

# ALASKA

## THE INDELIBLE EXPERIENCE

Adventure, incredible wildlife and fishing on a different scale. A float trip through the Alaskan wilderness leaves Jan Delaporte feeling more alive than ever.

## FOREIGN FORAYS

Waiting for take-off to a remote river, I gaze up and know that I am in Alaska. Mouse flies and streamers have been pinched to the canvas ceiling of the cockpit above the pilot's seat.

The bush pilot enters through the side door of the WWII float plane. "The other pilot (who was flying the rest of our group out) had to make an emergency landing, but they're all OK," he says nonchalantly. "We're flying out to pick them up now."

We fall silent, as our Alaskan pilot goes about this problem like any everyday humdrum glitch, much like fixing a defect patio door hinge.

An hour later we've all landed safely on the shore of a large lake surrounded by towering volcanic mountains. It is a stunningly beautiful late August afternoon in the Bristol Bay area, northwest of Dillingham. The group

is comprised of seven men from Denmark, including tour leader Rasmus, and me as the doyen at a mere 45 years of age. Our mission is to float the Good News River (fortunately not named the Bad News River) for 10 days and approximately 110km, starting far upstream at the lake, where we will be spending the first night under the stars.

Setting up camp is always an interesting study into human nature – often the better sides of it. Personally, I enjoy observing and participating in some sort of age-old, instinctive routine, where people seem to naturally fall into their most fitting roles – which of course is not always the case in society at large. We're paired in twos, both for tenting and rafting, and my raft buddy, Soren, is clearly the organised type, much like myself, so we quickly get into a very efficient mode of allocating different small tasks between us; unwrapping the tent, sorting out



A large lake trout, and inset, the author with a coho salmon

pegs, pitching it, holding the inner tent for the other etc.

Fishing on this first evening is simply amazing. We're camped on the banks of a small stream between two lakes, and fish are seen splashing everywhere in the current. The most eager guys are quickly into some aggressively-coloured sockeye salmon, red-bodied with fearsome green heads. They must have been in the river a while as the main run of red



salmon (their other name) is in June. I put on a purple Intruder fly on the 6wt fly rod and head downstream to get clear of all the commotion with splashing sockeye. It is my first cast of the trip, and anticipation is high... Kapow! Fish on, on the first cast! It's a good fighter, giving me some fierce runs before I can get it to hand. A beautiful lake trout, it turns out. It has probably taken up a lie in the current where it can scavenge on dead sockeye meat. Soon avoiding the countless sockeye salmon and targeting lake trout, which we do not expect to see many of for the remaining river trip, becomes the sport of the evening. Everyone hooks or lands one.

The number of fish in this stretch of water, no more than 300 yards, is simply insane. We also catch silver salmon, mostly coloured, Dolly Varden and a few whitefish. As the sun sets over the mountain range it taints a cloudless sky in the most awe-inspiring colours, and thousands of insects hatch over the water surface. Strangely,

we see very few fish rising. There is loud snoring in all the tents that night, everybody had a lot of first encounter wilderness impressions to digest, and I think we all forgot about bears.

The next morning, as we wake up, take down camp and start floating down the river, we are quickly reminded about Alaskan weather conditions and grizzly bears. The spotless sky of the day before has transformed into a menacing grey mass of rain, wind and cold. Everything has to be tightly secured to the raft and safely guarded

from the elements. We take off one raft at a time, two in each and one with three people. Soren and I are the first to go downstream, and we've barely floated for five minutes when I spot two large grizzly bears heading upstream along the bank to the right of us. They looked majestic and very much in charge. I assume they are heading for our recently abandoned

camp spot – ideal bear fishing grounds...

We reach our second campsite after five hours of combined rowing, floating and fishing down the river. It is located at the

confluence of a small creek and the main river. Unpacking a tent and sleeping gear in pouring rain is not something I will remember with fondness. A challenge at best, but it definitely hones your camp skills and teamwork abilities.

Of course everyone wants to go fishing after having set up camp, and since our dinner constantly consists of freeze-dried meals, no-one is too hungry either! Four of us head

up the small creek to explore its possibilities. And we do not regret it. First Rasmus chucks a huge mouse imitation fly across a small pool and a huge splash drowns it! We all thought it was one of the coveted resident rainbow trout, but it turns out to be one of the biggest Arctic grayling I have ever seen. Dark, steel grey with flossed fins; a primordial wilderness fish.

Further downstream the fishing just explodes. We must have hit the run of sea-run Dolly Varden head-on! There are literally thousands of them heading up this little creek, and they readily (most of the time) take everything we chuck at them. It doesn't take me long to switch to skated flies, ruffle hitch, dry flies etc. for more fun and action. They average a decent 3lb and the biggest we catch measures 70cm. Bright, ocean-fresh and strong. And superb sport on 5 and 6wt fly rods. Mixed in with these are also sea-run Arctic char with much stronger colours



# FOREIGN FORAYS



Fish on! And a stunning mountainous backdrop as well

– some of the males taking on these terrific deep green and red hues they are so famous for. For some reason they seem particularly eager to strike at skated flies, sometimes charging four or five times across the river, before they eventually hook themselves! Thrilling stuff.

Next day the weather is better, and Soren and I have a memorable experience at a fork in the river. These sea-run Dolly Varden would, from time to time, rise quite frequently for insects. I assume out of instinct from their juvenile days in the river. I was catching them on a small Grizzly Adams and having a ball with my 4wt rod. Soren wades to mid-river and is using an egg-sucking leech pattern. I spur him on, and suggest he should try casting at every possible angle to see if he could get Dolly Varden that way. He does as recommended, swinging the fly at downstream angles, stripping the fly at

upstream and sideways angles.

You've guessed it – he caught a Dolly Varden at every single angle he cast the fly. He was literally surrounded by fish, and there must have been tens of thousands of them swimming past us on that day. We also encountered the first ocean-fresh silvers, not many this far upstream, but a promising sign of things to come...

Needless to say the wilderness encounters were in a class of their own. Later on, during the float trip we spotted a mother bear (sow) with two cubs giving a swimming and salmon catching lesson. Just fantastic. All in all we saw five bears on the trip (including the cubs), one lone wolf that posed on a ridge above our camp for a couple of minutes, watching us, lots of beavers and their incredible dams, bald eagles, cranes, geese and much more. Hunting in these areas must be incredible – in fact we met two American guys who were combining ptarmigan shooting and fishing on their float trip.

All the outstanding fishing experiences on this trip are simply too many to mention in a short article. I have fished in many places around the world and caught numerous species, but skating flies for bright, yellow-white spotted Dolly Varden with insidious power, swinging streamers for voracious lake trout in the Arctic sunset and tackling ocean-fresh 15lb silver

salmon on a 7wt switch rod ranks right up there on the best-of list.

At times, weather conditions were downright cruel, we ran short on snacks and other extras towards the end of the trip, and camp life is a wonderful social setting, but also hard work. If I have to conclude anything from the trip, it would be this: It is quite amazing and probably very healthy for any modernised man to suddenly realise just how basic life is on a trip like this. All of a sudden you find yourself having to deal with the most simple elements of life, mere survival actually, i.e. how to stay dry when it is wet outside (hypothermia is a serious thing that can kill you), getting enough protein, sugar etc. for your body to balance energy consumption (usually it is the opposite issue in our over-plentiful, 'obese' consumer society), staying hydrated (boil or filter water), staying mentally on top (combatting fatigue, weariness, fear etc.). The interesting thing is that it actually makes you feel more alive, perhaps something about coming to terms with yourself and your place in the grand scheme of things.

I highly recommend it – and the fishing as well.



One of the many decent Dolly Varden landed by the author

The float trip was organised by Scandinavian operator Getaway Tours: [www.getawaytours.eu/services](http://www.getawaytours.eu/services)

For more images from this trip, go to my website: [www.flyfish-jandelaporte.com](http://www.flyfish-jandelaporte.com)