



# THE SILVER LINING OF ALASKA'S LOST COAST

TSIU RIVER ADVENTURE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN CLEVELAND



**An Alaska fishing adventure is the ultimate experience;** it's full immersion therapy in one of Mother Nature's most majestic settings. Personally, I have found it cathartic to wade into the currents of Alaska's wild rivers and rinse the soil of urban living from my soul. And after many years of pursuing fish, measuring the quality of an adventure by the character of the journey, I was excited to introduce my youngest son, Zack, to his first Alaska experience. I was confident the coho salmon of the Tsiu River would be the perfect fish.

Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting Company's Tsiu River Lodge was an ideal venue for us to explore the Tsiu's world-renowned migration of coho. Located about 100 miles southeast of Cordova,

the Tsiu is considered one of the most prolific coho fisheries in the world, with an estimated 100,000 to 120,000 salmon entering the river beginning in late July. The flow of silvers is typically plentiful by early August and builds quickly into a virtual tsunami of salmon flooding the river by the third week of the month—with the run continuing into October. Tom and Katie Prijatel, owners of Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting Company, operate their lodge from early August through October, taking advantage of the best of this spectacular event each season.

Zack and I had spent all summer practicing our casting and accumulating necessary gear for our journey to Alaska. By mid-August we were ready to spend

some of that currency in the pursuit of the legendary silvers of the Tsiu.

The flight from Cordova to the lodge in a Turbo Otter was one of the most breathtakingly beautiful plane rides I have ever experienced. The majestic peaks of the Chugach Range, their flanks covered with lush alpine valleys interspersed with a broken mosaic of towering Sitka spruce, seemed close enough to touch. On the right side of the plane our view was of a delta plain with ribbons of glacial runoff winding towards the slate grey sands of the Gulf of Alaska. After about an hour our pilot settled the Otter down on the landing strip like a leaf floating to the surface of the manicured grass runway.

We were ferried from the landing strip to



3



4



5

#### RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT:

##### **Conventional Tackle**

- Medium-action spinning rod.
- 12- or 14-pound Monofilament or Seaguar Fluorocarbon.
- Lures: 1/2- and 3/4-ounce Eppinger Devle Dogs and Dardevle spoons.
- Recommended Colors: Pink, fluorescent orange, black pearl, white pearl, red/white, glow/orange, chartreuse/orange dots, silver-half blue, hammered copper with orange stripe.

##### **Fly Fishing**

- 8-weight fast-action fly rod.
- Quality fly reel with a good drag, weight-forward floating line, and various rates of sink-tip.
- Suggested flies: Pink Pollywogs, Flash Flies, Clouser Minnow, Dolly Llama, Starlight Leech.
- Recommended Colors: Pink, pink/white, black/white, chartreuse/white, chartreuse/black, purple, bright orange.



6



7

1. Zack Cleveland shaking hands with the first salmon of this father-and-son adventure.

2. The author with a fresh-from-the-sea world-class coho caught in the tidal zone of the Tsiu.

3. The women of the Mackay clan hooking up (with silvers) at the Tiki Bar.

4. When fishing for coho, pink flies are consistently effective at triggering aggressive strikes

5. The Red and White Devle Dog spoon attracted silvers like a powerful magnet.

6. The lodge ATV and trailer making the daily crossing of a tidal flat on the way to the river.

7. A DeHavilland Otter resting on the manicured grass runway in front of the Tsiu River Lodge.

the lodge in all-terrain vehicles with trailers attached. It was as if we had entered an enchanted forest where six quaint cottages were tucked away under a thick canopy of Sitka spruce and hemlock. Not one of the cabins was closer than 200 feet from another, giving us the feeling of being in our own private retreat. The smell of spruce, moss and the fresh sea breeze scented the air like an elixir. The main lodge was a grand two-story building with a deck overlooking the fields of pink fireweed and the transition zone leading to the sea.

We arrived in the early afternoon and wasted no time suiting up for the river. Our guide Dan Tibbets was a young man about the same age as Zack with an engaging smile and loads of enthusiasm. This was the

opening week of the season and the whole crew was as excited as we were to get fishing.

One of Zack's special goals was to get a photo of himself holding a big salmon to put in our father-and-son adventure collage at home. He stood on a steep, sandy berm overlooking a gurgling braid and made his first cast of the trip. I could see the pearlescent glow of several salmon rolling in a slack-water pool 30 yards distant as his spoon made a high arc through the sky and splashed next to the rolling pod of silvers. Seconds later a big salmon tore a hole in the surface of the river with Zack's Devle Dog spoon dangling from its mouth. The fish rocketed 200 yards downstream with Zack executing a wader-waltz in hot pursuit. After a wild fight, our guide handed Zack





At top, the Tsiu River Lodge offers comfortable wilderness accommodations along Alaska's Lost Coast. Middle: The lodge dining room is first-class. At bottom, the reason we all want to visit the Tsiu—big, healthy, hard-fighting coho salmon.

his first salmon and a boost of self-confidence. As I watched him proudly hoist the salmon for his special photo, I could see the reflection of his smile on the flanks of the fish of his dreams.

There were certainly enough salmon to keep us busy during the afternoon, but it was evident that there had not been a big push from the sea in a few days. However, Dan assured us that the incoming tidal flow and forecasted rains that evening would refresh the river with fish.

I was up before sunrise in the early morning chill, standing on the second-story observation deck of the lodge, a mug of hot coffee clutched between my palms gazing towards the eastern horizon. The first flickering of amber light began to leak from the edge of the horizon to illuminate the snowcapped shoulders of the Chugach Range like a billboard. It was a humbling sight. My thoughts turned to fishing, and I was confident Zack and I were about to share one of the most remarkable adventures of our lifetimes.

The daily schedule at the lodge was relaxed and built around each guest's desired program for the day. Breakfast service was available beginning at 6:30 each morning. The chefs served a full buffet of hot and cold cereals with fresh fruit each morning, as well as hot breakfast cooked to order that included hash browns, eggs, reindeer sausage, bacon, ham and fresh juice, coffee and tea. By about 8 a.m. each morning we were ready to head to the river.

There is an awe-inspiring presence created by the scale of the landscape of the Lost Coast and its ever-changing moods. The 20-minute morning commute to the river began with a quarter-mile ride through prairies of cerise fireweed that stretched to the horizon, meeting the base of the mountains there. The cadence of massive breakers spilling onto the beach from the waters of the gulf combined with the arctic wind whistling through the timber makes a fitting soundtrack for the daily journey. The coastal landscape was strewn with a maze of weathered gray timber scattered in awkward positions. There were also many derelict fishing buoys from fisheries across the Pacific lying about, and on rare occasions a true treasure, such as an old Japanese hand-blown glass net buoy from decades ago. Many of these old buoys were made from recycled sake bottles that had been heated and blown into floats for fishing nets in the early 1900s.

Most of the salmon fishing is done on the lower sections of the river in the tidal zone, culminating at an upriver beat known as the Tiki Bar, where salmon stage by the hundreds before pushing upriver to spawn in the gravel headwaters. The river is shallow and crystal-clear with modest flows winding through ashen-gray volcanic sand. It is an interesting blend of wide glassy pools, riffles, defined channels and soft-water sloughs that all hold fish as they migrate from the sea. Most of the river is wadable and can be fished from shore with great success. We found the dynamics and mood of the river changed slightly each day with the tidal flow, rainfall and runoff from the snowpack of the mountains on the horizon. This would require us to explore each morning to discover which beats the silvers were holding in.

The next morning as we passed the mouth of the river headed upstream, there was a flotilla of seals bobbing in the surf feasting on fresh salmon as they ran the gauntlet into the river. It looked like the coho were making their move into the river and the fishing would be epic. As we approached a wide, shallow glide, the surface was quivering like a bowl of Jello in an earthquake as dozens of salmon charged upstream in loose formation.

As Zack was setting up his fly rod, a tiny hummingbird appeared and hovered over him like a fairy ensuring good luck for the day. It worked! Within moments Zack was pinned to the first fish he had ever caught on a fly rod, a 12-pound buck that was ricocheting all over the run. Zack and the salmon were

## IF YOU GO:

Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting Company • 907-424-5552  
www.alaskawilderness.com • info@alaskawilderness.com



both supercharged with elements of fight or flight, but eventually Dan took possession of the fish at the shoreline. After a victory whoop and photo we called it a draw and slid the big buck back into the river to complete his mission upstream.

By noon we were ready to take a break from the nonstop action when we heard the sputtering sound of an ATV approaching from around a bend in the river. It turned out to be Kelly, one of the staff from the lodge, delivering riverside lunch service, which is part of the daily routine for AWO guests. She brought us Yeti thermoses of delicious homemade soup, freshly-baked scones, cookies, coffee and hot chocolate and asked if there was anything we might need from the lodge that she could bring back to us. We appreciated the break each afternoon as we sat riverside gazing at the amazing scenery and chatting about the morning's adventures hauling in wild fish from the waters of the Tsiu.

We would spend the rest of the day exploring beats with names like the Tiki Bar, Sander's Point, the Corner, Route 66, Vegas and the Glory Hole. Each offered its own special challenges and required different techniques and presentations, depending on how and where the salmon were holding. It was incredibly fulfilling as a dad to watch my son gain confidence while mastering the nuances of enticing salmon to strike.

As for me, the best the river had to offer was saved for last.

Fishing on our last day of the trip, I was retrieving my swinging streamer when the line came tight. I executed a firm strip-set and the river exploded in front of me, a big silver blowing out of the water and crashing to the surface like a cinderblock dropped from a ten-story building. The fish ripped across the river, accompanied by the soundtrack of my knuckles being raked by the reel handle. After a spirited game of tug-of-war, Dan managed to tail the big salmon and we took a quick photo and returned him to the river. As I soaked my bruised knuckles in the cool water, I was content to call that my last fish of the trip. It was later confirmed that the big buck would be certified as a catch-and-release tippet-class world record with the Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame.

Tom and Katie Prijatel have created a beautiful wilderness retreat on the Lost Coast of Alaska. They were virtual pioneers, opening the first modest tent camp on the Tsiu River in 1986 to give fishermen access to the world-class fishing. In 2000, they decided it was time to upgrade their operation and built today's remarkable lodge, setting the standard for comfort and service. Tsiu River Lodge is open from

early August through October and features world-class coho salmon and steelhead fishing. The lodge offers six two-story cottages with all the amenities, including a small kitchen and coffeemaker—not that you will need it, as the chefs in the luxurious main lodge serve up extraordinary fare.

Beginning operation in May, Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting has other amazing options to explore the beauty of Alaska's Southcentral region, which include outpost cabins in the Wrangell mountains and floating cabins on Prince William Sound. They also operate an air-taxi service based out of Cordova.

By the end of the week I had lost count

of how many fish we had caught but not the number of hugs from my son. Life is about sharing the joy of the moment with the people you love, and Zack and I did just that while immersed in the wonder of Alaska's Lost Coast. As the jet lifted off from the tarmac in Cordova, we couldn't help but appreciate the great service and epic fishing orchestrated by the awesome staff of Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting Company.



Author John Cleveland can be reached at [john@eppinger.net](mailto:john@eppinger.net).



**907-424-5552**  
Cordova, Alaska  
[info@alaskawilderness.com](mailto:info@alaskawilderness.com)  
[www.alaskawilderness.com](http://www.alaskawilderness.com)

**With Alaskan Wilderness Outfitting Company, you'll experience incredible fishing, remote wilderness and some of Alaska's most spectacular beauty.**

- Guided and self-guided trips to Prince William Sound, Wrangell St. Elias National Park and North Gulf Coast on the Tsiu River.
- All trips are remote fly-in destinations that include fully outfitted self-guided trips in our one-of-a-kind outpost cabins, floating cabins, as well as a full-service lodge on the Tsiu River.
- Packages available, you choose the fish you want to catch and the accommodations you prefer, and we'll make it happen!


**FAMILY OWNED AND OPERATED SINCE 1984**  
VISIT OUR WEBSITE TO SEE ALL OUR GREAT LODGING AND INCREDIBLE FISHING!



**SEE MORE OF ALASKA ON THE**

## ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

Make it an unforgettable adventure. Our state ferries can transport you to places others have only dreamed about. Call or visit us online for routes and information.



**FerryAlaska.com/fish**  
**1-800-642-0066**

