

**Kamchatka Fly Fishing
and Visitors Guide**

By Rene Limeres

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Ultimate Rivers

P.O. Box 15

Healy, Alaska, USA 99743

907-441-2080

<http://www.ultimaterivers.com>

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PREFACE

KAMCHATKA—LAST FRONTIER OF COLD WATER ANGLING

As the last remaining wild stream fishing along our north Pacific coast was exploited during the last part of the twentieth century, it was inevitable that American anglers turn their attention to the largely unknown, vast territory lying west of Alaska in the remote provinces of Russia's Far East. These two regions, after all, share a common history and many similarities in terrain, climate, culture and natural resources. Rumors of great fishing in the rivers across the north Pacific had tantalized the adventure angling fraternity for decades, magnified perhaps by the hopeless inaccessibility created by the Iron Curtain.

The ideological divide that kept the U.S. and Russia at odds with each other for so long finally began to unravel, and lands that had been closed to all visitation were slowly opened to inquiring westerners. Because of its strategic military importance, the Kamchatka Peninsula was one of the last places in Russia to officially welcome foreigners, and it wasn't until the early 1990's that the first groups of American anglers got a chance to wet their lines in the streams of this former forbidden area. What they found exceeded their expectations. Here was a province of rivers— hundreds of clear flowing and utterly pristine drainages— running hither and yon across a rugged land of incomparable wild beauty, filled with smoldering volcanoes, snow-capped peaks, verdant meadows and birch forests. What made this paradise even more desirable was the rather obvious fact that Kamchatka's rivers, like those in Alaska, were blessed with amazingly abundant salmon, trout and charr populations that, due to isolation, had survived, virtually intact, the ravages of civilization. Could this be the next and last great frontier for cold water stream angling?

In the ensuing years, a hardy band of adventurous guides, scientists and sportsmen have set out to find the answer to this question, exploring rivers, setting up camps, doing research and sampling the fishing everywhere they go. The work of these pioneers, if nothing else, has confirmed that the initial euphoric observations on Kamchatka's potential were not only true but perhaps somewhat understated. For not only does the peninsula hold the last great stronghold of unexploited wild stream fishing, it also presents a rather unique opportunity to the enlightened

world community: the chance to study, enjoy and preserve entire unaltered ecosystems within the vitally important north Pacific maritime region.

If fly fishing for trout and salmon is your passion, then surely at some point in your career, Kamchatka will call you to its shores to experience the penultimate excitement in your sport. The lover of nature and wilderness, too, will find it hard to resist the siren call of magnificent, undisturbed landscapes, unique geomorphic features, and abundant wild animal life. For the adventurous spirit in us all that yearns for a place—somewhere!—that inspires and challenges and has not yet been tainted by the excesses of our mass culture, Kamchatka is such a place. But it won't be for very long! We hope this guide will prove useful in your exploration and enjoyment of one of the last great places for wild fishing and outdoor adventure.

Rene Limeres
Denali Park, Alaska 2016

INTRODUCTION TO KAMCHATKA



Imagine yourself on a windswept stretch of crumbling tarmac, in Far East Russia, as a giant helicopter fires up its turbines and signals the start of a fishing adventure of a lifetime. The immense rotor springs to life and the sound and excitement soon become almost unbearable as you and your trip mates scramble inside to find a seat amidst a mountain of gear and enough food and vodka for a small army. The powerful machine lifts the impressive load with ease, and you are soon whirling above a landscape unlike any you've ever seen before. Through forested hills of birch and meadows of wildflowers, against a backdrop of smoldering volcanoes and colossal, icy peaks, countless sparkling streams ramble, with no visible signs of man to mar the scene. Where are all the fishermen, you wonder, with all this good looking water and rumors of big trout?

The big chopper flies on through this endless, dreamy landscape, to the headwaters of an impressive looking stream, cascading down a steep, rocky valley. The pilot puts you down on a long sliver of gravel above boulder-strewn rapids, and before the plane is barely emptied, it seems, one of your buddies has rigged up and has a fish on. It's a rainbow trout, by God, a giant one, jumping and careening as only rainbows can do! The fish soon gets away, but no matter. There are plenty more just as big and

willing in the miles of stream you will have all to yourselves in the days ahead. For you, lucky soul, are in one of the last earthly paradises for the wild trout angler, a place where fishing fantasies come true, unlike anything you can imagine—Kamchatka!

Steeped in mystery and isolation, the Kamchatka Peninsula has long been an inspiring dream for would-be adventurers. From the days of Vitus Bering, it has been a fabled land of fire, ice, fur, and fish, beyond the farthest reaches of mainland Siberia. It extends over 700 miles from the eastern tip of Asia into the north Pacific, just beyond the sweep of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Shaped somewhat like a spear point, at its widest, some 300 miles across, it has a landmass with surrounding islands of approximately 182,000 square miles, larger than the state of California, and almost all of it total wilderness.

From its southernmost Pacific shores at latitude 51 degrees north to its northern border with the Asian mainland at 65 degrees, Kamchatka's terrain encompasses everything from rolling temperate forests and lush meadows to alpine, volcano-studded headlands to barren arctic tundra. Surrounded by three ocean bodies—the Okhotsk Sea along its west coast and the Bering Sea and Pacific Ocean along the east—this is a northern maritime province, with long, cold, snowy winters and cool, damp and cloudy summers. Only its innermost region, the “central valley” of the Kamchatka River between the two main mountain ranges, has any measure of continental climate and vegetation.

As one would expect, much of Kamchatka has the same look and feel as parts of neighboring Alaska. The dense forests of birch, alder and willow and thick understory of cow parsnip, fireweed and wild rose brambles could easily be mistaken for somewhere in the southcentral mainland of America's 49th state. Likewise, the barren tundra and sparse trees that predominate in the northern Koryak region seem so much like areas in the western and northern regions of Alaska.

But much of Kamchatka is also different and unique. Forged in the crucible of the Pacific's “Ring of fire”, the peninsula has abundant volcanism evident in the dozens of volcanoes scattered up and down its mountainous core—some 29 or so still trailing plumes in the sky—and hundreds of hot springs and other geothermal features, equaled in number and impressiveness only by those of Iceland. Kluchevsky, the dominating, classic cone-shaped volcano of the massive Klyuchi Group at the northern end of the eastern volcanic chain of mountains is well over 15,000 feet in elevation, the largest active volcano in all of Eurasia. And the “Valley of Geysers” in Kronotsky Preserve and nearby Uzon caldera with hundreds of steaming thermal pools and mud cauldrons rivals America's Yellowstone.

Many of these spectacular features can be accessed from the road system or via short helicopter ride from key hubs, and thus are a major attraction to eco-adventurers the world over.

Adding to the abundant topographical beauty are more than 400 glaciers, several colossal mountain ranges, thousands of rivers and lakes, extensive, marshy coastal plains and hundreds of miles of rugged, rocky coastline. With abundant wildlife rivaling and, in some ways, even surpassing that of Alaska, Kamchatka's natural wonders include unique sanctuaries like the phenomenal Kurile Lake/Ozernaya River system, the most abundant sockeye salmon rearing habitat in Asia and one of the world's best places to observe brown bears and eagles.

Populated by approximately 330,000 hardy souls, predominantly transplanted Russians (with native groups making up only 4% of the total) who live mostly in and around the largest city and main hub of Petropavlovsk, Kamchatka is essentially deserted once you leave its sparse road system. The economy, like that of Alaska, is built on resource extraction, with fishing, mining and lumbering the mainstay and a small amount of farming, cattle and reindeer herding and fur trapping. It is only recently that a small tourist industry has taken hold to service the growing needs of a world hungry for exotic and unspoiled vacation destinations.

One of Kamchatka's main attractions of course, and the key focus of this book is the phenomenal fly fishing potential of the hundreds of clear flowing streams along its coast, many of which have never been adequately sampled by modern anglers. The peninsula's location, physiography, and climate have created what are perhaps the finest stream fishing conditions on the planet, with thousands of miles of perfect wade-and-cast, sight fishing for abundant trout, charr, grayling and six species of salmon. (Unlike much of the water in Alaska that is too deep, swift or glacially silted for good fly fishing.) And the richness of the stream biota includes abundant aquatic insect life for some of the best dry fly fishing west of Montana.

But fishing this new Valhalla presents challenges unlike any other destination in the world. Aside from sampling some of the easier accessed streams around Petropavlovsk and other towns, anglers visiting Kamchatka face a daunting lack of infrastructure and services, in addition to the barriers of a foreign language and culture, making it extremely unlikely to have a safe, enjoyable and productive vacation without the help of an experienced local outfitter/guide. Connecting with the right organization to help you experience the best of Kamchatka's fishing is essential; but equally important to your success and appreciation, we feel, is a basic

understanding of the region's terrain, climate, resources, history, and culture.

It is to this end that we have compiled all the information presented in this book, to give prospective fly anglers and other tourists a feel for the unique flavor of the Kamchatka Peninsula and all it has to offer, and present useful guidelines on how to best plan and enjoy an adventure in what is surely one of the most appealing and least spoiled destinations on the planet. We have included details on many of the most notable area attractions besides fly fishing, for those interested, as well as information on some of the major activities available for tourists. For folks wanting to learn more about Kamchatka's many attractions and activities, we encourage them to contact some of the agencies and organizations listed.

It is our sincere hope that you can take the time to familiarize yourself with and eventually enjoy many of the unique opportunities that this developing frontier holds for lovers of outdoor adventure, wild nature, and travel to foreign lands. In doing so, you will not only enrich yourself but also the lives of many of the good people of Kamchatka, who, beyond their immediate economic needs, yearn, like you, for interaction with different cultures and the chance to make new friends. By reaching out to other lands, the world becomes a smaller place and the prospect for lasting peace and understanding among nations grows. If this book can help in a small way to further that cause, then we will consider our efforts more than repaid.

ABOUT THIS BOOK



Float fishing the Pymta River in southern Kamchatka

This book represents one of the first attempts to describe and catalog the extraordinary fly fishing opportunities of the Kamchatka Peninsula in the context of its unique setting and the many challenges presented by one of the last remaining angling frontiers of the world. We have compiled what we hope is the most up-to-date and accurate information from numerous sources—our own experiences, those of other guides, sport anglers, local fishermen, pilots and hunters/trappers, articles in scientific journals and conversations with some of Kamchatka’s most respected fish biologists. Readers should understand that much of the material in this book represents the current state of knowledge on a vast and still very much unexplored region, with fly fishing potential of countless rivers still uncharted, and many particulars of fish biology still undetermined. Use the information in this guide only as a starting point for your individual exploration, making sure to check with local sources for the most current information on conditions before heading out to fish, especially to remote locations. (Note: It is especially important to contact locals for latest

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conditions before fishing the more remote waters of central and northern Kamchatka.)

We begin our discussion of Kamchatka's fabulous fly fishing with basic descriptions of the peninsula's most important freshwater game fishes- their ecology, status, habits, best fishing locations & times, most popular fly fishing techniques/patterns, etc. Readers wanting more information on general habits and most popular fly fishing techniques, patterns and gear for most Kamchatka species are encouraged to consult the definitive reference on game fishes of Alaska: *Alaska Fishing: The Ultimate Angler's Guide, Deluxe 3rd Edition*, for many of the general characteristics and angling strategies for the species native to both neighboring provinces are the same.

Overviews of the peninsula's three main regions are provided, with emphasis on the major highlights and areas of interest for fly fishers. Included in these region sections is information on the rivers and streams that have proven most noteworthy so far for fly angling. (As noted, readers should keep in mind that these descriptions are far from conclusive and that many more streams, particularly in the more remote areas, may offer outstanding possibilities for fly fishing.) As much as possible, we give details on available species, conditions, access, suitability for river running, fishing pressure, and other aspects important to anyone contemplating fishing these waters. Also included in this book is a section on basic techniques and gear for Kamchatka fly anglers, and some comprehensive trip planning information and insider's tips for anyone interested in visiting Kamchatka.

We encourage you to contact and support the visitor service organizations we've cited, all of whom have been most sharing of their Kamchatka angling expertise, knowledge of local waters and other aspects of importance to inquiring anglers and other tourists. Your tourist dollars support these companies and other aspects of the local economy as well as the continued development of a new management ethic that recognizes and seeks to preserve a sustainable resource of the highest quality and value—the incomparable fly fishing of one of the last great places for wild cold water stream angling.

Readers Note: If you have information or personal experience pertaining to the fly fishing of the Kamchatka Peninsula (or any other outdoor activity) that adds to or conflicts with anything you have read in this book, we want to hear from you! It is our desire to update and expand the content in this guidebook to keep it as accurate and complete as possible. You can be part of this process and receive acknowledgment and complimentary copies of future editions. Contact the publisher for details.

OVERVIEW OF THE KAMCHATKA PENINSULA



Kamchatka's Physiography

Kamchatka's spectacular landscape was sculpted at the dawn of time by titanic forces—the intense pressure and heat created by the collision of continent-sized plates of the earth's crust (the northwest movement of the Pacific plate into the Eurasian continental plate). The resultant uplift and convergence created two rugged ranges of volcanic mountains that comprise the core of the peninsula and one of the most seismically active zones in the world (containing some 129 volcanoes, 29 of them active, along with dozens of geysers, hot springs, fumaroles, mud cauldrons and other features).

The Sredinny, or Central Range, is an ancient chain of mountains that forms the spine of Kamchatka, extending over 600 miles along the center of the peninsula, with elevations from 4800 to 5400 feet in the south, decreasing to 1800 to 2400 feet in the north. It contains 120 volcanoes, but only two active, Ichinsky (10,863 feet) and Khangar (6000 feet). The Vostochniy, or eastern range, fronts the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea, and is younger and more seismically active. Some of the more prominent live volcanoes it encompasses are: Mutnovsky (9969 feet), Gorely (5487 feet), Avachinsky (6951 feet), Zhupanovsky (8874 feet), Karymsky (4608 feet), Kizimen (7455 feet), Kronotsky (10,584 feet), Kluchevsky (15,437 feet), Tolbachik (11,046 feet), and Shiveluch (9849 feet). Kamchatka's glaciers, 414 in all, covering 334 square miles, are found on the highest summits of the Central Range and slopes of the tallest volcanoes.

The eastern headlands of the Vostochniy fall abruptly to a rugged, indented coastline of rocky bays, fjords, and small peninsulas. The western, Sea of Okhotsk side is more a gradual and extensive slope from the crest of the central range, with numerous, long river valleys that dissect the foothills, terraces and low-lying wetlands that comprise the west Kamchatka plain. Between the eastern and central ranges lies the Central Kamchatka plain and long, broad valley of the Kamchatka River.

Land of Rivers and Lakes

One of the most striking features of the landscape is the abundance of fresh water. Kamchatka's rugged topography and ample precipitation give rise to thousands of rivers, streams and creeks, and lakes and ponds almost beyond counting. And because of the lack of industry and sparse population, almost all of these waters are totally pristine. Only a handful of them receive any measure of recreational use, mostly by locals.

The upper courses of Kamchatka's mountain rivers are swift, rocky and single-channeled as they carve steep valleys into bedrock. They slow and widen as they emerge from the surrounding foothills, and become

braided as they enter the lowlands along the coast. (The gravel streambeds of the middle and lower sections of these rivers are what provide so much spawning habitat for salmon.) Many of these rivers form extensive lagoons at their terminus with the sea. On the western, Sea of Okhotsk side, the largest of these drainages are the Penzhina (443 miles), Bolshaya (175 miles), Tigil (180 miles), Icha, and Vorovskaya. On the northeast coast, emptying into the Bering Sea are the Ozernaya (124 miles), Ivashka, Karaga, Anapka, Valovayam and Apuka (185 miles) rivers. The biggest Pacific Ocean drainages include the Kamchatka (471 miles), Avacha and Zhupanova (130 miles) rivers.

The physical character of these streams—their size, clarity, swift flows and shallow to moderate depth— plus the fact that many are spring fed, makes them ideal for salmon, trout, and charr, as well as perfect for the fly fisherman. With their classic conditions, these many productive drainages represent what is undoubtedly the greatest reserve of high-quality wild stream fishing left in the world. Nowhere else—not even fabled Alaska— will you find such a concentration of perfect wade and sight fishing water and abundant fish populations. And presently, only a small share of this treasure trove has been exploited by anglers.

The lakes of Kamchatka are many, but surprising few are of the size seen in neighboring Alaska. Many of these small, shallow impoundments have been formed by old craters and calderas (Khangar, Kronotsky, Kurile, etc.), or lava dikes (Palana). But most are glacial in origin or develop in peat bogs. The largest lakes in Kamchatka are Nerpiche (173 square miles) and Kronotosky. The deepest is Kurile Lake at 1004 feet.

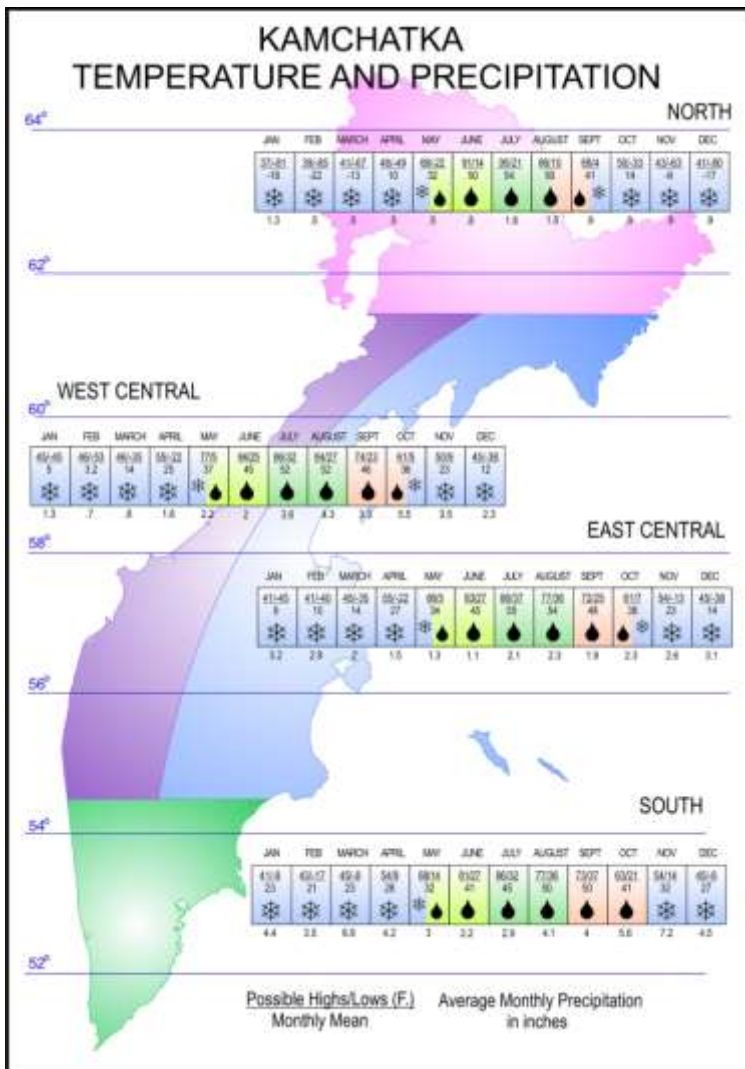
Kamchatka's Climate

Due to its location and physiography, Kamchatka has a highly variable climate of predominantly northern to subarctic maritime conditions, with seasonal influxes of continental air masses (due to its proximity to the mainland of Asia). This is especially noticeable in the sheltered central lowlands of the Kamchatka River valley, which see the coldest (to minus 40 F. in winter), hottest (up to two months of 70 degrees F. or more in summer) and driest weather (15 inches average annual precipitation) on the peninsula. Frigid ocean currents and prolonged ice cover (up to eight months on the Sea of Okhotsk) delay real spring in Kamchatka until late May and early June and keep most summers cool, damp and cloudy. This is especially true for northern Kamchatka, which lacks the high mountains to shield from the marine layer, and has from 150-260 cloudy days each year. Generally, the weather is more severe in the west than the east, due to the adjacent, icier Sea of Okhotsk.

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Winters in Kamchatka are snowy, long and cold, varying in severity with location, but persisting from late October or early November into April (and sometimes beyond) in much of the peninsula. Temperatures along the eastern coast seldom dip below zero. The largest amount of precipitation, up to 97 inches per year, falls on the eastern and southern mountain slopes of the peninsula; the lowest amount, 12 to 15 inches, on parts of the central valley.

Around Petropavlovsk-Yelizovo and the lowlands of the Avacha River valley, some of the peninsula's nicest weather occurs. Protected from



sea winds by the nearby volcanic ranges, this area attracts tourists with a longer summer, with average daily temperature of 60 degrees F. from July into the first part of September. Autumn there is usually sunny and dry, with temperatures, on average, in the 50's F. from the second half of September into October. Average daily temperatures remain above freezing some years until well into November.

Kamchatka's Vegetation

Despite a severe climate, Kamchatka supports a luxuriant growth of vegetation, due to its mineral-rich volcanic soils, long summer days and abundant precipitation. Great areas of land (30% of the peninsula), particularly in the south and central regions, are covered in forest, typically of large, gnarled stone (Erman's) birch, *Betula ermanii*, which is adapted to heavy snow winters, and the much less common, white birch, *Betula platyphylla*. Lush meadows of tall grasses, herbs and wildflowers abound in areas of disturbance, such as from fire or heavy snow accumulation. On mountain slopes and higher elevations, the birch groves give way to near-impenetrable stands of dwarf Siberian pine (elfin cedar), *pinus pumila*, and shrub alder. River lowlands, as in Alaska, are a haven for fast growing, water-loving species like willow (some 33 species in Kamchatka), alder, poplar and the unique and interesting *Chosenia* (*Chosenia arbutifolia*).

The forest in the central valley is mix of birch (both stone and white), aspen and conifers- the Dahurian larch, *Larix dahurica*, and Yeddo spruce, *Picea ajanensis*. A small, relict stand of Sakhalin fir trees, *Abies gracillis*, found near the mouth of the Semiachik River in the Kronotsky Nature Preserve represents the only conifers growing on Kamchatka's east coast.

In the lowlands of western Kamchatka and throughout the northern Koryak region, lie extensive areas of tundra, similar to western and northern Alaska. Dwarf shrubs of birch, alder, pine and willow predominate there, over a carpet of thick mosses and lichens. Sparse stands of trees, mostly birch, occur on better, well-drained sites.

Kamchatka's History

Due to its remoteness, ruggedness and austere climate, the Kamchatka Peninsula was one of the last lands to be explored and settled by the Russians (though various aboriginal peoples such as Koryaks, Evens, Aleuts, Itelmens, Chukchis, etc., lived there for thousands of years). By the middle of the seventeenth century, enterprising Russian Cossacks had spread to the far corners of eastern Siberia and settled in the Anadyr river basin. Rumors of a land of fire, rich in fish and fur, lying to the south were stoked by accounts of some of the most daring early explorers, including Mikhail Stadukhin, one of the first to sail down the coast (Sea of Okhotsk)

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and describe some of the lands he encountered. Later, bold Cossacks penetrated this territory and explored south to the Kamchatka River, though few written accounts survive of their forays. The first to actually get credit for making the geographical discovery of Kamchatka (based on the first written accounts of exploration) was Vladimir Atlasov, who, in 1697, led a squadron of Cossacks and natives on an extremely arduous thousand-kilometer trek from Anadyr to the banks of the Kamchatka river, where he erected a wooden cross to mark the acquisition of the peninsula by the Russian Empire. He later built two forts which served as trading posts in the area, and by the early years of the 18th century, hundreds of Russians were living among the native Kamchadals. Kamchatka by this time was considered part of the Yakutsk district of the Siberian province of Russia.

Curiosity about the extent of Asia and its possible connection to the New World prompted Tsar Peter the Great, in the final months of his life (late 1724 to early 1725), to commission an expedition to Kamchatka and beyond to determine if Siberia was joined to the Americas. Thus were begun perhaps the greatest organized adventures of exploration ever betook by man- the two voyages of Vitus J. Bering, a Dane who had served as a captain in the Russian Navy for twenty years and was appointed leader of the expeditions.

Both voyages entailed a grueling traverse of the vast and utterly wild expanses of Siberia, a long ordeal that inflicted severe losses of gear and men. When they reached the Pacific on the first expedition, Bering's crew built ships and set sail to the east, reaching the southern mainland of Kamchatka in the fall of 1727. The following summer, Bering sailed east and north from the mouth of the Kamchatka River in the ship "Saint Gabriel", following the coast of Asia to latitude slightly above 67 degrees north, beyond the strait separating the two continents, which was later named after him. The lateness of the season prevented his further exploration, and he returned to Kamchatka to spend the winter. He set sail again to the northeast next summer, but thick fog and bad weather hampered his efforts to reach the coast of the new lands. From his observations and numerous conversations with natives, however, he concluded that the two continents were separated and returned to St. Petersburg in 1730 to report to his superiors.

Though he had achieved much in the way of exploring and mapping the hitherto unknown coasts of northeast Siberia and Kamchatka, Bering was met with considerable skepticism from his peers for failing to conclusively prove the existence of a northeast passage. Undaunted, he

convinced Empress Anna to commission another expedition, far more ambitious and larger than the first.

The horse-drawn caravans of the second expedition left St. Petersburg in 1733. Included were two naval sections, directed to reach the unknown coast of America and find a sea route to Japan, and four detachments whose mission was to explore and map Siberia and Kamchatka. Two German scientists from the newly formed Russian Academy of Science, Gerhard Muller and Johann Gmelin, were in charge of this branch of the expedition, with the young student Stepan Krasheninnikov, their assistant.

When Bering reached the settlement of Okhotsk on the Pacific, he had two ships built, the Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which he, along with his lieutenant Alexei Chirikov, sailed to Avacha Bay on the southeast coast of Kamchatka in 1740, where he had previously sent supplies and men to build a small settlement, which later became the city of Petropavlovsk. In early June of the following year, both ships left to search for America, Bering in command of the “Saint Peter” and Chirikov in the “Saint Paul.” The boats became separated in heavy fog soon after leaving Kamchatka and Bering, after a brief attempt to locate the sister ship, resumed course to the north and east, eventually making landfall near Cape St. Elias, Alaska on the 20th of July, 1741. (His landing party included pioneer naturalist George Steller, who gathered the first written observations and specimens of Alaska’s natural history.) Chirikov made it farther south and east to the Alexander Archipelago but was unable to go ashore.

The explorers did not linger long in the new lands, heading southwest to skirt the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutians. Unfavorable winds, dwindling freshwater supplies, and scurvy hindered their progress back to Kamchatka, and Bering and his crew became shipwrecked in early November on one of the bleak Commander Islands off the east coast of Kamchatka. (Bering died there in early December). Chirikov made it back to Avacha Bay by October. Bering’s marooned crew suffered heavy casualties over the winter, but built a prow from the remains of the Saint Peter the following spring and summer and sailed it back to Petropavlovsk in early fall 1742.

In 1755, Stepan Krasheninnikov published his monumental book, “*Description of the Land of Kamchatka*”, detailing the geography, native culture and natural history of the peninsula, from his four years of exploring Kamchatka. Russian colonization continued, with settlers and exiles swelling the population to several thousand by the early 1800’s. In 1854, the French and British, who were battling Russian forces on the Crimean Peninsula, attacked Petropavlovsk. Although far outnumbered, local forces managed to defend the outpost during the siege. After the

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Anglo-French forces withdrew, Petropavlovsk was abandoned as a strategic liability, and the naval port was moved to Ust-Amur. The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 further decreased Petropavlovsk's importance as a hub for traders and explorers on their way to the American territories. In 1860, the Primorsky (Maritime) Region was established, and Kamchatka was placed under its jurisdiction. In 1875, the Kuril Islands were ceded to Japan in return for Russian sovereignty over Sakhalin. The Russian population of Kamchatka stayed around 2,500 until the turn of the century, while the native population increased to 5,000.

Beginning in 1926, Kamchatka was included in Russia's Far Eastern Territory, administered separately and then later as part of the Khabarovsk district. In 1956, it was given separate status in the USSR. Under the new Russian Federation, as of 2007, Kamchatka Krai (which includes the Koryak autonomous region and offshore islands) is part of the Far Eastern federal district. The city of Petropavlovsk is the capital. In 1991, it was opened to foreign visitors.

KAMCHATKA TODAY

Resources & Economy

The Kamchatka Peninsula, like neighboring Alaska, enjoys a rich bounty of natural resources. Abundant mineral wealth includes numerous deposits of precious metals (gold, platinum, and silver), mercury, complex metallic ores (copper/nickel/cobalt) and coal, oil and natural gas. Plentiful construction materials (sand, gravel, clay, pumice, perlite, building stone, etc.) are also widespread but barely utilized. The peninsula's notorious volcanism creates considerable geothermal potential at numerous sites (only a small number currently being exploited for power generation), along with an abundance of thermal and mineral waters of great value to commerce and personal recreation.

The legendary scenic and biological resources of the Kamchatka Peninsula are, of course, its greatest assets. Foremost among them certainly are the prolific fisheries, providing in waters in and around the peninsula a rich harvest of high-value commercial species (salmon, crab, halibut, pollock, etc.) in addition to some of the world's last remaining opportunities for virgin cold water sport fishing. The unique landscape features and rich and pristine assemblage of wildlife and plants (918 vertebrate animals and 1168 species of plants) are preserved in some 152 designated Protected Areas (nature parks, refuges, reserves, preserves, monuments, etc., comprising 27% of Kamchatka's land area), six of them of UNESCO World Heritage Status.

The 330,000 or so folks who live in Kamchatka earn their living mostly by fishing, canning, sealing, mining, lumbering, shipbuilding, and woodworking. Fishing and related industries dominate the economy and crabs and salmon are the main catch and exported worldwide. Tourism is of growing and significant importance, given the peninsula's world class reputation among Eco-tourists, fly fishermen, and hunters. A limited amount of timber harvesting (in the Central Valley), agriculture (grain, potato and other vegetable growing; dairy farming, cattle and reindeer herding) and harvesting of wild furs rounds out Kamchatka's economy.

Government

In accordance with the principles of self-government laid out in the Russian Constitution of 1993, Kamchatka is now a democratic republic, with government comprised of administrative, legislative and judicial bodies, organized and run much like the U.S. There is a governor, and mayors, district, city and town councils, judges, representatives, ministers, etc., either elected or appointed. The regional government retains a certain autonomy within the Russian Federation, much like an individual state of the U.S. has in the federal government.

People

Kamchatka's population today is comprised mostly of transplanted Russians, with a minority of natives from five major indigenous groups—the Evens, Itelmens, Koryaks, Aleuts, and Chukchis—that have occupied Kamchatka for at least 12,000 years. They are historically nomadic subsistence cultures, utilizing Kamchatka's abundant fish, game and marine mammals and also reindeer herding. They preserve their way of life today in villages and camps around the peninsula, concentrated mostly in the Bystrinsky district and northern Koryak region.

Russian people, in general, are proud, independent and resourceful. A tolerance for the inadequacies of their government and the deplorable conditions they sometimes must endure is a hallmark trait of their character. So too is their hospitableness to foreigners, though they may lack outward warmth to strangers on the streets.

Language

The official language of the Kamchatka region is Russian. Many of its people, however, speak some English and most tourist companies, large hotels, restaurants and government agencies have representatives capable of conversing in English. With the growth of foreign tourism, other languages like German and Japanese are increasingly spoken.

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Currency

The official currency of Kamchatka is the Russian rouble, available in coins for small denominations and bank notes for amounts of 10 roubles or more. (Foreign currency can be exchanged for roubles only at the banks.) Almost all businesses in Kamchatka perform cash transactions in roubles only, with credit cards (VISA and MASTERCARD) accepted only by large hotels, restaurants, and some supermarkets in Petropavlovsk-Yelizovo and other large hubs. ATM machines are available in major businesses and banks in the Yelizovo-Petropavlovsk metropolitan area.

Religion

As part of the Russian Federation, Kamchatka has no official religion recognized by the government. The Russian Orthodox Church has a rich history of involvement in the settlement and development of all of Far East Russia and continues its influence today with a majority of believers in Kamchatka. Their distinctive churches can be seen all across the region. There are also 70 other diverse denominations practicing within Kamchatka.

FRESHWATER GAMEFISHES OF KAMCHATKA



RAINBOW TROUT



Oncorhynchus mykiss

Common names: Mikizha (Russia); rainbow, rainbow trout and “bow” (U.S.); noble trout (Kamchatka), semga (steelhead, Russia)

Description: Beautifully colored and spotted native trout of Kamchatka, similar if not identical to same species found in North America. Grows to 32 inches and 12 lbs.; average size 16 to 20 inches, 1 ½ to 3 lbs.

Range/Abundance/Status: Found over most of southern and central Kamchatka. Locally abundant (frequently with charr) and thriving throughout range

Best Waters: Large, productive salmon rivers with variety of habitat

Best Rivers: Zhupanova, Opala, Ozernaya, Pymta, Icha, Tigil, Tikhaya, Kolpokova, Bolshaya & Kamchatka river systems

Best Fly Patterns: Forage, attractor and egg/flesh patterns; nymph and dry flies (including mouse patterns)

Best Times: Available year-round; best in spring and late summer into fall

The most widespread and popular cold water game fish in the world, the rainbow trout was originally described from wild specimens taken from Kamchatka streams as far back as the late 18th century. (The bigger sea-run forms, steelhead, came to be known as the Kamchatka salmon-trout, or “semga” to the Russians, while the river resident forms were called “mikizha” after the local vernacular.). These far-flung populations of robust native rainbows were “rediscovered” by westerners late in the 20th century as Kamchatka opened up its borders to tourists after the demise of the Soviet Union. Visiting anglers’ initial encounters with abundant, big wild trout and near-perfect stream conditions launched the beginning of Kamchatka’s sport fishing industry. These beautiful fighters remain the biggest draw for visiting fly anglers the world over, who come to experience some of the best wild fishing left for the species.

Description

The Kamchatka rainbow, in its most common form, is usually easily recognizable, different from any salmon, though it sometimes can be mistaken at first glance for a bright, sea-run Dolly Varden charr. River resident rainbows are sleek and streamlined, with topsides of olive green to gray or bluish-gray, blending into sides of silver or silver-gray that become whitish toward the belly. A pink, crimson or lilac stripe or blush along the midline and gill plate, along with prominent round black markings on the

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body and tail fin are salient identifying characters. Belly fins are generally pinkish to pearly white. Rainbow fry and parr can be hard to distinguish from young coho (silver salmon), which display similar color and markings. (Rainbow fingerlings have smaller eyes proportionately than coho.) The flesh of the rainbow trout varies from white to pink to light orange-red, depending on diet, and is considered choice eating.

Rainbows that spend time in estuaries and out at sea are generally more robust and salmon-like in appearance, with silvery coloration and fewer markings. It should be noted that appearance can vary with time of year, diet, maturity and location. Spawning brings physical changes, similar to but not as dramatic as in salmon, with a darkening of coloration and moderate jaw kypes in the males.

Much has been made of the hefty size of Kamchatka's rainbows. Average length and weight vary considerably from drainage to drainage (because of life history variation- read on for details), and can be anywhere from 16 to 24 inches and 1 & 1/2 to 4 lbs., which clearly puts Kamchatka's trout on a par with Alaska and other trophy locations. (Which is remarkable considering most of Kamchatka's big trout fisheries do not have large headwater lakes, unlike those in Alaska and the Southern Hemisphere.)



Distribution

The rainbow trout is distributed along much of the north Pacific Rim, from Mexico to Kamchatka. In Russia, the "mikizha" is found throughout most of southern and central Kamchatka, from the Ozernaya River in the east, to the Golygina River in the south, to the Palana River in the northwest. It is especially abundant in rivers with abundant spawning and rearing habitat and large runs of salmon. (The rainbow is not found in any numbers on the mainland along the Sea of Okhotsk, and only sporadically

on some of the islands south of the Kamchatka Peninsula.) The sea-run form of the rainbow trout, the steelhead or “semga” in Russian, has a similar, but much more sporadic distribution.

Life History

Kamchatka’s rainbow trout, for the most part, shares the same life history as the Alaska rainbow, with some interesting differences. It begins its life in much the same manner as salmon, hatching from eggs laid and fertilized in a gravel stream bed (spawning usually occurs in May or early June). Rainbow fry develop quickly, feeding on insect and crustacean life, and later, when larger, on minnows (sticklebacks and juvenile salmon) leeches, freshwater shrimp, the roe and flesh of spawning salmon and even small rodents. Extremely opportunistic, the adult rainbow trout will feed heavily on any available food source, making extensive migrations throughout its range to exploit seasonally available sustenance. It reaches sexual maturity in three to six years, and data collected show it may live to about ten (rarely longer). Unlike salmon, the rainbow trout can spawn multiple times during its lifespan.

Studies done over the last twenty years or so have turned up a remarkable diversity of rainbow life history variations on the rivers of Kamchatka (and shed light on why the average size is so large on many rivers). Apart from the common form that spends its entire life in freshwater or the less common, but well-known steelhead, which spends most of its adult life at sea, there are mikizha that make short feeding forays into estuaries and some even that go out along the coast for up to several months at a time. The trout populations in many of the rivers studied, it turns out, are a mix of these life history types (six possible life history variations have been identified), with some systems producing mostly steelhead, others mostly river resident fish and some rivers a blend of stream-dwelling, estuary feeding and ocean ranging types. Stream morphology, food abundance, genetics, water temperature regimes and other variables have been proposed as possibly influencing variations in life history. Whether this is a phenomenon unique to the rivers of Kamchatka remains to be determined.

Habits

Rainbows, compared to other trout, are notoriously rambunctious, and Kamchatka trout seem even more reckless than their counterparts in Alaska. They will follow a skittered mouse pattern right into shore, hitting it repeatedly and sometimes even hooking themselves at your feet. Or gorge on salmon roe until their bellies almost burst and the eggs spill out of

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their mouths as they grab your fly in their insatiable greed for more food. Perhaps the most endearing of the rainbow's traits, next to its spectacular fighting ability (few fish will leap as high or as often when hooked), is its easy arousal and vigorous manner in which it attacks prey. Nothing whacks a fly, lure or bait like a hungry rainbow, especially one that lives in the feast or famine waters of Alaska or Kamchatka! If you should fish during the early or late part of the season when food is relatively scarce, there'll be no mistaking the take of a rainbow for any other creature that swims in these waters.

This is not to say that the Kamchatka mikizha is a guaranteed pushover requiring little finesse to entice it to the fly. In situations of great food abundance, such as on summer salmon spawning beds or one of Kamchatka's prolific insect hatches, the rainbow may become surprisingly finicky, to the point even where it may steadfastly refuse any artificial enticement, much to your frustration. More commonly encountered however, will be situations requiring a careful "match the hatch" strategy, along with better line control to detect the subtle takes from fully sated and barely aroused trout. This unpredictability is one of the hallmark characteristics of the species, a trait that combined with its radiant beauty and supreme lust for freedom, make the rainbow the great game fish that it is.

FLY FISHING KAMCHATKA'S RAINBOW TROUT

In Kamchatka, the rainbow trout is frequently taken incidentally by Russians fishing for salmon, using heavy spinning gear and lures. There is also considerable targeted effort for the mikizha by residents who fish them, along with the peninsula's abundant Dolly Varden charr and (where available) grayling, on light spinning gear, primarily for subsistence. (Poachers also take quite a few incidentally in their illegal bulk netting of salmon.) Currently, the only significant fly fishing effort for the species occurs on the most popular rivers visited by foreign anglers (Zhupanova, Opala, Bolshaya, Ozernaya and others). Dozens of great Kamchatka trout rivers receive little or no fly fishing pressure.

Since Russia's rainbows share so many similarities with trout in Alaska, fly anglers interested in pursuing the Kamchatka mikizha will do well utilizing most of the strategies, gear, and flies used in the 49th state, with some exceptions. Rainbows can be fly fished successfully in Kamchatka from the beginning of open water season (April to May in most rivers) to ice-up (late October to November). Generally, forage, nymph and attractor patterns are most productive during early season fishing, while egg/flesh, attractors and dry fly patterns (including mouse imitations) work

best during the warmest months of the year. Fall fish will succumb to forage, attractor, egg/flesh and, when the conditions are right, dry fly patterns.

Since the rainbow is extremely opportunistic and far-ranging in its search for food, the accepted strategy is to target areas that may hold seasonally available food sources: lake outlets, stream confluences, river mouths and estuaries (for spring trout feeding on smolt and other forage); salmon spawning and holding areas (for egg and flesh feeding trout during summer and early fall); deep pools, cut banks, tail-outs, drop-offs, boulder-strewn rapids, sloughs, etc. (forage ambush sites used during the entire open water season); and anywhere feeding trout are observed (such as in areas where hatches occur). Local knowledge, maps, an ability to “read” rivers and polarized sunglasses will be extremely useful for locating feeding trout on Kamchatka’s clearwater streams.

Early Season Rainbows: Early season in Kamchatka runs from anytime open water is available (usually April or early May in most southern and central streams) to the arrival of the first salmon in early summer (usually early June). This period can present the most challenging trout fishing conditions of the year, with raw weather, possibly turbid and/or swollen streams and feeding fish that may be difficult to locate. (The trout are usually starving, however, and seldom present any challenge in enticement, once you do locate them.) Traditionally, this is the best time of year for forage pattern fishing (including nymphing), especially early on, as the rainbows will be keyed into larval insect and fish life and most prone to properly selected and presented artificials that mimic early season food items (including mouse patterns!) Attractors can also be used to great effect with these early season trout. Traditional wet fly swings and drifts will produce the most response, using floating or short sink tip lines and additional weight, if needed, to get the fly down. Small fish flies (Alevin, Fry, Parr, Smolt, Muddler, etc.) and Leeches are classic patterns for this kind of fishing, as are nymphs like the Hare’s Ear, Caddis, and Stonefly. If you do everything right, expect to take quite a few charr along with rainbows, as the two species share waters and compete for many of the available food sources this time of year.

As spring develops, rainbow trout will begin to gather around their traditional spawning sites: small feeder creeks, headwaters, side channels, lake outlets, etc. Hungry, testy and concentrated in great numbers in some areas, they are easy prey for anglers. As Kamchatka has yet to evolve management that protects rainbows at their most vulnerable time in their life cycle (as Alaska has), it is up to the discretion of anglers to leave these fish alone when they actively begin their spawning activities (usually mid-

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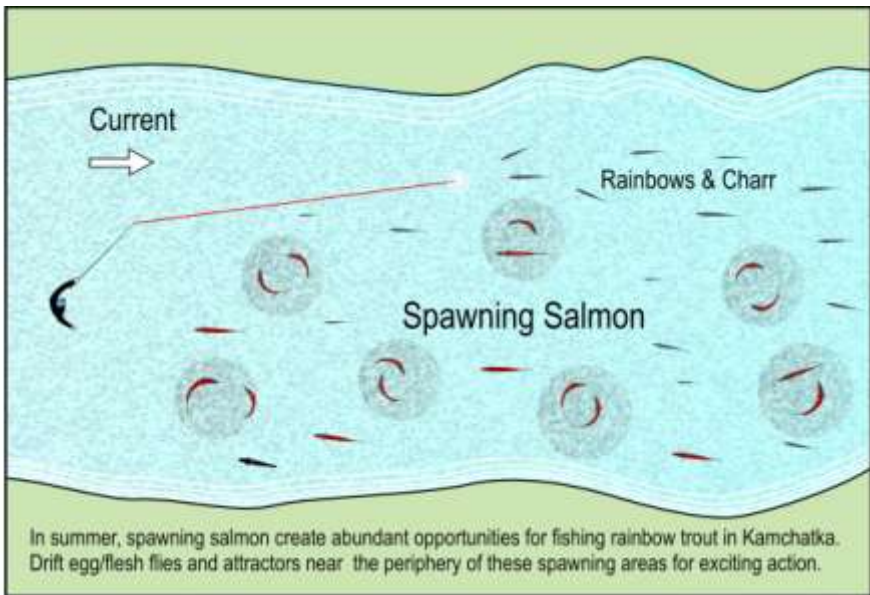
May into early June). After spawning, the trout, spent and famished, will linger briefly in these areas, and then disperse in search of abundant, seasonally available prey such as sea-bound smolt and the first insect hatches of the year. This can be another great time for fishing, to intercept these particularly hungry trout with a good forage pattern or attractor.

By late May or early June, most streams in Kamchatka will be running high and murky from the rapidly melting headwater snowpack, less than ideal conditions, for sure, but still great fishing possible, as the rainbows are in much better shape and the rising water temperatures bring on more feeding activity. There are still shoals of smolts making their panicked way to the sea in the larger, more productive systems and increasingly more emerging insect life for trout to focus on. And, the first groups of salmon begin entering lower rivers, an arrival of such great importance to the trout that they will literally “shadow” groups of their larger cousins as they make their way upriver to their spawning grounds. Depending on location and conditions, you can do fabulously well this time of year fishing forage, dry fly, attractors or even egg patterns. Best spots to locate trout are in river mouths, confluences, shallow to moderately deep pools, riffle sections, drop-offs and around structure like boulders and log jams.

Summer Rainbows: Real summer in most of Kamchatka begins in late June and continues into September. For trout, these warmest weeks of the year mean frenzied feeding on abundant insect hatches and salmon eggs. By the first or second week of July, most of the streams will settle down, presenting great conditions for wade-and-cast, sight fishing. Dry flies and egg patterns will naturally be the best producers this time of year, with attractors and forage flies usually providing consistent, but lesser results.

Locating feeding trout this time of year is usually no trick and consists of searching for hatches and spawning salmon, two activities not in short supply on the fecund rivers of Kamchatka during the height of summer. Most salmon spawning occurs in the middle to lower sections of rivers, where the gravel substrate and current are ideal for the success of the mating act and survival of the eggs. Look for groups of salmon holding in side channels, pool tail-outs, riffle sections, stream margins, sloughs, under cut banks and other prime locations. Good polarized sunglasses are essential for this task. (If, in a likely spot, you sight a group that does not show signs of moving upriver in a reasonable amount of time, you have probably found some spawners.) If you peer long enough into the water, you may sight smaller, lighter colored shapes moving around the periphery of these areas where the bigger fish are holding. These are the

opportunistic charr and rainbow trout that are feasting on the stray eggs that drift away from the nests into the current. (Some of the more bold and swift of these egg pirates can be seen darting into the salmon nests to grab eggs.) Depending on the size of the nest area and number of spawning salmon, there can be dozens of these marauders, so keyed into the color and shape of salmon eggs, they make easy prey for anglers drifting a suitable artificial enticement through their field of vision. A single or double egg fly (Glo Bug, Babine Special), bead egg, or appropriate attractor (Polar Shrimp, Skykomish Sunrise) drifted right above bottom (using a floating line, perhaps with split shot placed a short ways above the fly), is deadly in these situations. Strike indicators, if you fish them, can be extremely useful in this kind of fishing, particularly when using bead eggs.



Note: If you are targeting trout feeding on salmon roe, do not disturb spawning salmon by casting in or drifting through their redds. Instead, cast carefully to the trout holding on the periphery around and downstream of these salmon nests, and if you do accidentally hook one of the big spawners, which happens not infrequently when fishing attractor or egg patterns, break it off immediately.

Locating hatches is not as formulaic, as they can occur just about anywhere and anytime along Kamchatka's rocky streambeds. But in summer, you won't have to work too hard to find some kind of emerging insect activity, especially if you are fishing with a boat. Some of the more

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common areas to find rising fish are in stream margins, pools, tail-outs, riffle sections and feeder creek confluences. (You may even come upon an area where salmon spawning and hatches are occurring near or even adjacent to each other.) Keep in mind that in Kamchatka, these hatches attract the attention of not just the prized rainbow trout, but also abundant grayling and charr.

Fall Rainbows: Fall in most of Kamchatka's rainbow country comes in mid- to late September, with cooler nights creating a dramatic change in foliage and water temperatures, along with, in addition to waning food sources, a marked shift in the feeding behavior and movements of the peninsula's trout. The last runs of salmon wane, causing rainbows to scour spawning beds for any available eggs and carcasses. (Quite a few rivers in Kamchatka, however, get late runs of sockeye, chum, and silvers, well into September.) Many of these spawning areas, long into fall, can provide great fishing for anglers drifting egg and flesh patterns, tempting trout in the absolute peak of condition, fattened by a summer of gorging, with appetites heightened by the change in season. Egg and flesh flies (Glo Bug, Babine, Flesh Fly, Carcass Fly and others) and egg-like attractors (Polar Shrimp, Battle Creek, Skykomish Sunrise, Kamchatka Special, Cotton Candy, Pink Sparkler and similar patterns) are the ticket to some of the biggest rainbows of the year.

Forage and attractor patterns can also be used on these fat fall trout, with best results fishing areas like pools, confluences, sloughs, under cut banks and around structure (boulders, islands, logjams, etc.), to pick up hungry trout on the prowl as they begin to move from established summer feeding areas to overwintering sites. And don't overlook the Kamchatka fall as a fabulous time for mousing, as the trout become increasingly reckless when their abundant summer food supply begins to dwindle.

Dry Fly Fishing

Even anglers seasoned on the great rivers of the American West, New Zealand or South America will be happy with the dry fly fishing conditions in Kamchatka. Due to the climate and volcanic substrate, the rivers support a surprisingly rich biota of insect life (quite a few species of caddis, stone and dragonflies, some mayflies and numerous midges, black flies, mosquitoes and other insects) and are ideal for fly casting. The timing of these hatches is more spread out than in southern locales, with a peak in intensity during the warmest days of the year (July & August), but sustained throughout the open water season, especially on the more productive rivers. Even on off days of bum weather, if you are fishing with

a boat, you can usually locate surface feeding trout within a short distance along the rivers.

As previously noted, rainbows (and charr and grayling) that feed on these abundant hatches can become selective, ignoring other, more nourishing forage available nearby (such as salmon eggs/flesh, rodents, and small fish) and in extreme cases, refusing all but the most carefully matched and presented artificials. Fortunately, these persnickety rainbows are rare, and generally, the mikizha is more than willing to cooperate when presented with a fair imitation of what is on the menu, with no extreme technical prowess or specialized gear required on the part of the angler. (You can leave your fluorocarbon and hero casts back home.) If you do encounter a group of super-snooty rainbows that turn down your best attempts to match the hatch, some of the strategies used in Kamchatka to entice them are to switch to nymphing rigs, dropper fly setups, or even attractors. This sometimes works to jolt them out of their lethargy. Keep in mind, of course, that, similar to Alaska, there are almost always more eager fish available nearby, so don't spend too much time trying to raise overly finicky trout. (See section on techniques and gear for much more information on dry fly fishing in Kamchatka.)

Mouse Fishing

The most exciting and unique “dry fly” fishing in Kamchatka involves skittering rodent imitations across the surface, commonly known as “mousing”. This technique employs large, bushy flies constructed of spun deer hair, fur or foam, lifelike creations that mimic any one of several species of Kamchatka’s ubiquitous small rodents (voles, mice, lemmings, shrews) that periodically overrun river banks with their numbers and fall prey to marauding trout. The mouse, rat or lemming patterns typically used are best fished on or slightly below the surface, using twitches of the rod to impart lifelike action. Most productive areas are sloughs, pools, rock-filled rapids, under cut banks and around brush piles and logjams. The take of a big trout on these oversized surface patterns is quite dramatic and once experienced, leaves the angler feeling never quite the same about other, more tame surface presentations! The general rule is to let the fish hook itself; otherwise, you may pull the fly from the fish’s mouth if you get too trigger happy. A much more intensive fishing technique than drifting or stripping attractors or forage patterns, mousing is usually most productive during the low light of evening and morning and on cloudy days. (See the techniques and gear section for much more information on fishing with the Mouse and other faux rodents.)



An angler twitches a Mouse through some promising water on the Pymta River, southern Kamchatka.

Gearing Up

Most Kamchatka trout anglers bring a 5 or 6-weight, medium-action, standard length (8 to 9 foot) graphite fly rod for headwater and stream fishing, and a 7 or even an 8-weight, medium-action, standard or long (8 ½ to 10 foot) graphite rod for fishing the deeper, swifter water found in the lower sections of Kamchatka's trout rivers, especially the larger ones (Kamchatka, Zhupanova, Bolshaya, Ozernaya and others). Performance-tapered floating and short (5 foot or less) medium-density, sink-tip fly lines work best for almost all the waters you will encounter, along with 9 foot tapered nylon monofilament leaders (Kamchatka's rainbows are not leader shy, so fluorocarbon is not necessary) and 0X–5X (4 to 10 pound test) tippets. Strike indicators and split shot are commonly used. See gear and techniques section for more information on recommended gear for fly fishing Kamchatka's rainbow trout.

Note: Rainbow trout exhaust themselves so thoroughly when fighting that they are easily killed unless handled gently and released quickly into the water. Confer with your guide if you are not entirely familiar with proper “catch and release” techniques, and use micro or barbless hooks to minimize your impact on this world-class resource. (Get more information on minimum impact, catch and release fishing techniques in our section on techniques and gear for fly fishing Kamchatka.)

Recommended Wet Fly Patterns:

Spring: Alevin, Smolt, Fry, Parr and Sculpin (#4–10); Matuka, Woolly Bugger, Leech, Muddler (#4–8); Mickey Finn, Polar Shrimp (#6–8); Hare’s Ear Nymph, Bead Head Caddis (#8); Stone Nymph, Mayfly Nymph (#8–14); Bitch Creek #4–8, Bead Head Brassie (#10), Emerger #12

Summer/Fall: Egg Sucking Leech #6–8, Zonker #6–8, Flesh/Carcass Fly #4–6, Black Gnat #4–6, Bunny Bug #4–6, Crystal Bugger #6–8, McCune Sculpin #4–6, Cotton Candy #4–6, Battle Creek #6–8, Kamchatka Special #6–8, Polar Shrimp #6–8, Woolly Bugger #4–8, Glo Bug (Egg) #8–12, Marabou Muddler #4–8, Babine Special #4–8, Skykomish Sunrise #6–8, Bead Egg (5–8 mm with #8–12 egg hook), Crystal Bullet #4–8, Pink Sparkler #6–8

Recommended Dry Fly Patterns:

Wulff #10–14, Stonefly #10, Parachute Adams #14–20, Black Gnat #10–14, Elk Hair Caddis #12–16, Olive Stimulator #12, Mosquito #12–16, Midge #20–22, Cahill #12–18, Yellow Sally #12–16, Red Quill #16–20, Blue Wing Olive #12–18

Mouse (size #4–6): Whitlock’s Deerhair Mouse/Rat, Mercer’s Lemming, Morrish Mouse, Babine Foamback, Fur Mouse, Wiggle Lemming.

KAMCHATKA MOUSING



One of the most thrilling ways of fishing Kamchatka's big rainbows is to skitter a fake rodent across the water to induce savage surface strikes. There's just something about a giant trout coming up to whack a top water fly that sets an angler's pulse racing, especially in clear water where you can see all the action. Fishing mouse and other rodent imitations is arguably the ultimate "dry fly" angling for trout. It is usually done in tamer places only at night or more rarely, during very special conditions in daylight. But in the Far North—especially Alaska and Kamchatka, where the rainbows come big, bold and unsophisticated— an angler can consistently lure them to the surface with faux rodents practically any time of day. And though Alaska has some really great mousing water, Kamchatka, for reasons not entirely clear, has far and away the most abundant opportunities for taking big rainbows in this unique and exciting way. In fact, at times on certain rivers, you can fish a Mouse exclusively

and take all the rainbows your arms can handle, all day long, day after day. It can be that good.

In addition to traditional mouse, rat and lemming patterns, many other large, top water creations like bass poppers, pike frogs, diver flies, hopper patterns, pollywogs, steelhead waking flies, etc. will take Kamchatka's rainbows. Anything of size that's not too ridiculous looking and creates some kind of topwater disturbance will get the attention of these marauding, opportunistic feeders (shy trout don't make it in this part of the world), and it's not uncommon for them to pursue your fly until they hook themselves, quite often literally right at your feet, so focused and determined they are on getting big food morsels! Like any other pattern, however, a Mouse, when well presented, will have the greatest chance of enticing every trout within striking distance, including the largest and best fed.

Fishing the Mouse

The theory and techniques behind fishing rodent imitations are the same, regardless of the fly used. These topwater creations mimic small mammals (mice, voles, shrews and lemmings) found in cyclically varying numbers along trout streams in the Far North. During times of great abundance, these little critters are prone to fall or leap off banks into streams, where they become prime fare for hungry rainbow trout, charr, and even grayling. This creates a common enough food source for the trout to be constantly alert for any large surface commotion, particularly in areas near shore.

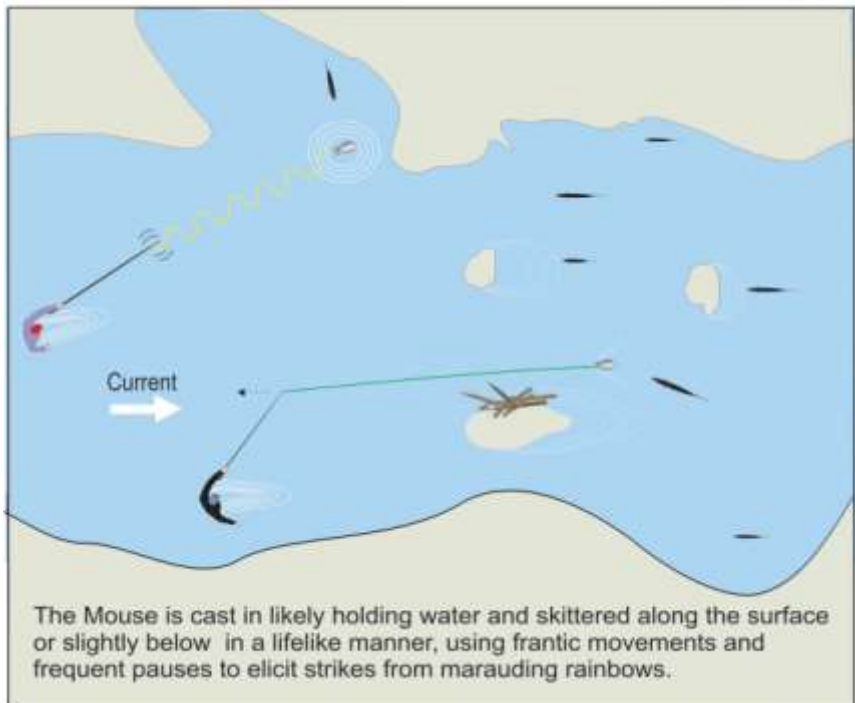
Kamchatka's streams have physical characteristics that make them ideal for mousing. Though they can be successfully fished just about anywhere along their length with rodent imitations, the best water on most rivers is usually found from the midsection down to the mouth, where there is less gradient and the kind of cover conducive to holding good rodent numbers. Best areas to tempt these large surface-feeding rainbows are in the backwaters of sloughs and meandering side channels, around brush piles, log jams and in back eddies. In the main channel, look for moderately shallow pools, drop-offs, cut banks, and rocky riffle sections of moderate depth. (Avoid very swift water with no structure or water that is too deep or too shallow.) Some of the best and most enjoyable mousing can be had in canyons with boulders large enough to break up the current and create spots where trout can hide and ambush prey. There an angler may even be able to hop (very carefully!) from rock to rock and lob a Mouse out into the small pockets of holding water, often with spectacular results. There is also great mousing to be had along Kamchatka's countless

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spring creeks, with their abundant aquatic vegetation that creates perfect ambush sites for hunky rainbows that explode out of the thick green cover to annihilate drifting rodent imitations.

Experience has shown that Kamchatka's rainbows can be taken on rodent imitations throughout the season, and at any time during the day, but are most prone to succumb to fake mice in late spring/early summer and late fall when the rich and easy fare of summer salmon spawn is not as readily available and during low light conditions such as in early morning, late evening and on cloudy days, when trout are more reckless in feeding. On rivers where rodent populations are at peak levels, however, the Mouse and similar patterns seem to fish well even during the height of salmon spawning and in bright midday conditions.

It should be said that mousing, compared to just about any other technique for rousing rainbows, involves significantly more effort and time to work productive stretches of water, so that, albeit the results are more dramatic and exciting, you won't cover the ground and take the numbers of fish that your comrades will using other, more traditional methods like swinging attractors or drifting egg/flesh flies. This is especially true during the height of the season when a wide variety of food sources is available. For those determ



ined to have the indescribable experience of a big trout thrashing the surface in pursuit of their little mouse fly, the tradeoff seems of little concern.

Technique

As far as basic mousing technique goes, the idea is to mimic the frantic movements of a small rodent adrift or drowning in the stream. Your fly should be presented as cleanly as possible in a promising area, and then allowed to sit for a moment or two before you begin your retrieve. Some anglers use a passive style, mostly drifting the fly, with maybe a twitch every now and then to create a slight wake. But most fishermen like to work the Mouse more, using twitches of the rod tip, held high, to jerk it in small hops along the surface, the idea being to create a noticeable wake and splash to sound the dinner bell for all nearby trout. You can vary the hopping motion with occasional side quivers of the rod to impart a nervous shake to the Mouse, for more realism. Most successful mousers do not work the fly too fast; slow retrieves seem to take more fish. And don't forget to pause every few hops; many strikes will come when the Mouse is at rest. If a fish follows it but doesn't take or only nibbles at the Mouse, kick up the action a bit to incite a strike, and if that doesn't work, wait a bit and then cast to it again.

Should these flies be dressed? Some guides and anglers prefer to fish mouse patterns, especially those made of rabbit fur, as drowning mice, working them at or slightly below the surface. They have great success fishing this way, too. For those who want the visibility and spectacular strikes that a high floating fly bring, some kind of dressing may be necessary, depending on the fly. (When fishing tightly packed, trimmed deerhair mouse variations or some of the foam back flies, you won't need any floatant.)

Smaller trout and charr (and grayling, as well) will often peck at a big Mouse, but the larger rainbows will engulf it, often with startling ferocity. Because of the manner at which a big trout takes and kills a rodent, the possibility of deep throat hooking is greater when fishing these flies than other imitations, so diligence is required to get a quick hookset and avoid injuring the fish. Many anglers let the fish take the Mouse under and swim away with it before setting the hook, but this often results in wounded fish. (You can do a lot to avoid this by fishing patterns tied with smaller, less damaging hooks, and pinching the barbs down.) If you do miss the fish, you can always cast to it again, as it will more than likely hit repeatedly unless it has been stung hard by steel.

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Standard mousing gear for Kamchatka is a 6 or 7-weight, medium-fast action, graphite rod, 8 ½ to 10 feet long, with matching reel loaded with performance-tapered floating line and standard (7 to 9 foot) tapered monofilament leader. In really big water or difficult conditions (heavy wind), you can bump up to an 8-weight. Tippets used are usually in the 0X to 2X (8 to 10 lb.) range.

Choosing the Right Pattern

Selecting appropriate patterns for a Kamchatka mousing expedition is complicated considerably by the plethora of rodent patterns currently available in shops and catalogs. Many are extremely lifelike and hard to resist, with cute little whiskers, tails, ear tufts and beady eyes that implore you to take them home. While the fly tiers have certainly achieved their goal of making them irresistible to fishermen, catching trout with these imitations is another matter. Some of the most likely looking ones fish horribly, while the least lifelike creations turn out to be stellar performers on stream. What are some of the characteristics of a great performing pattern that you should look for in a prospective mouse fly?

If you think about, little of the external adornment on these patterns is of any real consequence to a hungry, wild northern rainbow responding reflexively to a noisy disturbance and rodent profile on the stream's surface (quite often in diminished light). For the serious mouse angler, the concern should be more with a fly's potential performance than how well it mimics all the physical details of a rodent. How well will the fly cast? How will it float (buoyancy and staying upright)? Is it durable? And, of course, will the trout fall for it?

The materials and design used in these patterns is everything as far as performance goes. Spun deer hair, the original material used in mouse patterns (Whitlock's MouseRat) is still one of the best for creating flies that have buoyancy, realism, durability and are easy to cast. Fur, usually rabbit, certainly is tops for realism, but absorbs water and tends to sink and is more difficult to cast. Foam, a great material used in some of the more innovative patterns, is light, easily shaped and has unexcelled buoyancy and durability.

Most of the traditional patterns have a natural profile (i.e. Deerhair Mouse/Shrew and Fur Lemming) for realism that also makes them easier to cast and creates a good wake and splash. Sculpin and popper heads, foam backs and other nonconventional features may make the fly not as lifelike and/or easy to cast, but they add buoyancy and fish appeal with more surface wake, splash and quiver, so that many of these newer

Rene Limeres

patterns, surprisingly, fish just as well, if not better, under most conditions than the old standards most folks are familiar with.



TOP PATTERNS FOR MOUSING IN KAMCHATKA

The following are the most widely used big top water patterns for rainbow trout in Kamchatka, for reasons noted. They are available in nearly all the shops that cater to Alaska and Russia anglers. Keep in mind that you can select (or tie) many other similar patterns that will perform just as well, based on some of the criteria mentioned. Generally, rodent imitations are tied on a size 2 to 4 specialty hook.

Deerhair Mouse/Rat The original bass/pike mouse pattern (Whitlock's MouseRat being one of the most famous, in existence since 1965) of tightly wound, trimmed/untrimmed deer hair on a stinger hook now comes in many variations, all of them deadly on rainbow trout. I prefer the smaller, simpler versions that simulate a mouse/shrew (leather tail and ears, bead eyes and tiny whiskers optional!). Other common variations have long, bushy fur/deer hair tails or untrimmed deer hair bodies. This fly can't be beat for its performance. It's a great floater, easy to cast, unmatched for durability and the trout can't leave it alone. It comes in natural brown and black, both great colors for Kamchatka rainbows. (Many versions come with a weed guard on the hook, which is unnecessary for most of the trout fishing in Kamchatka and should be removed.)

Morrish Mouse This is one of the more innovative and successful mouse patterns in recent years (since 2001), that incorporates foam into the body for superior performance (great buoyancy and easy to cast). Compared to more traditional mouse patterns in the fly shop, this creation from famed fly tier Ken Morrish may at first not impress you for its lack of lifelike frills, but out on the streams of Kamchatka, it consistently fishes among the best, in nearly all conditions. Don't go to Russia without some of these in your fly box!

Fur Mouse/Lemming Another common, long-used rodent pattern for big Alaska/Russia trout, this is basically the fur version of the MouseRat and has unexcelled realism when tied with brown, gray or black rabbit fur. Unlike deer hair, fur absorbs water, and the performance (floating and casting) of this fly is markedly different than that of spun hair creations, and so it is usually fished as a drowning mouse or rat, with good results. Variations include deer hair sculpin heads with long tails and articulated bodies. Many have foam incorporated into them, adding buoyancy. Another essential fly to include in your mousing arsenal.

Mercer's Lemming This is another extremely popular and productive pattern used all over Alaska and Kamchatka, created by the Fly Shop's Mike Mercer over a decade ago. Somewhat different from other traditional mouse flies, Mercer's Lemming combines a bushy fur (rabbit and possum)

and Deerhair body with a foam popper head that adds flotation and splash. This fly really rousts the big ones! Another essential pattern for the serious Russia trout mouser.

Babine Foam Back This is one of the best, newer “non-traditional” top water flies seeing more use in Alaska and Russia. Actually created as a top water silver salmon pattern, this foam backed, highly buoyant, takeoff from the foam ‘Wog is tied by Rainy Flies and features a long tail of rabbit fur mixed with some rubber legs. It has great action, and the rainbows just go nuts over it, though you do get some tail strikes. (The tail can be shortened somewhat to compensate.) Best colors are natural brown, though, like the ‘Wog, you can fish bright colors for both trout and fall silver salmon. You can have a lot of fun with this one, as it really gets the trout worked up, and they annihilate it with great vigor.

Bomber This classic Atlantic salmon/steelhead pattern, very similar to a small deer hair Mouse in design and profile, will take rainbows on the surface when fished the same way. Quite a few of the larger (#2-4 hook) and fatter variations of this fly (Bulkley Mouse, Waller Waker, Moose Turd, etc.) offered by the shops and catalogs will work great to simulate a plump shrew or small vole. Natural colors work best.

Popper Bass/pike and salmon/trout popper flies will also take big, surface marauding Russia rainbows. There are many styles to choose from these days, fashioned from wood, foam, fur and hair. I like the hard foam and wood poppers (if you can find them), festooned with fur/leather tails and rubber legs. They fish best late in the evening, early in the morning or on cloudy days and are lots of fun, bringing savage surface strikes. Be sure to bring a few on your trip to Russia.

Wog A fast becoming classic Northwest top water Deerhair creation, the Pollywog was originally designed for Pacific Northwest silver salmon and steelhead trout. It has received quite a bit of subsequent notoriety here in Alaska, with spin-off variations like the Foam ‘Wog, which is a great trout fly, also seeing a lot of use. For big rainbows, use either a natural color in the Deerhair versions or darker colors in the foam back ‘Wogs. Another great fly for spectacular surface strikes.

OVERVIEW: PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO KAMCHATKA



Compared to almost any other tourist destination, Kamchatka is a true frontier, with barely developed infrastructure, and a language and culture unlike any that most folks are used to. To have a safe and enjoyable vacation there will require significantly more planning and preparation than for most anywhere else. To begin with, of course, for any other than citizens of the Russian Federation, Kamchatka is a foreign country, with strict requirements for foreign visitors that include necessary documentation (passports, invitations, visas, custom declarations, etc.), inspection at entry and registration upon arrival. (Check section on requirements for foreign visitors.)

Unless you have familiarity with the Russian language and their way of doing things and possess the time and gumption to take on the daunting prospect of a do-it-yourself adventure in a strange land that is quite often not very accommodating to foreigners, we strongly urge you to seek the services of a reputable Kamchatka tourism company or outfitter. (In any event, you will need a sponsor/host in the way of a tourist company, hotel, or individual to get your entry Visa.) These organizations have the experience, connections, and wherewithal to take care of all the essential arrangements and preparations necessary for your adventure once you arrive in Kamchatka. Most are operated as joint ventures with European or American partners, to utilize the considerable marketing expertise, reputation and other advantages of long established, free market

enterprises. No matter whom you book with or what kind of tour you sign up for, however, your hosts and guides in the field will undoubtedly be local Russians, who know the country like no other and want nothing more than to give you the adventure of a lifetime.

There are a surprising number of options available for guided adventure recreation on the peninsula, given how new tourism is in Kamchatka. Depending on what your main interests are and how much time and money you want to spend, you can arrange for “soft,” “hard,” or even extreme adventures that focus solely on your favorite activity or combine it with another (or even two or more) for more interest and variety. And generally, most of the more established tour companies can make all the arrangements for you, no matter what kind of hybrid adventure you come up with.

Because of all there is to see and do in Kamchatka, and the expense and time involved in getting there, most folks, especially Europeans, will plan vacations there of two weeks or more duration. (Americans are usually more limited in their time and travel options, and so most opt for one-week trips.) More time obviously allows you to see and do more things in Kamchatka, but just as important, it creates a more leisurely pace and flexibility in the itinerary, so there’s less stress. However much time you decide on for your Kamchatka adventure, it’s a good idea to plan and make arrangements well ahead, by late fall or early winter prior to your target date at the latest.