

## *SALMON FISHING – Alaska Style with Brown Bears*

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*They say there's 3 ways to get to King Salmon, Alaska. You can come by boat, plane or by birth canal. Our transportation of choice was air, the same as most residents and visitors – often salmon fishermen - to this village of 374 hardy souls southeast of Anchorage.*

*Our August trip coincided with the silver salmon run from Bristol Bay, the eastern most arm of the Bearing Sea. King Salmon is the jumping off point for floatplane trips to the Bay's tributaries and the outstanding fishing they offer. It's also the headquarters for the over 4,000,000-acre Katmai National Park.*

*Some say salmon fishing in Alaska will spoil you for life. I doubt that. We've got pretty good salmon fishing here too with Great Lakes on two borders, but the chance to fish the 64-mile long Alagnak River was too enticing to pass up. The Alagnak, which means "making mistakes" - something you don't want to do in this remote setting - originates in the Katmai Park.*

*The Alagnak Lodge, owned by Tony Behm who calls Hawaii home, is on one of the few private parcels around Katmai Park. The lodge caters to fishermen who want to experience Alaska in a remote setting away from crowds often found on more accessible water.*

*Our trip began with a morning flight from Minneapolis and ended at 6:30 when the floatplane from King Salmon pulled alongside the Lodge's dock where a fleet of boats were moored. Air travel can be brutal, but with a short layover in Anchorage and traveling west into Alaska Daylight Time, the trip seemed easy. Although Tony offered us a short fishing trip, we elected to pass and rest up for the morning. On our way up the stairs to the lodge we passed a tongue in cheek sign welcoming us to "Mount Alagnak, 48-steps above sea level," reflective of how close we were to salt water.*

*The river's about 100 yards wide at the lodge and shallow, 3 or 4 feet depending on the tide, and interspersed with islands and sandbars. It looked inviting, especially since we could see salmon rolling on the surface from the lodge. Real inviting.*

*"The best fishing coincides with the incoming tide," said Glenn Lemon, our guide for the week. "Salt water is only a few miles downstream and a fresh runs come in with the high tide. That's when fishing's best and the next one will be in the morning. It should be good," he added, heightening our expectations.*

*Lemon, a full time fishing guide calls Reno, Nevada home. "When I tell most people where I live, they're surprised Nevada has enough water for a fishing*

guide to make a living," he said. "I come here in summer to work and leave around the end of August. I guide almost exclusively on (125,000-acre) Pyramid Lake back home, from October to mid-May and target cutthroat trout. Then I come to Alaska," he said, adding with a knowing smile, "my office is better than most."

We met Glenn at the dock the next morning where he gave us a short reminder that safety's always first. The orientation included a reminder of the heavy population of brown bears along the river this time of year. Grizzly bears, a sub-species of brown bears live further inland without access to coastal food sources like salmon, so don't grow as big. In the Katmai, male brown bears often weight over 1,000 pounds.

"I'd just as soon we stayed in the boat when we did our fishing," said Glenn. "There's a lot of tall grass along shore and the bears seem to appear out of nowhere. They're looking for fish, but you don't want to surprise them," he said as we unlimbered our fly rods, but kept our spinning gear close too.

The big, quiet 4-stroke motors held the 17-foot flat bottom boats in place while we lengthened our casts toward the pod of salmon rolling along the submerged weed line near shore. This is no place for light, delicate fly line with tapered leaders. These fish, as Lemon pointed out, "don't know what line is. They come from the ocean and they aren't fussy."

Since we were keying on silver (coho) salmon rather than the chum and pinks also in the river, we were throwing jointed flash flies that mimicked a wiggling, twisted motion as we stripped them in. With these heavy flies, a strong "up-haul" generating a lot of line speed is needed to get airborne.

Our most effective colors were red with some sparkle woven into the fly's body, but I doubt it mattered with these fresh saltwater missiles. There's no need for the cautious, delicate presentations used on our in-land trout fishing and the gear we used reflected that. Heavy double-digit monofilament leaders worked well on our 9-weight rods spooled with floating fly line. We didn't feel over gunned either. These fish weighted between 8 and 14-pounds and wild as they were, anything less would leave you and your gear in shambles as I found out minutes later when my first Alaskan salmon tore and danced across the river.

When our arms tired from casting these heavy flies we turned to 9-foot spinning rods spooled with 40#-braided line and 25-pound mono leaders. "I can tell you guys are walleye fishermen," said Lemon after watching us work our jigs through the holding water in the time-honored Wisconsin manner. "It's a really effective way to catch them. Some think the gears too heavy, but that's what you need when these fish take off and even then, you better have your drag set."

*Although we were targeting silvers, there were enough chum and pinks around to provide for some incidental catches. As maligned as these fish are by some Alaskans – chums are also called dog salmon because that's what some feed to their dogs - we found the fresh run fish to be every bit as delicious as the silvers. We did a taste test on the 3 species and found slight variations in flavor and texture, but they had something in common. They were excellent table fare.*

*As good as the fishing was from the boat, we petitioned Glenn to let us wade fish trying not to sound like a couple spoiled teenagers. He could keep an eye out for bears while we worked the pods of fish along the sandbars. "OK, but if I say we got to go, get back in the boat right now," said Glenn. "I'll keep an eye out for them."*

*With that green light, we hopped out of the boat onto a sandbar armed with our fly rods again and began working seams in the riverbed, while Glenn played mother hen. Minutes later we were both hooked up, trying to stay out of each other's way. The action continued until we heard Glenn's warning. "We got to go. Now!"*

*Looking up we saw the big brown bear ambling down the riverbank. Although he appeared to be more interested in salmon, we heeded Glenn's advice.*

*The next day we left the Alagnak Lodge and headed for home along with a 50-pound box of frozen salmon fillets each. Am I spoiled now? No, I'm not, but on slow days I'll remember Alaska. I might find myself looking over my shoulder every once in a while too.*