

Wild River Guides

2015 Season Report



July 18th - July 26th, 2015
Goodnews River of Life.

An extraordinary Week of Fly-Fishing and Wildlife on the North Fork of the Goodnews.

Of course we'd come for the fly-fishing in the solitude that the Goodnews offers and indeed we got great wilderness angling but we

also experienced so much more! From the trip log of day 2, July 20'th, 2015 "Judy Pauwels and I hiked up a great curving bluff to gain a vantage and look down into the salmon pool below and the Char riffles upstream. Our companions Tom, Jed, Doug, and Dick fished a long riffle full of Char with just enough Rainbows to keep it interesting.



The view thirty feet below into the pool was of hundreds of Sockeye Salmon, in various larger schools and smaller "pods" staged in and adjacent to a hundred yard long salmon spawning channel. In the spawning channel pairs of Sockeyes and Chums were building redds and courting. A few pairs of Chums were depositing eggs and chasing Dolly Varden and Rainbow Trout away from their territories. It felt like we were guests at an exclusive aquarium, open only to a select few willing to raft the wilderness miles and attend.



We'd flown in the day prior, set up our rafts and rowed downriver into the heart of the fishery. The flight in had been excellent, the weather fair and we were excited to finally be on the river. From the trip log "At camp the Dolly Varden Char fishing was spectacular. Each angler had multiple hookups in an evening of shirtsleeve weather that was essentially bug free". What was interesting when you look at the fishing log was that 7 species were caught, that evening which is an unusually high diversity for an Alaska river. Arctic Grayling and Dolly Varden of course, Rainbows, Chum and Sockeye Salmon too but the -standout one of a kind- was the Lake Trout that Doug Wilson took.

From the trip log: One of the most outstanding days of combined fishing, river travel, and wildlife observations in my 35 consecutive seasons on Alaskan rivers! We awoke in a "pea soup fog" had coffee and breakfast and broke camp as the sun burned through. We fished to the bluff, which Judy and I climbed and then fished downriver to a gravel bar in a section of the river where we pulled over to watch a magnificent Bull Caribou and then we stayed on for the angling and the lunch opportunity. At the Caribou bar there were in excess of 100 large Char and a smattering of chrome bright Sockeye. Several dozen Char were landed including 6 between 24-30 inches.

There was a very nice gesture by Doug who'd just taken the largest Char of his life at the head of the Caribou bar when he handed his streamer rod to Judy and gave her the prime spot. Courtesy is part of what makes angling with a diverse group work out well.

Judy then landed an incredible, acrobatic Sockeye, which she donated, to the cook, followed by several huge Char. Thank you Doug! Thank you Judy. All this before lunch on our first full day.



The Caribou that day were off the charts. Portions of the Mulchatna herd were on the move. We had 3 spectacular viewings of large bulls crossing the river. Perhaps the most extraordinary Caribou sighting was of a cow and her calf. The cow proceeded into the river a full minute ahead of her calf and she was in a hurry. For unknown reasons Caribou will occasionally get a “wild hair” and charge cross-country as if the world were on fire. In this case she charged into the river passing within scant feet of our rafts.

A few moments later the Caribou calf- that was running flat- out attempting unsuccessfully to keep up, charged into the river between 2 rafts. Unlike the cow the calf wasn't totally sure what the mission was, mom was gone out of sight up the far bank and the calf was disoriented. Who wouldn't be? We backed off with the rafts and the calf made the river crossing following the scent of her mother who was racing off to the south. We then continued on down river through a modest canyon and found fish as we travelled. Somewhat fewer than 100 fish of 4 species were taken by the anglers on day 2 and we enjoyed a nice meal of Judy's fresh Sockeye for supper.



The days followed as we got into a rhythm of awakening early, packing camp and fishing through the miles of wilderness scenery & wildlife. As I made coffee one morning a cow moose walked within two dozen feet of camp and casually crossed the river. She waded without concern in bowling ball size cobble that is completely heinous for a human to wade across.

On the third day I fished and rafted with Jed Marshall and Dick Fulton. Dick has been on Alaskan expeditions of all sorts including a rugged trip with me on the South Fork and it was nice to catch up on what he's been up to.

Dick is living his retirement dream to the fullest and is a good role model for staying active. Jed, from the first hour captured my attention because he's an accomplished naturalist and keen to pull out binoculars for wildlife viewing. He got a good look at 2 Spectacled Eiders among other waterfowl



this day. But what I remember as well as the Eiders was a remarkable Char Jed took on a streamer along a bluff that holds salmon. Among the Sockeye he took a salmon sized Char which porpoised like mad about the pool and was a full team effort to net. Jed also released a jack King Salmon which are always noteworthy.



From the trip log of July 22 'Th, 2015:

"We took down the tents just before a day long rain began. The rain began gentle enough mid morning but later it rained quite hard, the kind of rain that seems to leap back upward to the sky when drops impact the river surface". We fished through it. Unquestionably a downpour affects effects expeditionary fly fishing. In the main because in very heavy rain one can neither see fish nor gauge water depth accurately whereas "garden variety" rain showers seem to have no affect or slightly improve the fishing. Our Gore Tex jackets and waders hugely improved our comfort in those classically wet Alaskan conditions.



From the log "From the first day onward Tom steadily released double digit numbers of fish". Looking at the log one notices that his Rainbow Trout catch was steady throughout the trip and that can only be achieved with good solid angling skill. The rainbow are a litmus test for Alaskan fly fishermen. We love Char for the sheer numbers of great sport fish but the rainbow mainly come to those with the skill to keep the fly in the strike zone hour after hour.



I fished with Tom and Doug. It was the day mentioned earlier with the semi-epic rain. They searched for Char and Trout with hoods cinched casting in the wind. Tom got out often and waded. In the late morning he waded a side channel below Canyon Creek and steadily took Char. The Char were present in good numbers spread across riffles, shoals, and the soft inside edge of gravel bars so the quest became one of taking the large fish among all the "cookie cutters". He accomplished that plus took 3 nice Rainbows under tough conditions. He pulled into camp wet that afternoon having earned each fish.



From the log: "Doug Wilson is an extremely proficient streamer fisherman with an intuitive grasp of where his fly is in the water column". If I could underscore the skill needed to really succeed with large trout, char, and salmon in Alaska it is to know where the fly is relative to the bottom and structure. One can fish great water for hours without a strike when the fly is too high. With a streamer too close to the surface one gets the sense that the water is barren. By fishing the streamer down quite deep- caveat- while not hung

up due to inattention- an angler's catch rate can be the stuff of legends. What is true is that Doug had fished his native, state of Maine waters, with streamers for years and many thousands of hours to get where he is as an angler.



It felt good to stretch our legs with an upland hike every so often to break up the day. Some days the hikes were modest and some were more ambitious but all were interesting. The blueberry crop was developing and worth kneeling into the moss and heather to eat. The aroma of the tundra was quite notable because as we walked our boots bruised Labrador Tea leaves and the fragrance followed behind.

We awoke on July 23 'Th, 2015: on a lovely gravel bar with a striking rock bluff below on river right. The bar and the creek mouth below it fished well for all of us. Jed fished with me and took some really nice Char and as the day progressed it got even better. 4 Rainbows came to the net and a really fine Sockeye was killed for dinner.



Jed and I fished and talked and passed the time commenting on the Ravens and Gulls eating salmon carcasses. And then we had our most amazing wildlife sighting of 2015. We'd both been looking at all the Bald Eagles on the river with binocs when we sighted what we believed was a Stellar's Sea Eagle feeding on a gravel bar. We radioed John's raft and he was able to get several sets of eyes on it to confirm the sighting. The eagle had distinctive shoulder patches and was unlike the tens of thousands of Bald Eagles that Jed and I've each seen in our careers as birders. Great excitement!



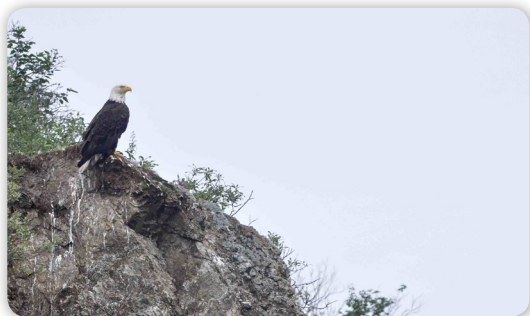
From the trip log of July 24'Th, 2015: "Judy and Jed fished with me and we had a very very good day". We targeted large Dolly Varden noticing as the day progressed that the Rainbow fishery was tapering off. They took 3 of only 6 rainbows in the log that day. Midday we fished down along a river right section below a bluff that terminated in a rock cliff down to the waterline. There were some large Char



holding here and perched directly above on the cliff was a mature Bald Eagle.

The group saw 2 Brown Bear on the 24th. And while our boat saw only the rear end of one bear heading away from the river, still Dick Fulton got a picture of another bear in better “composure.” We were firmly in the lower river down below Barnum Creek where the gradient slackened and the river spread out across vast gravel bars and long sweeping bends with occasional rock bluffs. These are the classic salmon pools of the lower river.

In one of the grand lower river salmon pools known to us as “the Carousel” 4 species of salmon were caught and released. Sockeye, Pink, Chum and a jack King. Truthfully the jack King was a “long distance” release- still we got to experience the abundance and diversity of the place. I remember Doug confidently knotting on a pink streamer and hooking a sea bright Pink on the first cast. Pinks like his, which are just fresh into the river are great sport fish!



A couple details of the Goodnews fishery that were notable. First was that the distribution and abundance of Rainbow was strong for 5 days and only fell off in the lower river. We took Rainbow in pools, near spawning salmon-, as you'd expect, and in woody debris. Regarding the Char, unlike other trips / seasons where the Dolly Varden are clustered in the upper 1/3'd they were evenly distributed across seven days of angling. On day seven, July 25th the log recorded in excess of one hundred twenty five Dolly Varden Char among 5 anglers. The salmon runs of 2015 were quite late by historical norms and that was our experience too. We took just enough Sockeye from top to bottom to feed the crew but it wasn't until July 25th that the Chum, Sockeye, and Pink fishery really began for us.

The first Coho of the 2015 season came to Tom Truesdell at takeout. He waded deep and persistently cast the big streamers, weeding through Pinks, Chum, and Sockeye until he hooked a Coho. Well-done anglers. What a fine week!