WHERE TO FISH THIS MONTH
Spotlight on 4 top overseas and UK fisheries to visit

Walk on the WILD SIDE

John Horsey samples the rugged delights of Alaska for Pacific salmon plus Arctic char & grayling.

Moose Creek runs high while John searches for Arctic grayling.
Our journey to Alaska

We opt for the last two weeks of August that will coincide with both freshwater species and provide us with a good chance of all but the king (chinook) salmon runs, which invariably end around early July in our chosen areas.

There are no direct flights from the UK to Anchorage and our route’s gateway city takes us via Seattle, arriving late evening. We have just enough time to sample the lively bars of this friendly city of just 300,000 people. After a plate of fresh oysters washed down with the local beers it’s time to catch up on some sleep and get ready for a hectic itinerary.

Alaska is huge and relatively underpopulated, making it great for exploring. It is so noted as a wilderness State that moose and bears are even seen wandering the city outskirts!

My first introduction to the ‘local’ wildlife is a morning visit to the Alaska Zoological Park in Anchorage. It’s loss of a zoo and more of a study centre and refuge for local wildlife that could not survive in the wild due to being orphaned or injured.

Walking with wolves

I’m to be given the opportunity to walk with two nine-year-old wolves, Denali and Nikolai his brother. They’re part of a family of cubs rescued at the age of two due to being orphaned or injured.

Walking with wolves is an experience that educates me for my walk on the wild side in the Alaska bush in the forthcoming days.

Targets for the trip

My task is to fish a number of designated places, some hundreds of miles apart, for a variety of species that Alaska is famed for. We will move well off the beaten track and meet some great local guides and characters including amazing wildlife in stunning locations.

Arctic grayling is my target, deep inside the two weeks that Martin required. With a short season and long winters in Alaska, timing is often critical. Dolly varden char and Arctic grayling are there all-year-round but the five species of Pacific salmon are extremely seasonal.

A grizzly bear had been spotted less than a mile away so we explore the river carefully. Bear attacks are very rare, often when a person comes into sudden close contact.”

Incredible sights of Denali

We make the dash to the gravel take off strip and the pilot gives us a great flight-seeing tour over the Alaska Range and Mount Denali (only renamed that very day from its original name of Mount McKinley by President Obama who happened to be touring the region at the same time).

Denali is the highest mountain peak in North America, with a summit elevation of 20,310 feet above sea level. And at 18,000ft, the base-to-peak rise is the largest of any mountain in the world situated entirely above sea level.

“We make it back to Anchorage which is to be our hub for exploring the southern region of Alaska, explore a few more bars, then pick up a hire car for our drive south down the scenic Kenai Peninsula with snow-capped Chugach mountains and numerous glaciers.

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knowledge to hook into fresh-run fish on the fly, so it’s ideal having a guide. Reubin has his favoured places and the Kenai can get pretty busy with anglers during the peak weeks. We are hitting the silver salmon and coho runs bang on and Reubin is keen to get out on the water as early as possible. He also has a theory that the coho take early in the day. We are fishing for silvers that entered the river on the previous night’s tide. They could not be fresher and will be aggressive. Even in the opaque shallow waters of the Kenai the coho are noted for locking their jaws as the sun rises higher. The early angler certainly gets action that is as guaranteed as it gets.

Our fast, well-equipped boat proved the perfect casting platform and a 25-yard accurate cast puts me right amongst a shoal of ‘taking’ coho. Single barbless hooks are mandatory and with the electrifying and acrobatic fight of big fresh silver salmon, you can expect to lose a few. I land three quality coho salmon up to around the 20lb mark and return them all. Each angler is allowed to take a brace of coho per day but once those fish are killed, then fishing must stop.

Tackle used for coho
I use my favourite 9ft 8wt rod. A good quality reel with lots of backing and a reliable disc drag is crucial as these fish need some stopping at times, especially in the strong current. I loaded the reel with a 40-plus Sniper Di-3 line. I use a short 8ft 20lb fluorocarbon tippet and my flies are Pink Bunny Bugs and a Black Conehead Zonker that Reubin gave to me.

Char and rainbows
The rising sun quickly burns off the surface mist and the salmon do as Reubin expects – switch off. Now is the time to head upriver and target the dolly varden char and rainbow trout that the Kenai is also noted for. Char and trout enjoy a rich feast of salmon eggs and are relatively easy to target if you know the right areas. I have around half a dozen char and trout to 3lb, which is great sport.

On my way back downriver we spot a moose feeding in one of the many shallow weedy bays, no doubt avoiding the forest bugs, and wading the cool waters of the bay as temperatures quickly rise. An experience I’ll never forget. My first part of the adventure provided some great fishing for trout, char and coho silver salmon. I had seen some interesting wildlife with amazing scenic backdrops. But the next part of my trip was to be even more special, huge Alaskan brown bears (grizzlies) just a few yards away and some of the most exciting salmon fishing on a fly rod that one could imagine. Find out next month…