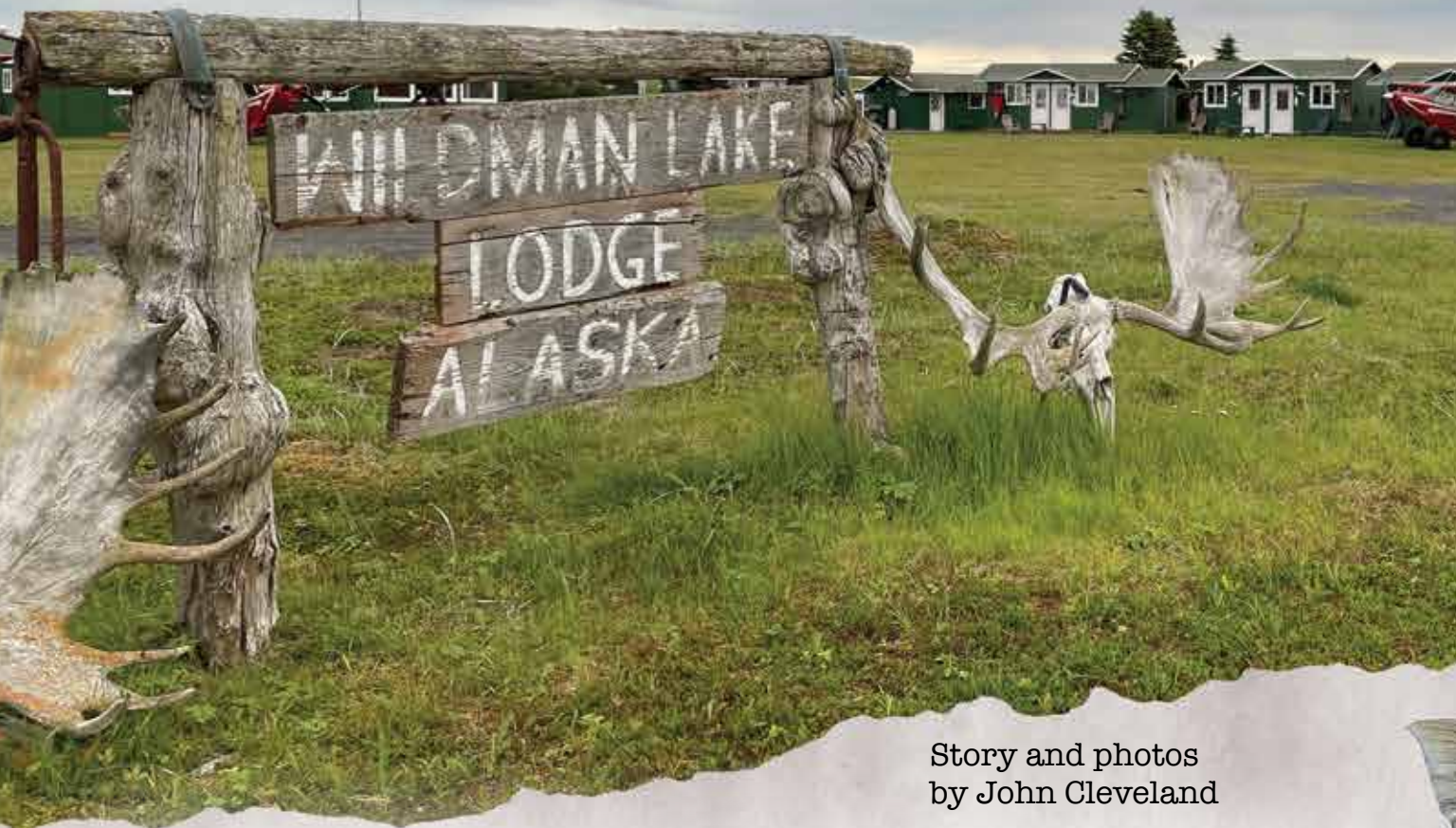


WILD FISH *of the* ALASKA PENINSULA



Story and photos
by John Cleveland

Alaska has become my North Star for adventure because it is one of the few places I have found that is bigger than my imagination. It is an unfiltered wilderness with unfathomable views that reach beyond our human possibilities. After a couple of years without traveling due to the pandemic, I was ready to take a trip to the wild side. The Aleutian Range extends from the mainland of Alaska like a thorny dragon's tail, its active volcanoes still breathing fire on occasion. This is a place where the earth is still geographically young and soft, where life is still literally percolating to the surface. The idea of fishing in a land that is still evolving and has active volcanoes was exactly the kind of breakout adventure I was looking for. After doing research I found that Wildman Lake Lodge, located 500 miles southwest of Anchorage at the western edge of the Alaska Peninsula, would put me at the epicenter of this transformative wilderness and promptly booked the second week in July.

The chartered twin-engine Piper Navajo taxied to a stop right next to the lodge after a scenic two-hour flight from Anchorage with spectacular views of the mountains, glaciers, and rivers that are the heart and soul of Alaska's wilderness paradise. After a

brief orientation and cabin assignments, everyone settled in and got their gear ready to fish in the home waters of the lodge for the afternoon.

Wildman Lake Lodge is owned and operated by Gary "Butch" King. Butch is an accomplished bush pilot and master guide with almost 50 years' experience in the wilds of the Alaska Peninsula. His passion for flying and attention to detail were especially evident in the six immaculately cared-for aircraft he keeps on station at the lodge for guest fly-outs. He handles the daily business of running his lodge with the care, confidence and humility of a man that knows how to make the magic happen for his guests. The main lodge is built on a plateau above the Ocean River and has an incredible view of the snowcapped Aleutian Range and vast meadows of tundra that stretch to the horizon. The river is a unique anomaly in that it is artesian sourced, maintaining its gin-clear complexion and fishability all season regardless of weather conditions. The warren of rustic, wood-paneled guest cabins are arranged in a semicircle with the lodge's aircraft moored on a trimmed grass courtyard in front of the cabins, ready to transport guests to prime fishing and

Wildman Lake Lodge is built on a plateau overlooking the Ocean River.

We found a remarkable number of char at the headwaters of the Ocean River one morning.



The pool below the headwaters of the Ocean River was full of aggressive char.



wildlife-viewing locations throughout the peninsula each morning. The cabins are finished in knotty pine and furnished in authentic Alaska-themed memorabilia with warm wool quilts on the beds. Deep beds of lichen, lowbush cranberries and tundra grass surround the lodge like a vast Arctic carpet reaching to the horizon.

Good Morning Coffee

At 7 a.m. there was a knock at my cabin door and when I opened the door a pot of hot coffee was perched on a small shelf waiting for me to add a little cream and sugar. I sat on my porch sipping the freshly brewed coffee, letting the caffeine take effect, the warm mug wrapped in the palm of my hand warding off the chill from the foggy vapors that had enveloped the land overnight. I watched as the early morning rays of the sun slowly dissolved the morning fog and the image of the snowcapped shoulders of Mount Veniaminof and surrounding peaks magically came into view like a Polaroid photograph developing before my eyes. I took a deep breath of paradise before heading into the lodge for breakfast.

On our first morning, Butch brought us even further into the middle-earth mystique of the lodge by changing the circadian rhythm of our days. We'd start an hour later; he explained the reason was it worked out better for his guests to get up an hour later than to sit about the lodge for an hour after breakfast waiting for the fog to dissipate before the planes could fly us out to fish. It worked like a charm as the fog would usually lift just after breakfast while I was there.

On my first-day adventure I would be flying out to Volcano Creek, which is about 30 minutes' flying time, with three guests: David, April, and Byron, who called the U.S. Virgin Islands their home. We would be fishing for king salmon. Flying in a helicopter was a bucket-list item for me and this morning would be my debut. It was exhilarating. The sensation was as if we were in the lens of a

movie camera as Captain Dan Scott took us due west, buzzing like a bumblebee in the wind 500 feet above the tundra. The dark gray shadows cast by the clouds scrolled like a ghostly herd of elephants migrating across the Serengeti of tundra below us, making for the kind of memorable image that a truly wild place is capable of projecting into our imaginations.

Dan set the helicopter down on a gravel bar with the gentle touch of a butterfly with sore feet. I would be the only one in the group flyfishing; my friends would be drifting salmon-egg clusters through the holding water with spinning gear. It was the second week in July, and I knew my choice of a fly rod would put me at a disadvantage because the kings were at the end of their spawning cycle and would be difficult to entice with a fly. I spent the next several hours stripping, drifting, and swinging some very sexy looking salmon streamers through every good piece of holding water I could locate within a half mile of our base without any effect. In the meantime, my friends drifting spawn sacks landed a half dozen good-sized kings, the largest being about 25 pounds. The salmon were there but I just couldn't get them to commit to a fly. My guide, Ron, suggested we change tactics in the afternoon and see if we could find a few rainbows I might fool with streamers and mouse flies.

He led me upstream a quarter mile to a couple of runs that he felt might hold rainbows and turned me loose. I began by swinging a purple streamer with a pink bead on its tail through a deep cut and instantly got connected to a rainbow that made a couple of sky-busting leaps as it felt the sting of my hook. A few moments later a beautiful 23-inch rainbow came to hand. I switched to a foam mouse fly and skated it across a long, clear run a couple times before it was smashed by a clone of the first rainbow. For the next hour and a half, I managed to fool four 18- to 20-inch rainbows by wading a mouse fly across the current. At one point Ron walked downstream to explore fresh runs for me to fish. A few minutes later I saw movement on the shoreline coming towards me and thought it was Ron but quickly realized it was a caribou. It stopped next to my daypack on the gravel bar to give me the once-over then slowly walked away, seemingly uninterested in my pursuits in the river. The flight back to the lodge was a thrill as the pilot followed the river's winding path for several hundred yards before gaining elevation and taking a heading for the lodge. What a great day!

Peter Caloon landing a big char for a guest on the main river channel.





It's hard to beat the adrenaline rush that comes with a wild rainbow T-boning a mouse fly.

CrossFit Rainbows

It was a bright, sunny morning when we left the lodge for a short hop in the helicopter to the headwaters of Rainbow Creek. Today I would be guided by Butch's grandson, Dylan, who is an apprentice hunting guide with four successfully guided grizzly bear hunts to his credit. Dan set the bird down on a raised berm of tundra overlooking the creek. Dylan and I hopped out and geared up for the 5½-mile walk we were about to make hunting for rainbows in the creek's cool, shaded pocket water as the helicopter buzzed off



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into the horizon. My plan for the day was to take up the challenge of drawing the rainbows from the diminutive pools of the creek by skating a mouse fly overhead. I began hooking fish almost immediately as my little mouse fly was T-boned by a silver-and-pink-flanked 16-inch rainbow in the first pool. For the next hour we fished our way down the creek hooking six rainbows including one tank that landed like a brick in the pool after hammering the fly. My little mouse fly was on fire. Though I only managed to land one fish, I was confident this was going to be an epic day of fishing. Little did I know how challenging things were about to become.

Without notice the sun melted into a low, scudding shroud of clouds that appeared over us and buckets of windblown rain began to pelt us. The creek's gin-clear waters became a milky gray as the swollen waters mixed with sediment. As the creek's volume increased the fishing slowed down to a trickle. When tundra is primed with a fresh downpour it becomes a slippery ankle-twisting pudding that sucks at your boots and made the remaining miles of our journey down the creek bed seem more like a CrossFit exercise than a fishing adventure. We fished for several hours in the morning under the relentless umbrella of clouds before taking a break for lunch around noon. Huddled on the hillside, I marveled at the comfort I felt wrapped in my GORE-TEX coat and waders, munching on sandwiches and chips while listening to Dylan tell me his stories about guiding in the remote wilds of Alaska.

We took our time fishing through the lower section of the river in the afternoon, and I managed to land several more respectable rainbows in the lower end of the creek before it flowed into the Ocean River a half mile from the lodge. I knew we hadn't experienced the best the creek had to offer because of the weather, but we had given it our best and had an adventure worthy of telling. I was thankful for the opportunity to enjoy the chase and challenge of this rugged land and felt a sense of accomplishment at having been tested and tempered in a wild place while immersing myself in the innate serenity of remote Alaska. Satisfyingly exhausted, I sat at the dinner table telling my story of the day's adventure on Rainbow Creek.

As I arrived at camp each afternoon, the delicious aromas from the kitchen wafting into the courtyard of the lodge gave a hint of what we could anticipate for dinner that evening. The pre-dinner "muktuk hour" began each afternoon at 6 p.m. and featured scrumptious hors d'oeuvres, served with a large portion of enthusiastically embellished storytelling, adding to the feeling of camaraderie at the lodge. Crispy fresh salads made with greens from the lodge's garden, fresh-baked rolls and entrees like grilled steaks, Arctic char, and roast pork loin with freshly baked desserts made for scrumptious dining throughout the week.

The Local Water

Most of the guests were either going on wildlife-viewing expeditions, or fishing for the plentiful sockeye salmon that had begun to arrive from the sea. I decided to stay on the local water and chase rainbows and char. The headwaters of the Ocean River are about two miles upriver from the lodge, plunging over a waterfall of jagged volcanic rock at its source. It follows a winding corridor of volcanic rocky braids surrounded by a vast prairie of tundra grass and stunted willow as it tumbles 15 miles to its end at the coastline of the Bering Sea. It has a plentiful resident population of rainbow trout and char. Beginning in late June the sockeye salmon begin to arrive, then in mid-August an epic run of big silver salmon, and large, beautifully colored char migrate from the Bering Sea into the river to spawn. The arrival of these fish in the middle of August coincides with the opening of ptarmigan season and the lodge offers cast-and-blast packages. The beginning of September brings with it the waterfowl season and the steelhead begin to come in from the sea to spawn, creating the potential of an epic hunting-and-fishing adventure.

My guide for the last few days of my trip would be Peter Caloon who has been guiding at the lodge for 20 years and could, without hesitation, be classified as a master fishing guide. He is also well versed in the history of the Alaska Peninsula, which I found fascinating and informative. One afternoon Peter stopped the boat at a bend



in the river and told me the history of the Aleut village dating back 4,000 years that was located at this very spot and inhabited until about 400 years ago. He has assisted archeologists in locating artifacts over the years and has a wealth of information about the area. I spent most my time on the river skating a mouse fly across the surface trying to tempt a rainbow into attacking it, and with a few helpful tips from Peter became intermittently successful at it. The adrenaline-charged moment a rainbow smashes a mouse fly is both dramatic and fulfilling, even though I missed many strikes while bringing a handful of beautiful rainbows to the net during my quest. The char seemed to be fond of a small black-and-orange Dolly Llama streamer that Peter offered to me after I had dredged my own flies through several runs without effect. Once I had the right fly (Angler's tip: If your guide offers you one of his flies, take it!) I began to catch char. At one point while I was fishing with another guest, we caught something like 20 char between us in one pool. Peter called it "charmageddon" and assured us it was a regular occurrence on the Ocean River. The incredible alchemy of wild fish, and the awe-inspiring views of the Aleutian Range as we fished the local water were truly remarkable to experience, and a fitting way to end a trip to the wild side of the Alaska Peninsula.

The fish, the scenery, the wildlife, and the people we share it with are the pigments that color the canvas of an epic wilderness adventure like the one I was privileged to have experienced at Wildman Lake Lodge. The incredible adventures orchestrated by the staff of the lodge and their amazing dedication to exceeding guest expectations were evident in everything they did. As the wheels of the twin-engine Navajo lifted from the crushed volcanic stone of the runway, I was grateful that Alaska had once again delivered an adventure beyond my wildest dreams.



John Cleveland is an award-winning outdoor writer who has a particular affinity for traditional bow hunting, flyfishing, and remote wilderness adventure. When not hunting, fishing or building cigar-box guitars he stays in shape for his next adventure by competing in triathlons. John can be reached at grouseman52@gmail.com

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