



A Goodnews River Lodge Fishing Adventure

This past August I made my 16th journey to the Goodnews River Lodge, and if ever a trip there was an odyssey, this past trip just about takes the cake. We arrived in Anchorage on Tuesday Aug 10, the day after the wreckage of Ted Steven's plane was discovered, and since we were flying out in that general direction, it had everybody just a little nervous about flying. When we got to the airport on Wednesday for the start of my 2 weeks at the Lodge, we learned that the entire west coast of Alaska had been socked in for 3 days and showed little hope of clearing that day. For only the second time in its history, the Lodge was forced to cancel the day's flight, leaving 18 of us with an extra day to kill in Anchorage. After finding a hotel for the night, we spent entirely too much time at the bar telling stories and swapping lies. The next day, we did indeed fly out and landed just before the weather closed in yet again. But while the weather was nasty, the fishing was red hot. The river was high, and just loaded with Silvers and hoards of annoying Pink Salmon that attacked anything we threw at them. Thursday afternoon and Friday were outstanding with dozens of chrome bright fish falling to my popper. Oh Boy! Oh Boy! - slough fishing the likes of which I hadn't seen since 2004. But it was destined to be short lived. We awoke on Saturday morning to gale force winds, with gusts to 70 mph! The Lodge sent a boat out to test the river for safety, and they couldn't even get a mile away from camp as there were 3 foot waves crashing over the bow. We went on weather watch all day, but the winds never laid down, and the rains continued. Another day lost....

The wind finally stopped on Sunday morning, and it was safe to go out in the boats again. But what about all that rain? The river was rising fast, and by afternoon it was chocolate brown and over the banks! For the first time in I witnessed the river totally blown out and flooding the camp. By nightfall, there was 2 feet of water under my tent. We had to wear our waders in camp all the time just to get to the bathrooms!

Now on any other river that would have spelled disaster for the fishing, but not on the Goodnews. While the main river was unfishable on Sunday, the braids, creeks, and sloughs provided plenty of shelter from the storm, and all we had to do was find some sheltered cleaner water and the game was on. Even in the height of the flood I managed to land 25+ Silvers that day. On Monday and Tuesday the river started to clear and drop, with the Middle Fork coming back the quickest. We found fish in seams and clean water, and they were very willing to play. Everyone came back happy and tired from catching so many fish.

By Wednesday, the start of my second week, the river had pretty much cleared though it was still pretty high, but all that fresh water pouring out into the Bering Sea brought fresh Silvers in by the thousands. Popper fishing in the Middle Fork was unbelievable, and we were back to catching 40-50 Silvers a day. By then all 3 forks of the river were fishing well and everybody came in with big smiles on their faces and lots of Silvers in their fish box. But while the Silver fishing recovered quickly, the Rainbow and Dolly action did not come back until the weekend, and even then finding them was still a challenge. We went looking for Rainbows on Saturday afternoon after a morning of non-stop action with Silvers on the popper, and while I tried in vain to get a Rainbow to eat the mouse, it was not to be. I had to settle for 3 'bows over 23" that ate a flesh fly hung under an indicator (Steak and Eggs, Alaska style). I fished for Dolly's on Sunday way up the North Fork, and after a frustrating morning of catching only 14-16" fish in the main river, we spotted a slough that normally is dry at that time of year that was pumping water into the main river. It looked like a perfect spot to throw a popper for Silvers, so made a cast and promptly hooked and landed a 26" Dolly – on a popper! I switched back to my 5 wt and spent the next 2 1/2 hours catching Dollys from 18-26" on every cast. What a river!

Well, after that incredible Dolly action, it was time to concentrate on Silvers for my last two days, so I spent Monday and Tuesday just hammering them. By Tuesday night my arms were just like rubber. With the flight leaving camp at 11:00 am the next day, I got up Wednesday morning and made 3 casts with my spinning rod (all of my other gear was packed) and landed 3 silvers right in front of camp. By the time I got them in, my arms were aching all over again. Mentally I didn't want the trip to end, but I knew it was time to pack my bags and end another outstanding season at the Goodnews River Lodge.

So that's my story and I'm sticking to it. The Goodnews River has got to be the most unbelievable fishery in the world. But don't just take my word for it. Ask anyone who was there. I fished with a first time guest (friend of a friend) on my last day there, an avid and very experienced Atlantic salmon fly fisherman. At the end of the day he acknowledged that the Goodnews River had spoiled him for life. He said he was going to have a hard time going back to catching 3 Atlantic salmon in a week after experiencing the outstanding fishing for chrome bright Silvers on the Goodnews River. Together we boated well over 100 Silvers that day, all fresh and feisty, with many of them running well into our backing. So I posed a question to him, and I'll pose it to you-

Is it better to have your best day on the river be your first day, or your last day?

I was fortunate enough to have both this year. When I visited the Lodge in July, my best day for Kings was my first day, with 17 to the boat on a fly. My best day for Silvers was my last. Which was better? It's just impossible to choose. They were both great, but that last day for Silvers was like shooting an eagle on the 18th hole. It keeps you coming back for more no matter how difficult the other 17 holes were. But it's not just the fantastic fishing that keeps you coming back, it's the fantastic people you get a chance to be with that makes it all so special. With all that adversity, no one complained and everyone had the proverbial trip of a lifetime. I know that "Good Lord Willin' and the Creek Don't Rise" I'll be heading back to the Goodnews River Lodge again next year. Tight Lines!

Gary Vasques