



DESTINATION

Braving the rigours of a cold spring, Field Editor **Graeme Field** goes in search of steelhead in Alaska's Situk River.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME FIELD & PAUL KING

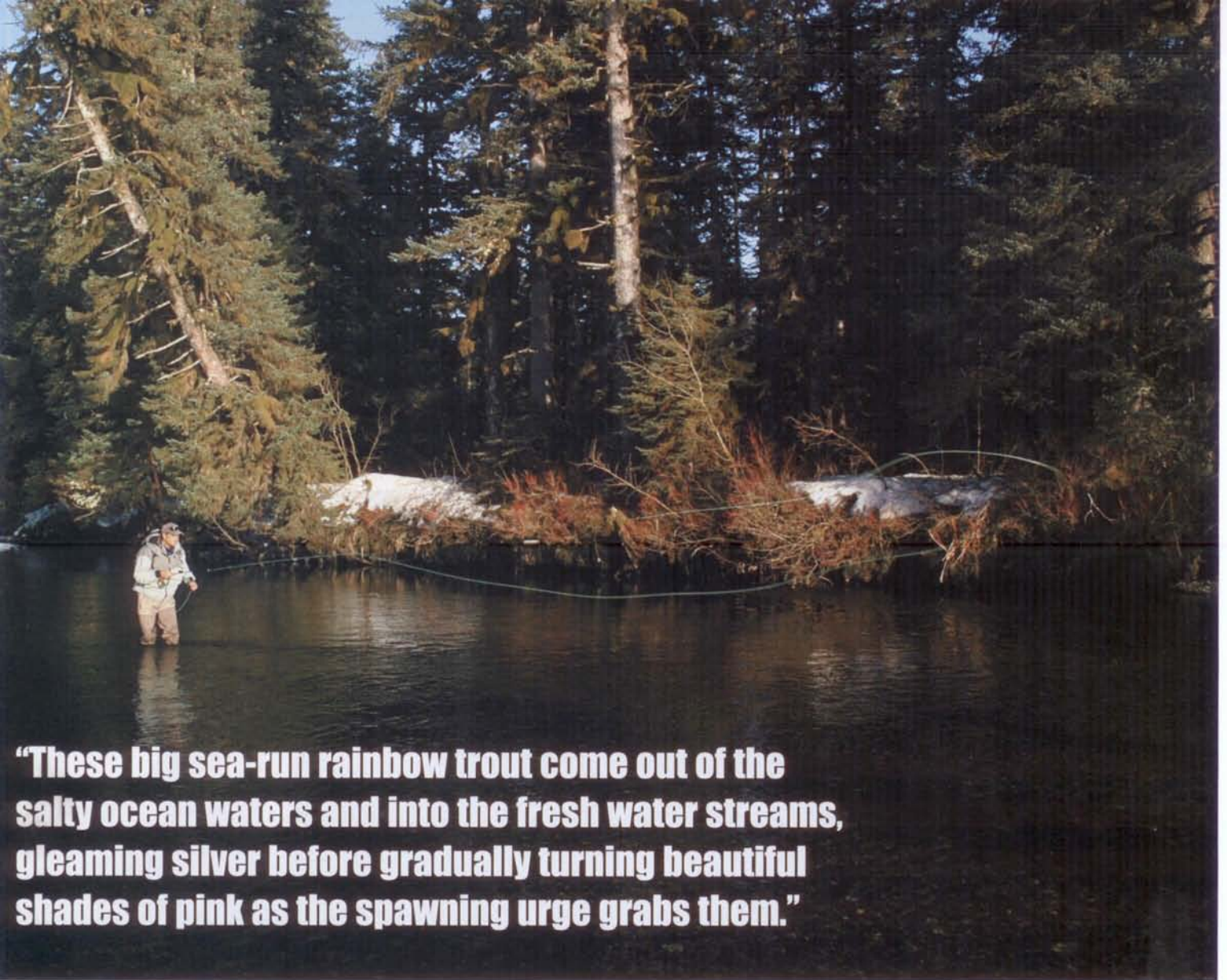
60 Degrees North

It was cold. Really cold. The kind of numbing, seeping, bone-chilling cold that shows complete disregard for any form of clothing, no matter how many layers you wrap yourself in. And it was wet. Piles of dirty snow lay in heaps on the runway, puddles of slush reflecting the eerie evening light as a soft rain drizzled down. We hurried from the aircraft, unprepared for the

freezing temperatures that greeted us as we stepped out of the Alaskan Airlines plane and onto the frozen tarmac. Flying over Canada earlier in the day, I noticed that the entire country was frozen solid, a definite snow line clearly defining the freeze barrier.

Bypassing those frigid and seemingly uninhabitable lands, we finally touched down in the town





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Previous page bottom: Paul King with a magnificent steelhead. Above: The author in search of early spring steelhead on the Situk River.

of Yakutat, Alaska where, due to the close proximity of the town to the sea, the snow was patchy and the trees were at least showing through. Looking around, I realised that this was going to be an entirely different Alaskan trip from any I had previously experienced. This was early season, the faintest touch of spring in the air, but bitterly cold. The bears were still fast asleep, but apparently a few hardy wolves were already on the prowl. Alaska was only just beginning to wake up and slowly emerge from the grip of a bitter northern winter.

With the first of the salmon runs still more than six weeks away, we were braving the freezing cold streams in search of one of the most highly regarded salmonoid species on fly – the sleek, powerful and beautiful steelhead. I’d met up with long-time fly fishing travel companion Paul King and three of his friends, Mitch, Kelly and Toivo, for a week of steelhead fishing in the Situk River that winds its way through these rugged, frozen lands before pouring into the Gulf of Alaska in the North Pacific Ocean. Every year, large numbers of steelhead enter these rivers to spawn on the gravel beds high upriver. These big sea-run rainbow trout come out of the salty ocean waters and into the fresh water streams, gleaming silver before gradually turning beautiful shades of pink as the spawning urge grabs them. It was in these fast but shallow streams that we were going to hunt these magnificent fish.

For the first few days we would be based at Blue Heron Inn – a low-key, warm and welcoming lodge at the water’s edge of a magnificent bay bordered by majestic, snow-covered peaks. Initially we were to fish the river on foot, accessing the water by forcing our way through heavy snowdrifts, bush and fallen spruce trees. Once we had covered most of the water higher upstream, the plan was to spend a couple of days floating downstream on aluminium drift boats, stopping at likely looking lies or logjams, or when we saw steelhead moving upriver. By the end of our trip we would have covered nearly 20 miles of prime water, and if we couldn’t catch ourselves a steelhead by then, then they just weren’t there.

Travelling in such an isolated part of Alaska is like stepping back in time. It’s nothing like you would imagine – the cars are old and imported second-hand, a lot of trash lies around, the houses are wooden and flimsy looking and there is very little movement from anyone or anything. Driving to the river in an ancient Ford four-wheel drive, along slippery, icy roads that cut a straight path through endless snowfields with fir trees that sagged under the weight of the snow, I felt like I really was in the middle of nowhere. It wasn’t long before tackle had been rigged, gloves donned, boots laced up and we were off through the snowy forest to find the river. Although it was cold out, walking quickly warmed up my body inside the cocoon of

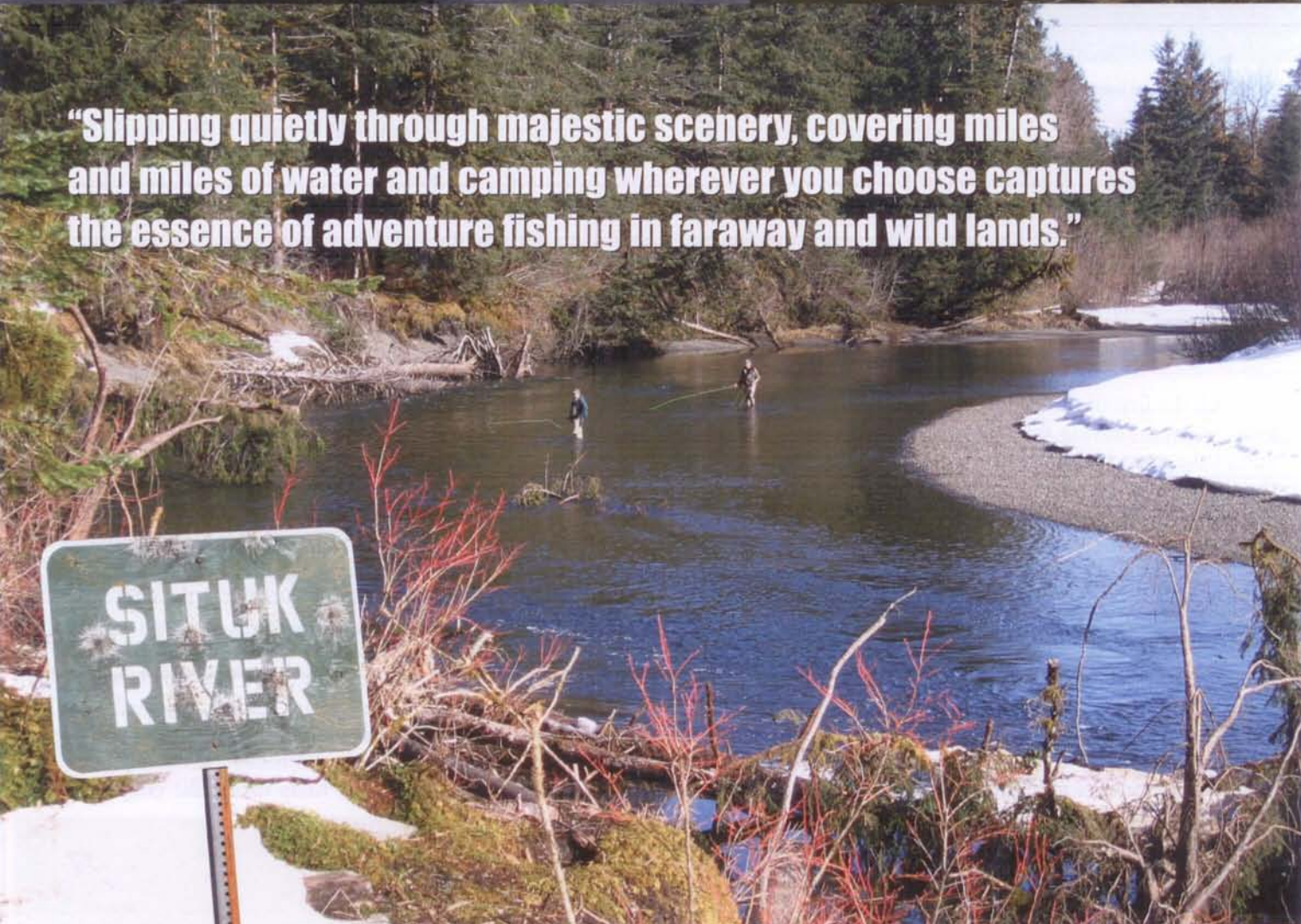


clothing, and my skin was soon prickling with sweat and my glasses were misting up. Eventually we emerged through the bush to find the crystal clear waters of the Situk River sliding quietly past us. I only had vague instructions from Paul: look for fish in the deep pools under logjams and undercut banks, then dead-drift an egg pattern past the fish, bouncing it right along the gravelly bottom. Oh, and watch your strike indicator like a hawk. Sounded pretty much like fishing for yellows in the Vaal River.

Left: The author's 37-inch steelhead. Bottom: The Situk River – logjams provide plenty of cover for the steelhead. Below: The campsite on the riverbank.



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Apparently these fish, as is the case with salmon, stop feeding once they enter the rivers to spawn. It is, however, still possible to take fish on fly if you are able to get your fly right into their faces as this is said to elicit a primal instinct and the fish can't help but have a snatch at the fly. Brightly coloured flies and glass beads are used in an attempt to infuriate the fish and trigger their aggression. Whatever the reason, catching steelhead still requires concentration, tactics and numerous fly changes in order to elicit a strike. I found myself in several situations where we would be casting into a lie of fish for more than 30 minutes without a flicker of interest, when suddenly someone would select the right coloured fly and immediately start hooking into fish. Often this would be the most minor colour change – seemingly insignificant to us but clearly

around a fire under the trees on the banks of a remote river, snow all around you and the knowledge that out in the darkness beyond where the flickering light of the fire reaches, bears, wolves and other creatures were hibernating and patiently waiting for the warmth of spring to creep into their bodies.

For three days we navigated through fast and slow water, over rapids and through the narrowest of gaps between big logjams. Drift-boating is a kind of water-based bumper car trip – the sturdy flat-bottomed boats can bump and grind over most obstacles the river throws at you, and the actual float can be great fun. Toss in some world-class fishing, sublime scenery and surreal, wild camping spots and you begin to get an idea of the wonderful experience I was revelling in each



Above left: The author with a beautiful female chromer, fresh from the ocean.

Above right: The snow on the banks attests to the cold, but at least the fish were willing.

important to the fish. This was proved time and time again, so I am in no doubt that even the slightest difference in colour is of vital importance in these rivers. We by no means caught hordes of fish and worked hard for each and every one we hooked into. The standard ratio in this river is to land approximately a third of the fish you hook – the strong currents and powerful fish make it pretty challenging to set the hook and stay connected. I managed to keep my figures at around 50/50 and found it to be a great balance of adaptability, hard work and just the right amount of reward to keep us interested and focussed.

After three days in the upper reaches of the river catching brightly painted fish that had been in the river for a number of days, we loaded up a couple of aluminium drift boats, a heap of camping gear, food and as many warm clothes as we could find and began a long drift downriver towards the distant ocean. Drifting is an excellent way of fishing Alaskan rivers – be it for salmon in summer or steelhead in the colder months. Slipping quietly through majestic scenery, covering miles and miles of water and camping wherever you choose captures the essence of adventure fishing in faraway and wild lands. The flexibility and mobility allowed us to hunt for fish and quickly pass by unproductive water. We found some truly spectacular places in which to set up camp, and although it was freezing cold, a blazing fire and some warm liquid made for a pleasant and unique experience. There is something special about huddling

day. When the sun disappears behind a mountain or clouds, the low temperatures can be a problem and I often found myself cold and constantly aware of the threat of hypothermia. Regular breaks to jog around or heat up a can of soup on the riverbank were essential to keeping the cold at bay.

But the fishing made up for any discomfort out on the water. We regularly landed good-sized steelhead; from large female “chromers” fresh from the sea and still sporting sea lice, to rich pink cock fish (bucks) in full spawning colours with big hooked kypes. These fish made for fantastic pictures – especially against a background of gleaming white snow – and it was one of these big trophy males that rounded off a fabulous trip for me. It was literally in the last pool we fished right at the end of the float. Fresh steelhead had just come in on the afternoon's high tide and were stacked up in the lower pools only a few hundred metres from the ocean. I had already taken two or three nice females when I hooked into a fish that tore downstream and ripped me all over the place for more than ten minutes before I was finally able to beach it on a stony gravel bar some way downstream. It turned out to be a magnificent cock fish, all of 37 inches and around 20lb in weight. It was a magic moment and a fitting end to another great trip with good friends. The fish was a trophy in every sense and will long remain the highlight of my latest sojourn into the frozen Alaskan wilderness.