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BILL HERZOG:
Jigs for Trout
32

Fish of
1000
Casts
8

NUSHAGAK
RIVER KINGS
18

DRANO
SPRINGERS
14



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SEE PAGE 33



FEATURES

RIVER KING OUTFITTERS 18

Kris Olsen • *Do-it-yourself Alaska adventure*

THE TIME IS NOW 30

James Allen • *Learning fishing skills*



THE MOST VERSATILE TROUT LURE 32

Bill Herzog • *Twitching jigs for trout*

ONE TRICK PONY 40

Josiah Darr • *Covering a ton of water*



TROLLING IN 4WD vs 2WD 44

George Krumm • *Trolling game changer*

WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS? 52

Josiah Darr • *How to take great photos*



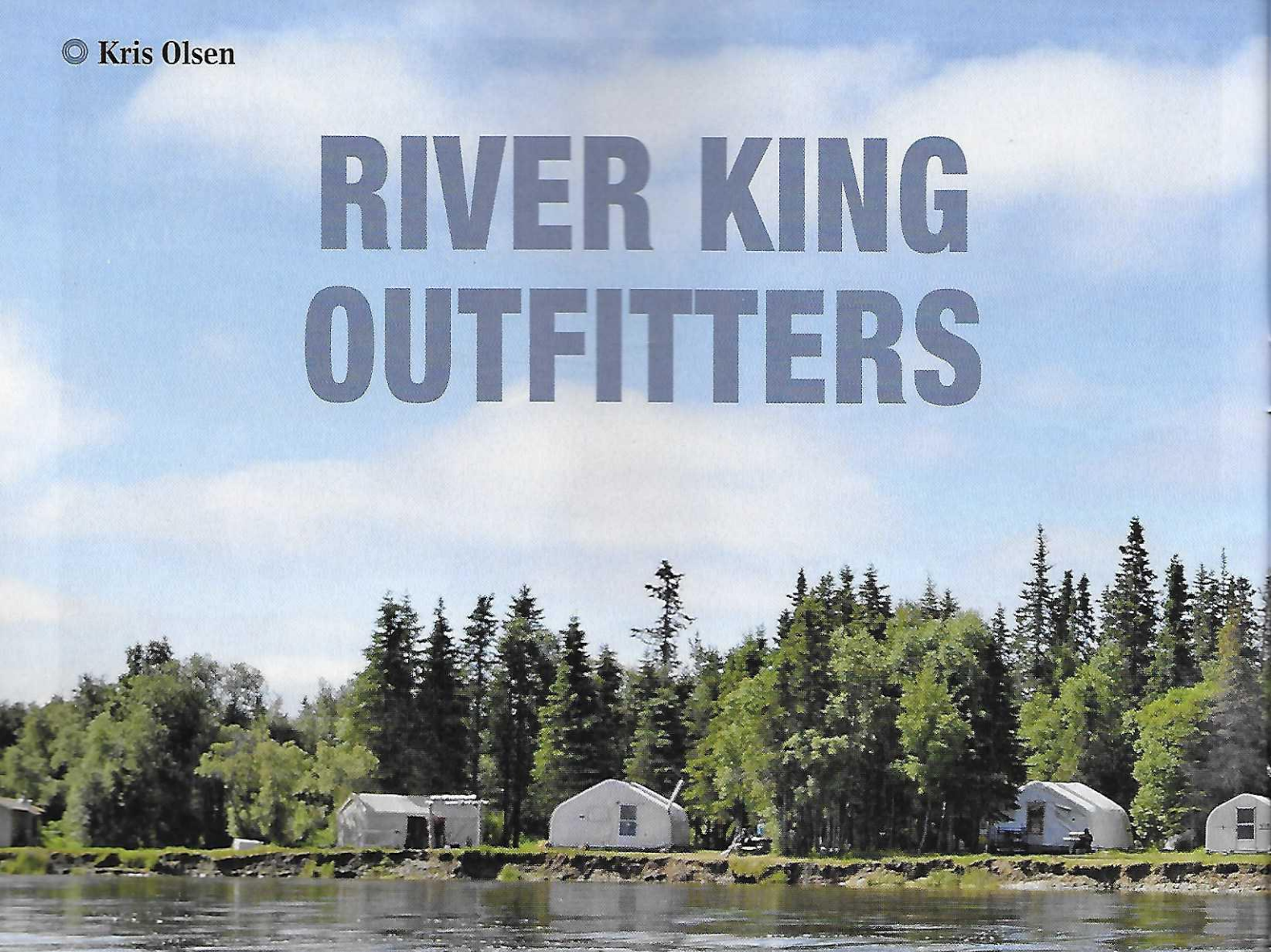
FREEDOM IN A BEAUTIFUL PRISON 62

Bill Herzog • *Day trips*



ON THE COVER: 87-year-old Jan Oden and guide Grant Scheele with an Oregon Coast steelhead

RIVER KING OUTFITTERS



Until my father's last breath, he loved to tell anyone who would listen how as a preschooler I would stand on a dock for hours with a stick and clothespin. Not until I was old enough to realize that a jar of Pautzke Balls of Fire and an Eagle Claw bait hook would significantly up my game did I have much success. I suffer a lifelong addiction to angling and it is common knowledge among my friends that I would likely prospect the bathtub if I thought I could find a willing biter in there.

After a buddy introduced me to steelhead fishing in the early 1980s, I was officially transformed and it wasn't long before I did a deep dive into the world of river angling. It became a real passion and I found I had a tremendous knack for reading water. My thirst for success and patience for teaching others eventually led me into the guiding business.

Randy Walker was a well-known Skykomish River guide and tackle shop owner who was the first to suggest I try my hand at it. I was intrigued, so I bought a new Willie drift boat, loaded up on gear and put my name out for hire. The SW Washington tributaries of Grays Harbor are where I ended up doing most of my guiding as the productivity, especially for fall salmon, far exceeded anything Puget Sound rivers could produce.

In the 1980s and all through the 1990s, those Grays Harbor tributaries delivered some of the best fall Chinook fishing imaginable. The kings were big, plentiful and while fairly easy to hook, were never easy to land. It was during those years that freshwater Chinook really became my favorite target. If there

were Chinook in the river, I could connect you with them.

As time wore on, fisheries became more crowded as the float-fishing craze overtook old-schoolers like me. Pools where I used to back-bounce eggs or pull plugs suddenly had six or seven boats anchored in them. Regulations got stricter and returns began to diminish. Over the course of just a few years the glory days of Washington freshwater Chinook fishing seemed a great distance in the rear-view mirror. However, the sheer excitement and adrenaline of those awe-inspiring days have always remained close to my heart.

Fast-forward to November 2017 when I traded some correspondence with Jon Boyd of River King Outfitters. Jon owns and runs a camp on Alaska's Nushagak River, well known to host the best run of wild Chinook in all of Alaska and long on my bucket list. Jon was patient and answered all my questions regarding a possible visit to his place. What truly caught my attention regarding his camp were two things.

First, River King Outfitters is located miles upriver from the other fishing operations on the Nushagak which are closely crowded together near Portage Creek. This means he has a large section of river mostly to himself and only occasionally sees boats from other camps. Second, RKO is a completely self-guided operation, perfect for anyone knowledgeable about fishing and operating a small motorboat. Your first day in camp they will show you the river and get you familiar with all your gear. After that, you have the entire week to fish on your own schedule. With nearly twenty-four

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hours of daylight, you can wreck yourself pretty darn easily.

After guiding for other outfitters, Jon had the unique opportunity in 2006 to privately purchase with a partner roughly 120 acres of land along the east channel of the Nushagak allowing for some rigid structures to be built. Most camps are located on leased parcels from the Native corporation and are not permitted to build permanent structures. Jon eventually bought out his partner and now is the sole owner of River King Outfitters.

In January 2018, Jon invited my son Kris Jr. and I to attend the Washington Sportsmen's Show in Puyallup for a personal meet and greet, leaving us a couple passes for admission. A quiet and unassuming guy, it was fun meeting him and learning more details as to what we might expect on a visit to RKO. I have fished all over Southeast Alaska, but this would be our first venture to the Bristol Bay area and the fabulous fisheries associated with the famous watersheds that serve it.

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In July 2018 we enjoyed a trip with RKO to the Nushagak that was as epic as any father-son adventure could possibly be. Jon is the sole reason that happened and we are both sincerely and enormously grateful for his kind understanding and incredible

generosity.

We planned our visit for the first week of July, but Chinook are present in consistently catchable numbers from mid-June to mid-July. The fish pass by camp in waves, so a slow day may be followed by an epic one, or vice-versa. The fishing can be just as good the first week as it is the last, often with the largest fish showing up late in the run. We just knew we were in for a pretty outstanding time when the day finally came to load our gear and head for the airport.

On June 30, after a three-hour flight to Anchorage and a one-hour flight to Dillingham, we overnighted at the Kingfisher Inn B&B with a float plane ride to camp scheduled the following morning. We awoke Sunday July 1 with the angst of small children waiting in line for the rides at Disneyland, only to be hit with the news of a slight postponement. Morning fog on the river scrubbed all flights in and out of camp for nearly three hours. Delays are a common occurrence in Alaska, so we did our best to take it in stride.

The shuttle driver for Bay Air finally arrived and we learned we were going to have to wait for the pilot to make the one hour round trip with another group before it was our turn. But alas, return he did and it was just Kris Jr. and I on the last of three flights into camp. After landing on the river and taxiing to the waiting camp crew, we were treated to the sight of a big moose standing not fifty yards from us on a small point of land, part of the welcoming committee.



The author with a Nushagak River king salmon.



Fish on! Enjoying the do-it-yourself experience.



Kris Jr. with a hefty Alaska king.

After a somewhat hurried lunch, camp tour and settling into our cabin, Jon personally took us up and down river on a quick circuit of the immediate area and to show us where his buoys were stationed in the travel lanes of the salmon highway. Many camp guests simply clipped their boats to a buoy and let out their plugs, patiently waiting for passing fish to strike. Many Chinook were landed via that method, but Kris Jr. and I were loath to sit on a buoy longer than it took to tie up fresh baits, much preferring to back-troll different runs.

We learned that weeks of rain had the river running unseasonably high, resulting in big waves of Chinook flying up the river. As in all types of fishing, timing is everything and is usually a circumstance beyond anyone's physical ability to control. Serendipity always plays her part, but when the stars and your tongue align just right, nothing can be more magical.

After getting into camp late in the day, we really only had a few hours to fish on our own and were still just getting acquainted with our surroundings. One thing immediately apparent to us was that the Nushagak River is a huge drainage, running very wide and very hard. This was a river unlike any other we had experienced but finding the soft current seams off points of land or along the cut-banks is rather easy and we just worked the edges as we would most any river.

We managed to land and release a fair number of nice kings that first afternoon. As soon as we hooked up, we simply pointed the boat towards the middle of the river and drifted along throughout the battle using the motor to our advantage. It was nothing after landing your fish to find yourself a half-mile down river from where you first hooked it.

There are two basic techniques employed by RKO guests. First there is side-drifting cured eggs, a tactic we employed early on with good success. This allows you to cover long stretches of water in pretty short order as you drift along with your eggs ticking bottom until they get engulfed. The second and our ultimate favorite, was to back-troll tuna-wrapped K15 Kwikfish plugs. I am a hard-core plug fisherman from my old guiding days, so we were dialed into that almost immediately once we learned the various runs best suited to that style of fishing.

Monday July 2, we hit the river early for our first full day. Still learning our way around, we opted for side-drifting eggs as another group of annual regular guests were having good success with that. We worked a long cut-bank repeatedly and

landed numerous kings prior to our lunch break. The afternoon session slowed for us considerably as the egg bite simply turned off, so we switched over to the tuna-wrapped plugs in the afternoon and soon found ourselves back in the game.

After dinner that night is when we first discovered what would become our go-to honey-hole for the entire rest of the week. On our first foray down river beyond the last couple buoys, we came around a sweeping left curve in the river and ran the plugs tight along a short little island maybe three hundred yards long. That slot produced repeated strikes throughout the week for us over and over and over again. It took us nearly two hours that first night to make two passes as the plugs kept getting crushed. We landed six nice kings, tagging our cards with fish of 22 and 23 pounds each.

Regulations change yearly on the Nushagak, but we could keep one Chinook per day and a total of four. Unlike many places in Alaska, you could still catch and release after retaining your daily limit. However, a new rule implemented in 2018 was that once tagged out, you could no longer fish with bait, so it was wise to be selective but also a little bit of a gamble.

Our second full day, Tuesday July 3, was our most impressive day. Kris Jr. landed a beauty right out of the gate, a chrome hen in the mid 20s, but since it was only 7:30 a.m. when he caught it we safely released it knowing more would come. As the day wore on we just kept catching fish, even as we ventured further upstream in the afternoon exploring more new-to-us water.

The first place we stopped after a roughly four-mile run up from camp produced our two largest kings, one landed and one not. It was just the tiniest little soft edge tight along a small island on an inside curve in the river, a sneaky looking run we almost didn't see. The high water is what made it an attractive lie that likely became worthless once the water dropped.

The first fish caught us off guard as we had just let the plugs out at the very top of the run. The inside rod tip was nearly touching the brush and was only fishing for a few seconds when it got crushed, burning Jr's thumb as the beast made a long run back towards Bristol Bay. It simply fell off the hook when it finished its rampage. We traded places and Kris Jr. took the helm to start in again. Near the end of the run I was staring at the inside rod when I heard line ripping off the outside one. That big chrome beauty got immediately tagged after a long ferocious battle and the search for productive water continued.

We worked our way downstream,

finding success in every place we stopped. We picked up two more in front of a private cabin then hit a long, slow cut-bank that took a couple hours to work through. You just gotta love a place that can produce like that. Kris Jr. released a few more tag-worthy kings, even as late as 5:00 p.m. I was skeptical but he was sure he could still do better.

The dinner hour always came at a great time. After a long day on the water, a good hot meal and something to drink can do wonders to recharge the batteries. For many guests, the cocktail hour ensued immediately afterwards, but like Jake and Elwood Blues we were on a "Mission from God," so back at it we went in search of one worthy king. Our first stop was our lower honey-hole. It was quick to produce three kings, but none admirable enough to tag.

Around 9:45 p.m. we ran back toward camp and slid into a soft seam just inside one of RKO's lower buoys. Kris Jr. let the plugs out and ten seconds later the left rod exploded. He was fast into the one he waited for all day, a big buck that tore up the river in every way imaginable. Once safely in the net and tagged on his license, we did a major high-five and reveled in our surroundings and how incredibly lucky we were his plan came together just as he envisioned it.

The next couple days were Ground Hog days, virtual repeats of the ones described above. The Lewis and Clark in us ultimately emerged and we eventually ran upwards of five miles in both directions from camp looking for good water to exploit. In the end we each tagged our four kings and both of us took home a 50-pound box of fillets.

Kris Jr. brought a hand-held counting device to keep track of our total catch. Every time we landed a king salmon we clicked the counter. Including a few hours on arrival day and four full days after that we ended up with a total of 62 kings landed.

Veteran Nushagak anglers might not be overly impressed with that but consider this. When you hear of the spectacular days the Nushagak can at times produce, it is usually done during the absolute peak of the run with a boat-load of anglers fishing with a guide who knows the river like the back of his hand. We were just two guys fishing who had never even been there before, learning each run for the first time.

There were a couple times we found ourselves near guide boats from other camps who were doing no better or worse, so we were ecstatic with our success and hope we can someday return to repeat it. Ultimately, the key was to keep working

different runs and just give it a minute. Trust me when I say that if we can do it, I have no doubt so can you.

River King Outfitters is the perfect place for anglers who dream of a world-class fishery, know how to run a small boat and wish to fish on your own 24-hour schedule. For those lovers of the game who fit that description, you only need plan a trip to RKO for all those dreams to come true. The vast majority of fishing outfitters in Alaska have very regimented programs with fully-guided fishing, so this is one very unique opportunity not easily found anywhere.

The Nushagak not only has a great Chinook run, it also hosts an amazing coho run in the month of August when the sloughs and soft water gets choked with aggressive silvers attacking anything that moves. Spinners, jigs, flies, everything gets hammered. RKO's total season is short however, running from mid-June through late August, so planning well ahead is always the best idea.

While the camp is simple and remote, it easily meets all of your basic needs including great food, comfortable beds, and even a hot-water-on-demand shower. RKO provides top quality equipment as well and the boats are perfect for two people. They aren't fancy mind you, but they don't need to be. The Yamaha 40hp four-stroke prop-driven outboards purr like kittens and will get you up or down river in a hurry while the idle-assist buttons make it super easy to get your speed just right when back-trolling.

Upon your return to camp, the staff will make sure your catch is immediately taken care of, properly filleted and vacuum packed for transport home. They will see to it your belly is full, your boat is always fueled and your tackle box is filled with essential stuff like leaders, weights, swivels, Spin-n-Glos, etc. Nice rod and reel combos (both left or right-handed) are always available, while in the tackle tent you will find an endless selection of plugs as well as more tuna and eggs than you can possibly burn through.

Being your own guide and fishing at your leisure is tremendously rewarding and the target rich environment of the Nushagak makes it super easy to be successful. It will also help make what can often be an expensive trip much more affordable. Our heartfelt thanks go out to Jon and his staff (Cameron, Jeff and Shanlynn) for their outstanding support all throughout our stay. Kris Jr. and I will forever treasure our visit with you guys and are inspired to someday return armed with the knowledge we now possess. Do yourself a favor and look them up on the web at <http://www.riverkingoutfitters.com/>. Tight lines!

