

## Mike Mercer's 2017 Alaska Trip –

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### Duncan's Upper Kanektok Camp



A quick and easy late morning flight on Delta delivered me from Sacramento to Seattle to Anchorage, arriving in plenty of time to check into my room at the Lakefront Anchorage, freshen up, then walk downstairs and enjoy a wonderful sweet-and-sour halibut dinner in the hotel's waterfront restaurant. I passed the hotel's highly popular bar after dinner – glancing in I saw the place was packed with guests watching sports and enjoying their favorite libation. The place was packed, and looked like fun. Instead of joining them, I opted to take a nice long walk down Seward Ave, enjoying the floatplanes taking off Hood Lake in the full daylight of 10 pm (Alaska in early summer) and burning off the giant ice cream sundae I had for dessert.

Late the next morning I enjoyed a fantastic breakfast – again at the hotel restaurant – of strawberry waffles and smoked bacon, then took the hotel shuttle to the international airport, where I caught my noontime Alaska Air flight out to the village of Bethel. Waiting for my luggage to come out of the carousel there, I saw a small group of guys huddled together and speaking in lowered tones – all wearing ball caps - and I figured they were probably going to one of the Duncan's two river camps, either the trouty Upper Camp with me, or the Lower Camp where the emphasis is on salmon. Sidling over to them, I introduced myself and asked if they were going fishing. Turned out this was the group of five guys I would be spending the next week with, and I couldn't have gotten any luckier – they were all great, relaxed, fun-loving guys who were repeaters to the camp. We caught the

shuttle van for the Ravn Air terminal which was about a mile away, and checked our luggage in for the flight to the village of Quinhagak, where the Duncan brothers would be waiting to pick us up. We had some time to kill, so got directions to one of the few restaurants in Bethel, about a half mile walk on a gravel road. We almost missed it, as it's in the upper story of an old government building which had a definite abandoned vibe to it...there was just a strange little handmade sign on the downstairs wall recommending the Chinese/American/Pizza house specialties. The lower story entryway was unmarked and less than inviting, and we almost gave up as the door was nearly frozen shut by years of cold winters. Finally one of the guys was able to shove through, leaving us in a tight, dingy stairwell that crept upward on sagging wooden stairs looking right out of an Eastern European Jason Bourne fight scene. Reaching the top, we turned down a hallway bracketed by long-empty office doors – some swung open to reveal more emptiness – then arrived, Twilight-Zone-like, to an open cafeteria with all the lights on...but no-one there. We wandered around making as much noise as possible, and shortly a man appeared as if by magic, and waved us to the register where he produced some laminated menus with photographs of the meal options (about half of which were marked out with a black Sharpie, apparently the victims of local dietary intolerances). We all ordered cheeseburgers. The burgers were surprisingly good (I suppose they should've been, at the \$18 going rate), and we all sat at a table and got to know each other for the next hour or so.

After lunch we climbed onboard the Ravn Air turbo Caravan for the 45 minute flight to Quinhagak, landing on a gravel strip out on the tundra. We were met by Brad Duncan in a big extended cab truck (Brad operates the Lower Camp, while his brother Clint would be our host on the Upper Camp), and driven the 10 minutes to the river at a rough launch ramp at the edge of town. Here the Upper Camp guides were waiting for us in their 18-foot Willie's and Alumaweld jet sleds – wide and super stable boats, with comfortable padded seats and 40-60 horsepower jet motors. They had us change into our waders, fleece, and rain jackets, as it was a cloudy cool day and it is about a 2-hour boat ride upstream. It did rain a slight bit on the way up, so it was a good call. About halfway up we passed the Togiak Wilderness boundary marker, above which the Duncan's Upper Camp has almost exclusive commercial access. The river changes quite a bit as one heads upriver – the lower end is wide and open tundra, with sweeping salmon runs; it gets progressively narrower and shallower in the upper half, with more classic trout structure. The upper camp is located just about where the river starts climbing up into the mountains. Arriving, we were assigned to our heated tents, where we changed into comfortable camp clothes, put away our luggage in the plastic bins provided, hung our shirts, jackets, and waders on the many hangars, laid our sleeping bags out onto the cots and thick foam pads provided, and strolled the 30 yards to the gargantuan dining tent. Here we met Clint, who gave us a wonderful introduction and explained what the week would look like. There was freshly smoked sockeye salmon “candy” on the tables, along with crackers and an amazing spread, as well as a bunch of other vegetables and assorted hors d' oeuvres. This would become a nightly pre-dinner event, and it never disappointed (and we certainly never ran out). The guides do double duty, guiding during the day and helping in the kitchen in the evenings. Clint is the chef, though a few of the guides were good cooks and helped out during dinners and breakfasts. This was a well-oiled team, and you never heard any grumbling, or saw any dissent in the ranks...Clint runs a very tight ship, while remaining a fun and amiable guy, with a million hilarious stories from

his 37 years on the Kanektok. Later they rolled out the dinner, and it was quite delicious and served in ridiculous quantities; I *guarantee* no-one ever leaves the dining tent hungry (think prime rib, lasagna, T-Bone steak, pork loin, etc)! It was nice that they served crisp green salads with each dinner, as well. The dinner was finished with a wonderful ice cream dessert, a rarity in remote tent camps. The remainder of the week we ate like kings, both in terms of quantity, and quality...it was never fancy, but always really, really good. (The guides also packed huge lunches daily, with either deli meats or PB&J, tons of potato chips, fruit, and all the cookies and candy you could eat). For those ready for it that first night, there was a comfortable and well-assembled shower tent, with lots of room to move around, a chair, vanity, and sink, and all the on-demand hot water one could desire. We were also shown the two bathroom tents out behind the guest tents a ways – everyone was shocked to find they were real, just-like-home, flush toilets! Considering how remote the camp is, and that it is on a wilderness refuge, this is an amazing luxury. They even have 24/7 power in the tents to plug things in or to recharge cameras – guests just need to have cameras with an USB adaptor cord. Tired from the long day of traveling, we made our ways back out to our tents, used the solar-powered reading lights for about 2 minutes, and drifted off into a contented slumber of anticipation.

Waking up the next morning at 7:30am (there's no rush as we had about 30 miles of the upper Kanektok all to ourselves every day), we had an enormous and delicious hot breakfast served by Clint and the guides (at any given time they have two extra guides and a camp hand in camp, and they switch out guiding and kitchen duties appropriately). Slipping into our waders, we were assigned to guides in pairs, each of which had a part of the river he knew very well and kind of specialized on (though they could all guide any part of the river, as needed). During the week we switched guides daily, so we all got to experience each guide, and every part of the river. Though it turned into a dreary weather week, our first day was beautiful, and I felt fortunate to run up to the uppermost river with their head guide, Dan Armstrong, and my partner for the week, Sean, a 50'ish contractor from the Rockies who used to guide for the Duncans years ago. It was a reflection of the continuity of the program that Sean's twenty-something son now guides here, and has for several years since he was a teenager. Dan has guided there now for 20 consecutive years! The upper river was a bit smaller in nature, and during the day we caught good numbers of fish, including a good percentage of fish 18-23 inches. It was beautiful to be floating and fishing with high mountain bluffs towering above us. Dan is a good fly tier – he guides for steelhead and trout in the Great Lake's rivers the rest of the season after closing up Alaska at their Kodiak steelhead camp in late October – and we fished his own mouse pattern most of this day. Sean and I caught a few dozen fish on mice this day, which we thought was wonderful...little did we know what was ahead.



Each day we fished a new and unique section of the river, spending at least 50% of our time slamming the banks with mice and streamers from the boat, with the remainder walking and wading the river's many side channels. What we discovered was the camp pretty much marked the halfway point of the fishing water – up to the mountains, and down to the refuge sign. And while the numbers in the upper river were excellent and there tended to be more larger trout in this early season week, the water downstream was often just silly with fish. The typical routine saw either Sean or I fishing mouse patterns from the front of the boat for the first half of the day, while the other slung streamers from the back. The guide stayed on the oars to guide and slow the downstream trajectory. Then, after lunch, we would switch and reverse angling roles. Sean and I both liked to wade and fish, so we asked to do that quite a bit, but to be honest, it was also fun to fish from the boat, and brutally effective. As well, it protects the fishery, as you don't stay in any one place and hammer on the fish. Using the Dali Lama streamers, we would simply cast to the side of the drifting boat, letting them drag and tumble with the drift of the jet sled. Fishing this way we got ridiculous number of hits, routinely every cast or two! While it's true one missed a lot of takes this way, the number of trout hooked was still pretty incredible. These fish were like Kamchatka trout in that they were wildly aggressive...if the guy in the front of the boat hooked a fish on the mouse – even if he fought it for several seconds – and it came unhooked, the same trout would often eat a streamer if you delivered it to the fish immediately. In fact, after a few days I started mixing things up, just because the streamer fishing was so predictably effective. By the last day, I was fishing mouse patterns exclusively, and still hooking more fish than can be believed! The lower stretches of the

river held far more *numbers* of fish – a good stick could literally hook over 50 trout a day here. Most of them were in the 14-18-inch range, with smaller numbers of fish both above and below that size range. Again, it is worth noting that once the salmon start spawning - in later July and August – the trout and Dolly Varden move all around, and you don't see such a demarcation of fish of like size hanging together – this is more of an early season phenomenon. During the week I landed several beautiful big rainbows (most trout here display classic “leopard” coloration) in the 22-23-inch range, and will never forget a monster that I lost after a series of cartwheeling leaps and reel-burning runs. There are some huge trout in this river! Importantly, for hardcore anglers, these guides are not afraid to work long days – I kept track, and most days we were on the water for 9-10 hours. Too, if that truly isn't enough, there is a nice gravel bar a short walk from the camp where you could go and fish after dinner.

Though we were early for salmon, they were starting to show up. Sean wanted to spend a few hours catching fresh chums, and the guide knew where to go – Sean enjoyed it. Towards week's end the sockeyes were coming in heavy – I lined a couple of chromers while casting streamers for trout. They tasted really, really good as hors d' oeuvres! Their king run was just starting, though 2 clients at the Lower Camp had landed over 10 fish the day before we left.

Dave Duncan's Upper Camp is a very strong operation...can't imagine much they could do to improve the place. They have 6 guest tents for 10 guests, so each week one client gets a private tent. The guides provide beads, but because these trout get so little pressure, the mouse and streamer fishing remains strong right through the big salmon spawn. Fishing from the boats is comfortable – the client in the bow has a comfortable padded swivel seat to sit on and fish, while the angler in the stern can choose to stand on raised platforms or in the boat well itself...and the guides have nets they throw over the motors, so no issue with loose line hooking on the motor appendages. I experienced the single most prolific day of mousing I've ever had in Alaska on my last day – not all big fish, but crazy amount of action; I probably averaged moving a fish on every 5th or 6th cast! Though no wifi is available at camp, there is a phone, in case of emergencies, and it's no problem for people to call it from home, if need be, as Clint stays in camp every day. A nice feature of fishing from rowed jet boats is no mosquitos – even in late June, the only time we had problems with them was when we had to walk through bankside grasses to reach the water. Having heaters in the tents was perfect, not only for cold nights, but to dry out damp clothes in the evenings...I would hang wet stuff before going to dinner each night, and by the time I went to bed everything was bone dry. This is a short season – last week in June through the end of August – so there are no “shoulder weeks”. At \$5400/week in 2018, this is a fantastic, semi-rustic fishing experience at a reasonable rate.



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### Ugashik Lake Lodge



From Anchorage, I took a PenAir flight out to King Salmon, where lodge owner/operator Phil Byrd met me in his Cessna 185 on floats and flew me the last 45 minutes out to his camp (the actual program in 2018 will substitute a charter flight with Branch River Air for the leg between King Salmon and the lodge; Phil will always do the daily flying to fishing). The lodge is on a small lake immediately adjacent (and connected by a small creek) to Upper Ugashik Lake. It is in the middle of nowhere, inside the boundaries of a major refuge. The setting is beautiful, with a low mountain immediately behind the lodge, the gorgeous snow-capped Pacific range in the background, and an in-your-face view of the huge Peulik Volcano out your cabin door. Unlike the huge Ugashik Lakes, the smaller lake is well-protected from wind, making for much more comfortable take-offs and landings, yet still plenty large enough regardless of wind direction. The actual lodge itself was a hunting lodge built in the 80's, and improved with newer roofing and siding over the years. It's snug and comfortable, with two duplex cabins overlooking the lake, connected to the main lodge by an extensive boardwalk system. Phil has been making upgrades, and will continue to do so. For next season there will be two major improvements – a brand new “great room” built onto the front of

the existing lodge, and a revamping of the shower room/toilet facility. Phil wants everyone to have a private room, so will only be taking two-three anglers a week (6 night/5 day stays, Sunday-Saturday) during king season; for silver season he will take four people, and bring out another guide to keep the angler/guide ratio at 2-to-1. The rooms have queen beds and plenty of room to unpack and hang stuff up, and a couple of good-sized windows. They provide towels, washcloths, soap and shampoo, and normally replace the towels and washcloths once in mid-week. The lodge has a separate generator shed, though they only run it a few hours in the middle of the day when guests are gone – just enough to power up the inverter system to give guests 24/7 power without a noisy generator. They also keep a few jet boats on the lakeshore right in front of the lodge - if they get terrible weather that prevents flying they are only a 30-minute boat ride down to Ugashik Narrows, where you can catch plenty of big char and grayling at any time of the season. Phil keeps his floatplane tethered on the shoreline just in front of the lodge. All of the flying to the rivers takes place out over tundra terrain in the strip of flatlands between the Pacific range and the Bering Sea, which is about as safe as it gets out there. There are also some nice trout/dolly streams back the other direction towards Becharof Lake – 20 minute flights from the lodge, if people want to mix it up a little - and the same flying conditions hold true here, as well.



Phil is the pilot and guide for his 2-3 guests a week, and while I was expecting him to be an expert pilot, I was pleasantly surprised to discover he is also a top-notch fly fishing guide. He knows his stuff, provides really great and up-to-date flies (and has quality loaner gear – rods/reels/lines at the



lodge), and really knows Alaska fishing. He has fished and guided all around Alaska, as well as for saltwater species on the East Coast. He's a serious fly fisherman, who knows how to guide! He is the real deal. His wife Beth is also a very bright and capable woman who is a joy to spend time with, and who seems to honestly enjoy being out in the middle of nowhere, cooking for and taking care of the guests. She is an excellent cook – the food is tasty and wholesome. Her entrees, hors d' oeuvres and desserts were *awesome*. One night they barbecued steaks outside on a big professional-grade barbecue – *really* good!

When I met lodge owner Phil Byrd at a Texas trade show early in 2017, he stated that he had the exclusive access on the lower portion of an amazing salmon river, where in 2016 he routinely hooked 10-15 chrome kings a day on swung flies. I initially questioned these numbers, though after speaking with Phil at length over a couple of days I found myself impressed with his knowledge of the region, and unpretentious attitude. Could it be true?

Fast forward several months, and after my first day on this incredible river with Phil, the answer was a resounding “**yes!**” I would guess the other angler at the lodge and myself that day had a cumulative total of around 30 grabs, hooking and losing a bunch, and landing probably 15-20 chrome kings between us. Most amazing, at one point we were hooking them so fast and furiously, we had 5 consecutive doubles! I've fished for king salmon on flies a lot over the past 40 years, but never experienced anything quite like that!





The first morning in camp dawned overcast and drizzly, perfect king fishing weather. Phil had told us the night before there was no rush to get to the river, as we had it to ourselves...checking the weather cams along our flight route this morning, he opted to wait awhile to let the ceiling lift. We relaxed and enjoyed the lodge, preparing our tackle for a couple of hours, and began our flight down-country about 10am. The flight was fascinating – the land we flew over was flat and pock-marked by a bunch of small lakes and ponds, and about every 10-15 minutes, a river. At about 40 minutes from the lodge Phil pointed ahead - craning my neck, I found the river ahead and below, and saw how it changed quickly from a wide, braided coastal plain waterway to a tighter, willow-banked channel several miles up from the sea. Phil circled once, then banked and landed in a mid-sized lake not far from the river. Tying the plane down securely, we unloaded our gear and walked about 50 yards through the bushes to a tundra stream, where Phil keeps his boat stashed. We loaded it up and headed downstream to where it joins the main river, about a mile away. Pulling off to the near bank a few hundred yards upstream of the creek mouth, Phil explained the run in front of us is where we would be starting. To be honest, the water wasn't exactly clearly delineated – the river is fairly flat in these lower stretches – and in fact it took fishing the rest of the day in varying runs to become familiar with the good holding water. Essentially, the lower river is largely in tidewater, and much of the wide river is only inches deep. Imagine a river flowing wide and shallow for a few miles, relatively featureless...and then envision a massive ice cream scoop coming down and scooping up 4'-8' deep trenches, scattered randomly along the river's length, most of which are about 50 – 100 yards long, and 50-100 feet across. That's it. One of the first things we noticed as we spread out and began sweeping our Intruder-style flies through this first trench was the amount of fish activity, both in our run, and all around in the massive shallow river flats. Phil believes the king run in this river to be many thousands of fish, which largely enter in about a 6-week time period. That is a constant barrage of big, bright kings shouldering into the river twice a day on each high tide. As we cast, it was fascinating to see the near constant roostertails of sea-bright salmon below us, as they made their way, sometimes for hundreds of yards through inches deep water. It got really interesting when, on high tides, enormous seals would follow them right up onto these flats, half out of the water, powering after them, moving almost shocking amounts of water while in hot pursuit. A real National Geographic moment!

About halfway through this first run I got my first tug, an electric grab that almost tore the rod from my grip. Unprepared, I reacted badly and completely farmed it. Next cast, another grab – prepared now, I pounded the strike and watched as a nickel-bright king vaulted into the air...it looked chunky at 50 feet away, and I can still remember seeing it was loaded with sea lice. Ten minutes later I slid my first king of the day into Phil's waiting grip, a gorgeous fish only hours out of the salt that Phil described as an "average fish" of about 23 pounds. It was a really, really good moment, and I recall looking around in awe at the raw and trackless wilderness that surrounded me, and thinking about how many summers these special fish had been ascending this amazing river. Taking a few shots of the fish, I waded back into the run just in time to hear a shout from upstream, as my fishing partner found a fish of his own. And so it went for about the next hour and a half as we fished down the length of the run twice, both of us hooking multiple kings each time through. I'll never forget the third fish I hooked, a true beast that even ever-conservative Phil estimated to easily be in the mid-

thirties, not just deep-bodied but also long...as it eventually wallowed on the surface, tiring, I realized there was a long interval between when the head broke the surface to when the tail finally followed suit. I really wanted that fish for a photo, so of course it came unhooked, and over the course of the day we were reminded of the hardness of these salmon's mouths, only solidly hooking perhaps half of the grabs we received.



With fish still grabbing, Phil had us reel up and get back in the boat and head upriver, anxious to show us more water. Perhaps half a mile upstream he killed the motor in mid-river and jumped out into shallow mud. Beginning to become accustomed to what holding water looked like, I saw this run dropped in at the top at probably 20 feet across, and then quickly ballooned to 100 feet in width, eventually tailing out probably 50 yards downstream. With great anticipation fueled by Phil's mention of having hooked a bunch of fish here the week before with a friend, we began to canvass the water, our 200-grain sinking tips quickly pulling the large, bright streamers into the slightly tinted depths. I immediately had a grab...but fifteen minutes later it remained the only one, so Phil loaded us back up and continued upriver, remarking that the fish were generally either packed into these runs, or quite scarce, so he never stayed long in a piece of water that wasn't producing consistent strikes. We repeated the scenario at the next run, not hooking a fish in the first thirty or so casts. Climbing back into the boat, I could see Phil mentally struggling with something, and as we came to the next run a few minutes upstream he made up his mind, telling us to sit back and relax, as he was going to pass up a bunch of good water to reach a pool that had been just unbelievable for he and

his friend the week before. About 20 minutes later we passed a large slough extending back into the tundra, and as I imagined how many huge silvers would be packed in there in a few short months, Phil pointed to a rather unremarkable-appearing run right above it. Unremarkable, that is, until he showed us where to watch, and we quickly realized there were fish constantly rolling in the medium flows near the bank. Anchoring in shallow water below the pool, I grew increasingly amazed at the numbers of fish clearly packed into these 50 yards of river – I couldn't watch for more than 15 seconds without seeing the wide back of a king break the surface. Wading the calf-deep water to the pool's edge, Phil gathered us together and told us we'd be changing out our flies. I watched as he knotted a rather ordinary-looking marabou spey pattern onto our leaders, and fought back the concern that we had been fishing proven patterns, and should we really be switching now? Rigging us both with the same fly, he had me walk to the top of the run, and my partner begin halfway down, both of us casting across and downstream, swinging our new flies through the moderate flows. It didn't take long to recognize our host knew what he was doing...almost immediately we both hooked up, the start of about two hours of nonstop action that included five double hookups and more grabs than I even want to guess the number of. I do remember early on I had strikes on eight consecutive casts, hooking four fish and landing three. The fish seemed impossibly grabby, and every time I was sure we must have worn out our welcome, there would be another flurry of action. We literally wore out a half dozen of the marabou patterns, opening up and even breaking off the trailer hooks as we became perhaps overly aggressive in fighting the fish; Phil was almost constantly on the run between us, unhooking fish after fish. It was easily, *easily* the best two hours of king fishing I've ever experienced, or even heard of. Finally, despite the fish continuing to grab, we agreed we really needed to give the place a rest, and headed back downstream to find some new water. Phil ran the boat slowly through the pool before heading out, and the sheer numbers of fish there was staggering, a mix of kings and equally bright chums. As the boat neared the downstream end of the pool there was a boiling mass of perhaps a hundred fish that went berserk as we pushed them into shallow water – leaning over the boat's edge to witness the melee we were sprayed with gouts of churning water and at one point there must have been thirty kings beneath my feet in an area about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Amazing!

To wrap this up, I will tell you the second day was very similar to the first, in terms of water fished and fish hooked. The third day dawned bright and sunny – unusual on the Peninsula – and we were far less successful, with both the bright sun and warming water slowing down the bite. We stayed and fished until early evening, and had a good session as the sun dropped lower on the horizon, but after the first few days we realized how spoiled we'd become; hooking maybe a dozen fish between us this day seemed intolerably slow, a number which on any other river would be considered stellar! The fourth day was again bright and sunny, and after a slow first half of the day I began experimenting with fly patterns, thinking outside of the box. In the run upstream that was packed with fish, the flies that worked previously were now useless. At day's end we had about the same action as on the previous day – quite good by normal standards, but frustrating when considering how many fish our flies were swing past on almost every cast. We did figure out that the lower runs near tidewater influence fished better than the staging pools upriver during these tough conditions, probably because of the constant influx of new fish. On the fifth and final day, the weather was

mixed – some clouds, some sunshine – and we decided to get up and get to the river earlier than we had, and begin in the upriver runs before the water began to warm in the afternoon. Arriving, the fishing was good, but I felt we were missing something with our fly choices; digging through my box I found a little stash of a small purple egg-sucking leech pattern – called an Egg Sucking Jig Wiggler Leech, a pattern I've carried in my box for a few years but which I've never fished - and tied one on. Paydirt! The fishing immediately went from good to absolutely spectacular again, as the kings just couldn't seem to get enough of that little fly. Eventually working our way back downstream to the tidal runs, Phil was amazed that the pattern was equally effective here, in water where we had been using nothing but large, traditional king salmon streamers all week. I suspect fish must have been moving through this run steadily while we were there, as I consistently noticed fish that would emerge up from the unseen depths of the run and hold just beneath the surface, slowly nosing their way upriver. I was shocked to find these fish were super aggressive, and would normally take if I made a cast above and very near to them and swung it past their face (sometimes they were quite close to me, taking the fly 15-20 feet away!). I experienced the most ridiculously productive fishing the last few hours of this last day, losing count of how many fish grabbed. It was an amazing end to an amazing five days of king fishing, and left me believing this must be the best king river in Alaska. It would have been interesting to have fished the other local rivers, too, but they will be available in the future; and to be honest, a part of me was happy to have experienced just this one river, with its unbelievable riches of kings.





Tackle requirements for king fishing this river were just what one would expect. I used a couple of different Winston 9 wt single-handed rods – a B3x and a Jungle Rod – and both worked perfectly. Double-handed rods would be fine, though not necessary, as most casts are in the 40-60 foot range. There was one run where we had a high grassy bank at our backs – it would have been nice to have had a two-hander there! I think a 10 wt would be heavier than really necessary, though if you were new to fighting big fish in a current, there might be an argument for it. The need for a high quality reel here cannot be overstated...more often than not I fought these fish much more with the reel drag than with the bend of the rod. Catching a dozen or more kings a day is actually a lot of work – in a good way – and after the first half dozen or so I tended to point my rod almost right at the fish during the fight, forcing them to pull directly against a very tight drag each time they surged away on a run. I was using Nautilus reels, and they were stellar. I cranked the drags down hard, and they really punished the fish during the fights. Fly lines were simple – the SA Sonar 25' sink tips were perfect, especially the 200-grain model. I also used a 250-grain tip - it was a bit too much line for some runs, perfect for a few others. Phil opined that an intermediate tip might be good for a few of the slower runs, and I agree – remember that these are aggressive fish that not uncommonly chased and ate fast-swinging or stripped flies. Leaders were simply 5'-6' lengths of 20# Maxima Ultragreen – there was no need for tapered leaders here. Except for the Jig Wiggler, flies were pretty standard fare for Alaska. I caught many of my fish on the Sili Leg Intruder in either pink/orange or blue/chartreuse; Hareball Leeches in pink/orange and orange/chartreuse; and the drab marabou spey fly with stinger hook mentioned earlier. Phil assured that many flies will work, but these are definitely staples. It seemed the tidewater-effected runs fished best with blue/chartreuse and pink/orange (except for the Jig Wiggler), while the fish in the staging pools upriver preferred more drab colors.