

The
Merit of

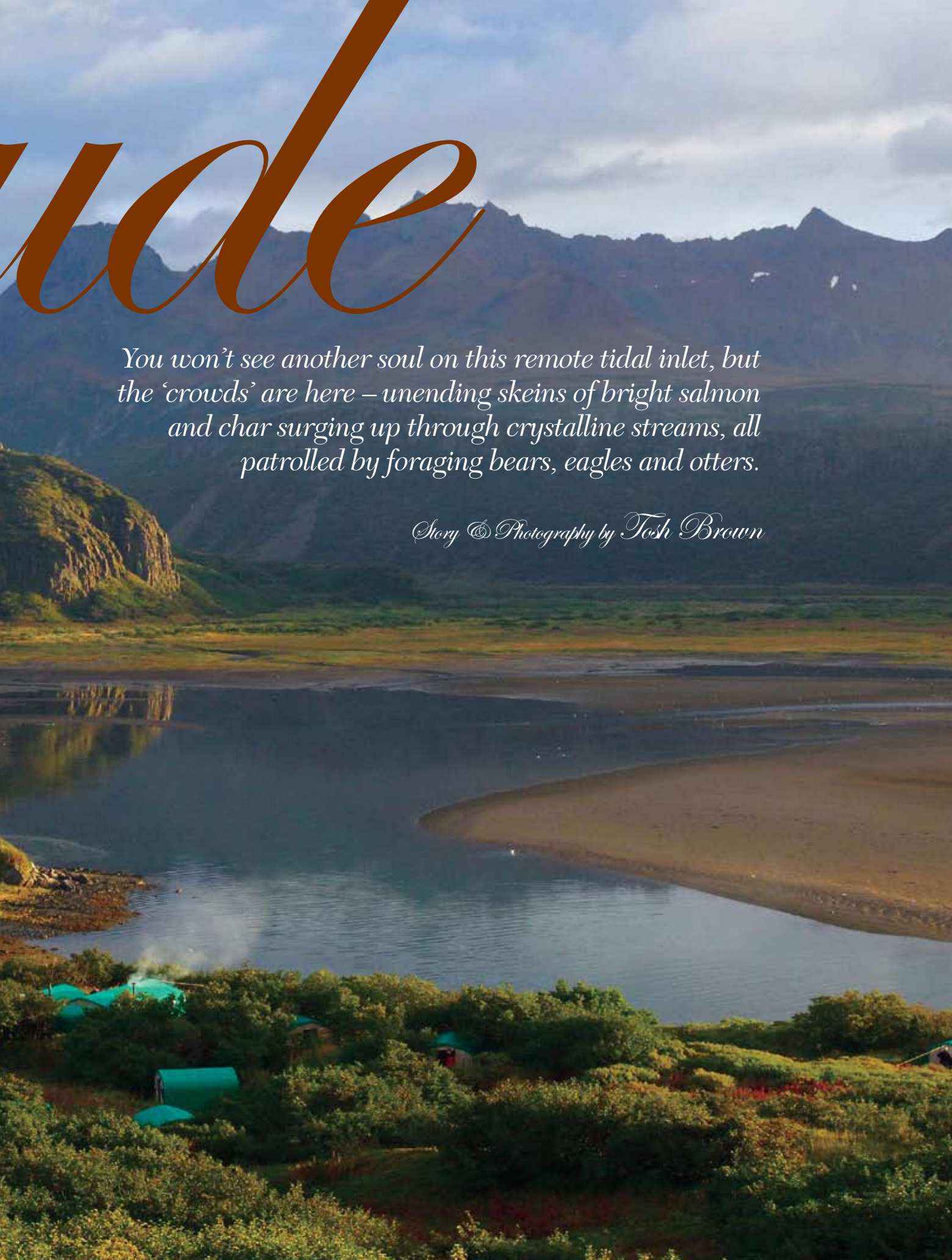
Solitude



wide

You won't see another soul on this remote tidal inlet, but the 'crowds' are here – unending skeins of bright salmon and char surging up through crystalline streams, all patrolled by foraging bears, eagles and otters.

Story & Photography by Josh Brown



After two hours of hiking through alternating spells of rain and wind, guide Collins Illich dropped his backpack onto the gravel bar and studied a deep pool where two stream channels had merged and carved out a distinct overhang on the opposite bank. At the head of the pool was a scattering of juvenile Arctic char holding in the current, all juking for position in the buffet line. The fish appeared as ephemeral smears of tan, chrome and orange suspended over the mottled streambed. Closer to the tail-out, Collins pointed out two noticeably larger specimens in a deep eddy, and then he turned and nodded upriver toward a rock outcropping profiled in the distance.

"See that point of rock that looks like a lion's head about a half-mile up from here."

The crest of the cliff was obscured by rain, fog and hanging clouds, but the lion's silhouette was discernible. Michael Siegman, originally from Melbourne, Australia, and quite possibly the most stoked-up angler I've ever met, turned and studied the view through a blur of condensation on his glasses.

"There's good fishing up past the lion's head," Collins said. "We could get a better view of it if we keep hiking – or we could start here and fish our way back to camp."

Michael glanced back at Collins and then he turned and gazed at the pool full of char at our feet.

"No offense, mate," Michael grinned while twisting the fly from the cork on his rod grip, "but I can see that lion just fine from here."

For the next six hours, in the absolute crappiest of weather, the three of us leapfrogged downriver through mobs of char that acted as if their next feeding opportunity might be their last. For big numbers and lots of action, a drifting egg-fly would draw an immediate strike from the spry twelve- to sixteen-inchers that crowded the head of each riffle. If you wanted to pre-qualify the experience, a persistently placed streamer would disperse the smaller fish and entice the hook-jawed bucks with the distended bellies that required both hands to land and release.

On this day, the third of our weeklong trip, we fished our way past bald eagles perched on rocky crags, a sow grizzly and three cubs that offered us plenty of room for safe maneuvering, and a lone red fox that regarded us as nothing more than a trio of two-legged curiosities. What we did not see, on one of the finest fishing days of my life, was another angler – or any evidence that anyone had fished here before us.

By the time we returned to camp later that afternoon,



the clouds had lifted a bit and the downpours had slowed to a cold and persistent drizzle.

Inside the main tent we found the rest of our group lounging around the wood stove with dry clothing, hors d'oeuvres, fly-fishing magazines, playing cards and paperbacks. Since most of them had stayed close to camp and fished only between squalls, it was suggested by Michael's fellow countryman, Nigel Nattrass, that we three sodden sports might be lacking in our ability to discern good weather from bad.

Never one to pass up an opportunity for a counter-jab, Michael shook the water off his jacket and proudly replied, "This is Alasker, bro. I can play cahds back at home."

Three months prior, when outfitter Rus Schwausch first described his Alaska Wilderness Safari camp to me by telephone, I asked him why he chose a remote tidal inlet on the Pacific side of the Aleutian Range.

"Great fishing, first and foremost," Rus replied. But that's not what sets us apart. The scenery is absolutely stunning; the wildlife and non-fishing activities are a big bonus; and limited access to hundreds of miles of coastline means we don't have to share water with other lodges and outfitters."

These days most people assume that the price of an Alaska fishing trip includes unmatched scenery; lots of fish and plenty of casting room for everyone. Even though fishing license sales top a half-million in Alaska, there shouldn't be a crowding problem in a state where most paved roads



lead to nowhere and caribou outnumber taxpayers . . . right?

Not necessarily.

Now granted, most of Alaska's great sportfisheries are located in the southern half of the state. But we're still describing a huge spread of land with thousands of river miles and mind-boggling numbers of fish – rainbows, Arctic char, grayling and five species of Pacific salmon. So how is it possible that some of Alaska's top rivers have become just as crowded as many of our urbanized fisheries in the Lower 48? Why are some of the guides on those rivers duking it out on the gravel bars for prime spots, and why are the bush pilots dogfighting for first landing rights? The answer: Because the fishing is great; the lodges are first-rate; and those are the rivers that everyone has heard about. Fishing news travels fast, these days – blistering fast through online chat rooms and fly-fishing bulletin boards.

So are all the great rivers in Alaska being over-run by the wader-clad masses? Should we write off the rest of the state as too remote and largely void of angling opportunity?

Not necessarily.

Clockwise, from left: Ted Menderek found this handy place to keep fly lures. • Menderek heads away from the helicopter, which had just landed along a river loaded with Arctic char. • Guide Johnny Quiroz seasons fillets. • This big, hook-nosed silver put up a terrific fight. • Rus Schwausch selects fly patterns for Australian angler Nigel Natrass.



Having fished a number of rivers in the Katmai and Bristol Bay drainages over the years, I've enjoyed some remarkable views through an assortment of small airplane windows. None of those flights compared, though, with the trip between King Salmon and Rus' camp on the Alaska Peninsula. With classical music piped in through our headsets, we flew over rolling tundra with scattered spruce and alder thickets, towering volcanic peaks with glacial flanks, and a stretch of rugged coastline that could never be fully appreciated from ground level.

The Alaska Wilderness Safari camp is perched on a hillside just a few hundred yards from the Pacific. An observation table (with spotting scopes) faces the mountains and tidal flats, and from there you can witness the daily ebb and flow of seawater, scads of bright salmon, foraging bears, eagles, moose, wolves, sea lions and river otters. If you have any doubts about the enormity of Alaska, a few minutes of glassing from the table will quickly refine your perspective.

If you've ever shied away from a particular outfitter because of a preconceived notion of tent camping, you'll have no problem finding comfort in Rus' innovative accommodations. There are two places in the world where safari-style lodging has evolved into an artform of portable lavishness: Africa and Alaska.

Meals from scratch – by a chef, not just a cook – are prepared and served in a 15x30 Weatherport tent that also serves as the camp's bar, headquarters and liar's club. Guests sleep double occupancy (cots, sleeping bags and flannel liners provided) in nearby 10x12 shelters of the same make. There's a heated tent for overnight drying of your waders and gear, and a hot shower tent for those who prefer a more civilized experience.

Providing basic comfort is Rus' first priority, but he also takes care of the smaller details that anglers appreciate in remote locations: reading lanterns, sleeping pads, clothes hangers, a sat-phone for emergencies, solar power for charging batteries, and an in-ground seismic alert system in case the larger predators tire of snorkeling for salmon and wander too close to the kitchen in the middle of the night.

When Rus explained our week's fishing program on the



first evening, it became apparent that scheduling and strict regimen would only apply to the posted breakfast and dinner times. The first four days would be walk-and-wade fishing, or hiking to the waterfalls or the tidal pools, or the beachfront – whatever we would like to do. Rus said that the more ambitious among us could hike upriver and fish all day for salmon and char, while others could hang out on the tidal flats (within range of a nap) and sight-cast to salmon pushing into the new water. Helicopter fly-outs to remote rivers would be available on the last two days, and Rus suggested that we reserve plenty of film, flies and energy for those days. "Lots of big, bright salmon, and great scenery," he promised.

The fishing season at Alaska Wilderness Safari begins in mid-July with the arrival of chum and pink salmon, along with gangs of ravenous char that follow them upriver to gorge on their spawn. In the early season the char are chrome bright and staging in the tidewater along with the salmon. In mid-August thousands of silver salmon come barreling in from the sea, and by September the char are spread throughout the river courses and decked out in their brilliant spawning colors. The





silvers remain fresh and strong all the way through September, and the last half of the month also offers some of the biggest and most decorative char of the season.

On the first day of our fishing week, the nine anglers (a full house) split up into groups of three rods per guide. Everyone was itching for silvers so we strung up our 8- and 9-weights with floating lines and the gaudiest of flies. Migrating salmon

don't feed once they enter fresh water, so they require a bit of tease and torment to provoke a strike. Sometimes they can be brazenly fussy, and then a new push of fish comes in and they all turn

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Clockwise, from top: The anglers rest after catching silvers in the surf. • Arctic char and silver salmon. • Schwausch (right) and Tony Leyland release a silver. • A leggy passerby. • Chris Cooper and Collins Illich, who displays the "Ho Bear" message that the guides would continuously yell when grizzlies were around.

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on at once. Pink, purple, green, lead eyes, flash and profile – when they're on the attack, the recipe is not as important as simply keeping your fly in the middle of all the slashing and porpoising.

"We really try hard to accommodate the angler's preference," Rus told me on the morning of our second day as the groups fanned out in search of new challenges. "Some are into the finesse and the more technical approach that the char require, and others are only interested in the big salmon bites and the long runs.

"We've got the best of both – and plenty to do if you get tired of fishing – and that makes it fun for the guides and the guests."

On that day I tagged along and photographed Chris Cooper from Michigan as he harassed pods of rolling silvers, while Michael and Nigel concentrated on a spot-and-stalk mission for char. Back at dinner that night, Texans Carol Eix and Colleen Church recounted their guided beach-walk and waterfall hike, and gave the rest of us grief for being entirely too consumed with a bunch of silly fish.

All differences of opinion on that matter and other topics were settled each evening at the camp's northernmost washer pit. By week's end it was Tony Leyland from northern England and the two anglers from Down Under who were schooling us "Yanks" on the intricacies of washer pitching.

On our last day I was standing next to the lunch fire with head guide, Ted Mendrek, as he tended two fresh salmon fillets over a bed of hot alder coals. The helicopter was parked nearby, and our assembly of nine rods was spread out over a mile of river and banging with some of the largest silvers we had found that week. Double and triple hookups were common that morning and Chris Cooper, along with his brother, Mark, and father, Darrell, were talking about flight-seeing on the way back to camp instead of fishing for the remainder of the day.

Opposite that position was Michael who was still casting and hooking like a man possessed and professing that he intended to catch salmon until he was absolutely sick of them.

As Ted opened one of the foil packets to season the lunch catch, we heard the faint drone of an airplane passing overhead. We hadn't seen a soul outside our group for the last six days, and this was also the first airplane – or hint of civilization – that had breached the periphery of our isolation.

"Probably moose hunters going back to King Salmon," Ted observed, nodding in the direction of the plane. "We've never seen any other fishermen on this river."

At that point I paused for a moment and considered our fortune. We had a crisp fall day – our fourth sunny day out of six – with a rugged mountain backdrop and a river choked with bright, aggressive salmon. Skeins of mallards and teal were curiously buzzing and circling our gravel bar as they staged for their big flight south. And the only bear we had seen that morning had graciously conceded the best fishing spot.

A week later I was back in Austin during a record September heat wave (108 on the 25th) that wafted into Texas on the heels of the twin tempests, Katrina and Rita. The city was packed to the gills with evacuees, lines at the gas stations were blocks long, and the grocery stores were picked clean of C batteries, duct tape, bottled water and everything remotely palatable.

As I sat down to write this article I typed a single word into the Google search box on my computer desktop:

S-o-l-i-t-u-d-e

What I found was a statement penned by an Austrian author and philosopher named Karl Kraus in 1874: "Solitude would be ideal if you could pick the people to avoid." I doubt Mr. Kraus ever fished a remote tidal inlet on the Alaska Peninsula, but I bet he would've enjoyed it. 🐟

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Contact outfitter Rus Schwausch at 512-656-2736 or visit his website at www.AlaskaWildernessSafari.com.