



# Out of Bristol Bay

The other side of the  
Aleutian Peninsula.

by Miles Nolte

On a bluff overlooking a tidal estuary, three guides sit on patched plastic chairs playing music. They're on a flat space cleared of brush and alders, fine reddish dirt tamped into an outdoor living room. There's a surprisingly flat and sturdy driftwood table at the center, its weathered gray boards lined with treasure: pocked brown bear skulls sprouting moss, half a moose jawbone, seashells and sand dollars, black fossils stamped in shards of shale.

4 IN 1, ALASKA, BY DEREK DEYOUNG



Behind the men, a volcanic valley yawns. Fifteen miles to the north, Mount Chiginagak rises 7,000 feet, topped by a snowy glacier, stark white and glowing blue. It feeds the river that empties into the tidal flat below. The men's music competes with the bleat of gulls and the splashing of salmon in the low tide flow.

It's generally a three-man band—two guitarists, one doubling as a singer; a percussionist shaking a plastic egg, fully clad in camo—but a harmonica player sits in sporadically. They play some covers from The Band, The Wood Brothers, Neil Young, and mix in some originals about living in isolation on Nakalilok Bay, thousands of miles from friends and family.

Living and working here require sacrifice: once a

come by. This camp sits alone. The nearest village is Ugashik, 80 miles away by helicopter. Or, if the weather and tides are good, bush plane.

I came in by helicopter from King Salmon on a Saturday with my mouth agape. Tundra gave way to Becharof Lake, the second-largest freshwater lake in Alaska, the edge of which boils with sulfurous volcanic release. We flew over the Ukinrek Maars, two ashen craters created in 1977 when subterranean magma touched the aquifer and for 11 days launched steam and debris into the sky. Volcanologists think it's stable now.

Southwest of the lake are the Aleutian mountains, and we climbed through a pass carved by flowing water; the river coursed red with sockeye

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week, mail is flown in. Mixed with the routine updates, the occasional letter carries news of a friend whose funeral will be missed, a significant other grown weary of the distance, maybe a care package with stale cookies to be savored.

The men don't come here for money; they could make more guiding in the Lower 48, and sleep in walled houses with mattresses and Internet access. They come back year after year for the same reason that guests gladly pay the lodge thousands of dollars a week: to be here, in this place.

Although I worked at a lodge in Alaska and have visited several others, I've never seen anything like Epic Angling & Adventure's Wilderness Safari Camp. I guided on a river that drained into Bristol Bay, a place famous for its rainbow trout and salmon fishing. The drainages that feed Bristol Bay from the north abound with fish, but they're also well stocked with fly-out lodges and anglers. Some of the better-known trout streams—the Moraine, American, Brooks—can have lines of parked floatplanes in the high season. The fishing is usually excellent, but solitude can be difficult to

salmon. One caribou bull tucked into the landscape. All that gave him away was his expansive rack subtly turning as he watched us motor overhead.

The Pacific Ocean lies beyond the mountains. We followed the coast, flying over headlands and bays bearded with kelp, until we reached the camp. I was satisfied with my trip already, and I hadn't even strung a rod. The two-day journey from Montana to Washington to Oregon to Anchorage to King Salmon was worth it, just for that helicopter ride.

But, of course, I did fish. Within a couple hours of arrival, I was standing in the estuary on an incoming tide, catching chum and pink salmon on nearly every cast. Though the conditions weren't ideal—high winds with an incoming tide—I switched to topwater flies, just to see if I could. My catch rate declined, but I spent the afternoon watching fish slash and boil behind a pink Pollywog. Their teeth shredded the foam body; one completely bit off the rabbit-strip tail. It didn't matter. Fish after fish took its turn trying to mutilate this gaudy intruder interrupting their upstream journey.

I have guided anglers into many more salmon than I can remember. I've stood at tidewater and cast to fish as they entered river systems. But I had never

seen salmon cruise a beach within range of an average fly caster. I spent most of the next day in knee-deep seawater casting to packs of pinks rushing past in the surf. The fish aren't quite so aggressive in the ocean as they are in the river, but they still eat, and it's sight fishing, watching the chase, the attack.

That afternoon I saw my first silver salmon of the trip. It was leading a group of pinks through the waves, its back glowing green, tail etched with black. My excitement interfered with my cast, and the fly landed well to the side of the fish and off angle, so that, when stripped, it jerked along his side instead of in front of him. As soon as the fish saw that marabou monstrosity, he turned off course, inhaled it, and carried my backing out to sea.

Varden in slow pools below spawning salmon. We took a boat into the bay and threw heavy sinking-tips to cod and small halibut. We anchored on kelp beds and caught black rockfish on flies until we got bored. We loaded back into helicopters and explored nearby drainages so thick with silver salmon that, after a couple of hours, catching them began to feel routine. The fishing was so consistent and so excellent that I found myself doing exactly what I often suggest to others and usually fail to do: tucking my rod under my arm, looking around, and appreciating where I was.

Despite the scenery, the wildlife, and the fishing, my favorite hour of the trip was musical. As the setting sun lit clouds hugging the ridges, the guides

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The fishing continued to be so good all week that to describe it in detail would be tedious. The marketing slogan for the camp is “500 Million Fish, 100 Thousand Bears, and You, with One Fly Rod.” When I asked Russ, the camp owner, where he got the statistics, he said he contacted the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and asked for estimates about bear and freshwater fish populations in the state. The bear number was easy, as those species are closely tracked and managed, but the biologist balked at the fish count.

“I have no idea.”

Russ worked on him. “Yeah, I don't need an exact figure or anything. Just a general idea, your best guess.”

This was a biologist, not a writer or an advertising agent. He didn't do guesses. He did estimates based on corroborated data. Though Russ was once an engineer with a similar affinity for objectivity and numeric precision, he's spent enough time in Alaska to accept a touch of romantic representation. He did some Google searching and settled on 500 million. The slogan conjures a strong image, and one that accurately captures how I felt much of the time I was there, regardless of veracity.

We hiked up the river valley and caught Dolly

worked their fretboards with cracked and callused fingers, leaving space for solos and vocal improvisations. On the tidal flat below, bears pulled salmon from pools and eddies. A sow lay on her back and let her cubs suckle. Birds glided overhead, and short-tailed weasels hid in the surrounding grass, hoping for food scraps. The assembled guests broke into applause and then rushed for their cameras, hoping to catch a sliver of the scene to take back to Houston, San Antonio, Boston, or in my case, Montana.

We were all hoping to hoard some remnant sublime moment. A few days later, all of us guests would leave this remote valley, but these men would remain for another month of 14-hour days. Running a fishing camp in an environment as harsh as it is breathtaking is hard work; guitars and music provide necessary distraction.

But the concert wasn't for our benefit, and I felt a sense of intrusion, like catching someone through a lit window dancing alone across a room. I envied them some, but mainly I felt gratitude to be there, to be listening to them, and seeing the bay stretch out beyond. ■

*Miles Nolte misses his summers in Alaska, but Montana isn't a bad alternative.*