

Wild River Guides

2015 Season Report

August 22nd - August 31th, 2015

Kanektok River Fly-Fishing at the Peak of the Coho Salmon Run.

Some of the anglers planned for this trip years in advance. All 8 participants wondered what fly-fishing for Coho would be like during the peak of the run. This week they'd find out.

From the log of August 23, 2015: "One Brown Bear and a Caribou were spotted on the flight inbound to Kagati Lake". As we shoved off down the Kanektok River "a Brown Bear fed on Blueberries on a hillside nearby. The mountains were partially shrouded in mist and showers". A Red Fox crested the hill behind us. We took it all in and some photographs as well.

As happens, the first day outbound from Dillingham was a long day of travel but very rich in experiences. Gear loaded in and out of floatplanes. Pitching in to unload planes. Rafts rigged and waterproof gear stowed onboard. Time for a hike in the tundra. We worked as a team and by evening we'd travelled a dozen miles, camp was set up,



meals eaten, and tents erected. Along with the adventure travel- but not forgotten- a couple dozen Dolly Varden Char, a handful of Arctic Grayling, and enough Rainbows to add diversity were caught and released.



From my field notes "A very heavy bodied bird flew low over camp several hours after dark- long past when we'd all turned in". All of us commented on it the following morning, speculating on what it might have been. The sound of the air rushing through pinion feathers was so very loud that we knew it wasn't an owl. What night flying bird would fly solo in absolute pitch darkness just feet above ground? We considered perhaps it was a Sandhill Crane flushed by a predator off it's roost, or likewise a Bald Eagle spooked by something and escaping by flying right "down on the deck" using the river to navigate. We will never know. And so the wilderness trip began with Alaska's natural history center stage.



Next morning before sunrise early rising anglers had released three Coho Salmon and some great trophy Char. In the pool in front of camp mixed schools of Salmon and Char were staged. Each species had migrated nearly 100 miles from the salt and now waited as their bodies were transformed hour by hour toward full sexual maturity. Camp was taken down and stowed. The morning was warm and extremely buggy. It was a relief to get the rafts moving downstream.



I fished with Michael and Christine Curci and we reminisced about the many hundreds of river miles we'd fished and rafted together in Alaska over the past 15 years. We spoke





of camps, and various rivers, and the different species taken. All the while enjoying where we were at this moment with the terrific Char, Rainbow, and Grayling fishing. From the Log: “Michael took an exceptional Dolly Varden Char from a Sockeye spawning channel toward day’s end. The day was autumnal with golden willow and brilliant orange cottonwood leaves and all the fireweed gone crimson”.

We stopped for lunch at a gravel bar where “The Char were thick as thieves” Dry flies, streamers, and trout beads all did well. We took the time to fish dry flies here and introduced the “skated fly” techniques we’ve developed.



Later Bill Horner in another reach of river took “the fish of a lifetime” and those who witnessed it all cheered. Jim Raymond, Charlie Morris and Jim Bean all fished top-water and reported the “mousing” for Rainbows this day was very, very good.



As we passed down through the alpine headwaters, the Kanektok gathered tributaries, some large and many smaller trickles. The river shape, indeed it’s streambed morphology changed almost hourly with the inputs of water and flood-borne gravels from those various sources.

The inputs of gravel push larger and larger gravel bars into existence providing increasing numbers of islands lined with Willow trees. The wildlife benefit and we saw good numbers of Moose and Caribou tracks. Likewise the fishery changed with the inputs of woody debris on the cut banks which favors Rainbows and so our experience as anglers changed too.

In our boat we saw something I’d only heard about but never actually seen before. From the log of day 3, August 25, 2015: “3 Harlequin Ducks, a hen with her 2 young, fed in a quiet slough behind spawning Sockeye Salmon, clearly targeting the fresh eggs.” How I wish I’d had underwater video



of that! One wonders what the Sockeye do about duck predation? When trout and char enter their territory to eat eggs they are chased and have the scars to prove how serious the salmon defend the redds. But ducks?

We passed a camp with a tent and a kitchen fly pitched where two older men had a noontime fire going and wondered if they were Moose hunters? “How long are you out for” we asked? “28 days!” they called back. The season has definitely shifted to autumn. Ducks and geese were trading about the valley feeding prior to their migrations. The poop of Ravens on the gravel bars was purple with blueberries as was the bear scat. Remains of salmon eaten by Brown Bears were common and generally only the head remained. We pushed on farther and found a fine gravel bar in an area of the river we’d always wanted to camp. The number of Sea Run Dolly’s we saw in the Sockeye spawning channel above camp was “staggering”, and I don’t mean to use the term irresponsibly. I don’t know how more Char could fit in that channel.

From the log of August 26: “Hard rain all night. 1.5 inches in the coffee cup at breakfast. The river rose several inches. We rowed and fished in showers against a west wind strong enough to occasionally push rafts back upriver.” The casting took lots of muscle. Our catch rate for Coho and Rainbow fell dramatically for some anglers, (those fishing streamers) while it was a banner day with more than one hundred Dolly Varden released for those fishing trout beads.



I rowed with Charlie and Bob. They were working hard for their fish. Charlie, who I’m just getting to know was super positive in attitude and outlook and put lots of power in the casts. Bob is an old friend, a true expert regarding the family of Char, which includes Brookies as well as these Dollys. He’s shared many hundreds of river miles fishing with my guides and I. Our destination, if the wind would allow was a lovely gravel



bar we call “Falcon Bluff.” To get there we’d follow guide Pete Jaacks who’d scouted a back channel into this magic water.

Pete’s back channel fished well and was out of the “pesky” wind, which had plagued us all day. At camp we felt a little battered by all the wind and made hot drinks to warm up. Certain participants enjoyed hot tea with a dram of Bourbon for flavor and reported on it favorably.



We watched the young guides climb the Falcon bluff for the territorial views after dinner. Guide Pete reported that later that evening he caught and released a “Jack” Coho. They are so rare that years go by between our landing specimens of those diminutive males. They are considerably less common than Jack Kings.

Early the morning of August 28th, as we broke camp, a dark chocolate Brown Bear went directly to the river about 100 yards from camp in clear view and grabbed a salmon then retreated into cover. The whole process taking less than 90 seconds. That was some highly efficient fishing! By afternoon the skies had completely cleared and the water dropped about 2 inches restoring its clarity. We watched a Gyrfalcon hunting for a couple minutes yet the highpoint of the day’s wildlife was a family of 4 River Otters playing in a salmon pool.

From the log of August 29th 2015. “The weather felt “Arctic” as we rafted and fished down into the lower river which is characterized by bigger salmon pools, sloughs below islands, each separated by long riffles. Over the course of the day the winds decreased and the water clarity improved. We luxuriated in the lack of wind driven rain, and the fishery turned on for us. In round numbers 50 Coho were released on the 28th. 100 released on the 29th and 150 on the 30th.

Wind and rain again on August 29th. The wind veered from the west to the northwest



and I was cautiously optimistic that the low-pressure system of past days was on its way out. I fished with, Jim and Bob and like all the rafts some fine fish were taken and released. It was a day to soak it all in. The river trip was coming to a close. Memories parsed and stored away. Friendships built.



From time to time we looked downriver at Brian's boat, which stayed out ahead scouting for pods of salmon with Christine and Cookie Horner angling in front. Countless times we saw them hooked up to double Coho shrieking with laughter. It was a great day! In Pete's boat likewise, 2 old friends- Bill Horner and Michael Curci- were doing well. Bringing up the rear- John's boat with Jim Raymond and Charlie were the high boat both in terms of numbers of Coho but also of Dolly Varden released.



The pools in the lower river were awash in salmon carcasses with scores of scavengers, the Gulls and Ravens, competing for the bounty with Red Fox, Mink & Otter. I made a curious journal entry that night that is hard to understand now without the Alaskan weather for context. From the log of August 29, I reported that: "It was too windy for appetizers"? I guess the weather was fine for hot drinks, though.



It can be a challenge dealing with the autumnal weather and it certainly is worth making sure all the gear is up to the tasks of keeping us warm & dry. We had some awkward periods this week when we all wished for better conditions but then the sun would make a brief appearance and light up our gravel bar and you'd look downriver and see your friends hooked up whooping and hollering while Coho cart-wheeled downstream.

Certainly August 30th, our last full day on the river, was as memorable as a day of fly-fishing gets. The wind was howling. Bright Silver Salmon were in every conceivable scrap of holding water. The sun was brilliant and lit up the backs and rosy sides of the salmon. To see such abundance was amazing enough but to pick up the streamer and cast, hooking a fish nearly every cast- time and again - was completely "over the top". I fished those last miles with Jim Raymond and Charlie



Morris, friends who've shared a lot of rafts together on wild rivers. It was a pleasure in all respects. The fish, the camaraderie, the sunshine were perfect. Eventually we put down the rods. We were satiated with the Coho angling experience and so rowed out the final mile to camp just taking it all in.

