



In the Theater of Trout

WE FOUND BIG, FEISTY RAINBOWS ALONG WITH PLENTY OF SILVERS, SOCKEYE,
BEARS AND BREATHING ROOM IN SOUTHWEST ALASKA
BY WILLIAM SISSON PHOTOS BY PAT FORD

*There is no better way to take in the
panorama of Alaska than from the air.*

Early morning is mirrored on the pale blue surface of ponds, lakes and streams, many without names, as we buzz across cloud meadows and gaze at mountain peaks topped with snow. I look down at all the water and wonder, *Fish?*

A rough beauty, Alaska remains a vast, unforgiving land, one with an “unfenced” quality that is sometimes best viewed from the seat of a de Havilland Beaver, a workhorse floatplane of the unpaved world.

Today we are flying south for an hour from Rainbow King Lodge in Iliamna, southwest Alaska, to a small river on the coast to fish for silver salmon.

It is a lovely morning; the sun climbs the backside of a mountain range to the east, and from time to time the light breaks through the clouds and bathes the peaks and valleys in an otherworldly glow.

We exit a mountain pass and sail over soggy marshland toward a narrow, slow-moving tidal river about a mile from the sea. Pilot Harry Ricci banks over the Swishak River once and makes his approach, setting the plane down as softly as the breathless morning.

The pilot nudges the floats up to the bank as guide Seth Hofland retrieves a long-handle ax from under one of the seats. He pounds a stake into the soft earth for securing the lines that hold the plane to the bank.

Two anglers, a videographer and I spill out of the plane and begin setting up our gear. No one else is here, although brown bears might well visit us before we depart. We have all the quiet and elbow room in the world.

Silver Mine

I stop and gaze at mountains and marsh and water and wonder if I've ever fished in a more beautiful setting than this soggy hem of

coastal plain. Mountains rise sharply to the north. I smell the sea to the south. Underfoot, the ground is wet and spongy. Silvers roll gently on the windless surface. Paradise? Damn close. I am eager to fish.

“Be careful,” Ricci warns. “You step off the edge of the bank, and all we'll be seeing of you is your hat.”

I hook and land a nice silver on my first cast, setting the tone for the next five hours. If you go three or four casts without a fish, you start to wonder if something might be amiss.

The silvers run between 12 and 16 pounds, hens and bucks, some blushed and others brightly chromed. We fish Teeny 200 grain sink tips, and bright and dark flies. I start with a garish pinkish-white creation that Hofland says was nicknamed the “clown dick.” Worked like a charm.

The fishing is excellent and the mood relaxed. Pat Ford, Rhona Chabot and I spread out along the flooded bank. Chabot is new to the fly game, but she is into a fish in short order. Not another plane lands.

The silvers whack our flies aggressively and fight well. And it doesn't matter if you miss or drop a fish — another is waiting.

They either jump, thrash on top, roll on the leader, dive to the bottom near the bank and dog it or turn on the jets and fly up, down or across the stream while the drag happily sings, *Run baby, run baby, run.*

Right before lunch, I hook a big hot buck that shoots about 50 yards upstream, well into my backing, coming clear out of the water three times. Damn, Sam. We all are happy campers.

Some days you just want to catch one nice fish after another until you are wrung out. Satiated on silver after silver after silver. You don't often get the opportunity we had on the Swishak.



The de Havilland Beaver is a workhorse floatplane of Alaska. (Below) A pair of nice rainbows.



Still, I fish right up until Ricci and Hofland tell me for the second time to pack it up and get back on board.

Wild Rainbows

Alaska has salmon up the wazoo, and Rainbow King Lodge has programs through the season targeting all five species. I have a fondness for silvers, which Ford correctly calls a very “accommodating” fish. They're aggressive. They jump, pull hard and knock the snot out of flies.

Having said that, this story, at its heart, is really about big, wild Alaskan rainbows, a remarkable fish that is fast, strong, ravenous and beautiful. In a land of alpha dogs, the native Alaskan 'bow is an apex predator: stout, vigorous and driven by the urgency of autumn. They are a fish full of fall, the fading light, the coming winter.

I was a guest at the lodge in mid-September, when the big rainbows move out of sprawling Iliamna Lake and into the streams to fatten up



Water, water, everywhere, and plenty of trout and salmon, too. The author with a 29-inch rainbow fresh from a tributary of Iliamna Lake.

for winter. Silvers? Most folks who travel to Rainbow King in September don't give them a second thought. They've flown in from around the world, the last leg being a 200-mile jump from Anchorage, to hunt these storied streams for trophy rainbows, which in Alaska means a fish of at least 30 inches. During the fall, those big scrappers might weigh 10 to 12 pounds, depending on their girth. That's one helluva fish.

The big rainbows of autumn move out of the lake to follow spawning sockeye up the tributaries of Iliamna the way wolves trail a herd of caribou, feeding on eggs and eventually the flesh of dead spawners, says longtime Alaskan angler Tony Weaver, an author, journalist, master casting instructor and former guide.

"They're right at the top of the food chain," says Weaver, 63, of Anchorage, who was at Rainbow King the same week I was there. "Alaskan rainbows are almost like wolves. They follow the food."

He says a pack of rainbows will run a king salmon up on the bank, where it will flop around and broadcast its eggs all over the shallows. "And there will be like 20 rainbows in there feeding like a bunch of hyenas," says Weaver, a well-traveled fisherman who has been called the Stu Apte of Alaska. "It's in their DNA. It's just the way they roll."

By the end of the week, it was easy to see

how people devote their angling lives to the pursuit of *Oncorhynchus mykiss*.

National Treasure

Ford, who chases fish around the globe and has held more than two dozen IGFA world records, is not easily impressed. But when he talks about big rainbows and Alaska, you hear excitement in his voice.

"They're like the bears," says Ford, a retired Miami trial lawyer and fishing photographer who makes it to Alaska at least once a year. "They come into the rivers and streams to feed on salmon eggs and salmon flesh. They're eating everything they see, and they're so strong. They're just really, really tough fish."

Ford, who has fished Alaska for almost 25 years, loves late summer and early fall. "September in Alaska is probably my favorite place on earth," says Ford, who took the photographs for this story. "And wild Alaskan rainbows are one of the real treasures that this country still has. They're strong and fresh and wild. They're beautiful jumpers. And they're amazing fighters."

Pure Protein

Hell-bent on packing on as much weight as possible, these big trout are sometimes referred to as Alaskan footballs for the ample girth they acquire in late summer and early fall.



*"It takes a true encounter to realize
that real animals, wild animals,
have all but passed from our lives."
John Burnside*

“When the salmon come into these streams, the rainbows begin to feed on pure protein, and they really bulk up,” says Rodger Glaspey, one of the owners of Rainbow King Lodge and a lifelong rainbow aficionado. “They go for the big meals, the ham and eggs. It’s pure protein ... just like going on steroids. I’ve never seen fish get such a girth on such a relatively short frame.”

Quick, lively and as unfettered as the tundra wind, Alaskan rainbows are a handful on a 6-weight rod, ripping off line and able to duck into tangled root balls or leap tall bounders.

“There is just no place in the world where you can find rainbows that are as electric as the Alaska rainbows,” says Glaspey, 66, a cotton merchant from California who has traipsed the world, from Patagonia to Russia’s Kamchatka Peninsula, chasing big ’bows before finally hanging up his waders on the shores of Iliamna Lake. “I’ve never seen the line sing through the water like it does with those rainbows in the fall. There’s nothing like it.”

The technique this time of year is to drift plastic beads imitating salmon eggs beneath a strike indicator with a bit of split shot and a barbless hook. Not the most elegant setup, perhaps, but it’s effective. In the early part of the season, before the salmon plow into the streams, the rainbows can be taken on dry flies. When the salmon arrive, the rainbows start looking down for their food.

Freshwater Steelhead

The fish that come out of Iliamna and other large lakes, starting in August, are an especially supercharged model. “They’re big, fast

and full of it,” Ford says. “They’re more like steelhead than freshwater rainbows. They’re basically freshwater steelhead. I’ve had them run across the stream and beach themselves on the other side. So crazy.”

Vast Iliamna (the third-largest lake entirely within the United States) functions as a freshwater ocean for these so-called “lake anadromous” rainbows, which have the fish-heavy diet, hefty size and coloration of their sea-run cousins.

There also is a population of Alaskan rainbows that spend most of their life in the rivers. These fish are more brightly colored than the lake fish, dressed as they are in the camouflage of the riverine environment.

Both are wild and lovely, but it’s the bruisers out of Iliamna that will make your hair stand up. “You can always tell when you hook one of those big lake fish,” Weaver says. “You go, ‘Oh boy, this is a different animal.’”

I hooked one such unbridled animal drifting the lower Newhalen River on a cool, cloudy morning while fishing with Glaspey and guide Kyle Walsh. We had found fish along the western bank and were making our third or fourth drift when the rainbow struck near the boat. You could tell it was a good fish as it tore up-river, jumped and continued headlong against the current. It porpoised once, then jumped a second time, maybe a third.

The big rainbow took line with authority and abruptly came back at the boat with the full flow of the river at its thick back and streaked beneath the transom. I quickly stabbed the rod into the water and made a smooth sweep beneath the jetdrive and stern section. Fish and rod and leader emerged unscathed on the



“The Gorge” on the Newhalen River is a top sockeye spot.

other side of the tin boat, and the rainbow — after a healthy back-and-forth tussle — came to the net. We beached the skiff, measured the fish carefully in the net, took a couple of photos and released it. It was all the fish you could ask for.

This thick, silver-colored rainbow measured 29 inches and not a smidgen more. The gold standard for a trophy ’bow in Alaska is 30 inches. “You’d be surprised by how many 28- and 29-inch fish there are,” Ford says. “They lose that last inch when you put a tape on them.”

I had become a believer, and now I had yet more reason to return.

Streamside

I fished at least six trout streams or parts of streams during my visit. Each was unique, and each left vivid memories that still fill me up.

The average fish here is probably 18 to 20 inches, which is a nice fish in the lower 48, but not ones that turn a head in Alaska. We all caught plenty of fat, slippery footballs, mostly up to about 24 inches, and a fair number between 28 and 29 inches, but no one scored a 30. Our catch was a mix of fresh lake fish and nicely colored river fish with rosy cheeks and pink flanks.

All of them jumped, vaulted and streaked with seemingly little effort. Weaver gently

cradled a 22-incher on the first morning and showed me the red circle beneath the fish’s jaw; the trout had worn its skin raw from setting up hard on the gravel bottom to get its share of salmon eggs.

“They’re not a dainty fish,” Weaver says. “They’re aggressive. They fight all the way to the end. They just won’t give up.”

It rained most of that day, and what few bugs were around weren’t in a biting mood. Lunch consisted of fresh silver salmon, baked beans, fried potatoes, canned corn, homemade bread, campfire cookies and instant coffee. We sat on wet folding chairs around a cook fire, and I’m not sure I could have been happier. I was warm, catching fish and had a full stomach.

Weaver and I finished the day smoking decent cigars in the drizzle and talking about a possible book on guns, floatplanes and cigars. After a good day on the lower Copper River, it sounded entirely plausible.

“An incredible day,” says Glaspey, a skilled fly-fisherman who is always ready to go around one more bend for fish.

These are the thoughts I scribbled in my notebook from that day: *I had a fish jump eight times — or was it 10? Ounce for ounce, they are as strong and fast and feisty as anything I’ve hooked. Airborne at the prick of a hook. Amazing.* ←

Lodge Particulars

Located a proverbial stone’s throw from Lake Iliamna, Rainbow King is one of a handful of so-called legacy lodges in the Bristol Bay/Iliamna drainage. It sits at the epicenter of some of the best rainbow fishing in the world.

Rainbow King is a fly-out lodge, with many of the best trout streams 15 to 30 minutes away by floatplane. The longest flights are an hour to the coast. The lodge has three floatplanes, two de Havilland Beavers and a turbine Otter.

Iliamna is a roughly 200-mile flight from Anchorage. There is also a 24/7 clinic about three miles from the lodge.

Open from June through September, the lodge accommodates 16 guests a week for all but the first and last two weeks of the season, when the limit is 12. During the height of the season the staff numbers about 22, including 10 guides.

From the knock on the door delivering a wake-up call and coffee an hour before you fly out for the day to hot stream-side lunches and wonderful evening meals, the lodge goes to lengths to take care of guests.

Rainbow King is also a “green” lodge, with hydroelectric power providing 100 percent of its electricity, says co-owner Rodger Glaspey, a cotton merchant and avid fly fisherman from Fresno, California.

“The neat thing about fishing at this lodge — and this is what I consider a grand lodge, a legacy lodge — it harbors some of the best rainbow trout fishing, I feel, in the world,” says Alaskan fishing veteran Tony Weaver, a journalist, author, master casting instructor and former guide from Anchorage who was at the lodge last September. “They have the program down. Rainbow King sits in the theater, and they have access to all the good seats. And they have a legacy staff that understands what the protocols are.”

The staff is experienced and stable. Manager Gus Augustynovich has been with the lodge since 1989, which gives the operation an experienced hand who is still in his 40s. And head fishing guide Tony Simmons is starting his sixth season.

I came to Rainbow King on the recommendation of Pat Ford, a retired lawyer and fishing photographer who has stayed at a host of lodges around the world. “Since

1993, I’ve spent over a year of my life fly-fishing in Alaska,” says Ford, who took the photos for this story. “I’ve been to a dozen lodges in Alaska, and most of them are excellent. The thing that makes Rainbow King special is the licenses to use streams exclusively. That gives them an edge.”

Rainbow King holds exclusive leases on six streams. “The legal access to those streams via our licensing with the native corporation is what sets us apart,” Glaspey says.

In addition to trophy rainbows, the lodge has programs targeting all five salmon species, along with Arctic grayling, Arctic char and halibut.

What else makes a lodge stay memorable? “You want to have unlimited hot water, the best food, the best beds and the greatest fishing program,” Glaspey notes. “There isn’t a set program where you fish here Monday, here Tuesday and here Wednesday. People have different skill levels, different aptitudes and different goals. Matching all that up correctly is the magic.”

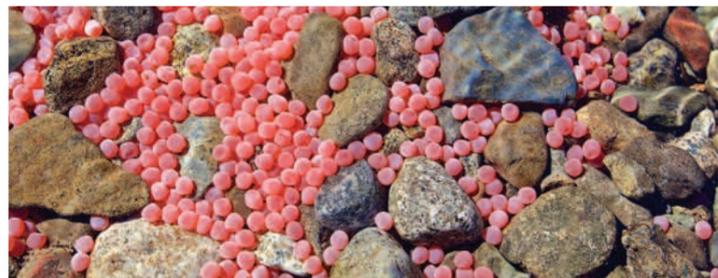
After a day on the water, Augustynovich, Simmons and Glaspey meet with guests in the recreation room to recap the day’s fishing, tell stories and share photos over drinks and hors d’oeuvres and discuss the next day’s fishing agenda. That’s fun, as is the dinner that follows. It’s nice to meet new fishing folk; I remember five or six of us laughing so hard one night at dinner that tears ran down our cheeks.

Glaspey started fishing Alaska in the late 1970s and stayed at a number of lodges before coming to Rainbow King in 1989 for the first time. After that visit, he never went elsewhere.

Glaspey and Ted Sheely, a business acquaintance and fishing friend, and his two sons bought the lodge in 2010 after the former owner died suddenly of a heart attack.

“We just thought it was an important resource, a precious thing,” says Glaspey, who is particularly passionate about big rainbows. “We knew we had a pearl. We’re doing our best to polish it for other people who want to enjoy the experience of the wilderness.”

The cost is \$8,500 per person for six nights/six days. For more information, visit rainbowking.com or call (800) 458-6539.



In fall, matching the hatch means selecting the right size and hue of bead to match the real thing deposited by spawning sockeye.