

FISHING FAIRBANKS

Anglers can test the waters of this northern city without getting soaked

Losing luggage is never fun, but when a duffel carrying fishing gear goes missing, a trip can turn ugly fast. Sure, Alaska's second largest city delivers a host of first-rate attractions to fill the days of travelers so inclined, and I've worn the Fairbanks tourist hat and visited the Museum of the North, ridden the Riverboat Discovery and panned for the shiny stuff at Gold Dredge Number 8. I had intended on this trip, however, to wear my waders, and I needed to be on, in and around the waters near the city soon, or unspeakable realities would become manifest—destitution foremost among them. Editors waited; deadlines loomed.

Yet instead of plying the Chena River for pike as planned, I found myself cursing my way through Walmart, wondering which duplicate items I had to buy. A shoulder strap on my carry-on backpack had snapped at LAX, forcing me to schlep askew like Quasimodo through various airports, and then I was treated like an impetuous scoundrel by an airline employee for daring to ask that I receive my purloined duffel in a timely manner. I had somehow managed to escape injury thus far on my Alaska misadventure, but an emergency-room visit couldn't be far off.

Thankfully, neither was Chena Hot Springs Resort. Wearing a brand new bathing suit, I waded into the soothing namesake water, soaking a few of the day's frustrations away but still worried that the next morning's fishing excursion a half-hour drive downstream would turn sour. My concerns were allayed when, a mere 23 hours after disappearing, my bag arrived. I did not trouble myself with the fact that the contents had all originally been assembled in China and shipped stateside in less time, not with the Upper Chena River awaiting me the next morning.

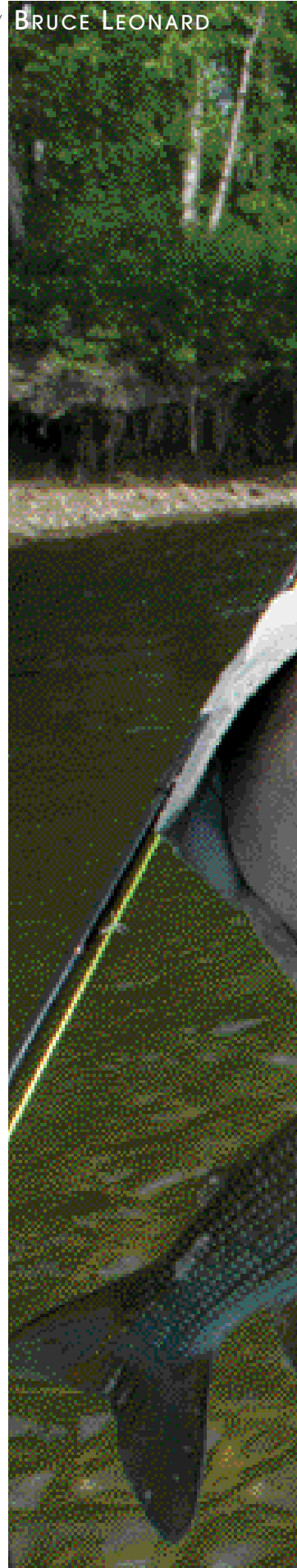
On the drive to meet my guide, I added the three moose I saw along Chena Hot Springs Road to the three I counted the previous night, and I was determined that my luck would change. When I rounded the corner to see where my fishing excursion would begin, I knew the change had occurred. Joe and Vicki Letarte live in a log trapper's cabin along a gorgeous, placid stretch of the Chena. They run Wilderness Enterprises from this off-the-grid outpost, which surprisingly happens to be only about a half-hour from Fairbanks. As the day progressed, I realized that the oxymoronic collision "remote suburb" kept popping in my head. No, the few houses near Wilderness Enterprises don't constitute a tract, but since exploring the nearby undeveloped wilderness of the Chena River State Recreation Area is within many people's daily commute time—requiring neither a bush plane nor a week-long commitment—the angler looking for a logistically simple, productive and affordable excursion would be hard pressed to do better than to fish for grayling on the Chena.

Yet there's the rub. The Upper Chena is a catch-and-release waterway, and Arctic grayling simply do not quicken the pulse of big-stick-carrying meat hunters. Alaska residents and Lower-48 tourists wanting nothing so badly as to fill coolers with kings and halibut obviously steer clear of inland catch-and-release rivers, and yet those big, grill-worthy quarry often elude us, despite what the travel brochures promise. Before sitting down to write this story I spent nearly five hours pursuing illustrious kings on the salt, and all that we three anglers had to show for our efforts was one snapped-off hookup. I've been skunked before and will be again, though I doubt that coming up empty on the Upper Chena is within the realm of possibility, since my limited fly-fishing skills rendered a tally that tickled the low end of average. According to Joe, on many occasions his full-day clients have landed more than 100 grayling.

That kind of piscatorial bounty is a direct result of the river's catch-and-release status. "A 12-inch grayling takes approximately five years to achieve 12 inches," said Joe, and the 20-inchers that he calls the "Holy Grail you're hoping for" simply would not exist if people still filled buckets with the fish, as they did in the early 1980s, nearly wiping out the species in the Chena. Yet today, said Joe, "We catch quite a few in the 17-, 18-inch class. The majority of the fish we catch are 14 to 16 inches."

Armed with hope and slathered in sunscreen and bug dope, I felt ready. After a short drive to the put-in, Joe shoved the 14-foot NRS raft into the current. Gin-clear water allowed me to scan the shallow river for fish, but all I saw for a decent stretch were smooth stones and the subtle undulations of the bottom.

Guide Joe Letarte with a bright Chena River grayling.





The sky was euphorically blue, the temperature pleasant and the wind non-existent, with the rippling water and dipping oars creating the only sounds. I began to roll cast a tan Elk Hair Caddis toward the cut banks, as Joe maneuvered the craft expertly. I shook the rust off my technique as we progressed downstream, the flaws in my mechanics lessened



by the fact that long-distance power casts are not necessary when floating this section of the Chena. I worked out the kinks, avoided overhanging branches I was sure I'd snag and began to drop the fly where I intended. Not once did I set the hook in any part of Joe's person, and I felt happy to be fishing so pristine a waterway, one that flowed past not a single home or other structure.

And yet I had a sneaking suspicion, as

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Joe inched the boat around sweepers and ran us deftly through riffles, that my bad luck stuck to me like something I'd stepped in. I had followed Joe's directions, casting where he told me to, holding the tailed-out drift in place for a few seconds before back-casting, saying silent incantations I'm not comfortable repeating in

print—with not a bite, not a rise, not even a single fish sighting. We'd been on the water for nearly an hour, and I was obviously jinxed. I considered my options: hari-kari seemed extreme, but giving up fishing in favor of checkers sounded about right. Maybe flower arranging. Joe, however, showed not the slightest worry. He tied on a California mosquito, and—voila!—my home state secured the first grayling hookup. The fish fought admirably, dart-

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ing and dashing and darting again. The battle was not a no-holds-barred cage match, but my eight-and-a-half-foot Orvis Clearwater five-weight and 3X tip-pet granted me an adrenaline rush and allowed the fish to swim away briskly once released.

Soon the strikes arrived every five-to-10 casts, as Joe's confident demeanor indicated they would, once we reached water he knew held fish. He asked me not to reveal his honey holes, but since I don't carry a GPS unit and wouldn't dare be more specific than "there was a downed tree nearby," self-guided anglers will have to dabble in empiricism, experimenting with trial and error until they can produce the desired results time and again. And anglers will do just that, if they are quick to tie on different flies when particular patterns aren't productive. Joe switched among the California mosquito, a basic mosquito, tan- and black Elk Hair Caddis and a nameless fly that looked like a miniaturized Phyllis Diller.

Between casts, we ate lunch and solved many of the world's problems. We discussed the vagaries of the travel-writing profession and Wilderness Enterprises' many hunting and fishing options, including the opportunity to throw a lure to monster northern pike in the Yukon. We were not equipped to solve the conundrum of Paris Hilton, yet as I boated fish after fish, including a beautiful 17-incher, I considered myself better off than the rich and famous, at least momentarily. Last year I spent five days aboard a 201-foot luxury yacht, flying in the onboard helicopter to unnamed peaks in British Columbia to ski down untracked powder, then darting to remote rivers to fish for bull trout. The five-day trip, had I paid for it, would have cost what I make in a year. And yet my day on the Upper Chena, talking with the adept and honorable guide, floating the crystal-clear water, landing 14 fish, including a 17-incher, and losing probably twice that many over the six-and-a-half river miles we floated proved to be the better experience—more organic, less stressful, less showy.

During my many years of traveling nearly full time, I don't believe I've encountered a better synthesis of atmosphere and action, a more poetic display of man and nature mingling than I did that day on the Chena. Considering my time on that water, I have to agree with Joe's assessment



Practicing catch and release on the Chena River.

of the river: "This is in my opinion a world-class grayling fishery. It is the only fishery I know of in the United States where you can actually drive the entire length of the river, stop and fish along the river and come up with the size and quality of the fish we caught today."

Of course, since I have nothing against throwing a spoon in the direction of a trout so I can save a buck and grill my catch, I set out a couple days later for Chena Lakes Recreation Area. Located about a half hour south of Fairbanks, the lake prohibits motorized crafts, even those with trolling motors, which means anglers have to work a bit for their meals. I set out in a canoe, and had I heeded the advice of Chris Jenkins, the park manager, and paddled completely across the lake, I wouldn't have spent an hour settling dry flies on the glassy surface, where they would occasionally be nudged by what felt like single-cell amoebas.

Eventually I got the message, and once I reached the narrow channel that hugs the west side of the islands in the northern section of the lake, I hooked up immediately. I used a spinning reel and a rainbow-trout patterned spoon far too big to hook anything small. Or so I had hoped. I caught and released eight rainbows of nine inches or less in an hour. My time on the water was limited, and so I gave myself five more casts before I paddled for the takeout. On cast No. 4, the spoon got slammed, and I fought something large for thirty seconds. The bag limit for the lake's species—rainbows, silver salmon and Arctic char—is 10, and I figured

lunch was on the line. But just as I wondered if I had time for a barbecue, what appeared to be a 22-inch silver rocketed three feet out of the water, contorted like a Flying Wallenda, then spit the hook. The heartbreaking "fish off" splash meant peanut butter and jelly awaited. Worse fates exist, I concluded as I paddled back to the RV. Like having one's luggage lost.



Bruce Leonard is a freelance writer/photographer who lives in Los Angeles. His feature on British Columbia's Siwash Lake Ranch recently appeared in the Robb Report, and he writes a monthly adventure column for Trailer Life Magazine called The Outsider.

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