

Memories of trout fishing in Alaska 2002

By Stelios Comminos

Seen from the plane the river was wide, very wide as it snaked through the desolate tundra. I could see the odd boat moving through the channels and up the strong current. A swarm of float planes of all sizes were scattered around the sky and on the river in amongst sport and commercial fishing boats. It was 8.30am as the Alaskan Airlines twin engine plane swept low over the Naknek River before landing at in the rainy cold town of King Salmon in Bristol Bay.



Seeing the rainy and obviously cold conditions - not to mention the harsh landscape we flew over on the two hour flight from Anchorage over the Kenai Peninsula - I felt somewhat apprehensive about whether I had spent my money wisely. It was not easy to tag this fishing trip onto a family visit to Anchorage. Finding a place to fish in Alaska was tricky – never knowing whether what you are seeing on the internet is real or not. With the help of Alaskan veteran Ed Austin in Johannesburg, I was able to find a reliable and credible booking agent who matched me with Katmai Fishing Adventures run by the reputable and world class fly fisher Nanci Morris.

The manager of Bear Trail Lodge was waiting for me as I searched in vain for my rucksack and rods that had clearly not been on the flight with me. “If your stuff is not here, it will be on the next plane in an hour – nothing unusual” she said, “we should be able to kit you out in the meantime. Your boat is waiting for you.” We arrived at the lodge and I could hear the boat engines being warmed up. As I opened the door to my room, Rob, my guide for the next few days greeted me. “Should we get going now?” he asked standing outside the door in his waders and raingear, dripping wet from the cold rain, “I have waders and stuff for you, maybe a bit big – but should do.” I looked at the rain and felt the cold wind blowing into the room and decided that this was ominous, a bad start to an expensive

trip. “No, I would rather wait for my own gear” I said, thinking that I needed a while to adjust myself to the situation. We arranged to meet as soon as he heard the next plane with my gear fly over and I decided to take a stroll along the deck of the lodge and scope out the river from a dry and comfortable viewpoint. Why did I spend all this money on flights, waders, boots, flies, guide and lodge? Will I be able to make the transition from flicking a fly with small casts in gentle berg streams to double hauling while trying to keep myself from being washed away in this Zambezi like river?

While waiting, Nanci stopped by and it did not take long for her to discover how apprehensive I was about this huge river. “How can you find the fish here?” I asked “my river skills in South Africa will be no use here! And, how do you wade in these conditions?”. “Easy” she said “divide the river into obvious pockets and then fish the pockets methodically – and you will also see the fish lies as you get closer, just listen and learn from your guide and grab him if you feel you are going to take a tumble.”

Having seen Ed Austin’s photos of huge salmon I was keen to find out more about them. Nanci was not very enthusiastic about salmon at all! “I suppose you could get one or two, it’s a bit early in the season and you will spend a good few hours out there trying when you could be catching trout – big trout. A few salmon have come out the past few days but only on lures trolled slowly. We can try if you want but I would suggest that you rather take advantage of some of the best trout waters in the world. I was sceptical about this, “who would want to catch trout when you can catch salmon?” I thought.

My rucksack arrived and I started the gearing up process – thermal long johns and vest, tracksuit pants, T-shirt, shirt, fleece jacket, waders, raincoat, hat, gloves....I felt as trussed up as a baby with a nappy, booties and all those warm layers that mothers tend to use. I could hardly bend down to put on and tie the large felt soled wading boots. Fishing in the berg with shorts was definitely more comfortable! On the advice of Rob, I reluctantly left my 5wt Loomis in the room and took my 8wt Sage and a density compensated 15ft sink tip line on my Lamson reel. Why would one want to catch trout on such a heavy rod” I thought - being used to my 2wt on the rivers and streams of Natal, “surely the trout are not all that big and different?”. I walked down to the jetty in the pouring and very cold rain. Rob was waiting on the boat and wasted no time in getting going.

We moved upstream against the rain on the jet engine boat, over deep channels and shallows. The water was cold and sometimes the same clear green colour as some parts of the Caribbean, the banks were low and filled with small trees and shrubs. Soon we arrived at an island about 4 km upstream. Rob opened a box of flies, and made a choice. The flies were huge, so huge that I was sceptical whether a trout would be able to swallow something that big! As Rob tied on a huge smolt pattern I indicated my doubt about his choice of size. “When you see the size of these trout, this fly will look tiny” he said. We walked along the edge of the island.

“Let’s try here first” he said, pointing to a long shallow bank with a small drop off about 10 meters from the island. I looked at the strong current and rocky bottom covered with obviously slippery algae and weeds and started wading. With the layers of clothing, waders and large boots I felt very unsure of myself – especially with the cold beginning to seep through. Standing at the drop off, I made my first cast across the current and into the blustering wind. Not being used to the action of

my newly acquired density compensated sink tip and the huge fly, my line folded in a tangle and got caught up on the rocks. I tried again and again, hoping that my surf fishing experience would soon kick and begin working for me.



After about 15 minutes of struggling to get used to the conditions and the feel of the new line, Rob suggested we move on. The rain had been flowing down my sleeves and my feet were freezing but we kept wading into the river, further and further from the island. Rob pointed to a riffle and suggested that I try it. By now my casting had improved and I was getting out at least 25 meters in the wind. My lined sailed down the current and I felt a hard bump and immediately struck. Within a few seconds the line in my stripping basket had shot through the eyes on my rod and my reel was screaming as it went way into the backing. "Let it run!" shouted Rob. The fish felt huge as I began to reel it in, behaving very unlike a berg trout. Being unused to such a large trout, I behaved like a beginner and tried to get the trout in as fast as possible. Inevitably, the fish released itself and I muttered a few unsavoury words to myself. We hung around for another hour or so before Rob suggested that we move on saying that in these windy and wet conditions it may be easier to fish off the boat.



We saw a boat moving slowly up the river with two anglers holding their trolling rods, I heard Rob mutter” Human rod holders! It’s the boat that catches the fish, not them!” After that comment, I was happy to forget the salmon!

We went upriver, looking for birds diving for smolt that were being chased to the surface by hunting trout. At a spot where the river was at its widest and below a small drop off where birds were screaming and diving, Rob eased off the motor and threw an anchor while I began to cast – eager to get my fly in the vicinity of the smolt. My fly dropped into the current and sped downstream on a very fast drift and as it swung back I felt a knock and instinctively struck. Nothing happened for a few seconds and I thought that I had hooked a rock. I started to strip the line in when it began to shoot out of my stripping basket faster than I had ever experienced – even faster than the many bonefish that I had caught in Mexico a few years ago. Within seconds I was way into my backing and I began to reel in cursing at the pain caused by my stupidity of not being careful of keeping my fingers away from the reel handle. At times the fish was immovable and at other times it moved rapidly from side to side of the boat, sometimes underneath. The hectic battle took all of 15 minutes and as the fish sidled up to the boat, I bent down to grab the hook. The slight slack given caused the fish to take off again at lightening speed. A few minutes later it was being scooped up in the catch net by Rob and the hook removed. A quick measurement (24 inches) and a photograph and it was back in the river. “That must have been about 6-7 pounds” said Rob, “not a bad fish and we can do better!” Well we didn’t, relatively speaking, and after a few more hours of fighting the wind and rain I landed 3 more “small” trout between 1 and 5 lbs. Strange how quickly one can adjust to the size of fish! We returned to the lodge and the welcome warm shower and hot meal.

The next morning, Rob was at the jetty at 7am and without wasting any time we made our way upstream. Feeling more confident about handling the conditions in my trussed up state, we fished all day from the boat and off the banks. The rain gave us respite occasionally but I learnt to ignore it and concentrate on catching fish. That day I caught at least 8 trout most between 4 and 8 pounds. Tired out by the wading and with painful arms from fighting the huge trout, I slept early.



The next morning at 7am we boarded a tiny float plane and flew over the desolate tundra across to Katmai Park. We landed on a lake at the bottom of Brook River and taxied in. These planes are really taxis! I discovered that almost everyone has a pilot's licence in Alaska and that flying is like driving, in fact almost the only way of getting anywhere. Our pilot handled the plane like a small car, and flew all the way with his first cup of coffee of the day nestled between his legs. Rob and I were greeted by the park rangers who put us through a bear training course before we were allowed to venture onto the river. The ranger looked puzzled at my home-made stripping basket and asked me what it was. Without hesitation I told her that it was my "bear catcher" to which she failed to respond. With a little badge indicating that we had been trained in bear safety pinned on our hats, we moved down to the river.

The Brook river is small compared to the Naknek and similar in size to our larger berg rivers. We looked for trout and saw many moving around, barely skittish at our presence. In amongst the trout there were shoals of large sockeye salmon holding against the current. Ignore them" said Rob, "they don't take flies that easy". He pointed out where I should begin casting; somehow he could see trout where I thought there were none! I began casting, this time with my 5wt Loomis and felt more at home with the tackle. After a few casts I was hooked onto a very large trout. It moved up and down the channels, sometimes jumping a metre into the air. From the start I knew that I would not land this one! After 45 minutes of straining, my arms feeling fatigued and sore, the fish slowed down and I managed to get it within 10 metres from where I was standing. I held it and waited for the line to slack a little before I moved forward. Suddenly the line shot out of the water, the fly had come off

due to a bad knot tied by Rob. Of course thereafter he got blamed endlessly throughout the day for his bad knotting every time I lost a fly or a fish!



In reality, I think that the fish were often too big to land on a 5wt –especially in the strong current. I was not used to catching such big fish on a 5wt - that was clear. Rob was more than patient with me and at the end of the day, I had caught 14 fish and nothing that I would call small in South African terms. By the time the float plane picked us up on the top lake, I knew I would not have lasted much longer. My arms were tired and my legs were wobbly from the difficult wading up the stream the whole day. Flying back to King Salmon, we ate our lunch that we had left on the plane in the morning - we were not allowed to take any food with us because of the bears. We saw no bears - only footprints and droppings. Apparently a week later the place would be bristling with bears – especially at Brook falls – when the salmon run really began.

Early in the morning of my last day, Nanci took me out. It was the first and only day of sunshine and no rain. The river felt very different and looked a lot calmer. There was no wind and by this time, my casting was near perfect with my whole line sailing out effortlessly - especially under Nanci's watchful eye and her critical comments!

Nanci took me upstream and then we worked our way slowly back to the lodge. We concentrated on fishing from the banks in all her secret spots! I caught my biggest fish that day 26 ½ inches. A beautiful fish! I caught a total of 18 fish that day 1 of 26", 2 of 24" 3 of 23" and the rest ranging about 3 to 4 lbs. We saw small rises at one stage and Nanci rigged up a light rod for me with a dry fly. Casting at the rises I caught a grayling of about 1 lb. just to see what they looked like. A beautiful fish with a wing like fin. We photographed it in the catch net and she gently released it without removing it from the water

What impressed me the most was the very strong sense of preserving and protecting the environment. Both Nanci and Rob ensured that as little damage as possible was done to the fish caught. With a strict catch and release approach in the Naknek, the trout fishing has improved significantly over the past few years. Nanci is impassioned about ensuring that the pristine state of the area is maintained – no doubt making her a little unpopular with some die-hards intent on taking as much as they can from the environment and leaving just as much behind. Like any place in the world, the development of infrastructure is encroaching rapidly. With guardians like Nanci, some of that can be slowed down or stopped all together.

I caught about 38 fish in the three and a half days that I fished, most of them over 4 lbs. No doubt I caught smaller fish in the 1-2lb range – but I have forgotten about them, but they fought harder than any equivalent sized fish here. As time separates – the trout become heavier and bigger and when I saw the ½ lb trout I landed on my 2 wt on a dam in Underberg recently, it looked minute compared - maybe the size of Nanci's M+M fly?