

THE NUSHAGAK

is Still for Kings

story and photos by stan cunningham

Kings or Chinook...it doesn't matter what you call them.

They're the hard-hitting, drag-pulling, jumping, splashing, bulldogging, hook straightening black mouthed and spotted salmon of the Pacific. The fish that every angler in Alaska is waiting for the moment the previous season's silver run ends. We dream of them, whether on a bait-casting rig or fly rod, in fresh or saltwater. It would be difficult to determine how many "trips of a lifetime" are planned with just this species in mind, but suffice to say numerous local Alaska economies benefit from our collective love of the king.

Getting down to specific fisheries, the Kenai River obviously boasts the size, as the record books reflect, while on the same peninsula, the nearby Kaslof River offers a nice combination of big fish and big numbers. Road-bound anglers also enjoy several productive fisheries along the George Parks Highway, namely the Little Susitna River and Montana and Willow creeks. But when it comes purely to numbers, southwest Alaska's Nushagak River certainly has to be named one of the top, if not the top, drainage for catching kings. That's what I've always read and heard anyway, and I wanted to see if the hype was real.

My first attempt to fish the Nushagak for its monster run of kings took place two years ago, with Nushagak River Adventures, but luck was not with me as a low fish count forced the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to close the king season the day before I arrived. We did well with chum and sockeye, and released several kings that we were not targeting (including a few on flies), but that was not what I wanted write about, so I was happy to oblige when I was invited back.

Brad Giroux is the owner of Nushagak River Adventures and we have talked several times about his operation since he purchased it over five years ago. Fresh off of running a successful operation on the Kenai River for several years, he wanted to fish a less crowded river. He jumped at the chance when the small parcel of private property and lodge came up for sale. The lodge is not a tent camp, which is the norm on much of the Nushagak, as Brad has one of the few operations on the river that is situated on private land. The wooden two story building has nine rooms, and he likes to keep the number of guests around 15. Other buildings on the private half-acre include a dining hall, a cook tent, guides' quarters, a kitchen and a clean, comfortable shower. This is a fishing lodge, however, and if you are looking for other activities such as kayaking, bear viewing or bird watching, Brad caters to those types of activities at his other lodge, Katmai Trophy Adventures, which is located on the Naknek River out of King Salmon.

To get to the lodge, first fly into King Salmon and then either take a floatplane directly to the Nushagak, or consider staying a day or two on the Naknek to fish for rainbows, sockeye



These happy anglers had a successful day of king fishing. Everyone, including the dog, is focused on the action.

or kings, and then fly over, which is what many guests choose to do. I stayed one day on the Naknek fishing for sockeye then flew to the Nushagak in the late afternoon. I got my first taste of what the king fishing was like when a couple of guests persuaded me to join them on the shore after dinner. I had been daydreaming of sleeping since the early afternoon, but after they told me of their success the night before I decided to join them. In 30 short minutes I landed a chum and then a bright 35-inch king, both of which I released. Four casts, two nice fish, then to my bunk to shake off the travel fatigue. It was looking like I would need the rest.

The quality of a fishing trip is often determined not only by the quality of fishing, but the people you share the trip with. I knew from last year Brad had the staff to make the trip as good as possible. Between the three guides at this camp, Ken Robertson, Kris Kallina, and Brent Seamans, there are over 65 years of Alaska fish-guiding experience, much of it in the Bristol Bay watershed. Both Ken and Kris are longtime Alaska hunting guides as well, and Brent's wife, Ana, serves as scheduler, cook and all-around organizer. I fished with all three guides and found their knowledge, instruction and of course, storytelling and humor, up to the task.

Every lodge has a character or two vis-

iting or working there. During my stay, the visiting character was young 19-year-old Ben Miller from Liverpool, England. With a stout accent, a great sense of humor and maturity beyond most his age, he was friends with everyone quickly. He also was a fishing fool and picked things up in a hurry. His one drawback was ownership of the world's ugliest fishing hat, which I should have drowned in the river because it looked alive. I spent the first two days fishing with just Ben and longtime Alaska guide, but pure Texan, Kris Kallina. Kris is a character as well, and I now have a few notebook pages of Kris-isms, anecdotes and witticisms gathered through 26 years of guiding. Fishing with those two would have been worth the price of admission without catching fish, but the fishing was great, too: we boated 22 kings the first day and 25 the next. But it didn't matter who I fished with, as we were all catching fish.

The lodge's placement is quite a distance upriver from Dillingham, located about six miles above Portage and in the east channel. Most of the other sport-fishing camps are closer to the bay, but we had no trouble catching bright fish, many with sea lice still attached. The benefit of the upriver location is less fishing pressure in some great holes. We often went even farther upriver and the only other boats we saw were from our lodge. Part of this soli-

tude is because almost the entirety of the land surrounding the lodge and the whole river is managed by the Choggiung Limited, the local Native corporation (choggiung.com/land/nushagak.asp). Some may see this as negative since they limit the number of operators and camping along the river bank, but as guide Brent Seamans pointed out, it also assures a less crowded river to fish the huge run of Nushagak king salmon. Case in point: a California family of six that stayed at the lodge two days went upriver each day and fished in essential solitude. Ken and Brent either brought sack lunches or cooked salmon for shore lunches so they could stay out fishing all day. When I asked if their expectations had been met, they told me they were exceeded (boating over 60 fish in two days will do that). The most telling sign was the two teenage boys down on the beach on the last day. As they waited for their floatplane to arrive for the trip home, they kept trying for that one last fish...and yes, they got one. Their fish boxes were full when they left for home.

The standard day at the lodge included a large, hot breakfast at 7 a.m., then out to the boats; a shore lunch if preferred or another hot lunch at noon, and then fishing until 5:30 p.m., followed by a large dinner. Fishing was great up- or downriver, or just out of camp. Some of the kings were large,



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With the good river current, made for exciting fights. When photographing one elder lady fighting and landing a big king, I heard her husband exclaim "I haven't seen you that excited in 49 years!"

But even with good guides, comfortable facilities and great food, generally it's the quality of the fishing that has the most effect on people's attitudes. The better the fishing, the happier the people. I find most of the folks I've met are happier and easier to get along with in the boat, on the bank or at the lodge fire pit when they have been catching fish. Everyone was catching fish here, and it showed.

A great example was watching the change made on Carol Harbaugh of Mississippi, who was fishing with her husband Ray. Ray and Carol are former missionaries who chose to fish the Nushagak as part of Ray's preparation to start a fishing and hunting travel-planning business. Upon hearing I was a writer, Carol asked me the night she arrived, "What's the attraction to this fishing thing?" She didn't know if she could just sit still for three to four hours less three to four days. We talked, didn't think I convinced her that fishing the Nush was much different than fishing for bluegill back in Mississippi. She decided to purchase a 5-day license anyway, more out of not wanting to just lie around the lodge rather than because of a

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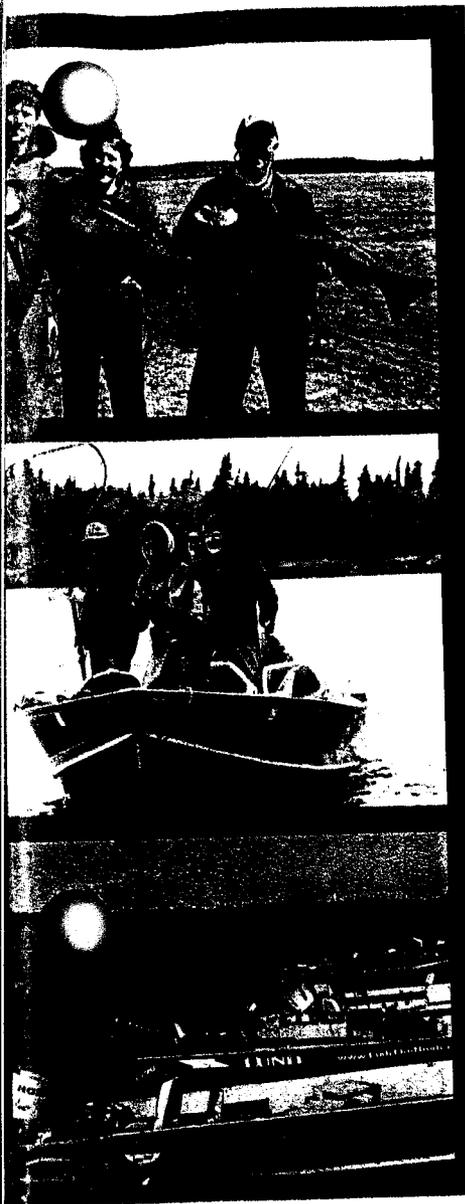
Clockwise: Netting a 40-pounder. Couples, families, friends—all kinds of groups fish Alaska. Bringing one to the boat. The Nushagak River Adventures' fleet at dusk.

sudden desire to go fishing. Her attitude soon changed and in the end, she out-fished her husband (and most everyone else) throughout the week. I was fortunate to fish with them one day with Brent guiding. This was her second day and when she hooked a big one, she was doing a few things that could cost a beginner a large fish. Brent used his skill as a teacher (his full-time fall and winter job), and did one of the best jobs I've seen anyone do of talking her through the fight as she landed a 42-inch king. She looked like a pro from then on, and acted like one, too.

This one of the best operations I've been to for those wanting to catch a large numbers of kings without having to rough it or spend large amounts of money. I've been fortunate enough to fish in Alaska for kings for the last 10 years, and I've never

encountered fishing where the numbers of fish caught equaled or exceeded the number of fish I caught on silver salmon trips. It did here. With these guides, all of the groups were successful. Ken told me that in three weeks his guests had boated over 300 fish. With three boats in camp, over 100 fish were landed each day.

I was fortunate to catch a lot of fish in my youth in Wyoming and Montana, but I also remember being younger and daydreaming of that once-in-a-lifetime trip fishing in Alaska. From reading magazines and watching fishing shows I had built up some pretty high expectations, many of which I've learned to temper with reality over the years. If I had come here first, however, my daydreams would have been exceeded. I caught 62 kings in four and a half days of fishing, and during a couple



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of which I was doing more photography than fishing. That's good—stupid, unrealistic good—but this is the Nushagak I'd read about. Now I had experienced it for myself.

In the fall and winter, Stan Cunningham teaches Wildlife Biology at Arizona State University, where he has spent 25 years studying large game mammals and carnivores. When the ice melts, another passion ignites, and he spends as much time as possible studying ways to catch more fish. He spends the majority of this time in Alaska, and he has been a contributor to Fish Alaska for the past 5 years.