



TOGIAC RIVER CONTACT INFO

Pen Air

www.penair.com or 907-243-2323

Togiak National Wildlife Refuge

<http://togiak.fws.gov/> or 907-842-1063

Togiak River Fishing Adventures

www.togiakfishing.com or 509-925-6606 winter
907-493-5744 summer

Togiak Natives Ltd.


for camping permits on private land, 907-493-5520

A bright Togiak River king. © Marcus Weiner



TOGIAK TANGO

The Togiak River lies in the western reaches of Bristol Bay, deep within the nirvana of Alaska fishing that produces salmon in ridiculous numbers, rainbow trout of Herculean proportion, and rich ecosystems populated with varied species popular to sport anglers. These fish can all be found at one time or another in a steady procession that begins in mid-June and lasts through September. From back-bouncing eggs to king salmon and hiking the Pungokebuk for rainbow trout to fly-fishing for sockeye within the wildlife refuge, the Togiak truly supplies a wide array of angling possibilities. Our job at Togiak River Fishing Adventures in the summer of 2004 was to explore many of them.



STORY BY MARCUS WEINER

The River

From its headwaters at Togiak Lake, the Togiak River is a gin-clear waterway that flows through the beautiful Togiak National Wildlife Refuge (TNWR) to its eventual muddy terminus in Togiak Bay. Earthquakes, volcanoes and glacier ice have given the land its characteristics and support this pristine river that flows at about three miles per hour over a 70-mile tract. It averages about 125 feet across and two to six feet deep, with its deepest holes at 16 to 20 feet. The Togiak combines classic fly-fishing water upstream—endless riffles, pools, and gravel bars—with excellent boat-fishing conditions downstream, where it becomes a deep, bending, and fairly narrow river where the salmon migration lanes can be found and fished with extreme precision.

Access in the 4.7-million-acre TNWR is limited to permitted parties, and in my opinion, the combination of remoteness and the proclivity of anglers to target salmon keeps angler numbers lower in the upper stretches of the Togiak. Powerboat activity is concentrated on the lower stretches for salmon. The primary sport-fish species found within the Togiak River are Chinook, coho, chum, sockeye, and pink salmon, Dolly Varden, Arctic char, Arctic grayling, rainbow trout, and northern pike. An additional 48 mammal species and 201 species of birds have been sighted in TNWR.

It is necessary for impact on the resources to be as minimal as possible, and the first four items listed below are mandatory within TNWR. Items five and six are highly recommended. For that matter, these are good practices to apply wherever you are fishing. (This information was gleaned from <http://togiak.fws.gov/>.)

1. There is a three-day camping limit on all the rivers throughout Togiak Refuge. After the third consecutive day in one location, the group must move their camp at least one mile.
2. Bury human waste 8 to 12 inches deep, at least 100 feet from the water, and burn or pack out (do not bury) paper.
3. Trash that will burn completely, such as paper, may be burned. Make sure your fire is hot enough to burn the trash completely. All trash that is not

burned must be packed out.

4. Campfires are allowed, using driftwood or other fallen wood. To preserve the wilderness experience, leave no trace behind: scatter your fire ring, wood, and any other remnants from your fire and collect any trash scraps in it. Using stoves for cooking, rather than fires, is more efficient, reliable, and keeps your cookware from turning black.
5. Be aware that you are in bear country. To avoid encounters, keep a clean camp and boat and dispose of any fish parts by tossing them into flowing water so they are carried away. You may wish to consider storing food scraps in your trash inside a sealed Zip-Loc type bag, rather than attempting to burn it, which may create a smell of food around your campsite.
6. Practice good catch-and-release techniques. This will help to conserve the fishery and is also culturally respectful. Using the best techniques to avoid unnecessary mortality will help to reduce conflicts and demonstrate your respect for the resources.

The Fisheries

King salmon are a significant draw on the river and are present in June and July. An average fish is around 20 pounds, with several specimens each year exceeding 40 pounds and even hitting the 50-pound mark. Alaska Department of Fish and Game statistics reflect an average return of 23,783 Chinook each year from 1997 to 2002 (this includes fish harvested in the commercial, sport, and subsistence fisheries; average escapement during the same period was 13,264).

Chum and sockeye salmon arrive in the June / July time frame with pinks starting to show in July. Bristol Bay hosts the largest return of sockeye salmon in the world, with a 10-year mean at 34 million per year. For the Togiak River, 700,000 fish were forecasted in 2004. Again, that number includes harvest. The commercial sockeye fishery in the area is managed to



Marcus Weiner displays a nice Togiak River king (top).

Togiak River Fishing Adventures offers a comfortable wilderness camp for visitors (bottom).

Fat rainbow trout like this one are abundant in the Togiak River system (right).

achieve an in-river escapement of 150,000 fish, with the most recent ten-year average escapement for the Togiak River being approximately 212,000 sockeye per year (both 2000 and 2001 were years of very large, above-average escapements).

Silvers in Togiak are also a good bet—10 pounds is about average for a



TOGIK RIVER FISHING ADVENTURES

Togiak River Fishing Adventures (TRFA) is a fishing camp jointly operated by Tikchik Narrows Lodge and Brad & Karla Estelle. The camp is located approximately 20 miles from the river's mouth. A short floatplane ride from Dillingham transports you directly to camp. The facilities are quite plush—large Weatherport tents serve as the dining hall and lounge, while smaller tents exist as guest sleeping quarters. The sleeping tents have electric heat, carpet, lights, two beds with bedding and individual bug nets. I didn't expect to find hot showers and toilets at a remote fishing camp, and was pleasantly surprised.

Meals at camp were very good, from hearty breakfasts of eggs, sausage and toast to multiple course dinners centered on meat and/or seafood. One evening we ate prime rib, while another featured king salmon. Box lunches are taken on the river, thereby minimizing downtime away from fishing.

The camp employs knowledgeable and experienced fishing guides who fish two clients per day, allowing each angler the help and attention required. Catering to all fishing styles, one can back-troll, spin fish, fly fish, drift fish, or wade and fish from banks and gravel bars. A typical day's fishing begins by leaving camp after breakfast at 8 a.m. and returning for dinner at 7:30 p.m.

Fishing packages are three to seven nights (ranging from \$1800-\$3650) and include meals, accommodations, and daily guided-fishing. It does not include tackle, a fishing license, gratuities, or transportation. There is a tackle shop on-hand and all kinds of tackle can be rented. Brad has added an interesting new package to the lineup in 2005 that combines a three to four-day float trip from the upper river to TRFA with a three to four-day stay at camp to fish the lower river. For more information on the camp, and guidance on what gear and tackle to bring, check out www.togiakfishing.com or e-mail Brad at trfa@eburg.com.



Togiak coho, though larger fish are fairly common; even a few 20-pounders are landed each year. Though they're probably the most difficult of Alaska's five Pacific salmon species to get good

numbers on, biologists estimate that the average total return, including harvest, for coho in the Togiak River has been 63,905 during the period between 1997 and 2003.

Resident rainbow trout migrate throughout the system and can be found during salmon season behind pods of spawning salmon. A good trout is in the 24-inch range, but 10-pound-plus fish can be found. Dolly Varden are also widely distributed throughout the system and are easily targeted on the upper river. Our experience proved that fish in the 20-inch range were abundant with several exceeding 24 inches. We did not catch any Arctic grayling on the trip, but I surmise that had we fished further upriver, we would have encountered a grayling. We also did not catch a pike during the trip, but investigation

into sloughs and slow-moving waters off the main channel could prove productive for pike.

Our Itinerary

We begin on a Pen Air flight on a SAAB 340 out of Anchorage to Dillingham. Next it is a 40-minute floatplane ride to the river. We fly in the Tikchik Narrows Lodge Beaver. Upon arriving in early afternoon, we eat lunch and head for the river. We will head downstream and fish a small tributary of the Togiak named Gechiak. Our guide for the afternoon is Bradley Schneider from Cincinnati, Ohio. He is a good guide and understands both how to find fish and how to have fun. It is about a 20-minute ride from camp in one of the camp's many jon boats, and after another 20-minute run up the tributary, we have gone about as far upstream as we can manage.

The river is home to rainbow trout and Dolly Varden and is currently hosting sockeye and chum salmon. Bradley will slowly walk the boat downstream while Wayne and I cast in tandem and dead-drift flies from the boat. We begin with egg and flesh patterns and are quickly rewarded with rainbows and Dollies. Over the course of the day, we land about two-dozen trout and char ranging from 12 to 24 inches. All are robust and especially eager to pounce on a Battle Creek Special, Egg-sucking Leech (ESL) or a variety of sculpin patterns. Wayne also sees success with beads. I am more inclined to use streamers as I notice that these fish react aggressively to movement. We use 5- and 6-weight rods with matching floating line, and 8 to 10-foot leaders tapered to 2X fluorocarbon tippet.

For the salmon, we fish with the same rods, and I find that they are not leader shy, so a heavier leader is suitable. The chum seem to like #2 and #4 ESLs, especially those that incorporate sparkle. Successfully catching sockeye means putting the fly right in front of their mouth, and on the occasion that we do this, we are sometimes rewarded with a landed red salmon. These fish are red hot—spinning and cartwheeling across the water, pausing a moment to regain their bearings and doing it all again.

Day 2 is spent with Mark Higgins, a seasoned guide who has been at TRFA since 1998. In the off-season he is a high

school teacher. We head downriver and will begin fishing for kings roughly three miles from the river mouth. Many king salmon migration lanes are between 8 to 12 feet in the lower river. This lane changes with the tide. We begin by back-trolling with a Luhr-Jensen K-15 Kwikfish that is wrapped with a herring fillet for scent. The rods used are G. Loomis 9-foot heavy, moderate action, 10 to 30-pound rods. The model is SAR 1084C. They are matched with Abu Garcia 6501C3 and 6500C3 reels.

Within 10 minutes, we land one jack king salmon and a dime-bright chum. Chum salmon that are this fresh are good to smoke, so this one ends up in the fish box for future salmon dips.

Mark rigs up another rod to back-bounce eggs and I begin to slowly bounce the eggs along the bottom of the river and away from the boat. Within 15 minutes, I feel the gentle mouthing of a king on the eggs and after snapping the rod up for a solid hook-set, I am into a nice king. It races away from the boat upriver, doubles back downriver under the boat, and then heads straight away from us and leaps into the air. It appears to be in the 30-pound range and is not cooperating. Finally it is landed and makes it into the box. I have a penchant for smoked salmon and this one will feed me for much of the winter.

I am especially impressed with Mark's care of each fish. Upon landing a fish that will be kept, Mark pulls the boat to shore and immediately bleeds the salmon. He cuts the gills and then works the belly to squeeze as much blood as possible from the fish. Proper care of the salmon insures that they will be prime at the table. After bleeding each fish, they are put into the fish box and covered with a wet burlap bag.

We continue to bang kings with several doubles of fish near 20 pounds. Both back-bouncing eggs and back-trolling plugs prove effective. We finish with a double—a 32-pound hen and 15-pound buck—each hooked within 10 seconds of each other, one on the plug and one on eggs. In total we hook and land 15 kings from 8 a.m. to noon, a terrific day of king fishing by my standards and there was still more than half the day left to fish!

All the fishing boats gather at a chosen spot, where the crew from camp

meets us to cook a shore-side salmon lunch. In addition to wonderfully seasoned and grilled salmon, we dine on stir-fried rice and homemade coleslaw. Lunch was quite a treat. Wayne, Mark, and I decide to go back to camp and clean the salmon before heading upriver to fish sockeye, chum, and perhaps a rogue king at the confluence of the Pungokebuk and Togiak.

On Day 3 we join Bradley on an adventure into the wilderness portion of the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. Our first spot is the camp's sockeye hole. Hundreds of sockeye mill around the confluence of a small creek and the Togiak River. It is simply a matter of the proper weighting and depth control to get our flies in front of the plentiful red salmon. We fish here for about three hours and successfully land 15 fish ranging 6 to 10 pounds. Most are dime bright and full of rod-bending and reel-screaming attitude. Flies don't seem to matter, but the right amount of split shot approximately two feet above our flies to get the weights to methodically tap along the bottom is the key to properly positioning our lure.

Next we journey further upstream to the confluence of the Togiak and Nayorun rivers. We can see a large pod of chum salmon spread out in the calmer water in the Togiak and assume that there are Dollies and rainbow below them waiting for eggs to eat. A few casts later and our suspicions are confirmed when Bradley hooks a Dolly Varden on a Glo-Bug pattern. These Dollies are all nice sized—somewhere between 20 to 24 inches fish that are purely chrome with small orange spots. We hook and land as many chum as we want to and all too often, an angry chum takes our flies before we can get them back to the Dollies.

Finally, we travel further upriver to the confluence of the Kemuk and Togiak Rivers. Shortly downstream of the mixing point, we dead-drift beads and flesh flies to several healthy rainbows before hiking up the Kemuk. Once we make it a few bends upriver, all of us begin to catch Dolly Varden. The water is clear and we sight-fish and wade about a mile upriver before turning around and heading back to the boat. In all it was another tremendous day catching four species of Alaska gamefish.

For our final day of fishing we choose to hike up the Pungokebuk with Tom

Ullepik. We will hike about two miles upriver and then fish rainbow trout on our way down. From the ridge on which we walk, you can get a view of the riffles, runs, and pools evident all along the Pungo. This is the type of trout water that I seek, small and easily fished, with varied types of water to provide a multitude of holding places for trout.

Wayne is rewarded with a rainbow on a small pink and white flesh fly on his first cast. We land several in the 16-inch class before the bite turns off. As we hike downriver, I notice sculpin among the rocks. Immediately I switch to a Woolhead Sculpin—a #4 or #6—and consistently catch fish all day long. Between the two of us, we landed nearly 40 trout, with the biggest measured at 21 x 10 inches. Three fish that were far larger were hooked, fought, and lost. It was a serious adrenaline rush to hook rainbows in excess of two feet and watch them fly out of the water to eye level, shake their heads, and spit the hook. Wayne hooked one very large trout that skied four times while racing downriver before finally snapping his leader.

We fished with 4- and 5-weight rods, with light leaders and only a single medium sized split shot. Tom proved to be a good guide and the day spent hiking and fishing with him is a real treat. I enjoyed this experience as much as catching 30-pound kings and it really served to highlight the variety that one can experience on the Togiak.

Fishing Gear and Tackle

Tackle and techniques can be as varied as the fish in the river. One angler at camp

chose to fish everything with a fly rod, and his arsenal was quite different from the anglers who chose only to fish for kings from the boat. During the king run, you will need heavier gear to handle 20-pound-plus fish, so for gear anglers, choose a heavy weight boat rod to support 20 to 30-pound-test line. A good reel with a strong drag and line capability of at least 200 yards is a must for fishing kings. A poor reel will not hold up to the abuse provided by Chinook. For fly anglers, an 8- to 10-weight rod should suffice. A floating line that integrates with a variety of medium, fast, and extra fast sinking tips would serve an angler well.

Silver, red, and chum salmon can be fished with 6- to 8-weight rods with matching lines (same characteristics as described for Chinook). Spin or bait-casting rods appropriate for 10- to 15-pound class line would be suitable with these species that are usually targeted while fishing from the bank. For the smaller species—Dolly Varden, Arctic char, rainbow trout, Arctic grayling, pink salmon—a spin rod in the 8- to 10-pound class would more than suffice. I fly-fished these species and targeted them with a 5- to 6-weight, 9½-foot rod with a matching Ross reel and floating line. I was also able to catch chum, sockeye, and one small king on this rod and reel. Pack leader and tippet from 30 pounds to 4X to cover the gamut.

Lures and flies are a matter of personal choice, but there are a small list of standards that I bring on fishing outings. For lures, have an array of spoons, spinners, and plugs. Spinners by Mepps, Blue Fox, and Luhr-Jensen in the #3, 4, and 5 sizes

are popular and effective for salmon while the smaller #1 and #2 sizes can work well for the other species in the river. An array of sizes and colors of spoons is also a must for the gear angler. A popular choice is the Blue Fox Pixie. Plugs are very effective when back trolling for salmon and in my opinion the most popular across the state is the Luhr Jensen Kwikfish. Sizes 14-16 should suffice. For fly anglers, bring an array of Woolly Buggers, Egg-sucking Leeches, Glo-Bugs, flesh flies, sculpins, and any other popular choices in these style of flies. I also bring a bead box with a variety of sized and colored beads to “match the hatch.”

Final Thoughts

This experience was unique in the sense that it offered so many different types of fishing opportunities without the use of a floatplane. It was also more luxurious than one might expect at a fishing camp—as opposed to a lodge—from heated tents with electricity to flush toilets and showers. I was impressed at how seamlessly the camp operated—hats off to Karla and Brad—and enjoyed all the people who worked at the camp. The guides are all good-natured and able to find fish. The twine that binds the package together is the impressive combination of salmon and resident species fished within an hour of camp.



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Mealtime at Togiak River Fishing Adventures. © Wayne Norris