

# Adventures *in the wild state*

A “Grand Slam” week of fishing on the banks of Alaska’s Goodnews River is a fisherman’s dream, says **Jonathan Young**

**T**HIS is an announcement from Anchorage International Airport: Alaska is obsessed with fishing and hunting. Squinting from its home at the entrance to

Gate B is a monster halibut caught by Jack Tragus on 11 June 1996 – 9ft 5in from snout to fin and weighing 459lb – while a world-record setting moose, shot by Dr Michael Cusack in 1973 in Bear Creek, stands in the main hall. And if you want a souvenir for the loved one, the airport shop sells sealskin slippers and a selection of Arctic-fox furs. Even the nearby parking tells a story; instead of cars there are hundreds of private floatplanes bobbing on their moorings.

Most of our fellow travellers were carrying rods as hand luggage and, like them, we’d travelled thousands of miles to experience the plenitude of Pacific salmon. For many years, as a young journalist, I’d edited the copy of the great Arthur Oglesby, that titan of fly-fishing in the ’70s and ’80s. When he wasn’t pursuing 50-pound Atlantic salmon on Norway’s Vosso, Oglesby would take parties to Alaska’s Bristol Bay and I’ve never forgotten his tales of massive salmon in mackerel numbers, a gilded promise of the sort of sport once enjoyed by our 19th-century forebears, bending cane rods in the Highlands. But perhaps others had. With the opening up of Russia’s Kola Peninsula and the spectacular catches on the Ponoï, such as the 19 rods landing more than 1,800 fish in a week at Ryabaga Camp in 2002, fishermen looked east, not west.

But that quantity of silver requires heavy payment in gold and while that’s deemed worthwhile by experienced anglers worldwide, the Pacific salmon give those >

**Left: some visitors prefer spey rods but guides favour single-handers. Below: a sea-fresh chum**





shackled with school fees and mortgages the chance to experience rod-wrenching days at comparatively low cost, especially if they travel to Goodnews River Lodge in Southwest Alaska. Set on the banks of the Goodnews River, flowing out of the Ahklun Mountains into the Bering Sea, a “Grand Slam” week in late July, when it’s possible to catch king, chum, pink, sockeye and coho salmon, as well as rainbow trout, Dolly Vardens (a sea-going char), Arctic char and grayling, costs \$5,950. Anyone under 16 accompanied by an adult fishes for \$3,995.

First, however, you need to get there. After the usual weedy films and plastic-food ordeal of economy class, we arrived finally at the last stage, a two-hour charter flight to the Lodge. Befuddled by travel, neither my 20-year-old son, Fergus, nor I had bothered to read the small notice by the check-in desk until, horribly, it was too late for remedial action. The boy almost giggled. “Looks like I’m not going to be the only one who can’t drink on this trip,” he said. “It says as we’re heading to a native-land destination, alcohol is banned.” What? I haven’t been “dry” since the local cider house allowed the town’s 14-year-olds a half pint of



scrumpy in the back parlour. A whole week without a drink? Unthinkable. But also, it seemed, inevitable.

We waited for the plane, eyeing up our fellow passengers’ hand luggage that we suspected carried liquid supplies. When she arrived, she was a beauty, a Super DC-3, Number N30TN, that had originally entered

service with the United States Air Force on 10 January 1941 and had then had a lively life, twice being seized for drug running by the US Drug Enforcement Agency and used as a crop sprayer before being sold to TransNorthern Aviation in 2003. Stretching luxuriously in the sparse seating, we watched Alaska’s mountains and glaciers roll by until a feather-light landing in Goodnews Bay village, followed by a brisk boat trip upriver to Goodnews Lodge.

We were shown to our digs for the week, a homely hut akin to a posh polytunnel fitted with an industrial-looking heater. After a brief lunch of salmon and a glug of coffee, we set off for an afternoon’s fishing.

At Goodnews you’re issued daily with a different guide, so there’s the chance to learn something new each day. This also avoids the personality clashes that occasionally occur (I shall never forget the ordeal of being stuck for a week with “Pedrito the Bastard” on another expedition). Our guide for the afternoon was Jan Stewart, a local man from the Yup’ik people who own the land. We climbed into his boat, moored 60 yards from our hut. “Hope you’re ready for a long boat ride,” he warned,



**Above: a moose and calf cross the river within sight of the camp. Below: the camp’s huts nestled next to the Goodnews River**

gunning up the big outboard before cutting the engine 90 seconds later and landing us 250 yards from the camp. He almost smiled and we decided we liked Stewart a lot; he had our sense of humour.

He steered Fergus to a junction pool 30 yards into the river and within a minute his 9-wt rod was bowed by something strong, one of the six chum he caught in the next two hours, together with a pink. Most of the fish were fresh, the camp being a short run from the sea, and I could hardly concentrate on my own fishing for the sound of suppressed yells and Stewart’s traipse out to net another fish. “Still not connected, Dad?” came the boy’s “encouraging” cry as I questioned the wisdom of bringing him and the lack of gin-and-tonic solace at the end of the session.

But this is why I’d brought the boy out here. Up to now his fishing was limited to stocked trout and the odd pollock and wrasse. I wanted him to learn not only how to cast properly but also how to play salmon, something that’s not learnt easily or quickly nowadays on Scottish fish. Finally, I connected with a sockeye, which turned out to be foul-hooked and, as Stewart told me with a grin, “doesn’t count”.

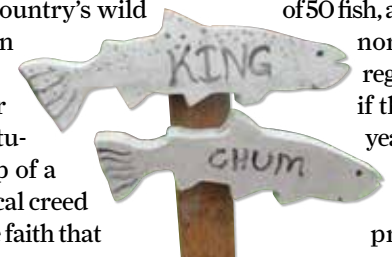
We returned to the Lodge for a shower, supper and our briefing by the camp’s owner, Mike Gorton. Like the rest of his team, Gorton isn’t merely keen on fishing, it’s a religion that pulls American outdoorsmen to a near-monastic existence in the country’s wild places. He started guiding in Alaska in 1987 before working at the Goodnews River Lodge for seven years, eventually buying it with the help of a friend in 1996. His evangelical creed is to “revive and rekindle the faith that

ennobles the human spirit” by returning people to the simple joys of fishing they once experienced before being submersed by the cares of modern life.

His ethos attracts fishermen throughout the world. The British mostly come in June armed with spey rods to tackle the king salmon (though the guides think they would fare far better with single-handed 10-wts) that average 20lb-25lb but can reach more than 40lb. The disciples of the coho or silver salmon arrive in mid-August when, according to our guides, it’s almost impossible not to cast a fly and catch one, with a daily catch per rod

of 50 fish, averaging 10lb-15lb, being the norm. Sport is so intense that regulars pay for their slots even if they cannot make them that year so as not to lose their place.

At the end of July and early August the pinks predominate. Weighing >



**Guides Jan Stewart (above) and Will Schmitt with the writer. The guides change daily**







around 4lb-6lb, they have a two-year lifecycle with most of the fish returning in even-numbered years, such as 2016.

Absorbing these facts, Fergus and I met the other guests, who included New York lawyer Gregg Rubin and his son, Winick, and the extended Haaker family, who have a thriving business selling street sweepers and sewage trucks in California. Like us, they could barely wait to finish supper before chucking another line in the river outside the Lodge.

Mornings start early at Goodnews, with a 7am cooked breakfast. Having packed your "piece" for the day, it's then on to the boats at 8am, with the option of returning to camp for a hot bowl of soup at lunchtime.

Our guide on the first full day was Will Schmitt, who taught Fergus to double-haul cast and water-load the line successfully, both essential skills for this type of fishing. All the guides were patient instructors who took time to show a relative novice the finer techniques; this alone was worth the trip.

In the meantime, I kept at it, managing to catch four out of the five salmon species, including a sockeye (that rarely take the fly) and a "jack" chinook, which only take the title of "king" when they're 20lb-plus. In total, we ended up landing 10 fish before heading back, wolfing down supper and crashing out at 10.30pm, when the camp generator is switched off. Our week coincided with a good run of chums, which don't really deserve their

**Above: a land unspoilt by man. Right: Fergus Young with one of our 127 fish for the week**

dismissive name. In fact, it seems to be derived from the term "tzum", meaning striped, from the local pidgin language Chinook Jargon.

That seems more apt for a handsome, brutally powerful fish that we landed in numbers on the second day, spent with guide Steve Brown; a 12-pounder falling to Fergus' rod, together with his first coho, a magnificent 15-pounder still festooned with long-tailed sea lice, and another 25 fish, mostly a mix of chums and pinks. Brown shared our appreciation of these bulldogs of the sea, saying, "if they grew as big as kings you'd hardly be able to get them in the boat".

Our new friends, Gregg and Winick, agreed and the immediately styled "Friends of Chum" were able to renew their battle the next day. Gregg and Winick landed 46, with a little help from a spinning rod, while Fergus and I managed 24 with our next guide, Johnny Napolitano, including my 15-pounder chum, a zebra-marked pugilist that Napolitano said was "the biggest I've had on the boat this season", and a couple of cohos for Fergus, one a 12-pounder and especially gladdening for him since I'd had no silvers that day.

Having caught a shortish-lifetime's worth of fish it was time to experiment. Steve Cratty was the cool dude of the Lodge, sporting shades and shirts that were more "Glasto fest"



than Alaskan west. Ex-US Army, he'd found a home among the itinerant world of professional guides and was determined to forge a reputation as a technical instructor. But the first three hours did not go well. The chum run was literally dying out, the early spawners now drifting past dead or as half-decayed zombies, while the replenishing influx of silvers had yet to happen. In three hours, Fergus had four pinks and I had one; wonderful numbers on a Scottish river but disappointing on what one of the guides had pronounced proudly to be "the salmon capital of the world".

So Cratty decided to change tactics. Instead of swinging streamer flies in the tidal water for the yet-to-arrive silvers we headed upstream to fish dry fly. Well, almost dry fly. Though it's not unknown to catch Atlantics on the top in Iceland, especially with a riffled hitch fly, it's not often we witness the actual take with salmon. But Pacifics belie their name and can be goaded into explosive action with a Gurgler fly, a simple confection consisting mainly of a doubled-backed strip of foam. Sitting high on the water, with a protruding top lip, when stripped through the water fast it creates a wake, a splash and the distinctive noise that gives it its name.

Cratty zapped upstream to a backwater where the fish lie before pushing on to their spawning grounds, and through the vodka-clear water we could see hundreds of pinks among the cohorts of red sockeye, while downstream there was the frequent ripple of a fresh pod of silvers moving up. Chucking our Gurglers across the water, Fergus and I started stripping fast and within seconds we had fish



following, their bow waves rippling the surface before they grabbed the fly. We managed to land 20 on the Gurgler, including a hefty silver that leapt like an Olympic floor gymnast.

The experience had been what our cousins would describe as "awesome" and it seems the pair of us had passed some sort of test as our next guide, Eric Leininger, offered to lend us his personal rods fitted with Rio shooting-head flylines that make it easy to boom out a long chuck; but not before he'd checked us out with the other guides who'd assured him, "Yeah, they're ok, they can fish."

We added another 12 to the tally, plus another 12 caught on a bank patterned with bear footprints, making a grand total of 127

**Above left: perfecting casting skills. Above: a coho (silver) caught on the Gurgler. Below: the extensive Goodnews river system**

fish between us for six-and-a-half days' fishing. Does the tally matter? Not really. Numbers don't reveal the joy of being in a pristine wilderness, with little trace of man outside the camp. No litter, no building, no noise except the companionable croaking of ravens and the heavy thump of jumping salmon. Nor can figures tally the pleasure of new friends and of sharing a whole week with your son. But the catch statistics do show why the long journey to Alaska becomes a pilgrimage for all those who love endless wild places and wild fish. ■

## HEADING TO ALASKA

### CONTACT

The writer's trip was hassle-free and organised by Frontiers Travel, Kennet Cottage, Kempford, Gloucestershire GL7 4EQ.  
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### TIPS

We let the Lodge provide us with waders, wading boots and all the fishing tackle, which worked perfectly. You do need a wading jacket, some warm layers, stripping gloves and mosquito spray, but the beasts weren't as ferocious as the midges found on the south-west coast of Scotland.

