

## LANI WALLER

**I**N JUNE OF 1912 THE residents of Katmai and Savonski villages began to feel the earth move in a series of powerful and rhythmic convulsions. The two villages, located on the upper Alaska peninsula, were situated on either side of Mt. Katmai and what is now known as Mt. Novarupta. The settlements were small, isolated communities comprised mainly of native Indian and Eskimo populations. A few Russian fur traders and hunters had visited the area, along with a few other whites, but for the most part the two villages seemed lost and forgotten in a world that was poised on the brink of World War I.

The landscapes there had also remained unchanged for countless years, a wilderness blend of low-lying, lush tundra, dense forests of spruce and birch and an immense water system dominated by several large lakes. Vast glacial formations covered extensive portions of the high country, which seemed to lie eternally frozen beneath a harsh mantle of opaque white ice.

On June 6, only five days later, both Mt. Katmai and Mt. Novarupta erupted in one of the most violent volcanic explosions of recorded history. The force of the eruption was felt as far north as Dawson, 650 miles away in Canada's Yukon Territory, and much of the entire Northern Hemisphere was darkened for three days as pumice and black ash rained down continuously.

The National Geographic Society subsequently launched two major exploratory expeditions to the Katmai area, one in 1912 and another in 1915. It was the second expedition, led by 31-year-old Robert Griggs, that suddenly brought the entire area into public view.

Griggs was totally unprepared for the magnitude of what he found, but in the true spirit of a scientist and

*Near the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, unusual geologic forces, a harsh climate and a wilderness setting have worked together to produce . . .*

# Alaska's Katmai Rainbows

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LANI WALLER lives in San Rafael, California. He has guided the Katmai, Alaska, area during the past two summers.



The photo on the preceding two pages and the photo above illustrate the dramatic setting the angler may encounter when fishing for the rainbows of the Katmai National Monument, as well as the excitement of a hook up. Below, a characteristic Katmai rainbow.



explorer he collected as much information and as many photographs as he could and returned home ecstatic. His vivid account of his long overland trek through nearly impossible traveling conditions remains a classic in the literature of Twentieth Century exploration.

Interested in obtaining a view of the hidden and mysterious Ukak River valley, Griggs and a single companion struggled for days, fighting quicksand, driving windstorms and bitter-cold rain. Upon reaching a height of land, after nearly turning back several times, he and his fellow explorer looked down the slope toward the Ukak valley. They saw no river but a landscape of awesome proportions and as alien to their eyes as if they were peering at the surface of the moon. Although he did not know it then, it was to be the high

point of Griggs's life as an explorer and one of the major geological discoveries of all time—the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. Griggs's journal describes the scene as follows:

"I can never forget my sensations at the sight which met my eyes as I surmounted the hillock and looked down the valley; for behind a blue mountain in the distance, were hundreds—no thousands—of little volcanoes. . . . They were not so little either . . . many of them were sending up columns of steam which rose a thousand feet before dissolving. After a careful estimate, we judged there must be a thousand whose columns would exceed 500 feet."

A triumphant Griggs returned home after extensive exploration and mapping of the Katmai area. He published his account in the January 1916 issue of *National Geographic* magazine, where it drew immediate response, not only from Society members but from the general public as well. An enthusiastic Congress soon passed legislation creating what is now known as Katmai National Monument. Griggs's original discovery site was later enlarged by additional federal land reservations, and today the monument comprises some 2.8 million acres.

**THE PARK IS A STUDY** in geological contrasts. Located just west of Kodiak Island, its physical setting is both rich and diverse in its beauty. Jagged columns of ice-covered mountains rise abruptly from soft, tundra-covered valley floors. Dense forests of spruce and birch grow in leeward, sheltered locations behind mountain ranges that protect them from freezing arctic-winter winds. The eastern coastline of the monument, ruggedly beautiful with fjordlike inlets, spans some 40 miles

along the Shelikof Straits. Water is seemingly everywhere. The long physical isolation of this Alaskan area and a respect for the land by sparse native inhabitants have left it free, wild and unspoiled. Its fisheries are also unchanged and current angling regulations in the monument are designed to protect their pristine condition.

The rainbows in Katmai lakes and streams are unlike any others. Strong for their size, beautifully formed and exquisitely colored, they live in absolutely unspoiled environments. Little or no interference from human contact has allowed these strains to develop with a physical strength and cleanness of form that is unmistakable. There are no clipped fins here, no plastic discs stapled through backs and no deformed dorsals. Faced with harsh living conditions and plagued with almost impossible odds against winter survival, the rainbows have developed and adapted in a manner that is as remarkable as it is uncommon. Very short growing seasons—perhaps four months at best—followed by long, lean winters have almost eliminated the kind of diet and lifestyle that other members of their species enjoy in warmer, more supportive environments. But, despite these conditions, they have flourished and remain unchanged, now threatened only by man. They are trophy fish in the truest sense of the word.

In order to deal with the demands of their world, many of these rainbows must make annual migrations into favored streams, not only to reproduce but to prepare themselves for the harsh demands of the winter season. The early migration is usually in May or June and lasts only a short time. Some of these fish will remain in chosen streams all summer, while the remainder return to spend summer in the lakes.

The fall migration serves another purpose. Spurred on by some growing sense of urgency, the rainbows follow migrating runs of sockeye salmon and gorge themselves on drifting, protein-rich salmon eggs in a last attempt to gather and store the sufficient reserves of energy they will need to survive long periods of winter cold and semidarkness. Once back within the winter shelter of the lake, they will remain isolated and comparatively dormant throughout the entire winter, conserving energy by feeding only in certain places and traveling only in budgeted measure. For many of these trout, this migration is critical, as many of the streams will freeze solid during the winter season.

The all-too-short arctic summers allow only the slowest growth. Thus the rainbows's lives are determined and measured in the shortest of terms, and a five-pound fish may be over ten years old. Without protection, entire populations of brood stock could be eliminated in only a few short seasons.

The watersheds inside Katmai are immense and require time and experience to understand fully. The size of the area and its isolation make exploration slow and difficult. Fortunately, there are only two roads within the entire park, and the combined total mileage is less than 20 miles. There are no roads in.

The water system is dominated by Naknek Lake, Lake Grosvenor and Lake Coville, along with several key

streams, most of which either enter or leave the lake system at some point. These form the major watersheds used by the rainbow in Katmai. Most spawning takes place in either the Naknek River or the Brooks River. However, virtually any suitable stream may be used by spawners. Grosvenor Lake and Lake Coville lie on the northern side of the park. Long and relatively narrow with irregular and angular shorelines, they each span some 15 to 20 miles, and many streams enter them, most of which are unexplored and unfished.

One of the very best streams, the American River, enters Lake Coville at the lake's extreme northwestern end. A beautiful and isolated river, it can only be reached by float plane or by boat ride from Grosvenor Fishing Camp. Virtually unfished, it is superb fly water and contains large and unusually marked fish.

The best-known stream in Katmai is the Brooks River. Located between Lake Brooks and the Iliuk Arm of Naknek Lake, it threads an angular path only two and a half miles before it empties into Iliuk Arm. It is a classic fly-fishing stream and the park system has wisely restricted it to fly-fishing-only. It hosts a stable population of relatively large rainbows throughout the season and some very large fish in the fall months. It is jealously guarded by the park service as well as by a small but loyal band of followers who fish it each year. The Brooks also has one of the finest runs of sockeye salmon in Alaska, and they are noted for their willingness to take artificial patterns.

**THE SUMMER FISHING** in Katmai usually produces rainbows that will average from two to four pounds. Larger fish are taken each summer but without any degree of predictability. They are there, but you have to hunt them. They are very strong fish for their size, with unusual speed and power. I have had 16-inch rainbows strip out the entire fly line and get into the backing on their first run. The summer fish are located throughout the park at various times during the summer months, and local guides operating out of Grosvenor or Kulik camps keep visiting anglers in touch with changing conditions.

The Katmai weather is usually temperate in the summer, although unstable, and the season is relaxed. Wildflowers are in abundance and many species of wildlife can be seen. Only the night chill and the ice visible in the high country betray the transitory nature of the summer season.

However, warm clothing and rain gear are essential during the summer, as local high winds, called "williwaws," occasionally spoil the tranquillity of the season, bringing unwelcome rain and almost impossible fly-fishing conditions. It is the price you pay for the kind of scenery and fishing that exist there, and fortunately spells of bad weather are normally short-lived.

Late August and early September mark the beginning of the fall season. The country and its wildlife both change, obviously preparing themselves for the approaching winter. The moods of the rivers change as well, and are given hue by the migrating schools of sockeye salmon in full spawning colors. This is the

time when some of the larger rainbows move into the streams.

The angler should normally change his approach at this time of year. While standard fly patterns will continue to produce some fish, the overwhelming favorite is some kind of fly that resembles a salmon egg. Gaudily dressed patterns of bright orange and red, fished deeply, are the order of the day, and many knowledgeable anglers will use no others.



ANGLERS WHO FISH the Katmai National Monument must fly by airline to Anchorage, Alaska, where they take Wien Air Alaska charter flights to King Salmon, Alaska. From there transportation is by charter to the three camps that are situated in the Katmai area and cater to fishermen. They are Grosvenor Camp, Brooks Camp and Kulick Camp. Camp prices range as follows: Grosvenor, \$115 per day; Brooks, \$70 per day; and Kulick, \$200 per day. Fishermen should check what is included in the daily rate charged. Kulick Camp, for instance, charges high, but the price includes meals, lodging, float-plane rides, guides and boats. Brooks Camp for its \$70 per day fee includes only meals and lodging in its rate, while Grosvenor includes guides, boats, meals and lodging, but no float planes.

Air fare from San Francisco to the camps and back was \$400 per person on "supersaver" airline rates in 1978. Rates may have increased since then. Ten-day Alaskan fishing licenses cost \$15 and can be purchased either at the Alaskan fish and game field station at King Salmon or at some of the fishing camps. LANI WALLER

The park waters also contain some excellent dry-fly fishing despite a tradition in the use of wet flies. Most of the best dry-fly fishing is to be had during the summer, although it can remain productive into the fall season as well.

The streams in Katmai are usually in good shape in summer, clear and stable, and the absence of logging, over-zealous road building and other destructive activities allows the watersheds to function in normal and predictable patterns. Thus, the angler usually has optimum conditions all season long, even in the event of rain.

The first thing the visiting dry-fly fisherman will notice is the relative lack of aquatic-insect hatches and activity in general. The short growing season and

severe winters are apparently restrictive and do not allow full development of these insects. A few hardy caddisflies will be found, as well as minor populations of mayflies, but for the most part you will find few of these insects in Katmai. Despite this dearth of aquatic insects the rainbows behave themselves and respond like proper dry-fly fish. Even the larger fish will come to a floating pattern, an added bonus for the angler who prefers to fish in this manner.

Most standard dry-fly patterns do the trick. Classics such as the Deerhair Horner, Adams, Cahills and Quill Gordon work well, and caddis patterns and grasshopper imitations do well, too. There is usually no need for more specific patterns, although some fish are selective and require special attention.

Most of the Katmai dry-fly fishing is done blindly, that is, casting to fish you cannot even see. It is uncommon to see fish feeding regularly on the surface and, for the most part, you fish to the position, not the fish. Also, the holding positions are very similar to those you would expect anywhere else, but you sometimes find fish in shallower, less secretive places and you must constantly look for those lies. This has always interested me, but it remains an unsolved mystery. Perhaps it is the lack of human contact that causes these fish to lie so openly. Anyway, polaroid glasses and cautious wading are required.

Some of the best dry-fly fishing is on the Brooks River. This stream is one of the most dependable streams in the Naknek drainage, and it has stable populations of rainbows all summer long. Because it is one of the most important spawning areas in the park, it has dense populations of migrating, spring-run rainbows. Many of these fish will remain in the Brooks River, feeding on sculpin, stickleback minnows and some insect life, as well as young salmon fry. In addition, there is a large run of adult sockeye salmon in the Brooks River, and this spawning draws large rainbows up from the Iliuk Arm of Naknek.

The water on the Brooks is varied. There are choppy runs, smooth glides and foam-rimmed pockets. They all produce. It is a pleasant stream to fish, easily waded and suitable for light lines. Standard patterns are all that is needed.

There are special regulations on the Brooks River, including a catch-and-release program that allows the angler two fish per day, one of which may be 20 inches or over. In addition, most knowledgeable anglers depress the barbs on their hooks, making release easy and harmless.

Brooks Camp and Lodge is the headquarters for fishing on the Brooks River, and it has modern and comfortable accommodations. The American River, some 15 to 20 miles to the north, is still largely unexplored with the dry fly, but some great opportunities undoubtedly exist there. As mentioned before, the river is isolated and can only be reached by float plane or boat ride from Grovesnor Fishing Camp, the headquarters for the Coville and Grovesnor drainage.

The American is a very unusual river, and the lower sections especially have an almost alien beauty about

them. The floral landscapes surrounding these sections are bizarre assemblages of mangrovelike trees and shrubs whose twisted root systems extend tentaclelike into absolutely clear water. The river bottom, a strange mosaic of cream-colored clay and salt-and-pepper patches of coarse gravel, contains unusual underwater vegetation. The currents move gently, animating the plants in almost hypnotic rhythms. It's a nice place to fish, and there are some large rainbows there that are unusually marked and fit in perfectly with the mood of the river.

The lower sections of the American must be fished out of the boat from Grosvenor. And while some wading is possible in a few sections, much depends on the water levels. The middle and upper sections of the river can be fished on foot, however, and they are more traditional in their fly-fishing attraction. Forests of spruce line the banks, and wading is usually easy. This is some of the wildest country in the monument and guides are essential.

Wet-fly fishing in the park differs some from what a visiting angler might expect. Although standard wet flies and nymphs are effective, they have been overshadowed by the fall wet-fly season with its particular emphasis on egg-imitators and by the excellent streamer and bucktail fishing to be had.

Any standard nymph or wet-fly pattern in #16 to #6 will produce, and my favorites include anything that is hairy and ugly looking. Dubbed bodies are best and should be weighted. Either sinking-tip lines or shooting-tapers can be used effectively, depending on your preference. Most streams in the park do not require distance casting, but shooting-taper lines are handy at times, especially in the areas where the streams either leave or enter a lake.

The importance of and emphasis on the streamer and bucktail fishing in Alaska is unusual when viewed against the background of most American wet-fly traditions. The emphasis may also be viewed as being exaggerated to some anglers, but it is so for a reason. Small fish simply play a more crucial role in the life cycle of the rainbow in Alaska. Since there are usually insufficient quantities of insects to support the adult fish, they must use smaller fish for food.

In Katmai waters the two basic forage fish are young salmon fry and dense populations of sculpins. Both of these are readily available throughout the season and exist in large numbers. The sculpin, usually associated with Montana drainages, actually exists in greater numbers in some Alaskan drainages. The sculpin patterns are deadly all season, and a good tie in the hands of an experienced streamer and bucktail fisherman is an awesome combination. They should be fished close to bottom, with a sinking-tip line if at all possible.

During the salmon-smolt migrations, streamer patterns are especially productive. Outmigrations of the young salmon begin in May and continue through July. In addition, the young salmon will spend from one to three years in monument lakes, so the rainbows have good access to them during most of their early life cycles and under a variety of conditions.

Sinking-tip lines are preferable in fishing Katmai waters because the floating section allows the angler more variety in his retrieves and line manipulations than full-sinking lines. It is possible to use line bellying, currents and slack-water pockets to animate retrieves in combinations of patterns that would be impossible with a fully sunk line. In my opinion, shooting-tapers run a poor second, but are oftentimes the only way to get down deep enough, so they should be carried.

Wet-fly strategy should change with the coming of fall. This is the spawning season of the sockeye salmon, and their influence in the life cycles of creatures in the monument is obvious. Without the sockeye salmon, life would be even more difficult for Katmai rainbows, and some biologists feel that they could not exist at all. Since sockeye are plankton eaters, they do not compete with even the young trout to any great extent, yet they provide the trout brood stock with an abundant food supply over relatively long periods.

During the sockeye's spawning season, most experienced fishermen use bright red or orange patterns exclusively. Dead drifted through likely looking stretches, they will usually outfish other patterns. Either floating lines with long leaders or sinking-tip lines will dead drift these patterns most effectively. Mending a shooting-taper line is just about impossible, although this line is very effective if the current is formed in such a way that it takes the fly to the fish with a minimum of line belly. A radically bellied line imparts too much speed to the fly, which may be all right when using streamer or sculpin patterns, but which is usually counterproductive when the pattern should be fished dead drift.

Katmai is truly bear country, and populations usually increase along the banks of the streams as the spawning begins in earnest. Earlier in the season, bears present little problem because the salmon are strong and fresh and may only be caught in certain locations where they congregate in great numbers. Anglers can learn these places and avoid them if need be. However, as the salmon grow weaker they may be found in any number of places along a stream, and this increases the chances of encountering a bear.

The Park Service does a good job educating visitors to all aspects of the monument, including its varied forms of wildlife. The park's published goals and philosophies seem to support the wild nature of the area in a way that will allow it to remain as it is now. Persons who want information can write to the Park Superintendent, P. O. Box 7, King Salmon, Alaska 99613.

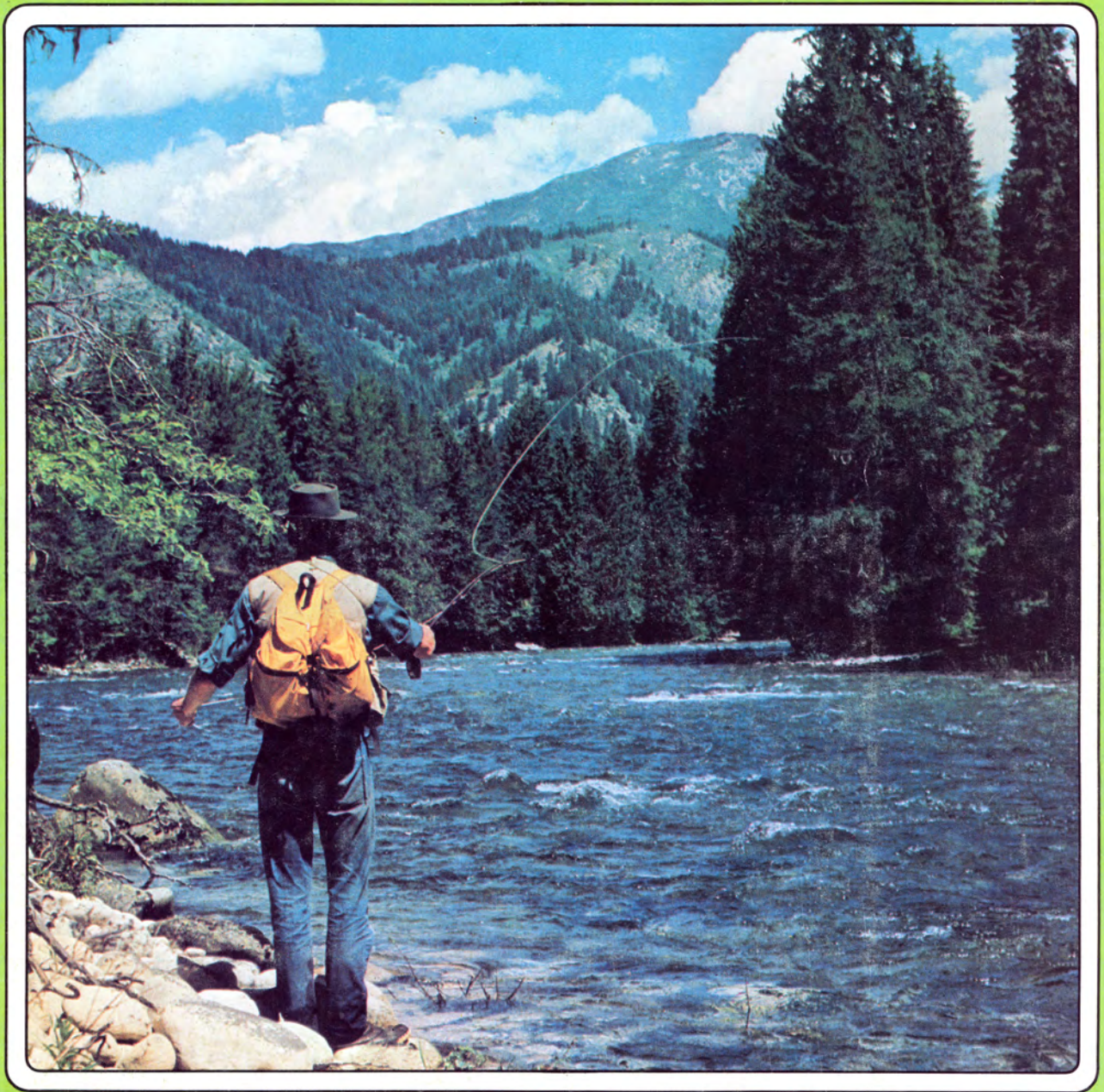
It may sound trite, but Alaska still stands very close to the edge of creation. My first experiences there had a profound effect upon me and will not soon be forgotten. The images that confront you in Alaska are uniquely beautiful in an age where science and technical proficiencies are used to measure the quality of our lives and continually bombard our sensitivities with a collection of shabby and boring alternatives. In the Katmai National Monument, it is as though no time has passed at all; and in many ways it hasn't. That's the most beautiful and strangest thing of all.

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