coho day needed to satisfy his appetite for Alaska for another 10 months before his return.

We came into camp in the early evening and the guides set camp up while the guests relaxed with a glass of wine in hand. John and Greg prepped dinner while Charlie and Brian waded across the river to hit a seam and caught a few more Silvers. It made for a nice spectacle for the rest of the group to watch the guides catch fish as the group feasted on appetizers. We had salmon curry for dinner with salad and naan bread and enjoyed the warm evening. Malone rowed Brian and Rich across the river after dinner and the rest of the group watched as they landed more fish. It was great evening entertainment for us, accompanied by one last dram of Christine's peppermint schnapps with hot cocoa. Julius from Reel Action Lodge stopped by to introduce himself and chat about the weather and river conditions before heading back downriver. It was an action packed day and we were all exhausted from catching so many fish. We broke down our faithful fly rods and called it a night.





### **From the trip log of August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

We arrived early in the morning in the Village, broke down our gear into organized lines and were picked up by Carl. He transported us a few miles from the Marina to the Airstrip where he dropped us on the gravel Tarmac. We had some issues with our initial charters and it was a long day of waiting around using our resources to try to get planes to Quinhagak. The Cessna

caravans that we had chartered were grounded and restrictions were put on IFR flights due to a presence of volcanic ash from an eruption on the Aleutians earlier in the week. We re-provisioned with goods from the Quinhagak store and made quesadillas, grilled cheese with sautéed veggies and rice for dinner. We all piled into a small house on the Tarmac and unrolled our sleeping pads for yet another night sleeping on the ground, but we did have a roof over our heads and indoor plumbing as an upgrade.

### **From the trip log of August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019**

We woke up early, hopeful for more favorable weather but the morning turned into afternoon and it was another very long day of waiting around trying to get planes to us. We were finally able to get all the guests and Brian out on a Cessna Caravan back to Dillingham. A Piper Cherokee from Dillingham landed late in the evening and was able to get Greg and his gear out as well. After the day on the Tarmac we were able to get almost everyone back to Dillingham where they would be able to catch flights to Anchorage, and eventually their final destinations.



Charlie and John spent the remainder of Labor Day weekend in the Quinhagak house meeting people passing through the village, playing Backgammon and orchestrating logistics to get them and the gear transported. On Day 11 they arranged a Caravan to bring them back to Dillingham with enough time to get Charlie a shower and a couple of beers before making it onto his scheduled flight. It was an interesting end to a season and left everyone with a good story to tell. While sitting on the Tarmac waiting I think everyone's minds migrated back to the river, holding big, strong, wild Salmon and beautiful Rainbows and remembering that this chapter in the journey was part of the adventure.