

# Rainbow Rapture

Living the Dream on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula *By Will Blair*

**Dreams.** All fly anglers have dreams. My fly-fishing dreams go something like this: fly with a few good friends to a clear river full of hungry, aggressive, trophy-size trout. Nobody else around—nobody for hundreds of miles. Tie on the biggest, burliest fly I have and catch massive native trout—trout that burn my reel, bust my knuckles, and make my arm ache. Not flipper trout, but broad-shouldered wild fish with huge teeth, big tails, spotted eyes, and bad intentions toward anything that looks edible.

for both the Ozernaya Jet Boat Lodge and the Two Yurt River Float. Both programs have been running for more than a decade, respectively, supported by the adventurous anglers who venture here to see what wilderness fishing really looks like.

As an outfitter, I love the challenge of stringing together day after day of solid fishing, regardless of the location—but what a location this is. It certainly helps to have a private Mi-2 helicopter along with a pilot with 30 years of experience, and, of course, my GPS. A vivid part of this angling dreamscape is flying over a valley laced with never-fished ribbons of clear water, seeing huge fish scatter from the shadow of the helicopter, and then picking a spot and easing into the languid and surreal rhythm of cast and catch.

To the north and east of Two Yurt Lodge runs the Yelovka River, a huge river flowing straight south directly into the massive Kamchatka River. This is a roadless wilderness brimming with salmon. The Yelovka drains a gigantic area, with six major tributaries, each different in character and scope. Two of them emanate from glaciers and often run turbid with glacial till, but they are full of

huge rainbows, grayling, and Dolly Varden, and when the glaciers freeze or during low water caused by dry weather, they are fishable. The helicopter allows us to adjust our strategy on the fly, instantly adjusting to current conditions.

On one outing, for example, I wanted to try the Khunhilok River, but after a few minutes we decided to try a different river, opting to check out the Shishey River, which also typically runs somewhat turbid. We landed next to a small, clear tributary, and on the first cast into the little stream, trout practically fought over the opportunity to hammer a Dolly Llama streamer—fish on!

It was a short tributary, and we caught nice 'bows all the way to the mouth of the main river. Around lunchtime, I conferred with Volodya, our adroit pilot, telling him I had earlier seen another, bigger clear-flowing tributary about 10 minutes downriver and wanted to try it during the afternoon. We hopped over to that stream, landed, and, while eating lunch, enjoyed watching two brown bears play-fighting in a field just 100 yards away. Here, too, the dream became reality: this creek, which most as-



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***Ultimate angling experience: fly-out fishing where trout regularly eat mammals, bears outnumber humans, and active volcanos fill the horizon.***

Amazingly, this dream has been my reality for the past 18 years on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, but this idyllic summer dream reached its pinnacle the past two seasons: in 2014 and 2015, we ran Rainbows From Above, Kamchatka's only full fly-out program, set on the northern corridor of the peninsula. When I'm busy guiding clients, I rarely fish myself, but I'm privileged to watch my dream realized, coming out of the darkness into the light, day after day, by anglers in my charge.

Fifteen years ago I was introduced to Two Yurt Base Lodge when it was just a nascent dream for Victor Rebrikov and myself. This place is lost in time, set at the west end of Two Yurt Lake, which annually hosts a run of 500,000 sockeye salmon. On the other end of the food chain, as many as 500 adult brown bears call this valley home. Hot springs dot the landscape, overlooked by the glaciated peaks of Kamchatka's central range. Victor set up a 50-year exclusive lease of the entire valley back in 1999, and it has been his private spring bear-hunting location ever since. It is also where we store all of our equipment



surely had never before been fished, was full of spawning king, chum, and sockeye salmon.

Standing on the bank of this knee-deep stream, its water as clear as fine Russian vodka, I asked one client to make a cast from the bank. He flipped a huge leech pattern into the water at our feet and began shaking line out of his rod tip in preparation for casting when suddenly a 2-foot-long trout appeared, snatched the fly, and casually swam off. The battle was on, one of many in that beautiful stream. The day ended with eyes still registering disbelief, as if my clients were all trying to shake off the fog after a deep, wonderful, dream-filled sleep. And that was just the first day of their trip.

Each night, on the satellite phone, we called the weather stations at Petropavlovsk and Kozyrevsk to check the forecast and make a plan. It is a broad plan, which can entail flying over the mountains to spring creeks on the peninsula's west coast. In 2007, I took four anglers to one of these creeks. At the end of the day, when I found two of them waiting in the helicopter, I asked if everything was OK, and practically in unison they simply and elatedly said, "We never want to catch that many trout again!"

Last summer, we flew to that same creek three times, and I am reasonably sure it had not been fished since our foray in 2007. And while I'm rarely keen on counting fish, the fact is that on that super-fertile spring creek, our groups of four anglers caught literally hundreds of trout per day, and not a single fish was less than 20 inches long.

Before lunch one day, I watched as one angler sitting on the bank caught three huge trout while just hanging her mouse fly off the end of her rod.

These are fat fish in a small, easy-to-wade, gravel-bottom river. Moreover, these creeks support dense runs of spawning chum salmon, whose spawn and flesh provide food for 20- to 28-inch trout, big Dollies, and some kundzha (white-spotted char). These fish also eat rodents, and mouse patterns elicit violent, explosive, unforgettable strikes. In fact, mousing is often the most productive tactic—not to mention the most exciting for many anglers.

One afternoon I showed Mike Lucy a huge spun-hair

mouse fly he had given me three years earlier. I do mean huge: about 6 inches long, 2 inches in diameter, and tied on a tube. Mike and I laughed about how hard it was to hook fish on this fly. As a professional guide, I generally focus on my clients rather than fish myself, but on this occasion, after a lot of arm-twisting by Mike, I agreed to fish cleanup. Even after all the anglers in the party had caught numerous trout from a single run, that giant mouse fly still drew explosive strikes—strikes so savage that we all

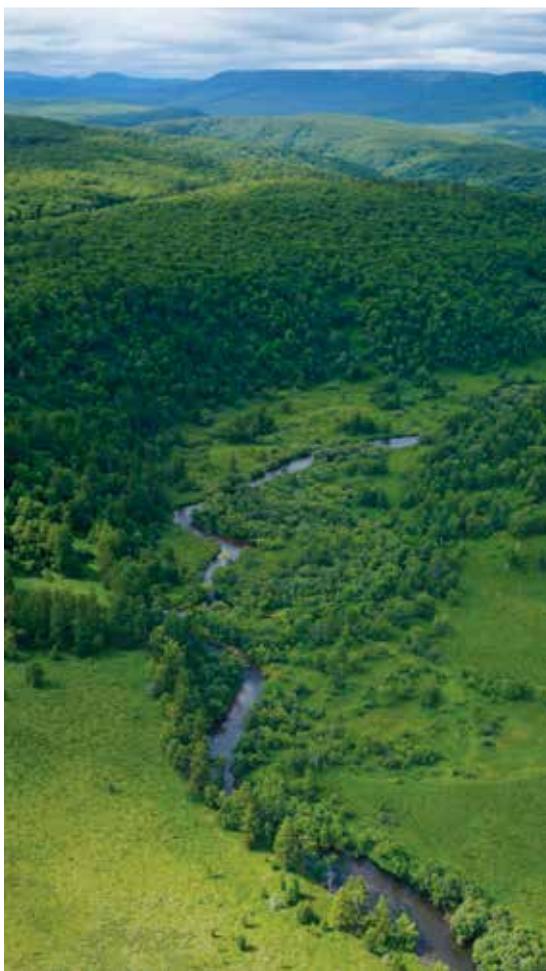
switched to big foam tube mouse flies. Soon thereafter it sounded like toilets were flushing all over the river as huge trout exploded on the flies. In less than an hour I had 25 takes and landed 15 trout, one of which was so fat we decided to measure it: 21 inches long with a 14-inch girth. That equates to a 6-pound fish, taken in knee-deep water.

Just a 20-minute helicopter ride north of Two Yurt Lodge, the Rassoshina River, more than 40 miles long and crystal clear, is full of big, burly trout, large grayling, and huge Dolly Varden. In contrast to some of the other streams, the Rassoshina is swift, and studded with medium-size boulders. It's loaded with fish, and is a perfect introductory river for anglers venturing to Kamchatka, so I often choose this river for the first day of a trip. It's a great place to set the bar for the week.

One week, on the first morning in the first run, I watched Mike Lucy cast repeatedly to the fastest water within his reach. I strolled up and asked how it was going, and he told me, "Not well."

He has fished with me before and he's a skilled angler, so I was frank with him, explaining that he had a better chance of catching a cold than a trout in that fast water. It is one of the first and most important things I try to teach Kamchatka anglers: fish the slow water.

As we worked down the river and he started to see the current breaks, drop-offs, and food funnels, he began to hook big trout at will. Mike's son, a novice fly angler, had accompanied him on this expedition, and Mike wanted to serve as his guide and spend the time to mentor his son in how to catch these Kamchatka leviathans. It was the highlight of my season, watching father and son wade side by side,



***In this incredible wilderness setting, gorgeous rivers are full of big, wild rainbows that have never seen a fly.***

catching big trout, laughing, carrying on like old friends in the middle of nowhere.

Toward the end of one day, I noticed on my GPS a waypoint marked “Great Hole,” from 2007. At the moment, I had been marking a new spot now called “Loaded.” Loaded was just that, and thoroughly fishing it took us an hour or more. Then, as we approached Great Hole, I heard Volodya coming downriver to fetch us. It was a luxury to know we had all the time we wanted to fish Great Hole as we strolled to the helicopter, dreaming of the dinner and camaraderie back at the lodge.

Great Hole lived up to its name in grandiose style. About 200 yards long, lined by lava ledge rock, studded with big fish-holding boulders, it’s a dream to wade, with lots of gravel and soft currents. After hooking numerous fish on streamers, Mike’s son decided to try a mouse, and within 20 minutes he had landed four huge trout, all about 2 feet long and heavy from eating salmon eggs for a month. Talk about spoiling a newbie!

The luxury of Rainbows From Above goes well beyond the opulence of watching one memorable guest eat 30 crepes in a morning, beyond the surrealism of soaking in a hot spring as the early-morning mist burns off the hillside. The most compelling luxury is that you have the world’s most perfect trout streams all to yourself, sans competition from other anglers. There’s no need to rush, no need for predawn awakenings. We have breakfast at 8 and depart at 9. The helicopter stays nearby all day, rejoining us at lunch after the morning’s vigorous walk-and-wade fishing session; after lunch, the fishing begins anew, until the helicopter retrieves us, often on a scenic gravel bar, for the return to the lodge. The only significant physical requirement is that anglers need to be capable of walking all day.

Kamchatka is truly a dream world for fly anglers, a unique wilderness replete with spectacular rivers brimming with huge trout—it dominates my thoughts and my dreams. I can’t wait to wade and fish these amazing rivers again this summer, under the endless pure skies and snow-fringed crags of Kamchatka. 🐟



## Kamchatka FAQs

**How do I book a trip?** These exclusive trips are available through [www.thebestofkamchatka.com](http://www.thebestofkamchatka.com), (530) 941-8524, [bigrainbows@thebestofkamchatka.com](mailto:bigrainbows@thebestofkamchatka.com).

**What is the season?** July–early September.

**How do I get there?** A convenient 4-hr. flight between Anchorage and Petropavlovsk, Russia, typically leaves on Monday morning and returns you the following Monday. Buses and helicopters ferry you to the Ozernaya River and Two Yurt Lodge and Rainbows From Above.

**What travel papers do I need?** You need a current passport and a visa to enter Russia, but no immunizations are required. Information on Russian visa requirements: (800) 215-4378, [www.allstatepassports.com/russia.html](http://www.allstatepassports.com/russia.html).

**What tackle should I bring?** 9-ft. rods, 6- to 7-wt. for the Ozernaya and Rainbows From Above, 5- to 6-wt. for the Two Yurt; floating lines (optional 15-ft. sinking-tip line, type IV); 6- and 7.5-ft. leaders with 0.012–2X tippets; disk-drag reels and backing to handle screaming runs.

**What other gear should I bring?** Be smart; pack light. Waterproof rain jacket and guide-weight Gore-Tex waders; felt-sole wading boots (no studs); layered clothing for warmth (fleece, etc.); protective hat; polarized sunglasses (amber is best); bug net, insect-repellent shirts, insect repellent; sunscreen (SPF 55); sleeping bag (air mattresses are provided); waterproof gear bags. See “Miscellaneous Equipment Checklist” at [www.thebestofkamchatka.com](http://www.thebestofkamchatka.com) for current information.

**What flies should I bring?** Dolly Llama (black, olive), Zuddlers (black, olive), sculpin patterns (olive, black, tan), rabbit leeches (black, purple), smolt patterns, Muddler Minnows, traditional salmon flies (pink, chartreuse), Parachute Adams, Stimulator (yellow, orange), Elk Hair Caddis, assorted mayfly patterns, Morrish Mouse. Important: Do not bring streamers larger than 4X long, size 4, or mice tied on bass-style stinger hooks.

**What else should I consider?** First, consider renting a satellite phone; cellphones generally don’t work. Also consider buying travel cancellation insurance (not the same as emergency medical evacuation or trip insurance). When traveling to Kamchatka, expect the unexpected. Take a deep breath and relax. Be sure to read The Best of Kamchatka’s brochure, available from Will Blair, (530) 941-8524, [www.thebestofkamchatka.com](http://www.thebestofkamchatka.com).

