

A gin-clear river slices through tall trees and thick vegetation restricting us from any distracting views of the surrounding mountains. My friend Scott and I have waded down this little river for the past five hours. We're lost in the rhythm of leapfrogging and casting into each prospective holding area—we wouldn't have looked up at the view, even if we could have seen it.

Scott crouches and approaches a deep hole. I hop over a log to fish a noisy, tumbling side braid. It's small. We're fishing streamers today, and I try my best to cast a black Dolly Llama under an overhanging tree. *Splat!* I'm too cautious. My fly lands short and sloppy in shallow water just six inches from shore. I instinctively strip in line, and curse under my breath. As the streamer emerges onto shore, the surface is ripped apart as a charging rainbow steams in for the attack. The fish is half out of the water when it chomps onto the limp streamer, then spins around and violently shakes itself back into the water, where it submerges like a U-boat.

EIGHT DAYS OF CHRISTMAS IN JULY

Catching Alaska 'bows, by the dozens,
off the beaten path. **BY CHRIS MORGAN**



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS MORGAN

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In the previous hours I've seen the ferocity of these hungry trout, but I can't believe what is happening. I simply stand in disbelief. I look over at Scott to see if he witnessed the attack, but he's lost in his own world and totally focused downriver. A tug on my line snaps me back into the moment, and I fight this hungry fish to the shore. It's a native Alaskan rainbow; thick, heavily spotted, with a wide red streak running down both sides. It pulses with a muscular energy. I lessen my hold, and it darts back under the white water. Out loud, I thank him for such a great fight, for being such a wonderful representative of his kind.

An hour later, and a half mile downriver, Scott and I rest on a wide, stony island. Our guide, Trapper Jim, stands quietly next to us. Neither short nor tall, he is lean in words and appearance. Trapper Jim has lived in this remote part of Alaska longer than anyone and was the first white person to settle down and make a living on the banks of the Talachulitna River. While Scott and I high-five, laugh, and smile like giddy grade-schoolers, Trapper Jim's face shows no emotion.

We hear the dull thudding sound breaking the air before we see the helicopter above the sentinel-straight pines. Looking like a large mosquito, the helicopter cuts a narrow arc around the landing area, then settles down in a whirlwind of sand and debris.

Within moments, Scott and I are seated next to the pilot. He's an ever-smiling guy from Germany named Marco. The intercom cracks to life.

"How was the fishing?" he asks.

I look at Marco and then over at Scott. I don't know how to answer that question. An adequate answer escapes me. All I muster is, "It was amazing!"

It is only day one of our weeklong Alaska fishing vacation at Talaheim Lodge, which is located an hour's flight west of Anchorage. In the course of six hours, I have caught more large, aggressive rainbow trout than I usually catch in a season. I hold the tattered remains of my single black Dolly Llama fly in my hand and think of the 41 rainbow trout that slammed into it with intent to kill. I can't say this is already the greatest fly fishing adventure of my life, but it sure is starting out on a positive note.

In recent years the guys in our family have gotten together each year to fish the West's better-known rivers. During each of these trips, the subject of Alaska would come up. We knew about Alaska—that place where you can catch big fish. Lots of big fish. I'd fished there many times and knew that all the hype was real.

For me, however, fishing Alaska always meant doing it with no frills. I knew my style wasn't for everyone. And I knew we had to organize a different type of trip if this group of guys, who ranged in age from 40 to 77, wanted to visit.

After much research we chose Talaheim because it's accessible with only a short flight from Anchorage. This operation specializes in fly-out helicopter fishing. That gets clients to remote rivers where the only footprints you'll see are the ones from someone in your group, or your own. We booked a week in July when the king salmon were ending their upriver run and the famous Alaskan rainbow trout were at the height of their

hunting season. By the time summer arrived, our group of eight included my father, my uncle, one of my dad's old air force flying buddies, my brother, two of my cousins, and Scott.

On a Friday in mid-July, we descended upon Anchorage from various locations across the United States. We spent that night eating, drinking, and talking about the fun week ahead. The next morning we enjoyed breakfast at the Lakefront Anchorage Hotel on Lake Spenard.

As I ate my eggs, a weathered hand appeared above my plate. It was Mark Miller, owner of Talaheim. After handshakes we quickly finished our food, shuttled over to the airport, and within 30 minutes were airborne in two vintage de Havilland Beavers, flying away from the morning sun.

Anchorage quickly disappeared as we crossed the Knik Arm. Soon, only roadless lands passed below, a vast mixture of birch, shrubs, ponds and lakes that looked like shiny pockmarks on a green blanket. This would be our home for a week.

After a scenic 45-minute flight, we landed roughly on a dirt strip that points toward clusters of wood cabins nestled snugly in the surrounding trees. The lodge is near a bend in the Talachulitna River, to the east of the Tordrillo Mountains, looking north to Denali and south onto the rolling taiga leading to Beluga Lake. In 1974, Miller started what would become Talaheim Lodge. Over the past 40 years, he has grown it into a well-oiled lodge catering to the fisherman who prefer smaller waters, off the beaten path.

We unpacked and were introduced to the small staff and guides. Our head guide, Scott, is a tall, former architectural partner from Minnesota with a shock of white hair. He radiates a sense of calm professionalism, and we know we're in great hands for the week.

After gearing up, we're divided into pairs, who are in turn assigned a guide, a stretch of river, and a time to be at the helicopter



Variety is a big draw when fishing out of Talaheim Lodge. Daily fly-outs drop you on water where you'll encounter grayling, rainbow trout, and Dolly Varden char. Salmon are possible too.



launch area. Scott and I are teamed up and head out to meet our helicopter. I can't believe we flew in less than two hours ago and are just about to fly out.

The growing season for Alaska trout is short, so the only question on their minds when they view a potential meal is *Can I eat it or can it eat me?* The answer to the question determines their response. Their standard meal is any food they can find. As the season progresses, they'll focus on salmon eggs and flesh, but for now they'll hit almost anything we can throw at them.

Nelly, Miller's diminutive niece, stands just inches below the whirling blades of an idling helicopter and refuels it. She closes the cap, swings down with the fuel nozzle, gathers the fuel line into a tidy pile, and trots toward us. Over the drone, she tells us our guide is already on the river, and we're to load this helicopter. Before I know it, she has grabbed our gear, heaved it into a storage compartment, and is gesturing for us to board.

The helicopter rises, filling the air with noise and dust. We turn and roar quickly over the buildings, the river, and out across the trees on our way to catching our first fish of the trip.

After a short flight and a quick unloading, we watch the helicopter disappear, low and fast downriver. It becomes quiet. Still. There's no sound beyond the splashing of the small river. There are no roads within 50 miles. No people. We are alone in the wilderness. This is what we came for. For the next six hours, we enjoy a more ancient world.

That evening we gather at the main lodge and enjoy hors d'oeuvres and draft beer. Jeremy, the lodge chef, is a recent addition to the staff, having been enticed away from an upscale Anchorage restaurant. Adorned with tribal tattoos, Jeremy brings a breath of cool and urban to the lodge, as well as the skill of a master chef. We sit at the long dining table and devour a delicious meal of halibut, then spend the rest of the evening drinking more beer, sharing stories, and looking forward to the next day.

There is no true dawn during an Alaskan summer, so by the

LOGISTICS

GETTING THERE: Many major airlines service Anchorage, Alaska, and I recommend flying in on a Friday. We stayed at the Lakefront Anchorage Hotel on Lake Spenard, which is the lake where the charter flight will depart from on Saturday morning to take you to Talaheim Lodge.

GEAR: Talaheim Lodge provides all the gear necessary to enjoy a week of fishing. Coordinate with them on wader sizes and any other special needs. If you have comfortable waders and boots, take them. I took my own rods and reels. Definitely take any flies you are fond of using for the fish you're targeting. I was happy I took a dozen black Dolly Llama flies that worked very well with the rainbow trout. I was also glad I took some Elk-Hair Caddis, which worked well on grayling and the occasional trout.

FISH: The time of season dictates which fishing is at its peak. We were there to primarily fish for rainbow trout, Dolly Varden and grayling. While the king salmon were still spawning, their season had just closed and the waves of chum, sockeye, and pink salmon were starting to make their way up the river system.

MORE INFO: alaskatalaheimlodge.com.

time we wake and exit our cabins, the sun is up and the sky is changing from steel to blue.

Head guide, Scott, stands at one end of the dining table with a dry-erase board and explains the day's plan. We're each paired with a different member of the group, assigned a river, given helicopter departure times, and on-river pickup times. Once we're all briefed and understand the plan, we disperse for the day. Five of us in our group are ex-military aviators, so the coordination briefing brings back wonderful memories of years spent briefing and launching well-coordinated squadrons of airplanes into the dawn sky. For today's "mission," I'm teamed up with my brother, Marc, and we're fishing a small river, primarily filled with Dolly Varden.

I can't help but hum Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" as I watch the first two helicopters lift off and fly low over our heads, carrying our guides to position them on the rivers. We wait our turn, knowing the helicopters will soon be back.

The mountains loom, white and imposing, to our west. We descend and follow a serpentine river. A bear splashes out of the river as we pass overhead. I hope it's long gone by the time we wade by. A mile upriver we spot our young guide, Mason, standing on a narrow gravel bank. Our pilot circles, points the helicopter into the wind, and descends.

The river is small and intimate with knee-deep runs connecting turquoise-blue holes. The water is so clear that Marc's cast brings a half-dozen Dollys darting toward the fly. It's difficult to tell which one gets there first, but Marc tightens the line, and there's no doubt an upset fish is on the other end.

We slowly work our way downstream and continue catching Dollys in every hole and bend. Our stream joins a larger, milky blue river, and here the fishing gets even better. Marc and I throw streamers into the seam where the two rivers meet, and we catch so many feisty Dollys I can imagine them literally stacked up in the opaque water.

Later, I feel a wave of sadness as the familiar, beating sound of the approaching helicopter signals the end of another day on the water. It's only after sitting in the helicopter that I realize how tired my arm is and how hungry I am.

It hasn't taken long to fall into a routine. We joke that it's like Christmas every day... in July. We know it'll come to an end, but we don't think about it. We have gotten into the ritual of it all. Wake, plan, fish, relax, sleep, repeat. Soon it becomes obvious that the joy we feel is not just the amazing fishing and scenery but also the chance to spend so much time with family and old friends in an environment away from the distractions of everyday life. The moments sharing a lunch by the river with my dad, listening to Jay tell old air force stories by the fireplace before dinner, wishing my cousins the best of luck as they load into a helicopter for a day on a new river—these moments are the most special of the trip.

Several days later I'm trudging through knee-deep, crystal clear water with my cousin Matt. He's a slender, gentle giant of a guy, and I always love our days together. The clouds move quickly over the surrounding hills, and tendrils of showers sweep into the valley, across the river, and disappear over the next ridge. The

river we march through is lined by dense thickets, and we're trying our best not to surprise any local wildlife, in particular the bears. Most of the bears I've encountered have either sprinted away like an obese gazelle or simply strolled away with the indifference of a village mutt. But we're not taking chances. We stomp through the water as though we're wearing clown shoes and we talk to each other like two hard-of-hearing vets yelling war stories.

Several hundred yards behind us is our guide, Trapper Jim, who brings the inflatable raft that can support only one person in such a shallow headwaters. The helicopter had to land in a flat area high on the river where there are few fish, so we're making our way downriver to a cut in the hills and good holding water.

As we descend the high tundra into a serpentine gorge, the gradient increases, as well as the volume of water. Soon we're catching rainbows at a regular clip. The river cuts along the base of tall cliffs plunging deep into the water. As I strip my fly at the base of a cliff, I feel a sharp thump and set the hook. I think it's another rainbow, but this one bends my 5-weight rod like a sapling. I hope it's not a king salmon. I start running down the shore. At the tail of the pool, I'm able to get downstream of the fish and peer into the depths. I'm relieved to see it's a chum salmon, so at least I have a chance.

Matt and Trapper Jim appear from the bend upstream, and I call for a net. They look at each other and shrug. Without a net, I decide to gingerly guide the salmon toward the shallows and the sandy shore. I pull and the fish slowly moves toward me. I smile and look up at Matt. At that moment, the salmon turns and surges past me into the frothy boulder-filled rapids. I can't keep up with it. The line goes taut and breaks with a twang.

Matt and Trapper Jim casually float down to where I sit, tying on a new fly.

"No net, huh?" I ask.

Trapper Jim elaborates with a simple "Nope." And that's all he has to say about that.

I look at Matt. "Did you see me lose that salmon?" I ask.

"Yes, I did, Cuz." Matt stoops down to wrap his long arm around my shoulder. "Life's not always about winning, Cuz. It's not always cold beers and high fives, right?"

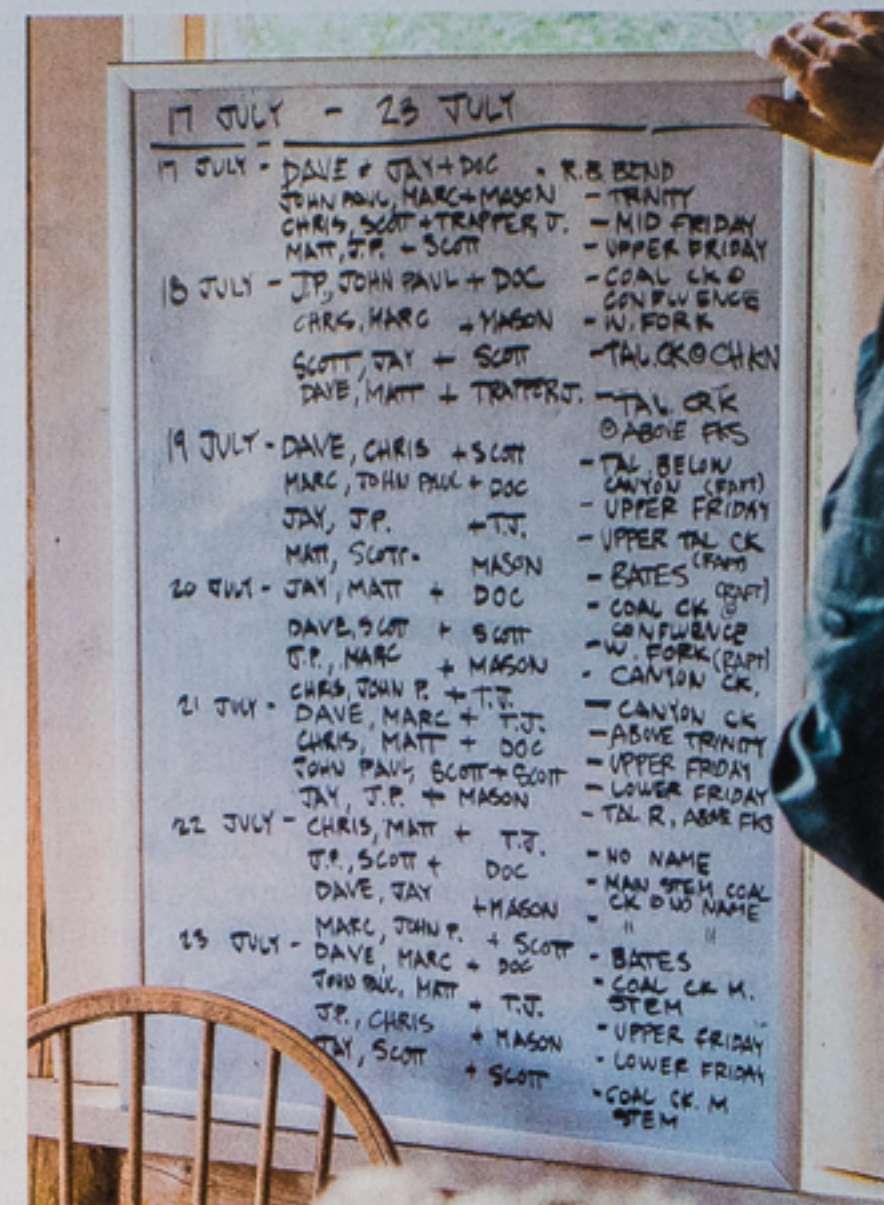
I offer a confused look.

"Now, can you go somewhere else to tie on that fly?" he asks. "You're standing right where I want to cast."

He tries to hold back a smile, but can't. He laughs, gently pushes me out of the way, and starts casting.

The days continue until they run out. By that time, we've grasped the soul of fly fishing. The fishing was great, but more important, we'd stood next to our friends and relatives beside trackless rivers, tired and satisfied from the pursuit of one simple thing. At the end of these days, we'd shared the comfort of food, conversation, beer, and, finally, a dreamless sleep. I'll treasure those experiences forever.

Chris Morgan is a videographer who spent two decades as a fighter pilot in the US Air Force. He now roams the western mountains (and sometimes Alaska) while creating content for clients in the outdoor industry. See more of his work at www.twosherpas.com.



After a delicious breakfast, the day's plan was revealed, showing us who was teaming up to fish specific rivers.. Then it was off to the water for another day of bliss.



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