

of Kamchatka

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MARK LANCE



Above: Two Yurt River leopard rainbow.

*Left: Glassy water on the Two Yurt is
great for fishing mice patterns.*

Day and night through Alaska's short summer months the Anchorage airport is buzzing with sportsman schlepping duffel bags and rod cases. Anchorage is the "jumping" off place to many wilderness fishing adventures. "What river are you headed to?" a fellow traveler asked. I instantly recollected memories of past trips to Alaska.



*Jet boating to the beat on the Ozernia.
Right: Typical Ozernia rainbow.*

But when I replied, "We are on our way to Kamchatka," I could hardly believe what I had just said. It was finally sinking in, we were leaving Alaska altogether, heading to a foreign land and unequaled angling wilderness.

With your finger on a map, trace the arcuate shape of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Continue along the path of the arc westward into the Bering Sea until you intersect Kamchatka. The prominent peninsula juts south from Russia's far east. The mountainous spine and rugged coastline of the peninsula reveals its volcanic origin. Active volcanic peaks, some rising up to 15,000 feet elevation, and glaciers create a beautiful landscape and surreal backdrop to countless rivers. Rivers of salmon and trout. Rivers of grayling and char. The Kamchatka Peninsula is said to be the world's greatest salmon sanctuary and the largest spawning ground for salmon species in Eurasia. Its rivers, many yet to be explored with a fly rod, are spectacularly beautiful and waiting for adventurers.

Our flight from Anchorage approached the coast of the peninsula; we banked hard against the mountains guarding the bay, and landed smoothly in the port of Petropavlovsk. "Petro" is Kamchatka's largest city and the industrial, scientific and cultural center of Kamchatka. Nearly 90% of the population on the peninsula lives here. The remaining 10% live in small settlements on the edge of vast uninhabited wilderness. It is this wilderness and the promise of spectacular fishing that drew us to Kamchatka.

Will Blair, owner of The Best of Kamchatka, met us as we stepped through customs. After long-awaited greetings and introductions to other anglers in our group we loaded gear into a van and headed for the heliport. Beyond Petropavlovsk, the Mi8 helicopter is the workhorse for commerce and wilderness travel on Kamchatka. The Mi8 is a huge beast, with rear cargo doors opening wide to consume piles of gear, supplies and anglers anxious to get to fishing camp. With much anticipation and the sharp whine of the turbines and rotors we were off, headed over the coastal range toward our destination, the Two Yurt and the Ozernaya rivers.

Floating the Two Yurt

On the flight north we peered through the helicopter's small, round windows to the landscape below. A bird's eye view of fertile valleys, taiga, birch forests, volcanoes, glaciers and pristine rivers gave us a perspective of a vast wilderness we would soon experience from the ground.

The Mi8 set us down in a small clearing at Camp One. From here our itinerary for the next two weeks was straightforward. Fish, eat, and sleep. Each day we would float and fish from one-man or two-man pontoon-style rafts, the perfect method for fishing the Two Yurt. This freestone river originates in a high-mountain lake, growing in size and depth along its journey to the Kamchatka River. At Camp One you can easily wade back and forth across the river working the prime holding water with dry flies or streamers. This upper section is similar to a medium size Rocky Mountain stream with riffles, pocket water, deep runs, cut banks and braided channels and islands.

Each morning we packed our "day" gear into small dry bags, secured them to the platform on the rear of our rafts and headed downstream, stopping frequently to fish along the way. Our



Russian guides were helpful in pointing out productive water, locating fish and selecting flies, but they did not "hover" over us every minute, as some guides have a tendency to do. They were good company on the river and helped us feel as though we were exploring new water on our own.

The Two Yurt is loaded with rainbows, Dolly Varden, and grayling. Our trip, in late July, was in-between salmon runs so our primary target was the rainbows which had followed the king salmon on their earlier spawning migration up river. A pattern for where to find fish quickly emerged. Big rainbows command the good feeding lanes near the fast water, where there is good current running over a change in bottom structure, or near the protection of boulders and cut banks. We were nearly always rewarded with a violent strike from a large rainbow when we spent time working a streamer through this interesting water. Our most productive

patterns were dark-colored streamers dressed with marabou or strips of rabbit fur and a little Krystal Flash in the tail. These lively, pulsating materials drive them crazy. We caught many rainbows averaging 18 to 22 inches and every day we landed a few in the 25- to 27-inch range. My wife, Sharon, landed the big fish of the trip, an unbelievable 30-inch rainbow, hooked on a weighted streamer stripped through deep, fast current in the middle of the river.

Grayling, too, are abundant on the Two Yurt. They tend to hold in softer current or light riffle water. These fish rise readily to high-floating dry flies like Caddis, Humpys or bushy Stimulator patterns drifted naturally in the current or “twitched” across the surface. Drakes and Pale Morning Duns will also bring a rise. Kamchatka

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grayling tended to be far larger than expected and put up a tussle unlike what I have experienced in other rivers. It was not unusual to hook up with many grayling throughout the day, with the occasional surprise of a 17- to 20-incher. And of course, surface strikes are always a hoot, no matter what size the fish.

We also enjoyed hooking brightly colored Dolly Varden. The Dollies cannot resist the torment of a bright rubber-legged streamer stripped or jigged along in the current. Another productive technique was a dead drift with the occasional twitch in deep current or near the edge of seams. Our boxes of standard Woolly Buggers and variations came in handy. One very productive variation is to slide a large gold bead or tungsten bullet head onto the leader prior to tying on the fly, then, snug the bead over the knot and up against the fly. The bead not only helps get the fly down in the water column, but also adds a little “attractor” appeal to the fly. Though it does not happen often, if the action slowed at all we added an egg-colored bead or two on the leader in front of the fly. This little trick moves fish! It became the sure-fire method for ensuring a shore lunch of fresh Dolly Varden cooked over birch coals.

Each day, as we fished our way down the river, the camp cook and camp helpers floated our personal gear to the next camp in large rafts. The Best of Kamchatka camps were made up of A-frame “cabins”

furnished for two anglers and a large dining tent with wooden floors. Hot showers and flush toilets added an unexpected comfort to camp and showcased the clever resourcefulness of our Russian guides deep in the Kamchatka wilderness.

By the time we reached Camp Six we were hitting our stride. Fish, eat, sleep. Fish, eat, sleep. We had experienced fly-fishing in a true wilderness, and had caught a lifetime worth of trout, grayling and Dolly Varden. But, we had reached the end of the Two Yurt portion of our journey. The chopper arrived late in the day and in a flurry of loading our gear and saying goodbyes to our new Russian friends we were off to our next river, the Ozernaya.

Mousing the Ozernaya

The Ozernaya River, or the "Oz" as it is affectionately called by those few anglers lucky enough to fish it, is a large spring creek. Our camp sat high on a lush bench overlooking the Oz. Will Blair selected the camp site for the view of this beautiful river, for the little tributary that keeps the beer and vodka cool, but most of all for its proximity to world-class trout and salmon fishing.

Like the Two Yurt, the Oz is undoubtedly one of the finest rainbow fisheries on the planet. Having over thirty miles of fishable water accessible by jet boat allowed us to spread out and explore a different beat every day. We had the river to ourselves. More importantly, having only eight anglers per day on this river ensures that many of the beats are "rested" daily. The guides are very conscious of protecting this spectacular fishery. A strict "catch and release" policy is enforced for the rainbows. Hook size restrictions also play an important role reducing accidental hook mortality.

The Oz runs so clear that you can watch giant rainbows follow and strike a fly deep under the surface. A favorite fly for the Oz is the Whitlock Diving Baitfish, a large fly of spun elk hair shaped to dive under the surface when stripped, large plastic eyes, and trailing saddle hackle feathers to give it the silhouette and action of a baitfish. This fly proved irresistible when cast down and across with a floating line, then swung and teased through the current. At the end of the natural swing, let the fly hang in the current for a couple of seconds then give a few short strips before lifting the fly out of the water for the next cast. This technique often brought a mighty strike as rainbows attacked thinking that their prey was going to escape.

Though swinging streamers is very productive on the Oz, the



Above: Scouting the "arsenal", top picks: Leeches, Woolly Buggers, Articulating Leeches and Sculpins.

Left: Grayling and Dolly Varden are very abundant.

most spectacular and visual of all fly-fishing is done with a mouse pattern skated across the surface. To see a wake racing toward your fly then a large white mouth open wide will turn your knees to jelly. One could fish a mouse pattern for a lifetime on the Oz and never tire of the aggressive, often acrobatic takes. Hooking a 25-inch rainbow on a mouse deep in the hinterlands of Kamchatka may be the ultimate fly-fishing experience.

The Last Frontier

Until the early 1990's Kamchatka was off limits due to its strategic military importance during the cold war. Fortunately the region is now open for travel, but it is still virtually unexplored. Anglers have barely scratched the surface. Though it is quicker to reach fly water in Kamchatka than to get to Chile or Argentina, this is truly the "Last Frontier" for trout and salmon fishing. If you value a true wilderness fishing experience, no people, and unbelievable fly-fishing, you have to put Kamchatka's Two Yurt and the Ozernaya rivers on your "life list" of fishing destinations.