

Wild River Guides

2016 Season Report



August 11th - August 18th, 2016

Goodnews River at the Peak of the Season.

A week of great fishing and camaraderie with Ken Gangloff, Michael & Christine Curci, Margaret Clark, Michael Malone, Dick Fulton, Bruce Dubke, and Al Baldrich.

From the log of August 11, 2016

With so many returning guests, the guide staff felt like we were welcoming them home. The returning anglers already knew how the floatplane logistics worked in the Alaska bush and their experience helped make the week of fishing, rafting and camping smooth. We awoke on fly out day excited for what travel adventures lay ahead. We got the phone call to be in our waders and ready to fly by 9:15am. "Oh boy- here we go!"



Although almost all our participants had traveled by floatplane before, still that mode of travel never gets old. Its an awe inspiring way to see the landscape that makes you feel like a young child again with your face pressed against the plane window. We felt fortunate to fly the entire group out to the river by the early afternoon. After a short safety briefing from Brian and the staff, we launched down the river.



From the lake to our first proposed camp it ordinarily takes 2 hours of steady rowing but under the relatively high water conditions this week, the journey was quick. As soon as the fly-fishing commenced we started hooking up on Sea Run Dolly Varden Char aggregated here in the upper river some 60 miles from the salt. Christine and Margret had a mother & daughter double hook-up fishing in two different rafts floating side by side.



By mid August, four out of the five Pacific Salmon species found in the Goodnews system are spawning actively. Pink, Sockeye, Chum and Kings were all on or near spawning redds. The “Trout Bead” rigged with an indicator was the weapon of choice for most anglers and nothing represents Salmon eggs better. For Dolly Varden Char these eggs are irresistible.

We made our first camp on a nice gravel bar where pods of crimson Sockeye were staging to spawn. Behind those Sockeye, waiting for the eggs to drop were hundreds of ravenous Char. All our guests enjoyed catching and releasing them. The log recorded 101 Char released this first afternoon and evening.

During the dinner preparation period Dick and Al ribbed each other with good-natured humor. They have shared hundreds of wilderness camps together over the decades including camps on very remote rivers with us in Alaska. We enjoyed a big Pasta dinner served riverside under fair skies and unwound after a long travel day. As we were eating, the biggest brown Bear we'd seen all year crested a hill on the opposite bank. We were reminded that it's a sign of a healthy ecosystem to have





larger male bears present. Late a light rain nudged us into our tents and lulled us to sleep ending a fine first day on the river.

From the log of August 12, 2016

The fishing was awesome! Day two we shoved off from camp midmorning under fairly heavy cloud cover but fishing was on fire right “out of the gates”. You could fish a drift nearly anywhere

in the river and hook a willing Dolly Varden Char. We found what we call a “Char flat” on river left near a small bluff overlook. For reasons that have never been fully explained Dolly Varden Char are comfortable in 6-12 inches of soft water along the inside bend of gravel bars. This is completely opposite the Rainbow’s preferred habitat for deep water adjacent to woody debris on the outside of river bends. So we fish these “soft water” flats with trout beads and with various top water patterns. Michael Malone was having an excellent day with the “Preparation H” mouse pattern for both Char and Rainbows.

Bruce Dubke built a winning streak hooking more than 10 fish in that run. We floated onward and continued releasing Char until our lunch break at a tributary. A few anglers already had streamer rods rigged and others rigged theirs. Bruce took a really nice 24” Dolly Varden Char stripping a streamer right in the out flow of the tributary. Michael Malone hooked a bright red fish that we initially thought was a Sockeye until we saw the characteristic hooked upper jaw or “kype” of the male Coho Salmon.

This day was planned to be highest raft mileage day of the week and we had to make sure we “cracked off” enough miles to get through the canyon where there are few viable camps. It was strong fishing throughout the canyon with anglers taking char on the surface, with streamers, and trout beads. As we approached the end of the canyon we paddled together watching Christine, casting a streamer, release a lovely 25” char.





We rafted to our 15-mile goal where Dick and Al found aggressive Pink Salmon just upstream from a prospective campsite. That sealed the deal: this bar would make a good camp!



Aubrey filleted some nice Char for dinner and Chef Pete made “Goodnews fish tacos”. The assortment of sautéed veggies, Mexican shredded cheese and greens on a soft corn tortilla brought some of the comforts of home to our gravel bar. A glass of wine. Life was good!

From the log of August 13, 2016

A warm meal on a cold morning. We ate Oatmeal on chilly morning number three to help get our bodies warmed and furnaces stoked for a day on the water. While anglers were enjoying their breakfast, head guide Brian was experimenting with an orange Gurgler top water pattern that we use for Char.



Brian hooked something that went airborne and those of us watching realized it was a bright Coho. That was a fine breakfast spectacle. Michael M slid a net under Brian’s first Coho of the year.

Only a couple hundred yards down from camp, on a reach below a river left bluff, Al and Dick doubled up on a pair of nice Dolly Varden. Afterwards the Dolly fishing began to taper off and we had difficulty finding consistent numbers of fish prior to lunch. The anglers who had switched from egg patterns / trout beads to streamers were releasing a variety of Salmon species with aggressive Pink Salmon the most prevalent. At the end of day three our log recorded just short of four hundred

Char released over 3 days. But now we had passed below the upriver pre-spawn staging area for Char and their occurrence would diminish daily.



We came to a tributary on the right. Dick hooked and landed a fine Coho over 10lbs. Michael M was fishing a mouse on his 5-weight fly rod at the confluence of that tributary, seeking revenge on a rainbow that had recently come unbuttoned, when a small “sip” sucked his mouse under. It was a Coho Salmon on a mouse! Not something that one sees too often. Just down river Kenny landed some really nice Dollies.

We rounded a river bend to find a canoe group camped so we pushed downriver to locate and pioneer a new camp. As Brian got a fire going, chef Pete started cooking his renowned riverside Pizza. For dinner we enjoyed rounds of Pesto pizzas alternated with Red sauce Pizzas with a wide variety of toppings.

For about 20 minutes, the skies opened up and the rain poured down on camp. John “baby-sat” the campfire acting as a wind and rain block while he fed it dry wood. After the storm past, the fire still lived! Michael C fished the head of the bar after dinner and absolutely hammered the Pink Salmon while Michael M led a party across the river by boat to fish a large slough. Pink Salmon were aggressive and it was reported that Coho were taken. We turned in to our tents after a beautiful sunset.

From the log of August 14, 2016

At breakfast we had wildlife in camp. Two young foxes romped around the outskirts of camp and casually dined on spawned out Salmon carcasses along the shore.

They chewed willow sticks, rubbed against last night’s firewood, chased each other and in all ways were photogenic and entertaining for over 20 minutes.



We pushed off and some anglers cast trout beads for Char while others tossed streamers for Salmon. One of the incredible things about the Goodnews River is that you travel through the verdant alpine Ahklun Mountain range for the entire float. The mountains kept us company as the river propelled us ever downward toward the bay. As we descended the pods of migratory Char and Coho Salmon were pushing up. One angler reaping the benefits of the Salmon migration was a large Juvenile Bald Eagle sitting triumphantly on a carcass as we drifted by.



We stopped at a river left slough, which held Coho and ate lunch. Several anglers including Margret, Al, Dick and Michael M took Salmon there. Michael Curci while sight casting to a nice bright Silver Salmon watched it turn and inhale his Kilowatt streamer. We ate that fine fish for dinner!

We rafted a half-mile down to a pool at the Wilderness Boundary of the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. Coho were staged in the pool although it's not that easy to fish. Still

Kenny and Michael M doubled up in the lower end of the pool while Margaret and Al doubled up in the upper pool. Some anglers make it look easy.

As the afternoon passed the fishing tapered off. John, Michael and Christine explored a new channel although no fish were found. Bruce fished the head of the bar where camp would be located and caught a nice bright Coho to accompany Michael C's fish for dinner. We would feast!

Chef Pete served pan fried Salmon fillets and Basmati rice in a camp that is so unique in its character. Rolling tundra on one side of camp and mountainous peaks on the other with a rocky bluff creating a back eddy on the right. We sat and enjoyed the food and our view, appreciating this connection to nature.

From the log of August 15, 2016

Clouds filled the sky again this day. Rafting and casting after breakfast we fished a few hundred yards down to a small tributary we call KoHa creek, Dick struck and landed a nice Coho to start the day. The river was so much wider now having accumulated the many tributaries we'd passed and vastly increased its water volume. Our once modest alpine headwater stream was swollen with the week's rains and the river had both volume and a pushy current. These higher seasonal August flows stimulate more Salmon to move into the river from the estuary and as one descends into the lower river the Coho get brighter, stronger, and more abundant. Looking downstream at this time of year is exciting!



We stopped for lunch at a gravel bar that provided a mixed bag of Coho and Pink Salmon. Almost every angler released something that gave his or her arms a workout. After lunch Pete, Margret and Christine led the downriver charge and stopped in a little unprepossessing slough on river left. It was absolutely loaded with Silvers / Coho and both anglers released about 10 fish each during the 45 minutes they spent there.



We stopped at a bigger slough on river left late in the day. It was large enough for 3 rafts to fish effectively. Michael M was releasing fish after fish in the reach he fished. He had the physical height to wade out deeper than most anglers and a nice double haul to present the fly a bit farther. The result was that he had some really spectacular days including this one where he released over 20 Coho.



Across that slough, Christine and Margaret were doing well. Dick meanwhile hooked a Coho that was as bright as a mirror and over 12 lbs. That was a “down and dirty” battle according to witnesses but the result was that Dick’s Salmon was headed for the dinner table. We had been holding out for a fish of super high quality and this was it.



We set up our camp for the night on the broad river bar and chef Pete served dinner. Afterward Michael M spearheaded a “mission” to row back upriver to the last slough we’d fished. He rowed Aubrey, putting her onto her first Coho on a fly for a memorable evening. Our camp sat under a nearly full moon and which illuminant glow blanketed the camp as we slept.

From the log of August 16, 2016

In the latter half of an Alaska wilderness expedition one relaxes day-on-day feeling increasingly comfortable in a sub-arctic environment that once seemed perhaps a bit foreboding. What we stress as guides is to be relaxed and enjoy the moment while staying alert and not becoming complacent. By mid trip there is fatigue from the long days. One’s hands generally have many cuts from fly leaders and the teeth of the large fish we’ve unhooked. One needs to focus on safety each day but particularly later in the trip.



Our sixth day was a day of big and small adventures. The Pink Salmon fishing was fairly strong and the Coho were crowded in small “side” pockets where we wouldn’t find them earlier in the season. The fishing was challenging for the first half of the day. We scouted many new channels because the boatmen and women could take advantage of the higher than normal water conditions. Pete’s raft explored a side channel on the right below an eagle perch that led them down to a big slough over a mile below their departure from the main channel.



John, Bruce and Margret’s raft explored another new channel about one quarter mile below Pete’s channel but on the other side of the river. That yielded a nice Rainbow, Coho, Sockeye and a Jack King!

We continued downriver taking Coho in small eddies and sloughs but we had to work for them — the fishing was never “stupid”. Later that afternoon, Brian and John pulled their boats into a slough to get out of a “pesky” tail wind. John poked into

the small cut where they could hold position out of the wind. Coho could be seen. It was here that Bruce and Margret fished what they named the “Turtle slough” releasing nearly a dozen Coho, some approaching 15 lbs!

Another newly “pioneered camp” on a river bar where as the sun got lower, the evening turned truly beautiful. Dinner was riverside Sushi prepared by guest chef Brian Malchoff. The Arctic poppy was in bloom on the sand bar and the yellow blossoms added to the rich color of the landscape, as the sun got low. The Willow leaves were now beginning to turn yellow and indeed the whole of the vegetated land from gravel bars to the rolling tundra was turning to autumn colors of muted yellows, oranges, and reds.



From the log of August 17, 2016

Pete loves to explore new channels when he has adventuresome anglers aboard. It is understood

that if a newly “pioneered” channel doesn’t work out that there may be some “sweat equity” involved portaging the raft back to the main river. In any case his team disappeared that morning down a right hand channel to see how it fished. Meanwhile on the main river Dick and Margret both hooked nice Coho in a back eddy we call “Psycho Seam”.



We worked our way down into a long bluff run known as the “Coho Carousel” but while bright Pink Salmon were caught we continued downstream searching for more Coho. Down river we found what we were looking for. Kenny and Bruce were on their game and released enough fish to wear out their arms. Meanwhile Pete’s boat, back from exploring, rowed into a slough that simply doesn’t exist in lower water conditions and there they landed several Coho at a rate of approximately one cast per fish.



A riverside lunch of smoked Salmon, crème cheese, and crackers with wasabi did the trick. We refueled and rested our casting arms. Life was pretty good in the lower Goodnews. While the weather was never heinous this week it was still challenging. Likewise the fishing was never crazy-easy but it was very productive. The camaraderie was first class and that tied it all together.



That afternoon we fished at the base of a bluff full of Bank Swallow nests. Pete and Aubrey’s boats both took really good numbers of Coho. By this point in the trip our angler’s arms were more or less “done in” from casting heavy rods loaded with streamers for days. Still one’s drive to catch ever more of those hard charging Silver Salmon kept the tired muscles moving.

Head Guide Brian intended to pioneer a new camp in a Chum Salmon spawning channel and as he started to lay out the tent arrangements, Margret

lost a bright Coho just as her group was getting ready beach their raft. But she was undaunted and hiked back up to the spot where she lost the fish and hooked and landed a great Salmon in precisely the same spot. That’s perseverance! Speaking of perseverance the tally of Coho released this week was over 200! A good week fishing with good people!



It was chef Pete's last dinner and he served the Salmon Curry and Jasmine Rice meal that he had been perfecting all summer. It was a spectacular dinner. Thank you Pete!

From the log of August, 18, 2016

The final morning was an O-Dark-thirty wake up. We broke camp using our headlamps and flashlights. There was a sense of finality that the season had changed over this week from summer to autumn. The coffee was hot. We made small

talk at the table. It was dark and cold. The tents came down for the last time and were stowed. The rafts loaded for the last time. We headed toward the estuary where some hardy anglers fished while we waited for Bavilla Merritt to collect us into his powerboat and take us to the Goodnews Bay village runway. Homeward and happy with our accomplishments.

