



the
hatch

Last year, Will Blair finished

his 18th season on Kamchatka, a career guiding in the Russian

Far East that started with reading an article in *Fly Fisherman*. At the time, Blair was working in Bristol Bay, and the peninsula, just emerging from Soviet rule, seemed like a version of the Last Frontier frozen in time, a wilderness created by military isolation. It had few people, fewer roads, lots of bears, and was possibly the birthplace of rainbow trout. Within a year he was guiding there.

As Blair prepares for another season, *Stonefly* caught up with him to talk about almost two decades in one of the planet's last great strongholds of wild trout and salmon.

It's roughly the size of California and about half of Oregon, about a thousand-mile peninsula.

It has one dirt road up the central valley.

Since *perestroika* and the fall of the Soviet Union in '91, Kamchatka has actually halved in population. During Soviet rule, they would fly single engine planes to support the small villages. Those have completely dried up.

It's a huge place with a total population of just over 200,000 people and 95 percent of them live in the capitol, Petropavlovsk.

We're 350 miles north of there and we operate in an area almost the size of Katmai National Park. We're alone up there on almost three million acres.

Two years ago, I drove from our Ozernaya lodge to the mouth of the river. It took me five hours by jet boat. We didn't see a single person until we got to the mouth where a dozen guys were commercially fishing. One hundred miles without a sign of anybody.

TEXT BY WILL RIZZO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL BLAIR



Alaska is four times as populated per square kilometer.

Kamchatka has been a forward listening base to the U.S., it's still very tightly controlled by the military. Our lodge on the Ozernaya River is actually located inside a restricted military area.

Ballistic missile parts are all over the river. Everything from eight-by-ten inches to pieces bigger than our jet boat.

Kamchatka is considered remote and the middle-of-nowhere even by Russian standards.

There's one dam on the entire peninsula.

The salmon runs are spectacular. On the Dvukhyurtochnaya River, they probably saw 800,000 sockeye salmon last year. It gets huge king salmon runs that start in July and go until September.

Kamchatka get's one third of the world's pacific salmon spawning on it.

If you ask Russian biologists, they will tell you rainbow trout developed somewhere on the west coast of Kamchatka, on the Tigil River drainage or the Voyampolka, before spreading over Bernigia into Alaska.

They look slightly different. You'll catch one trout that looks almost like a cutthroat, and then another that looks just like an Alaskan rainbow.

You can take just three flies to Kamchatka: a black and olive Dolly Lama, a parachute Adams, and a mouse. That's all you really need.

We use floating lines with 15-pound tippet. These fish don't care. No nymph fishing and no beads.

Kamchatka's head biologist guided for us. He did a creel survey in 2013 and 2014. We took 88 people over nine weeks to the Ozernaya, and they landed 7,953 rainbows that averaged 22 inches. That's landed.

There are both American and Russian guides. The Russian guides, like Igor Shitilo and Sergei Pashuk, are mountain men, they've survived at a different level. They can do things with their little hatchets that maybe Jim Bridger could do, but very few Americans can. Real outdoorsmen.

We have A-frame cabins and flush-toilet outhouses. It's nice. Flew it all by helicopter and built it by hand.

My partner Victor Rebrikov is a stud; he's a former KGB major, veterinarian for the Chukotka region's reindeer herd, and outfitter for bear, moose, and sheep for the last 20 years. He's guided everyone from Kalashnikov to Putin's buddies. He's connected to everyone. He's able to get things done.

The Russians have done a couple of smart things. They just outlawed offshore netting last summer. No one can offshore net around Kamchatka, not the Japanese, Chinese, North or South Koreans. No one.

They assigned every river a single commercial fishing company.

If you're given the Kolpakova or the Ozernaya, that is now your river. It's incentivized these commercial companies to take care of the rivers.

It's facilitated some pretty nasty stuff on the west coast where there's more poaching. The commercial guys have come out fighting.

Now you don't have guys in the headwaters digging fish off their spawning redds because the guy who owns it is going to fly up there in his helicopter, and God knows what's going to happen.

The Russians are actually doing some forward thinking to stem the tide of destruction.

We fly up the Yelovka River valley to the Ozernaya camp over all these rivers, many that I've fished. But there's one called Keninin, two drainages south. It's crystal clear and looks like a spring creek. My Russian partner had told me it's no good, a Russian had the hunting rights and had killed all the fish.

So last year on our fly-out program, I decided to defy the advice of my Russian partner. We flew up there and it's absolutely loaded with steelhead-sized rainbows, 28-inch trout. It's all gravel, braided, and spectacular.

I'm pretty sure we were the first people to cast a fly into that river. That was last summer. That can only happen in Kamchatka.

Will Blair co-owns and operates The Best of Kamchatka guide service (thebestofkamchatka.com).