

# *Wild River Guides* 2013 Season Report

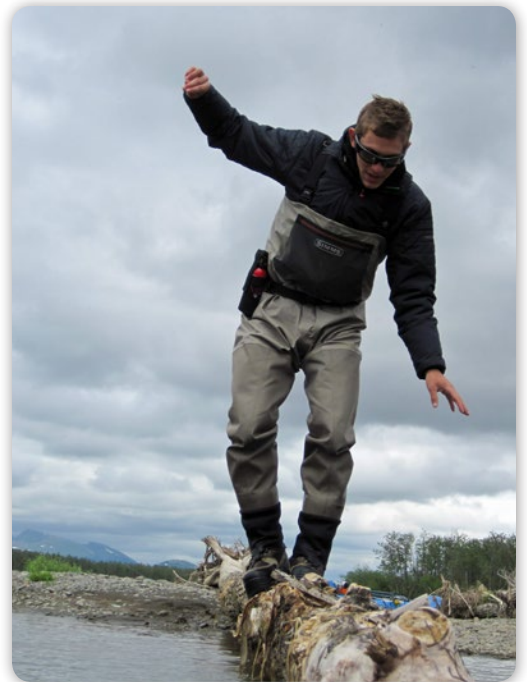


June 30th - July 7th, 2013

## The Nathan Family Fly Fishing Expedition in Alaska's Bristol Bay.

Reeven, the eldest son in the Nathan family, flew out first to Togiak lake by floatplane with guides Olly & Brian to set up our rafts and locate a camp. Later Reeven's father, Jorde Nathan, Reeven's brother Chase, and I flew northwest to join them. I recorded in the trip log that the view from the outbound floatplane was "cloud shrouded like a Japanese painting, with just the lower flanks of the mountains in view. Rick Grant, our pilot made a U-turn at one point when a pass was obscured by a rain shower and found another valley with passage open toward the lake."

Jorde Nathan and I had collaboratively planned this trip for several years with a goal of introducing his sons to salmon fly-fishing in a true Alaska wilderness setting. We planned to raft and fish and camp for one rare week when both his son's school and work calendars overlapped. We'd have time to sharpen the young men's fly-fishing skills.



8 weeks prior of spectacular sunny spring weather closed out before we landed at Togiak Lake and Alaska became fickle with her weather -hardly allowing us glimpses of the alpine mountains around us. In the mist and showers the Nathan men explored the fishery near the river outlet as well as

up-lake and released a dozen Arctic Char and several Sockeye Salmon. Two Ravens perched near camp while I did chores and started dinner although I trusted them, not at all, with a fresh Sockeye fillet sitting on the table. Pasta and Sockeye and good company made for a nice evening in our first Alaska camp of 2013.



We awoke to the shrieking of Arctic terns as they dove into the river in front of camp catching fingerling Sockeye smolt. The other birds of the tundra were chorusing, singing territorial challenges, or mournfully wailing from Common Loons to diminutive Yellow-crowned sparrows, from yodeling Sandhill Cranes to shrieking Yellowlegs. After a simple breakfast and coffee and we began our morning routine, to help one another to take down tents, load the rafts, then after some fishing from camp we'd launch for a day of exploration and down river travel.



We watched as Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologists set up their salmon counting station near where Togiak River exits the lake while pods of Sockeye salmon scooted upriver. I spent the day with the eldest Nathan son, Reeven rafting down the upper Togiak valley where glacial moraines dominate the landscape. Here the tundra landscape consists of moss and lichens, heather and dwarf birch. We stopped from time to time to climb a bluff or walk along a gravel bar to stimulate our circulation. As the cool damp air and fog was pushed up valley by a headwind we added layers of clothing. Reeven, a self-described "non-fisherman" took 9 Arctic Char, 1 Grayling, and 1 Dolly Varden enroute to camp.



Alaska's weather would dominate our trip. A large low pressure front originating in the Bering Sea was slowly moving east. We had cool rain showers with modest intervals between them to work with. This is the typical moist weather pattern that refills the Bristol Bay watersheds and allows the worlds greatest population of salmon to thrive. We adapted and "layered up" with 2 or 3 layers under our waders and plenty of vests and jackets to keep our core warm. By the end of the second day of raft travel everyone knew what you meant when you queried: "Perhaps this is an interval?" We enjoyed the brief

intervals between rain or mist or showers and elevated them to the status of a sunny day at the beach, although it only meant that rain was not flowing down off one's hood for a few minutes. Still, in those periods we enjoyed ourselves and we used intervals strategically to set up and take down tents and accomplish our riverside housekeeping.

The fishing that week was not the "easy" fishing of a Alaskan salmon stream in mid summer but rather it was 42 degree water - early season -fishing and Jorde and the boys really had to put in long periods searching for the Grayling, Char, Chum & Sockeye. Pink and black colored bunny strip streamers took char and salmon as we descended toward camp, just above the Ongivivuk River confluence. In every portion of the river where Sockeye Salmon were staged we found Arctic Char



accompanying them. Later in the season one could fish all week in the Togiak and not catch an Arctic Char but in the early season they descend from the lake, which is their stronghold, to feed alongside Grayling and Rainbow and to accompany the inbound salmon.

From the tail of a small island where Jorde took a Chum Salmon, Brian pointed his hand downriver to a low bluff where we saw a grey Timber Wolf appear. The wolf paced down a trail atop the low bluff with her eyes focused on the river, ears pitched forward perhaps seeking a salmon from the pool we'd fished. More than other rivers in the region we see wolves along the Togiak. In the summer months- the abundant Moose, which wolves favor in wintertime, are less accessible. Summertime Moose are dispersed across hundreds of square miles of valley and tributary creeks and it is more likely that the salmon food-source explains our summer wolf sightings.



Below the Ongivinuk River confluence the young Nathan family anglers, Reeven & Chase found their rhythm with salmon. They located holding water that produced Chum Salmon in good numbers and Reeven took his first salmon on a fly. Chum, eager to take a streamer, were such a contrast to the Sockeye, which streamed by in chrome pods ignoring nearly every offering presented. After Reeven's first salmon on a fly, his brother Chase took a Rainbow, then a "Jack" King Salmon- which we kept for our dinner. Later at camp Jorde released a really fine Rainbow! But it was not the trophy Rainbow which was to come the following morning.

The upper Togiak, like most Alaskan rivers is less productive, but the middle river begins to accumulate tributaries and pick up waterborne nutrients while meandering across an ever-larger flood plain. Productivity for wildlife like Swainsons Thrushes, Sandhill Cranes, Tree Swallows and Mink increases as channels deepen and braided gravel bars from prior floods anchor logs in their lee. In the woody debris and the waters among islands the leopard spotted Rainbow Trout feed on Sculpin and Stickleback, on larval Lamprey and fry of salmon, on Grayling and Whitefish. The Togiak harbors good numbers of Rainbows but locating them in such a vast watershed takes time, persistence, and hundreds or thousands of searching casts and ultimately the fickle combination of skill and luck to land the trophy. Jorde and the boys cast and searched for trout through the "wood" for hours at a cost of many streamers- left snagged on root-wads and sunken logs, but that is how it's done. One loses lots of flies, then quickly re-ties and gets back at it.

After a quick coffee and breakfast, Jorde was out of camp throwing streamers in a "interval" of morning mist and fog held down close to the river surface. A Rainbow Trout- of salmon sized



proportions- inhaled his streamer while he cast below our island camp in a pool littered with hundreds of sunken logs. Against very long odds he landed the fish and we all were giddy with excitement and pleasure that such a fine fish graced us to be admired, photographed, and carefully released. I would not see another Rainbow of that size all summer. A truly spectacular Rainbow. The largest fish of the year!

By our fifth day of travel I could see the progress that Chase had made casting a fly rod. He had previously cast some dry flies in Utah and had lots of experience with spinning gear on Canadian canoe trips but on this Togiak trip he'd picked up a seven-weight rod and started casting heavy Alaskan streamers. Father and son, Jorde and Chase, searched for fish below the confluence of a small river where they saw salmon porpoising. Here Chase really put all the week's fly fishing technique together and took several salmon on consecutive casts. Finally he'd had enough. He'd



experienced the strain and arm cramps from fighting large and powerful fish. At noon Reeven took a Sockeye that we killed for dinner and we continued down. The log records: “The fishing was not easy. Jorde took 3 Rainbows, numerous Chum Salmon, and several Arctic Char.”

Our sixth and final full day was a marathon of casting and searching for Salmon and Rainbows while rafting through what the trip log records as: “Extreme fog with partial clearing in the evening.”

Fog actually occurs in relatively calm, so-called ‘fair weather’ between low-pressure systems in Bristol Bay. The fog rolls in because further inland, up by Togiak Lake, there are clear skies and the sun lifts the air mass and sucks in the cool moist Bristol Bay fog. The weather as we approached Togiak Bay was fully maritime. One could smell Herring and kelp from the bay and downriver hear the cries of the large Glaucous gulls feeding on salmon carcasses.



We ended the trip on such a high note. The morning fishing was quite good and later, out of the mist we saw the unmistakable profile of a Dehavilland Beaver inbound to pick us up. A fine week!