

Paul Smith: Enjoying Alaska's Alagnak River, one of the planet's last, best strongholds for salmon



Dave Zeug of Shell Lake, Wisconsin, reels in a chum salmon while fishing on the Alagnak River in Alaska.
PAUL A. SMITH

PAUL A. SMITH | MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL | 1:15 pm CDT September 22, 2018

ALAGNAK RIVER, ALASKA - As our jon boat ground to a stop on an island in the Alagnak River, a 10-pound silver salmon leaped out of the water.

The fish was close enough that small spots, probably sea lice, could be seen on its lower flank.

Moments later, a similar-sized chum salmon also jumped. Ten seconds passed and another silver porpoised midstream.

"I guess there's a couple in here," said Glen Lemon, a fishing guide for [Alagnak Lodge](#), as a wry smile creased his face.

The actual number of fish – all within casting distance – was likely closer to several dozen.

That's the way things go in Alaska. The landscape is so vast, the terrain so wild, the resources so abundant that those who live or work here are prone to understatement.

Whatever the number, the splashy welcoming party was much appreciated by Dave Zeug of Shell Lake, Wisconsin, and me.

We clambered out of the boat and grabbed fly rods, ready to pull a few fish in for even closer inspection. As we did, we spotted another sign of the area's plentiful wildlife stamped into the sandy shore – the tracks of a brown bear.



An fly rod rests next to a brown bear track in the sand along the Alagnak River.
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In this part of the world, anglers don't have to look far to know they're not at the top of the food chain.

It's part of the allure and excitement of Alaska.

And here, in the waters that drain into Bristol Bay, the bruins and human anglers and dozens of other species are drawn together by the undisputed MVP of the ecosystem: salmon.

In a spectacular phenomenon of nature, adult salmon return to their natal streams to spawn and die. Their progeny hatch, go to sea and return years later to seed the next generation. And so on, as it has for millennia, without any assist from humans.

That is, if the system isn't disrupted. And the young find enough to eat. And enough of them survive to maturity. And enough are allowed to return to spawn.

In the 21st century, the salmon need humans help to not mess things up.

Over the last several hundred years, wild salmon have provided one of nature's most beautiful examples of sustainability. It's still on display in a select, though declining, number of places.

There is no better spot on the planet to experience a salmon run than Alaska's Bristol Bay. The region hosts the largest sockeye (red) salmon migration in the world, as well as runs of chinook (king), silver (coho), chum (dog) and pink (humpback).

The Bristol Bay salmon fishery has an annual economic value of \$1.5 billion, according to a University of Alaska-Anchorage **study**, and is tapped by commercial boats, subsistence fishers, recreational anglers and the tourism sector.

And that staggering total doesn't even consider the ecological treasure salmon bring to the region.

As climatic and oceanographic conditions have changed in recent years, awareness of the high and arguably irreplaceable value of Bristol Bay's salmon fishery has increased as salmon runs in other parts of Alaska, as well as British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California, have declined.



Dave Zeug fights a chum salmon while fishing on the Alagnak River near King Salmon, Alaska.
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Because no hatchery fish are raised or released in the watershed, Bristol Bay's salmon populations are entirely wild.

In late August, I traveled with Zeug, 68, and three generations of the Moss family – Bruce, 71, of Spooner, Wisconsin, his son John, 50, and grandson Cormac, 14, both of Eau Claire, Wisconsin – to fish salmon on the Alagnak.

We stayed at **Alagnak Lodge**, positioned on a high bank about six miles from the river's confluence with the Kvichak River, and about 10 from the Pacific Ocean.

Designated a Wild and Scenic River by the federal government, the Alagnak is one of dozens of untamed rivers in the area that form fertile spawning grounds for salmon. It's also home to rainbow trout, Arctic grayling and Dolly Varden.

The Alagnak is somewhat rare in that it hosts runs of all five Pacific Ocean salmon.

The river begins as the outflow of Kukaklek Lake in Katmai National Park and Preserve in the Aleutian Range; its total length is 64 miles.

According to the National Park Service, in the local language Alagnak means "making mistakes," perhaps a reference to the river's dynamic, branching nature.

But Native American Placenames of the United States associates the river's name with the Yupik word *alagnaq*, a type of red berry.

Both derivations seem plausible. The upper river is intricately braided. And the squat, nearshore vegetation along its lower stretches was peppered with cranberries and other wild fruits.

How does a group of Wisconsinites find its way to a remote Alaska fishing lodge? In our case it was due to Bruce Moss, who had been on the Alagnak three times, starting with a 2001 float, camp and fish trip down the river on a raft with two companions.

He returned twice more in recent years, staying both times at Alagnak Lodge.

"To me, the fishing has always been near perfect," Moss said. "You don't catch a fish on every cast, which can be boring. But if you work at it, you'll catch plenty, and a 10-pound salmon on a fly rod is a real treat."

When Zeug earlier this year pitched the idea for an Alaskan fishing trip, it didn't take much convincing for the five of us to agree to go to Alagnak.

Our trip spanned Aug. 19 to 26 and included five days of fishing, and our timing coincided with strong runs of silver and chum and a moderate run of pinks.



A float plane arrives at the dock at Alagnak Lodge on the Alagnak River in Alaska.
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Built in 1980, the lodge is a two-story, dormitory style building, with room for 20 guests.

The first level features a dining room, kitchen, shower rooms, a fly tying bench and a social parlor. Guest rooms are on the second floor.

Several outbuildings, including a sauna "hot lodge" and a smokehouse, are scattered on the property. A motorized lift, powered by an old Jeep engine, is used to pull luggage and other gear up "Mount Alagnak," the 48-step incline from the lodge's dock to the top of the bank.

The ambiance is family-style and unpretentious. The guests and guides gather for three meals a day and often develop long-term friendships, said lodge owner Tony Behm, 75.

A case in point was provided during our stay by Neal Peters of Long Beach, California, and John Plumb of Norfolk, England. The two met at Alagnak 12 years ago and now plan their annual returns to the lodge during the same week so they can fish together.

Peters fishes from the stern with a switch rod and Plumb from the bow with a conventional one-handed rod.

They prefer to come in mid- or late August when the silver run is peaking.

"You get one on the line and it jumps and you just think 'wow,'" Plumb said.

It's a challenge to reach most destinations in the 49th state. Even Juneau, the state capital, can be accessed only by boat or aircraft.

To get to Alagnak Lodge from Milwaukee required four flights, the last on a float plane.

The only mammals that arrive here by any other means are four-legged.



A brown bear eats a salmon in the Alagnak River in Alaska.
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And there are plenty of them. We saw brown bears daily, as well as beavers and a few moose. One evening, we saw a grey wolf along the river. Caribou winter in the area.

A brown bear sow and cub were frequent sights near the lodge. One day they left muddy paw prints on the dock.

"I've only got one rule," said Lemon, 44, our fishing guide and a retired U.S. Army specialist. "When a bear shows up, it owns the bar. We move out."

Fishing at Alagnak Lodge had a daily rhythm that was easy to adopt.

Breakfast was served at 6 a.m., followed by a fishing session from 7 to 11, lunch at noon, fishing from 1 to 5 p.m., dinner at 6 and fishing from 7 to 10.

Anglers typically choose two of the three daily fishing sessions. Since large pulses of fresh salmon often come into the river on high tides, we consulted with the guides and tidal charts to select our fishing times.

When not fishing, a card table was available as well as a video monitor to play movies or tapes. Internet was undependable enough to make it easy to detach from cell phones and laptops.

In reality, we spent most of our down time talking and telling stories. A few afternoon naps were recorded, too.

We also had fun visiting with staff member Wayne Haag, 77, who ran the camp smokehouse. Now in his 12th season at Alagnak Lodge, Haag has perfected smoking racks of fresh salmon over a propane heater, frying pan and pieces of birch.



Wayne Haag of Alagnak Lodge in Alaska offers freshly smoked salmon to guests.
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It all happens in a wooden structure about the size of an outhouse.

He fired up the smoker each morning and tended it for about 8 hours as he prepared tail and belly pieces from our salmon. His recipe called for a slightly sweet brine and a target temperature of 145 degrees.

He used a wooden wedge to open or close the door of the smoker and adjust the temperature.

"It's prehistoric, but it works," Haag said.

When we booked our trip we had no idea how fortunate we were to have selected a lodge in Bristol Bay.

Many salmon runs were dismal this summer in Alaska. Returns were so poor on some of the state's most famous salmon rivers outside of Bristol Bay, including the Kenai, Kodiak and Copper, that the waters were temporarily or permanently closed to salmon fishing.

The reason for the poor runs is not known with certainty, though a hypothesis centers on a "warm blob" of water in the Pacific Ocean that could be affecting the food sources and survival of young salmon from parts of Alaska.

Less than 1 percent of salmon smolts from the Kenai and other affected rivers are surviving to adulthood and returning to spawn, down from a historical average of 4 percent, according to state fisheries biologists.

But Bristol Bay is showing better health and balance in its salmon fishery. In fact, the 2018 Bristol Bay sockeye run was one for the record books. An estimated 62.3 million sockeyes returned, the most since records were initiated in 1893, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

The 2018 sockeye run was 69 percent above the 20-year average.

Commercial netters harvested 41.3 million sockeyes in Bristol Bay this year, the second highest catch in history, while 21 million sockeyes were allowed to "escape" up the bay's rivers to spawn, according to ADFG.

Among other species, the 2018 Bristol Bay silver and chum runs were up nearly 100% over their 20-year averages, while chinook was down 13 percent and pinks were down 55 percent.

One concerning trend was evident this year statewide (including Bristol Bay): the average size of salmon was smaller, indicating lower productivity in the ocean, according to fisheries biologists.

By the time of our visit, most commercial fishing in the bay had ended.

Salmon were free to enter the Kvitchek and Alagnak without running a gauntlet of nets.

Sport fishing, however, was in full force on the rivers. We saw boats from two other lodges on the Alagnak daily, and float planes periodically dropped anglers off on day trips.

Lemon showed Zeug and me the two primary Alagnak River silver salmon fishing tactics.

One was right out of a Wisconsin jig fisherman's play book: A medium-heavy spinning rod spooled with braided main line and a fluorocarbon leader and tipped with a half-ounce ball head jig with a red marabou body.

We fished this as we cast and drifted downriver.

The other was a weighted red marabou and flashabou tube fly fished on a standard fly rod with a floating line. This outfit was used when we waded on sand bars or shorelines.

Both resulted in most hook-ups when the lure was bounced or drifted along the bottom.

"It's not rocket science, is it?" Zeug said after he hooked a silver salmon on the jig setup on our first outing.

We hooked many of our salmon by casting the marabou jig into the weed-lined seams along the edges of the main river. The water was 1 to 3 feet deep, but the current flowed about 3 miles per hour.

The relatively heavy jig was just right for the conditions.

"They've spent the last few years in the ocean, but when they get in the river, they relate to weeds and bottom structure almost like a bass," Lemon said.

Zeug and I caught from three to 20 fish per session, the exact number usually dictated by how much time we spent sight-seeing and how many fresh fish were in the area.

One evening, for example, Lemon took us upriver to a deserted village with a Russian Orthodox church. The inhabitants, we were told, were ravaged by an outbreak of the Spanish flu in 1919.

Another evening we drifted down the middle of the river and watched a pair of brown bears as they fished along the bank. The bear's catch rate was at least equal to ours.

Each of our first three days Zeug and I kept our daily bag limits of three silver salmon apiece and then released everything else. The fish ranged from 7 to 12 pounds and were a delight to behold; many had sea lice on their sides, indicating they had just entered freshwater.



A silver salmon, also known as coho, is filleted after a fishing outing on the Alagnak River in the Bristol Bay region of southwestern Alaska.
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We also caught many chum salmon, which fought just as hard as the silvers and were perhaps even more aggressive on the take.

These fish, also called dog or keta salmon (after the species name *Oncorhynchus keta*), became my favorite.

In the early stages of spawning, the handsome fish bear subtle purple and red stripes on their sides. Their bodies are streamlined, similar to steelhead. And the meat has a milder taste than silver salmon.

How it ever acquired a derogatory name such as chum I'll never know. Fish marketing gurus already recognized the need for different branding. They sell it as "silverbright salmon."

At camp, I started calling them something that seemed grander and more fitting: "tiger" salmon.

Now that's a name worthy of a wild Alaskan fish.

Zeug and I landed only silver, pink and "tiger" salmon. But John Moss hooked a rainbow trout that was estimated at 10 pounds, the only trout our group encountered on the trip.



Cormac Moss, left, of Eau Claire, Wisconsin caught and released this silver salmon on the Alagnak River in Alaska.
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By the end of our five days, each of us had accumulated a tasty dividend for our efforts: a 50-pound box of salmon fillets and smoked salmon pieces.

The fish was vacuum sealed and frozen during our stay, and then packed in waxed cardboard boxes for our flights home.

We had been privileged to experience a wild river full of salmon in one of the planet's last, best strongholds for the fish.

But make no mistake: The future of salmon is in doubt, even here, where a large mine has been proposed and climatic or ecosystem changes could prove devastating.

As our float plane lifted off the Alagnak and headed for King Salmon, I looked south toward the expanse of Bristol Bay with a mixture of gratitude and concern.

As a nation, we've got to do everything in our power to preserve wild salmon runs.

If you get the chance, go see it for yourself. I'm confident you'll agree.