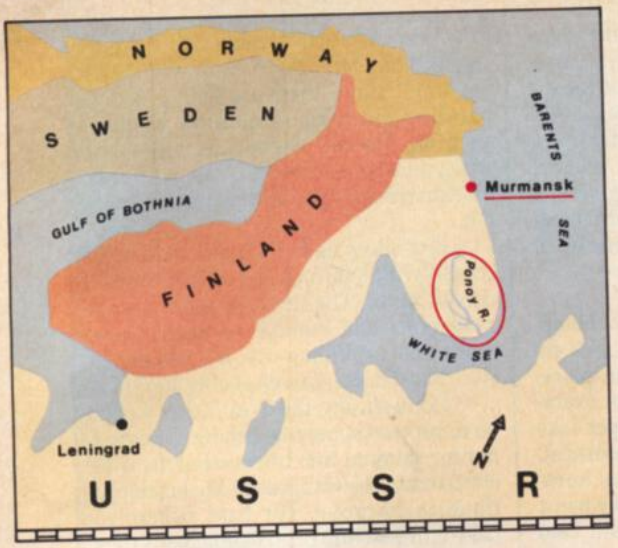
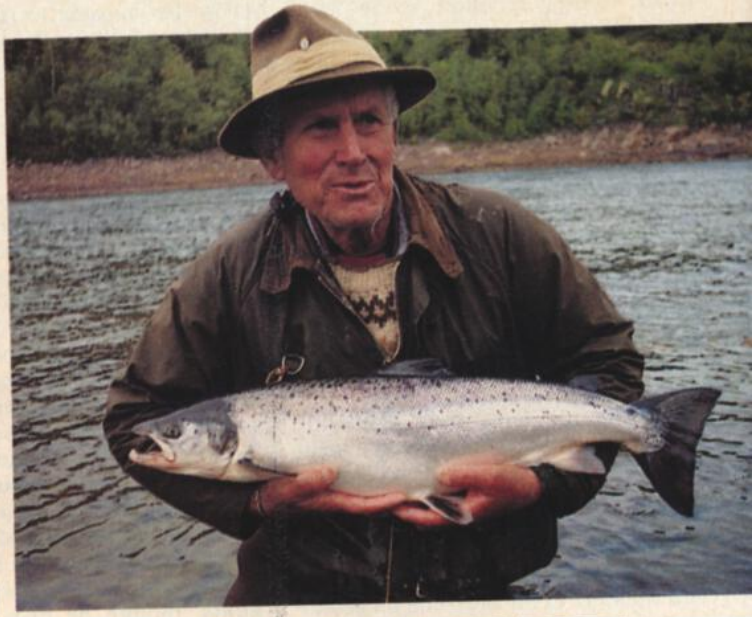


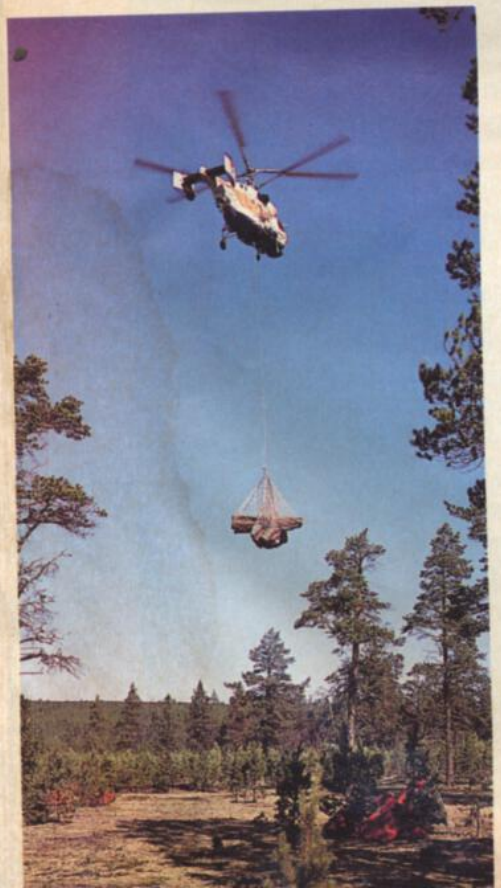
MAP BY BRUCE TAYLOR



THE BIG SECRET

BY DUNCAN BARNES

Remote and pristine, Russia's fabled Ponoy River has been opened to foreign salmon anglers.



When Tim Rajeff finally faced off with "The Man From Land Use" last July in Murmansk, he was already a veteran of Soviet bureaucracy. Flashing ten handwritten pages documenting his considerable cargo—two aluminum skiffs, one inflatable boat, two outboard motors, Finnish tents, a chain saw, and a lifetime supply of paper and plastic products—he had already successfully negotiated the Russian border from Finland in Eero Pettersson's Land Rover.

Now all he needed was the obligatory 20 pounds or so of licenses and permits and the blessing of The State in order to proceed to the remote southeast Kola Peninsula to set up an Atlantic salmon sport fishing camp for "foreigners" who would pay big bucks to fish the fabled Ponoy River.

"It was a tall order—a first—for the bureaucrats," Rajeff admits, "but it was equally frustrating for us. There we were with $15,000 worth of gear in hand, plus a bunch more waiting for us with a crew of Russians at the end of the paved road in Lavozero. And our first group of anglers was due on August 4."

During a lull in the wrangling, Rajeff, a Russian-speaking, thirty-year-old Californian with experience in the construction business and years of guiding in Alaska under his belt, decided to put his cards on the table. "I asked the boss man what he thought the odds were that we would have the camp on the Ponoy River ready for the first fishermen," Rajeff recalls. "So he reaches into his desk drawer, pulls out his I-Ching dice and rolls 'em. Then he looks at me and says: 'The odds? Maybe 50-50 that you even *get* to the Ponoy River.' "

"Just about everything in the Soviet Union has political overtones, and undertones," says Rajeff. "A Russian always has to keep that in mind when he's trying to do business. It's okay to be a politician in Russia, but nobody likes a Russian bureaucrat."

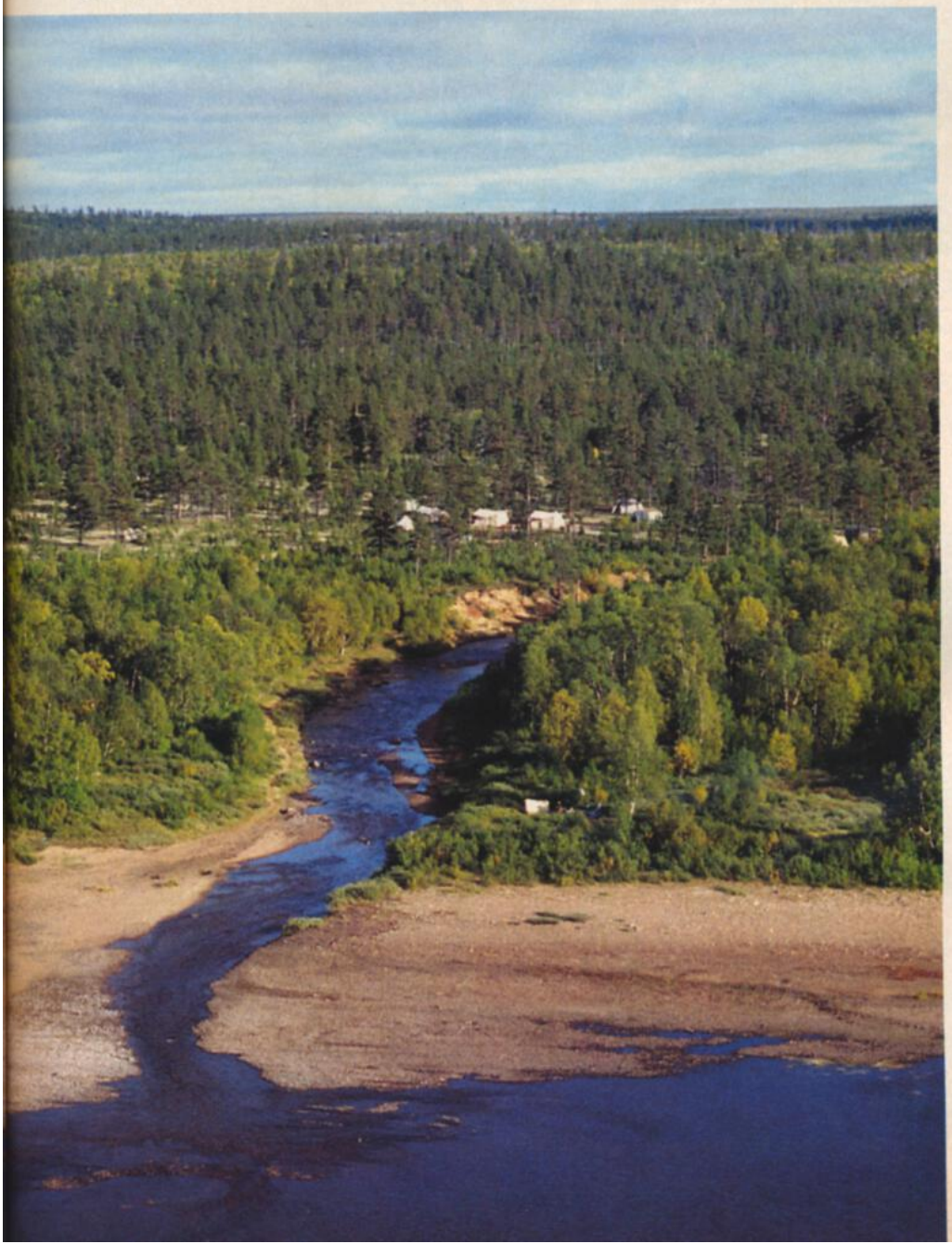
WHEN Gary Loomis, the ebullient rod manufacturer from Woodland, Washington, first met Andrei Velikanov in Leningrad in June 1989, it took Loomis about 2 seconds to steer the conversation to the subject of Atlantic salmon. Velikanov, an ichthyologist and skilled outdoors-

A huge KA32 helicopter, packed with boats and motors, canned goods, tents, generators, toilet seats, and other gear, lowers part of its load at the remote Ponoy campsite. Above, Bill Brewster with a Ponoy salmon.

PHOTO AT LEFT BY TIM RAJEFF; ALL OTHERS BY BOB STEARNS

Pioneers all, this crew set up the Ponoy River Camp in 4½ days. From left: Andrei Velikanov, Alexi Vojgev, Valeri Zubor, Katherine Hart, Tim Rajeff—the honcho—Sasha Shizokov with Gleb Velikanov, Vladimir Rivkin, and Sergei Greshnikov. At far right is "Gap" Gaptrakhmanov, manager of AGRAPROM, the state agricultural organization in Murmansk.

We flew from Murmansk on the Barents Sea to the edge of the Ponoy in an Antonov 2 bi-plane, circa 1938. The outboard props (left) took a beating in the low water. The finished tent camp (below) was spacious and comfortable.



man who speaks fluent English, regaled Loomis with stories about the untapped wealth of salmon rivers on the Kola Peninsula and later introduced him to Eero Pettersson, a hunting and fishing travel agent from Helsinki with excellent connections in the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1989, working with Bill Davis, an American travel agent, Loomis, Pettersson, and Velikanov hosted a small group of American fly fishermen on the Umba River, another Kola Peninsula salmon fishery. The Umba was hot, but the Loomis group had its sights set on the Ponoy, a wilderness river in which, Velikanov said, salmon weighing more than 70 pounds had been recorded.

Pettersson and Velikanov pulled the right strings, and on July 2, 1989, they landed by helicopter on a rocky beach near the tiny village of Kanevka on the Ponoy, fished for 39 hours, and caught sixty salmon ranging from 10 to 35 pounds on spoons and flies. "The fishing was stupidly good," Pettersson admits, "and the water level was perfect. So the decision to establish a tent camp on the bluff above Pacha [the home pool] was easy."

The Ponoy is a big, tea-colored river, flowing slowly but with considerable force, and upwards of 100 yards wide in places. It wells up out of rich swampland just above the Arctic Circle at approximately 67 degrees north latitude, and runs roughly west to east for about 300 miles through tundra and taiga to the White Sea, an inlet of the Barents Sea. It is a pristine river reachable only by air and unsullied by logging, mining, dams, fish canneries and processing *(Continued on page 75)*

runs only 2 to 3 feet deep. Clunn fishes this shallow cranker in cover that most anglers reserve for spinnerbaits, grinding it over wood and ripping it through weeds. On the final day of the three-day event, Clunn's relentless cranking netted a five-fish limit weighing 18 pounds 7 ounces, giving him a runaway victory and his fourth Classic title.

Other crankbaits that bounce freely over shallow cover have been around for years, and they have produced many bass on the rebound for aggressive anglers who are willing to risk snags. One of the best is a small, fat balsa lure with a rounded diving bill. Run this little cranker through brushy treetops, stumps, logs, boulders, and sparse weeds, and you'll be amazed at how infrequently it hangs up. The lure not only gets into the stuff that holds bass, but its tenacious bumping, plowing, and popping free of cover is the kind of action that turns passive bass into aggressors.

Another old shallow crankbait features a metal diving bill that shields the front treble, a metal guard on the belly that protects the rear treble, and a trailing rubber skirt that exaggerates the lure's wide, wobbling action. This often-overlooked floating lure performs best with slow to medium retrieves and will readily climb over most obstacles.

Some snagging, of course, is inevitable when cranking shallow cover. Buoyant lures often will float free if you give slack to the line and pause for a few seconds. When that fails, grasp the line above the rod tip, pull it back sling-shot fashion, and let the taut monofilament spring from your fingers. You may have to repeat this process several times. While this tactic works well, it's not infallible. This is the time to stay cool, ease your boat near the snag, and crank the lure tight against the tip-top guide. Then *gently* push and jiggle the rod to free the hooks. On some days your patience will be tested, but the bass you catch will make it worthwhile.

Snagging may be reduced by bending in the lead hook on the front treble with needle-nose pliers. While the lead hook is the one that hangs up most frequently, it is also the one that frequently hooks bass. The choice is yours. Whenever you free a super-shallow crankbait from a stump or other bass cover, check the hooks to insure that none have been straightened or dulled. Use pliers to put the bend back in a straightened hook, and a small stone or some type of hook sharpener to touch up the point. Always have these items close at hand.

You'll encounter fewer snags by using a medium-action rod, which allows for better casting accuracy than the stiff rods employed by many bass anglers. Short, pinpoint casts are often necessary when cranking shallow cover, since you may have to hit small openings before retrieving to avoid snagging. The flexible tip also does a better job of keeping treble hooks firmly implanted after the strike, reducing the number of bass that pull or jump free. Fiberglass rods are especially forgiving in this respect and some anglers prefer them when bumping crankbaits through wood. The fast tip of a graphite rod, however, is better for imparting twitching retrieves and crankbaits through weeds.

They only time you may prefer a truly stout rod is when casting a shallow-running crankbait that has a single large hook which lets you apply heavy pressure to extract bass from thick cover. One model currently available has a single down-turned hook protruding from its tail that is the same size found on many spinnerbaits. The hook is dressed with a skirt, like a spinnerbait, and the lure runs with a snakelike wobble. The hook's point is protected from snags by the diving bill and two wire guards that protrude from the crankbait's belly. You may fearlessly cast this crankbait into shallow labyrinths where no crankbait has ever gone before.

There are other styles of super-shallow crankbaits on the market, and you're bound to see new designs in the near future. That's good news for bass anglers. As long as bass continue feeding in thin water, as they always have, super-shallow cranking will continue to be effective.

BULL

(Continued from page 45)

nothing is as absorbing as hunting with the certainty that something will happen. Then there was a crash as if a 10-ton boulder had rolled from the bluff above through the timber, and the brief glimpse of teak-and-ivory antlers with the sun glinting off them and the disappearing creamy, heart-shaped rump. That was the last of him that season, and I knew it as I sat on a deadfall and watched my hands shake.

I had similar luck on the last day of the following season (it was the third hunt for him—by that time I was keeping track), as I still-hunted back into the timber again and jumped him at 20 yards. As he crashed off through the trees, bowling over saplings and hurtling blowdowns, I couldn't quite get the crosshairs anywhere but on his rump. If I touched off the .270 like that, he'd get away and die miserably.

He made it through that long, hard winter and the late-coming spring, though that next September he looked poor and his antlers were smaller as I scouted before the hunt. "He's passed his prime," I told the mare as we rode to camp.

He was with two raghorn bulls that fourth season, and as they fed out of the timber on opening evening in the dusky half-light, I could just make out the old bull hanging back in the trees behind a screen of fir saplings. Then it was dark, and I stumbled down the ridge to where the mare waited in the night and chuckled softly at my approach. I waited and watched the meadow for several days, then still-hunted back into the tangle. I heard the bulls go far ahead; the wind had shifted suddenly, and that was it for the season.

The final season I scouted a week before the hunt and he was there. I knew then as I looked at the bony flanks and watched him take those old-man steps back into the timber that this would be his last year on the mountain. There was no doubt, and as soon as the first heavy snows came he'd begin that irreversible downward spiral.

The old one-eyed bull was in the meadow in the late dawn of opening day just standing in the wind. I hesitated after settling the crosshairs on that dark shoulder spot and looked up from the rifle. *You get old and you die,* I thought, but I knew it was better this way than in the winter. "It's better," I told myself aloud, perhaps rationalizing just a bit, the sound of my voice as soothing as if someone else had confirmed it, too. I pressed the trigger and the bull hunched and sagged forward.

I walked up to him. Though he was still a six by six, the antlers were no longer the massive, heavy-beamed rack they were two years earlier. *Maybe I shouldn't have shot him; maybe I should have let him have the rest of the fall until the snows got too heavy.* But then I saw him in my mind lying in the belly-deep, blue-cold snow, like that bull I'd watched die in Yellowstone. He took six days to do it, weakening all the time until he was too feeble to keep the coyotes from eating at his haunches and the magpies away from his eyes.

"It was right to shoot him," I said to myself. A heavy, deep bugle and then the grunting of a prime bull floated up from that sunless timber at the base of the mountain, and in my mind I could see the bull in the gloom of the trees with beams as big around as a man's forearm.

BIG SECRET

(Continued from page 43)

centers, or poachers. And it boasts the largest run of Atlantic salmon in the salmon-rich Kola Peninsula.

How big *is* the Ponoy's run of wild salmon? "It is very difficult to say, but it is *very* big," says Velikanov. "You see, for a long time, salmon were a 'strategic material' in Russia, and the Ponoy was in a closed military zone. So together they were part of 'The Big Secret.' This *is* Russia, you know," Velikanov says with a big grin.

"So we are just now beginning to evaluate the number of salmon in the Ponoy. The State has decided that the local peo-

ple [mostly Finns, Laplanders, and some Hungarians who have herded reindeer and netted salmon there for more than 400 years] should take about 60 tons of salmon every year in their funnel nets at the mouth of the river and sell the salted flesh and 'red caviar' to The State. But I think more than 100,000 salmon come into this river every year—maybe 120,000 or 130,000 salmon. So the local people do not take very much and now the 'Big Secret' is out. There are, I think, enough fish left for you to catch on a fly."

BUREAUCRACY breeds bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, just as it does in America. So it was not surprising that when Tim Rajeff finally got the go ahead to put a camp on the Ponoy and manage it for Gary Loomis and Eero Pettersson, the KGB made him wait another five days in Murmansk for *its* blessing. And then, not to be outdone, the *local* police in Lovozero refused to let Velikanov and his men leave for the Ponoy.

"The Russian machine is not ready for Americans," Velikanov said. "Russians don't know how to do business."

But on July 31, a double-bladed KA32 helicopter lifted off the tarmac at Lavozero for the 250 kilometer flight to the river, carrying thirteen men, three boats and two motors, and a 5-foot-square metal cage packed with canned goods and suspended from a steel cable beneath the chopper. Slung under that were two cargo nets filled with everything from Finnish tents with zippers (Russian tents don't have zippers), to generators, toilet seats, tools, rope, mattresses, light bulbs, and wood stoves.

When the big helicopter set down on the beach beside Pacha, only a large fire ring was visible on the bluff above, where Pettersson and Velikanov had camped during their exploratory trip. But in four-and-a-half days, working from dawn until late into the night, Rajeff, Velikanov and his gang of six men from the Russian Federation of Hunters and Fishermen Central Organization, Leningrad chapter, and Rajeff's friend from San Francisco, Katherine Hart, had set up a spacious and comfortable tent camp complete with electricity, showers with hot water, cooking and dining tents, a wooden stairway down to the river, and a near-lethal "black" sauna in a canvas tent. A reliable radio link soon connected the camp with the air strip at Kanevka and, through relays, on to Murmansk. In the dining tent, the Leningraders set up a cash bar in the spirit, if not the local custom, of free enterprise.

During the next five weeks, thirty-four Americans and Europeans made the long journey to the Ponoy. Severe drought conditions had lowered the water level to such an extent that one local reindeer herder declared solemnly that the river had not been this low in 200 years. Rajeff was forced to send the anglers downriver to find salmon. They got there in an eclectic collection of outboard-powered boats that bumped, bounced and slewed through rock gardens camouflaged by the tea-colored water. Gasoline the color of charcoal made the motors run ragged, shear pins (actually rusty nails in assorted sizes) broke constantly, and the blades on the props looked like big pieces of shrapnel.

To compound the situation, the "fishing police" who patrol the Kola Peninsula decided to prove their bureaucratic prowess by finding fault with the ream of paperwork Rajeff had secured in Murmansk. The fishing police fined camp guides for possession of spinning rods without a license; they fined the camp owners for launching their boats in the Ponoy without a license; and they even fined one guide for leaving camp without a license to do so. "It is the Russian way," Rajeff said with a shrug.

To get anglers far enough downriver to find salmon, Rajeff and Velikanov used helicopters—when they were available—at $200 U.S. per hour, 3 hours minimum, adding an interesting but noisy and costly dimension to the fishing. But in mid-August, a KA-32 helicopter crashed on a training flight, killing all eleven on board. Aeroflot immediately suspended all helicopter service on the Kola Peninsula and put every one of its choppers through a painstaking maintenance check. It took nearly two weeks for Aeroflot to get back to full service, and the fishermen in camp had only a few chances to fly downriver to where the salmon were congregated.

But despite all this, over a period of four weeks, thirty-four anglers caught 354 salmon—117 on flies and 237 on spoons—ranging from grilse of 5 and 6 pounds, to a few fish in the 20- to 28-pound class, and a lot more running from 9 to 15 pounds. In fishing, perseverance pays.

And for those of us who enjoy smelling the roses as much as the fishing, it was quite an adventure. Like just getting to the Ponoy. Arriving in Murmansk too late in the day to fly on to camp, we overnighted in a sanitorium run by Alexander V. Simonshen, "chief doctor" and master masseur. After a dinner of lamb and fried potatoes, accompanied by lots of salted fish, cold cuts, cucumbers, and bowls full of small tomatoes which the Russians eat like plums, Gennady Makarov showed us where those sweet little tomatoes are grown year-round—in rows of huge greenhouses run by hydro-electric power. Then, as darkness fell, Gennady, dressed in his best blue suit, black shoes, and overcoat, dug potatoes in his own garden for us to take to the fishing camp. We wrapped them in a copy of *Pravda*, Northern Edition.

That night, unable to conquer a bad case of jet lag, I lay awake in the narrow sanitorium bed, listening to muffled booms made by military jets breaking the sound barrier—for hours on end. The next morning at 7, the good doctor lived up to his reputation by giving two of us a memorable massage, assisted by a lady with a gleaming set of gold-edged teeth. Mournful Russian music played on the radio and a clock ticked loudly.

Then it was on to the Ponoy by what we were told would be "fixed-wing aircraft." Actually, there were *two* fixed wings on *each side* of the fuselage, a configuration common to a bi-plane. The craft is an Antonov 2, or "AN-2," built in 1938. The Aeroflot pilots were quick to point out that this noisy, drafty, flame-belching radial-engined plane is the *real* workhorse of the north country, and that our DC3, and the Beaver and the Otter, only have two wings. Anyway, the AN-2 lumbered along, flying no higher than 1,000 feet max, and often a lot lower, over the mist-shrouded tundra. We landed 2 hours later at Kanevka in a swirl of red dust. There, a helicopter, the *new* workhorse of the north country, whisked us to camp in a matter of minutes.

FOR OUR small group of American fly fishermen—Bill Brewster, Hal Lyman, Bob Stearns, and myself—fishing the Ponoy was an opportunity to prospect virgin Atlantic salmon water. Unlike some of the anglers before us, we were fortunate to have the use of a helicopter most of the time. And there were more than enough visual clues—long, slick pools, current seams, whitewater pockets, passages between boulders—so you could fish water that at least *looked* right, but it was often an educated guess.

The four of us caught forty-two fish, ranging from grilse to Lyman's fresh-run 17-pounder. *Much* bigger fish showed frequently, sometimes porpoising in the current, often a sign of a "taking fish." But they were in deep mid-river lies out of casting range. Not being able to at least "cover" some of these monsters with a fly left all of us muttering and mumbling.

The most productive beat was a series of long, smooth slicks near the mouth of a tributary called the Purnach, where the salmon took everything from traditional wet salmon ties like the Green Highlander and the Blue Charm, and the Black Bear-Green Butt, hitched and skated on top as a "searching pattern," to big dry flies and steelhead patterns like the Purple Peril and the Skunk. Bill Brewster's Woolly Worm, a fly with green body, white hackle, and long black marabou tail that Lyman disparaged as looking like an "old toothbrush," was a killer; so was a Jim Teeny Flash Fly, in black and "hot green," tied on a No. 2 hook.

On our next to last day on the Ponoy, we took an extra long turn downriver in the helicopter and landed on the beach in a stretch of canyon water just below a tributary called the Tomba. Andrei Velikanov

assured us that no "foreigner" had ever fished there before. In a few hours, we took eight salmon from one 50-yard-long stretch of water that just looked hot, and was. The following day, Bill Brewster, who had fished every other country in the world with runs of Atlantic salmon, caught his 700th salmon in the Tomba canyon, a strong silver 12 1/2-pound female which twice took him halfway into his backing.

Brewster's 700th fish, like several other female salmon killed to feed the camp, had a swollen belly but only a smattering of eggs inside. Velikanov explained that a number of Ponoy salmon come into the river from the sea with immature gonads and remain there through the winter, living off their body fat, until they are sexually ripe and ready to spawn the following autumn. Hal Lyman reports that this behavior also occurs in Quebec's Ungava River.

With or without eggs, the Ponoy salmon made excellent table fare. Operating out of a small cook tent with a dirt floor, Vladimir Rivkin, a professor of ichthyology, served up salmon poached and baked, borsch and other hearty soups, broiled chicken, assorted shaslik (stew) dishes, smoked grayling and sea trout (there are some very big sea-run browns in the Ponoy), and pasta, plus the always present cucumber slices, stacks of bread, and lots of canned Hungarian peas. None of us could figure out who ate all those canned peas or the cans of mystery meat which were left untouched by everyone at lunchtime on the river. Someone described the canned meat as being "as good or as bad as canned dog food, depending on your point of view."

When Bill Brewster and I made up a batch of gravlax with salt, sugar, dill powder, and fresh dill, the guides quickly countered with their own version of salmon cured in salt. Russians also dote on lard, and when Mike Fitzgerald of Fish and Game Frontiers, Inc., the sporting travel agency, arrived in camp with a big slab of uncooked bacon, the Russians took out their knives, cut off sizable chunks, and wolfed them down raw, with bread. Some of them thought it would be a nice touch to give the Americans in camp raw bacon sandwiches. Fortunately, Katherine Hart intervened, explaining that strange as it might seem, Americans preferred their bacon cooked. What else would you expect from these American technoids who had polarized sun glasses in every tint imaginable, several rod, reel, and line combinations worth $1,000 U.S. each, and form-fitting, colorful clothing that was both warm and waterproof?

Dinners in camp were very relaxing, expecially for those of us who first braved the "black sauna," lying on wooden benches and alternating in the sunnyside up and over-lightly positions while Andrei "beat" us with green willow branches soaked and softened in boiling water. After dinner, Valeri Zubor and Sasha Shizokov strummed their guitars and sang haunting Russian songs in front of the wood stove. Valeri, a master guide, wore matching green pants and jacket, *jagermeister*-style, both meticulously cut and sewn by his wife in Leningrad, who also spins hair from his big Husky dog, Oran, to make wool for Valeri's socks.

Gleb Velikanov, Andrei's precocious ten-year-old son, liked to sit outside near the big bonfire that blazed every night inside a circle of boulders. Gleb can carve a very realistic pistol from a chunk of soft pine, using a long-bladed hunting knife; he is also a budding caricaturist and speaker of English.

"I am missing school," he explained one night, "but I learn here many things"—like hauling wood, smoking grayling, congratulating the sports when they caught a salmon (saying "a very nice fish indeed, sir," and giving the traditional Russian thumbs-up sign), and wrestling with the camp dogs, and with Alexi Vojgev, the head guide. Gleb also sold some of his caricatures, done in ballpoint pen, to the Americans after watching how Sergei Greshnikov, the camp "finance minister," sold Russian T-shirts, fur hats, babushkas, and other trinkets from behind the bar. It was Sergei, of course, who wore the latest Seiko wristwatch and the real American jeans.

Gleb was also picking up some solid tips on baseball from Tim Rajeff, a pretty fair third baseman for the Mayes Oyster House softball team in San Francisco. A cut down birch tree limb made a decent bat and Rajeff had Gleb hitting beach stones with regularity. Gleb needs to learn to keep his hands together on the bat . . . .

IN THE starkly beautiful Russian wilderness through which the Ponoy flows, the contrasts in cultures bridge centuries. Sonic booms from unseen jet aircraft echo over the distant tundra, and helicopters swoop down to pick up the sports and whisk them downriver to a salmon pool. On the outskirts of camp, two reindeer herders from Kanevka share a teepee with an open hearth for cooking and reindeer skins to lie on. "They could stay at home in the village," Andrei says, "but from March until October, they prefer to live on the tundra with the reindeer, and the moose, the fox, and the bear, like their people have done for hundreds of years."

During our last night in camp, one filled with vodka toasts to Russian/American friendship ("no politics, just friends," said Vladimir Rivkin), Andrei admitted that he may have been overly pessimistic about the Ponoy experiment.

"I think it is working because we all want the same thing—to catch big fish—and the potential for really big salmon in this river is so great," Andrei said. "And it is working also because we have all, how you say, persevered.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

■ There would appear to be two major runs of salmon in the Ponoy, one that peaks in June and early July, and another, with bigger fish, in late August and September. To take better advantage of the peak runs and to counter low water conditions should they recur, Gary Loomis and Eero Pettersson will build a new main camp, exclusively for fly fishermen, downriver near the Purnach. From there, access by boat to already proven water, including five tributary streams, will be much easier. New boats, one with a jet outboard conversion unit, will be added. Tim Rajeff is excited about the possibility of fishing "drops" to get at some of those big salmon that are always just out of casting range to wading anglers.

The original camp upriver at Pacha will also be operated at certain times, primarily for spin fishermen.

Bookings for the Ponoy are handled by G. Loomis Outdoors Adventures, Dept. FS, P.O. Box E, Woodland, Wash. 98674, telephone: (206) 225-6516; and by Fish & Game Frontiers, Inc., Dept. FS, P.O. Box 161, Pearce Mill Rd., Wexford, Pa. 15090, telephone: (800) 245-1950.

Ranges from $3,400 to $5,500 for six-and-a-half days of fishing, depending on dates and camp location, plus airfare.

BLACK BELT

(Continued from page 31)

grave, and on this brown January landscape. To many, the country would appear dreary—stands of pine and leafless oaks interspersed with muddy fields. To a hunter, however, there were roadside deer paths, visible even from the cab of a pickup traveling 55 miles per hour, indicating that the oaks and fields were indeed heaven to whitetail deer.

Most hunters think you can shoot a deer a day in Alabama, and most hunters are wrong. You can shoot two deer a day, a buck and a doe, throughout 140 days of bow and rifle seasons. As Bob Pitman explained between history lessons, across the whole state there's an average of onedeer for every l0 acres, or sixty-four per square mile. Since some of the state consists of reservoirs and shopping malls, back in the hills there are more than sixty-four deer per square mile. To gain some understanding of this density, imagine that the deer are distributed evenly, like holes in a pegboard, across the countryside. Put a hunter out there, anywhere, and he'd have four deer within 150 yards of his stand.

Many Southern whitetails are considerably smaller than Northern deer, but in part of Alabama the bucks grow as big as they do anywhere. The Black Belt is a stretch of darker, richer soil that crosses the state about a third of the way up from the Gulf of Mexico. Bob Pitman owns a