

Tamin' the Taimen



ALASKA ANGLER BUD HODSON (on the "Alaska Sportsman" cover and above) displays a sea-run *taimen* taken in the Khabarovsk region of Siberia's Far East coast. As the walls of the Cold War crumble, anglers from all over may now stalk these great gamefish. (Bud Hodson)

IT CAME WITH NO WARNING. The cacophonous explosion of spray shattered the still water and starry night. I woke with a start as my rod tore loose from my limp hands. Instinctively, I jumped up and reeled backward, nearly launching my sleepy comrades from the longboat into the icy, black river. The boat pitched wildly, arms and legs flailed, people shouted. I struggled to hang on, falling backward while our hysterical guide cursed me frantically in Russian. In the darkness beyond, under the vast Siberian sky, something enormous and primordial had seized my line.

The boat settled down--all of us were wide awake now. Suddenly, the fish sounded. Then down it went again, my crude Russian reel screaming and threatening to explode in my hands. I could feel the fish's awesome power as I leaned back for all I was worth. I knew my gear would never hold this monster. It paused for a

A team of Alaskan anglers ventures to remote Siberian rivers, with help from Soviet comrades, to learn the secrets of a legendary fish.

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By Rene Limeres

few seconds then changed direction, moving away from the boat with power. The fish ran about 40 yards, then lunged toward the surface, clearing the water in one, two, three thunderous flops that reverberated into the night. I was barely hanging on, and then the line went limp, parted like thread. None of us had ever seen anything like it.

September in central Siberia. Forget the harse images of penury and desolation. Instead, picture a land of story-book beauty; dense, rolling upland forests, tinged with the first splashes of autumn color; clear, cold rivers that rush down from Asia's craggy mountain rim; and quaint, isolated villages where life still follows the rhythms of an ancient nomadic culture. The September days are Indian summer warm-- the nights frosty, starry and vast. Forests of stately Siberian larch, birch and cedar hold

the argali sheep and other creatures stranger than the imagination.

Our Alaskan continent had been invited to assess the region's recreation potential--particularly the sport fishing--as part of a cultural exchange and adventure tour sponsored by the Soviet Peace Committee of Moscow. As professional fishing guides, and some of the first Westerners allowed in the region, our expertise was valued in the Soviets' efforts to improve and develop their burgeoning tourist industry. Our trip took us from Moscow's cathedrals to remote headwaters of the mighty Yenisei River in central Siberia.

Siberia's mystique draws inevitable comparisons with Alaska. But proud as Alaskans may be of their rugged "last frontier," nothing can quite compare with the staggering immensity of the world's largest country. Eight hours from Moscow in a cramped Aeroflot jet, you are only halfway into this expanse of steppe, mountains, tundra and taiga.

Spanning seven time zones, with rivers that dwarf Alaska's Yukon and mountains that sneer down at our continent's crown peaks, Siberia is truly the mother of wilderness. A land of forbidding isolation and terrifying extremes, parts of northeastern Siberia have mean January temperatures of nearly minus 50 degrees F, while the central plateau in summer can top 120 degrees. Soviets repeatedly reminded us of the region's unforgiving nature. "Be careful, Siberia not Alaska."

Of the fantastic fishing and hunting tales associated with this region, perhaps none stretch the imagination more than the reports of trout, called "taimen," that weigh more than 200 pounds. But this is no fish tale; these fish do exist. Neither salmon nor trout, they are part of a remarkable group of salmonid fishes, distributed from the headwaters of the Danube River in Europe to the Sakhalin Islands of Japan. Long-lived, solitary predators, they occur almost exclusively in freshwater, with an anadromous form found along the coast of the Soviet Far East. To tie into this Russian enigma, one must travel to the headwaters of the great Siberian rivers--the Lena, Ob or Yenisei.

Our trip began when we teamed up with a crew of Siberia's finest homegrown rivermen--Oleg, Yuri, Valerev and Tola--on a remote tributary of the Yenisei. These men didn't know what to make of our strange Western ways, especially our high-tech ensemble of bright rafts, nylon



A SOVIET GUIDE (above) uses his handmade boat to tow a rubber raft for American clients.

A Yankee fisherman (below) gets some river savvy from his guides in Siberia's Far East. (Rene Limeres)



tents, coolers and sophisticated fishing gear. These people get along splendidly with hand-hewn longboats, sleeping under the stars and using makeshift fishing gear. Even more strange to them was the peculiar American habit of releasing fish; no self-respecting Siberian would ever think of returning his hard-won prize to the river. Despite our great cultural differences, the shared love of wild rivers and adventure fostered a powerful kinship. By the end of the second day, we were all sitting around the campfire sipping vodka and trading stories like the best of comrades.

While sharing spirits and spirited conversation, I really began to absorb the Siberian culture and the many wonders the country holds, particularly its animal and fish life. Siberia enjoys much greater diversity of species than comparable latitudes elsewhere. We sat wide-eyed for many nights as our hosts charmed us with

tales of rare snow leopards, exotic Marco Polo sheep, wild camels, splendid white tigers and, of course, those living legends of the rivers, the taimen.

In one classic Mongol folk tale, wandering tribesmen came upon a huge taimen imprisoned in the ice during a particularly severe winter. The starving nomads hacked off pieces of the frozen fish to ward off death, and returned to feed from it throughout the long winter. In the spring, when the ice thawed, the beast, incredibly, swam away unharmed, so monstrous was its size.

A substantial part of the taimen myth, however, is rooted in fact. With a maximum lifespan of 170 years, the taimen are among the longest lived of any freshwater fish. Oleg, our main guide who had been raised on the river, talked of certain fish he had known since childhood like they were old friends. He recounted tales of fierce battles that would belittle the best of Alaska fish stories. "How big?," we asked him time and again. He would stretch his arms out wide and shake his head, "Two meters, maybe 60, 70 kilos." A kilo is 2.2 pounds.

The size of these voracious Siberian predators has been well documented. The largest verified specimen weighed 109 kilos--nearly 240 pounds.

The vodka-clear headwaters of the Yenisei is known to hold some of these 200-pound-plus monsters. The river flows swiftly over a bed of gravel into the immense low-lying plains that characterize much of northern Siberia. By all appearances we could easily have been on a river in the northern Rockies.

On the second day out, one of our group hook the oddest fish I had ever seen. It had the graceful body of a trout and the pinched head and tiny mouth of a whitefish. Called a *lenok*, I later learned it is somehow related to the taimen. Both are considered ancient relic species of the salmon and trout clan. We caught many on the trip, and they proved to be fair fighters and even better table fare.

We also caught grayling, Siberian pike and scads of whitefish. But it was the taimen we were really after, and two days of solid fishing produced no sign of the great fish. We foolishly ignored our guides, who insisted that the large taimen feed only at night. They also said we were using the wrong gear and techniques.

By the end of the third day, we were stymied. So our group had a long talk and decided it was time to swallow our pride, put away the designer rods and fancy

lures and get down to basics with the Siberians. The natives, we discovered, have a novel way of angling for taimen. My journal entry from that first night out tells it all:

"Late in the evening, after the social rituals around the fire, we were roused from a drowsy stupor and herded into longboats. No lights of any kind are allowed, as the big taimen are extremely shy. The Siberians then produce primitive fishing gear, which look more like ice fishing rigs than casting outfits for giant trout. We are each given a standard Siberian taimen lure: a black-leather mouse six inches long festooned with a gang of treble hooks. It looks deadly. We are told to lie in the bottom of a boat and remain silent while the guide poles into the currents. It turns into quite a ride, and I'm very glad Oleg knows the river; one mistake, and it would be a cold midnight swim for us all.

"After a while, we came to a broad stretch of flat water. This is the taimen's prowling grounds. Here, in the shallows, the monsters are said to attack their quarry, be it fish, fowl or rodent. Oleg says they sometimes chase fish up onto the rocks before devouring them.

"We tie on the mice (no easy trick in the dark) and cast them into the pool, retrieving in short jerks. Oleg instructs us in his staccato Russian, even though he knows none of us can understand a single word. Before long, Lee has a strike, just a quiet splash, actually. But in his nervousness, he's too quick and pulls the lure from the fish's mouth. Oleg scolds him. The Siberians say taimen will stun prey with their tails before moving in for the kill. Whatever the case, it seems important to pay close attention to your lure, as strikes may be few and far between given the extreme territorial nature of these fish."

Up close, a taimen looks menacing. Its body is salmonid in form, only more elongated; its color is a subdued silver-gray top brown with black spots and rosy tail; and its head is broad and flattened, allowing for an enormous gaping mouth filled with several rows of sharp teeth.

Casting surface lures from longboats to giant, prehistoric trout in the dark may not be the easiest or smartest fishing pursuit, but it is exciting. One night, I had a big fish follow my mouse lure in, pecking at it three times before it hooked itself just a couple of yards from the boat. The fish instantly dove straight down, jamming my rod in an impossible arc, then surfaced on the other side of the boat with a gigantic bellyflop, freeing itself in the process.

That same night, Lee had a taimen yank the rod out of his hands. This appar-

Getting There

Organizing a Siberian fishing vacation is no casual undertaking. Careful planning and a good guide are the keys to success.

Both Aeroflot and Alaska Airlines service the Far East cities of Khabarovsk and Magadan from Anchorage. Round-trip fares range from \$1,100 to \$1,500. Ask your travel agent for details.

There are a number of organizations offering fishing adventures throughout the Soviet Union. Most offer complete package tours with all transportation, accommodations, meals and guide fees provided from the point of departure.

Prices and options for fishing vary. Alaska-Siberia Expeditions combines an exclusive 14-day taimen fishing excursion to northcentral Siberia with an expedition to Kamchatka for rainbow trout and steelhead for about \$4,500. For more information, phone (907) 345-4308.

Russian Fishing Adventures, operated by longtime Alaska guides Bud Hodson and Bus Bergmann, takes groups of six to eight to the Khabarovsk region for sea-run taimen. The eight- to ten-day trips cost from \$4,500 to \$6,000, all inclusive. For more information, phone (907) 248-7047.



A SIBERIAN GUIDE displays a Soviet fishing rod and tackle. (Rene Limeres)

ently is common; the Siberians say it takes three men to fish the big ones: one to man the boat, one to wield the rod, and another to shoot the gun when the fish jumps.

But our run-in with the "big one" came on the next-to-last night of angling. We had fished for several hours with only two strikes and one small taimen landed. The chill night air and late hour was getting the best of my fishing buddies, as they hunkered down in the bottom of the small boat. I was ready to do the same when, suddenly, all hell broke loose. An explosive strike brought me charging to my feet, nearly capsizing the boat. I managed to hang on, as the beast fought with a determination unmatched in all my years of battling the best of North America's freshwater gamefish. Though we never did get a close look at it, we all agreed the fish easily could have gone 150 pounds or more.

Besides our lack of experience, we were handicapped by inadequate gear. Without steel leaders, quality forged hooks and modern heavyweight casting gear, we had little hope of landing a true trophy taimen. The fish's extremely hard mouth--much harder than any salmon or pike--makes it terribly difficult to secure a firm hookset. That, combined with the taimen's bullish strength, pugnacity and leaping antics, throws the odds clearly in its favor.

Our time with the Siberians seemed much too short. We fished until the last day and then were treated by our hosts to a *banya*, or traditional steambath, built of piled rocks that are super-heated with a bonfire. A small enclosure was erected, and we got in, baking in the intense heat until the signal was given to plunge into the icy river. Next, a customary round of vodka and then back into the tent. This was repeated four or five times. By our baptism we laughingly declared ourselves "brothers of the taimen," united by our experiences with the great fish and our respect for the magnificent wild country it inhabits.

Around the fire for the last time, Oleg gave me a great bear hug and handed me his gold watch. I was speechless. He told me to come back, and I promised him I would. Then I gave him my fly rod, vest, hat, even some lessons in casting. He grinned and shook his head, and I could tell that fishing, for him, would never be the same. Nor would it be for me. I had shared with my Russian brothers a ritual that is perhaps as old as their culture itself, matching wits and brawn against a living legend of a time long ago. ◉

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