



Going with **THE FLOW**

Story & photos by John Cleveland

Most of the year my world is filled with too much noise, too many people and too many rules!

I have always found something compelling about the soul-grounding calm that I experience in truly wild places, places that bring the intangibles of life into focus and dreams to life. This past year my good friend Cole Publiski and I wanted to experience an authentic Alaskan wilderness adventure while floating down a remote river, unfiltered by the safety, comfort and amenities of lodge life. This quest led us to Rob Kinkade, owner of Aniak Air Guides who specializes in outfitting fishing and hunting expeditions with top-quality equipment in southwest Alaska's most pristine wilderness. Rob bases his adventures out of the village of Aniak, and his remote "Kog Camp" located approximately 80 air miles distant on the Kogruklu River.

Upon arriving in Aniak on Saturday morning, Rob was there to welcome us with a powerful handshake befitting a man who knows how to take care of business and instill confidence in his clients. Due to a nasty weather front moving in over the mountains we would need to fly around to reach camp. Rob suggested we waste no time flying out to the KOG camp where we would begin our journey the next morning. Rob's Piper Super Cub can accommodate one passenger, so Cole stayed in town while Rob and I flew out to his camp. The marginal weather kept Cole in Aniak overnight; Rob picked him up the next morning and flew him out to the camp to begin our journey.

Kog Camp

Rob is an engaging, self-reliant soul, and architect of a dream in progress. About a year ago he began breaking ground for his camp on the Kogruklu River. The camp is a magnificently organic undertaking, and its development is a



Our camp at the base of the Kulukbuk hills offered breathtaking views and great fishing.

testament to Rob's talents as an engineer, carpenter, and his strength of will! He has completed a runway, and one permanent outbuilding that houses his office, kitchen, storage and a shower with solar-generated hot water. Using a combination of solar energy, propane and gas generators, he can power a refrigerator, as well as run his computer and communication systems. He has also dug a well and engineered a septic system. All of the lumber to build the camp is milled using hand tools and chainsaws. Last summer he housed guests in expedition tents and plans to have his first guest cabin completed next summer. This is Rob's personal vision of Shangri-La in Alaska.

Based on the "wish list" I discussed with Rob earlier in the summer, he recommended the Holitna River for our adventure. The Holitna flows approximately 150 miles through some of the most remote wilderness in southwest Alaska and is the largest river system in the lower Kuskokwim basin. Flowing north along the Kuskokwim mountains and out of the Taylor mountains at an easy (Class I and II) pace, it houses almost unlimited gravel bars for camping, and offers a diverse fishery that includes all five species of Pacific salmon, Arctic grayling, Arctic char, Dolly Varden char, sheefish and trophy-sized northern pike.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Aniak Air Guides
Rob Kinkade
E: aniakairguides@yahoo.com
W: www.aniakairguides.com
P: 907-299-3503

Alaskan Adventures
Dan Paull
E: dan@alaskanadventures.net
W: www.alaskanadventures.com
P: 303-881-0200

Whether you're looking for an all-inclusive guided trip, or a more economical do-it-yourself adventure, Aniak Air Guides, with over 20 years of experience will provide a memorable fishing trip. They supply excellent service and top-quality equipment. Pricing includes all bush flying, airport pickups and transportation around Aniak, rafts and camping gear. They are located at the heart of three of the most productive fisheries in western/southwest Alaska (the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Bristol Bay drainages) giving them access to the best of the best when it comes to quality fishing opportunities. All five species of Pacific salmon, rainbow trout, lake trout, Arctic char, Dolly Varden, Arctic grayling, northern pike and sheefish are all present in this remote and scenic area of Alaska. Their featured rivers include the Kogruklu, Chukowan, Aniak, Anvik, Holitna, Hoholitna, Innoko, the Upper Nushagak, Kipchuk, Kisaralik, and the Salmon. Aniak Air Guides will also customize trips to target just about any species of fish you'd like to target.

Grayling need clean, cold water to survive, and they thrive in the Holitna River.



Clockwise from top left: Alaskan Adventures Lodge is a comfortable oasis overlooking the Holitna River. Fertile soil and long daylight summer hours help when growing vegetables. When the opportunity arose, we dried our gear in the fleeting rays of the sun. Catching grayling on dries was one of the highlights of the trip. Skating dries for grayling was often effective.

The Journey Begins

As the raft shifted off of the gravel bar's purchase and gave way to the pull of the river's current, we were both excited and just a little apprehensive about what the river would have in store for us. Cole is an experienced guide and oarsman from Michigan and took the first shift at the oars. Before we had rounded the first bend of the river, I was casting a small, pink and white Dardevle spoon and made contact with a feisty two-pound grayling. The grayling continued to eagerly hit our spoons all afternoon, and by the end of the day, two of them would be sacrificed for breakfast the next morning.

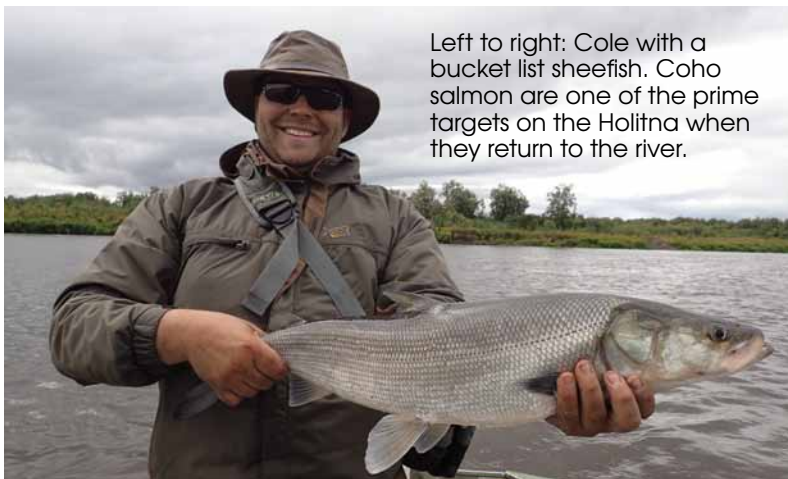
As the day progressed we noticed lots of

bright-red mounds that looked like cherry pies scattered about the gravel bars as we drifted by. Suddenly, a massive brown bear appeared 75 yards downriver, and with a woof ran into the willows lining the river's bank. Upon further inspection, the cherry pies turned out to be cranberry pies—bear scat topped with undigested high bush cranberries. We were both thrilled to see that first big bear, and more than a little concerned as the reality sank in that we would be camping in their yard for the next week.

Our first day on the river was humbling with the realization that we were truly tourists with temporary visas in a beautifully exotic and harsh land. Though

we were hoping to catch a char, they did not materialize as we had hoped. Late in the afternoon we arrived at our first campsite, a slender gravel bar nicknamed "Shotgun," at the confluence of the Kogrulkuk and Chukowan river's. This is where the Holitna River begins.

Shortly after arriving at camp, heavy winds and a toad-choking rainstorm began to pelt us in full force. We were wet, hungry and now faced our first real challenge which was setting up the expedition-style tent in a raging storm and fading light without reading the directions. With all the support poles, panels, and loops it felt more like we were trying to build a high-tech lunar space module than a tent. It took 45 frustrating



Left to right: Cole with a bucket list sheefish. Coho salmon are one of the prime targets on the Holitna when they return to the river.



minutes to assemble, and when erected the interior was soaking wet. We took a break from setting up camp after our stormy baptism and stood next to the smoky pyre of smoldering wood Cole had managed to ignite, eating peanut-butter sandwiches and reassuring ourselves the weather and the salmon fishing would get better as we progressed downriver toward the approaching run.

The next morning, upon unzipping the tent flap, we were greeted by a wet, soupy fog enveloping the camp. Not to be discouraged, I fired up the Coleman stove and made a hot pot of black coffee that dripped with the viscosity of maple syrup, and a delicious breakfast of sautéed grayling and fried eggs before breaking camp. We both noticed the river had risen a few inches overnight but were not overly concerned. The rising water would later become a major concern.

I began my apprenticeship as oarsman that morning under Cole's watchful eye. After a few fender benders bouncing the raft off log jams, I began to get the hang of it and we continued the journey safely as Cole kept an eye on my technique. The grayling continued to attack our spoons, and Cole caught a couple of beautifully-colored char in a deep pool. The Taylor Mountain Range came into view, and with it, breathtaking views of vertical cliffs and steep, rocky terrain flanking the rivers path. We found ourselves flushing brown bears from the passing gravel bars like quail on a Georgia preserve. By the time we made camp on "Grizzly Island" we had seen at least 10 brown bears that fortunately displayed encouraging behavior by running away as soon as they sensed our presence. We kept a robust fire going all night hoping to discourage visitors. We had come prepared for bear encounters with a respectful attitude of avoidance, kept our camp clean, and made plenty of noise when on shore to avoid surprising a bear at close quarters. We each carried a canister of bear spray, and 12-gauge pump shotguns as an extra measure of protection.

Hitting the Reset Button


It normally takes a few days in the bush before the reset button of your soul is activated, and this trip was no different. We found ourselves resisting the natural rhythm of the land and were pushing the river with an unnecessary sense of urgency as we had not yet let go of urban baggage. On the third day it happened; we found the cadence of the river and began to relax and go with the flow.

As the days flowed by the river continued to rise from water rolling off the flanks of



Fish Anchorage this winter!

FishHound Expeditions
FishHoundExpeditions.com 907.382.1802



Remote Self-Guided Float Trips
IT WILL BE JUST YOU AND THE RIVER.

CELEBRATING 24 YEARS!

RIVERS: ANIAK • HOLITNA • KING SALMON
• KISARALIK • KOGRUKLUK • SALMON
• FLOAT FISHING: FIVE SALMON SPECIES
• CHAR • DOLLY VARDEN • GRAYLING
• PIKE & SHEEFISH • RAINBOW TROUT

Aniak Air
GUIDES • 907-299-3503
WWW.ANIAKAIRGUIDES.COM



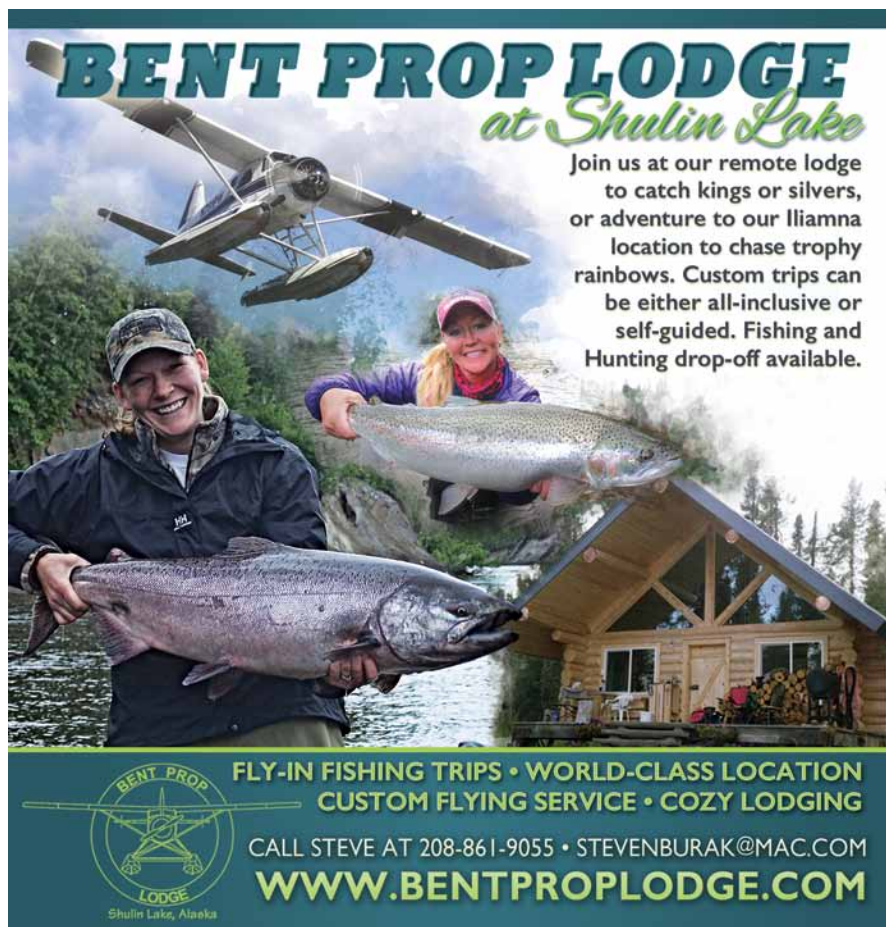
ALASKAN ADVENTURES

FISH AND HUNT ON THE HOLITNA RIVER!

Our lodge offers hundreds of miles of secluded water to fish salmon, pike and sheefish.

7 DAYS FULLY GUIDED
Includes flights to and from Anchorage, meals and lodging.
Visit our website for details.

www.Alaskan-Adventures.com • (303) 881-0200



BENT PROP LODGE
at Shulin Lake

Join us at our remote lodge to catch kings or silvers, or adventure to our Iliamna location to chase trophy rainbows. Custom trips can be either all-inclusive or self-guided. Fishing and Hunting drop-off available.

FLY-IN FISHING TRIPS • WORLD-CLASS LOCATION
CUSTOM FLYING SERVICE • COZY LODGING

CALL STEVE AT 208-861-9055 • STEVENBURAK@MAC.COM
WWW.BENTPROPLDGE.COM

BENT PROP LODGE
Shulin Lake, Alaska

the Taylor and Kuskokwim mountains, making it more and more difficult to read the river and locate fish. Fortunately, the grayling were good sports, and continued to eat our spoons like candy throughout the trip. The lyrics of the song by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young kept going through my mind, "If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with" and in our case it was the lovely Arctic grayling that continued to keep us occupied while we searched for coho.

The Silver Bar

We had been on the river five days without hooking any salmon but had become experts at catching the eager grayling that seemed to have possessed the river. In fact, they had become one of our main sources of protein along with a healthy supplement of peanut-butter sandwiches, venison jerky and trail mix. We both felt frustrated that we had not even seen a coho in five days of searching. After breakfast, Cole was casting from a narrow spit of gravel just downstream from our camp when a beautifully-blushed coho smashed his spinner and leaped into the sky, landing like a big silver brick. We had finally found what we hoped would be a mother lode of silver. Between high-fives and a couple of body slams we managed to bring in a couple more silvers before they figured out our game and shut down for the morning.

This became the "Silver Bar" campsite in my journal notes. As we broke camp I noticed the river had risen about 12 inches overnight but was not alarmed as the water clarity remained good. We kept Rob updated daily on the fishing and rising water via a Garmin inReach Explorer device that enabled us to send and receive text messages via satellite. The device is also a GPS and was synced with our smart phone which displayed a detailed map and waypoints for our journey. Our ability to communicate with Rob would later add an interesting twist to our journey.

Magic Moments at Coho Corner

It's the times when the magic moments of Mother Nature's wonder emerge that etch themselves into our memories forever. We found a beautiful campsite on the first gravel bar as the river entered the Kulukbuk hills. A cathedral-like hillside towering hundreds of feet above the river with a lush green carpet of spruce ran for several miles parallel to the river. We watched as a bald eagle and a peregrine falcon engaged in an amazing aerial duel in the sky above the hillside as we came ashore. After setting up camp overlooking the hills, Cole made a cast while standing next to our tent and hooked a coho, and then another. He quickly became immersed in the fineries of pinning salmon to his spinners. The salmon fishing was definitely looking up

along with our spirits.

A short time after dinner, I was attracted to events taking place upstream from camp as I noticed a hatch of blue winged olive mayflies taking place. Catching grayling on dry flies is one of my passions, and 20 minutes later I had set up my 6-weight fly rod, positioning myself waist deep in the wide, flat run, and began one of the most delightful evenings I have ever experienced on a river. The mayflies were emerging on the surface of the run like gossamer fairies being born to the last gray light of the evening sky, and the grayling were busy sipping them like hors d'oeuvres at an all-you-can-eat buffet. I spent the next hour drifting an Adams dry fly across the surface of their dining room table, picking up a dozen feisty grayling in the fading twilight. Cole and I had both found a special moment on the river to be part of, he with salmon, and me with grayling.

Later that evening, a big storm moved into the valley and we tucked ourselves in the tent for the night as the rain pounded the canvas walls like buckshot being fired from the clouds. The next morning it was still raining. We stayed in the tent reading until late morning with the hope the rain would stop. It didn't! I finally got up and got the coffee pot going and cooked a batch of beef hash in the scudding rain. Soon thereafter we stowed our wet gear in the raft and headed downriver.

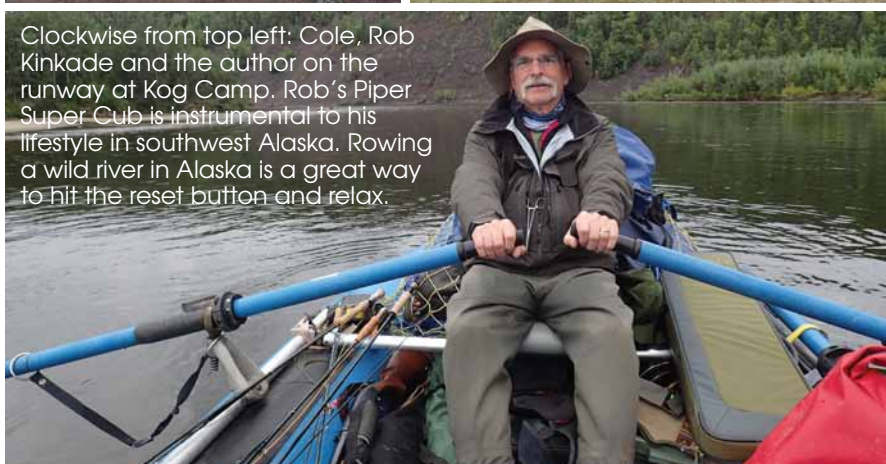
The Resurrection Bar

On our 7th morning we awoke to our raft swinging in the current with only the tip of the bow stuck on a rock preventing it from making a solo journey downstream. The river had now risen to almost biblical levels and we were getting seriously concerned about where we would be able to camp for the last two days of the journey. We shoved off after stowing our gear on the raft and topped the load off with a large bundle of kindling we had managed to keep dry under a tarp. Other than the rising water it was a beautiful sunny day, and the grayling were keeping us entertained by steadily smacking our spoons as usual, when all of a sudden Cole yelled "Salmon!" We had just passed over a large school of coho holding in a pool 30 feet from a long, slender gravel bar. I immediately pulled the raft ashore. Cole hooked up on his first cast and I on my second. Our spirits jumped exponentially as it appeared we had finally run head on into the migrating silvers.

The action was steady for the better part of an hour when we were both startled to hear the sound of an outboard motor heading upriver towards our position. An olive-colored jet boat rounded the bend below us and approached with two smiling



Clockwise from top left: Cole, Rob Kinkade and the author on the runway at Kog Camp. Rob's Piper Super Cub is instrumental to his lifestyle in southwest Alaska. Rowing a wild river in Alaska is a great way to hit the reset button and relax.





The Garmin Inreach SE+ was an essential tool for navigation and communicating with our outfitter.

fellows wrapped in Gore-Tex rain suits asking if our names were John and Cole. I quickly responded that if they were not with the FBI, ATF, or the CIA then we were indeed John and Cole. They said Rob Kinkade had alerted them that we were having a difficult time finding fish due to the rising water. They had taken it upon themselves to ride upriver to check on us from Rocky's Alaskan Adventures lodge.

They introduced themselves as Rocky McElveen, the founder of Rocky's lodge, and his companion Dan Paull, the new owner of the lodge now called Alaskan Adventures. Rocky held up a tote bag and said they brought us moose burgers, chips, trail mix, cookies, juice, and a thermos of hot coffee. Next, Rocky asked if we would like to spend the last two days of our trip as guests at the lodge while being guided personally by their staff. My occasional doubts about higher powers were challenged at that moment, as the power had just manifested itself in the form of a jet boat with two wonderfully generous human beings appearing out of the wilderness. We said yes! They told us they would send a boat to pick us up in the morning.

That evening for our last supper on the river, I cooked up a big pot of creamy wild rice and salmon chowder that was definitely the most delicious meal we had enjoyed on the river all week, and a fitting tribute to the hunt for the elusive silver salmon of the rising river, and to the salmon we sacrificed for this great meal.

Two Swans

On our final morning we awoke to a thick fog hovering above the surface of the river like a predator. I stood next to the warmth of the campfire with a steaming-hot cup of coffee marveling at the serenity I felt while listening to the long silences typical of dawn in wild places. Like an opaque watercolor mirage, two tundra swans

three bears

**PRIVATE CAMP.
SCENIC WILDERNESS.**

BELUGA LAKE
BASE CAMP
- ALASKA -

Contact Sportsman's Air Service
for Reservations & Flights:
907-301-2638
www.BelugaCamp.com

FLY OUT FROM ANCHORAGE for a remote wilderness experience at our stunning camp on Beluga Lake at the base of Triumvirate Glacier and at the foot of the Alaska Range. We offer DIY or catered options—Perfect for families, couples and groups.

GO OFF THE GRID

**ALASKA
ALASKA**
OUTDOORS TV

Alaska's best outdoor enthusiasts team up to challenge rugged terrain and often-unforgiving conditions. Cameras follow these outdoor adventurers in each episode as they explore a variety of diverse hunting and fishing opportunities in Alaska's last frontier.



{Alaska's Lifestyle Series}

 www.facebook.com/Alaska.Outdoors.TV
Check your local listing for showtimes.



floated silently into view on the river's surface and scrolled by like two ghostly sculptures on a carousel. At that moment I knew I had found what I had sought of this journey and surrendered to the cadence and rhythm of the river's spirit. It was now time to begin the last part of our adventure at Rocky's lodge.

Rocky's Alaskan Adventures Lodge is an oasis in the wilderness, perched on the edge of a tall bluff overlooking a wide bend in the Holitna River. The lodge has been serving guests for over 35 years including at least one president! It is equipped with a 2,300-foot runway, six cabins and a Jurassic garden that supplies vibrantly-colored vegetables for the chef-prepared meals throughout the summer and fall. Lush raspberry bushes covered in huge red berries are scattered throughout the property.

We had been very lucky as the lodge was closing up for the season and they were emptying the coolers. We were given our own cabin and were treated to fabulous multi-course meals featuring roast beef, and the next evening platters of smoked spare ribs with more side dishes than we could possibly eat. Rocky, his wife Sharon and the new owner of the lodge, Dan Paull, treated us to gracious hospitality and generosity considering we were just a couple of strays they had picked up on a gravel bar in the bush. We had a wonderful time fishing with Dan and managed to catch coho, pike and sheefish all in one day. Alaskan Adventures is now on my short list of places I must return to.

On our last day in the bush, Rob flew us from Rocky's to the Aniak Three Rivers Lodge, owned by Mike and Jane Robinson, to overnight before boarding commercial flights that would take us home to our families. We had met some remarkable people and experienced the opportunity to become part of wild Alaska. Listening to the silence and serenity of the Holitna will feed the vocabulary of our dreams until we return. I have learned over the years you can judge a man's character and integrity by the friends he keeps, and Rob Kinkade keeps himself surrounded with some of the most kind and generous characters I have ever had the pleasure to meet. Our journey down the Holitna became an adventure of a lifetime thanks to the coordination of a remarkable group of people that enabled us to share in the magic of this remote Alaskan paradise.



John Cleveland is Marketing Director for Eppinger, and a freelance outdoor adventure writer for several sporting publications. He can be reached at jcleveland33@hotmail.com.

Skinner Sights LLC

INTRODUCING THE SKINNER BUSH PILOT® LIMITED EDITION




**44 MAGNUM
357 MAGNUM**

16" OCTAGONAL BARREL
\$1499

45-70 GOVT

18" OCTAGONAL BARREL
\$1850



Actual 50 Yard Test Target



PREMIUM
SURVIVAL
ITEMS INCLUDED
AS SHOWN

>>>

OKC Rat-7 with "Bush PILOT" logo
Knife serial numbered to gun



Everything fits in the custom
Skinner Folding Take Down Case!

- Features Quick Easy Take Down
- 44 Magnum & 45-70 Govt
- Stainless Hard Chrome Finish
- Skinner Sights with Fiber Optic Front Sight
- Carbine Built to Skinner Sights Spec by Chiappa

STURDY PEEP SIGHTS (AND MORE) FOR YOUR RIFLES

406-745-4570

PLEASE SEE OUR WEBSITE FOR MORE INFORMATION

WWW.SKINNERSIGHTS.COM

P.O. BOX 1810, ST. IGNATIUS, MT 59865

man gear