

KAMCHATKA,

FEATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON NEWMAN

When fellow steelhead junkie Mike Gallen drifted the idea of heading to Russia to explore one of the remote rivers on the Kamchatka Peninsula, I had a list of reasons why he should exclude me from the plans. Nine months later, with my list of excuses eroded, I found myself in the Anchorage Airport, preparing to board a flight on Magadan Airlines. In just under four hours we would travel 1200 miles across the International Date Line, over the Bering Sea and land in Petropavlosk (PK), the launch point for the trip of a lifetime.

Rene Limeres, renowned author and guide, was responsible for planning our trip. With more than 30 years of experience running float trips in Alaska, Limeres had become disheartened by the growing number of anglers invading the better drainages. With a passion to escape the crowds, Limeres began planning trips in the late 1980s to the Russia mainland to fish for Taimen. At that time Kamchatka was off limits to tourism because of its strategic military significance. With 1/3 of the entire Pacific Ocean's salmon population returning to the peninsula to spawn, it was obvious that this sliver of land that rests 7000 miles east of Moscow held some truly amazing fisheries. In the

early 90s the door started to open and several guiding operations began to explore a number of rivers on the peninsula. Limeres was one of the early pioneers and began offering fully guided trips to experience this fabulous fishery. To plan our trip, Limeres would coordinate with the husband and wife team of Sasha and Galina, owners of Climb, Kamchatka's premiere wilderness adventure company.

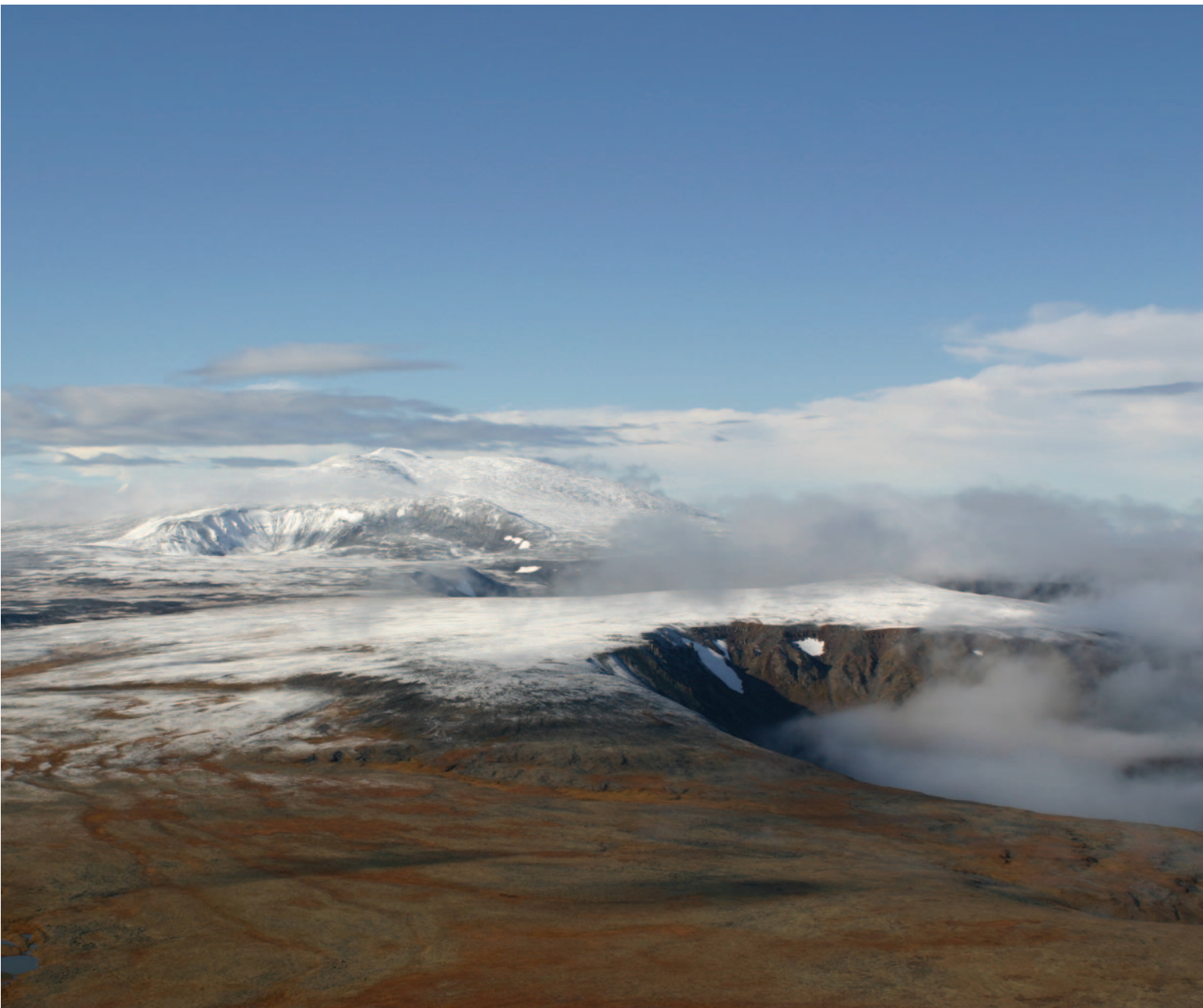
After landing in PK, we went through the painfully slow process of clearing customs. As we emerged from the airport we were greeted by members of Climb. We loaded our gear into a bus and began a journey that would take us more than 300 miles north to the small mountain village of Esso. Just outside of



From left: big rainbows like the one pictured here would site at the mouth of spawning tributaries and feed on salmon eggs and flesh; a fall waterfall; and awesome views from the helicopter will take your breath away.

RUSSIA

Just a short hop from Alaska, Kamchatka, Russia is a trout fishing adventure of a lifetime



town was a crumbling tarmac, which housed two giant helicopters. As the engines warmed and the rotors turned we packed into one of the old birds, months of planning had finally culminated. Our flight would take us through amazing mountain passes, over the tops of dormant volcanoes, and finally touch us down on the headwaters of the Tikhaya River.

Once the helicopter landed it took every ounce of discipline we could muster not grab

a rod and sprint to the river, but night was falling fast and we had tents to set up and gear to prepare for the next day. As our Russian crew inflated rafts and Galina cooked dinner, we were able to sneak a few casts into the fading twilight, but nothing could prepare us for the next 10 days.

When day broke, we were treated to fresh crepes, pancakes, hot coffee and thoughts of finally being released into this hidden para-

dise. With five thirtysomethings from California ready for action, our guides loaded us into three rafts and our voyage began. We all had different visions of what to expect but they all included huge numbers of “Mikija” the Russian term for rainbow trout. This was an exploratory trip, and Limeres assured us that no tour group had ever floated down the Tikhaya, which helped add to the excitement of exploring the unknown.



Clockwise from top: off current back water, like the area pictured here, makes for ideal mousing conditions; the helicopter dropoff point was at an elevation of 3000 feet and was 90 miles from the ocean; relaxing at camp; and a fine Dolly Varden.

As we began to meander down the river our minds were momentarily taken away from fishing when a majestic Stellar Eagle soared above us. Bear trails lined the banks of the river, and although the bears had vacated the area in search of berries during that time of year, the occasional fresh track always kept us aware of our surroundings.

The first stop of the trip produced a strike on almost every cast from a willing population of hungry Dollie Varden. The dollies were feeding on decomposing salmon flesh and were easy targets for any type of fly patterned in white or pink. With rainbows being the target species we'd have to aggressively search the fly box to find something the dollies would leave alone.



As we scratched our way through the day, dollies and a mix of Kundzha, an Eastern Siberian Char, seemed to dominate the catch. I began to wonder to myself whether the Tikhaya held the populations of rainbows that other rivers on the peninsula were famous for harboring. Our gang of five would

all break the double figure mark the first day, but we all expected more.

As we pulled into camp that evening, with the rest of the crew setting tents and drying waders, I decided to tie on a mouse pattern and sneak down to the river. We had heard the amazing stories about vicious strikes on the sur-



ESSENTIALS FOR PLANNING A TRIP OF YOUR OWN

burg, or Moscow. The shorter option is to board a Magadan flight in Anchorage. Customer service with Magadan is terrible, to avoid frustration use a travel agent, or let your American guide handle the details.

Mosquitoes and Bugs

Kamchatka is very similar to Alaska in both the amazing fishing opportunities, and the bug encounters. Our group fished late in the season and experienced plenty of rain, when the weather did clear, so did the number of insects. Although the normal repellents will keep the mosquitoes in check, you'll want to have a bug net to keep the swarms of black flies out of your ears, eyes, nose and mouth. This will be used less than an hour a day, but will make relaxing at camp much more pleasurable.

Rain

Summers can be warm and mild in Kamchatka resulting in T-Shirt fishing conditions, but storms with strong winds and rain are common. You'll want to bring the best Gore-tex raingear available. Our group used a combination of Simms products and had nothing but compliments for its reliability. Your clothes will be loading into

dry bags, but take it one step further, place dry clothing in stuff sacks, or vacuum packed bags. Once you place clothes with moisture in your drag bag, you will battle dampness the rest of the trip. Being able to break out a dry pair of socks and clean underwear on day 8 will make you very happy.

Tackle

Our group brought enough gear to open a small tackle store, after the second day we had the staples figured out. A combination of six, seven, and eight weight rods all worked. The six weight was a little light for casting large mouse patterns, and underpowered for salmon encounters. The optimum rod was the Loomis GLX FR 1147-4, a 9½-foot seven-weight that allowed for long casts, easy mending, and a sporting fight. It's also a four-piece rod that can easily be taken as a carry-on attached to a backpack. The four top flies were the Moorish Mouse, the McCune, the Umpqua Swimming Bait Fish, and the Micro Spawn. Because the trout in this region have virtually zero pressure they are very unsophisticated, which allows for heavy leaders to be used. We used 10 pound P-Line CFX-Fluorocarbon, which allowed us to land

fish quickly, and get them back in the water unharmed. Do not use Fluorocarbon while mouse fishing, because of its properties it sinks making it harder to keep your fly on the surface. Waders are like umpires, you don't notice them unless they are bad. Our entire group used either the Simms G-3s or the Guide Series and had virtually zero problems.

More than just fishing

While in Kamchatka we choose to explore one of the 29 active volcanoes in the region, which added to an already amazing trip. We also went horseback riding, soaked in natural hot springs, and went to a native museum. Your tour group can help maximize your trip by offering more than just world class fishing.

Contacts

Rene Limeres is the owner of Ultimate Rivers, he specializes in small group trips to Kamchatka that can be adjusted to the type of fishing that you want to do. He can be reached at (907) 688-6535 or at www.ultimaterivers.com. Another reputable guide service instrumental in exploring Kamchatka is Ouzel Expeditions, and they can be reached at (800) 825-8196 or by e-mail at paul@ouzel.com.

Paperwork

Kamchatka is known as a Russian border zone and has strict travel requirements. You will need a passport and a visa. To obtain a visa you will need a written invitation from a travel agency or tour group that includes your itinerary. This has to be submitted to the Russian Consulate.

Flights

There are two airlines that currently fly to Petropavlosk. Aeroflot is an option when traveling from St. Peters-

face but nobody had tried "the mouse" until that point. As a beginning fly fisherman my thin skills were evident as I tried to cast the bulky fly. After several chuck and ducks the fly sailed to a slack piece of water across the river. As the current caught the fly line and drug the mouse from the undisturbed section of water near the bank into the rippled main current, my fly disappeared in an explosion and for the next three

days I never searched for another pattern. The rainbows had finally exposed their weakness and we had the patterns to make them pay.

It became customary to compare numbers, techniques and fly selections during our daily lunch stop. And by the second day the mouse had begun to dominate the spotlight. With over 100 fish caught between the group on our morning session it was obvious that



the Russian rainbows had no reservations about breaking the surface in hopes of ending the life of a rodent.

On one stretch of river I choose to cast into a little back eddy off of the main current. Not wanting to crowd my area, Limeres waded across the river and began to give me a lesson on mouse fishing. He would wiggle, shake, twitch, and strip the mouse over a submerged weed-bed. With 15 rainbows to 25 inches landed on 19 casts, I could only watch each explosion with amazement, and question how many trout a small piece of water could hold.

As the days passed on the trip, we began to look forward to Galina's Gravel Bar Café. The lunch stops just seemed to get better the farther we moved down river. Hot soup, cold beer, and a warm fire were on the daily menu, but we constantly were surprised with smoked fish, salmon frogs (see attached recipe) and a never ending supply of Russian chocolates and cheese. On one particular stop, Sasha choose to set camp at the mouth of a spawning tributary, where huge rainbows had positioned themselves to take advantage of the constant supply of salmon eggs entering the river. While I enjoying a hot bowl of borsch, and rested a tender shoulder, Dave



Ott continued to cast his favorite fly, a sculpin pattern called "The McCune." When he called out "hey guys, I'll need a pic of this bad boy." I was too involved with my soup to honor his request until I saw the huge fish swirl near the bank. I then scrambled to cap-

ture the photo opportunity of a fat 27-inch-plus rainbow. We would go on to pull over two dozen fish out of the spot, with the majority stretching the tape over 20 inches.

Each night would involve the Russian tradition of countless vodka shots, and then turn

Opposite: anything pink for the silvers (and the author); and at left, a bird's eye view of the Tikhaya One from the Aira helicopter excites the entire crew with expectations of huge rainbows.



into a session of Texas Hold-Em around the campfire. While playing cards we would try to count the number of fish caught each day. As our learning curve rose our counts soared. An exact number would be impossible to calculate, but as a group a good guesstimate was 250 to 300 fish a day landed in the better stretches of river. This was a gaudy number that would later spawn conversations about a return trip.

Andre, one of our lovable Russian guides, found humor in our constant awareness of bear tracks and sign. While the rest of us were looking at digital pictures and video, during a lunch stop, Andre disappeared into the woods unnoticed. On this particular river bank large tracks were the telltale sign of a huge Russian brown bear that had recently been in the area. We snapped pictures of the tracks and tried to imagine the size of the animal when suddenly the thick bushes and trees behind us started to move. Chara, our bear dog, sprang to attention and started to bark. With the movement of the trees and the loud grunts, we were all prepared for our first bear encounter. As some of us panicked and started to run, others prepared their cameras. A second later

Andre emerged from the wooded area with a smile from ear to ear. He tricked us all including Chara, and was quickly given the nickname "Medved," the Russian name for bear.

Although this was a fly-fishing trip we had given our Rapalogies to our guide long in advance. Our first efforts were always with the fly, but we each had a spinning rod rigged with hardware in our arsenal. These trout had no reservations about striking broken back Rapalas, TD Minnows, Little Cleos, and Panther Martins. Steelhead techniques such as a float with a jig, or a bright plastic worm, all worked very well. Limeres would look on in disgust, but could not question the effectiveness of these lures.

Rain would pound us for nine straight days. As digital cameras succumbed to the moisture, river level remained consistent, and the trout continued to cooperate.

On our ninth evening, which was scheduled to be our final night on the river, we enjoyed the last of our food, and toasted each angler, guide, and cook, with both Champagne, and then vodka. We would have a short float the next morning, and then prepare a landing area during the afternoon. As we de-

flated rafts and filled dry bags, the sky began to darken. As the raindrops gathered in size and momentum Golina would use the satellite phone to contact our helicopter pilot. The bad weather that we were experiencing was even worse in the mountain passes, and would result in a bonus night on the river. Since we had eaten almost all of our food the night before, dinner would consist of a few left over potatoes



California fishing junkie Dave Ott was a long way from home when he landed this exotic Eastern Siberian Charr.



and onions, and several rainbows that would never learn how gentle we could be while practicing catch and release.

We awoke to blue skies and sunshine. Our pilot informed us to be ready in three hours. Wanting to seize one more opportunity, Dave Heib and myself, unpacked our fly rods, climbed into our waders and jumped on a bear trail that led to a gravel bar about 1/2 mile above camp. With a mix of coho and rainbows we had nonstop ac-

GALINA'S RUSSIAN SALMON FROGS

Salmon Frogs were cooked for lunch on the river, they are easy to prepare, and a great reward for tireless hours spent in the outdoors. They're also a wonderful addition to any back yard barbecue.

Serves 6 to 10 people.

- 2 pounds of Fresh Salmon (Steelhead or Dolly Varden can be substituted) Skin should be removed and fillet should be deboned.
- 2 potatoes
- 2 white or yellow onions
- 2 fresh eggs
- 2-3 ounces of flour
- 1 tablespoon of soy sauce
- salt & black paper to taste
- 1 cup of peas (optional)
- 1 package of enoki mushrooms (optional)

Slice salmon, potatoes and onions into small spaghetti like pieces, ranging in size from 1 to 2 inches long. Place in a mixing bowl, and then add eggs, flour, salt and pepper. At this point use your hand to break the eggs, and to mix the ingredients together. Add one tablespoon of soy sauce. The mixture should be the consistency of a thick porridge. In a frying pan heat 1/4 inch of vegetable oil. Place large silver dollar sized spoonfuls of mixture in the hot oil, the mixture should be about 1/2 inch thick. Cook on both sides until the cake turns a golden brown. Once removed from the oil it is best to place the small cake on a paper towel to cool and to drain excess oil. Salmon Frogs can be served plain, or to add flavor you can squeeze a lemon, or add cocktail sauce. They can be used as an appetizer or eaten as a main course.



tion until we heard the unmistakable sound of a helicopter in the distance. Our time on the Tikhaya had come to an end. As we boarded the helicopter, sadness fell over the group. We had created a bond with our Russian counterparts, and were sad that in a few days our comrades would again be thousands of miles away.

While on the bus ride back to PK, it didn't take long for Limeres to start planning our next trip. The 10-hour bus ride, gave Limeres plenty of time to talk about the virgin rivers that possibly help the Holy Grail of this trout fishing frontier. I couldn't help but think to myself that trout fishing, as I had known it, would never be the same. **W**

» Author Don Newman lives in Burlingame, California, and is an obsessed steelhead hunter during the winter months.