

Goodnews Lodge – Alaska - In pursuit of the King!!



View from lower section of the Goodnews to the distant mountains. With only one fishing camp on the entire river system you can be assured that there will never be an over-crowding issue.

A fresh run King Salmon or Chinook is not a fish to be addressed half-heartedly! They can be fickle to take, the seasonal window to have a good chance of hooking a tide bright fish is limited to no more than a month, they have an all too frequent ability to long-distance release for no apparent good reason, they are typically averse to any bright days and if any part of your fishing gear has any weakness they will find it! In short they are not easy to tame. Get all of the above right and their title as King Salmon is duly deserved. They are spectacular, amazingly powerful and BIG. 20-30-40-50lbs big!! Goodnews River and camp is situated on the far eastern seaboard of Alaska and is one of the best fishing lodges to catch Kings on a swung fly. Certainly worthy of a significant globetrotting adventure and that is exactly where we ended for over the last week of June.

GoodnewsRiverLodge.com

The Last, Best Kept Secret

The flight from Anchorage to Goodnews Bay is when things start to get interesting. Goodnews offers an exclusive charter flight in a fabulous Douglas DC3 (Dakota) that first entered service in 1941 with the USAAF. It was subsequently the second ever airframe to be converted by Douglas into a Super DC3 and has since had a long and eventful history that included on two occasions being impounded by the US Drug Enforcement Agency. I checked under my seat but could not find any hidden stash from its previous history!!

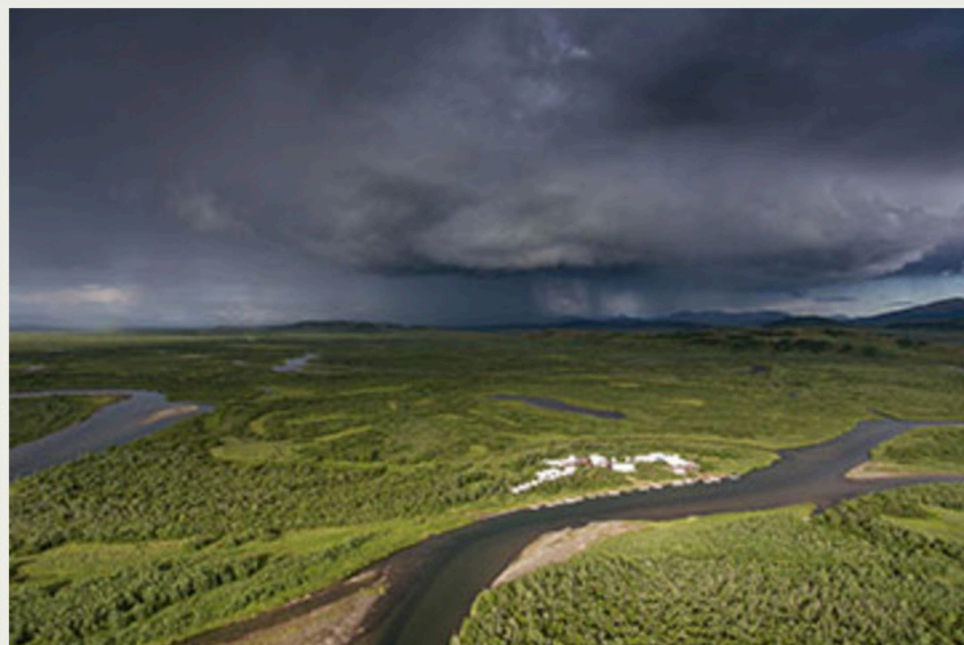
Whilst on the runway the plane sits at a jaunty 10 degree up angle so you 'climb' as you walk towards the front seats and it only levels out as you get airborne. You really do feel as if you are flying in a slice of history. For those a little unsure of the air-worthiness of a 70 yr old plane as a testament to their durability there are still over 400 in worldwide circulation.



Spectacular views flying out of Anchorage ----- Equally impressive Trans Northern DC3 Charter

There is no doubt that the village of Goodnews is a remote outpost! It is hard to imagine how a community can survive out here, a significant 2-½ hr flight from Anchorage. The landing strip is just that, a landing strip! Indications that this part of the world can indeed be very wild was the sight of a 40ft iso shipping container sitting in the middle of the tundra as we begun our approach to the airstrip at Goodnews. It was an abandoned dumping spot as initially assumed but had in fact been lifted and deposited there by a hurricane some years earlier, a distance of about 500M from where it had originally been placed.

Goodnews fishing lodge / camp is a 20 minute boat journey across first the estuary and then up the Goodnews river. Having previously fished on the Kanektok river I was expecting something quite similar, a single main waterway with numerous bars (gravel banks) that you fished from. Goodnews River is in fact very different. The main channel quickly splits and subdivides into a myriad of both small and medium sizes streams. As you go further upstream the river divides into three main arteries that snake out of the distant mountains. This serves to give each fishing day significant character as you hop from one pool to another whether chasing fish on the incoming tide, a certain species of fish or style of fishing. There is no formal beat rotation in operation but you fish with a different guide each day and each will have their own perspective on where to go, what to do and how to do it.



The camp under the midnight sun...at midnight!! ----- Goodnews Camp from the sky with an impressive cloudburst in the distance

Mike Gorton is the owner operator of Goodnews. A more charismatic and engaged owner you are unlikely to find. The opening brief over lunch on arrival set the tone as each and every member of staff was personally introduced. His history, originally guiding in the area and how he subsequently came to own and run the lodge is truly fascinating story and worthy of a documentary. Without going into detail a 20 minute discussion with him really sets the tone as to the adversities, trials and tribulations that exist operating a lodge in such a remote environment. Mike oozes charisma and his unflinching enthusiasm and dedication to making the operation run smoothly is captivating.

Anglers fish in pairs with a dedicated guide for the day and a jet boat by means of transport. Where or how you fish is entirely up to you. Over this specific week the firm emphasis was on those who wanted to fly-fish, with King Salmon being the primary objective. That said there were also good numbers of Chum and Sockeye salmon around and being early season (the prime time for King Salmon) the numbers of fish entering the river was steadily increasing. Sometimes the numbers of fish were very evident in terms of activity on the surface however it was with the use of the newly acquired WhereWiseMenFish 'eye in the sky' that it was really possible to see the huge quantity of fish in the system. For those used to sparser numbers of Atlantic Salmon the number of fish is simply staggering. Although it required less than ideal fishing conditions to see what was going on (bright sunshine) on our first gloriously evening it provided as clear a window into the river as you could ever hope for.



Heading out on a Typical Goodnews jetboat ----- View of the 'Home Pool'. As the week went on more and more fish could clearly be seen in it.

The bottom of the Goodnews is for the most part smooth and sandy making wading very easy. It is also light-coloured and on a sunny windless day it would be possible to count almost every single fish in the river...if you had a lot of time on your hands. Pods of salmon could be seen working their way steadily upstream. Wherever there was structure on the river bottom or alongside the bank it was possible to see fish holding. Big King Salmon could clearly be seen taking the lion's share of the best holding spots, edging the smaller Chum or Sockeye out of the way. Every now and then with a flick of a tail and a flash of silver a fish would jump, briefly upsetting the status quo before falling back into place.

Whenever there was a period of good visibility I struggled to tear myself away from my airborne window into the river. The behaviour and actions of the fish were on display in a way that I had never seen before. By way of example if you have been brought up on a diet of anti canoe prejudice on the basis that it disturbs the fish a jetboat running the river is the nuclear equivalent! From above the perspective is very very different. Fish would dart swiftly out of the way but within a few minutes they typically reformed and regrouped in their original lies. I do not refute that almost any activity can break an angler's tranquillity and peace of mind, but from the sky, in terms of disrupting the fish, for the most part they appeared unmoved by the activity of the boats. Likewise it is possible to catch a salmon within moments of a jetboat having passed.



For fly-fishers the bulk of the fishing can be done from the bank but on the lower section of the Goodnews there are areas that are best covered from a boat. King Salmon by default will find the deepest holes in a river and they will not come up to a fly in the same way that an Atlantic Salmon might. Most of the time you need to present the fly on the nose of a King! In the tidal sections of Goodnews where the river is widest and deepest, when fishing from the bank, it is probable that even with a fast sinking tip your fly will be swinging too far up in the water column whilst over the best holding water. It will only really be fishing at the correct height further round in the swing, regardless of how well you have been mending the fly and in these instances fishing from the boat yields the best results.

A good number of the team on our 'King' week were veterans of the Goodnews. It is easy to imagine that everything that could be known about fishing for King Salmon has been learnt however as with all fishing it pays to experiment and here I have to give credit to Mark Weems. Whilst fishing the same week last year he had tried a large Tungsten Frances. The theory being that the profile and weight of the Tungsten Frances would get it fishing in the right place at the right depth, quicker than a standard intruder style patterns which are normally considered the 'go-to' flies when fishing for Chinook. Despite a level of initial "what is that" from the guides he very quickly achieved some good results. This year both he and his partner Philip returned with a suitable armoury and unquestionably between the two of them they achieved the lions share of success using their Frances flies. Cerise seemed to be the most effective colour and having the fly loosely tied to give it more movement was the preferred style.

As is the way of things last year the King Salmon fishing had been spectacular. This year it was slower. Ironically the run of Kings for the 2016 season was exceptional. There is a fish counter on Middle Fork, one of the 3 branches of the main river which splits above and below the lodge. At the counter it recorded 3,619 Kings passing through it compared to 1,350 in 2015 when the actual rod catches had been excellent. Why then had our week been slower? Frustratingly what had proved to be less than ideal fishing conditions for us was by contrast fabulous for the Kings who made quick work of the lower stretches, not really holding in the pools but charging on up river. It is quite possible that had we got an indication of the fact that the fish were moving so quickly we could of intercepted them higher up the system, but the default position for fishing at the start of the run is to intercept then silver and bright off the tide!! You never stop learning and as with Mark and his Tungsten Francis flies you can never stop experimenting!



Sockeye and Kings queuing to get passed the fish counter at Middle Fork. The bulk of the Kings are in the deeper water to the middle and right. Fishing is NOT allowed within the immediate proximity of the counter!

When a big King takes it is spectacular. The take can be savage, and when they decide to head off, they are literally unstoppable. Kings need to be played hard; drags are turned up to an almost unthinkable level of resistance to those used to playing an Atlantic Salmon. And when they go...they really go. It is all too easy to be spooled by a fish. The initial thrill of hooking a big fish followed by the excitement of having it take line can quickly turn into a panic as both the fish gains momentum and the spool empties. Twists in the backing and knots which may not have seen daylight for quite some time quickly get exposed! Very often without the assistance of the boat to chase down a fish you can see your fish and your snapped line streaking off down river along with your dream!



Philip Walker, Goodnews veteran with two fabulous Chinook

To get the best out of fishing for King Salmon it is sometimes best not to fish for them! There are times when they simply are not on the take and specifically that is over days when it is bright and sunny. On days like this it can be worth re-focusing on other species. On one such afternoon we headed off to floss for Sockeye. The theory is that the Sockeye get hooked as the line passes between their open mouths. Without going into details the reality is a little more unsophisticated. Methods of catching them aside, for our team it provided a very fun and different afternoon on an unsuitably bright and sunny day. The result was a ton of action and a supply of fabulous fresh and very sustainable wild fish. These were subsequently exchanged for smoked fish in Anchorage and will ensure a hearty supply of very delicious salmon for many months to come.



In pursuit of the ever plentiful Sockeye on a bright and less than ideal King Salmon afternoon

Lodging at Goodnews is in relatively compact tent cabins. With almost constant daylight during the summer, unless you want to sleep with your head under your pillow, it is worth equipping yourself with an eye mask and some wax earplugs in the event that your fishing partner or neighbour next door snores! Although there is a good communal ablutions block Mike and his team have been steadily improving all aspects of the lodging and each year add one or two larger ensuite tent cabins. I have nothing but admiration for the way the camp is run. The logistics of maintaining the countless boats, lodge infrastructure, implementing improvements and then running a relentless schedule that offers no breaks from the day the camp opens to its closure for winter is nothing but punishing. The fact that everything runs as smoothly as it does is extremely impressive!

The prime weeks for King Salmon are over the last week of June and early July but the run continues until the end of July. Unlike some of the other species of Pacific Salmon you do have to work hard for your fish and realistic hook up expectations probably run in the 3-8 fish/day range. As is often the case there can be days of feast or famine but when things go right and you hit a pod of fresh fish coming in off the tide things can get really exciting. The reward for slimmer pickings than alternate species of Pacific Salmon is the chance of a 35-45lb or larger 'off the tide' Chinook Salmon. Even when hooked these fish are monsters to contain and landing one is as much of an achievement as a fish of that size deserves to be.

