

BIG FISH ARE A GIFT

Bear Trail Lodge Rainbow Adventures

Story & photos
by John Cleveland

Above: Our guide, Kvichak, netting a large rainbow under the watchful eye of a brown bear.

Jenny and Steve Weiner with a beautiful example of one of the five trophy rainbows they caught that were over 30 inches while fishing at Bear Trail Lodge.



We took a short break from fishing to observe the dozens of bears feasting on salmon at the falls.

There is something compelling about the power of an Alaskan adventure that dwells in my dreams during the off season. Those dreams are fueled by the challenge of the chase, the unfiltered beauty, and primal instincts that are activated when experiencing life in wild places.

The passion and excitement of being drawn towards the timeless relationship of predator and prey as you become part of this primal narrative while fishing a wilderness river is hard to resist. Not unlike the bears, trophy rainbow trout and other predators that follow the salmon as they migrate into one of Alaska's wild rivers to spawn, I travel to Alaska each year to chase big fish right alongside them. The Naknek River is renowned for having some of the largest, hardest-fighting rainbow trout in Alaska and I wanted the challenge of pinning myself to one of those beasts with a fly rod.

Bristol Bay is an incredible resource where almost 70% of the world's sockeye salmon are caught each year. Over 20 million sockeye salmon migrate through Bristol Bay every year. It is these prolific salmon migrations that are the key elements in the food chain that attract every kind of predator including man, grizzly bears, and some of Alaska's largest rainbow trout that spend the summer and fall months fattening up on the eggs and flesh of the salmon as they play out their life cycles in the surrounding rivers of Bristol Bay. The Naknek River is one of the primary conduits for millions of migrating salmon including over two million sockeye each summer. It runs approximately 35 miles in length, draining a large lake system including Naknek Lake, Brooks Lake and interconnecting river systems. It feeds into

Kvichak Bay and the Bering Sea, and is surrounded by the Katmai National Park and Preserve. Its long rapids, flat glides lined with polished stone, and deep pools studded with boulders, make the river an ideal candidate for swinging flies with a spey rod for big rainbow trout.

The flight from Anchorage to the town of King Salmon in southwest Alaska was just over an hour in length. The scenery as we flew over Alaska's wild country was a breathtaking prelude to the week I was about to spend at Bear Trail Lodge located on the Naknek River at the doorstep of Katmai National Park. I was met at the King Salmon airport by head guide Heidi Wild. As we drove down the gravel drive towards the river the impressively grand structure of Bear Trail Lodge came into view. Its stunning, wood-planked siding and detailed landscaping suggested an organization where the details are important.

Upon entering the lodge, I was amazed at the stunningly beautiful interior. It is built around an impressive grand sunroom with 20-foot cathedral ceilings flanked with cedar paneling tastefully decorated with handmade quilts, a beautiful bull moose shoulder mount and lots of authentic Alaskan memorabilia, and is appointed with comfortable, overstuffed leather chairs to lounge in at the end of a long day on the river. There is a well-stocked bar, its

walls covered with recent photos of dozens of gigantic, 30-plus-inch rainbows that had been caught during the season, and a recreation room with pool table, well-stocked fly-tying desk and a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace. If that were not enough cool stuff, there was a large, open kitchen with a breakfast bar where we would gather each morning for an opulent buffet of freshly prepared pastries, muffins, eggs, waffles, pancakes, bacon, sausage and other goodies before heading out for the day's adventure. It felt more like a well-appointed resort than a fishing lodge. I think it would be fair to say Bear Trail is a little of both.

The cabins are nestled in a copse of mixed birch and spruce trees overlooking the wild riparian landscape of the Naknek. Raised wooden walkways wind through the forest leading to each of these unique cabins, giving you the feeling of walking into a small Tolkienesque story-book village. Many of the guest cabins are paneled in knotty cedar board and house beautifully hand-crafted log furniture. In addition to the cabins, Bear Trail has a yurt that can accommodate a small group of four to six people in a comfortable and unique atmosphere. In addition, there is a heated wader room with lockers designed to stow your waders and fishing gear overnight next to the main lodge.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and smell of sizzling bacon wafting into my bedroom in the loft brought me out of a deep slumber like smelling salts in the predawn darkness of the new day. I bounced out of bed and headed downstairs in anticipation of watching the sun rise before breakfast. Regardless of where I travel, I consider sunrise a special gift provided by Mother Earth and I relished being in the audience every morning with a hot cup of coffee to enjoy watching her take her first breath of the day as the sun emerged from the eastern horizon and spread its light across the adventuresome landscape of the

Naknek River valley.

The previous evening after finishing a delicious meal of king crab legs, my guide Reuben Hastings, a lifelong Alaskan resident, had asked me what I would like to fish for the next morning. I suggested we try to catch a few coho to take home for the grill first, then concentrate on the Naknek's main attraction, big rainbow trout.

We tried several creeks that often hold silvers without much more than a couple of halfhearted tugs on my Dardevle spoon by stoic fish unwilling to commit. Due to the abnormally warm weather this season the coho had entered the river and instead of staging had moved quickly upriver to their spawning grounds earlier than they normally would have. We quickly rebooted and headed upriver to a beat known as Preacher's and began to float beads down the run in pursuit of rainbows. We could see some very nice fish moving in and out of the run as I drifted my

bead through the current. Reuben changed out my bead a few times until he found the magic bead (the right color and size). At that point it didn't take long to hook up and I had landed a half-dozen trout in the 12- to 18-inch range when a nice mid-twenties 'bow bent my fly rod and catapulted into the sky. Shortly thereafter it slipped the hook and I was back to soaking my bead through the same run when my fly rod buckled and my reel began to sizzle as a very big fish ripped 200 feet of backing off my reel in one dramatic run as it plowed down the river. I was pinned to the biggest rainbow I had ever hooked for three or four minutes before it charged upstream towards me. I stripped and ripped line as fast as I could to keep it tight without effect, and the line went slack! Reuben nodded and said, "That very well could have been your first encounter with one of the Naknek's legendary 30-inch trophy rainbows." I felt very optimistic about tagging a bucket list 'bow this coming week as we headed back to the lodge in the afternoon. The gold and crimson colors of the approaching fall, blanketing the hillsides and cradling the river and the mother grizzly and her two cubs feasting on sockeye salmon on shore, seasoned the day with a sense of wonder and adventure like only wild Alaska can do.

That evening two new guests arrived at the lodge. Steve and Jenny Weiner are regular guests who have been coming to Bear Trail Lodge for over a decade and are good friends with many of the staff, along with being well traveled and exceptionally well versed in the fineries of French wines, and the rainbows of the Naknek River. When I chatted with them about their experience flyfishing for Alaskan rainbows their answers were humble, and unassuming. I would discover in the following days that I was talking with a couple "sleepers," as they were rainbow ninjas and would account for five huge rainbows over 30 inches, and one mega 'bow that was over 32 inches in length.



The grand sunroom with its twenty-foot cathedral ceiling has a spectacular view of the Naknek and Alaskan range on the horizon.

My second day on the river began at dawn as my young guide, Kvichak, deftly navigated the river through a deep, swirling curtain of chowder-thick fog with the confidence of a seasoned guide as he led us to the upper reaches of the Rapids to begin the day. This is where my first rainbow over 20 inches would come to hand as Kvichak and I sight fished the upper reaches of the Rapids by identifying the outline of rainbows on the stream bed, which look a bit like the blurry image on an old photographic negative, and drifted beads to them. The hen swung her head towards my bead, and it was game on. She put up a classic rainbow fight with an initial reel-screaming, 150-foot run across the river, in addition to several attempts at escape into the sky before being netted. It was a great feeling to be on the board with such a beautiful fish and my confidence was restored in my ability to keep a fish hooked until netted. The remainder of the day I caught a few dollies and a couple rainbows while enjoying the beautiful riparian scenery and wildlife of the Alaskan wilderness.

As we fished our way back to the lodge that afternoon, Kvichak spotted a mother grizzly with five cubs romping on a hillside overlooking the river. It was one of the most incredible sights I have ever seen, as the cubs were running up the hill and rolling down and tagging each other like children on a playground, while the mother bear sat posted on the hill keeping a close eye on them to make sure they were safe from dangerous intruders. Apparently, this family has been under observation by ADF&G because of the uniqueness of having five cubs being cared for by one sow, and they have hypothesized that she adopted two or three of the cubs when their mother



Author with a 27-inch Naknek rainbow caught swinging a black articulated leech tied by his guide, Josh Scott.

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Releasing a rainbow.

was killed the year prior. The Nature Channel could not have created a more amazing scene than what we witnessed that afternoon in our own private outdoor theater. I felt pretty good about the day's events and by late afternoon I was ready to take a break and relax a bit at the lodge over appetizers and a mug of hot coffee before dinner.

Chef Walter prepared a bounty of delicious appetizers each afternoon such as Santa Fe rolls, Cajun shrimp, baba ghanoush, baby lamb chops, and salmon pâté, and had them ready for us to munch on when we returned from a long day of wrestling rainbows on the big river. There were a couple of afternoons, especially the day he put out grilled baby lamb chops that were so delicious, that I had a hard time pacing myself so I would have room for one of his delicious gourmet dinners.

The next couple of days were full of an inspiring collage of beautiful scenery, incredible wildlife, and exciting, adrenaline-charged hookups with big rainbows interspersed with humbling moments of frustration, as I lost contact with almost every big rainbow I hooked with one glorious exception. I was swinging a flesh fly through a beat known as Brown Bear when it jerked to a stop in the water column and a big, silver rainbow blew out of the rapids and headed downriver with 100 feet of backing in tow. With Josh's coaching, I finally brought it to the net and was shocked that the hook hadn't fallen out! It turned out to be a thick, silver-flanked 27-inch rainbow fresh out of the lake with its silver flanks bulging with the salmon eggs it had been feasting on. We took a few photos, and with a powerful stroke of the tail, it launched back into the belly of the river. By my third day on the river I was reminded of an adage that I often repeat to myself on wilderness adventures: Big fish are a gift not a given. On some trips you just have to keep the faith and keep swinging until you hit a home run.

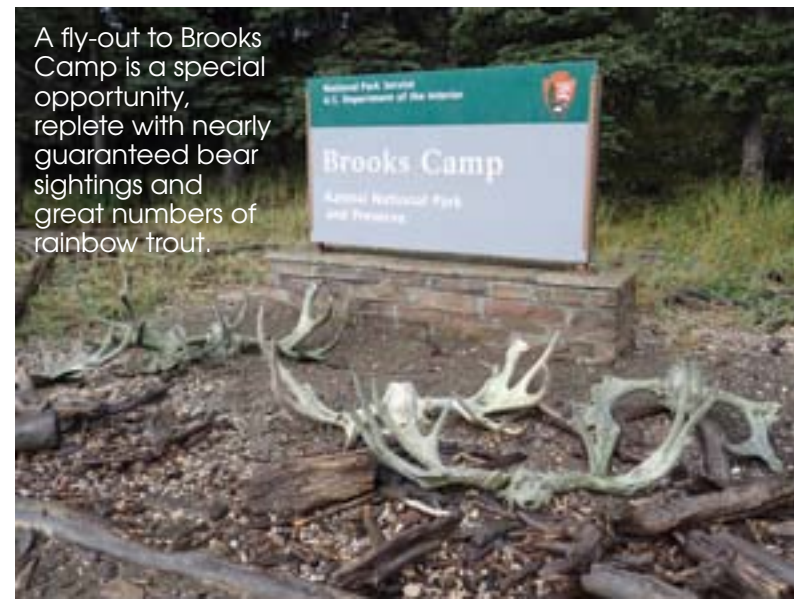
Just the simple act of traveling in this wild country is inspirational and grounding, as each morning my guide would navigate our boat up the river toward the Rapids, and the texture and colors of the scenery would change slightly over the landscape. It felt as if we were immersed in the canvas of a beautiful watercolor painting in progress, as the chilled fall air compelled Mother Nature to paint the hillsides with colored brush strokes before winter covers the land with a deep, white blanket of snow.

On my fifth day on the river a light rain had begun to fall as my guide, Josh, and I left the lodge before first light and drove to the boat launch near the Rapids. The rain continued to build in intensity all day with temperatures in the 40s, chilled by a robust mixture of 15 to 20 mph gusting winds and rain drops that resembled buckshot more than rain drops as they splattered on our GORE-TEX coats.

We spent most of the day swinging an articulated, black leech pattern that Josh had tied up for me the night before. Except for a few smaller rainbows, my streamer had swung through the current unmolested most of the day. Josh was walking the boat through

a beat known as the Flats with me swinging one of his articulated black leeches while standing on the bow of the boat when my fly came to a smashing halt and a huge, silver rocket ship blasted off into the sky and raced into the rapids, ripping the slack line laying on the bow of the boat at my feet into the river behind it. To my horror, I then realized that I had line wrapped around my leg and frantically tried to shake it free to no avail as the line pulled tight for an instant and Josh's streamer popped out of the rainbow's mouth. It was midday and we decided it was a good time to hunker down out of the wind and take a lunch break while coming up with a game plan for the afternoon, which would include spending time at Brown Bear and seeing if I could get another rainbow out of the run as I had the day before.

Josh again walked the boat slowly through the run a couple times. On the second pass he spotted a big rainbow 60 yards downstream in a riffle. He slowly moved the boat into position and I fired a cast with a black leech across the rapids, drifting it into the pocket where he had seen the rise. The surface of the river exploded as my fly flew out of the river with a big, silver-flanked rainbow pinned to it! It had most of my backing in the river before I was



A fly-out to Brooks Camp is a special opportunity, replete with nearly guaranteed bear sightings and great numbers of rainbow trout.

able to turn it and slowly work her towards Josh's net 10 minutes later. We were both pumped about this fish, as we had worked hard all day in heavy weather and finally had the prize close at hand! I had her close to the net several times when suddenly it all went south as my leader touched the side of the net, dislodging the fly, and we watched another big rainbow slip back into the safety of the river's deep currents.

Though I didn't land a big fish that day, I would rate it as one of the more memorable and personally satisfying days I have

spent on a wild river in a long time. We had hunted hard, found some big fish and had become drenched in the untamed elemental powers of the river and its surroundings. It's not always about the quantifiable events we encounter, such as landing big fish, but that we had the privilege of being players in the narrative of a special day in a special place on the planet. It was such a day. I left the river that afternoon satisfyingly exhausted and happy to be in Alaska. The raw power of the elements brings a sharpness of focus to one's soul when faced with difficult conditions, testing your endurance and dedication to task. It was a good day to be alive.

The next day I would be taking a float plane to Brooks Falls with a fellow guest Mike Carter and our guides, Kvichak and Alexia, to fish

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Kvichak getting ready to release a Brooks River trophy.

the Brooks River for rainbows, and to observe the famed bears of Brooks Falls.

I took a moment in the evening to stand outside on the second-story, wrap-around deck overlooking the river and the Alaska Range towards Katmai National Preserve and Brooks Falls to reflect on the past five days on the Naknek. By the end of my fifth day I had been humbled by the difficulty I was having keeping big fish attached to my flies. The guides were putting me on fish, but there was some odd confluence of karma keeping me from landing them. As I watched the crisp edge of dusk roll across the tundra like a blanket being pulled across the earth, all became momentarily quiet as the globe seemingly stopped turning and the land became still as the last flickering light of the sun melted into the western horizon. I had a feeling tomorrow would be a special day.

The Cessna splashed down in the bay at the mouth of the Brooks River like a big Canada goose settling in to a set of decoys, and taxied through the choppy surf to the edge of the gray volcanic sand in front of Brooks Camp. The prehistoric cackle of sandhill cranes caught my attention as I stepped onto the beach and looked skyward towards the grey, scudding clouds swirling in the sky above, then down at the odd sight of rocks floating in the surf at my feet. It was evident we had descended into a surreal world of adventure. I was told the floating rocks are volcanic pumice from the massive eruption in 1912 of a volcano named Novarupta that changed the Katmai landscape dramatically.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that there was only one other floatplane moored on the beach. We unloaded our gear from the plane and our guides, Kvichak and Alexia, led us up a trail to a rustic log building that was the ranger station for the mandatory bear school lecture which must be completed before entering the park. During a 20-minute presentation by the park ranger we were informed about the rules that would minimize the dangers of a brown bear encounter becoming life threatening. It became vividly clear during the presentation that we were now functioning in the land where predator and prey were clearly distinguishable and that the Brooks Camp was not a playground for the faint of heart!

During the next eight hours we would walk amongst giant brown bears and sight fish to trophy rainbow trout as they feasted on salmon eggs and held in lairs behind pods of sockeye salmon. We hiked a quarter mile to the river on a muddy bear trail covered in bear tracks and mounds of scat sprinkled with bright-red highbush cranberries. I double checked them to see if there were any whistles or bells in the mix, but to my relief I didn't see any evidence

of human carnage. My bear awareness was at a maximum setting as we trekked through the thick brush without incident towards the river.

It didn't take us long to find a long riffle with pods of rainbows slurping eggs as they tumbled down the polished-marble gravel bed of the river. We began drifting beads to them and the action was immediate and intense as both Mike and I had large trout somersaulting through the sky above the river and dashing up and down the beat under the watchful eye of our guides and several nearby brown bears. Mike and I took turns all morning fishing through the run while regularly having to yield the water to the many big bears that wandered into the beat. This was, without a doubt, the most exciting fishing I have ever experienced, as we had to be bear aware at every moment. By 10:30 I had lost count of the 20- to 27-inch rainbows we had caught, all the while keeping both Alexia and Kvichak busy with their nets and as bear traffic controllers for the group. There had been a cold rain drenching us all morning, so we decided to take an early lunch back at the ranger station where they had a small shelter with picnic tables surrounded with a four-foot-high electric fence to keep bears at bay.

The plan for the rest of the day was to hike about a mile to the bear-viewing platform at the falls and check out the bears, then back to fishing for the rest of the day. The falls were just as amazing as I had imagined with a dozen brown bears chasing down sockeye salmon in the rapids and one big bear standing at the top edge of the falls, grabbing salmon as they launched themselves out of the plunge pool below the falls and regularly into the bear's mouth. The fishing the remainder of the afternoon continued to be incredible with many 20-plus-inch 'bows coming to hand.

Mike and I were both preoccupied fighting large rainbows when, like a referee at a boxing match, Kvichak called the fight and said it was time to head back to the ranger station to meet the float plane. We had spent an amazing day at Brooks Camp in an adrenaline-fueled adventure awash in brown bears and big rainbows, surrounded by the magic and wonder of a truly wild place.

The owners of Bear Trail Lodge, Nanci Morris Lyon and Heath Lyon, are two very talented and remarkable people. Between them they have over 60 years



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of experience guiding in Alaska, much of it on the Naknek. They are residents of King Salmon and their lives are completely invested, heart and soul, in the well-being of their community, the environment, and the team of wonderful employees that work with them to create the 5-star lodge of their dreams. They are active stewards of the land and their passion and enthusiasm for keeping the river and its fish healthy are evident in everything they do. They are in the business of exceeding their guests' expectations, and they make it happen with a very talented team of employees, most of whom are Alaska residents, adding to the authenticity of the Alaskan experience for visitors. The guides at Bear Trail are also some of the most knowledgeable and hardworking I have had the pleasure to fish with in Alaska.

Bear Trail Lodge is a first-class fishing resort in the business of making dreams come true. By the end of the week I had been soaked with the joy of the chase and given the gift of some very big rainbows. The wonder of discovery never gets old for me as every river has a special character and mystique and reveals her gifts to you one beat at a time while wrapped in its flow. The Naknek River and Brooks Falls gave me more than enough adventure to fuel my dreams and settle my soul for another year until I return to this bold and beautiful land of adventure called Alaska.

John Cleveland is currently feeding his family by working as Marketing Director for Dardevle spoons, and feeding his soul by flyfishing in Alaska, Northern Canada and the Arctic while writing about those adventures as a freelance writer. John can be reached at grouseman52@gmail.com.



TARGET MULTIPLE SPECIES:

- Salmon
- Rainbow Trout
- Northern Pike
- Arctic Grayling
- Lake Trout
- Dolly Varden/Char

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