

Iliamna Paradise:

A RAINBOW KING ADVENTURE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JOHN CLEVELAND

A fishing lodge typically awakens in a progression of sights, sounds and smells as the dawn approaches. The smell of wood smoke, the chattering of a squirrel, the waft of brewing coffee and the sizzle of bacon seeps into the character of the chilled morning air and signals the arrival of a new fishing day. Here, near the village of Iliamna, Rainbow King Lodge had added an extra touch to the morning wakeup call by having one of their cheerful staff personally deliver a cup of freshly brewed coffee to my cabin. After that it's easy to assemble my gear and head to the main lodge for breakfast.

The day before I had made my way to the lodge, which is located on the shores of Lake Iliamna in southwest Alaska. The hour and twenty-minute flight from Anchorage offered breathtaking views of the expansive mountain ranges that dominate the region. Upon landing at the village of Iliamna we were greeted by the staff at Rainbow King Lodge and were driven a short distance to the lodge. The unassuming dark brown wood exterior reminded me of a quaint northern Michigan motel nestled in a forest of spruce salted with golden birch leaves rustling in the crisp, cool breezes of fall. We were invited to follow a wood-planked path into a stunningly beautiful courtyard with landscaped rock gardens and a carpet of manicured grass that led us to the main lodge. The interior of the main lodge was an impressive affair, with a huge field-stone fireplace and décor reminiscent of a private sporting club decorated with wildlife sculptures, classic paintings, a modest library of Alaska adventure books and overstuffed leather couches. Brief introductions were made, and cabins assigned, we took a short break to unpack before dinner. At dinner we were given a full orientation of the lodge and the fishing adventures available to us in the coming week.

Lake Iliamna, Alaska's largest lake, is a 77-mile-long, crystal-clear jewel wrapped in the arms of the Alaska Range. The region features outstanding fishing for all five species of Pacific salmon, epic-sized rainbow trout, Arctic char, Dolly Varden, grayling and northern pike; and Rainbow King Lodge gives fishermen convenient access to all of it.

I chose to start my week chasing silver salmon on the



A floatplane returns to the docks after a day's adventure. Inset: Anglers work a brushy bank for prized Bristol Bay rainbows.

coast and would be joined by my new friends and first-time guests to Rainbow King Lodge, Ed McCormick and Toby Librot. As I settled into my cabin for the night I was confident we were about to have a great week exploring the currents and character of the legendary rivers of southwest Alaska.

After breakfast we eagerly awaited the arrival of the floatplanes that would transport us to our first adventure of the week. We heard the chest-rattling rumble of the DeHavilland Beavers moments before the planes emerged from the early morning vapors hovering over the lake's surface. They touched down on the big lake before us and taxied to the beach in front of the lodge. We loaded our gear, piled into our seats and ascended into the morning sunrise.

The terrain below scrolled by like a silent movie and after about 45 minutes our pilot descended into the valley and slipped the plane's floats onto a crooked ribbon of water winding through the muskeg, eventually taxiing to a grassy berm at the river's edge. I could see dozens of coho rolling and jumping in the wide, clear pools in front of me as I set up on the grassy bank. Tying on a bright pink Medusa, I stripped off some line, got it in the air, double-hauled and launched the streamer towards a pod of rolling silvers across the river. As my fly swung with the current the line suddenly went tight and in the excitement of my first strike, I strip-set the hook so hard I yanked the fly right out of the fish's mouth. My young guide Robert chuckled at my enthusiasm and tactfully suggested I relax and simply raise the rod firmly on the next fish. It worked! A gorgeous coho of about 12 pounds blew four feet out of the river when I set the hook and put up a spectacular fight, spinning backing off my reel three times before succumbing to Robert's net.

After an hour or so the sun came out and the bite subsided significantly. Coho are notoriously finicky biters when exposed to direct sunlight, so I changed to spinning gear and a ¾-ounce Dardevle spoon we call the "Gray Ghost" and the bite lit up again. I alternated between my fly rod and spinning gear throughout the rest of the day, experimenting with new flies and spoon prototypes that I had made especially for this trip. Though I have an affinity for fly fishing, I like to use spinning gear periodically on large rivers as it gives me the ability to explore pockets of water that are out of reach with my fly rod. During all but the king salmon run, you will be well-equipped for just about any Alaska trip by bringing a

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6- and 8-weight fly rod and a medium-action spinning rod.

Though the fishing was the primary reason I was here, I also enjoyed taking breaks to sit on a weathered gray log embedded in the soft muskeg to breathe in the salt-laced air and appreciate the beauty of the vast tidal plain. There is something enchanting about your first day on the water in Alaska. It's not so much about what you catch, but simply that you are engaged. It is a day of transition where the noise and nonsense of urban life are

carried away by the cadence of the river's current.

My partners Ed and Toby were both successful in landing their first-ever silver salmon while fishing that day. Ed is a very passionate, experienced fly fisherman and he had a great day landing a dozen or more coho on his fly rod. Toby was new to fly fishing and it took her almost five hours of determined effort to hook her first salmon. She remained upbeat and enthusiastic all morning while guide Robert stayed by her side, coaching and

encouraging until suddenly at 2 p.m. a big silver missile exploded out of the water in front of Toby. Having the opportunity to witness a novice catch her first salmon was inspirational and as much of a thrill for Ed and I as it was for Toby.

Silver salmon begin to arrive in the Iliamna area in early-August and will run consistently through late September. The coho are spectacular fighting fish that will give you lots of aerial acrobatics and strip yards of backing off your reel as you wrestle them to shore. Fresh-from-the-ocean silvers are an incredibly good-eating fish as well, and I always try to bring a few home for the grill and smoker.

There is much more salmon action to be had earlier in the season in this part of Alaska, too. Chinook salmon fishing begins in mid-June and continues through late July, and for those who want to chase kings, Rainbow King Lodge operates a comfortable tent camp on a prime section of the Nushagak River, which features one of Alaska's largest annual returns of king salmon. Late June brings incredible runs of sockeye salmon to the region—to the tune of over 4.5 million sockeye during the summer of 2016. Scrappy pink salmon swarm the rivers and streams in throughout the Iliamna region beginning in mid-July and continuing through mid-

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August, providing lots of fun on light tackle, while chum salmon arrive in early July and run through mid- to late August.

For anglers the world-over, however, the biggest draw to the Iliamna region is the area's trophy-sized rainbow trout. Unlike the salmon peaks, the rainbow fishing is excellent all summer in the Bristol Bay region, as the early season brings with it good hatches of caddis, stoneflies and mayflies, meaning there is good dry-fly fishing through most of July on some rivers. The sockeye smolt run happens in June and is a great time to swing streamers at big rainbows immersed in a feeding frenzy as the smolt bolt for the sea. Chugging a mouse fly across the surface will bring explosive strikes during the summer and can be a most memorable and rewarding experience for a fly fisherman. By late July the egg drop begins and the rainbows will turn their attention to looking for protein-rich eggs tumbling downriver. At this time egg patterns and beads are the most productive offerings and that will continue through mid-September when the salmon have completed their spawning cycles and flesh flies and large streamers return to the fore. My favorite time of the year to chase big rainbows is in late August and September, after the trout have had a chance to fatten up on the salmon runs. There are usually good numbers of coho salmon to be found during the same timeframe.

No matter the time of year you visit, Rainbow King Lodge will get you on the waters fishing best at that particular point in time, whether via floatplane, boat or van, so regardless of weather conditions you will always have access to good fishing. They have private leases on over a half-dozen of the best rivers in the region, which helps. Iliamna is a very popular region and some of the rivers get a lot of pressure; through the private access Rainbow King can provide their guests with uncrowded rivers and unpressured fish. This is a premium in a popular destination such as the Lake Iliamna region.

After conquering the coho, our next excursion took us on a short flight to a small stream the lodge staff has aptly named "Rainbow River." Ed and Toby were in search of an Arctic grayling, a bucket-list fish for Ed, and we were assured this was the spot.

The Rainbow River is classic trout water with many gentle gravel bars that made for very approachable wading. The river's edge was lined with spruce and birch trees with the water revealing an open character—flat riffles and long, smooth runs making it easy to read and





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cast a fly. We took a brief ride upriver in two jet boats, ghosting through the early morning fog as we navigated the narrow, winding channels. I began my day casting dry flies and beads to eagerly awaiting grayling in a broad, shallow run. Fishing a beat just upstream from me and drifting dry flies over a pocket of pearlescent water, Ed and Toby had their bucket lists overflowing with grayling within a few hours on the river. Later in the morning I began sight-fishing to the silvery shadows staging behind the spawning sockeye. The water was so clear I could see the rainbows snatch my bead as it bounced past their position on the gravel, and they'd instantly go airborne, silver flanks flashing in the sunlight as they somersaulted through the sky. Sight-fishing is a thrill when you

have the opportunity, and the action was constant. While most of the trout were in the 12- to 18-inch range, I did latch onto four or five that broke 20 inches and got my backing wet. By the end of the day we had all experienced the magic of Iliamna fishing on this little dream stream called the Rainbow River. Even our shore lunch was special, as our guide, Tom, prepared grayling fillets sautéed in garlic butter, fried potatoes, canned beans and corn with a side of garlic toast and warm chocolate chip cookies. This on-the-water culinary over-achievement was a theme of the week, as over the course of the week we feasted on shrimp jambalaya, sautéed salmon fillets, hot Rueben sandwiches and the most delicious hot salmon sandwiches sizzled in a skillet on an open

fire I have ever tasted.

On our last day in Alaska the temperatures had slid into the low-50s and we were greeted by light drizzle and a stiff northern wind that held the approach of winter in its wet chill. I chose to fish for rainbows on the Newhalen River with one of the owners of the lodge, Jake Sheely, and his uncle Ken and cousin Kenneth. Our last day would turn out to be one of those epic days that form the memories of a lifetime. The Newhalen is a wide river with long, flat glides; its bottom is paved with polished gravel, sockeye salmon and big rainbow trout in the fall of the year. The sockeye were holding in thick pods in every run and the big rainbows were right behind them. The conditions were perfect for fishing a bead and float. Our guide, Tony, was an expert at handling the boat and had us drifting over the pods of sockeye all morning. The rainbows were so aggressive we had to be careful as we unhooked a fish not to let the bead fall in the current or another fish would swipe the offering almost instantly. The result was a monumental day of fishing. We had silver-flanked rainbows shooting out of the river all morning like shards of silver shrapnel, more than 15 wide-bodied trout over 20 inches coming to hand in all, including a breathtaking fish of over



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Tony Librot.

27 inches. Full disclosure requires me to tell you Jake and I had fished this same river two days prior and caught over a hundred rainbow trout between us, with 35 measuring over 20 inches and one 28 1/2-inch block of silver dynamite that took almost 100 yards of my backing and made three heart-stopping leaps into the sky on his first run!

I've fished enough to know that special days full of bountiful quantities of big fish are a gift, not a given, and so I was very thankful that the Newhalen had given us two of her best days. And of course, I appreciated that I wouldn't have been here to enjoy it if not for Rainbow King Lodge.

John Cleveland is the marketing director for Eppinger Manufacturing Company, makers of the iconic Dardevle spoons in Michigan. He has been chasing fish and outdoor adventures throughout North American and the Arctic with both fly- and conventional tackle for over 50 years and enjoys sharing the magic of wilderness adventure as a freelance outdoor writer. When not fishing he competes in triathlons to stay in shape for the next adventure. He can be reached at john@eppinger.net.

Author's Note: This story is dedicated to my sister Ellen Cleveland Minzey who loved the adventure and spiritual powers of living in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. After a brave and courageous battle with cancer she is now free to soar like an eagle at play, Between the Mountains and the Moon.

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