

Wild River Guides

2017 Season Report



August 23rd - August 30th, 2017

The Kukaktlik/ Middle Fork Goodnews at it's Peak.

A group of experienced Bristol Bay anglers assembled in Dillingham for the “season finale” in the last week of August.

From the log of August 23rd & 24th, 2017

We waited on flying weather at Lake Alegnagek for 2 days while the cloud deck was at ground level and no aircraft could pass through the mountains to the west. We entertained ourselves reading and playing cards, with lots of napping and gazing at the rain clouds scudding past.

From the log of August 25th, 2017

We flew outbound through autumnal rain showers, profoundly glad to find our way through the mountain passes to Kukaktlim Lake, the drop off lake for the Kukaktlik River. We'd burned up too much time on prior days waiting for flying weather to fish the Kanektok and opted for the sublime Kukaktlik, also known as the “Middle Fork of the Goodnews”.





Conditions were lovely as we assembled rafts and rigged fly rods. Sunshine and a freshening breeze at the lake, no biting insects. We pushed off and started downriver eager to see what lay ahead. I travelled with Jed Marshal and Judy Pauwels. The three of us last shared a week together on the North Fork of the Goodnews 2 years ago. We recollected those adventures and anticipated more to come.

Rafting down river through the alpine hills and diminutive canyons and bluff sections angler Steve Kurian spotted a bull Caribou as it crested a ridge to the south. His ability to spot animals was a wonderful thing and paid off with lots of sightings over the course of the week.

At camp anglers caught and released a mixed bag of Dolly Varden, Rainbow Trout and Arctic Grayling. Nothing exceptional but a good beginning. Mice were skated, trout beads drifted and streamers swung. The egg imitations did the lion's share of the catching.

From the log of August 26th, 2017

The morning barometer was steady overnight and for the first time in 3 days we passed a night without rain. Jed, Tom, Judy and I saw some interesting birds including a Wandering Tattler, Kingfisher, 3 skeins of Cackling Canada Geese winging south bound, a handful of Northern Harriers, a few juvenile Greater Yellowlegs, and Wilsons Snipe, then at days end a Black Turnstone.

John Jinishian fished with Matt Luck while watching a Bull Moose. Matt took the first 3 Coho of the trip as well as the resident Rainbows, Grayling and anadromous Dolly Varden. We all took nice numbers of Char, each mile more productive than the last.

With the rafts together on a gravel bar for some fishing and lunch we watched 2 Brown Bear moving across and down a small ridge angling toward the river. We really did have some good observations in good light and yet we were never sure of their age or sex. One was quite large and so the question is: was the slightly smaller bear her 4-year-old cub or an extremely well nourished 3 year old? Or was the smaller bear a female in the company of a boar, which would be unusual at this time of year? We speculated and took photos but could not be sure.



In camp that night we experienced a terrific rainstorm, a true downpour during dinner. All the guests and guides were undercover in the wing except John who carried on the Chef's duties creating a dozen personal pan pizzas with his rain jacket hood up. When the rain passed there was 1 inch of rain in the coffee cups on the counter. After dinner the low sun lit up the tundra ridges with golden light.



From the log of August 27th, 2017

In the morning we awoke to the sun peaking out below a low deck of clouds, which is called a "marine Layer" around here. Like other waters our fishing tends to be strong in the mornings and taper off as the day passes, however it is strong longer in cloudy weather and tapers off more rapidly in direct sunlight. In any case we celebrate the overcast! Anglers took as many Char as they wanted near camp as the guides loaded rafts. If I had to put a number on the camp Char fishing it would be above 50 with the larger fish in the deep-water channel right off camp.

The Char fishing remained strong throughout the day with trout beads taking the majority. The river morphology changed this day from a small mountain stream to a medium sized salmon river with the addition of several minor and one major tributary. With the larger water flow the river has, over time, scoured out deep pockets of holding water for salmon. In these pockets we switched to heavier streamer rods and gaudy Coho flies. Anglers fished with great intensity sight casting to pods of Silver Salmon.

28 Coho came to hand over the course of the day's downriver travel. The notable fly patterns were Kilowatts, Megawatts, and large weighted pink and purple streamers. I fished with Matt and Steve, both commercial Salmon fishermen who'd wrapped up their Bristol Bay season in July. I especially appreciated their enthusiasm for trying a variety of fly patterns as we worked out which patterns were most effective for Rainbows, in particular.



At lunch we approached a large gravel bar awash in salmon carcasses and flushed 100 large Glaucous-winged Gulls off their feed. Gulls open up a carcass going through the eye first and then puncture the gill into the abdominal cavity or open the brain. Every gravel and sand bar is covered with carcasses, likely 1000 per mile or more. The amount of biomass decomposing staggers the imagination and with it the input of ocean derived Nitrogen fuels future stream productivity. From Gulls to Mink. From Bears to Eagles and from Wolves to waterfowl all get in on the feast of salmon flesh. Likewise, we get in on the feast and kill one perfect fish every afternoon for the chef.



Bob Erickson provided a fine chrome Coho for the camp this afternoon and Matt Luck gave an incredible seminar on fish butchery. He taught us a new and creative way to “butterfly” the salmon. Thank you Matt! In our tents later the passing light rain showers added to the river and avian “sound-scape” and a Brown Bear or two splashed in the slough near camp. A rich experience.

From the log of August 28th, 2017

At sunrise a pair of Tundra Swans and 13 Magpies flew past in the pastel light while we made coffee. We held our cups looking across the tundra where wind and rain and frost and the cutting action of the river are the natural forces shaping this land. Steve Kurian alerted us to a Brown Bear running across a nearby ridge and we got our binoculars on it amazed at the speed of the bear. It was covering ground like a racehorse. Then we saw the Gray Wolf behind the bear at a full run and we had a ringside seat as the wolf chased the bear out of the area. This is typical wolf behavior if the bear was intruding into a den territory with pups.

We fished and rafted aware that the Rainbows this week were not in typical bankside and woody debris habitat but rather were most abundant in mid channel among spawning salmon. They were eager to take beads or streamers. This is the autumn pattern and anglers have to get out of the mindset of summertime that the ‘Bows are in the “wood”’.



The Coho numbers built with each mile downstream. Every slough had fish and the rafts went “bar hopping” or leapfrogging downriver, anglers getting out and wading gravel bars and swinging the big streamers.

We camped on a truly vast gravel “Plain” certainly large enough to land a Cessna 185 airplane on. Our view was north toward the Main Fork or North Fork of the Goodnews. Just the one ridge dividing the 2 forks separated us. We call the bar we camped on “Tenkara” from some historic Tenkara fly-fishing antics, which took place here. A Red Fox nosed around camp in the evening light. Some settled in around the campfire while others fished late.



From the log of August 29th, 2017

We awoke at dawn to a stiff north wind and checked the barometer. The pressure fell overnight. Tomorrow is our fly out day and I was anxious about weather changes, which might affect our return from the river. Still what can one do? We adapt to the conditions we find and go forward. There was a brown Bear on the divide ridge to the north grazing on Blueberries. Northern Harriers were passing through the valley in migration. Greater White Fronted Geese fed on blueberries in the tundra and Cranes and Swans passed overhead. Steve and Bob Erickson explored a slough below camp, taking 10 Coho before breakfast.

We broke camp and began one of the best days of Coho Salmon angling many of us will ever experience. John Jinishian fished with Alex, his father. I fished with Bob and Tom Truesdell. Pete fished with Steve and Judy. Brian fished with Matt and Jed. It turns out it's the rare angler who can definitively recall at days end whether she or he released 19 Coho or was it 39?

We were well past the numerical consciousness/ counting of fish released that occupy an angler on normal days. This highly intense fishing in fact becomes surreal as yet another fish run the line out toward the backing. When the fishing is



this intense one's experience of time distorts. One chooses to fish dry flies on days like this not because one will take more fish on a pink pollywog but because numbers no longer matter. What matters is the pleasure of watching the fish come to the surface, the jaws slowly opening and then closing to crush the dry fly. One has taken enough fish and everything else is gravy. Anglers took as many fish on the surface as they desired.

The winds increased all day rocking the Willow trees. The gusts cause the leaves to roll over exposing the silver undersides. I looked upriver from time to time and saw the father and son boat fishing dries exclusively and trading off. Father on the oars. Son driving casts through the wind into the quiet water of the slough where the Polly Wog is most effective. Then son John on the oars and Alex casting. I watched Judy putting every muscle of her body behind the graphite working fish after fish to the net. It was a very very good day.



The fishing below our last camp was beyond belief. The number of fish pushing upriver was mind bending. It's likely that no one including the guides had ever caught so many absolutely fresh chrome fish in such a concentrated period. It was very hard to make a cast and not take a fish. The salmon competed for the fly for hours.



How many fish was impossible to say. Perhaps a way to estimate the number taken and released is that it likely takes 5 minutes to hook and land each fish. Therefore 5 anglers were releasing 60 Coho per hour. No one will ever know for sure. No angler will ever forget that last night.



From the log of August 30th, 2017

All night the North wind howled. In the morning it was cold and blustery, yet blessedly dry. It took a team effort to maintain windbreaks in the kitchen and keep the camp stove functioning to make coffee. We broke the last camp efficiently, yet not without questioning, "Why were we leaving at the absolute peak of the Coho run?"