


62° North

In search of king salmon

Surely he is not going to land on that!" I thought as the pilot banked the single-engined Otter floatplane in a tight turn, and dropped rapidly down towards what appeared to be no more than a tiny, wooded and winding stream. I glanced nervously at my fellow passengers, seeking some reassurance that we weren't on the last downward plunge of our lives, but received only nervous looks in return. Well, these Alaskan bush pilots haven't earned their daring reputation for nothing, and within minutes we were all breathing a collective sigh of relief as the plane skidded smoothly down a shallow, twisting stretch of the Talachulitna River in the uninhabited Alaskan wilderness, wingtips clipping the trees and smooth boulders whipping past only inches below the big floats as we taxied in towards the bank.

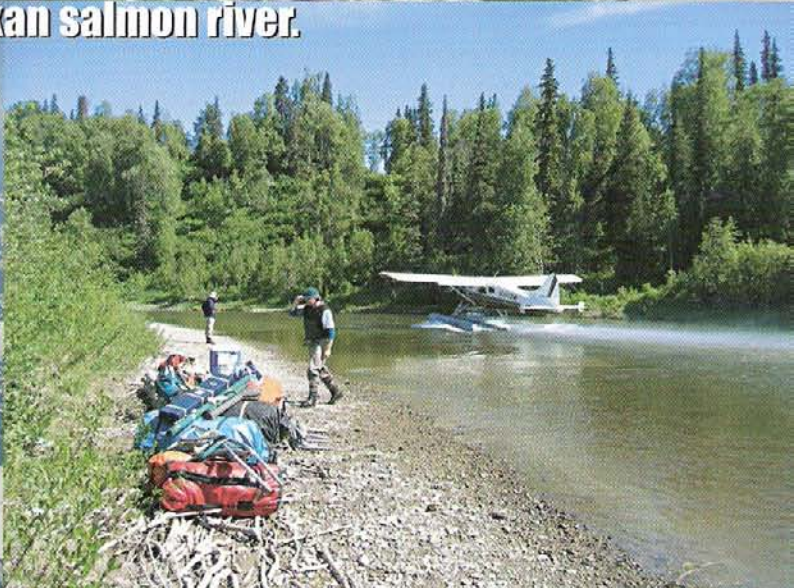


In Part II of his American odyssey, Field Editor **Graeme Field** takes on the challenge of the fabled king salmon.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALLY NORCROSS AND PAUL KING



The pilot beached the plane on the stony riverbank, and we disembarked into the icy, clear water of a wild Alaskan salmon river.



Top: The author with his first king salmon of the trip. **Above left:** Alaska is a vast, mountainous wilderness that offers challenging backcountry fishing for the adventurous angler. **Above right:** Alaskan bush pilots haven't earned their daring reputation for nothing – the floatplane taking off on a shallow stretch of the Talachulitna River.

The pilot beached the plane on the stony riverbank, and we disembarked into the icy, clear water of a wild Alaskan salmon river. Having flown the whole way dressed in waders, we were cleverly prepared for the cold and wet landing, but alas not for the clouds of bloodthirsty mosquitoes that burst forth from the streamside bushes to greet us. My already bursting bladder was temporarily forgotten as super-strong repellent was frantically dug out of the bags and generously applied to any exposed skin. Minutes later we were waving goodbye to the plane as it disappeared on its way downstream, powering over the tops of the

wooded banks and heading back south towards the state capital, Anchorage. We were suddenly alone in this harsh wilderness with not a sign of civilisation for miles in any direction, and six carefree days of floating and fishing ahead of us. It was a warm, sunny day, and in the shelter of the wooded riverbank it wasn't long before we had worked up a real sweat pumping up the rafts and loading gear ready for our first float. The water was fast but the runs fairly tame, and after stringing together some rods we began the first of many downstream drifts into the unknown in search of the great Pacific king salmon.



Rainbow trout, bull trout and grayling all join the feast and gorge themselves on the millions of rich salmon eggs that are laid on the spawning beds in the streams.

Right: Many strikingly coloured rainbow trout such as this one feed on the hoards of salmon eggs that fill the river.
Far right: Replenishing salmon flies at camp.



Top: The final king salmon of the trip.

Right: This pretty grayling was caught during an afternoon hatch.
Above: Navigating the torrent rapids can become a tricky exercise, and it is essential that all gear is packed tight and waterproof.

Every year, beginning in May, thousands of king salmon migrate from the ocean up into the huge glacial rivers of Alaska, unerringly navigating themselves back to the exact streams in which they were born. Here they spawn in huge numbers before dying at their birthplace, the carcasses of rotting fish drifting downstream, eventually decaying and replenishing the essential nutrients in this fascinating phenomenon of nature. With the salmon come the other hunters – bears, beavers, birds and trout. Rainbow trout, bull trout (dolly varden) and grayling all join the feast and gorge themselves on the millions of rich salmon eggs that are laid on the spawning beds in the streams. The resident grizzly

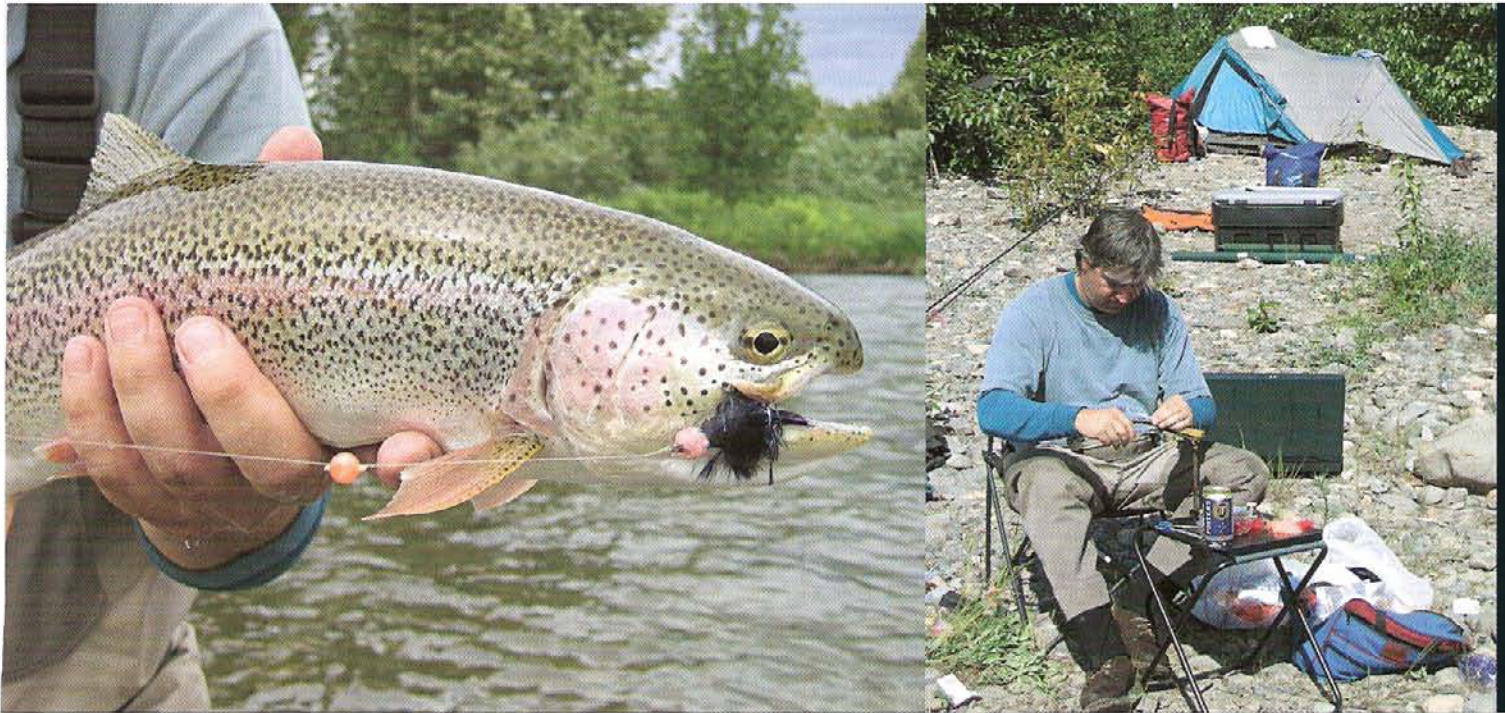
and black bears, ravenous after months of hibernation, fight for the leaping fish as they force their way upstream against the raging currents of the spring runoff.

In late June each year fishermen of all shapes and sizes converge on the accessible rivers of southern Alaska around the city of Anchorage, and this widely popular salmon fest closely resembles the chaos on our shorelines at the height of the annual shad run in South Africa. However, only an hour or two's flight from Anchorage, one can leave the crowds behind and enjoy miles of pristine river to oneself, packed full of fish and not the slightest trace of human habitation for days on end.

Convincing my better half that rowing would be a really fun and challenging exercise, and that someone proficient in the art of angling needed to be in charge of the fishing, I left the highly important job of safe navigation to her, and proceeded to work the water with an “egg-sucking leech” imitation as we floated steadily downstream. Soon both boats were into strikingly coloured rainbow trout – lean and hungry in anticipation of the hoards of eggs soon to be filling the river. We caught our fill of these feisty little trout as we worked further and further downstream, eyes peeled for our first glimpse of a famed king salmon.

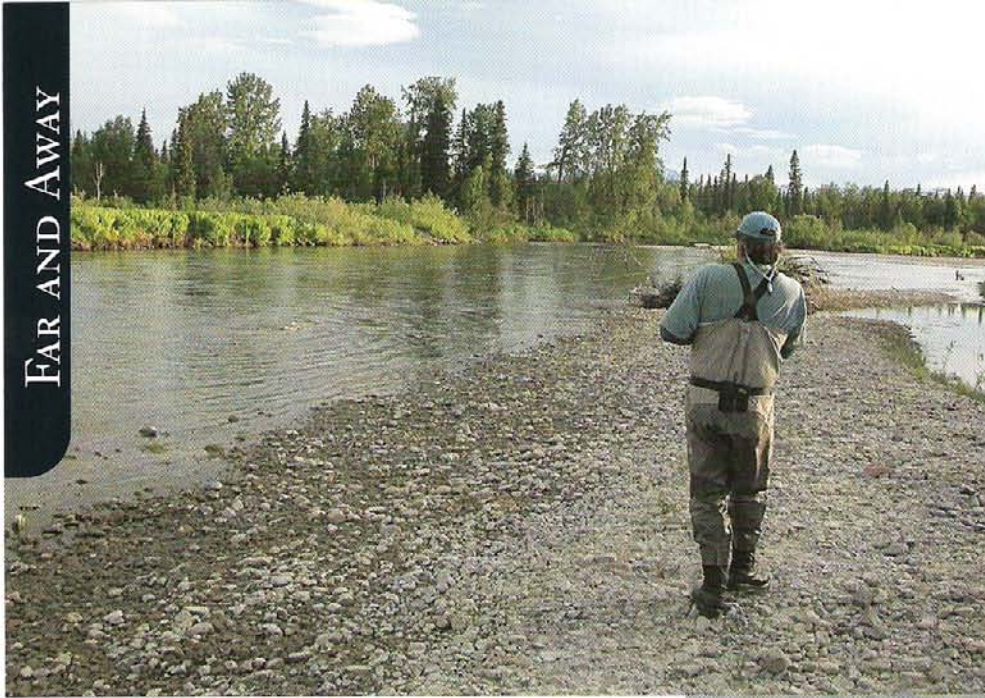
The king salmon remained elusive, so when we reached a great-looking camping spot at the confluence of a feeder stream and the main river, we pulled the rafts out and set up camp for the night. Tents were pitched and fires made, and then it was back to fishing. Paul and Jim, my fishing companions, elected to work the deep confluence for kings, while I took my trout rod and the .44 Magnum (bears are a real and constant threat in this wilderness) and went exploring the fast moving feeder stream that roared out of the mountains behind us. I took a number of grayling on a dry fly during an afternoon hatch before heading back to where Paul and Jim were working the deeper water with the bigger salmon rods. I found that Paul had been snapped up by what could only have been a big

Years of fishing in trout streams conditions you to expect fish of a certain size to be inhabiting the regular trout lies. It therefore comes as a complete surprise when you suddenly encounter a huge 50lb king salmon going in the opposite direction. That first fish looked so out of place in the shallow water that I nearly fell off the boat in astonishment. At the time we were negotiating a stretch of broken water down a long run when, literally a foot below the boat, a huge silver-pink salmon exploded out from under us and disappeared upstream. “Salmon! King! Fish!” I spluttered. I forgot all about rowing (I had temporarily taken over this task in anticipation of some rougher water) and stared out behind us as the fish disappeared from view. I was jolted back to my senses as we slammed into a rock and jammed ourselves solid in the middle of the river, much to the amusement of the occupants of the other boat. After some interesting and unconventional raft recovery manoeuvres, we hit calmer water and another good-looking campsite, so decided to stop and concentrate on the more important task of actually hooking into one of these massive fish. We fished hard without success, but later that evening we finally started seeing fish breaking the surface as the first schools moved upriver. However, we still could not manage any hookups and instead despondently resorted to drinking beer and tying flies around the blazing driftwood fire on another perfect evening. Things could have been worse, I suppose.



salmon, but after no further takes, he had resorted to fishing for the abundant rainbows holding in the eddies. I joined him and we fished our way well into a perfect evening. The sun stays above the horizon for more than 20 hours of the day in summer, so we had to drag ourselves from the water to make dinner with the sun still high at 10pm. No complaints from us though – we headed straight back onto the water after we had eaten. That’s how it went for the first three days as we meandered our way down the river, ever closer to the point where it meets the huge, glacial Sekwentna River. Although the rainbows were great fun, I found myself growing more despondent as time wore on and the king salmon continued to elude us.

Life got a whole lot better the following morning. I awoke to the splashing of large numbers of big kings as they worked their way relentlessly upstream. I needed no second invitation and, while the others whipped up a quick breakfast, I flung that heavy fly time and time again into the roaring current. Across and down, mending and swinging, I worked the water persistently, determined to catch one of those elusive and mythical fish that we had travelled continents to find. The take, when it came, was so unbelievably sweet. Having grown accustomed to the rattling, tugging take of a 2lb rainbow, it was so completely satisfying to feel the solid weight of a big fish ripping the line from my hands as



Above: Paul fishing into late evening.

Right: A salmon in its pink spawning colours.

Below: An aerial view of the wild Alaskan wilderness.



it turned and tore off downstream in the current, leaping repeatedly as it went. The magical silvery-pink light reflecting off the thick flanks as the big fish launched itself into the air on that first jump will remain in my memory for a long time. Following the fish as it tore downstream, I passed the breakfast gathering, collected some supporters and photographers, and we all charged after the fish, slipping and sliding on the rocks and crashing through the brush as we went. Gradually the side strain began to tell on the fish, and I edged it closer and out of the main current. After a final burst of energy as it boiled in the shallows at my feet, I had it subdued and breathed a huge sigh of relief as Paul finally cradled the big fish. It was an immensely satisfying moment since we had all worked hard for that fish, and it injected new life into our party of intrepid river rafters. It was odd to gently release that salmon, showing all the care that I normally do when handling fish, only to know that it would spawn and die in a few weeks, possibly even days, as Mother Nature reclaimed one of her own.

Paul and Jim needed no further motivation – the salmon rods came out and soon heavily weighted flies closely resembling fluffy red golf balls were being launched like tracer bullets into the rushing water. We finally started hooking fish

on a fairly regular basis, and although many were lost, we also landed some absolute beauties. I think by the end of the trip an average of only about one in four had been landed. Leaping fish and roaring water often worked in tandem to destroy the relatively light tippets we were using. Our days became a routine of fishing hard until the supply of flies had run out, then traipsing from the water straight to the temporary fly-tying table to load up for the next foray into the river.



The fishing was excellent from then on as the salmon started pushing into the river in good numbers. Everyone landed a number of these awesome fish, some real silvery “chromers” fresh from the sea, and some bigger, darker fish already in their pink spawning colours. They were all big, strong fish, and I felt that by the end of the trip we had hooked and landed just the right number of fish to ensure that we treasured each and every one.

Alaska is a huge, mountainous, watery wilderness that boasts an incredible amount of fishable water and plenty of adventure. For nearly a week we enjoyed nature, sharing the wild, wooded banks with bears, beavers and various wild antelope, and it was humbling to be in such uncharted wilderness still free of the influences of an ever-increasing and demanding population. Although we unintentionally parted company with our GPS on day two, following an altercation with a particularly nasty section of rapids, we finally found ourselves at the junction with the raging glacial river where the incoming salmon take a rest and clean the glacial silt from their gills before heading off again to find the river of their birth. A short, hair-raising run from there took us to our pre-arranged pick-up point, and it wasn't long before the drone of the floatplane could be heard above the rush of the water. It was a wet and smelly crowd of wader-clad anglers that piled into the floatplane, but no one seemed to notice. We watched the forest slide away below us, and reflected on an extraordinary and thrilling outdoor experience in a truly remarkable land.