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Catching on the Kanektok

Life on a salmon river in full swing.

By Dave Karczynski | June 2021

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Walrus have a penis bone called an oosik–lighter in hand than a moose foreleg, it makes an excellent salmon bonk. Black bear bile can heal your liver and melt your gallstones–and get you arrested if you're caught in possession of one. If you are encircled by griz and need to cross homicidal CFS to safety, doff your waders, trap them with air and float to the far bank–but kiss your boots goodbye. Mullets are the most efficient haircut known to man–only the word is pronounced moo-LAY.

In an essential place, one learns essential things.

This July afternoon I am indeed in such an essential place–western Alaska's Kanektok River. More precisely, I'm up to my waist in a chum salmon pool fighting my fifth fish in as many casts, this one raging like it's just snorted a full tub of bath salts. This particularly fresh specimen has me feeling less

like an angler than a matador–my buddy's warning to wear a cup on the Kanektok was not wrong–and after charging me twice it turns on a dime and takes off in the direction of the Bering Sea. My fishing mates, Hillari Denny and Doc Rideout, groan impatiently. Though we've only been at it an hour, we've already learned that one angler tethered to a fresh chum is danger, two is a cat's cradle, and three is a broken-rodded bird's nest. One mottled silver rocket at a time, please.

"Must be foul hooked," I shout, and right on cue the fish breaches to flaunt a hook stuck squarely in its mouth. My guide chortles. Hillari and Doc shake their heads. I crank the knob on my drag and look for a similar mechanism on my arm.

The signs this would be a special trip were there the moment we debarked the plane in Quinhagak, after having flown from Anchorage to Bethel. Our shuttle was the sweetest fish ride I'd ever seen, a refurbished school bus with lightning-bolt cracks across the windshield and a rear cab stripped to make a living-room sized platform for gear. Then there was the gross ubiquity of fish in every stage of life and death–leaping and torquing to shake sea lice, shotgunning through the riffles ahead of our boats, dangling from the eaves of

the natives' smokehouses, hanging in the mouths of raptors and gulls. And finally there was our digs. There's just something about a tent camp that speaks to the seriousness of the piscatorial endeavor. Many of my best fishing days—char in the Andes, mahseer in India, muskies in Michigan—have started with me staring up at a pitched ceiling in the dark, grasping around for my headlamp, wondering where I am.

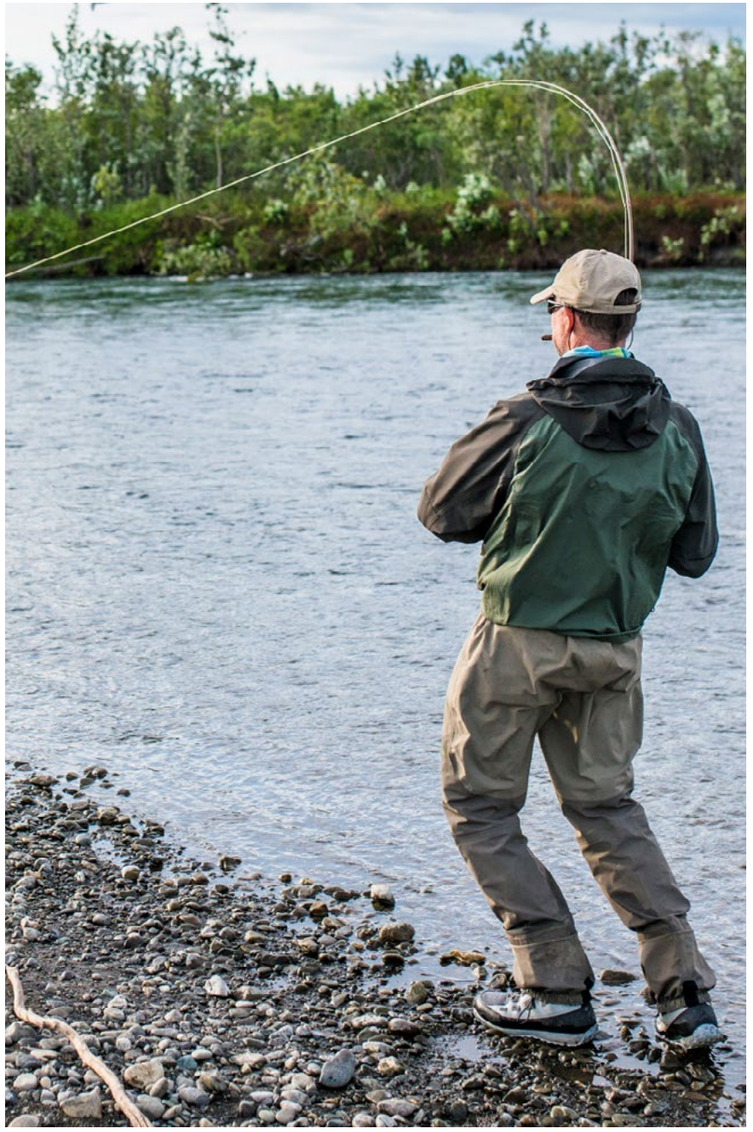
Finally, my chum is in the net, and there is much rejoicing. It's a big chrome male with sea lice for days, which earns it a driftwood bonk and free ride to the smokehouse. In no time Hillari is rearing back into a popper-eater that makes her reel sing like a stuck pig. I watch it thrash and tailwalk as I pick a gnarly bowtie out of my running line, unaware that my fly has slipped off its guide and is dangling in the water 10 feet away. Another big chum slams it like a cheater's first move in tug-of-war, and I barely free my fingers before the knot squeaks tight, and the fish rips downstream.

That's another essential thing I've learned today: You can lose a finger on this river if you're not careful.

The Kanektok is a seriously busy river, a conveyor belt of salmonid flesh some 80 miles long, beginning in the gunsmoke blue Ahklun Mountains and ending in Kuskokwim Bay at the native town of Quinhagak, which in the Yupik language means "new river channel." From June to September, its banks are as close to the center of the salmon universe as you can get without sprouting gills. Kings run mid June to mid July, chums mid June to mid August. Sockeye appear in late June and do their thing until the end of the next month. Every other year, pink salmon patrol the river from mid July to early August. Bringing up the rear of the salmon train, silvers run late July through mid September.

I'm here for the Kanektok kings, which have evolved an affinity for annihilating swung flies that is suppressed in other populations. This is not to say you can't swing a few up elsewhere—you certainly can—but you are unlucky to land a face cord of chinook per day here—what counts as an excellent outing when the run is peaking around the Fourth of July.

There are many challenges to western Alaska king fishing. The first is abiding by the cadence of the tides. On my swing water back in Michigan the CFS has more fixity than the stars, but the Kanektok heaves and falls to the tune of 15 feet a day. This requires anglers to use their line hand to manage the speed of the swing as a morning progresses. As the tide comes in and the current slows, a pure swing turns to a steady left-hand strip and



before you know it you're bringing the fly back in long, slow pulls, like some grandmother working her triceps at the gym. Then there's the importance of using your eyes. Down in the distance, between the old moose skeleton and the abandoned snow machine, you'll see a pod of fish breach, at which point you must throw down your sandwich or coffee or camera and make sure your fly is swimming—but not too low. The tidal bottoms have a fair amount of sediment, and kings like to swim with their chins above the murk. Finally, if you are lucky enough to get bit, the king salmon hookset asks you to be a Buddha and beast at the same time, letting the fish leisurely eat the fly and turn downstream before you drive the hook home with a pneumatic intensity—what the guides call "crossing the eyes".

After which, best of luck.

The Kanektok has its year-round residents as well, rainbows and grayling and dollies that spend the summer in a living hell of salmon Frogger but are rewarded with endless fatty eggs to feast on in return. Given all this fishing opportunity, Kanektok days are predictable only in their unpredictability. You might start the day swinging kings before the current stalls and you hop in the boat to work the pinch points with a single-handed rod. After lunch on the bank, a chum tows you up a side channel where big rainbows with junkyard dog DNA are sulking in a pool, flesh chunks the size of a Crunch bar in their maws. This gives you a rainbow jones, so you shoot upriver to mouse the afternoon, working logjams and flushing rainbows that chomp behind your mouse like they've been playing too much PacMan. But then another boat whooshes by, a guide traces a wavelength in the air with his free hand—the tide is going back out—so you gun it back downstream to where the river meets the sea and the horizon goes on forever.

In short, one thing leads to another.

One of our how-did-we-get-here? excursions finds us 20 miles upstream of camp egging a side channel plunge pool where dollies seethe like mosquito larvae in a storm puddle. After having a mostly quiet morning, Doc Rideout unleashes a one man "char-mageddon," catching one cartwheeling dollie after another. I ditch my rod and instead focus on capturing some midair pictures, and while I get a few decent images, I feel more keenly than usual the limitations of the camera. The modern angler lives in an era of the photograph—we swipe, scroll and tap more fish pics in a day than we used to see in a year. But, after watching this "char-pocalypse" I'm

convinced that what fishing needs is not more photographs, but more sounds, not an Instagram but a Piscaphone. To hear the sizzle of the drag, the stumbling of the angler on cobble, the collective sucking in of breath when a good fish jumps, and the guide sloshing forward to stab the net. To listen to the hoots, hollers and high-fives. To behold that moment when the pool goes quiet and the angler goes quieter—that beautiful sound of an angler finally getting his or her fill.

There's a politeness some exceptional fish grant visiting fishing writers by appearing on the last and most "fateful" day of the trip, but mine comes just past midweek. It catches me totally off guard. Not only do I not see it coming—no porpoising or breaching gives its presence away—but it's also questionable as to whether my fly was moving when it took. Like a smallmouth taking a popper, my best king rocketed out of the water just after my fly landed. And then it took off downstream.

Way downstream.

When an angler suffering acute salmonitis in his shoulders, biceps, wrists and obliques comes up on a chrome, well-fed king salmon fresh from the sea, it's unclear who is going to emerge the victor. The first few minutes of the fight are a blur. And then, slowly, I start to gain ground.

That's when the anxiety sets it.

I know I have a good fish on when I begin to fear losing it—and that fear shows. Followers of my future Piscaphone account will be able to easily distinguish between tiny fish and tremendous fish. Catching small fish, I laugh through an open smile. Catching giants,

I curse through gritted teeth. After 10 more minutes—enough time for me to recite a fairly complete encyclopedia of profanity through clenched jaws—my guide motions that it is time. I do as I have been instructed all week, keeping the fish in waist-deep water—shallow water freaks them out—and lift its head just as the net harpoons forward. I stare at the fish in the net for a minute before we get out the tape measure. Forty inches. After flirting with that number all week, I have finally done it.

After a few quick pics it is time to say goodbye, and I find a quiet, shallow flat for the release. In those last moments before letting the fish go, a familiar melancholy settles in. I've never been able to quite explain the feeling, which only happens on the best fish, the ones that push you to tie new creatures at the vice, the ones that keep you very alert and awake at night and very distant and distracted at work, the ones that pull you through more airports than is decent in a single day. They are the dream that held power over you all those months and years—that is, until you are holding that dream by the tail. And then it is as if a god has fallen out of the sky in the middle of the day, and you're watching its wings flounder as it swims in the net. There's a sense of vulnerability in this moment of having caught

the dragon, an awareness that if this impossible dream is real and mortal, then you, who are far less impossible, are real and mortal, too.

Dusk is coming in purple and the river is streaming silver when my best king swims off. I am done for the day.

There's a feeling, in the endless twilight of an Alaska summer night, of having wandered into some fashion of afterlife. You glut on king crab and strip steaks and salmon cooked three ways, then stroll back down to the river for just a few more casts before bed, which turn into a few more hours of casting. There's something different about this extra round of fishing, when the light genuflects and the moon rises above the alders. It feels quieter, more intimate, existing apart from the every day business of fishing. Other spirits mill about. A native from Quinhagak arrives on an ATV to meditatively cast a spoon. A few guides slip away to egg rainbows in the permadusk. Ted Leeson once wrote that modern angling was born when certain of our ancestors, after netting and trapping and cleaning fish all day, snuck back to the water at night with a stick and string, because they just could not stay away. Life on the Kanektok corroborates this theory, and no time more so than on the last night, when even those guests who usually go to bed after dinner find themselves waddling

out to the beach and taking up a position in the run. A few guides assemble a bonfire on the beach, giving the blue mercury of the river a golden glow. Bear stories begin to circulate. One of the guides walks around with an electric hair trimmer giving away free mullets. There are two takers. At the edge of the fire, Chum the campdog rests with chin on his paws, ears trained toward the darkening trees and what might lay beyond.

Among the guests, talk turns to naming our respective highlights of the week. Answers are predictable. "My 40-pound king." "When that 28-inch rainbow crushed my mouse." "The day I caught 100 pounds of fish without moving my feet." But when it's time for one of the older Brits to answer, he shakes his head and smiles. "All of it," he says. "I just like catching."

I just like catching. Catching. The intransitive act. No object. I've never heard the phrase, can't tell if it's poetry or a British commonplace, but its purity makes my head ring like a bell. Often we fly anglers fall prey to a "connoisseurship" at odds with the simplicity that fishing promises. We say things like, "I like bugging low-water smallmouth" or "I only fish the first few days of the Hex hatch." I once saw a homemade bumper sticker that read, "Tricos or GTFO." But a week on a Western Alaska salmon river in full swing reminds even the most worldly angler what, deep down, fishing is all about.

Before heading to my tent I walk down to the water one last time. I pick up my 8-weight and take up position in the middle of a run between a pile of driftwood and some old grizzly tracks. I'm just here to catch, I tell the river—no objective, no expectation. I make one last cast after another, on this perfect summer night, under a perfect twilit sky, in what feels like the most essential place in the world.

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Dave Karczynski is our man on the ground in Alaska. He fears no bear and fishes with an assassin's mentality. When not plundering his local waters or heading to the north country, he serves as a lecturer at the University of Michigan. Check out more of his work on IG @davekarczynski

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