

# ALASKA'S WILD RIVER GUIDES

## *2019 Season Report*



June 28th - July 5th, 2019

## Kanektok River Fly Fishing Expedition

**The season opens with 100 miles of Rainbows, Char, Salmon, Grayling, Wildlife and camaraderie**

**From the trip log of June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

For the first trip of each season there is always some uncertainty as to what the river conditions will be out west on the refuge. We prepare for spring high water, the start of the salmon run and, hungry resident species. On our initial trip down any river for the season we have to make sure to stay vigilant to any changes in the river since the previous autumn.



All of the guests arrived in Dillingham in the afternoon and each angler unpacked out of their travel luggage and into our waterproof dry bags. As a team, we discussed what to expect from the fishing, navigational hazards, weather and wildlife. With a drink in hand, we went over our pre-trip briefings and it was

apparent the group was mentally prepared to get out on the river. We filled our bellies with fresh Sockeye Salmon got to know each other a bit better and we turned in to enjoy our beds while looking forward to spending tomorrow night on the gravel bar.

### **From the trip log of June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

On a typical fly out day we usually need to wake up at the crack of dawn but we were able to rest until 7am before we got the coffee coursing through our bodies.

We enjoyed a civilized bacon and egg breakfast as while waiting for the call from our pilot's wife, Denise. After breakfast, everyone organized their gear and when we got the call that it was time to wader up, the group was ready. Everyone piled into the Van and headed to Shannon's pond to divide the gear into balanced planeloads. Under favorable blue skies we flew westbound, bound for Pegati Lake and the Kanektok River Headwaters. Our first two planes landed at the 11:45am and the guides and guests worked together to get the planes unloaded swiftly. John and Bailey got to work building rafts. Our final planeload landed a little before 2pm and we loaded up the gear and pushed off the lakeshore and down the river at 3pm. After a few miles, the first boat saw a



young moose who was spooked down river by the sight of the raft. We made camp on a small island gravel bar that was perfect for our 8-person group and Pete began cooking up a big pasta dinner. We refueled with food and wine after a big day of travel and moving gear from cars, planes and boats.

Water conditions were higher than average but that made our travel swift and efficient. In the early season, before the salmon run is in full swing the resident species (rainbows and grayling) are keyed in on natural morsels like smolt, mice, sculpin and insects. The anglers were eager to get a taste of the Alaskan fishing that was in front of them. It was a beautiful sun filled evening and a warm welcome to our first day

on the river. Greg caught a nice rainbow wading below camp while throwing a smolt pattern. Paul did a little exploring and caught several nice Rainbows and a Grayling around camp. After dinner most of the anglers got out of their waders and sat under the wing with a beer or glass of wine enjoying the Alaskan landscape. Adam was eager to keep fishing and stayed in his waders to take advantage of the almost 24 hours of light during early July. He waded across the side channel below camp and provided some evening entertainment for the rest of us as he hooked and fought several nice rainbows. Greg also remained in his waders and he hopped into the water to assist Adam and net his fish. It was the first of many examples of great teamwork we would experience. Our first trip of the season is certainly our best trip for resident species like Rainbows and Grayling but we also tend to experience pestering bugs, especially with light winds. The buzzing mosquitoes reminded us that we needed to be diligent about zipping up our tents so we could sleep in peace. The light still filled the skies as we got cozy in our tents and the sun eventually dropped over the horizon after midnight while we all slept hard from the long travel day.



### **From the trip log of June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Our early season trips are special to people for a lot of reasons. The long days, nice weather and hungry fish are all alluring factors for joining Wild River Guides for a float in early July. Many of our guests look forward to an opportunity to catch their first fish on a Mouse pattern. There is a level of adrenaline associated with any top water eat, but the experience of fishing these rodent patterns is completely unique.



Adam started the morning throwing a mouse pattern for hungry post spawn Rainbows. The first couple of miles yielded little action but he persisted. As we

came up on the first major tributary of the Kanektok he made a perfect cast along the shoreline and his fly was sucked under. After a nice tussle we slid a strong 20" male Rainbow into the net. Several other anglers decided to throw the mouse and several nice Grayling were caught. We were able to hike up some small creeks and sight cast to fish. Pete and Bailey's boats spotted a cow Moose with two calves moving through the Tundra effortlessly. While fishing with the streamer, Mike caught a nice 20-inch Rainbow. The captains Log stated, "Everyone had a good day catching fish."

Each year the high water and ice reshapes the river and gravel bars shift, and at times completely disappear.



Finding camps during our first trips of the season can occasionally be challenging. On our second night the gravel bar we intended to stay on was occupied, not by other anglers, but by highly migratory Arctic Terns. The Terns are an incredible species that have one of the longest migrations of any animal. They travel each year from the southern tip of

Argentina all the way up to the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge to reproduce. We learned that the Terns were nesting on the bar as Pete walked up to check out the gravel and was pecked on the head. Eventually we found a bar that was well suited for a group of our size but it had taken some extra time. The guides set up camp and started dinner and the anglers continued to fish while Mike started building a fire. After a full day of fishing Paul hadn't had enough and we pretty much had to drag him off the river for dinner. The landscapes, wildlife and fishing make Alaska a place where it's easy to lose track of time. After dinner the

group sat around Mike's campfire and enjoyed the warmth before retiring to our tents for the night.



### **From the trip log of June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

We arose early in the morning and loaded up on a hearty breakfast before a long day of floating. Our morning started with

a little Jungle tour as we navigated through overhanging willows and submerged woody debris that took a few of our flies. Fishing for Rainbows was consistent around the wood in the morning but the numbers of migrating salmon were still low. Adam caught another nice Rainbow on the Prep-H mouse. Late in the morning we came across a deep pool where two braids merged creating a big eddy containing several hundred spawning Sockeye. We fished around them looking for hungry migratory fish. Vince swung a black and white streamer



through the pod and caught a nice bright 20" Char. The presence of the Char is a good sign that more migratory species were entering the river.

While we stopped for lunch, Greg continued fishing hard and enticed a nice Rainbow to eat his fly and entertain the group as we ate. After lunch we continued catching

Rainbows and Grayling out of woody sections as we floated. Just before pulling into camp Paul wrestled with a big Chum on his 7-weight that Pete was able to net for him. He quickly came to the realization that a 7- weight was a little bit light for the task of messing with these tough salmon. The fishing lessons we learn the hard way are the ones that tend to stick with us.

We arrived in the late afternoon at a traditional camp, which we call Falcon Bluff. The bar didn't have much wood on it, and we needed to appease Mike's desire for pyrotechnics. Pete rowed across the river and collected some from a downstream bar. At this point in the trip Mike was dignified as our resident "fire starter."

It was pizza night on the river and everyone decided to enjoy it around Mike's fire. The group sat by the fire trading stories from the day. While doing dishes Pete looked up at the bluff and saw something spook from the edge of the cliff. Seconds later, a lone wolf emerged around the corner. He was upwind and could not pick up our scent or sound. He studied us from his perch 150 feet up for another 30 seconds. Pete alerted the guests at the fire of the Wolf and they were able to catch a glimpse before he spooked back over the ridge. This was the only wolf viewing of the season and was of an un-characteristically long duration.

## From the trip log of July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019

We awoke to a chilly morning but luckily Mike was fast to start up a campfire to warm our bones. The cloud cover burned off and we had high sun in the mid morning. The bright rays were useful to spot and target fish. While exploring a side channel, Greg sight cast to a nice Rainbow Trout that crushed his streamer.



The fishing seemed to come in waves. This section of the river was a combination of productive woody banks and straight sections where fishing was slow. Vince worked the wood with a streamer and pulled a few nice Rainbows. We stopped for lunch while enjoying the views of a long cliff just down river. After lunch Paul almost immediately hooked into a nice 22 inch Char that we kept for dinner.

As our boats continued down the river we decided to take a small channel only a little wider than our rafts. Pete and John's boats saw a Great Horned Owl in the side channel. John's boat didn't pay much attention to the Owl because Paul was hooked up on a 20 inch Rainbow that they were working hard to get into shallow water. Everyone was laughing that John nearly went over his waders as the boat drifted off the shoreline when he was netting the fish. We passed over where the weir is generally set up. For 2019, there was no commercial harvest in Quinhagak Village so the necessity for fish counting did not exist. The structure of the weir still lay on the bank and the standing wave spanned the course of the river where the gate was set up in years past.

The fish that we had decided to keep for dinner had flesh that was too worm infested for our standards. A new mission was launched to catch fresh Char for dinner and

with a little help from a magic bead, Vince and Paul quickly got it done. After



dinner, Pete brought out his Spey rod and Adam, Vince and Paul took turns practicing and/or learning the basics of a Spey cast. Vince managed to swing up a nice bright fish and entertain the rest of the group. We settled at another evening fire built by Mike and traded stories from the day. Greg fished late into the evening and the group celebrated the day with a nightcap from Paul's Scotch.

### **From the trip log of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019**

The day started a bit gloomier than the previous days of sun. We donned our raincoats, ready to test them against Alaskan rains. We had a hot oatmeal breakfast to combat the chill of the weather. Rain is a normal part of the forecast for any day in western Alaska and the anglers were eager to get on the river.

Some people have fishing related goals in mind prior to their trip and others develop them over the course of the week. After seeing Adam's success with the mouse, Paul decided he wanted to try this method. Paul not only got the fish he was looking for but a bonus visual experience! He cast his fly towards an overhanging tree, began to skate his mouse, and a nice rainbow shot out of the wood like a missile, smashing his fly 20 feet off the bank. Sights like this never



get old. Mike began his day throwing his 8-weight for big fish. He was able to land a big chrome Chum salmon after a hard fight. These silver fish, fresh from the ocean are a ton of fun to target! It's a pivotal moment in an angler's life when they catch their first Pacific Salmon. Adam's goal for the day was to check this box as well. He achieved his goal by bringing a nice Sockeye into the

net. He also caught several nice Rainbows on mouse patterns.

We began to see a steady numbers of Kings throughout the day and we were able to wade fish and sight cast to a few of them. Armed with his 9- weight, Vince targeted a pod of resting fish, and hooked and landed a nice King Salmon. Additionally, he caught five other species throughout the course of the day (Rainbow, Grayling, Dolly Varden, Chum and Sockeye Salmon). We made a pit stop at a steep bluff we coined as "Broken Ankle Bluff" and discovered some absolutely huge Wolf tracks. While we seldom see the Wolves (we got lucky on night 3), the frequent signs remind us of the truly wild landscape we are in.



It was a steady day of fishing in overcast conditions that turned in to a sunny afternoon. Once we reached camp Greg insisted on continuing to fish and was rewarded with a nice Rainbow at the camp bar. We got the tents set up and many anglers put on bug nets prior to dinner. The winter of 2019 was substantial enough to create a good snow pack on the Togiak National Wildlife

Refuge, which is great for water levels and navigation but generally creates ideal conditions for breeding mosquitoes. On this evening, the sun was shining and the wind was light and the bugs were aggressive. They even managed to get through the smoke screen provided by Mike's fire. The bugs are unpredictable much like the weather in western Alaska and as the sun got lower they "went to bed" and left us in peace.

### **From the trip log of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

There is a point in our early season Kanektok trips where we start to see better numbers of Salmon and our guest's focus tends to shift away from our resident species and towards the migratory Pacific Salmon.



Chum Salmon get a bad rap because they are not the best suited for fresh table fare, but they are true heavy weight contenders when hooked with a fly rod. They will battle all the way to the net and they are responsible for a great deal of broken graphite over the course of a season. It was a gloomy morning but we found a few

pockets stacked with fish and after throwing a streamer into them it became clear what we had found was a pod of the underrated Chum. Adam and Greg

were the first to one of these holes and they were able to pull fish out of a fast water section riddled with woody debris. Adam's fly line did get broken on one of these strong fish and Vince came to the rescue and generously let him borrow one of his backups. We ended up setting up our lunch on this bar and the other anglers got a chance to get in on the fun.

Throughout the course of a season, we have a lot of parents and their children come to float with Wild River Guides. It's always special to share a trip with family and the moments that transpire are memorable to say the least. After Greg's success in the lunch spot, he let his son Mike step in to take a shot while the guides were setting up. Mike hooked into a nice Chum and fought it expertly in the fast current. Greg stepped up with the net and scooped Mike's fish in a nice father-son bonding moment. Just after lunch Pete decided to make a few casts and see if he couldn't find a fresh Sockeye for dinner. In just 3 casts, he was tight to a quality fish that became our supper.



Vince had gotten a taste of the King Salmon the day prior but he was hungry for a shot at a larger trophy. While fishing with Pete, they worked a pod of Kings hard and changed flies several times before they watched a 25-pounder eat his bright green fly. Once hooked, it was off to the races to chase the fish down with the raft and after a 12-minute fight, they slid the fish into the net, snapped a few photos and released it to continue on its spawning journey. This fish was one of the largest Kings of the 2019 season.

We see a lot of anglers coming from traditional western trout backgrounds who join us for floats in western Alaska. Our Leopard Rainbows are unique to the Bristol Bay Watershed and many anglers are interested in targeting wild strains of fish they find in their home waters. Greg is an angler who spends a lot of time targeting Trout in the lower 48 and his appreciation for the Rainbows during the week was apparent. He landed a nice rainbow in the



afternoon after catching many salmon over the course of the day.

The sun came out in the late afternoon as we made camp in a dried up channel with plenty of firewood. Paul, Adam and Vince all caught nice bright Sockeye even though we already had a nice fish for dinner. The fresh Sockeye melted in our mouths after a long river day. It was another day in the books and another evening fire by Mike to combat the insects and keep us warm. We thanked the fish gods for the bounty and rested well in the comfort of our tents.

### **From the trip log of July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Spending the Fourth of July on the river is a true privilege. On a holiday generally associated with fireworks and gluttony, the sights and sounds of the river gives us a chance to get back to more simple roots and enjoy unspoiled wild habitats for the nations' holiday. It was our final full day of the trip and the group shared mixed feelings about the conclusion. Even with sore bodies from a week on the river the thought of the last day generally drives people to fish a bit harder.

We were in the lower river and the Salmon were moving into the river by the hundreds. Most anglers were throwing streamers exclusively in search of the big fish they



had gotten a taste of over the past few days. The Chum were plentiful and willing to eat flies, which made for a fun day. Greg crushed Chum all day and Mike got a bonus and caught his first King of the trip! Adam had a good day and caught three species of salmon and decided to target Rainbows with the mouse getting one more nice fish in the late afternoon. Vince caught Chum, Char, and one more King to end the trip strong. Along with many Chum, Paul hooked some truly acrobatic Sockeye in the afternoon that provided a spectacle for the passing rafts.

We stopped for lunch and had a smoked salmon lunch as our Alaskan version of 4<sup>th</sup> of July hot dogs and hamburgers. Throughout the day we passed by many locals who had taken their boats up river to enjoy the holiday with picnics, fishing, and family time. We always have positive interactions with the residents of the Yupik village of Quinhagak.

The high sun made for a lovely warm afternoon and provided great visibility for spotting fish. Late in the afternoon we were in need of a fish for dinner so the guides went to work and John was able to rope a Sockeye for our Sushi night. After finding a nice unoccupied gravel bar with great fishing and nice pea sized stones, we set up camp and enjoyed the refreshment of a cold beer in the hot sun. Adam, Vince, and Paul continued to fish right up until the dinner bell rang.



Sushi is always a fan favorite and everyone ate their fill to recharge their batteries from a long day of fishing. After our sugar filled Joe-Joe dessert cookies the anglers were restless and stayed up late taking the final pulls off Paul's scotch and trading stories about the week. It was a perfect evening and there was not a single cloud in the sky. Anglers made their final casts and we closed out the evening with a beautiful sunset at midnight. The colorful sky gave us spectacular natural fireworks on the Fourth of July as we went to bed.



### **From the trip log of July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

We had an early start and a beautiful morning. We got our fix of caffeine, packed up our gear, broke camp and started our row down to Quinhagak. We arrived at the "Marina" and parked our rafts at 8:45am among the cluster of aluminum

boats that lined the shore. We broke down all the gear so it would fit in an airplane once again and waited for our village transport vehicles. The van and truck arrived around 10:30am and drove us to the airstrip. Our pilot Eric arrived right at 12pm and we were able to load all the guests with Pete into the Navajo. Bailey and John stayed with the gear and waited for the second planeload. Everyone landed back in Dillingham safely and got a much needed and refreshing shower and a cold Beer. It was a great week to kick the season off with phenomenal people, fish and weather.