

# *Wild River Guides*

## 2012 Season Report



July 6th - 11th, 2012

### Togiak River Expedition from Lake to Estuary. A Paradox Sports Trip With US Army Veterans.

The pilot circled an island where the aqua blue river flowed out of Togiak Lake. He asked if we thought the gravel bar below could work as a camp? An hour earlier in Dillingham, Alaska we'd carefully loaded the floatplane with a wheelchair modified for off road travel, a whitewater raft, and provisions for a weeklong trip through the Togiak Refuge Wilderness. Travis Snow, a paraplegic outdoorsman looked down at the island from an airplane evaluating some challenging terrain.



On that afternoon in early July three disabled U.S. Army veterans\* with a passion for the outdoors sponsored by Paradox Sports, embarked with Mark Rutherford and Oliver Merrill for a fly fishing expedition. We would raft and fish the Togiak River from its headwaters lake to Bristol Bay estuary. We planned to camp six nights on gravel bars under the midnight sun, and with some luck take great fish on the fly.

We chose the Togiak because it is a major Alaskan Salmon spawning river contributing to the world class Bristol Bay salmon fishery. It is a destination for knowledgeable fly casters from around the globe. On average 20,000 King salmon and 200,000 Sockeye Salmon return to spawn in the Togiak plus tens of thousands of Chum, Coho, and Pink Salmon. We would see no other rafting groups. We also chose that river because if we had a serious medical problem, there are several places on the Togiak where a floatplane could land for a medical evacuation.

At the end of several months of planning we were a team of 5 committed to the trip. Our arrival timing was good. 7000 Sockeye Salmon had migrated past our proposed camp in the prior 2 days according to Fish and Game staff nearby. Eric and I unloaded the wheelchair with off road tires, set it up in the gravel, then helped Travis get to his wheel chair on the beach.



Travis and Sean had never fly fished, although they had loads of conventional fishing experience. So we knew there would be a learning curve with the fly-casting.



After some riverside casting instruction the two new fly casters were hooked on the rhythm of the sport while Eric Ortegren with fly-casting skills honed on the San Juan River near his home in New Mexico went right to work. Sockeye Salmon and Arctic Char were holding in the eddy seam below our island camp where the Togiak River exits the lake. Sockeye also known as “Red Salmon” or simply “Reds” are rarely “easy” to hook and frustrate the fly caster by refusing the fly more often than not. In the roadside waters of the Kenai Peninsula for instance, Sockeye are deliberately snagged or “flossed” in untold thousands. That was not our objective. We presented the fly correctly and took salmon that peeled out of the holding water to strike. Mastering the “dead drift” with a Sockeye fly pattern and the “swing” of a bunny strip leech didn’t happen immediately but hour-by-hour and day-by-day the catch rate increased. By weeks end the group had taken most of the major game fish species in the Togiak; King Salmon, Sockeye Salmon, Chum Salmon, Arctic Char, and Rainbow Trout on the fly!



Day one ended with spectacular midnight sun at the outlet of Togiak Lake looking at snow capped peaks. Red salmon fins showed in the current and brilliant white Arctic Terns with blood red bills dove into the water eating outbound salmon smolt. Loons cried in the distance. Fillets of Char and Sockeye were cooked with soy and ginger and pasta. Only one thing was missing, sleep. Sleep was not a big part of our experience for a few days until we acclimatized.

We fished and rafted through the week and settled into a routine for our wilderness travel. We’d eat and break camp by mid morning. Fish and float until late afternoon. Then make camp on a gravel bar beach choosing the best possible gravel conditions for a wheel chair to negotiate. Ask anyone returned from a week rafting and fly-fishing in Alaska and they’ll tell you that the camping has to be done right because it’s an important part of the experience!



The participant's strengths and weakness' would partially define our group's success facing challenges in the wilderness. How the guys coped with their physical challenges would be critical. How we solved our interpersonal challenges and performed, as a team when travel got tough would be important too.

Eric Ortegren brought strengths that made the team stronger inspite of the damage that a mortar shell had done to his spine. Countless times when Travis needed a "lift & carry" to his wheelchair Eric was there to serve.

Sean Bennett compensated for what rifle bullets, surgeries, and skin grafts had done to his left arm. Sean was the guy we looked to when heavy work needed to be done, especially dragging rafts and setting them up as windbreaks.



Travis Snow had developed tremendous upper body strength since loosing the use of his legs. He was constantly working side by side with other team members moving gear from camp to rafts, filleting fish, setting up tents. Plus Travis' arm strength powered his casting through long hours of entry-level practice. As a group we would work with each other's physical limitations until it became a pretty seamless effort.

We considered that PTSD might be a challenge and we discussed it prior to the trip. I can't speak for other veteran's trips but I can say that for our group we dealt with each other's abilities and disabilities and we coped with the challenges as they arose.



We travelled down the Togiak River valley in a tundra landscape essentially void of trees between ice carved volcanic mountains and glacial hills. Open, treeless, Tundra allowed our eyes to wander free of the river channel. We saw the "bones" of the land, the sharp mountain ridge tops and the glacial moraines. As the rafts maneuvered down river, we prospected for Salmon and Char with fly rods. A cloudy haze gradually obscured the sun on the second afternoon creating the halo effect known as a sundog that forecast the arrival of a

weather front in the next 24 hours. Lenticular clouds gradually formed over the high terrain. After two days of sun we'd deal with other weather forces.

On night two the immediate challenge was to find a gravel bar of sufficient size for our tents in the upper Togiak River. We finally found a gravel bar that worked for us. Indeed it not only worked as a camp but Arctic Char hung in the current, took the fly, and Travis filleted two fine 18" fish for dinner. We hunkered under the camp fly as thunder storms roared in the peaks behind us and dinner cooked. We were sheltered. What would tomorrow bring?

Cold and windy. Eric cast all day for Char, Grayling, or Trout without reward. It was one of those days early in the season when the river seemed devoid of life. It is not uncommon that a bunch of early Sockeye will be at the headwaters lake and then the upper river will have only pods of migrating fish. Today the fish showed us no love. The air was cold, and the water was cold, and we became cold. We scouted for a camp that would give us protection from the coming storm and I was introduced to the military concept of a "Fatal Funnel"!



We watched a brown bear swim across the river as we unloaded our rafts at days end. The bear was departing the general area that we proposed to camp in. We always scouted prospective camps for tracks and bear trails and gave consideration to placing the camp out of harms way from bears and also out of harms way from weather. There lies the problem. In a Bristol Bay or Bering Sea storm one wants wind protection and that is found behind a screen of Willows. But out of consideration of Brown bears we did not want to camp

in brush that provided cover for the "enemy" and so Olly & I were educated on the terminology "fatal funnel" and we found it descriptive for a situation we'd been dealing with for many years.

A "fatal funnel" in military terms is the most dangerous portion of a "doorway" or entry into a space where a soldier is vulnerable to attack or ambush. On gravel bars in Brown Bear habitat our discussion hinged on the fact that Brown Bear use flood channel "corridors" behind a wall of willows as travel pathways. At this camp we needed some wind protection provided by the willows but there was a "door" opening through thick brush right next to our proposed camp from a flood channel corridor. That door leading into camp could be a bear "funnel" and how we camped in relation to it was the consideration. Our options were that we could camp entirely in the protected leeward corridor and have the safest situation in a heavy wind storm or we could camp exposed on the gravel beach and have the most "defensible" camp from Brown Bear or choose somewhere in between.



It was instructive to travel with military professionals who considered the hazards of wilderness travel in Bear country from that perspective. We carried Bear Spray, took precautions in and around camp, and had a terrific time-sharing the country with the mostly unseen bears. The following night we spent on a gravel bar at the mouth of a tributary river and saw the tracks of a really large, I hazard to say enormous, Brown Bear. Tracks the size of which I see only once or twice each year. Generally the largest bears are quite rare and disappear from the rivers entirely when boat travel commences in late June and indeed these tracks were weeks old. Bears, which are that large, retreat and live secretive lives on the smaller salmon tributaries and mountainsides where they are unmolested.

We travelled down toward where the Ongivinuk River and several other small river tributaries enter the Togiak. Below a small island a slough formed with “soft water” and a place for migrating salmon to get out of the current. We could see salmon “porpoising”. Travis was fishing one of our favorite Sockeye Salmon flies named the “Copper Swan.” His rod bent over hard when a salmon struck and for the next 10 minutes he battled his first large Salmon. He had dreamed about coming to Alaska and catching his first salmon since he was a boy and now he was making that happen. The fish came to the net finally and we were all thrilled for him. Later in the trip when he’d caught many more salmon he’d refine his tactics to manage the fly line, to keep the fish out of the logs & debris, to use the power of the rod efficiently but for today, the excitement of the first salmon of his life was powerful and we all were happy to be part of it. That evening at camp he wheeled his chair out into the river current as far as he felt safe and worked on his cast and hooked and landed a gorgeous sea bright Dolly Varden.



The fishery slowly changed from the upper river with resident Arctic Char and Sockeye to more and more Sockeye, and Chum Salmon, a sprinkling of Dolly Varden and Rainbow Trout, although Rainbows were relatively rare. Each day saw more and more salmon caught and released. On the fourth day, according to the log, Eric took more than 11 Sockeye and Chum Salmon, 2 Char, and 1 Rainbow. One of the guys killed a chrome bright Sockeye for dinner that night!

For a fly caster new to Alaska, as the abundance of salmon increases, so does the pleasure fighting large fish and as one’s experience with large fish grows one’s competence with the whole process grows until toward the end of a week it seems almost easy. One “reads” the water, and casts where you believe fish are holding, hooks up like it is meant to be. But for Sean Bennett, our team member who lives in Alaska and has caught all these fish before, hundreds of times, for Sean the motivation and the reward were different.



Sean, who will carry scars from combat in Afghanistan for the rest of his life, came not for a chance at “the trip of a lifetime to Alaska”. He is an Alaska resident who came specifically to add fly-fishing to his outdoor skill set. He already is an accomplished Alaskan outdoorsman. He started off at Togiak Lake on day number one putting together a functional cast. He loaded the fly rod and “shot” line rather than the fancy false casting which many of us were taught as dry fly fishermen. Sean cast in a “get it done fashion” and from the beginning caught loads of fish. There is a lesson there: fancy casting is not what it is about. Success on these wild rivers will come with a “serviceable” cast that delivers the fly. Then the work begins to fish it deep and keep fishing it deep. I won’t deny that a double haul cast is desirable for Sean or any Bristol Bay bound angler but it is way more important that the fly be working deep by any means available than that the cast be lovely.

We’d planned for foul weather and we got foul weather. Still we had the right team and so we fished through the wind and rain each day. Then we set up the most storm proof camps that we could devise in the late afternoons. Each evening we ate salmon, Arctic Char, or Dolly Varden on the beach behind a windbreak or under the “wing” that serves as roof for our kitchen. Stories were told.



On the lower reaches of the Togiak the flow of the water slowed and spread out across many channels and islands. The vast flat flood plain resulted from thousands of years of floods depositing sand and the nutrients from millions of salmon carcasses. The lower river didn’t inspire us with grand vistas the way the view at Togiak Lake did but the lower river was full of fish and sublime in a different way. Tree Swallows skimmed above the river ‘hawking’ Caddis. Bald Eagles perched in overhanging Cottonwood Trees. Arctic Terns dove into the river emerging with smolt in their bill. Big gulls fed on salmon carcasses. The riverside vegetation was lush.



Now at nearly every slough and below each island I’d look around and count multiple fly rods bowed with heavy salmon or char. The guys had the casting mastered and the long slow drift, getting the fly down and keeping it deep. I spent the final day with Sean. Sean probably knows as much about King

Salmon as I do, perhaps more. He’d won the 2-day Kenai Classic sport-fishing event, catching the largest King Salmon for the second year in a row in 2009! We had one goal left this week: to hook a King Salmon on the fly and we were in the perfect place at the perfect time to do it. It was overcast and drizzling when we left camp to row and fish the final 6 miles of the river.

We launched from camp and went right to work. I don't remember much talk. We went directly to classic King Salmon holding water. I focused on holding the raft adjacent to the "seam" at the tail of an island and Sean focused on keeping the large fly, an Intruder, deep. He knew where the fly was in relation to the bottom. He felt the take of a fish. Sean, unlike virtually every other entry-level fly caster I've hosted, understands how to set the hook into a salmon jaw. The fish surged out into the current and headed upstream. It was a textbook battle. I've watched hundreds of Kings taken on the fly and Sean's technique was as good as the best. He never gave the fish any pause and kept up the maximum pressure the 7-weight fly rod could bear. The leverage of the rod, the drag, and his good right arm did the work..

Sean and I shared a great feeling of satisfaction when he released that King Salmon. Taking a King on a light fly rod from a raft in a powerful river current took all his skill as an angler and it took all my skill to handle the boat so the boat was not an impediment to the fishing. Our fly-fishing expedition would end several hours from now, and many fish later, but Sean had accomplished what he set out to do and he relaxed into a different "head space".



For Travis and Eric fishing with Olly in the lower river, during those final hours I turned to see that their boat was hooked up to double fish so often that I lost track. Travis & Eric had formed a bond early in the trip that grew deeper by the hour. He tested the bond in the final hours because those chrome bright Sockeye, Chum and the large Char and trout were too big for one angler to net and land in a raft. "Team netting" was essential so it often fell to Eric to put up his rod and help Travis land a fish. It's highly unlikely that anyone in all of Alaska had

bigger smiles than Eric Ortengren or Travis Snow as they wrapped up day six of the Paradox Sports fly fishing expedition.

Out of the foul weather came wonderful surprises in the form of generosity from the two-lodges/camps located on the Togiak River. Word had gotten around the river that "wounded warriors" were going to be rafting and fishing this week. The owners of both Togiak River Fishing Adventures and Togiak River Lodge personally greeted our participants, invited them in out of the weather, fed them and in every way rolled out the red carpet for our veterans. It was such a pleasure to be part of the river community when the lodges showed their thanks for what our servicemen gave. It was unscripted hospitality and generosity from the heart!

John Merritt and Paradox Sports began this collaboration with me in 2008. We've hosted 11 significantly disabled fly casters on extraordinary expeditions into true Alaska Wilderness. The 2012 participants Travis, Eric, and Sean showered us with thanks! From their comments before and afterwards, from reflections later in correspondence it is clear that the expedition hugely surpassed

their expectations. Why? In general terms “I think a trip becomes a more meaningful experience when the angler, disabled or able bodied, fully participates in the entire wilderness travel experience. In this case because they shared all the work, they cared for one another and patched each other up when needed, pushed past some hardships, and they certainly pushed past some physical pain.”

Does Alaska Wilderness expeditionary travel have value for disabled veterans? Obviously I’m hardly qualified to speak to this. The men I travelled with in 2012 had outdoors skills blended with their military training which made them great wilderness travel companions and they deeply appreciated the experience. They were among other things trained to jump out of aircraft with weapons and to evaluate risk in whatever situation they landed in. So they were well adapted to flying out in small bush planes with essential equipment and dealing with whatever nature dealt us. They were trained to be leaders and it showed. They personally know a great deal about suffering. The veterans I met and travelled with knew the difference between a “packaged tour” and an authentic experience. They knew the difference between a training exercise and “show time”. They have bullshit detectors tuned to know real from fake. They know the difference between being patronized (or celebrated) as disabled veterans and doing the hard work themselves. In the light of their military training, their military service, their wounds, and their recovery it’s easy to see why they chose to become part of a team, to participate in rafting, camping, and fly fishing together in the Alaska Wilderness.



\* Two of the veterans were disabled in combat. One was disabled in vehicle accident just weeks after he rejoined civilian life.

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