

Epic Angling and Adventure



In the shadow of Mount Chiginagak, an unnamed river in western Alaska hosts a variety of visitors. Some have been returning to this river valley for millions of years,

making the arduous journey upriver to spawn in pristine waters. Compared to many fisheries in the United States and beyond, the rivers and the surrounding ecosystem here remain essentially undisturbed by humans, except for a handful of dedicated anglers and their pilots.

EPIC Angling & Adventure operates two remote, off-the-grid angling camps near the Bristol Bay watershed and on the Pacific coast of the Alaska Peninsula Wildlife Refuge. Owner Rus Schwausch says that while other rivers in Alaska are being “loved to death” by overcrowding or overfishing, EPIC has managed to preserve something truly unique.

“You’ll never see another angler when you’re out there,” says veteran guide Don Mutert. This is in part due to a strict special use permitting process required of any commercial activity in the refuges. And of course, the camps are only accessible by plane.

Flying into camp is a “surreal experience,” says Peter Sclafani, a guide at EPIC. “You fly over a breathtaking mountain range covered in glaciers, where nearly all of the peaks are unnamed... only to then step off the plane and see fresh bear tracks trailing along the shore during low tide.”

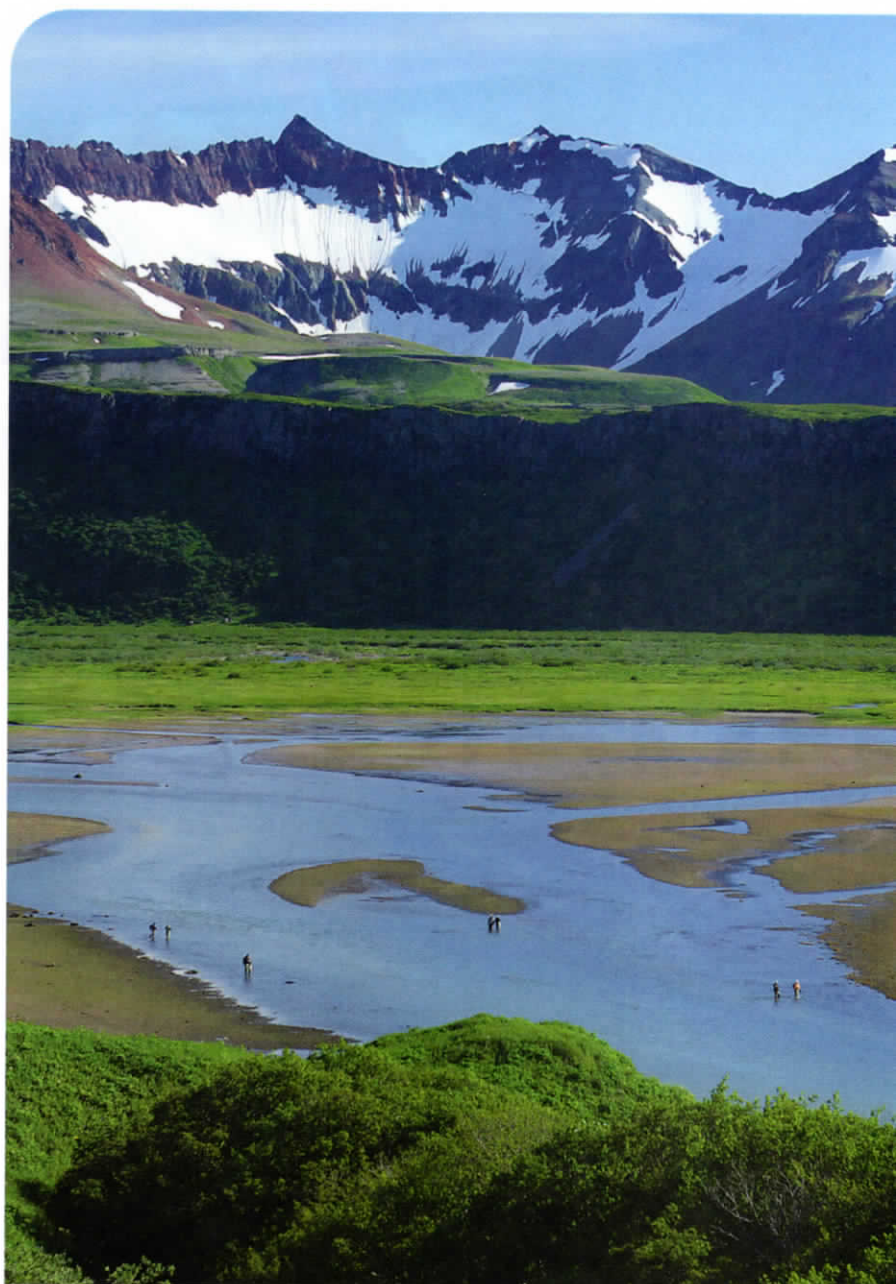
During their week-long stay, clients spend their time roaming vast tidal flats and navigating the social dynamics of bears, or viewing glaciers from the vantage point of a helicopter on their way to a secret fishing spot, most likely one teeming with salmon and Dolly Varden.

According to Schwausch, it is this immersion into an awe-inspiring wilderness that fosters a sense that, “rather than feeling like we are meant

to dominate and control the land and its resources, we feel and act more like humble visitors.” Guests often say that they finally began to understand the necessity of land and wildlife conservation during their time at camp.

And the area is not without the need for protection. The proposed Pebble

Mine has threatened the headwaters of neighboring Bristol Bay for decades despite overwhelming public opposition. Meanwhile, some fisheries across the state have experienced a marked decline in the health and annual quantity of keystone species such as salmon and herring.



Pocket Water



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In effort to conserve this vital resource, most of the fishing at EPIC camps is catch and release—though they may keep the occasional salmon for dinner. “I love how fly fishing can bring you to some of the most beautiful places in the world, just to catch a fish and let it go,” Sclafani says.

In a similar fashion, EPIC camps leave no trace. Every fall, for about two weeks, the guides pack up camp, making sure nothing is left behind. “It is pretty remarkable that our entire camps get completely broken down... when we leave the camp you wouldn’t even know we were there,” Mutert says.

Like spawning salmon, these secondary visitors quietly disappear; only to return again in the summer, year after year, bowing to the cyclical nature of a truly wild place.

—Anne Vollertsen