

Wild River Guides 2013 Season Report



July 10th - 17th, 2013

An Alaska Guide's Family Vacation

Our guide staff carved out the week of July 10-17th 2013 for our own vacation fly fishing trip and we sent invitations out to fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and cousins. For some weeks the phone lines were busy and emails were flying through cyber-space. Calendars were compared and employers consulted. We celebrated the affirmative rsvps and hoped that those who couldn't join us will join us next time.

A working guide's, mid-season vacation, is so rare because a fly fishing company can rarely afford to release days that retail customers could book. Still once in awhile the guides need some quality time on the water as reward for their great service. Our 2013 bookings were ample so we took advantage. On past guide's vacations we've accomplished the notable first descents of various salmon rivers and trout creeks or we've chosen the most inaccessible rivers requiring an overland portage for access. In this case we'd float a remote river requiring extra-long hours on the oars so we'd invite as many family oarsmen as possible. Out of nine fly casters we had a core of seven rowers.



We began with an evening 12-mile row through the alpine tundra uplands. We'd been fogged in at Dillingham, unable to fly that morning and it was 7:00 pm by the time we had the rafts loaded and

pushed off downriver. 3 hours of steady rowing meant 3 hours of steady casting but here's the deal. We needed to pass through 10-15 miles of Grayling stream on our first night and we'd gotten such a late start that fly casting was going to be limited to flipping dry flies and nymphs as we oared non-stop down river. There'd be no time for back rowing or covering the water with streamers or beads. No one was more surprised than I that 2 very fine rainbows took traditional dry flies as we cruised along. Of course Arctic Grayling were eager to take both dries & nymphs. We closed out the day with a dinner at midnight. Father, uncle, & cousins all together sharing the camp, the mosquitoes, a cold beer, and the sense of welcome that one's tent provides at the end of a day of travel in the bush.



The first days on the river were magic. Alaska's fickle weather was uncharacteristically lovely as a stable dome of high air pressure built over us. It's a gross understatement to say that wildlife were abundant.



Caribou bulls were migrating past and Brown Bears were near the river. We watched a mink swim across the stream in front of the raft while being dive bombed and attacked by several Arctic Terns. No doubt the nesting Terns had good reason to attack the Mink. But the observation of how the mink, a ferocious, although diminutive predator is received by Arctic Terns stands in contrast to how the Terns completely tolerate the presence of Beavers, even small juvenile beavers not so much larger than adult mink.

In thousands of observations of Beavers swimming in Tern habitat we've never see a Beaver mobbed. So clearly the Terns and other wildlife that might be considered prey by a mink have a very refined image of what is a real threat and what is not. Did we feel threatened by the Brown Bears? No but one stays alert!

From the Log of July 11, 2013: "The sun was intense. Barometer 29.25 inches and rising. Our raft team rowed hard for a second high mileage day. We took only Grayling from our boat as we floated and cast but we saw some fine Rainbow trout being released in the other rafts. Olly's father Joe took his "personal best" Rainbow Trout of his life. We were having trouble landing the Sockeye Salmon, which we'd occasionally hook. They are wild and acrobatic and the cook really wanted some fresh fillets. So the pressure was on. Today we had good views of a Merlin (small falcon) as it flew downriver above a stand of Cottonwood trees and we had a great view of a Bald Eagle perched below camp."

Each night after camp was set up we rotated family members through the kitchen. There was always good teamwork filleting the day's fish, making epic salads, or being wine steward. Meanwhile the



guys not employed in the kitchen had time to hang out in camp and talk about family, about work, about previous epic trips or pick up a fly rod and patrol the beach knowing a net man is just a shout away. There is a nice relaxed pace to the fishing out of camp. Some of us are more effective anglers while wading than we are from the boat because the wading whole process is slowed down and more variables are controlled and we can better adjust our fly presentation.

From the log of July 12, 2013: “We’ve travelled nearly 50 miles by now and the fishing is very strong. Charlie P. rowed us beautifully while Joe and I fished down a very narrow side channel. When trout were hooked it was total mayhem with fish jumping near the boat among logjams while the overhanging willows swept past the raft. We waited at the exit of that “jungle tour” channel for the other rafts to safely emerge. Steve piloted one boat and had a “relieved” look on his face as he pulled into the main channel. In the evenings Charlie inspired us by his example to fish mice more. He took Rainbows in every part of the river from mid channel to shoreline woody cover on the mouse.” In the late afternoon the weather began to change with “mare’s tail” clouds appearing and the barometer falling.



On the fourth day Charlie Merrill took the oars and began to work out the oar stroke in a raft weighing #1,000 pounds. Like so many of us he’d rowed on flat water and saltwater but had not experienced moving water. When one gets in the rowing seat for the first time on a moving river, all of a sudden the entire rowing process can feel dyslexic. The oars, which you’ve been watching your brother and father operate, seem insanely cumbersome and the boat has so much inertia that the raft course must be anticipated many dozens of yards I advance. Still after some hours “on the sticks” the experience changes from panic toward confidence and every hour toward greater competence. Your boat mate’s would stop worrying about their personal safety and return to throwing mice and streamers as



the river-scape unfurls ahead. Charlie and some others got real Alaska rowing mileage that week.

There was lot’s of need for a good net man. We travelled among hundreds of pairs of Chum Salmon



at various stages of courtship and redd construction. The Rainbow Trout were in classic attendance around spawning aggregations of Chum. Generally the trout waited off to one side in deeper water toward cover. Some of the sight fishing was with mouse patterns and what we experienced was among the best my guides and I have ever had. A particular highlight was the huge slab Rainbow that Hart took in heavy woody cover. My notes mention that it was a “full rodeo”. I should also mention that my log is unclear about whether it was 4 family members or 5 that they took the largest Rainbow Trout of their lives that week.

By day 6 the weather had changed and we set up our evening camp with the rafts as windbreaks for the tents. The nice thing

was that wind and cool temperatures kept the mosquitoes at bay. There had been times earlier with fair weather, and no wind, that the “mozzies” were a significant force of nature, but now in the cool & showery weather at the end of the trip no bugs! We sat under the shelter of the Kitchen tarp “wing” in the evenings chatting until someone casting a flyline would hook up a fish and then there would be movement toward the fly rods and we’d disperse along the gravel bar enjoying the camaraderie while we cast.



The “Night of the V Wakes” will probably remain in the family’s collective memory forever. Guide Brain Malchoff was fishing late in the evening on July 16 and called out that V wakes were pulsing upriver in shallow water. It didn’t take him long to figure out that the V wakes were pushed ahead of absolutely chrome bright sea run Dolly Varden just in from the estuary a few hours ago. Each year we anticipate the arrival of the Dolly Varden Char in mid July and tonight they came on and on and on. The largest Char return first. They are the adults who will spawn in October and they run from 18-27 inches. What a night of Char fishing to end the guide’s vacation!

