

Of Mice,
Men,
Bears,
and Trout.



By: Eric Rauch

Day six on the river: As I pour the steam into my double haul I catch a glimpse of a large, shadowy form on the bank... HEY BEAR! HEY BEAR! GET OUTTA HERE BEAR! My heart, jumping out of my chest, seems only to be contained by my waders and fly vest. I walk slowly backwards, upstream, waving my hands in the air, shouting, and trying to catch my breath. My brother, only 20 yards beyond me, is still carving graceful arcs in the air with his 8 weight fly rod, oddly use to our daily bruin encounters. Attached to his 15 pound tapered leader is a wide gap, 1.0 hook covered in enough deer hair to float a small battalion of the normal size 14 elk haired caddis we are accustomed to throwing at fish. I hear the huge fly land with a sploosh behind me like a wet sock, while I watch the sow and her cubs round the bend about 30 yards downstream, continuing their own fishing rituals. It's only a matter of minutes before I shake the "almost in a car wreck" feeling and get back to the task at hand: tossing huge mice patterns to the gigantic Rainbow trout of Kamchatka, Russia.

August 17th, 2007, ten miles east and 2500 feet above Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport, my mind was on the 25 hours and 13 time zones I still had to cross. I was bound for JFK, were I would rendezvous with my brother, Ian.



Author: Eric Rauch - cookie cutter Kapushka Bow.

Then together onto Moscow, the epicenter of the former Soviet Union, and continuing yet further to Petropavlovsk, Russia on the Kamchatka peninsula.

We arrived on the 20th, or was it the 19th? Days and time seemed to blend on the long flights but that was of little consequence now. We were in far eastern Russia and only a short helicopter ride away from our final destination, the Kapushka River. After a much-needed night in a hotel, we were greeted at 7am by our interpreter who led us to a van overflowing with gear and supplies. We shoved our dry bags in on top and before the doors closed, we were speeding down a car-jammed corridor at 125 kph. Twenty minutes later, I released my death grip from the "oh-shit" handle as we arrived in a field full of old abandon biplanes, prop equipped military fighters, and discarded helicopters all from the now historical Soviet Era. In addition to the aviation graveyard, there were a few stray dogs and a friendly dairy cow on the end of a 30-foot tether.



Ian Rauch

Men in military fatigues topped with Nike ball caps and finished with brown dress shoes, opened the ass-end of a dented and sloppily painted, MI-8 chopper and began to load our gear. Others climbed the flying machine like ants and seemed to make some fine-tuned adjustments to the engines with needle-nose pliers and a length of metal pipe. Within an hour, we were loaded and the twin turbines began to whine. Inside the beast, we were packed in with the gear next to windows that opened like portholes. My brother was conveniently seated next to a case of beer which we helped ourselves to as the dinosaur began to lift off the ground.

We carved our way around steaming volcanic peaks and over snow and water-filled craters. Before we could pop a tab on beer number two, we were shooting down the river valley at what seemed like 10 vertical feet, looking over the water we would be fishing for the next 8 days. We eventually put down on the green tundra, only feet from the river, onto what would be the site of our first nights camp. As the gear was ejected from the chopper, we chatted with our American guide who had made his way over from Alaska three weeks earlier. He set the ground rules: 8wt rods, 15 – 20 lb. tippet, mice and large streamers; watch out for bears, dinner at 7pm.



Russian MI-8 Helicopter

We put on our waders, assembled our rods and made our way to the river, which was maybe 40 yards across and strewn with small suitcase size boulders. Finally, it was time to fish!

My brother no more than wetted his line and I hear "FISH ON!" as a 5-pound dolly varden breaks the surface mid river. Little did we know this was just a teaser. We motioned to the guys at camp that we were headed downstream and they motioned back. They seemed to want us to go across the river? I glanced over at the far bank just as my brother began his splashy retreat towards camp. A grizzly had already snuck up on us and was cruising the bank 30 yards away, looking for the last of the salmon. Being from the Midwest I had never experienced a feeling quite like the shift from hunter to hunted. We walked slowly back towards camp staying together, making noise, and waving our arms, as we were told to do. No doubt that from the bears view we looked like circus clowns stumbling around in the water shouting in some foreign language. The thought briefly occurred to me, do Russian bears only understand Russian? Either way, the brute seemed disinterested in our antics, and moved slowly off upstream in search of less inhabited waters. On the river for a matter of minutes and our first bear encounter. Incredible.

We, on the other hand, fished downstream around a bend, and out of sight of camp, the bear image imprinted in our thoughts. We netted a few nice char and an occasional chum salmon, more than enough to keep our attention. However, an hour or so into our trip and none of the legendary rainbow trout we were after had tightened our lines. Most of the water we were fishing was calf deep and fish were holding in the pockets around the larger boulders. I noticed a nice seam along the far bank where two small river braids joined the main branch. It looked fishy. I waded my way over and found it to be only ankle deep, but decided to toss my six-inch bunny leach into the sweet spot anyhow. As my fly slapped the surface it disappeared in an aggressive swirl and then exploded back through the surface in the maw of the largest trout I had ever seen first hand. A couple head shakes later and both the fish and fly were free again. I felt I knew my quarry a little better and thought aggressive behavior calls for an aggressive fly. I clipped off the leach and pulled a mouse pattern from my box that looked to take half a deer hide to spin. I tied an improved clinch knot and worked half a bottle of silicon floatant into the bushy layers of hair. One less than graceful back cast and my fly was at the top of the vein again. I let it drift a yard and then gave it a mousy twitch. My fly then disappeared under the surface, no splash, no dimple, and no sound, just gone. I set the hook into what at first seemed like the riverbed but soon made its way downstream into my backing. "FISH ON!" My rod and heart pumped as the drag whined trying to persuade the fish to change its course. I gained some ground as I followed the fish downstream and around a small island where my brother was standing mid-river fighting his own battle.



We exchanged the ceremonious "thumbs up" and watched as each fish broke the surface several times trying to disgorge our clumps of hair and feathers disguised as a meal. I made my way to a small gravel bar and after several attempts, got a hold of the taut 7-foot leader. The 26-inch rainbow was massive; we guessed it at 10 pounds of beauty and muscle. A couple photos for the memory book and the fish slipped back into the water sending up a spray with its tail as it left my hands. The game was on.

We fished the next few hours downstream taking several fish in the "grande" category which persuaded us to give up on our nets as the 24" baskets were simply too small and the handles cracked under the weight of the foreign fish. We turned back to camp around 7pm, late for dinner, but full on adrenalin. Turning around revealed we were once again, the close neighbor of a robust bear and couple smaller tagalongs. The sound of the river was quickly masked by the sound of blood pounding through my arteries. Our shouts and whistles did little to run them off or even get their attention. They were on a fishing quest, similar to ours, and quite content to share the river with us as they worked their way upstream, splashing after spawned out chum. We followed the family back toward camp for over an hour occasionally getting a comfortable enough distance to fish ourselves, but never willing to lose sight of them completely. They parted from the river following a well-worn trail only a few yards behind camp. Incredible.



This awesome scene played out daily for the next 8 days, while we caught more and larger fish as we continued down river. Most days averaged 20 or so trout, 25 – 28 inches and 10 – 14 lbs., with as many dollys in between as you wanted to catch. Again, simply incredible. Of course, the end came all too quickly but my arms and shoulders begged for a break.

As the chopper set down at our final camp sight I knew I had experienced a trip of a lifetime in Kamchatka, Russia.



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