

Words:  
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BY ARRIVAL IN ANCHORAGE the weather sucked and the polyester suits procured from Goodwill no longer seemed like a great idea. The concept was celebrity attire for our annual trip to the tundra—the opening of Alaska West’s fish camp, the infamous “Week 1” of early June. It was a preposterous idea from the beginning, and the man behind it, Jason Koertge (“The Reverend”), was coming undone: “Dude, it’s raining. It’s cold. It’s a long boat ride upriver. We’re gonna get wet.”

“Ditch the cummerbund, you’ll be fine.”

Celebratory garb for an annual trip to a place so desolate and vast as the western Alaska tundra might seem weird, but it’s the sheer weirdness of the place that is cause for celebration. The endless flatness isn’t what the tourism board advertises as the quintessential Alaskan Experience. No glaciers. No whales. No magnificent mountain peaks. Just another river among rivers in the endless, scrubby vastness, and one that just might be the best place on the planet to swing flies for large chinook.

Kings are the season’s first salmon to migrate upriver and we were in camp for Week 1, the beginning of the annual sport-fishing season. This is meaningful to you if you’ve spent any time near a healthy salmon artery and understand exactly how fast these rivers fill up with multiple species as the summer progresses. Week 1 is clean. Nothing but kings. And if the kings haven’t arrived yet, nothing at all, except the smaller resident critters—rainbows and grayling.

We were headed seven miles upriver from the local native village where the river meets the Bering Sea. It’s not a luxurious lodge. A simple tent camp set up every May and taken down every September, providing shelter, hot food, and half-loony, half-mystic fishing guides with jet sleds. Perfect.

My companions were experienced king salmon fishermen, and that’s about all we had in common. If there’s a maladjusted angler prototype beyond the steelheader, it’s the chinook enthusiast. West Coast fishing lore is littered with stories of lost friendships, fistfights, and river wars due to bad king fishing habits. Hook into a few large ones and you’ll understand why. Luckily, these guys fell somewhere on the lee side of the insanity winds, mostly. But king-fishing is king fishing, and it isn’t easy. The sort of fella that will endure the vastness of tundra and endless casts with heavy-as-hell fly lines and call it fun is, by nature, a bit different. This was a group fluent in Aquaseal, Advil, and 750-grain shooting heads.

Kings are special. All anadromous fish possess a distinct sporting style, possibly best described by the Finnish word “Sisu,” which articulates a high degree of fortitude and fighting spirit. Steelhead and coho are exuberant, with long runs and jumps, but chinooks exhibit immense power and strength of will that is unparalleled in sea-run fish. Perhaps these qualities are amplified on the tundra, and, looking into the eyes of a large chinook, they remain extraordinarily distant, as if refusing to acknowledge your existence. Kings spend most of their life in the deep ocean. They are, in fact, much more sea creature than freshwater creature, and hooking and landing a sea creature traveling from the vast ocean to the vast tundra is the *ne plus ultra*; deeply wild fish in a deeply wild place.

It was evening when we reached camp and the winds had freshened into a steady, cold breeze. By morning the wind was joined by a hard rain. And so it would be for the entirety of Week 1. Thankfully, the kings hadn’t shown up either. Hardship is a badge of honor. And nothing raises *esprit de corps* on the tundra like whiskey.

In the Alaskan bush, whiskey is valuable currency. At Chinook camp, whiskey is pure gold. There’s nothing cash can buy on the tundra that whiskey can’t. Bush planes don’t hold much weight, and whiskey is heavy. It’s an expensive proposition to bring booze into the tundra, and downright illegal in most of the native villages. The nearest liquor store is several hundred miles distant. A veteran member of our traveling party had been to Anchorage a few days ahead of time, and through significant diligence, came to know the weight restrictions of our specific aircraft. Properly spread amongst our luggage, we would bear the weight of a hefty cache of cheap whiskey. A plastic handle of Rich & Rare Canadian whiskey, delivered to your guide the night before, will put you in the best run on the river. Which is a meaningful opportunity when the fishing gets tough and fish are hitting in one, and only one, run on the river. And these guides know how to bargain.

I suspect the fun of running a jet boat on \$8-per-gallon gas in this wild place keeps many of the guides coming back. There’s a distinct working culture in camp, including a unique language passed through generations of peers living the dichotomy of a daily life squeezed between flatulent VC “sports” from Silicon Valley and the local neighbors, the Yup’ik Eskimos, living a subsistence lifestyle, drift-net fishing for kings or fetching firewood or “catching” bears and beavers

◀ RIGHT, TOP ROW,  
LEFT TO RIGHT ▶

Jeff Hickman and Kenny Morrish relax after the “Mouse Off Tourney 2010.” The flies, Mr. Hankey and the Morrish Mouse, fished to a deadlock. Photo: Rob Elam.

Ready for battle (left to right): Ed Hepp, Jason Koertge, Horatio Nailknot, and Jeff Hickman stroll Anchorage’s Ted Stevens International in standard issue AK footwear-Xtratuf boots. Photo: Rob Elam.

Longtime guide Trevor Covich catches a Yupik girl leaping from the town short bus. The short bus is for visiting anglers, not the locals, because they ride quads and snow machines. Photo: Rob Elam.

◀ RIGHT, BOTTOM ROW,  
LEFT TO RIGHT ▶

Tundra aromatherapy: Horatio enjoys Rich & Rare vapors at 9am. Photo: Andrew Grillos.

Culled for dinner: A small jack king volunteers for the cleaning table. Photo: Andrew Grillos.

“Always net head first” is easier said than done, as Jim Palmersheim attempts to corral a large king. Photo: Rob Elam.

with their rifles. Camp vernacular is a cross between Seattle hipster, Yup'ik dialect, and whatever odds and ends wash up on the Bering Sea mud flats. In this world so completely removed from the typical modern existence, new language is a necessity: "Forget the Chinkus Flinkus. Let's critter up on a few schniddles, maybe?"

By midweek the fishing hadn't improved. Nor had the weather. This is when the truly gifted king guys get deep into it—talking of sink-itip minutiae, differences in fly color imperceptible to most eyes, and very, very specific fishing locations, locations secret even in a small camp on a wild river with no pressure. They rise from the lee side of insanity and embrace the wind. A few of us knew it was time to retire to the gravel bar campfire, pull out the flask, and make plans for some rainbow trout fishing. The kings would arrive. They always do.

The rainbow fishery there would be even more fabled, if it wasn't overshadowed by the kings. The

trout lodges around Dillingham and King Salmon can't reach Chinook Camp with their float planes. Before the salmon arrive and start dropping eggs, the fish are hungry and aggressive, and the mouse fishing can be shockingly good. There's a small river nearby, a trout river, that offers some respite from the wind and exposed tundra. A long sled to the upper braids offers high banks, a few more trees, and lots and lots of rainbows. If you've ever wanted to take a huge grayling on the mouse, this is where you do it. When the king fishing is off, and the guys start with the nervous ticks, I could just fish trout and forget about the kings. Maybe.

It was the end of the week before the big kings started to show up, perfectly teasing us for next year. As writer Tom McGuane once advised friend and fellow scribe Jim Harrison: "You can't quit anything until it gets in your way."

Which is sometimes hard to sense on the lee side of insanity. ☹

