



By Mary and Charles Love

Alaska may be the last great place to cast a line.

Particularly the Kenai River—wild, majestic, teeming with sockeyes, cohos and rainbow trout.

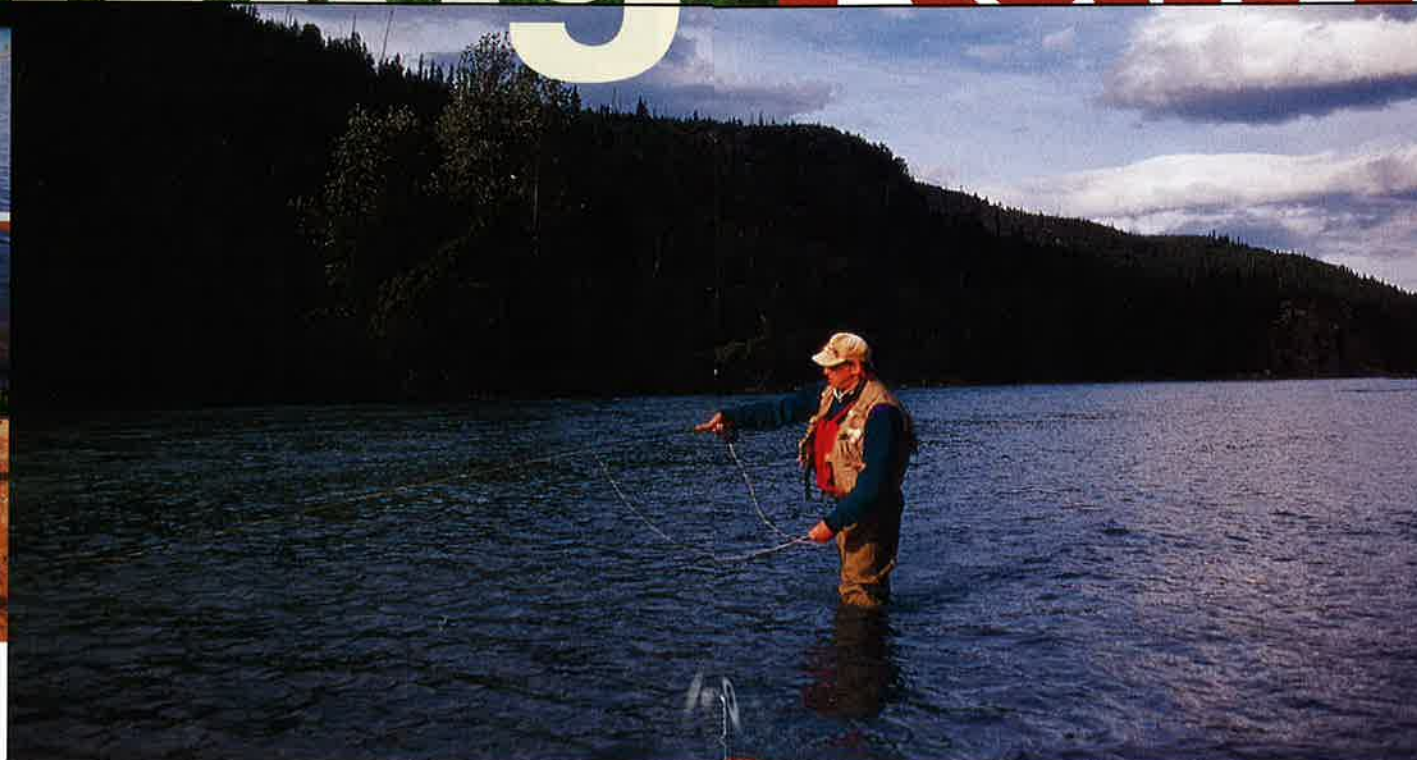
OUR 5 A.M. WAKE-UP CALL—ACTUALLY A WAKE-up knock—was right on time. I cracked open the door of our cabin, braced for a blast of cold Alaskan air. Out of the darkness, a man passed two mugs of steaming coffee. “Something to get your heart going,” he said.

Ahead was a day of late summer fishing on south-central Alaska’s legendary Kenai River.

The Kenai River flows across the Kenai Peninsula, a 9,000-square-mile wilderness area that hangs, like a cluster of grapes, off Alaska’s mainland just south of Anchorage. The peninsula is a microcosm of Alaska: Endless, snow-capped mountain ranges step down to forests of alder and fir; brilliant yellow meadows host wildflowers and late summer berries; glaciers calve, thunderously, into peaceful fjords. Include

# Chasing Rainbows

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Redoubt Volcano as seen from the Kenai Peninsula; fishing on the Kenai River; morning’s catch of silver salmon



a wildlife population of bald eagles, bear, moose, sea otters and whales, to name just a few, and you have all the ingredients for an intense Alaska wilderness experience.

Serious fishermen come every year for sockeyes (red salmon), cohos (silver salmon) and humpies (pink salmon). But it’s also home to other prized sport fish: rainbow trout, arctic char, Dolly Varden (a char named after a colorfully dressed coquette in the Dickens’s novel, *Barnaby Rudge*) and even a few grayling.

The best thing about fishing the Kenai is that it’s only a short drive from central Alaska’s two main gateways—Anchorage, Alaska’s air hub, and Seward, a popular port for cruise ships. As a result, a variety of accommodations have sprung up near the peninsula’s two main roads. These range from public and private campgrounds to cabins and full-service lodges.

For us, the choice was easy. We had come to Alaska on a photography assignment, laden with cameras and lenses, and had no desire to add camping and fishing gear to our luggage. For these reasons, we booked three days of fishing with the Great Alaska Adventure Lodge,



an upscale facility that provided meals, private guides and all our fishing gear.

The Great Alaska Adventure Lodge is in Sterling, about an hour and a half's drive from Anchorage at the confluence of the Moose and Kenai rivers. From here, the lodge's attentive staff was more than willing to chauffeur us to any number of adventures: east, to trout and salmon fishing on the Upper Kenai; west, to salmon fishing on the Lower Kenai; or south, to halibut fishing in Seward or Homer. If, at the end of the day, we still hadn't had enough, we could fish all night on the lodge's beach.

This morning, however, our destination was the "Upper-Upper," a stretch of the Kenai that begins near the river's source, glacier-fed Kenai Lake. In preparation, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast in the lodge's dining room before boarding a van for the 30-minute drive to Cooper's Landing.

Ed, our guide, well-tanned and in his 20s, was dressed in a crisp pair of navy-blue chest waders. He spoke in a slow, folksy monotone, with the "tell-it-like-it-is" style I've come to associate with experienced fishing guides.

"Today," he said, "I'm not sure what's going to happen. The trout have been in transition. They've been moving, but it hasn't been red-hot fishing. But any day now...it's like someone flicks a switch. The salmon drop their eggs and that's when, man, the trout just turn on. You'll be catching rainbows and Dolly Varden that are stuffed with salmon eggs—the eggs are just flying out of their mouths. Hopefully, today will be that day."

It was a perfect morning for fishing—clear with only a slight chill in the air. Ahead of us the sun was peeking over the spruce trees. Beyond the trees, in the distance, glacier-covered mountains were purple shadows in the morning light. A swirling mist veiled the river, and through it we could see small fishing boats bob by, caught in the Kenai's swift current. The water, reflecting its glacier origin, was a milky shade of turquoise.

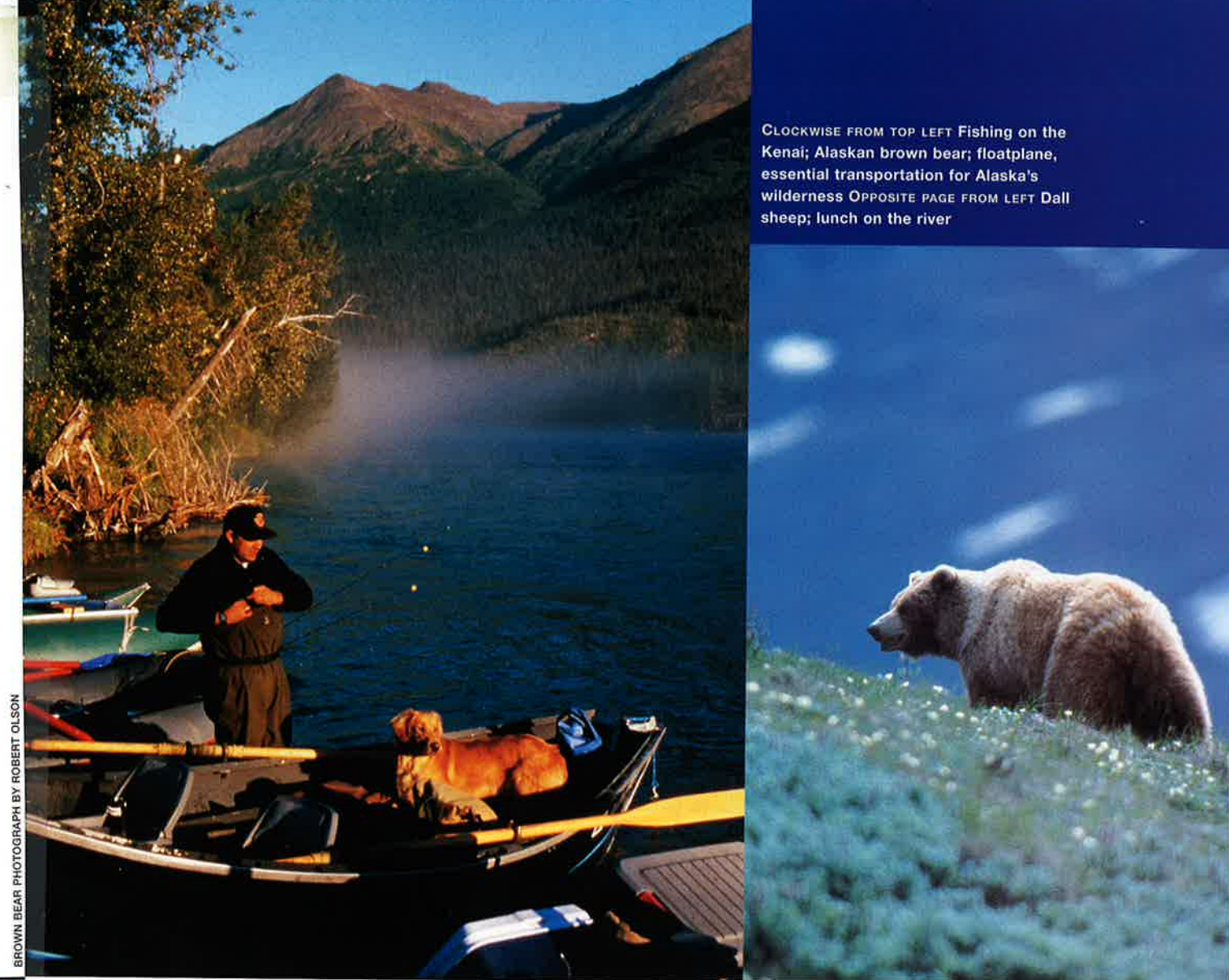
Aside from being a prime habitat for rainbow trout and Dolly Varden, the Kenai is known for its world-record king salmon (up to 97 pounds). In fact, the Kenai has produced more International Game Fish Association world records than any river on earth.

At the landing, we launched our own flat-bottomed boat onto the watery highway. Red salmon season ended weeks ago. But that didn't mean reds had disappeared. On the contrary, they were everywhere, and our mission was to avoid them. Ed was compassionate: "They've had a long journey. They've made it through all the other fishermen who tried to get them when they were bright, silvery and fresh. Now it's their turn to spawn, so we leave 'em alone."

Our guide had all the gear we needed for a morning of spin fishing (fly-fishing would have been an option had we brought our own gear). Ed suggested we start with a six-weight rod and a leader with a "slinky" weight (parachute cord filled with buckshot) to keep the line on the bottom. At the end of my line was a small pink bead that resembled a salmon egg.

"We're trying to keep a natural-looking drift to the egg pat-

**The Kenai** has produced more International Game Fish Association world records than any river on earth.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Fishing on the Kenai; Alaskan brown bear; floatplane, essential transportation for Alaska's wilderness OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT Dall sheep; lunch on the river

BROWN BEAR PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT OLSON



## WAYS TO EXPLORE THE KENAI PENINSULA

- The Great Alaska Adventure Lodge (800/544-2261; [www.greatalaska.com](http://www.greatalaska.com)) offers adventure packages that appeal to the whole family. In addition to fishing, activities include camping, canoeing, sea kayaking, rafting and bear viewing. The attentive staff picks guests up at the local airport and can arrange transportation to other parts of the peninsula—down the west coast to Homer, for example, to explore the charming artist community of Halibut Cove, or to Seward for a guided cruise of the Kenai Fjords National Park.

- The 26 Glacier Cruise™ (800/544-0529) provides a relaxing break from

Alaska's more physical activities. The state-of-the-art, jet-impelled catamaran, the Klondike Express, brings passengers face-to-face with Prince William Sound's stunning tidewater glaciers.

- Ketchum Air Service Inc. (800/433-9114; [ketchum@alaska.net](mailto:ketchum@alaska.net)) can take you, by floatplane, on a flight-seeing tour of Mount McKinley or drop you off at your own private cabin for a real wilderness adventure.

- For more information on accommodations and attractions on the Kenai Peninsula, consult the *Kenai Peninsula*



Discovery Vacation Guide 2001 (907/283-3850) or visit [www.visitkenai.com](http://www.visitkenai.com).

- The scenic Alaska Railroad (800/544-0552) offers daily service between Seward and Anchorage.





**“The salmon drop their eggs and that’s when, man, the trout just turn on. You’ll be catching rainbows that are stuffed with salmon eggs.”**

tern,” he explained. “You want to feel the bottom all the time. It’ll take some practice to recognize a bite. Sometimes the fish will hammer the line and there’s no question; other times they’ll pick it up softly and you have to set the hook fast.”

Ed sat in the middle of the boat, rowing against the current to slow our drift. Occasionally, he offered advice on where to cast—usually 45 degrees from the stern toward calmer water near the river’s banks. It wasn’t long before rods were bending and drags screaming. First in my net was a 6-pound rainbow, followed by a 26-inch Dolly Varden that impressed even our guide.

As we drifted farther downstream, another rod bent toward the water. The line raced from the reel and a silver arc flashed beneath the surface. With a deliberate jerk on the rod, my husband set the hook in an even larger rainbow, then, 10 minutes later, another Dolly Varden.

Occasionally, we pulled our boat to shore to fish from the gravel beaches. The salmon, long red dashes in the water, hovered around our legs like affectionate pets. But their attentiveness was an illusion. We would look up to cast, then back down again, and they were gone.

By noon, we each had caught and released five rainbows and two Dolly Vardens. At lunchtime, Ed put on his chef’s hat. On a portable grill, he arranged marinated chicken breasts and a col-

orful assortment of fresh vegetables. A quick lunch, a nap on the bank with our faces toward the sun, then it was time to go.

We pulled our boats ashore at Jim’s Landing just before Skilak Lake, a large ballooning of the Kenai River before it continued west to our lodge and ultimately, Cook Inlet.

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## Chasing Rainbows

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**“This is the last good place. You can drive 10 minutes and be surrounded by wilderness and breathtaking scenery.”**

That’s where we met Red and Bob, serious fly fishermen dressed for success—so well dressed, we concluded they could have opened a sporting goods store right there on the river bank. From a high-tech vessel called a kata-raft (best described as a piece of canvas stretched across two rubber pontoons) they were unloading shiny carbon-fiber rods, the latest in neoprene waders, and boxes full of colorful flies. They were, in the words of my husband, “one helluva photo opp.”

The men, who appeared to be in their late 40s or early 50s, grinned like mischievous school boys. A fawn-colored mustache and beard framed Red’s smile; Bob’s was interrupted by a long cigar, which he clenched in his teeth. Between drags, Bob explained that he and Red were “walk-in” guides for the smaller tributaries of the Kenai. For the past seven years they had fished together on their days off.

Like us, Bob was casting a weighted line with an egg pattern. But from the beginning of July to the second week in August he said he uses a dry fly that imitates a caddis fly, a “parachute” pattern

that sits lower in the water and is more clearly visible to the fish.

Red and Bob were eloquent spokesmen for fishing on the Kenai. As Bob observed, “This is the last good place. You can drive 10 minutes and be surrounded by wilderness and breathtaking scenery. The fishing season is short and intense. If I could fish all year, I’d be living under the bridge with my tackle in a cardboard box. It’s that good.”

Red’s testimonial was a quote from *The Starlight Creek Angling Society*, a reflection on fly-fishing by the late Harry Middleton, a writer well known to aficionados of the sport: “There is not a day that goes by that I don’t thank whatever gods there might be for trout and trout fishing. It is absolutely the most fun a man can have with his clothes on.”

We agreed. Though we were a few days ahead of August’s busiest trout week, we couldn’t complain. For scenic beauty and challenging fishing, even if you only have a few days, it’s hard to beat the Kenai. In the words of our guide, it’s “something to get your heart going.” ♦