

Alaska Without Trout

Sight-fishing silvers in the salt BY MILES NOLTE

IT GOT TO THE POINT where I started hating salmon. I never stopped respecting them, or loving what they represented—wildness—but I began to dislike them as quarry, particularly late in the season when they rotted from the inside out, dying by the thousands and leaving every gravel bar crawling with maggots. We used to anchor in the middle of the river and eat lunch in the boat, just to avoid the stench.

I couldn’t eat salmon for a few years after I stopped guiding in Alaska. That was almost all we ate, since they swam past the lodge by the millions. Picture that scene from *Forrest Gump* with Bubba, only replace shrimp with salmon: *baked salmon, grilled salmon, fried salmon, barbeque salmon, salmon spread, salmon salad, salmon soup, salmon and onions ...*

By the third season, even catching salmon had lost some of its flavor. Sockeye were the worst. Since they rarely eat flies, anglers “floss” them, a euphemism that implies care and stewardship but really just means snagging them in the face. Even the salmon that attack flies and take out line didn’t excite me much by then. Wanna know how to wake up a pool of lethargic salmon? Spin some donuts over their heads in a jet-boat, then throw a streamer or Glo-Bug into the agitated mass. Trout may eat worms and have brains the size of a thumbnail, but at least they know enough to flee from a two-stroke engine.

Nearly a decade after my last season guiding in the far north, I got a call from Rus Schwausch who owns EPIC Angling and Adventure camps. In 2005, Rus offered me a job that I turned down because I wanted trout. At that time, he didn’t have any operations with rainbow fishing. We reconnected a few years later—after I published some stories about guiding in Alaska—and have stayed friends since. Last year Rus wanted me to come up and see his Safari Camp, the same place I had declined to work all those years previous. The invitation felt synchronous, and I was missing Alaska, so I agreed, but I was far more excited about the place than the salmon fishing.

Rus’ Safari Camp sits on the Pacific (or southern) side of the Aleutian Range, a coastal mountain range that extends into the Bering Sea. Supposedly, these mountains are the northern terminus of the North American Cordillera, that raised skeleton of the continent. It begins in Mexico, ascends through the Sierras, the Cascades, and the various Rockies, and ends in this protrusion of rocky headlands pointing at Kamchatka like a shattered finger.

The camp stands alone, a series of Weatherport tents on the wind-battered, western bluff of Nakalilok Bay. To the south, the Pacific stretches endless. To the east, the estuary spreads out in tidal flats patrolled by brown bear, wolves, eagles, terns, and gulls. To the north, huge calderas rise from sea level into the clouds, occasionally giving up a glacier peep show.

The first afternoon I rigged an 8-weight and headed out in gale force winds. So many pinks loitered and shuddered at a seeping spring next to camp that they looked like a singular, gray mass,



A GOOD PLACE FOR A ROMANTIC STROLL WITH AN EIGHT-WEIGHT.

studded with hundreds of dorsal fins. Two casts and two humpies later, I moved on, hoping to find fresh chums in deeper water. I did, but the sheer biomass of pinks was nearly impenetrable. Nine out of every ten casts got attacked by the angry dwarfs of the Pacific Salmon family. After an hour of that, I clipped off the streamer, tied on a pollywog, and dropped the fish catching numbers down to a reasonable level. Still, by the end of the afternoon the foam body looked like a dog-eaten Frisbee and the rabbit-strip tail was long since bitten off.

The next morning, I volunteered to help out by doing a little guiding. I figured I’d have more fun watching other people catch

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salmon than doing so myself. I was still ecstatic to be in that place, thrilled at having a week to explore that valley, but salmon fishing was about what I expected and remembered, only easier. Rus and the other staff were grateful for a little help and I spent the morning running between two guys about my parents’ age who had never even held flyrods before, constantly unhooking fish.

After lunch, Rus made me quit guiding and led a group of us out of the estuary and down to the beach. I could see salmon leaping in the bay, well out of casting range, so I walked the beach, looking at shells and driftwood.

I found a spit of sand that jutted out into the bay and followed it until the waves flirted with the tops of my waders. The water was cold and briny. Bobbing harbor seal heads appeared and disappeared all around like a lifesized, maritime game of whack-a-mole.

And then they were there, right in front of me, a school of pink salmon following the sandy contour of the beach. They caught me unprepared, and by the time I did lob a fly into the group, they were going away and avoided it. A different game. I dug the toes of my boots into the sand and started to scan. If it weren’t for the freezing cold ➡



HOW YOU LIKE ME NOW?

water, the heavy Gore-Tex, and the bear tracks on the beach, it would have felt like bonefishing.

I remained rooted for the next few hours, trying to spot the roving packs of fish before they saw me and changed course. When I was able to do so, and accurately drop a fly in front of them, a couple would usually break from the group and chase, sometimes they even ate. It was visual and exciting and exactly what had been missing from the previous day's fishing: a challenge.

When Rus came to check on me later that afternoon, my lower body was numb, my eyes blurred from strain.

"You having fun?" He yelled over the breaking surf.

"Hell yeah. This is amazing."

"Keep your eyes out for silvers. Ken just caught one up the beach."

Seconds later I spotted a group of fish very close to me with one bright green back, bigger than the others, leading the charge. The cast wasn't perfect but the fly was large and bright. She accelerated as soon as she saw it, jumped high in the air on the hook-set, and landed inside the loop of slack fly line that the tide had pulled out behind me.

The fight was comical and Rus saw it all. I managed to land the fish by walking the tangled mass of leader, fly line, and pissed off silver up on the beach. I knelt and thanked her before knocking her on the head with a piece of driftwood and cutting her gill rakers. I watched the blood seep in the sand and trickle downhill, a tiny dark river flowing back to sea.

The beach renewed my interest in salmon fishing. That spit of sand became my hunting grounds. Fishing in the estuary produced more fish, but less satisfaction, and I got to know a couple of the seals that had unique markings on their foreheads. I never actually saw them take any fish, but I think they were eating some of my exhausted escapees, because as the days passed they were less wary of me. It seemed like a good trade: making friends with seals for a few salmon that I didn't need. When my eyes blurred from focus, I would stare off into the blue-gray haze of the horizon and look for whale spouts.

Toward the end of the week, the wind laid down enough that

we could take a small cataraft equipped with an outboard into the bay. Rus had a fly rod custom built for halibut fishing. It cast like a rake handle but got the job done. Having never caught a halibut, much less on fly gear, I abandoned the sand spit and climbed aboard. We tried a few rock piles and kelp beds. The halibut didn't feel like playing, but we caught black rockfish until we got sick of it and then toured around the bay, luxuriating in the rare calm and sunshine, drinking the vistas and the empty space.

We passed a small island with a dark, rocky base and a grassy knoll at the top. Seals sunned themselves on the rocks and brightly colored starfish bloomed in the tidepools around the margins. Rus told me about a cook who used to work at the camp: he and his wife conceived a child on that island. The child died just before childbirth, the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. Rus and the staff held a ceremony on that island and laid his tiny urn beneath a rock.

I rocked in the swell and pictured a half dozen grizzled Alaskan fishing guides bawling their eyes out atop a green outcropping jutting into the cold Pacific Ocean with seals and starfish all around, the mountains looming above and the fish migrating below on their way to spawn and die.

Rus told me there are several places where ashes have been scattered in that bay. His father's ashes are on a beach near there. On the far side, they found a cross and cairn from someone unconnected to their camp, perhaps a commercial fisherman whose buddies laid him to rest. It's the kind of place where people want to spend eternity, but I wouldn't want to try and ride out a winter there.

On the way back in, I stood on the bow of Rus' boat and sight-fished a few more mirrored silvers in the salt. After releasing the last one, I turned and smiled at him: "I wish I would have taken that job you offered me all those years ago. I'm starting to think trout fishing is overrated."

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