

Words & Pictures: Martin Founds & John Horsey

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

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Moose Creek runs high while John searches for Arctic grayling.

WHEN Martin Founds asked if I would like to explore and develop some adventure fishing products in Alaska I just could not refuse. Alaska has always been one of the last great frontiers of travel and fishing in remote areas for Pacific salmon, char and Arctic grayling. Consequently it has always been high on my wish list.

With so many competitions and running the Lexus heats it was pretty tough fitting in 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.

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 to Alaska'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 Alaskan 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 under populated, 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 less 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 the alpha male and Nikolai his brother. They're part of a family of cubs rescued at the age of two weeks and reared in a large enclosure but with careful human 'contact' which – as I find out – they relish and thrive upon.

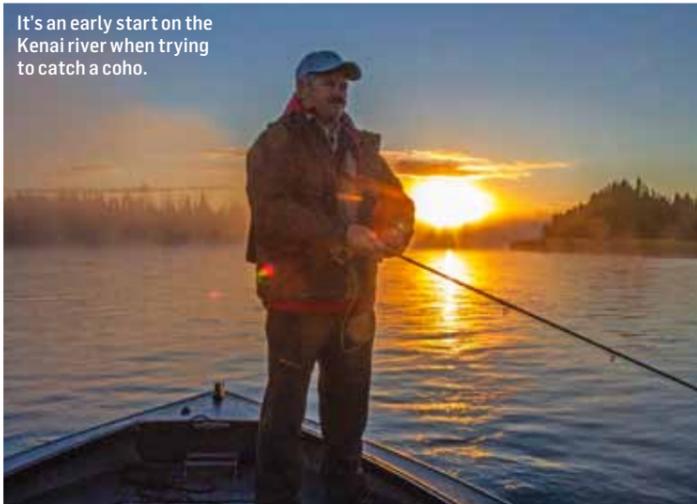
This is an experience that educates me for my walk on the wild side in the Alaska bush in the forthcoming days.

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 Denali National Park, some 300 miles north and west of Anchorage. I'm to travel in relative luxury aboard Alaska Rail for the first eight hours before taking a 90-minute flight deep into the park.

However, as with all trips in wilderness



It's an early start on the Kenai river when trying to catch a coho.



John Horsey comes face to face with Nikolai – 100% wolf!



John Horsey and top guide Reubin with a hefty coho salmon.

“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.”

areas, plans can change quickly and they do. I get snowed in at the Denali railhead and spend a night in a five-star hotel. The next day we're allocated seats on a six-hour bus trip to Kantishna but again due to heavy snow, the first of the season, the journey takes us 12 hours!

First grayling

Moose Creek is a stunning fast-flowing small river flowing through a beautiful valley with snow-capped mountains on either side. 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 causing the bear to panic. Attacks are generally more from self-defence and so,

as we walk the riverbank looking for fish-holding water, we are very much on our guard and making plenty of noise.

The creek runs high with some colour so it's not going to be easy fly fishing. I find a deeper pool a mile upstream, which looks like a good holding place in high water. After an hour it produces a nicely-coloured Arctic grayling on a size 12 Goldhead Pheasant Tail Nymph.

We spot the grizzly feeding on the roots of shrubs on a nearby bluff and are expecting a few more fish when our driver from Kantishna Air Taxis turns up claiming that if we are to get out in the next couple of days we would have to fly out within the hour. Another storm front is moving in and, although we would have loved a couple more

days here, our itinerary is very tight. We are expected down at the bottom end of the Kenai Peninsular just two days later.

Incredible sights of Mount McKinley

We make the dash to the gravel take off strip and the pilot gives us a great flight-seeing trip 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 Peninsular with snow-capped Chugach mountains and numerous glaciers.

Coho are running

Top local guide and salmon angler, Reubin Payne is based close to the characterful town of Soldotna/Kenai City where he runs a top guide service on the Kenai River – Alaskan Widespread Fishing Adventures. Over an evening barbeque of steak and some local beers Reubin gives us the good news that the coho are running in decent numbers but the bad news is that we are making a 4.30am start! Anyone that knows me well will understand that early for me is around 8am!

However I always take the local experts' advice and they do not come more knowledgeable than Reubin. So we awake before the sun breaks above the horizon and are speeding up the mist-covered mighty Kenai River in virtual darkness.

Coho take early in the day

Even with one of the best rivers in Alaska that attracts literally millions of Pacific salmon (all five species, during the spring/summer runs) it still requires skill and >>



A small Moose Creek Arctic grayling.

THIS MONTH: ALASKA

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



A small fresh-run coho salmon for John. Great sport on a fly rod.

Goldhead PTN

- Hook:** Size 10 comp heavy
- Thread:** Brown
- Rib:** Copper wire
- Thorax, body & tail:** Cock pheasant centre tail fibres
- Wingcase:** Pearl UV tinsel
- Head:** Gold bead

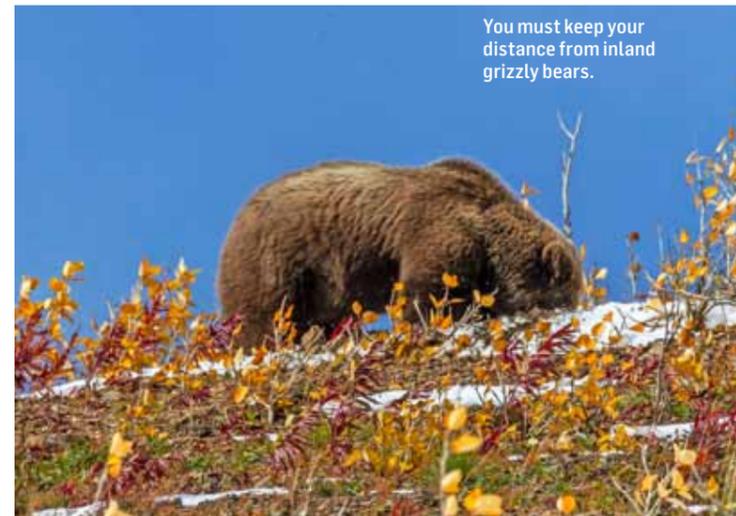


moose feeding in one of the many shallow weedy bays, no doubt avoiding the forest bugs, and wading the cool waters of the bay as temperatures quickly rise.

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... 🐾



You must keep your distance from inland grizzly bears.



The dolly varden char predate on salmon eggs but they're a welcome species to catch.



A bow moose feeds on aquatic vegetation while avoiding the flies..

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