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North to Alaska – The Rush Is On By Jack Dennis

The word Alaska invokes a multitude of images: vastness, its wildness, wilderness, large flowing rivers, snow capped peaks, bears and animals, and of course, fish. My first and only time fishing Alaska occurred when I was in my early 20's. It was a fall fishing adventure that has always brought me warm memories. My only other visit back to Alaska was in the heart of December where the temperatures plunged to 50 below and I was giving fly fishing programs about warm weather destinations in several Alaskan cities. After visiting with many of the anglers who attended the meetings I realized that I needed to go back to Alaska. This last summer that opportunity afforded itself with Gene Herring, producer of Fly Fish magazine where I serve in the role of co-host on this weekly series on the outdoor channel. He wanted me to come up and do several TV shows and a large video promotion for a fishing destination that Gene had gone to many times, King Salmon Lodge on Lake Naknek in the south west part of the vast state of Alaska.

I told Gene the only time I could go would be the last week in September and he said that would work out fine for the lodge. I also gave him another requirement: I would be able to bring my wife, Sandy along. Since our three kids have grown up and gone off to do the battles of the world we have found more time to fish together and Sandy has really caught the joy of fly fishing. The prospects of a trip to the vast wilderness of Alaska appealed to her.

Thirty-year-old memories somehow have a way of fading away, but the first sight of the spectacular mountains as we landed at Anchorage brought it all back. Old memories were further invoked when we boarded a 580 Convair; a replica of the ones that flew into Jackson for thirty years before jet service took its place. It was a beautiful fall day with not a cloud in the sky. The plane was less than 1/3 full leaving you to wander from one window to the other to take in the sheer beauty of the peaks, streams and the fall foliage in full bloom.

We were immediately given a briefing by Gus, the manager He explained how the week would go as Gene looked at the various fishing options that we would have. Since we're filming a show we would rotate around the paying guests. The weather was good, so we decided to go straight in to a destination in Katmai National Park almost an hour flight from the lodge in a bush plane.

Part of the lore of the Alaska is the flying into these spectacular destinations and our first day was no disappointment. Otter Creek. was about three or four miles from the ocean in the most incredible scenery I could ever imagine. As Gene, our pilot, maneuvered in, he banked to see if there were any bears or moose in the water then banked again between two mountains of bright yellow colored beach and dropped the flaps as if we were headed down. I saw was miles and miles of willows, but no water. The plane sank lower and lower and all of a sudden he dropped it right into one of the longest pools on a stream that I've ever seen. Spectacular!

As we were taxiing I looked out from the wing and saw huge schools of fish darting away from the plane and I looked over at Tom Williamson one of the owners of the lodge, and he grinned and said, "They're still here and they look hot as hell". Boy was he ever right. It wasn't even 15 minutes before my wife hit her first silver, leaping out of the water, jumping out of the water and tearing off line. She was squealing like a kid at Christmas. Forty five salmon later my wife finally had enough. She was hotter than hell and the cameras were rolling. Everybody was catching salmon and at lunchtime we were treated to the freshest salmon we would ever have in our lives, caught fifty feet away and then cooked. It melted in your mouth along with potatoes, all cooked hot over an open fire.

The next day clouds had rolled in; grey clouds but still plenty of good light and the temperature was noticeably cooler. We geared up for fall fishing as we know it in the Rocky Mountains and it certainly wasn't uncomfortable at all. This day we would be go a creek called Gibraltar Creek, a creek system where the Rainbow King Lodge has exclusive fishing rights which they have negotiated with the native Indian tribe in the area. So we knew we would be the only anglers in that stream that day. We would be going with three of the lodge owners, Tom, Dick Ebel, and Dick..... This trip would require a flight in a fixed gear Beaver and would land on the other side of the lake at one of the Indian villages and walk into the stream. It was an easy walk of a little over a mile. We dropped into a stream that easily could have been in New Zealand or high in the Rocky Mountains, beautiful gem clear water breaking into several side channels. It kind of reminded me of the Big Hole River in low water.

We waded across the stream to a small little island that was pegged as a prime place to be by the guides, Tom and Cory. Tom took my wife over to the upper part of the island and immediately started fly fishing with her on egg patterns that they use.

It wasn't 20 minutes later and Sandy was into her first Alaskan rainbow. Her first rainbow weighed in at about five pounds and, in spite of the day being a bit breezy and cool, Sandy was having the time of her life and Gene was getting some excellent footage. Tom and I were on a quest for a bigger rainbow looking for something spectacular for the video. We headed downstream. The interesting thing about this is that all of a sudden I started seeing big gray shadows intermixed with the sockeye salmon that were in the final stages of spawning. Many had died and the banks were lined with carcasses making for a not too fragrant smell. And the bright red colors of the fish still spawning littered the stream like silent pink ghosts as they did their final dance of life. This is Alaska. This is what you come for. And following them were the rainbows. The death of one fish meant life to another and the cycle started all over again.

But I was about to find out something I never thought about fishing Alaska. I was always under the impression you cast it out and let it drift and you work it long enough and you would certainly get the rainbows. And this of course is true. But all of a sudden I found something that I really loved. And that was sight fishing to a fish that I can see. It's like nothing on earth. I don't care whether it's a bone fish in the Bahamas, or a carp in the Midwest, seeing the fish, watching him react to the fly, that's what fly fishing is to me. And I didn't realize that you could do that in Alaska. Boy was I in for a surprise for the next few days. Even though it was a gray cloudy day I could see the fish and I was off and running as I nailed my first seven pound Alaskan rainbow on my little three weight.

It will be back in the Otter as we would be going up there with the two Dicks and landing with the Otter in a small lake at the very top of thedrainage. From here the creek bubbles out of the ground in the form of springs forming a small creek getting bigger until it is the size of a big Spring Creek. In fact it looked exactly like that; like a spring creek in Montana, except that there were salmon everywhere. In the upper part of the creek we could tell that the salmon were done and there were very few rainbows. What rainbows we did see were very willing participants as we tried both egg and nymph patterns and scored right off the bat. As we walked downstream we started seeing more fish until we came to a run that was just about as beautiful as anything I had seen in my fishing career. From one point I could spot over 30 rainbows feeding, many of them pushing ten pounds. What was so spectacular was the way they were feeding on the eggs were like they were feeding on nymphs moving back and forth. You could see them perfectly in the clear water. It was a beautiful day and they showed up like little gems. It was definitely three way country and I was off and running.

Sandy scored right off the bat with three spectacular rainbows and I kept eyeing one great big fish. For the next 20 minutes Gene and I proceeded to try and get this fish. With the camera over my shoulder from the fisherman's perspective we filmed it. After trying many different eggs. Finally the right cast with no drag at all and a fish sucked in the egg and we had a spectacular fish on. He leapt everywhere in the pool trying to tangle me up but we were able to land a beautiful nine pound rainbow on the three weight.

It was spectacular. He gave me every bit of the fight that I expected. Tom and I were off on a race to try and find some of the bigger fish. Alas, about the best we could be was about an eight or nine pound fish and we resigned ourselves to the fact that after another good spectacularly cooked lunch that would have to wait for another day and another place.

That day was the cap to a beautiful week's trip to Alaska. We've really seen it all but not enough; enough of course to come back again. There's so much of Alaska to see. There's more to just the fishing lodge and the fishing. And we would find that out on the trip back. Tonight would be the final dinner and we were looking forward to Alaskan King crab legs. On the flight back Gene decided we needed to see a little bit more of Alaska and he took us on a beautiful scenic ride. We had plenty of daylight and it was a gorgeous afternoon. We flew over some caribou hunters that had a fresh kill. We saw moose, bear, fox ...all the animals Alaska tells you about in the tourist journals. We had it all. While we never encountered any bear on the fishing trip they are an integral part of the Alaska fishing scene

So if you haven't been to Alaska let me tell you right now there isn't a better place you can go than the Rainbow King Lodge. The staff was first rate from the time first thing in the morning when they woke you up with a hot cup of coffee to your departure time on the airplanes, to the time every evening when they prepared new hor'doerves overlooking the lake it couldn't have been better. I rate this lodge as good as any I've ever been to and the staff and guides as competent as anywhere.