

ALASKA'S WILD RIVER GUIDES

2018 Season Report

July 30th - August 6th, 2018
Kukaktlim River Fly-Fishing Expedition



**50 miles of Rainbows,
Char, plus the Coho
arrive!**

**From the log of July 30th,
2018**

Our attempt to fly out was unsuccessful and we knew we would not be able to get the entire group out together. It's a huge gamble to try to get part of a group out, especially when the

forecast looks unfavorable for the following couple days. We didn't know it at the time, but we were about to go down in the record books. This would be the longest stretch of un-flyable days we have seen in our 15 years of operation. Instead of separating our group, we opted to keep the entire group together and move up to Rick and Denise's lake house for the night. It was a lovely evening with a bright sun and a gorgeous evening. We slept in the comfort of beds with a roof over our head for another night. We ate well, stayed warm, and dry with a beautiful view. We rested in comfort ready to take another shot at getting out on the river in the morning.



From the log of July 31st, 2018

We awoke the next morning to heavy fog and knew that we were going nowhere fast. We had some experienced guests on the river this week and they knew the risks that come with fishing some of the most pristine Salmon water in the world. When we are weathered in and unable to fly out to the river, the group still has to be on call. We can't leave our pilots waiting if there is a break in the weather and they can get us out. By 2:30 PM, if the weather shows little signs of improvement, we usually call it for the day. At this point we began to launch missions to fish the Wood River, which was walking distance from the lake house. We also had the option to fish off the dock was a good intercept point for migrating Salmon. The water in the Wood River was record high and holding water for salmon was limited. There were a few productive pockets that our talented guide staff discovered. Bailey and Francie went on a mission to find some good fishing below the wood river bridge. They found a great pocket and managed to hook and land two pink Salmon, a chum Salmon and a nice Rainbow! Hank also fished the bridge and caught a nice chum salmon. These fish are bulldogs and even when you get them close the fight it not over. This fish took another run after he was at Hank's feet and snapped the tip of his 8-weight but this was not the end of this rod. Joe and Tracy made their way down to the dock and got a little casting practice in. Micheal, Tom, Mike and Eric explored the bridge and found a few willing Pink salmon between the group. We enjoyed fish tacos for dinner as we looked out over mission bay.

From the log of August 1st, 2018

We had developed physical marker for our chance of success getting out to the field by the third morning. At the far end of Lake Aleknagik lay Mt. Mable. The peak of the mountain sits at about 1200' and





we knew that if we could see the top of Mt. Mable, we may have success in getting out. Conditions remained more or less the same around the lake and the pilots in the region reported conditions to the west that they would not be able to safely navigate. We stayed in touch with our pilots every few hours and got several new reports from weather cams, pilots, and float parties already in the west. Our friends down the street run a

small store called Wood River Market that was typically open daily for espresso and cookies. Most of the guests took the short walk to the store daily. The day dragged out as conditions worsened. We took on another task to fix the rod that Hanks chum had broken the night before. Brian and John worked on the rod and were able to heat the guide and remove the pieces of graphite so they could remount the tip top guide. Hank was able to fish that rod for the rest of the week. We realized that we had a very slim chance of getting out by 2 PM and began to make plans to fish around the lake. Several anglers drove up to the Narrows where Mission bay begins on lake Aleknagik. Joe and Hank paddled up to the same area with canoes accompanied by Bailey and John. Joe was first to come tight; a slice of silver took off making his reel sing. Before long, he landed the first Coho of the season for any guest with WRG. Such an accomplishment is worthy of praise. Bailey and Hank



were fishing the north drift and caught the second Coho of the season in addition to a pink salmon and a nice rainbow trout. Tom and Michael both grinded it out fishing below the bridge and caught nice Pink salmon. We all reconvened for dinner at the house and had some unexpected guests visit in the evening. The day prior, Bailey and Francie had seen a cow moose with two calves in the area. Tom and Michael were fishing the dock after dinner focused on catching a few more fish. The Cow moved





into the backyard to graze on the nearby willows. The Calves began to play in the yard, bucking up and down and chasing each other around. We all had a incredible vantage point from the window but Michael and Tom were really in the heart of the action for an experience none of us will every forget.

From the log of August 2nd, 2018



On our 3rd morning at the lake, Mt. Mable still remained shy and the fog to the west was blocking us from our destination of Pegati Lake and the Kanektok. At this point we would have only 5 nights to complete the 100 mile long Kanektok if we could make it out by the afternoon but the forecasts were not looking favorable. The guides began to draw alternative plans for shorter rivers. We had established a backup plan to get to the Middle Fork of the Goodnews once

the weather lifted. We ate well and sat in limbo for the first half of the day. Tracy and Joe continued to fish down on the dock. Mike, Michael, Eric and Tom were hardcore anglers and it was difficult to keep them off the water. If they had a few minutes to get down and fish the dock or the bridge, that's where they could be found. Francie and Hank went for a canoe mission up and Francie caught 5 pink salmon and 1 Coho. Hank caught 2 pink salmon a bit later while fishing with Joe. Later in the afternoon, Joe and Tracy went for their own canoe journey and Joe caught a Coho. Eric worked all the best spots for all they were worth. He caught his first pink at the Bridge, then another pink and Sockeye at the narrows while fishing from the Canoe with John. He returned from the narrows and fished the dock hard and was able to get his first Coho on the fly as well. It was a very productive day for the young angler. Francie and Tracy went for a hike up towards Meadow road in the afternoon to stretch their legs and explore some new scenery. Everyone did his or her best to stay optimistic. We had





gotten our share of practice in the local water and we were ready to get into the true bush. We got a very strong report for good weather the following day and everyone went to sleep hopeful that we would be able to get out on the river the following day.

From the log of August 3rd, 2018

Everyone woke early to a clear view of Mt. Mable in all its beauty. The sun peeked out early and we realized that we would be getting out to the river. Spirits were high and we were all ready to get into the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. The planes were on the dock by 8am and we were loaded up and ready to depart in no time. We were rewarded for our waiting in bad weather with a beautiful flying day. We had unimpeded views across the landscape. The first plane touched down on Kukatlim

lake just after 9am and we got to work blowing up boats. The other planes weren't far behind and we were able to depart the lake just after 12pm. We pushed for 4 hours and were able to cover about 15 miles in that time. During the first hour of pushing, Brian's and John's boats



got a good look at a young bear that was running away after hearing Brian's "Hey Bear!" calls. After we covered a good portion of the 18-mile catch up day, we opened up the fishing season. Mike fished a Gurgler and was able to catch his first Grayling on his very first cast! He also caught a Rainbow and a 24" Dolly Varden, on a Gurgler!

Michael and Mike doubled up on some great Char in true spawning color. Eric fished a bead and put a hurting on the dollies, Grayling, rainbows and even caught a Jack King salmon. Tom caught 2 Dolly Varden that were 28" long out of the same hole. We think that it may have been the same hungry fish caught twice. We arrived at a lovely camp at the confluence with the true Middle Fork by 6:30pm and began to set up our home for the night. Everyone was still hungry for fish and all the guests dispersed across the shore to fish the waters, alive with fish. Joe caught a nice 20" Rainbow on a mouse fly just outside of camp. The water was electric, and everyone's rods were bent as we looked down the shoreline. It was difficult to pull people away from the river that night, even with the smells of Pizza wafting through the air. We all enjoyed dinner together and gave thanks that we were finally on the river.





From the log of August 4th, 2018

Most guests awoke early and eager to get a little fishing in before breakfast began. Everyone was ready to explore the river in a full day of fishing. We got our morning protein and loaded up the boats to hit the river. The notes from the logs read, "Everyone catches lots of char". We were finally immersed in the spectacular fishing we had been seeking. More Dolly Varden Char were caught on this day then any other day of the season. Over 200 fish were caught and released. Francie started off the morning with a 28" Dolly on a streamer. The Dolly fishing stayed consistent for the entire group and Eric experienced another day where he lost count of the number of fish he caught. Michael also caught more fish then he could count. Tom caught two 15lb King Salmon as by-catch. One ate his bead and one ate a purple streamer. Both

were fought well and released quickly. Hank also caught two large Jacks in the 10 lb range on the streamer. Including jacks, more kings were caught on this day then any other day of the season, 24 total were caught and released as by-catch. Joe and Tracy both caught char up to 27" and everyone had a smile on their faces by the end of the day. Just before we arrived at camp, Francie caught a 20" Rainbow that ripped line and was chased around with the boat. Luckily she had Hank in the seat next to her to get a good net on the fish! We made camp at an old camp we had not used in a couple years but it was perfect for our group. We enjoyed Salmon curry and the entire group got together to collect firewood and make a lovely campfire. We roasted S'mores until the sun got low and everyone retired to the comforts of their tents.

From the log of August 5th, 2018

We were now in the lower river and we had traveled about 40 miles in just a few short days. We broke down camp and got





moving early. Overcast skies and intermittent rain would be a theme for the day. The Char in the lower river were a bit more spaced out than the days prior. Coho had been on the guests' minds since we left the lake. We had seen very few in the river thus far but we were getting closer to the ocean and the fish that were pouring into the system. Hank caught the first Coho of the day while fishing on Brian's boat. It's always at this



point where you feel like it's going to be easy to catch these fish the rest of the day. This moment always replays itself in your head as the day gets late and the group struggles to find a dinner fish. Hank's fish was released seeing as it was quite early in the morning. Many anglers were throwing streamers and catching a variety of salmon species. All five species of salmon were caught on this day. More chum salmon were caught on this day

then any other day of the season, over 20 fish were caught and released. The girls boat with Francie, Tracy and Bailey continued to do well with Char and spotted a Red Fox milling around the river.

Tracy caught a nice rainbow trout just before lunch. We broke for lunch at a bar with a big slough at the bottom end of it. Joe, Hank and Mike all caught Coho out of this pocket prior to lunch. We put Joe and Mike's fish in the same net to see which would be a better eating size for dinner and ended up releasing Joe's fish to continue its spawning run. After lunch, we started to find more Coho. Tom got a





bright fish just after lunch. We came through the weir channel which wasn't under operation this year due to the high water but the structures were all still in place. The winds picked up aggressively in the afternoon and we experienced



some gusts over 30 mph which made for some interesting fishing conditions. Eric did catch a nice 23" rainbow that catapulted out from underneath a pod of Coho and grabbed his fly. The group caught a few more Coho and we decided to make some miles into this aggressive headwind. Brian pulled in the lead boat and John's boat drafted behind him. Tom and Mike and Joe and Hank sat in the bow of each boat and shared jokes while the captains pushed into a fierce headwind. The wind died off a bit in the evening not long after we got into camp. Brian rolled fresh Silver Salmon sushi for the group to enjoy. Michael shared some very interesting tracks with the group created by the vegetation getting pushed in the predominant wind direction. A curious seal joined us in camp. He would swim up river under the water and pop up at the top of the bar and poke his head up as he drifted by in the current. It provided some good evening entertainment.



From the log of August 6th, 2018

This was supposed to be our fly out day but conversations with our pilots the night prior indicated that it would be difficult to get to us with poor visibility. We slept later than we do on most takeout mornings. All Salmon species will run in with the tide and tend to move more during the night. We saw this as an opportunity at a fresh group of fish in the lower part of the river. Brian dragged his raft up our bar and rowed up and across the river to hit a flat where we had caught fish in the past. Eric and Mike doubled up on Coho initially and then each caught one more. We shuttled a few more people up and Joe captained his own boat

to bring anglers across the river. We spent a lot of the morning waiting to hear if our pilots would be able to pick us up. We ate a big lunch and prepared for another update. We spoke with our pilots and they thought they could get two light-weight people with their personal gear out. They were already picking up a group of 4 from our designated pick up location and they were willing to leave rafts with us so we could get Tracy and Francie out. We packed Brian's boat with their gear and they rowed hastily to make the rendezvous with Rick in a tight travel window. The rest of the group was not far behind.



We got down to the landing zone just as the Beaver was taking off. We knew the rest of us would not be able to get out but we proceeded to break down rafts and stack equipment. We called in a pick up from the Yu'pik village of Goodnews Bay. The 10 of us sat and drank the last of our beers. Joe Merritt and Sam picked us up from the Landing zone in two boats and we were able to get all of our gear in three total boatloads. Bavillia Merritt, our

usual boatman was waiting on the beach. Still spry at the young age of 82, he performed laps with his ATV and trailer to shuttle all our gear up to Wayne's cabins on the top of the hill. The three small cabins were a tight squeeze for the 10 of us but it was good to be warm and dry. We cooked up soup for dinner and traded stories from the week. Just after our dinner was complete, Joe Merritt came to the cabins with a big pan of Pizza left over from the river lodge. I think everyone was just pretending to be full from the soup because many slices of Pizza disappeared not long after its delivery. We went to sleep with hopes of more favorable flying weather in the morning.

From the log of August 7th, 2018

The group awoke early and the guides began to call every reputable wheeled plane pilot we could contact to get people out and hopefully make their flights on time. The weather was much better and we even had a lovely sunrise to boost our hopes. It took three separate airplanes at three separate times to get everyone out but all were able to make their flights include Brian who was set to fly to Spain for a wedding 48 later. The day was exhausting but a success for getting everyone out safely. It might have been a more unorthodox then we were used to but we were all richer from the experience and humbled by the power and beauty of Alaska.