



# BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE MOON

FISHING HARD MADE EASY  
AT GOODNEWS RIVER LODGE

STORY BY JOHN CLEVELAND

The Goodnews River Lodge, pictured below, offers exclusive access to the wild, scenic and incredibly fishy river of the same name.







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A pair of healthy, chrome coho—just another day on the Goodnews, where coho doubles are a regular occurrence.

As we arrived at Detroit Metro Airport the smell of jet fuel mixed with the acrid exhaust of the city's thousands of commuters, all of whom are presumably racing to meet deadlines driven by the clock of the civilized world. We were greeted by the pitched roar of jet engines stirring the morning air into a cacophony even greater than that of the standard urban commute. Watching the support vehicles darting back and forth under the giant aluminum carriages like pinballs bouncing through a game, I was mindful of the irony in how much noise and commotion is required to deliver us to the serenity of remote Alaska.

As Director of Marketing for Eppinger Manufacturing Company, makers of the world famous Dardevle line of spoons, I have had the opportunity to travel to some of Canada's finest fishing destinations in the Northwest Territories and the Arctic, but until now Alaska has been just a dream. I will be sharing this adventure with another first-timer to Alaska, my son Eric. This is our first father-and-son wilderness trip and we have been busy all summer anticipating the adventure and gathering our gear for what I was confident would be a trip of a lifetime to the Goodnews River Lodge.

The lodge is perched bankside on the river of the same name, which drains around 1,000 square miles

of the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, flowing from the Ahklun Mountains southwest to Goodnews Bay, a trip of about 90 river-miles from the start of the North Fork to the bay, moving through a riparian habitat of willow, alder, the usual tundra vegetation and an occasional stand of cottonwood. When combined with the Middle and South Forks, the lodge has more than 400 total miles of river to fish. Plus, I already know that each of Alaska's five species of Pacific salmon return to the system, as do significant numbers of sea-run Dolly Varden; resident grayling populations are thick as well and of above-average size, and the rainbow trout, existing about as far north as possible for the species, thrive. Best of all, I know there's only one sport-fishing camp on the entire river and that's where we're headed.

A well-kept 1950 DC-3 was standing on the tarmac at Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, ready to transport us 450 miles to the lodge, located in southwest Alaska. The smell of various mechanical lubricating fluids, fishing gear and a dose of anticipation permeated the interior as we got settled into our seats. The radial engines thundered to life like two fire-breathing dragons and the fuselage shook when the pilot hit the starter switch and began the preflight warm-up. After two-and-a-half hours flying time the plane slowly

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Tackle of the trade: here is a lineup of spoons, flies and poppers, all of which worked to great success on the river's coho.

lumbered below the cloudy gray scud to reveal a beautiful valley with a ribbon of blue water that would be our theater of adventure this coming week.

We took a short ride upriver to the lodge after deplaning. The camp features high-tech heated Weatherport tents that reminded me of the treehouses of my youth, all of them raised several feet above the tundra and standing in formation along the bank of the river, each with a comfortable porch and convenient rod storage rack. Raised walkways with rope handrails led us through the camp to the main lodge, a bathhouse with six private washrooms and a building with a heated drying room to store our gear at the end of the day. All of this built with ingenuity, style and a sense of adventure in the remote wilderness of southwest Alaska.

and angling skills to the limit. It was awesome watching my son Eric as he hooked and landed the first salmon of his life. He flashed me a beaming smile and immediately returned to the business at hand.

Like its sister drainage, the Kanektok, the Goodnews River has some of southwest Alaska's most productive and varied stream fishing for all species of salmon, trout, grayling and sea-run Dolly Varden. Chum and sockeye move into the river in late June and early July. The king return peaks just a bit later in the Goodnews than in other rivers, but begins in earnest in mid- to late June and continues building into July. The Dollies are sea-run and enter the river about mid-July. Mid-August is prime silver fishing. We were here during this peak of the

The lodge accommodates only 18 guests per week and is located seven miles upriver from the Bering Sea just above the tidewater. It is the only full-service lodge on the three-branch Goodnews River system. Guests have access via jet boat to the entire waterway, which assures a minimum of fishing pressure and lots of very fresh unpressured fish.

Unlike many popular rivers in Alaska, when fishing from Goodnews River Lodge you will not have to compete with other anglers every day for the best runs and pools on the river.

Eric and I were dressed and ready to start fishing within an hour of arrival. Our guide, Hamilton, was waiting for us at his jet boat. A short ride downstream and Ham had us set up on a large, sweeping pool with legions of silver salmon in formation at the edge of the current. We chose to start the day with spinning tackle and Dardevle spoons and made cross-current casts, swinging the spoons through the hole. We both immediately hooked up and were on our way to the first of many double hookups for the week. The salmon were leaping three full feet out of the water, performing a wild ballet and testing our gear

coho return.

The young salmon smolt of the Goodnews are nourished by the clearwater wash of a river laced with the elemental powers of a landscape forged by volcanic eruptions then crushed by the weight of billions of pounds of snow and ice as this barren and beautiful land was born. The spirit of these young fish are steeped and tempered in this powerful broth for a year as they mature before running to the sea, where they build stamina before eventually being drawn to return for the spawn two or three years later. As we meet them each morning in the river they are like seasoned soldiers of the sea, having been chased by every predator imaginable in the open ocean. As evidence, some of the silvers we caught carried scars on their flanks from running the gauntlet of saltwater predators such as seals and sharks while making their way to the river's braids and pools to rest before their final push to spawn.

We were greeted each day with fresh silvers, moving in the river's current towards the runs, eddies and braids where we would meet them just a few miles from the sea. Silvers will hold in these tidewater pools for several days until they move upriver towards spawning areas. This made for very predictable fishing most of the week. These were hot, enthusiastic fish that would aggressively strike a well-presented spoon or fly.

Throughout the week we used Dardevle spoons exclusively while gear fishing. We found the most effective approach was to make a cross-current cast and swing our spoons through a run, then making a moderate retrieve to keep the spoon at the same depth as the fish. Another very effective tactic was to swing a spoon through a run and then just let it float or dangle in front of a pod of fish. The silvers would often slam a spoon presented in this fashion. Additionally, the sun was always a factor in the action. The bite was predictably more aggressive in the morning, late afternoon and during overcast periods of the day. When the sun would come out the silvers would become decidedly shy and require some finesse to catch. We would switch to smaller spoons in a dark color and it would be game-on again. One afternoon Eric tried this tactic and he landed five salmon within 20 minutes after having gone almost 30 minutes without a hookup using a larger spoon. Downsizing works!

The guides at Goodnews River Lodge are an eclectic group yet professional across the board, each offering interesting and personal perspectives on the river and the nuances of fishing for its residents.





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High-tech Weatherport tents make sure guests at Goodnews River Lodge are warm, dry and comfortable when off the water.

The lodge rotates guides each day, giving guests a chance to take full advantage of the array of knowledge their guides possess. All of them have a special area of expertise on the river and a refined knowledge of particular sections of its waters. The newer guides on the staff focused on the main channels of the river while several of the senior guides would spirit guests to less known sections of the river system to share their secrets with us for the day. This assures that the resident rainbow, Dolly Varden and grayling populations are never overfished.

It was basically a non-stop fish-fest each day, as energized new arrivals from the sea took up stations in the tidewater runs each morning. These coho will put both you and your tackle through an

endurance test. An 8-weight fly rod is perfect for these silvers, paired with a quality large-arbor reel housing at least 150 yards of backing. I always started the day with a pink fly and would change patterns and colors as the fish dictated. The most consistent performers were lead-eyed streamers in bright colors and tied with some flash. When fished on a floating line, these front-weighted streamers offer a jigging motion when retrieved, which can often help to trigger aggressive strikes during slower periods of the day. Otherwise, the most effective fly presentations were not unlike fishing our spoons. A cross-current cast, let the fly drift into a pod of fish, then strip with a moderately-paced stop-and-go motion, using six- to 15-inch bursts as you bring

the fly in. Swinging your streamer through a run and letting it dangle in the current at the end of the swing can be very effective as well. For deeper runs, it is a good idea to have a second rod ready, rigged with a sink-tip.

The first two days we focused entirely on chasing chrome-bright silvers fresh from the sea, but on our third day we took time to explore some of the secluded waters of the Goodnews that hold trophy-size grayling, Dolly Varden and rainbow trout. Our guide for the day, Brian, took Eric and I on a journey upriver, beached the boat, slung a stainless Remington 870 over his shoulder and pointed into the braids. We proceeded to wade the river's smaller channels all afternoon, fishing through the maze of willows that blanket





The author and his son, Eric, display another pair of bright beauties.

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Eric fights another feisty coho while the Goodnews River Lodge Guide stands at the ready.



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Eric with a dandy grayling caught while exploring the many smaller braids and channels of the Goodnews.



The TransNorthern flight makes getting to this wilderness river and camp much easier than one might imagine.

© Goodnews River Lodge



Coursing through wild Alaska country, the Goodnews is an adventurous angler's dream.

© Goodnews River Lodge

the valley. The grayling here average 16- to 18 inches, though several trophy fish well over 20 inches came to hand. These effervescent little fish made for good sport on light tackle. Eric used his ultralite spinning rod and small spoons while I used my 5-weight fly rod with a variety of small streamers and dry flies. Brian had indeed taken us to a very special place. By the end of the day we had caught grayling, Dolly Varden, rainbow trout and silver salmon, and had seen more fresh bear sign than I could imagine without actually stepping on a bear. This day was an absolute gold-plated adventure that my son and I will treasure forever.

Behind all this, the welcoming reception, knowledgeable staff, the luxury setting and impeccable service, is Goodnews River Lodge owner Mike Gorton, whose decades of dedication to the Goodnews mean he's also known as "The River Keeper". Mike is meticulous about managing this wonderful resource so it remains a wild, unspoiled playground for the creatures that live here and the guests that visit each summer. He has owned and operated the lodge since 1996, bought after being head

guide for two years, and takes great pride in maintaining the natural balance of the pristine wilderness that envelops the Goodnews system. In all, Mike has worked at Goodnews River Lodge since 1989 and his staff is carefully chosen; they are a well-led team that believes in what they are doing and it shows in every aspect of the lodge's operation.

All of this becomes clear in my last 30 minutes of fishing on the river. I was feverishly casting for just one last salmon when I stopped in mid-cast, finally realizing I didn't need to catch another fish. I took a deep breath of the crisp Arctic air and felt the rhythm of the current drawing my thoughts to the privilege of having been able to enjoy the unspoiled beauty of the Goodnews River. Thanks to the incredible fishing, the guides and of course, Mike Gorton, I had already captured what I was seeking on the river. Having accomplished, and shared it with my son was gift enough.



*John Cleveland is Marketing Director for Eppinger Manufacturing Co. This is the first time his work has appeared in Fish Alaska magazine.*