



JOHN RANDOLPH PHOTOS

Yelizova (inset left) is surrounded by active volcanoes. Russian military helicopters take fishermen to the fishing. Zhupanova River resident rainbows (above) are thick-bodied in preparation for spring spawning.

ALASKA POINTS ITS BONY Aleutian Islands finger at the Kamchatka Peninsula just north of the Russian city of Petropavlovsk (Peter-Paul) as though suggesting something that fishermen have long suspected: If Alaska is so good to us, then perhaps untouched Kamchatka can be better.

We could just after distant honey holes, but because Kamchatka had been closed to foreigners since the communist revolution of 1918, no fisherman could decipher whether the rumors of an angling shangri-la had any substance. So when the first group of American fly fishermen touched down last spring in a U.S. charter at Provideniya in east Siberia and headed tentively south to Anadyr, hop, skipping, and jumping from tiny airport to airport toward Petropavlovsk, their Alaska charter was the first foreign plane ever to land at the military air bases.

In April of 1992 Tony Sarp and John Donovan on a Mark Air 737 had landed at Yelizova to explore the Kamchatka fishing. Their plane, greeted by television cameras, had been the first foreign aircraft ever to land in Kamchatka. Before Sarp's arrival, the "Ruskies" had expected U.S. bombers or missiles. Defending against intrusion, Kamchatka-based MIG interceptors had even shot down a wayward Korean airliner.

KAMCHATKA

JOHN RANDOLPH



Zhupanova River rainbows are resident and "coastal" strains of fish. The resident fish (left) have markings similar to Alaska rainbows. Coastal 'bows have the darker backs, similar to North American steelhead. Reindeer (above) are native to the Kamchatka Peninsula.

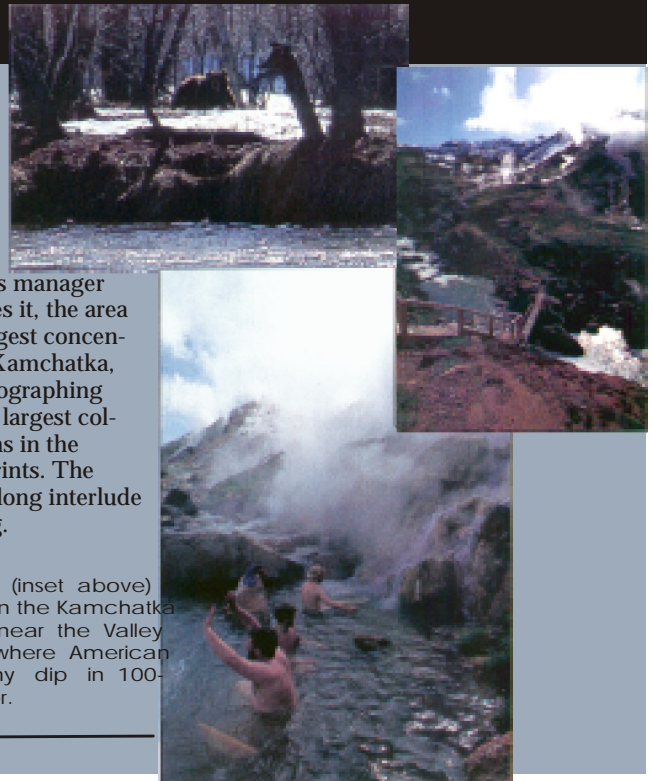
VALLEY OF GEYSERS

KAMCHATKA IS LOCATED on the edge of one of the earth's plates called the *Rim of Fire*, stretching from our Northwest to Alaska across the Bering Sea and down the east coast of Russia to Japan. Along the rim spectacular volcanoes thrust high into the sky and spew forth landscape-shaping lava. Kamchatka is a land of volcanoes, ten of them active in the Petropavlovsk region. As Tony Sarp puts it: "There are hot springs everywhere. It's like a huge Yellowstone Park." The Valley of Geysers, 30 minutes by chopper from the Zhupanova, is an inactive volcanic caldera, a large rocky valley carpeted with meadow

grasses shot through with wisps and geysers of steam and surrounded by stands of birch. Huge bear tracks mark the soft muds. As Valley of Geysers manager Vitalii Nikolaenki describes it, the area is home ground for the largest concentration of brown bears in Kamchatka, and his life's work of photographing them comprises the single largest collection of bear photographs in the world--50,000 slides and prints. The Valley of Geysers is a day-long interlude in the Cedar Lodge fishing.



Brown bears (inset above) grow large on the Kamchatka salmon runs near the Valley of Geysers, where American guides skinny dip in 100-degree water.



Our plane last summer was only the fourth "foreigner" to land at the bases, but the Russian children somehow knew we were coming and were there on the tarmac at Anadyr to trade suddenly outdated Lenin medals for dollars as we headed the 750 miles south toward the Zhupanova River.

We had heard that the Zhupanova was an unusual river, with runs of five Pacific salmon species and "coastal rainbows" that averaged eight pounds and with some fish as large as 15 pounds. Coastal rainbows are an anomaly, fish that, unlike steelhead, are brief visitors to the salt, opportunists that spawn and live for short periods in the rivers and then depart to the sea for several months before returning.

Not much was known about coastal rainbows (mikizha). Would they be like Lake Iliamna rainbows--football-shaped silver rockets that could take you into your backing and perhaps spool you? Rumors had it that some of the answers lay in a 40-page recent American translation of Russian research papers on the Kamchatka rivers called, grandly, "The Noble Trout of Kamchatka," but no one knew where to obtain it.

Petropavlovsk, situated on a deep arm of the North Pacific,

and nearby Yelisoa are twin cities with some 500,000 people, white and other ethnic Russians who had been enticed to live in cold and remote Kamchatka Peninsula by incentive pay under the communist government. According to *The New York Times*, since the fall of communism in the old Soviet Union large numbers of people have left this area to return to their native provinces, while a few are newly arrived in search of



Gold in the vast Kamchatka wilderness.

The Zhupanova River and the joint Russian-Sarp Cedar Base Lodge operation lay north of the city, 30 minutes by helicopter, in the 23,000-square-mile Kamchatka Preserve, an unspoiled wilderness forest of birch, aspen, and beech. We were to fish an upper stretch of the river during the last week of May. Two groups of 16 fly fishers would precede us for two weeks. These three groups would fish during the rainbow prespawn and spawning periods. Runoff would begin during the three-week period. The first salmon, kings, would arrive in mid-June, accompanied by a million-fish run of Dolly Varden (average five pounds) and the mysterious kundzha. (The East Siberian white-spotted charr averages five pounds. Its name is pronounced "kungia".) The summer runs also include sockeyes, chums, humpies, and silver salmon--but no cherry salmon or sea-run taimen (found on some other Kamchatka rivers). We would fish three days fly-out by Russian military MI-8 helicopters and five days by boat.

Oregonians Jim and Donna Teeny, who accompanied the two groups that preceded us, reported that their groups had averaged three rainbows per fisherman, with top rods as high as 20 fish on their best days. The fish were all rainbows, and all were taken on streamers. The prespawn fish had averaged 25 inches and about



The Russians built a new lodge in 1992 on the banks of the Zhupanova. Kamchatkans, mostly of white Russian extraction, are warm and well mannered--and have many gold teeth.

IF YOU GO

The Russian people are warm, proud, reserved, and well mannered. They like Americans and are eager to barter, especially for rubles, which are rapidly falling in value as the economy weakens. (A Russian earns an average of \$30 a month; the exchange rate in November 1993 was 1,200

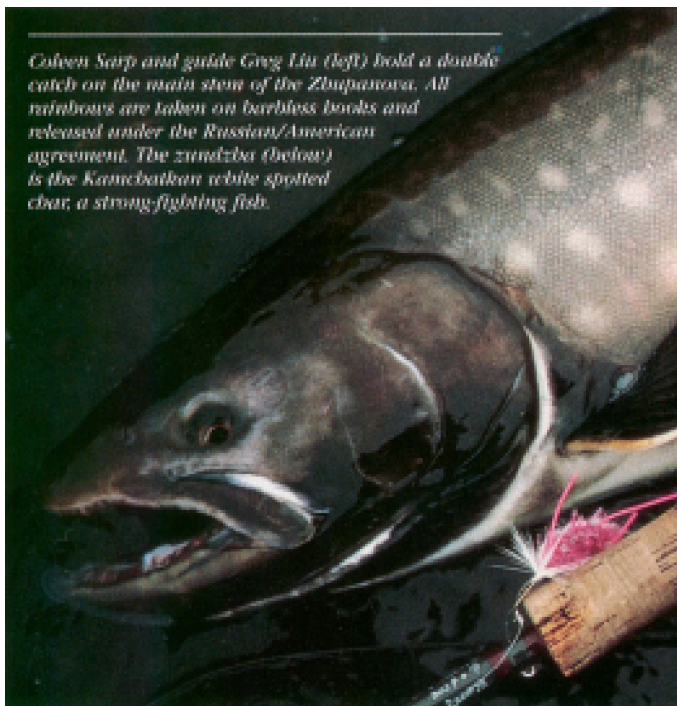
rubles/\$1.) Kamchatka food is basic:the meat--a mixture of reindeer and pork fat; the soup-- borscht; the carbohydrates-- potatoes. Cedar

Base Lodge flies in American meats and is teaching the Russian cooks

American dishes. The Zhupanova trips are 10 days, 6 to 8 days of fishing, with from three

to five days of helicopter fishing on 135 miles of rivers and tributaries.

Tackle required for the river include 9-foot graphite 7- or 8-weights with reserve power (bring a back-up rod); quality reels with 100 to 200 feet of 20-pound backing; a selection of flies mentioned in this article; 3- to 9-foot abrasion-resistant leaders; felt-sole wading shoes or boots; in spring, five-millimeter neoprene waders, stormwear, down vests, and warm gloves and hats; in summer, wet wading is comfortable. Lines for spring fishing include the Teeny T-200 and T-300 and standard weight-forward floaters and sinking-tips. You are weight-limited to 40 pounds (total) on the flights.



Colven Sarp and guide Greg Liu (left) hold a double catch on the main stem of the Zhupanova. All rainbows are taken on barbless hooks and released under the Russian/American agreement. The kundzha (below) is the Kamchatkan white spotted charr, a strong-fighting fish.

eight pounds. Teeny reported that one ten-pound rainbow had taken him into his backing. The rest had fought well but not with cartwheeling, reel-emptying runs. The largest fish taken in the two mid-May weeks was a 30-inch fish just over ten pounds. The largest rainbow landed on the river last spring was a 33-inch 13-pound rainbow taken by Fred Willey of Fresno, California.



Although spring water temperatures hover between 34° and 40° F., Kamchatka rainbows take the fly hard.

After spawning in the headwaters, the resident rainbows disperse throughout the river. We caught half kelts (spawned-out rainbows) and half pre-spawn fish. When the Teenys' group had arrived in the second week of May, five feet of snow lay melting on the Zhupanova River's banks. Water temperatures hovered in the low 30s, and air temperatures ranged from below freezing at night to the mid-50s during the day.

When our pilot, a veteran of Russia's Afghanistan war, hovered his powerful chopper down at the newly constructed Cedar Lodge on the Zhupanova, the river ran in cold, caramel-colored spring spate and deep patches of corn snow lay melting in the shady areas along the banks. The guides, all Americans from Tony Sarp's Katmai Lodge operation on Alaska's Alagnak River, said the runoff

was in full flush. We would be forced to fish the tributary mouths and the clear right fork of the main river. All the fishing would be catch-and-release with barbless hooks.

Our fishing roughly paralleled the Teenys' second week catch mix--three-quarters kelts and one-quarter pre-spawn fish. International Sportsmen's Expo shows promoter Ed Rice on the first afternoon stepped into a long tributary

eddy and hooked and released eight 25-inch rainbow kelts within two hours. With the main river in spate, tributary fishing would keep us busy during the week, except when we fished the clear, graveled right fork of the Zhupanova and day catches jumped to six, four- to eight-pound rainbows per rod, with high rods taking 13 fish.

The First Year

Accounts from fishing groups to the Zhupanova this past spring and summer have painted a picture of a superb Kamchatka river, the first of hundreds awaiting sport-fishing exploration on the peninsula. The fishing news is excellent, but the political and economic future of Russia will determine what happens on these rivers, because the country's natural resources are for sale under the new capitalism.

Kamchatka, thanks to a group of conscientious American fly fishers, has made the right beginning.

As to Russia's Kola Peninsula, where Atlantic salmon are the prey, Americans convinced Russian bureaucrats that fly fishers would not harm the fragile sport fisheries but would pay big bucks to catch-and-release fish. Convinced that they could make money from their Zhupanova River resource without injuring it, the Kamchatkan communists-become capitalists granted an angling franchise to Sarp, who formed Tony Sarp's Kamchatka Fishing Adventures and began flying in Americans to fish.

Coastal Rainbows

Coastal rainbows run into and out of the east-coast rivers of the Kamchatka 750-mile-long peninsula but are less prevalent in the west-coast streams. Steelhead run some west-coast rivers but do not run the east-coast streams. The

Kamchatka River is the largest river system on the east coast of the peninsula. There are rumors of yard-long rainbows on this river, but exploration is just beginning. The Zhupanova rainbows average 24 inches long (eight pounds, in late summer), and during good fishing weeks daily catch rates for experienced fishermen run around eight fish, but catches of as high as 20 or as low as two fish per day have been reported.

It's important to distinguish between resident and coastal rainbows on this river. Resident fish are more drab, more silver-gray than the dramatically marked steelheadlike coastal fish, with their black backs and chrome-bright flanks. The coastal fish show up more frequently as the summer wanes, until many large male fish appear in September and October. The guides report no evidence of previous spawning on any of the coastal rainbows caught last summer. The coastal rainbows are much hotter fighters than the resident fish, which only occasionally take you into backing, despite their large size.

The 13-pound Willey fish, a river resident, was the longest rainbow taken on the Zhupanova last year. The heaviest fish measured 29 inches with a 22- to 24-inch girth (estimated 14 pounds). Thirty anglers landed rainbows over 30 inches long on the river last year.

The Zhupanova is a spate freestone river that can go out quickly if heavy Pacific rains pound the watershed. It went out twice in the summer of '93 after the runoff ended--once for three days and once for five. But the American guides, all Alaska veterans, say the southern Kamchatka weather is much more even than that of western Alaska, with far fewer rain blowouts and lost fishing days.

Rainbow fishing during the salmon spawning runs--late June through September--provides excellent mouse fishing. Pounding banks and holding cover with standard Alaska-style mouse patterns provide the action. The guides report that, unlike the rainbows in Alaska, Zhupanova fish seldom hold near the salmon spawning redds to pick off eggs. Here the fish hold in relatively shallow weedy runs, in water as thin as from one to two feet deep and with the right current speed.

Egg-fly and streamer fishing in the deep main-river holding pools can provide constant action on 'bows, with egg patterns fished on a floating line and 30 inches of leader with a strike indicator, and split-shot from 8 to 12 inches above the egg. Purple Egg-sucking Leeches and Mink Muddlers (#2 and #4) are hot flies during the salmon runs. Clouser Deep Minnows--white/blue

or white/chartreuse--#4 Teeny Nymphs, and a Zhupanova innovation called the Strawberry Shortcake are hot flies during runoff.

The largest rainbows are taken in the fall, after they have fed all summer on salmon eggs and flesh. The guides and anglers believe that large four-year (or older) coastal 'bows follow the silver salmon runs (as late as December) into

June through mid-August, and silver salmon (six- to eight-pound average) begin to show on the upper Zhupanova around mid-August, and the runs continue until late December.

The spawning areas on the river are crowded with salmon, which provide the basic food for the brown bears of Kamchatka. (The largest brown bears in the world--some bears weigh over a ton--are found on the Kamchatka

fins is characteristic of North American char. It, too, is a coastal fish, entering the Kamchatka rivers to feed opportunistically on salmon eggs and lingering to spawn in fall before returning to the lower reaches of the rivers or the salt. Zundzha on this river average around eight pounds, and an experienced angler can catch from eight to ten fish a day during peak periods in late August and September. The largest Zhupanova zundzha taken last year measured 39 inches and weighed 18 pounds.

The zundzha makes short powerful runs with headshakes and tail-to-head thrusts of its body. Experienced anglers use the rod to cushion against these high-torque thrusts, but many large fish are lost by fishermen unfamiliar with the technique (strong tippets are not the answer). The zundzha is truly a trophy char that, along with the river's large rainbows, should make Kamchatka a world-class fly-rod destination.

Alaska vs. Kamchatka

The six Alaska guides who have fished and guided the Zhupanova agree that this river compares with the best rainbow-trout fishing in Alaska. As Zhupanova guide Guy Fulhart describes it: "The river has the rainbow fishing that Alaska used to have, but with much better weather." Howard Eskin, a veteran Alaska fisherman, describes the fish as the "most beautifully conditioned rainbows I have ever seen."

Which begs the question: Why? In two words: Food and no fishing harvest. Unlike Alaska streams, the Zhupanova has an extremely rich biota of mayflies, caddis, and stoneflies--all evident in the bottom life and the hatches that come off in clouds. The adult rainbows do not feed much on the hatches, perhaps because there are so many other, larger foods to devour--a spring-long feast of fry and smolts and a summer-

long milkshake of salmon eggs. Is it any wonder that this river has quickly claimed a rank among the world's best rainbow fisheries?

The Russians intend to protect it. Catch-and-release fishing will be maintained, and outfitting and guiding will be strictly controlled. The river is inaccessible except by aircraft, and river-mouth commercial netting is strictly controlled. The Russians have been approached by industrial logging concerns from Japan and other countries, but they show little inclination to allow a rape of their precious wilderness. The Kamchatka Preserve is one of six untouched and unspoiled virgin forests remaining on the globe. Fly fishers are among the very few visitors allowed to enjoy this special place.

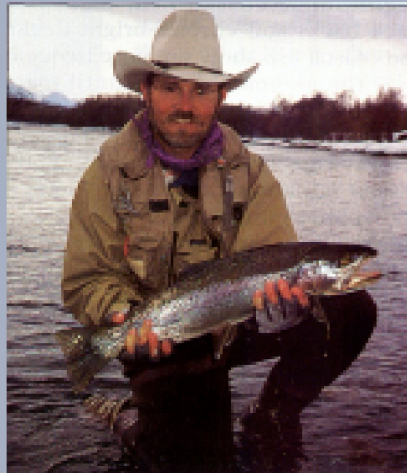


THE FISHES OF KAMCHATKA



TEENY NYMPH COMPANY PHOTO

Large rainbows (right) are the main attraction in Kamchatka, but kundzha (above), arctic charr (below), and salmon also provide exciting fishing.



TEENY NYMPH COMPANY PHOTO



RENEE LIMERES PHOTO

the river and stay through winter until spawning. Rainbow catch rates increase in September, and the fish are large.

Salmon

The salmon runs on the Zhupanova are, with one exception, smaller than the runs on most Bristol Bay Alaska rivers. Despite rumors of 30-kilo kings, Zhupanova fish average around 20 pounds and spawn mostly in the lower river. Sockeye (June through mid-July) are also a small lower-river run, with fish averaging four pounds. Chum salmon begin their runs in mid-June and run through mid-July (average eight pounds). A three- to four-million fish run of humpies (pinks, four- to seven-pound average) clogs the river from mid-

Peninsula, and more browns per square mile are found here than anywhere else on earth.) Howard Eskin, Ph.D., of New York City, reports seeing as many as 38 bears in one day, but other anglers say an eight-bear day is normal during the spawning runs. The bears are hunted, and they are shy of humans and have not learned yet that the sound of a screaming reel means food.

Kundzha

The East Siberian White Spotted Char are comparable in fighting qualities to the North American Arctic Char. The dusky-gray fish has soft white circles centered with red dots along its flanks, and the dramatic white outlining along its ventral