

# A Haven for Salmon, and for Salmon Fishers



Kirk Deeter

Max Mamaev, a Ponoï River guide, with an Atlantic salmon. A decrease of fishing at the river's mouth has contributed to higher catch rates upstream.

By CHRIS SANTELLA  
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MURMANSK, Russia — My fly skittered across the current in front of our jet boat on the Lower Tomba beat of Russia's Ponoï River, darting erratically as the tension on my line increased. Suddenly, there was a violent splash, and I felt a significant tug. Then nothing.



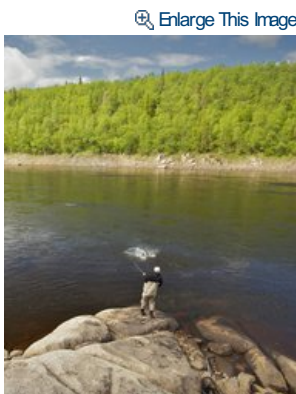
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"Don't give the fish any line and don't yank the rod back," said Max Mamaev, the head guide at the Ponoï River Company. "When you feel the weight of the fish, lift gently."

I cast again toward the birch-blanketed bank as two peregrine falcons mobbed a white-tailed sea eagle in the sky above. As the fly accelerated below the boat, a fish rose and missed the fly. Then there was a second swirl, and the line came tight. I lifted slowly and was fast to my 10th Atlantic salmon of the day.

On the Ponoï, anglers almost always get a second chance.

The draw of Atlantic salmon for many devotees is, at least in part, the difficulty of catching them. Much of the challenge is borne of the general scarcity of salmon in many river systems that once held sizable runs and the number of anglers besieging the fish with colorfully named flies in the streams where returns are more stable. (Atlantic salmon spend their first few years in fresh water, go to sea — where they grow considerably — for one or more years



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A guest fighting a fish in the Tomba beat of Russia's Ponoï River, which has some of the world's best Atlantic salmon waters and gives anglers many chances to catch the fish.

and return to their natal rivers to spawn. Some will die after spawning; others will return to the sea for another cycle.) Most anglers will log many hours on the river between fish hooked, an experience that can foster a fatalistic, if not pessimistic, temperament.

The Ponoï, which flows 250 miles through the taiga terrain of Russia's southern Kola Peninsula (below Murmansk), turns the equation of long hours for few fish on its head. The season runs from late May to early October.

"In the Atlantic salmon world, the Ponoï is one of the crown jewels," said Bill Taylor, the president and chief executive officer of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, an international conservation organization based in New Brunswick in Canada. "It boasts the most prolific wild runs of Atlantic salmon in the world. Some anglers have a week or two on the river locked in on their calendars and spend the rest of the year looking forward to the trip. For others, it's a once-in-a-lifetime adventure where the fly fisher knows they have a shot at landing as many salmon in a week as they could in a lifetime on their home rivers. Because of its isolation, the Ponoï faces few of the threats — poor forestry practices, agricultural runoff, open net pen salmon farming and urbanization — that hamper healthy wild salmon runs in southern Europe, Canada and the United States."

Mollie Fitzgerald, a co-owner of Frontiers International Travel in Gibsonia, Pa., said: "Neophyte fly anglers do not gravitate toward Atlantic salmon fishing. That's because on most salmon rivers, a week's fishing may be about one great fish hooked. And that can be frustrating. On the Ponoï, even a first-time fly fisherman can get great rewards. There are rivers with bigger fish and a few that have similarly strong catch rates, but for consistent fishing over a long season, nothing compares to the Ponoï. We've been sending anglers there since the camp opened in the early '90s, and catch rates have steadily improved with the cessation of commercial fishing at the mouth and focused catch-and-release efforts."

During the week of my stay, the 18 anglers at the Ponoï River Company's Ryabaga camp averaged more than 60 salmon each, fishing roughly eight hours a day for six days. Several anglers caught and released more than 100 fish.

To reach the Ryabaga camp, anglers must get to Murmansk and then fly two hours in a military issue Mi-8 helicopter — few people's idea of comfortable conveyance. During prime fishing weeks, lodge fees can exceed \$13,000.

The tea-color Ponoï is a big river, at some points 300 yards across. Many runs can be fished from shore, though to access some holding water, anglers fish from boats. Guides anchor at the top of a piece of promising water — a drop, in Ponoï parlance. The upstream angler casts to the right, the downstream angler to the left. After every few casts, the guide releases several yards of anchor rope, "dropping" the boat farther into the run. Fourteen-foot, two-handed spey rods are the order of the day on the Ponoï; the long rods allow anglers to make longer casts to cover more water with less effort. Traditional and tube-style flies are used.

"Whether you're fishing a skating fly or a wet fly, you want to keep it moving, as the salmon like it fast," Mamaev, the head guide, said. "If the current isn't moving the fly quickly enough, try stripping or twitching the fly."

The Ponoï sits above the Arctic Circle at 67 degrees latitude, and from late May through July, the sun never sets. Ardent (or insomniac) anglers can cast through the night on the Ryabaga camp's home pool, one of the most productive spots on the river. At 11:30 one night, I stood near the midpoint of the pool. Unseasonably warm weather had brought the thick stands of birch trees lining the river into bud, and fish were steadily leaping clear of the water below me. I unfurled a cast. As the fly swung down, I looked upstream, where another angler was casting. The still present sun's rays glinted off his fly line as it cut through the rapidly cooling air. A jerk on my rod jolted me back to the matter at hand, and a fish cleared the water at the end of my line, shaking the fly free.

I prepared to cast again, confident another fish would be waiting.

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