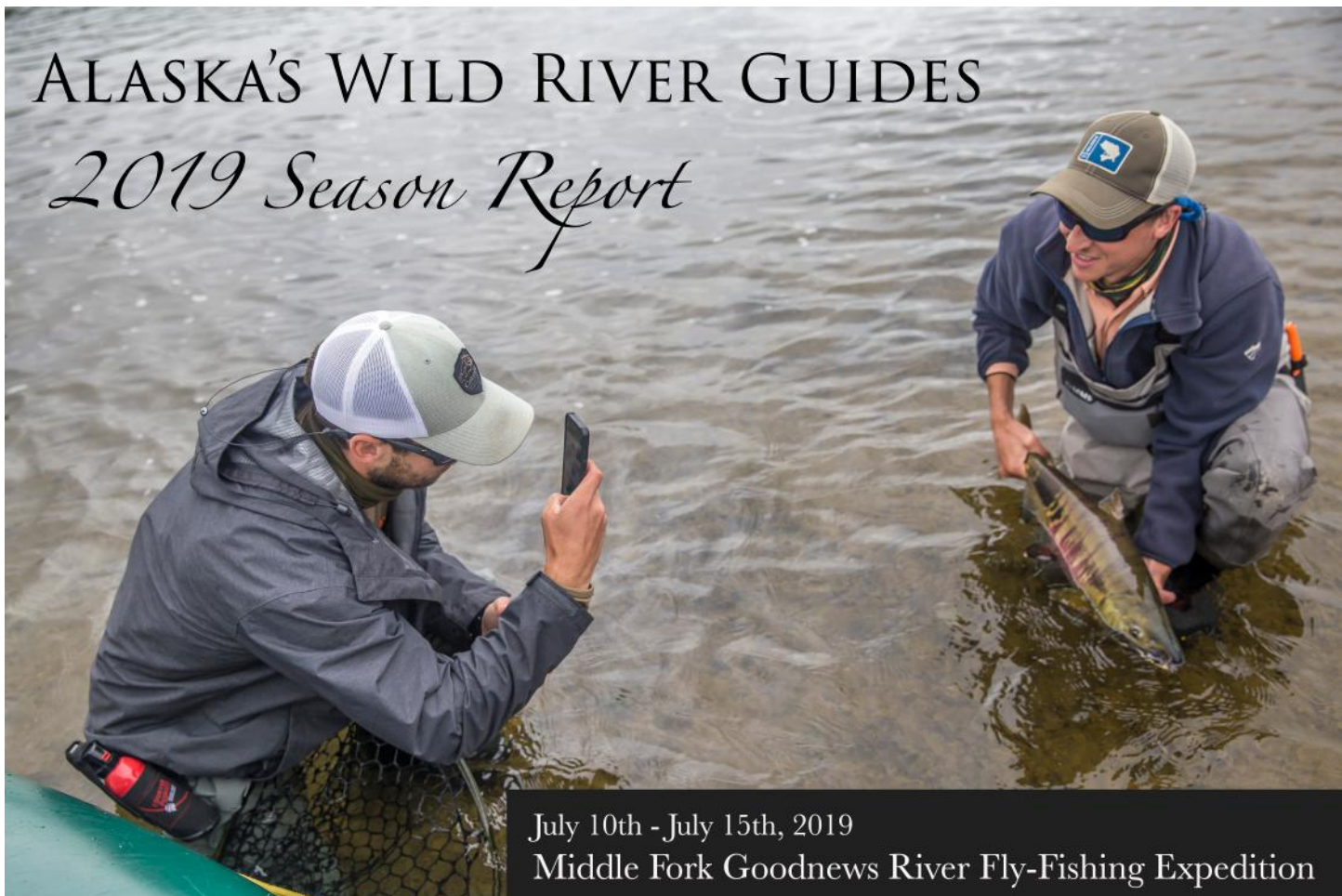


# ALASKA'S WILD RIVER GUIDES

## *2019 Season Report*



July 10th - July 15th, 2019

Middle Fork Goodnews River Fly-Fishing Expedition



**50 wild miles of Rainbow, Char, Sockeye, Kings & Wildlife.**

**From the trip log of July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Although no members of the group had ever fished with Wild River Guides, it was apparent that this was a hardcore group of anglers. We had a group of friends traveling from New

Mexico in search of new adventures, a father and son looking to make new memories and progress their fly fishing skills, a hardcore well-traveled angler searching for new goals, and two friends enjoying the experiences of their mid-twenties. The group meshed well together and was a pleasure to have on this special river in the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge.

On fly out day we woke up by 7am and made sure to fuel up on plenty of coffee, bacon and eggs before heading to the floatplane pond. We divided up the gear, guides and guests into two Cessna and two Beaver loads. Everyone was eager to get to the river as we awaited the instructions of our pilots to get us out safely.

While the rest of the state was suffering from terrible wildfires, the skies were clear in Dillingham. Our destination frequently has different weather and we encountered overcast skies when we reached the headwaters of Kukaktlim lake.



We landed smoothly surrounded by dramatic mountains and the vibrantly blooming hillsides of early July. The entire group was in the field ready to push off the shore by mid-afternoon.



The Middle Fork of the Goodnews is special for so many reasons and the small size fosters intimate experiences. Over the past few weeks the Sockeye Salmon had entered the river in force and as soon as we moved from the lake into the river currents, we began spotting them. Within the first mile we ran into numbers of Sockeye so great that when we spooked a school, they created a wave that rocked our 14-foot rafts! On the float down from the lake the lead boat spotted a female Caribou cresting a riverside bluff, a treat to see because their numbers have declined in recent years and

our sightings have become less common. Many anglers were focused on the fish but Pat was focused on his surroundings and exhilarated by the magnitude of the landscape. At the end of the day we are all lucky just to be able to travel in the pristine wild lands of the Refuge.

After three and a half hours of floating we arrived at a nice gravel bar well suited to accommodate our twelve-person group for the night. It was early evening but we still had hours before the sun would set. We released the eager anglers to explore the fishery while the guides set up tents and started cooking dinner. The New Mexico boys (Chris, Steve & Win) explored downriver and caught Grayling, Rainbows and Dollies. Brian caught a lovely 22-inch Arctic Char while fishing around camp. Although we don't catch many of these fish outside of the Lakes, exceptions are found in the upper river. While Arctic's are genetically identical to the Sea-Run Dolly Varden Char, they never go to sea and have greater



yellow pigments on their bellies. The late afternoon sun spread rays over camp and provided a warm welcome for our first night on the River. We piled on a big pasta dinner and many anglers continued fishing after dinner late into the night. The captain's log stated "six species were caught at camp one." We would see if we could add to the list in the morning.



### **From the trip log of July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

It usually takes a couple days for each person to get accustomed to the backcountry at the start of each trip. This trip was full of energetic anglers who were happy to fish hard and enjoy every minute of the day. They woke up early and fished before breakfast and stayed up late fishing after dinner. We ate a late breakfast and departed the gravel bar at 10am.

Pete's boat spotted a cow Moose with a calf on the hillside a couple of miles down from camp. It is incredible to see how large a Moose is when it is only a little over a month old. Pat and Jonathan fished side by side as father and son much of the week. Their teamwork and level of respect for each other was a true pleasure. Their life experiences were truly captivating to hear about and they were always welcome company in the boat. They caught several Dollies and Grayling in the morning and Jonathan caught a nice Rainbow that Pat netted for him.

The captain's log reads, "The King Salmon run was the strongest we have ever seen in this fork." Our King Salmon get large and eat heavy flies. If you spend a few hours targeting them, your arm will feel it the next day! Pat caught the first King Salmon of the trip while sight casting to a pod of fish. Mike also caught a 15-pound King and two Jacks. While Jack Kings only spend a year at sea, they are still sexually mature and tough fighters pound for pound. Good numbers of Dolly Varden had come into the river and we caught them consistently throughout the day, including some big males. Adam caught a 24-inch Char and Brian also landed a nice 23-inch Rainbow on a streamer. Chris caught his first bright Sockeye on a bead.

The fishing was steady throughout the day but it improved even more when we reached our camp at the confluence with



the Middle Fork in the late afternoon. While the guides set up the tents, the anglers fished hard in the 70-degree Alaskan heat. Everywhere the anglers explored they found good fishing. The New Mexico guys walked up the true middle Fork and in a few short hours caught over 60 char. Jonathan

entertained the guides and caught three Kings and a Sockeye right in front of camp. Pete cooked up Sockeye Salmon fish tacos for dinner with all the fixings and the guests refueled before heading back on the river.

Almost everyone enjoyed fishing late into the evening in the land of the midnight sun. Justin even managed to catch his first Alaskan fish, a large Char after dinner. Every angler had a positive vibe about the day. After dinner Adam and Chris were doubled up on Char moving to avoid each other in the shallows as the evening light splashed off the airborne droplets of water. It was a lovely spectacle to cap off an extraordinary day of fishing. Eventually the sun dropped behind the Cottonwoods and everyone headed for the comfort of their tents.



### **From the trip log of July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Temperatures had dropped overnight but that did not stop the guests from making some casts before getting a hot cup of coffee. It is interesting to see how the motivation to fish increases the speed in that guests get packed up in the morning. We always try to pick well-balanced camps with nice gravel, views and good fishing but sometimes we need to settle for one aspect over another. This camp had everything we were looking for and it was hard to leave, but it was time to explore another section of this beautiful river.

As we departed the gravel bar every boat hooked up in a matter of seconds. Chris came tight on a nice fish and after a good fight we put his first fish of the morning into the net. It was a beautiful 25-inch Char, full of energy, which slipped away before we could get a photo. We had not seen another human on our float

until we passed by the Bristol Bay Lodge Spike camp in the late morning. While we rarely see other raft groups on this river we have always had positive interactions with any parties we encounter.

The group targeted Char, Rainbows, Sockeye, Chum and Kings throughout the morning. Pat continued to add to his species list and caught both Chum and Sockeye Salmon. For the second day in a row the captain's log stated that this was "the best King numbers ever seen on the refuge." Steve and Chris doubled at the same time with Jack Kings that were almost identical. Steve had had rotator cuff surgery six months earlier and had successfully taken up casting with his left hand while his right healed. It was really impressive to see him adapt to the injury and fish hard all week. Brian chose to target large kings with Justin and his hard work paid off with a nice 20-pound fish. While throwing big streamers he also caught a 27 plus inch bright Char. Jonathan caught plenty of large fish throughout the trip but he secured the title of smallest fish caught all week as well.



Sockeye can be tough to catch and there are several theories for the best way to target them. Year after year we see a high percentage of the Sockeye that we hooked with a bead. For the second day in a row Chris landed a bright Sockeye with this method. The afternoon brought mist and we set up camp under overcast skies with light precipitation. Mike is a talented and determined angler who isn't afraid to put in time for positive results. He scouted the woody debris around camp with a mouse pattern for Rainbows. His persistence paid off and enticed a nice one into eating

his fly. After seeing Mike's success, Brian was inspired to throw a streamer and caught a nice Rainbow further downstream. This was our first afternoon with light rain and lower temperatures. While dinner was being prepped the group gathered wood and built a campfire.

Everyone sat around the fire as the hot Pizzas came off the pan. The guys devoured slices and polished off their beers while Steve and Chris led some beer can slingshot target practice. A Beaver sat on the bank across from camp enjoying a willow bark dinner. He was not fazed by our presence and we watched and



photographed him for over twenty minutes. S'mores were on the dessert menu and we all tested our marshmallow roasting techniques around the fire. The dark skies encouraged the group to retire to the comfort of their tents early. We slept with a pitter-patter of light rain on the tents dreaming of what tomorrow would bring.

### **From the trip log of July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019**



The morning marked the halfway point of the trip. We always say it takes a few days to shed the baggage of the outside world and mentally “arrive” in the Alaskan Bush. By this point in the trip the group had arrived and were accustomed to daily life off grid. Many anglers had their gear packed up before they even came to breakfast. As we were preparing to break camp a Mink scurried along the shoreline before disappearing into the brush.



The morning streamer bite started off strong with bright colors working under overcast skies. The Chum were active and Adam hooked into a hard fighting, blushed up fish early in the day. Several anglers threw gurgler patterns and caught Grayling, Dollies and Rainbows on the

orange floating pattern. We spent some time exploring side channels before lunch. Adam hopped out in swift water to cast at the top of a skinny side channel and a nice 17” Rainbow came up and crushed his pink fly. Pete’s boat floated the entire channel and Brian stuck several Rainbows on the mouse during the exploration.

The three other boats stayed with the main channel and found a stretch of river loaded up with Kings. Mike sight cast to and landed a few nice Kings, hooking several more. Steve and Adam both hooked and landed nice Sockeye at the top and bottom of the run. Wynn and Chris pulled Jack Kings and Dollies from the top of the run. The high King numbers acted as a double-edged sword. Although we had a lot of good opportunities to target them while wading, the method is slow and we needed to make up miles at the end of the day. We pushed our way down river through a tight jungle like section as a light rain began to fall. About a mile above our target camp zone we spooked a 3





to 4 year-old brown bear. He saw our raft and catapulted across the swift current in an explosion of water and disappeared into the brush. The final mile of winding river was filled with “Hey Bear” calls as we floated around each corner.

The guests worked hard throughout the day and caught some really nice Sockeye but they were all too blushed up to keep for dinner. After one last effort by all the members of the group to catch a dinner fish, we decided on a different recipe. We used smoked Salmon in Pete’s famous Salmon curry recipe with couscous and Naan and the hot meal was just what the doctor ordered. The rain continued to fall and we enjoyed dinner together under the wing. Although the water levels were average, rain always helps bring more Salmon into Bristol Bay Rivers. The rain drove anglers to their tents after the wine and beer were polished off.

### **From the trip log of July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

A Beaver was heard slapping his tail throughout the night but most still slept hard. The morning rains delayed the pace of breaking camp. Everyone got a little extra sleep and was well rested when it was time for a warm oatmeal breakfast. In the later days of our July trips we enter the lower river and the numbers of Salmon generally increase. Four species of Salmon were flooding in the river and the Captains log reported, “strong Salmon fishing throughout the day.”



Everyone did well on Chum Salmon through the day but we caught a wide diversity of fish including Sockeye, Rainbows, Kings and Dollies. Mike caught an 18-pound King Salmon while sight casting in the morning. Brian had a case of the fumbles and dropped his rod and go pro in the water but we were able to retrieve both safely. We passed through the fish counting weir by floating over a small opening in the center. The massive underwater fence is used to regulate the commercial fisheries in the bay. It spans the entire river and funnels all fish into a small cage that is opened to allow passage where they are individually counted.

On the other side of the weir, the waters teemed with fish waiting to continue their migration. Due to regulations, we were not fishing these waters but all

enjoyed the spectacle. We moved down river and found incredible numbers of salmon. The fishing for Chum was as good as it gets and we were consistently doubling up on big fish all afternoon. The great fishing continued as we made our way down river to our final camp. We camped just across the river from the base of Lookout Mountain, which the natives traditionally used as a hunting lookout point. We were just a few miles from the ocean and the fish were fresh and bright.



Most anglers continued to catch fish from camp until the dinner bell rang. It was Sushi night and lucky for us Mike had caught a bright Sockeye after lunch that John filleted. There was a mishap and the Nori wrappers that were hiding in a Budweiser box were mistakenly burned a few nights prior. The rain let up before dinner and the main course was changed from Sushi to poke bowls that were eagerly devoured. Once again everyone pitched in to gather wood and build a campfire. The evening views were breathtaking and we concluded the day reminiscing about a great week on the river.

### **From the trip log of July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

We woke up early in the morning to push down into the confluence with the North Fork of the Goodnews and on to the “landing zone” to rendezvous with our pilots. The jet boats we rowed past on our way down river were an uncommon sight for the week. When we arrived at our take out, we found an extremely high flood tide that submerged the banks where we usually stage our gear. The high water levels made the group work together and improvise. We loaded up one raft with most of the gear to keep it dry and flipped another over so we could deflate and roll our rafts on top of it. Our pilots landed and were able to get most of the guests out of the high water conditions and back to Dillingham. It was a challenging couple of hours but as the tide receded we were able to break down our other rafts and get the second planeload out safely. We couldn't have asked for a better group to calmly deal with an adverse situation and enjoy a great week on the river.

