

# Rainbow Rivers



Located in the heart of Iliamna big-trout country, Rainbow River Lodge is home-base for some grand Alaska fishing adventures.

Iliamna rainbows are certainly well-fed.



I have enjoyed the magic of launching feathers into the wind with a fly rod for over 50 years and have traveled to some of North America's premier trout venues with the soul purpose of fooling big fish with a fly. Yet until this past September when I was invited to fish at Rainbow River Lodge I had not experienced the famed rainbows of the Iliamna region in Alaska. Their world-class reputation made for sweet dreams as I counted the days before I would arrive at the lodge located on the legendary Copper River.

Lake Iliamna is the largest lake in Alaska and is flanked by Lake Clark National Park to the north and Katmai National Park & Preserve to the south. Just a little more than an hour's flight from Anchorage, the lake and the drainage it centers is a virtual fish-factory, featuring one of the largest sockeye runs in the world, which topped 7 million fish this year. Additionally, the waters of the overall Iliamna watershed play host to the remaining four species of Alaska's Pacific salmon, as well as rainbow trout, Arctic char, Dolly Varden, grayling and northern pike. There is eventful fishing all season long.

I arrived at Rainbow River Lodge via a DeHavilland Beaver

settling down on a pristine lake with the finesse of a butterfly with sore feet. The floatplane taxied to shore and we were welcomed by the staff of the lodge with hardy handshakes, directions to our assigned cabins and an invitation to dinner once we got our gear stowed. The lodge is a grand affair with 20-foot cathedral ceilings perched on a gentle slope surrounded by spruce trees and a warren of handsome cedar-clad cabins that would be our home for the coming week.

As is customary at Rainbow River Lodge we had arrived in the afternoon and would begin fishing in the morning. On the first evening at camp we gathered in the main lodge for a wonderful meal of grilled Copper River salmon and began to get to know each other. I quickly realized that the camp was inhabited by a group of well-traveled and passionate fly anglers that had come from as far as Switzerland to the Iliamna region to exclusively play with trophy rainbow trout. All but two were repeat guests of the lodge. The stories they told of prior rainbow adventures were exciting and gave me a feeling of confidence that I would be in for a very special week of fishing in Alaska. I was not disappointed.



Story and Photos  
by John Cleveland



Comfortable accommodations make for happy anglers each morning at Rainbow River Lodge.



The lake-run fish of the Iliamna tributaries maintain a bright silver coloration similar to ocean-going steelhead.

In September the rainbows are looking for high-protein salmon eggs and flesh, both of which drift down the channels and braids like an all-you-can-eat buffet. These fish are at the tail end of a four-month-long chain of endless food supplied by the prolific runs of salmon that begin in June and run through September every year. By the time fall arrives they have taken on the shape, size and attitude of linebackers at a college football game. They are fast, tough and strong, and the result is one of the most highly-prized fighting machines a fly fisherman can pursue in Alaska. We began our weeklong quest for these beautiful beasts early the next morning.

The camp awakened at about 5 a.m. with the scent of fresh-brewed coffee wafting through the crisp fall air as



Tools of the trade: an angler's ultimate Iliamna preparation kit.



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the cooks began setting up breakfast in the lodge. I tasted the flavor of wood smoke curling from the lodge's chimney as I walked to my first cup of coffee. The dining room quickly filled with anticipation and banter as everyone began to assemble for breakfast, which is served between 6 and 7 a.m. depending on your particular fishing venue and flight schedule for the day. Immediately after breakfast we would head back to our cabins, gather our gear and walk down the winding, crushed-rock paths leading to the waiting floatplanes, their radial engines growling in the predawn as a tongue of flame flickered from the exhaust ports.

The Copper River is a classic trout stream of modest flow running through a scenic valley blanketed with birch, spruce and cottonwood trees. Rainbow River Lodge is actually located right on the river, too, giving guests easy access to world-class fishing without having to fly-out, which is a great selling point when inclement weather makes it difficult to take to the skies.

The Copper River was the first river in Alaska designated a fly-fishing catch-and-release-only river due to the quality and quantity of its resident rainbow population. Protected from seemingly relentless tundra winds and packed with deep, winding pools, long flat glides and undercut banks, it is a fly fisherman's dream and holds some terrifically large rainbow trout. This is where I spent my first day apprenticing how to fish with an indicator and bead rig. After a brief coaching session with my guide Chris Leeman, I was ready to give it a try. My first awkward cast wasn't pretty but resulted in a remarkably good drift through a short current seam and my indicator vanished. I gave my fly rod a quick wrist snap downstream as previously instructed and a 25-inch silver missile vaulted into the air, somersaulting back into the current and proceeding to peel line off my reel at lightning speed. After a brief skirmish, Chris scooped a beautiful green-backed rainbow with a thick pink stripe and crimson gill plates into the net. The moment I snap-set that hook and the rainbow vaulted into the sky; I realized I would become hooked just as firmly on the chase for big powerful Alaska rainbows.

The remainder of the day I was both encouraged and humbled by big trout while working on my casting and hook-setting skills. Though my technique was a bit wobbly I managed to land 15- or 20 gorgeous rainbows from 14- to 25

## SEASONAL GUIDE TO THE AREA

### June

In June and early July, trout anglers will want to pay attention to strong hatches of caddis, stoneflies and a variety of mayflies, as well as the other protein-rich food sources available, such as sockeye smolt, leeches and mice. Streamer, nymph and dry-fly fishing remains excellent through most of July. Chrome-bright king salmon begin to enter rivers in mid-June and run through the third week in July. Chum salmon will begin to appear about this time also.

### July

The beginning of July brings immense squadrons of sockeye salmon into the system. This season the sockeye run in the Iliamna drainage totaled a record-breaking 7.2 million fish. And late July brings the "egg drop" from all those fish. Drifting single egg patterns becomes highly productive at this time. Rainbows start to put pounds on fast as they gorge themselves with salmon eggs. The feisty pink salmon invade the river systems from mid-July through mid-August, providing plenty of fun with fly tackle.

### August

The second week in August brings fishable quantities of coho salmon, which will continue running through mid-September. Coho are highly sought after as spectacular fighters and excellent table fare.

### September

Rainbow fishing is strong throughout the entire summer but September is the month when trout junkies gather from all over the world to chase some of the largest rainbows on the planet. These fish have spent most of the summer feasting on salmon eggs and flesh, and as a result, they are very large and ready to run, jump and spin like no other freshwater fish you have encountered. The fishing program in September is about three things: beads, flesh flies or swinging large streamers.



inches while enjoying the camaraderie of my new friend and fishing partner Robin Poole as we let the beauty and power of the river's currents wash the last vestiges of urbanity from our minds. We had a great day.

Robin, a Montana resident and my roommate for the week, is a soft-spoken, free-spirited individual, a diehard fly fisherman and accomplished wildlife photographer. He has been a fixture at the lodge for over 12 years, spending two to three weeks each season chasing the native trout in the Iliamna watershed and photographing its creatures and breathtaking scenery. Through the decades Robin has had the opportunity to fish some of the most revered trophy trout waters on the planet, including many of the finest rivers of New Zealand, Argentina, Chile, Canada and England. As a man with choices and the wherewithal to pretty much fish at will anywhere in the world, he has settled on Rainbow River Lodge.

The action was nonstop all week, as we fished a different river every day. Each had its own special nuances and character. The landscape was unique in each flow. Lower Talarik Creek, for instance, was a sturdy river featuring open current and a vast Arctic tundra landscape with crushed glacial sands lining the banks, while the Gibraltar River was a more intimate stream lined with thick curtains of willow and a lanky blanket of tundra grass. The Kvichak, on the other hand, is a big river that drains Lake Iliamna, acting as an artery that feeds legions of ocean-run salmon into the lake every summer. It is a broad moving carpet of crystal-clear water with long, flat glides that make for incredibly long drifts. With three operational DeHavilland Beavers, Rainbow River Lodge can give its guests easy access to virtually all of the region's famous waters, including the Copper, Gibraltar, Iliamna, Kvichak, Kulik, upper American and Newhalen rivers, as well as Lower Talarik, Moraine and Funnel creeks. The shape, quantity, color and size of fish varied in each system I fished and made every day a unique experience.

As an example, on one morning our Beaver lifted from the lake's surface at first light as we took an early departure to gain advantage of the best beat on the Talarik. Twenty-five minutes later, as the first flicker of light leaked over the mountains in the East, the plane settled on a backwater slough a short walk from the river's mouth and we claimed our beat for the day. Lower Talarik Creek has a well-earned reputation for



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### Iliamna River Lodge

Sister lodge to Rainbow River Lodge, Iliamna River Lodge is a 5-star facility located on the Iliamna River, accommodating up to 8 guests per week. Recently remodeled, it features a more intimate setting on one of the region's best trout and salmon venues. Visit [www.iliamnariverlodge.com](http://www.iliamnariverlodge.com) to learn more.

producing very big, chrome-bright, lake-run rainbows and within minutes of our arrival all four of us had one of these bright shiny fish ripping line from our reels. It was if we had all pulled the pin on a hand grenade at the same time as rainbows began to explode into the sky. During the next several hours it was a continuous traffic jam of action as we had rainbows rocketing downstream and pirouetting like wild ballerinas out of the river while our guides were running up and down the gravel bar trying to keep pace with the nets. By noon we had brought to hand 30- to 40 of these powerful silver-flanked fish and it was time for a break. To be honest it was the guides that suggested we take a break as none of us would have stopped fishing without their better judgment and subtle prompting.

Later, the afternoon bite subsided to a series of on-and-off periods where the fishing would shut down for perhaps 30- or 40 minutes at a time and then suddenly everyone would have a fish on again. It appeared fresh trout were moving into the river from Lake Iliamna throughout the day. Then, late

in the afternoon, my concentration had drifted away with my indicator when I suddenly realized it had gone under. I snapped my rod downstream and my fly line whipped tight as a rooster tail of spray tore across the river. Line spun off my spool to the musical accompaniment of the reel's whining drag. The big rainbow began to plow downstream toward the river mouth and I sprinted down the gravel bar trying to take back line. Perhaps five minutes later, hitting the final few yards of moving water, the rainbow bolted into the lake's surf and was momentarily pushed back by a wave into my guide TJ's waiting net. We let her rest, took a quick photo

and watched the trout take a powerful surge into the current's flow. The action on the Talarik had lived up to the creek's reputation as a world-class producer of some of the most powerful trout in Alaska.

Rainbow River Lodge is a gem amongst the many lodges I have had the pleasure to visit. Every detail has been



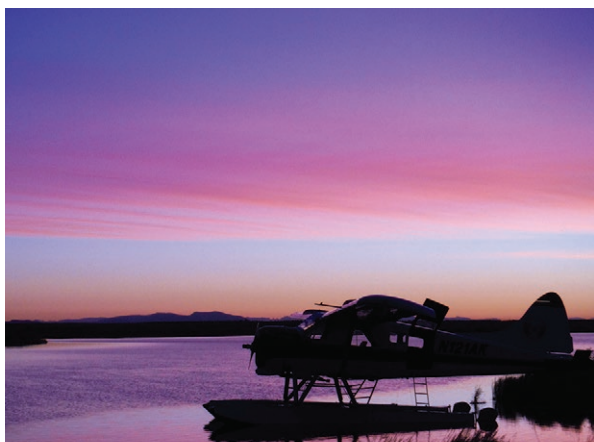
With the surrounding fauna turning toward the hues of fall, you can bet the trout of the Iliamna region are in prime shape.

An advertisement for American-Made Needlepoint fishing hooks. The background features a close-up of a rainbow trout's head. Overlaid on the image is a large, curved fishing hook. The text "AMERICAN-MADE" is written in large, white, bold letters across the top. Below it, "NEEDLEPOINT" is written in large, red, bold letters. To the right, "LONGER." is written in white, bold letters. In the center, "STRONGER." is written in white, bold letters. Below that, "SHARPER." is written in white, bold letters. At the bottom, "NEEDLEPOINT HOOK DESIGN" is written in white, bold letters, followed by "Needlepoint design for sharpness" in smaller white text. A circular seal with "made in the USA" is visible in the top right corner. A shield-shaped logo with a red eagle and the text "Platinum Black Plus finish provides superior corrosion resistance" is on the right. A logo for "Eagle Claw Lazer Sharp" is at the bottom right, with the tagline "SHARPER. STRONGER. LONGER." below it. Social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are at the bottom right. Copyright information "©2015 EAGLE CLAW FISHING TACKLE DENVER, COLORADO EAGLECLAW.COM" is at the bottom center.



## IF YOU GO:

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A Rainbow River Lodge floatplane at the ready for another day's fantastic fishing.

attended to here. The lodge is nestled among pines overlooking a small lake that also serves as a landing strip for the floatplanes taking guests on daily fly-outs. The main lodge and dining area have a commanding view of majestic snowcapped mountains and a gold and green patchwork of fall colors lining a picturesque alpine valley in the fall of

the year. The cabins have Indian slate entries while the walls are finished with beautiful cedar planks and the flooring is hardwood maple. The furniture is handmade Aspen log furniture.

In the afternoon as we would unload our gear from the floatplane after a day of epic adventure on one of Alaska's blue-ribbon streams, the aromas of fresh-baked goods, roasting meat and other delicious culinary gifts wafted through the air surrounding the lodge. Each night we would enjoy scrumptious multi-course meals served by the friendly, attentive staff. They are driven by a singular focus at Rainbow River Lodge and that is to make sure everything you experience while visiting is perfect. Their commitment to excellence in service is the result of an owner that believes in his staff and walks the talk when it comes to service and hospitality. Chad Hewitt has the operation distilled to the consistency of an aged bottle of cabernet: comfortable, unpretentious,

no rough edges, just as a fine vintage wine should be. On the water the guides are some of the best I have had the pleasure to fish with. They know the water, the fish and how to catch them.

By the end of an incredible week of fishing a least three catch-and-release fly-rod line-class world records had been set, and we were all ready for a trip to rehab for wrist, arm and shoulder repair. The fishing is certainly the marque event that propels most of us to Alaska's finest fishing venues, and yet as with a fine meal, it is not simply the entrée but the additional accoutrements that add exponentially to the enjoyment of the experience. It's about the journey, the adventures and characters we meet along the way that form lasting memories of Alaska's frontiers of fishing. For my part, I sure enjoyed the journey, the passion, purpose and enthusiasm of fishing at Rainbow River Lodge.



*John Cleveland is Marketing Director for Eppinger Manufacturing Co. He has previously written about fishing the Goodnews River for Fish Alaska magazine.*

A large advertisement for Angry Eagle Lodge &amp; Outfitters. It features two men in fishing gear wading in a river. The text "THE FISH HAVE BEEN ASKING ABOUT YOU" is prominently displayed in the center. In the bottom left, a quote from Field &amp; Stream magazine reads: "ONE OF THE TOP 25 FISHING LODGES IN NORTH AMERICA...". In the bottom right, there is a logo for "ANGRY EAGLE lodge &amp; outfitters" featuring a stylized eagle. An inset image in the top right shows a close-up of a fish being caught.

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