

# *Wild River Guides*

## 2013 Season Report

August 23rd - 31th, 2014

### Kanektok River Fly Fishing. The Season's Grand Finale!



**100 miles of Rainbow, Char, Coho, Wildlife and Great Camping.**

The Kanektok River in the Togiak Refuge is an immensely rewarding river and full of challenges! One hundred miles of channels, braids, sloughs, and islands lay ahead of us as we inflated rafts and shoved off. One never knows at the beginning: will the weather be fair or foul? Will the Coho Salmon be in? Will the Dolly Varden be in good numbers? Will the Brown Bears be polite?



What we knew at the outset is that we had a very strong group of returning guests with lots of camping experience. They were gung ho outdoorswomen and outdoorsmen and their spirits were high.

At our first camp Megan Harris and Ron Antipa caught and released nice Rainbows while Ron "set the bar high" by taking his trout on a mouse. We ate two of the Dolly Varden we'd



taken for dinner, released 22 others and then we all watched a sow Brown Bear with 2 cubs fishing for Salmon. Turning in late seemed just fine. We were all happy to be on the river.

From the log of August 24, 2014 “Rain showers marched across the vast riverine landscape. The cloud cover kept the lighting subdued with occasional shafts of sunlight penetrating into distant valleys. The riverside Willows and the distant tundra vegetation are beginning to turn shades of yellow & brown.” In addition to guides Brian Malchoff and Peter Jaacks we had returning anglers Rob, Pete, Chuck, & Mike who were generous with their angling gifts and shared knowledge of the Bristol Bay fishery with those here for the first time. Rob Crawford took plenty of time out from his angling to coach Tim, Bob, and the Harris girls. The trip log recorded that Rob “found time to release 53 Char and a Coho” that day. We’d learn as days went by that Rob has a gift of making it look easy.



The fishing in the upper river was nice but was “discontinuous” so one had to row from one productive zone to another productive zone to intercept the migrant fish. As an angler one had to be patient, put the rod up, and travel efficiently through less productive reaches. This is the normal pattern for the upper reaches of Alaskan salmon rivers and so one moves on down at a good pace until one finds more fish. The Coho in the upper river were of a color almost like a pale cherry. We kept moving to find brighter fish.





Part of our group hiked well up one of the creeks we passed today. They bushwhacked noisily through the bear brush to higher ground and then followed game trails to a bluff where they could look down into the creek.

They spotted, then stalked, and then caught some spectacular trophy Dolly Varden Char. Reports came down that an apricot colored marabou streamer took a tremendous fish, as did an orange flash fly.

From the log of August 25, 2014 “Megan Harris released the two largest Rainbows of her life today and several returning anglers took the largest Dolly Varden of their lives. Dry flies for the Char worked well as did trout beads. Streamers fished deep selected for the larger fish. When I fished with Bob Peterson and Katie Harris that afternoon there was an exciting moment as Katie’s rod bucked violently when a huge Dolly grabbed the fly. For a long moment we weren’t sure whether she’d hang on to the rod!

Pete Speer was “on fire” on August 25, as he was any day that he wasn’t on the oars! He took scads of Char that day. Many of you have fished with Pete over the years and will remember that he’s not at all shy about alerting the whole world when he’s hooked up! His hoots and hollers and yodels are legendary. Pete’s a joy to have on an angling expedition.

In a field of Arctic Poppies Megan set up to paint the country that she was travelling through. Out of camp where the distractions were diminished she took time to record some of the subtleties of the landscape.







Bob Peterson, making his first trip to Alaska took fish with each day topping the prior day. He'd come from a tradition of light tackle trout fishing in California and he soon mastered fishing trout beads under an indicator. Working hard he spent many hours working out his casts with the heavy weighted streamers we use for Rainbow & Salmon.



On August 26 Bob took his first Sockeye Salmon and then 2 days later on August 29'th he took his first 2 Coho. It was a particular joy to watch Bob fighting those first large powerful fish, watching him master letting the fly reel drag do the work and learn to use the entire length of the rod to fight the salmon. After those first two Silvers there was no stopping him.

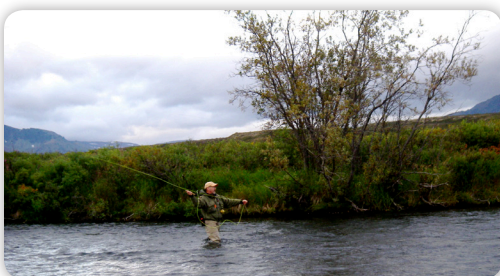


Such a joy! Chuck brought his daughters Katie & Megan Harris. Raised in the Tetons both women were highly accomplished backcountry campers and fully qualified trip leaders in their own right.



Chuck and the girls had days ahead in which to share rafts, to net each other's fish, and laugh at each other's antics. The fishing stories the family collected that week might last awhile!

Most of the Kanektok group were serious students of wildlife and



natural history so there were special moments over the course of the week with binoculars out. The adult eagle guarding the nestling as we floated by was one such moment. The Bears of course. The shorebirds feeding along the river margins and back sloughs. The Falcoln's nest. There were long periods we'd focus on the smaller elements, the wildflowers on the





river bars, which gave a splash of color in the wild landscape. The play of the dark clouds across the brooding sky. The contrasting yellow Arctic poppy flowers against the pebbles and moss.



It takes about 2 days and 30 river miles before the Kanektok really becomes a river in which you want to wade any more than necessary. In the upper river the cobble is large and angular, algae covered and slippery. That angular cobble has not been “sorted” into gravel and worn by river flow for long enough and in certain areas is simply quite treacherous wading. There are exceptions in the upper river but the wading improves as one rafts down.

Mike DiCiano stands out in a group of anglers. He’s up early, usually first on the water, and hooks and releases fish quietly before breakfast. “First on the water” matters with Coho and Rainbow. The morning ritual was: I’d drink coffee, check the barometer, and write field notes in the log while the sun rose and there in front of camp I’d watch Mike



fish. An afternoon that I spent with Mike he modestly released five fine Coho and Five Rainbow as we explored sloughs of the lower river together. When you analyze why DiCiano’s catch rate (or Rob Crawford, Brian Malchoff, Pete Jaacks) you conclude that it’s mostly a matter efficiency; very little wasted energy and lot’s of time with the fly in the water.



Here’s Mike’s fishing method as an example for any of us to emulate: He casts a fly into the target zone with whatever cast is serviceable (though not necessarily pretty- who cares), lets it sink, and keeping it deep, he retrieves it with nice sharp strips giving the streamer a pulsing-undulating action, ending that drift with a re-cast. He uses very little false casting, just shoots it back out and get’s to work. Sometimes he changes it up and simply dead drifts the streamer. Mike and the other high





mileage anglers don't waste time re-casting to the same water his last cast searched. He knows if there was a fish there he'd have it and if not he moves on. Lot's of us stand in the same spot and recast to the same zone time after time with poor results. With these migratory fish one must constantly move to find them so Mike keeps moving. Once he's found them then he stays for a little while, perhaps 15 minutes until he's taken the aggressive fish and moves along.

Looking out across the Kanektok floodplain can be humbling. There is no question that the forces at work here dwarf our small human movements through the Togiak Wilderness and down the river. From a good overlook one can see both "garden variety ox-bow meanders" in the river bed which look like marvelous fishing as well as portions of the Kanektok riverbed where floodwaters have opened raw wounds blasting through Willows and Cottonwood stands.



Looking across the valley braided with islands, cut by channels, bisected with currents and pools containing thousands of tons woody debris, one is not thinking about a walk in the park. One can hardly imagine travel on foot at all in the valley lowlands. Even in a raft the route finding can be tricky.



On August 26 the morning started off "socked in" with a marine layer like San Francisco Bay and then as the afternoon warmed up we rowed into headwinds that made for challenging casting. We watched the low flying geese listening to them gabble as flocks sought out feeding and resting areas in the valley.

I rowed with Tim Bareis and Ron Antipa, both on their first trip to fly fish in Bristol Bay. Tim starting off the morning with a Rainbow leaping head high only a dozen feet from the raft. Tim & Ron cast through the morning, working streamers and



trout beads. We pulled over for lunch on a shallow pool with hundreds of Char. Ron tied on a dry fly, skated it above the Char and had fun. The afternoon brought Grayling, and Coho along with the Char and Trout. One of Ron's Coho made a delicious dinner!

As we traveled mid-river we left behind the trophy Char of the headwaters and the fishing changed to smaller fish in the 12-16" class interspersed with occasional larger fish. This pattern is how Dolly Varden are distributed in most Bristol Bay Rivers. The large adult Char which are going to spawn in a given year cluster in the headwaters where spawning will take place in October. The smaller fish mid-river are widely distributed often associated with salmon but sometimes inexplicably arrayed on vast shallow shoals numbering hundreds of fish.

Mid trip our camp was set up at the base of a bluff and Katie Harris supplied a perfect chrome Salmon (Coho/ Silver) for our Sushi dinner. Off the end of the bar that we camped on were more Coho, which were impossible to get a cast in to. Coho as well as Rainbow love to lie among the driftwood below gravel bars. There they can rest from the river current, and the Rainbows have cover from Bald Eagles while waiting for smolt or flesh of decayed salmon to be delivered to them.



Chuck Harris, his daughters and some others climbed the bluff in the morning. That particular geologic formation was part of a vast "table-land" which once must have been the floor of the lake/river bed many thousands of years ago. Perhaps after the weight of the ice released, the floor was uplifted. In any case the river has cut 50 feet through those Pleistocene sands and gravel deposits. King Fishers were active along the bluff, a Bald Eagle, and a Merlin cruised past. The river birdlife is now dominated by Geese, Ravens, and Gulls. Gone are the Greater Yellowlegs, and Spotted Sandpipers of summer.





From the log of August 29, 2014. We had rafted more than 70 miles and were well down in the lower river when a Cormorant (possibly a "Double Crested") landed near us in a minor eddy of the main Kanektok river channel. How odd to see the large black sea bird inland on fresh water but then it's a reminder of how close we are to the mighty Bering Sea. We are now so far from the mountains whence we began that the mountains are just distant smudges on the horizon.



Guides Brian and Pete discovered a small slough so insanely full of Dolly Varden in spawning colors that looking at it seemed like you were experiencing an exhibit in an aquarium. There were many hundreds of Dolly Varden packed tightly, milling in the water column. What you mainly saw was a vision of painted fins against a crimson flank. As the light variously refracted off the water we could see hundreds of pectoral, pelvic, and anal fins each colored orange and cream color on the leading edge and offset by black. With so much movement of color among the crimson and green bodies it was hard to focus on individual fish.



Bob Peterson took several absolutely beautiful fish from that Char aquarium and then we put the rods down and spent some time just watching the fish. That evening everyone spoke of those Char as a beautiful highlight of the day. Each day of travel imprinted on us memories of some scenes, some sounds, and some emotions.

Every major slough now held fresh Coho and so some nice sight fishing was accomplished. We got out to wade all the water we could. The fishing was unbelievably strong. Coho were taken on Pink Polly Wogs and virtually all the streamer patterns we cast took fish until the bite ended.



Then we moved on. We had a memorable hour hooking up in a gin clear side channel on the right. In that green channel against the brown pea gravel bottom you could watch the fish holding. Some were bright from the sea and some had a light pink blush from a week in the river. You picked a fish and placed the cast just right.



Great Horned Owls hooted and the last two nights were clear and cold with the river level dropping. The Coho Salmon fishing was extraordinary even by Bristol Bay standards and we savored it. We watched during the day as the fishing lodge operators in the lower river dismantled their operations and freighted gear downriver by powerboat. The season was ending for sports anglers.



Sometime after midnight Michael rallied the group to watch the Northern Lights. We awoke at dawn and broke down our last camp.

