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FLY FISHING

in SALT WATERS

Stripers, croakers,
snook and more

Pacific salmon
on a dry fly

Getting started
in the salt



**TOUGH
COUSINS:**

*Trevally
& Jack Crevalle*



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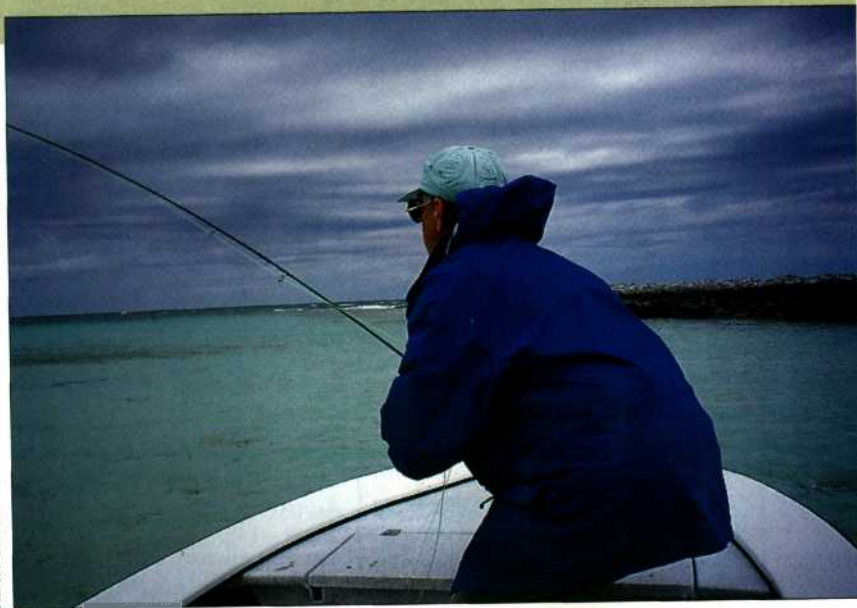
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A Christmas Island trevally came aboard just long enough to pose with some flies and then was released.

Photo by
BRIAN O'KEEFE

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FLY FISHING

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Watch for the November/December issue featuring:

- Winter stripers • Salmon off the beach • Marco Island • Costa Rica sailfish • Budget fly-fishing boats • Fixing "broken" casts • Tying the Flashtail Clouser • Australia's Sidney Island • Saltwater 101 • And more!

Written by
Jack W.
Berryman

A school of ocean-fresh coho salmon had just moved into the tidal reaches of the Alagnak River, porpoising, leaping and rolling, bright silvers drawn by the instinct to return to the river in which they were born. As recently as the day before they had been feeding in nearby Bristol Bay, and now they were coming to us still bearing sea lice and robust appetites.

Earlier in the week we had caught bright pink (humpy) and chum (dog) salmon on a wet fly, but this morning we planned to try for the silvers with a surface pattern. Our fly of choice was the Pink Polliwog, or 'Wog for short, a pattern which had its origins at Katmai Lodge on the Alagnak in the late 1980s. That was when Walt Grau, a guide, began experimenting with a pink mouse pattern, and his early attempts were later refined into the Polliwog by Ed Ward and Dec Hogan, who also guided at Katmai. Since then, fly fishers have enticed pink, chum, and coho salmon to rise to the 'Wog's provocative look and action.

The 'Wog is a fairly simple fly with a fluorescent pink marabou tail and a full body of fluorescent pink spun deer hair. The body is tied very thick, trimmed flat on the bottom, and cut wedge-shaped on the front. In fact, the 'Wog is very much like a deer-hair popper, and in the water it resembles the action of classic lures like the Jitterbug and Hoola Popper. It is most effective when cast over active or agitated fish, left to sit for 10 to 20 seconds, then retrieved with a



In the brightening morning light, we could see migrating coho moving through eddies near the shore. Occasionally one jumped within a yard of the grass growing on the tidal mud flats. The water was still and smooth, much like the surface of a lake, and we anchored the boat carefully to avoid spooking the fish.

I cast my 'Wog toward a large swirl near the bank and waited what seemed like minutes before guide Shawn Maltais nodded to begin the retrieve. I gave the 'Wog three quick strips, let it rest, then repeated the procedure. Just as I started to strip again we saw a bright silver form boil behind the fly and dart away. What a rush!

I let the fly sit still again, then resumed the retrieve. By now the 'Wog was about 40 feet from the boat and we could see almost to the bottom in 10 feet of clear water. We could also see three large silvers cautiously following the 'Wog.

Suddenly one of them shot upward to take the fly. "Here comes one!" Shawn shouted. "He's got it. Hit 'im!"

I struck hard and all hell broke loose. The mint

'Wog Willing,

constant rapid strip or a start-and-stop retrieve. If the fly sinks or dives below the surface, then you are not "wogging" properly. If this happens, you must false cast several times to dry the fly and perhaps apply some floatant. The 'Wog must ride high in the water and be waking and gurgling to fish its best.

green floating fly line made a sound like a low-flying jet as it ripped through the water with 12 pounds of wild coho at the other end. The fish was into my backing in seconds and put on an aerial display that had us gasping with excitement. About five minutes later we had our first 'Wog-caught coho in hand.

THE Salmon Will Rise!

Fly fishers have written often of the thrill of watching a large fish come to the surface for a dry fly. Most of the time they're talking about trout, however; Pacific salmon normally do not feed on the surface, so taking one on a dry fly is something special. Part of the challenge of fishing for coho with the 'Wog is to entice them into committing what, for the fish, is a somewhat unnatural act—rising to the surface. It also takes experience to gauge when salmon are in the mood to rise, or to find them in water conducive to 'Wogging. Of course, landing a large ocean-going salmon (some Alaskan coho exceed 20 pounds) on fairly light fly-fishing tackle adds even more excitement to this style of fishing.

That morning my fishing partner Dave Vedder and I hooked 15 coho from 12 to 16 pounds on 'Wogs. While solid takes did not occur on every cast, we had enough action to keep us excited for almost three hours. The near misses, swirls, bulges, and V-wakes around our 'Wog soon became just as fascinating and stimulating as the hook-ups. Once we became familiar with the technique, we also tried experimenting with 'Wogs of different sizes and varying the speed of our retrieves. One thing was certain: When a salmon took, it was never subtle.

The Alagnak River, also known as the Branch River, enters Bristol Bay near the towns of King Salmon and Kvichak in the southwestern corner of Alaska. All five species of Pacific salmon are abundant in season, and the fishing begins in June when large numbers of chinook and sockeye salmon begin to appear.

Chum salmon start to show up in late June or early July and are available through mid-August. During even-numbered years, pink salmon also are quite abundant in July and much of August. The coho come in August and September and provide some of the best action for fly fishers.

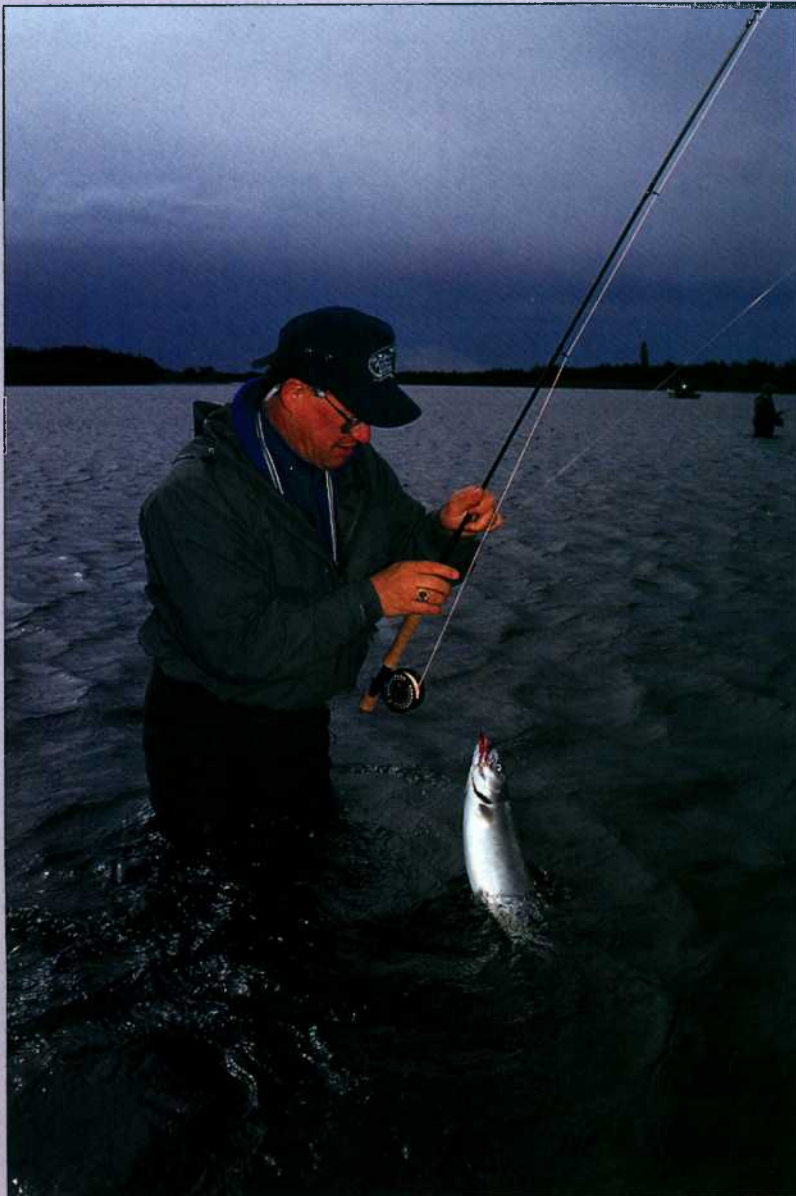
Katmai Lodge was opened in 1979 by Tony Sarp. In the years since it has developed into a large and spacious complex on a bluff overlooking the river. Buildings include the main lodge, a dining room, and separate quarters for guests and guides, with indoor plumbing, electricity, and heat available in every building. The delicious meals are served buffet-style. Plenty of beer and soft drinks are available and wine is served with dinner.

Anglers are guided by top professionals recruited from Washington, Oregon, California, and the Great Lakes area. Guides prepare the boats for fishing each day, pack lunches or cook a shore lunch on a gas grill, assist with equipment, prepare any fish kept for freezing, and share their knowledge of tactics related to the angler's specific interests or

*Opposite:
A 'Wog in
the water.*

*Below: Author
brings a bright
coho to hand
for release.*

Photos: DAVE VEDDER



method of fishing. In addition to a fleet of 18 jet boats and numerous prop-powered sleds, the lodge has two DeHavilland Beaver float planes for fly-outs to more remote fishing spots. The lodge requires its angling guests to use single barbless hooks and release all female salmon.

During our week of fishing on the Alagnak we also caught several pink salmon on the 'Wog. They came into the river in even greater numbers than the silvers, and again we watched for jumpers to mark the locations of their schools. However, the pinks tended to congregate in shallower water than the silvers, so instead of casting to them from an anchored boat we fished on foot, wading along sandbars and mudflats. The pinks ran from 4 to 8 pounds and were a real test on a 5- or 6-weight rod. The male fish were especially great fighters.

Alaskan summer days have 12 to 14 hours of daylight, so you get plenty of fishing time. The lower reaches of the Alagnak are influenced directly by the tides in Bristol Bay, which may fluctuate as much as 20 feet, but the guides are well versed on the effects of these tidal changes and on most days they were able to put us in position to intercept incoming waves of fresh salmon on the flood tide. Some salmon also retreated from the Alagnak on the ebb tide, so we sometimes fished that, too, and had good success on both.

Right: An Alagnak coho that attacked a slowly retrieved 'Wog.

Jack Berryman with a silver salmon and Dave Vedder with a pink, one of many double-heads.



Photo: JACK W. BERRYMAN

What You'll Want to Know if You Intend to Go

The first thing you should know about getting to the Alagnak River is that you need to make your airline reservations early. Booking flights to Anchorage from most major cities in the United States or Canada usually is not a problem; the problem is getting from Anchorage to the town of King Salmon. Alaska Airlines and Reeve Aleutian both have several direct daily flights from Anchorage to King Salmon, but they fill rapidly during June, July, and August. If you don't book early, you won't get there.


One way around this problem is to make travel arrangements directly through Katmai Lodge, which is planning to ferry guests from Anchorage to King Salmon on a chartered jet. The lodge also provides air transportation from King Salmon to the lodge via wheeled aircraft or float plane.

Katmai Lodge keeps limited supplies of fishing gear, boots, vests, and rain gear on hand for emergencies. This was particularly helpful during the week we were there; two British anglers arrived without their luggage, which had been lost by an airline. It showed up two days later. The lodge also has several fly-tying areas set up for guests and stocks a large and varied selection of tying materials.

A good source of information on flies for Alaskan fishing is the book *Fly Patterns of Alaska*, compiled by the Alaska Flyfishers and published by Frank Amato Publications, P.O. Box 82112, Portland, OR 97282, telephone (800) 541-9498.



Photo: JACK W. BERRYMAN

If you enjoy fishing for fresh, ocean-bright salmon in the shallows of a tidal environment, you'll find the Alagnak area can't be beat. And if you want the thrill of a lifetime, try "Wogging" for coho, pink, or chums. You'll never be sorry you did. 

You should have a 6-weight rod for pink salmon and a 7- or 8-weight for coho and chums. Sometimes even a 9-weight is nice for the stubborn chums. Choose a matching weight-forward floating line. A couple of reels and spare spools with ample backing will keep you fishing all week.

Insects are not much of a problem while you're on the river, but take repellent anyway. Rain gear, gloves, several hats, lip balm, and sun block will all help make your trip more enjoyable. The Alagnak is never much warmer than 45 degrees, so take warm waders. Be sure to take a camera and plenty of film. The scenery and wildlife are spectacular.

For further information, contact Katmai Lodge, 2825 90th Street S.E., Everett, WA 98208, telephone (206) 337-0326. Other lodges offering fly-fishing services on the Alagnak River include Anglers Paradise Lodge, 4700 Aircraft Drive, Anchorage, AK 99502, telephone (907) 243-5448; Alagnak Lodge, 4117 Hillcrest Way, Sacramento, CA 95821, telephone (800) 877-9903, and Alaska Rainbow Lodge, P.O. Box 39, King Salmon, AK 99613, telephone (800) 451-6198.

A non-resident 14-day sport-fishing license costs



Photo: DAVE VEIDDER

\$30. A three-day tag for chinook salmon costs another \$15, or a 14-day tag costs \$35.

Other good sources of information on the area include *Katmai Country and Alaska's Salmon Fisheries*, published by Alaska Geographic, Box 4-EEE, Anchorage, AK 99509, and the *Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer*, published by DeLorme Mapping, P.O. Box 298, Freeport, ME 04032.

Above: An Alagnak coho "gets some air."

Far left: Salmon drying on Indian racks along the Alagnak River.

Near left: A sow grizzly and her cubs in one of the many "braids" in the upper reaches of the Alagnak River.



Photo: JACK W. BERRYMAN



Photo: DAVE VEIDDER

• ANCHORAGE

