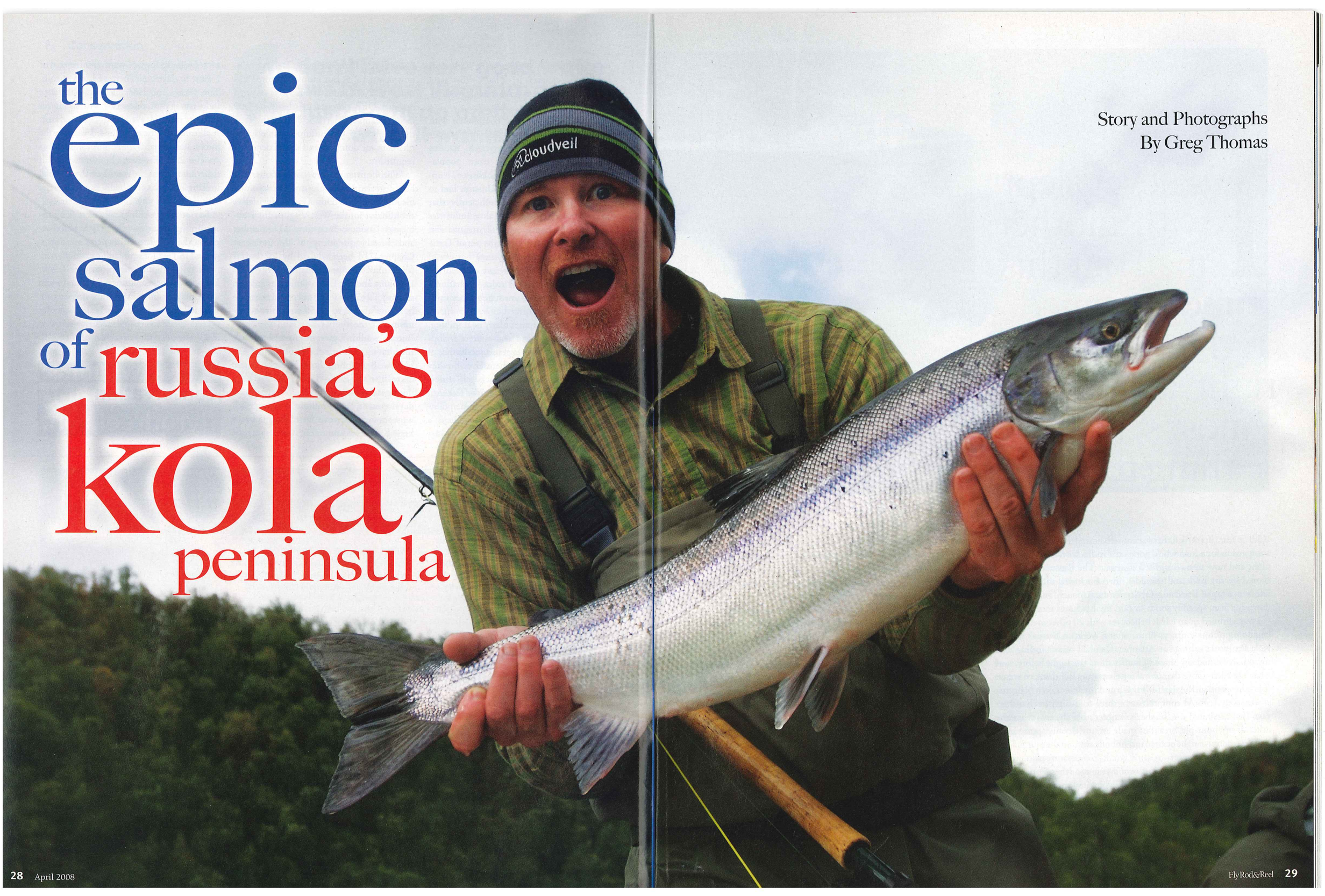
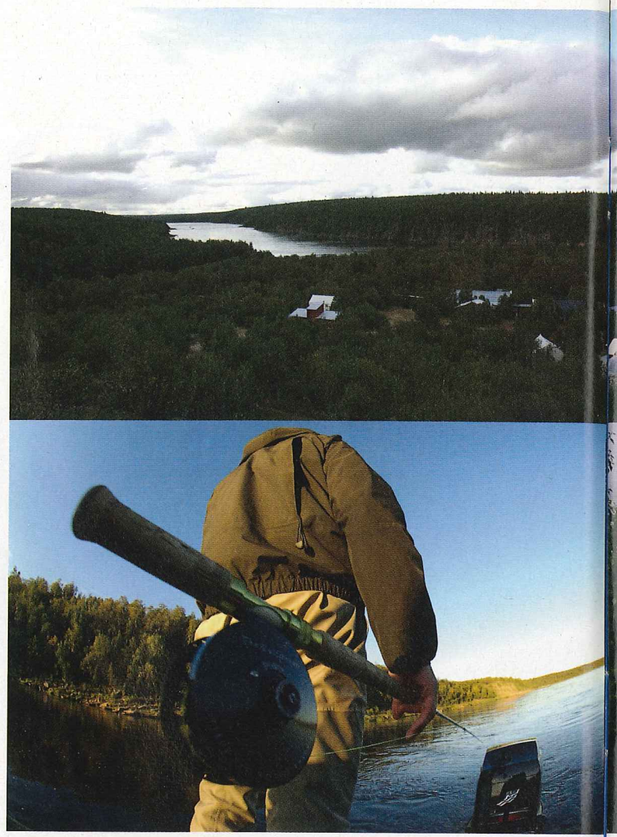
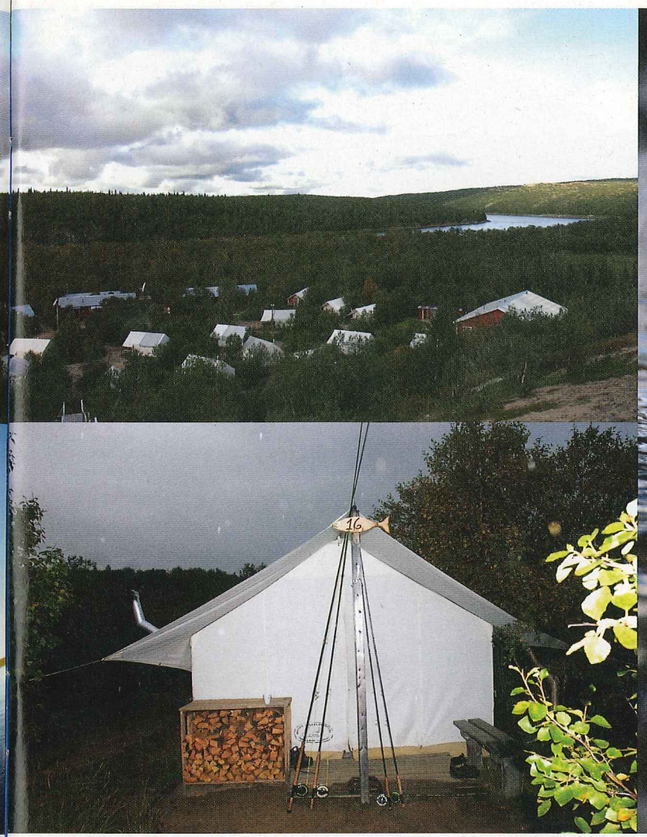
# the epic salmon of russia's kola peninsula

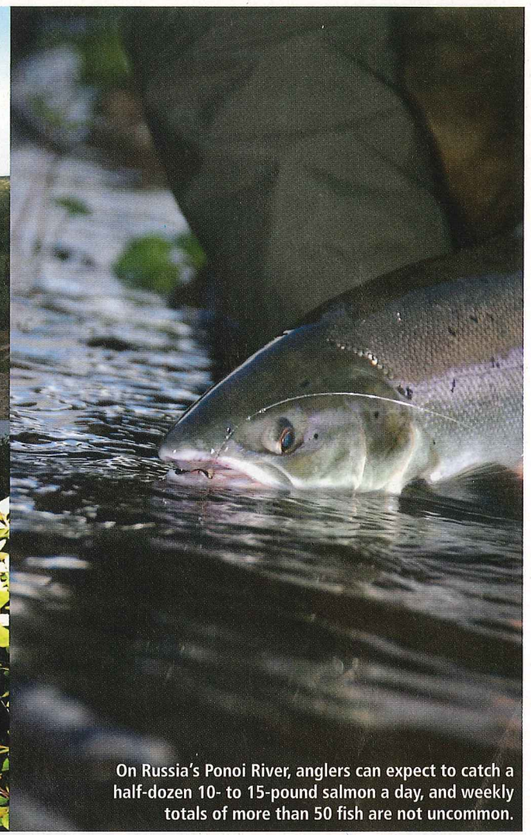
Story and Photographs
By Greg Thomas



I'd never slept with another man but this time it seemed right—or, if not right, at least the most sensible thing to do.







On Russia's Ponoi River, anglers can expect to catch a half-dozen 10- to 15-pound salmon a day, and weekly totals of more than 50 fish are not uncommon.

Call it fear, if you'd like, of a muscle-bound Russian, or call it compassion for a man who'd gone on a vodka barrage the previous night and now seemed in total disrepair. The Russian's head had started on my neck and shoulder, then burrowed into my chest like a marsupial searching for its mother's pouch and now slid down my arm, speedily south toward my lap…and mortification.

I was sardined in an MI-8 helicopter with 20 other men, on the beginning of our journeys home after a week on Russia's distant Kola Peninsula fishing for Atlantic salmon. I wasn't feeling well myself, as I'd had my share of vodka shots the night before, and what I needed, more than *anything* else, was a tall drink of water. If I didn't get that Russian off my lap and my hands on a Nalgene, it was likely I would contaminate a three-foot-high stack of luggage that separated one of the helicopter's bench seats from the other. If my hour-old breakfast made an unwelcome appearance, a chain reaction might occur. And nobody wanted that.

The entire affair began just over a year ago when Ponoi River Company's manager, Will Casella, invited me to Russia, as a guest. At the time, mid-January, we were fishing steelhead on eastern Washington's Grande Ronde River and enduring 10-degree nights around an enormous campfire. In the mornings, we drove to Bogan's Oasis to thaw and order greasy-spoon breakfasts while waiting for the temperature to rise above freezing and the river's slush ice to dissipate. We had plenty of time to rib each other, which is how Casella and I often communicate. It was a sign of bad things to come.

"Uh, were you going to finish your omelet this week or are you not fishing today," I said.

"I'm waiting for summer so I don't have to go through another day listening to you cry about how bad your hands hurt," Casella said.

"Boy," I said. "Just noticed something. You were first in line when they handed out eyebrows, weren't you."

And then this, a serious statement from Casella: "Thomas, you have to fish Atlantic salmon in Russia this year. They're just as good as steelhead, maybe better, and you can join me late in the season when we see the fall brights. They are tremendous fish and they show up in unbelievable numbers. They'll truly kick your ass. If you can hook one."

Atlantic salmon intrigue me, for various reasons: they are found in compelling lands, such as Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Russia; Atlantics grow large, meaning 60 pounds or more, and they are said to fight as well, if not better, than any fish in the world; wealthy people pay exorbitant fees to cast for those fish and, as often as not, they walk away from the water empty-handed, their $2,000 daily rod fee having bought nothing more than a satchel of grief.

On some rivers you practically have to fill a dead man's shoes for an opportunity to fish it and there are waiting lists to get on the waiting list to do so. On most rivers these days, dwindling stocks make the capture of any salmon, let alone a good one, not in favor of a betting man. However, on Russia's Kola Peninsula, the Atlantic salmon's last frontier, those fish come eager and often to the fly.

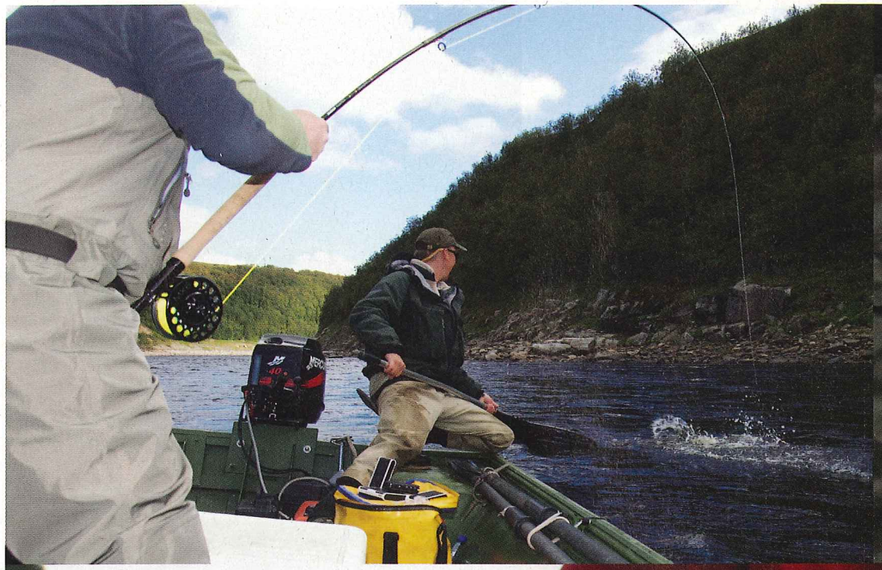
The Kola Peninsula, which rates about the size of Scotland, offers many great rivers, including the Kola, the Varzuga, the Varzina, the Rydna, the Litza, the Pana and the Umba, all of which host commercial angling operations. The region also contains the Ponoi, the largest and longest river on the peninsula. Most avid Atlantic salmon anglers, you should know, consider the Ponoi to be the greatest salmon stream in the world. Science backs up that assertion.

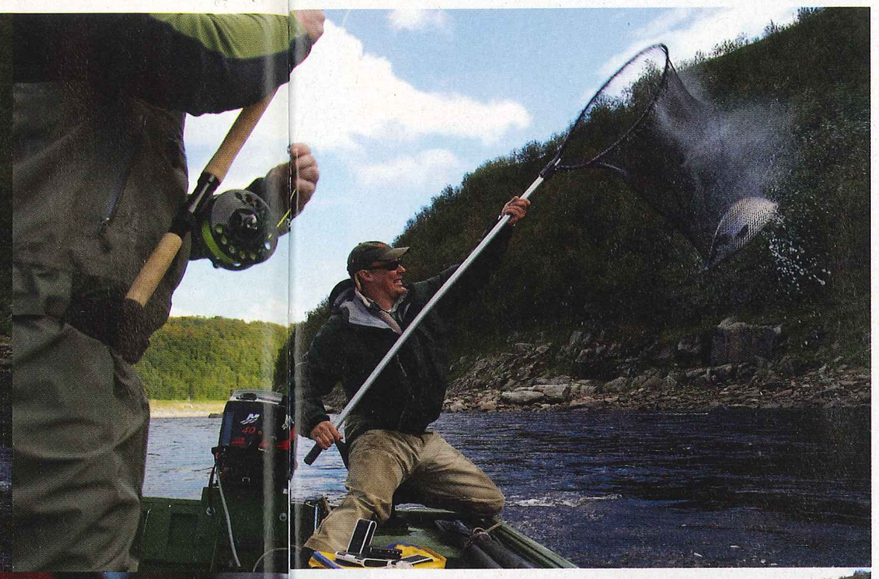
In a good year, the Ponoi receives between 30,000 and 100,000 fresh salmon, which join equal numbers of fish that arrived the previous year (Ponoi salmon spend up to 20 months in the river before returning to sea). While the Ponoi's salmon rarely stretch past the 20-pound mark and less frequently achieve 30 pounds, there is no other place where anglers can expect to catch a half-dozen 10- to 15-pounders a day, sometimes more, and walk away after a week with tallies of 50 or more fish. In addition, because those fish spend so much time in freshwater, and apparently don't eat while there, they arrive in outstanding shape, their skins stretched tight with muscle and fat reserves that sustain them until their next trip to the bountiful White Sea.

Sitting in Bogan's Oasis with Casella, I said, "I'll tell you who'll kick my ass if I accept your offer. My wife. She'll be eight months pregnant in September."

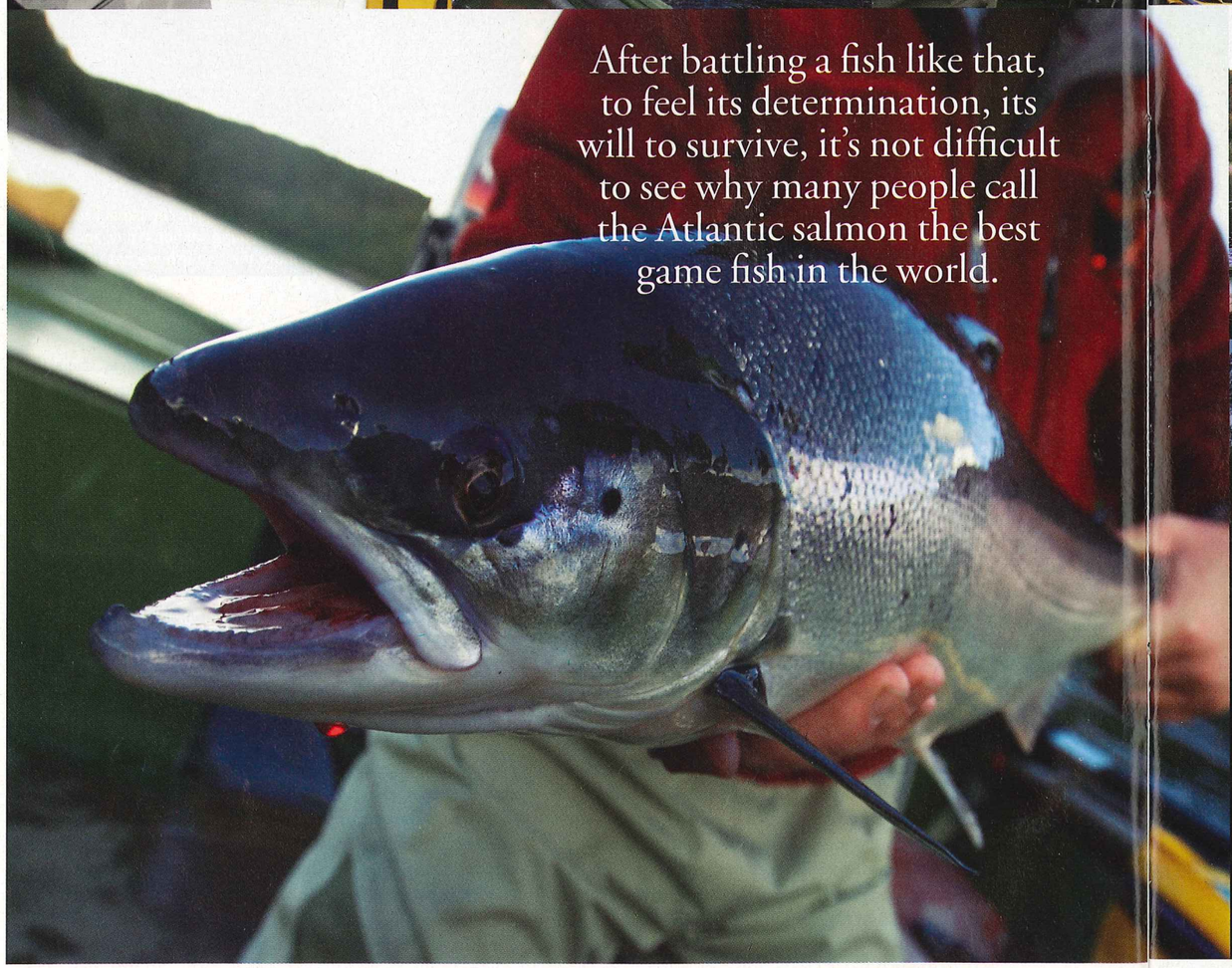
Eight months later I flew from Bozeman to Minneapolis to Amsterdam to Helsinki and then to Murmansk, Russia, followed by a two-hour helicopter flight over the Kola Peninsula's expansive and wild tundra. After a total of 18 hours in the air, I arrived at Ponoi River Company's Ryabaga Camp and was shaking hands with Casella. I introduced him to my accomplice, Dan Summerfield, a lifelong Montanan and a guy I described as a "wicked trout-head."

That night, after a meal of fresh Atlantic salmon, prepared by a professional American chef and Russian-staffed kitchen, and several three-ounce shots of vodka to secure our friendships with fellow guests, Dan and I staggered to our ivory-white canvas tent, which harbored two comfortable beds, a nightstand, a wood rack to hang our gear on, a sink with running water, a mirror, two chocolate bars and, best of all, a small wood-burning stove that warmed us each morning before breakfast and was prepped for ignition each evening when we returned from the river.

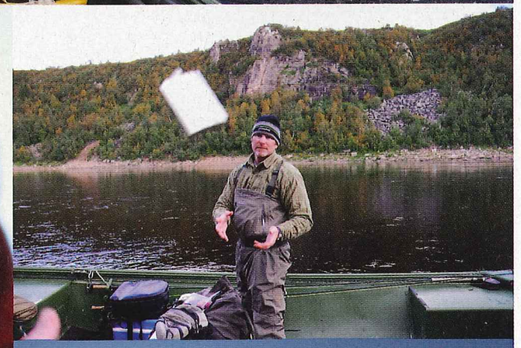


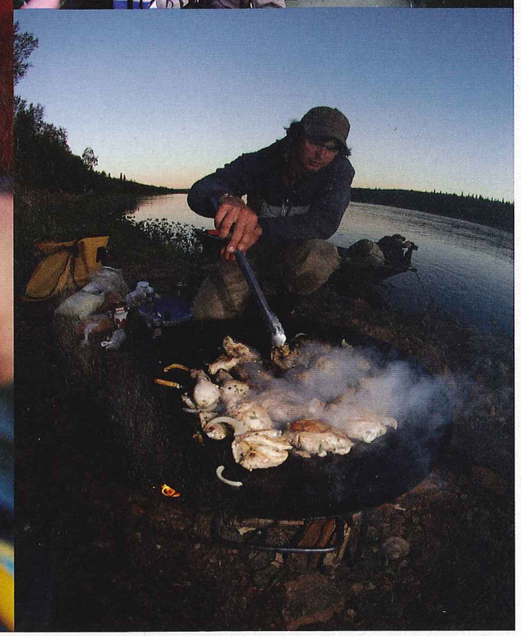






After battling a fish like that, to feel its determination, its will to survive, it's not difficult to see why many people call the Atlantic salmon the best game fish in the world.





Uncertainty and anadromous fish go together. And to some extent, that is the appeal of fishing for salmon and steelhead, wherever they are found. Questions of whether the fish have arrived; whether they have arrived in sufficient or poor numbers; and whether they choose to eat or, for whatever reason, play the lock-jaw angling-torture game, is actually part of that appeal. No true angler wants to spend his or her days casting to stocked trout in a Bobcat-built cesspool where the outcome is given before the first cast is made and repetition spawns boredom like wildfire. Then again, nobody wants to fly halfway around the world to get skunked. What Summerfield and I learned the following day was that the Ponoi's fall brights were late and that the weather north of the Arctic Circle can be brutal—even in late August and early September.

In fact, an hour into the angling, a sheet of rain and damaging winds descended on us, a front that wouldn't let up for 10 hours. This wasn't good: Dan and I are fledgling Spey-casters and the wind issued no favors. Fortunately, our guide, Misha, instructed and before long Dan and I each managed a fish, both "darkies," the standard term for an Atlantic salmon that's finned in freshwater for a month or more. The freshwater contorts these fish, turning a perfect chrome-bright beauty to dark brown. In addition, the cockfish realize a terrible nightmare—their top snout takes on the dimension of the late Walter Matthau's nose and the tip of the bottom jaw transforms into a giant kype.

The guides at Ryabaga Camp, a mix of Russians, Argentines, Frenchmen, and Swedes, regarded those darkies with a hint of chagrin, not because they didn't respect those salmon, but because fall is a time to search for brights and those guides were eager to see some chromers tearing up the river. So, instead of hammering slow water where darkies reign we set the boat mid-river or fished from shore in places where a strong current solicited fresh fish.

Each day we worked a different beat with a different guide, as did the other anglers. The beats (Purnache, Gold Beach, Hourglass, Falls Creek, Upper and Lower Tomba and Hardcurve) each measured about six miles, which offered all the water one would require for a quality day. We were 50 miles above saltwater and, fortunately, by our third day fresh fish were pushing through in solid numbers.

On that same day a major angling issue arose and I had to address my soul to combat it. Basically, while I worked hard to produce a single decent Spey cast, and worked harder to hook a single fish, at the other end of the boat Dan had mastered his stroke and was drilling one fish after the other. I spent most of the day lying, and trying to look happy. I'd say, rather unconvincingly, "Alright Dan. Good job. Nice fish." Dan and I were fishing identical green tube flies, in the same fashion, each of us covering prime water, at the proper depth and speed, on our respective sides of the boat or from the bank. My mood really wasn't that bad until Casella joined us in the boat and set in on an epic rant, something, I was sure, tied to that eyebrows comment made on the Grande Ronde River eight months prior.

"Thomas!" he said. "What the hell are you doing? Would you cast a single-handed rod like that? Look at that loop. Three days on the water and that's how you Spey cast? Come on. Dan's smoking them over here." Then the guide, Max, set in with, "Maybe stop that rod on the backcast . . . Or just watch Dan. He gets it." And then, from the new expert, Dan: "Thomas. You should

Continued on page 56 ▶

 ▶ Continued from page 33

change your fly." Suddenly our 17-foot flat-bottom jet boat felt like a tiny cage, and I felt like the world's biggest loser.

As we'd done each day, we took lunch on the riverbank. I hadn't said a word in an hour. I couldn't think of a word to say except "f—k." And that hadn't gotten me anywhere. I found a smooth rock 15 yards from my partners to sit on and I stared into a cup of bean soup, one of the varieties prepared each day by the Russian women, the best soups I'd ever tasted.

I considered my life, briefly. There wasn't much to say about my high school or college years except middling grades. After my college aspirations for fame and fortune (namely, a successful novel and lucrative speaking engagements) had flown right out the window, most guys would have made a career change. My motto was steady as she fails.

There were other problems, too: books that required months of research, and then sold poorly and never brought royalties; a stint in Canada for steelhead when my roll-casting abilities abandoned me, like a baseball player suffering an 0-for-32 slump; and now my ineptitude with a two-hand rod in Russia. But why?

Could it have been the eight hours of sleep that Dan and I allowed during the first 85 hours of our trip while running hard in the air over the Atlantic and even harder when we landed in Helsinki? Was it jetlag or all those vodka shots at the dinner table? Was it trying to sleep as Dan snored away the hours? He'd left his apnea apparatus in the States. One morning a fellow angler named Gerry passed our tent. At breakfast, in a rich Scottish accent, he asked, "Jeezus Chrheist. I walked past your tent and it sounded like fusion going on in there. What was it?" Was it really my fault and did any of it matter?

To buck the depression I began talking silently to myself, something the psychologists don't recommend. After a long internal monologue, finally, I thought, *How damned spoiled are you Greg, really, to be feeling sorry for yourself on the Ponoi River in the face of pure good fortune?*

I peered up from my soup and stared across the broad, tea-color river to the opposite bank. It rose steeply, a pile of slate gray boulders, mixed with various grasses and wildflowers. Its draws featured stunted spruce and fir trees and patches of willow and alder. The sun broke from the clouds, shined soft light on the beginning of fall foliage and lent some warmth to the chilly day. I scanned the area for a brown bear or a reindeer or a gyrfalcon, wildlife often spotted on the Ponoi. And what did I have to do? Finish lunch, and afterwards? Fish for chrome-bright Atlantic salmon for a few more hours. And after that all I had to do was simply enjoy the scenery as we flew in a helicopter from our beat back to camp where another round of vodka shots and a meal of Barents Sea king crab would be delivered to my plate. It was time for me to buck up.

That afternoon I approached the river with confidence and worked hard on my cast and a few hours later I was punching 80-footers to the bank. Just before dark, with the boat anchored mid-river in a slick above some rapids, I hooked my first true fall bright of the trip, a salmon that tore around the shallow tailout threatening to head downstream, through the rapids, to certain freedom. My 14-foot, 8-weight Winston stayed at full bend for several minutes before I finally slid that fish into an awaiting net. Dan, Will and Max cheered. I felt like Willis Reed.

That night Dan and I abandoned our fellow guests and joined Will and another guide, Tommy, and ran five miles upstream from camp. We popped the caps off Nevskoe beer, uncorked a couple bottles of wine, and threw a cap from a bottle of vodka into the garbage bucket. Then, Tommy pulled out a wok-like skillet and set it over an open fire. First he heated oil, onion and garlic, and then added marinated chicken, followed by wild rice and homemade marinara. Cracked pepper and grilled homemade bread topped it off. Later, after supper, we floated down the Ponoi in the dark, engine off, current purring around giant midstream boulders, while heavy steam rose from the river and an Arctic full moon that seemed near enough to touch crested the bluff. There are moments in life, I have found, no matter what your social position might be or where your life has been or is headed, when you feel as rich as any other person on the planet. And that night was one of them.

The following day Dan and I drew the Swedish guide, Per, and headed downriver to the upper Tomba beat. Shortly after our arrival, as if by magic, a push of bright

# Going to the Kola

## Expectations:

During a weeklong stay on the Ponoi, Dan Summerfield and the author landed 50 Atlantic salmon, about half bright fish, half dark. They fished the week of August 23 to 30. The fishing was rated as slow in comparison to a typical year, but there were plenty of fish to cast to. In good years, some anglers have walked away from camp having landed more than a hundred salmon for the week.

The numbers of fish caught per week may not be as high on some of the Kola's other streams, but larger fish are encountered on some waters more often, including the Kola, Kharlofka and East Litza.

Accommodations at Ponoi River Company's Ryabaga Camp were excellent and anything that the author or his companion needed was quickly tended to.

## Gear:

On any of the Kola's big salmon rivers, anglers could tie into the fish of a lifetime. Even on the Ponoi 20-pounders are not uncommon. To handle a fish like that, especially a chrome-bright specimen, anglers need to harbor a stout rod—8- and 9-weight rods are ideal and they can be in the single-hand or double-hand variety. For the big rivers, such as the Kola and Ponoi, double-handers are advised, but they aren't required.

Because stream conditions vary throughout the season, it pays to arrive with a multi-tip line. If the water is high and roily, an angler may need to put on a sink-tip and drop down. In ideal conditions anglers may be able to tie on a floating tip and skate dry flies.

Tippets in the 8- to 12-pound range suffice. Tube flies and standard patterns, such as Muddlers, Green Highlanders, Mickey Finns, Ally's Shrimp, Hairy Marys and Bombers, draw takes. Tie your patterns on size 2, 4 and 6 double hooks.

Make sure you bring warm clothing and be prepared to wear it in layers. Remember, the Kola Peninsula is located north of the Arctic Circle. Any given day could bring blustery conditions. A quality rain jacket and waders are essential.

## Getting There:

Anglers must fly to Helsinki, Finland, and catch a connecting flight to Murmansk. From Murmansk most anglers fly on helicopters to remote lodges with some flights taking two hours and requiring a fuel stop. Other lodges are accessed via a van ride from Murmansk. Driving time can reach five hours.

## Outfitters:

The Ponoi River Company and Northern Rivers Company are the two largest commercial operations on the Kola Peninsula. Smaller entities, including a few mentioned here, also offer appealing options.

**Ponoi River Company/Frontiers** offers fishing on the Ponoi River, the longest and most productive stream on the Kola Peninsula. There are two camps to choose from, Ryabaga and Brevyeni. In addition, trips can be arranged on the Purnache. The season begins in May and ends in October. **frontierstravel.com**

**Northern Rivers Company** offers fishing in the Kola Peninsula's designated Atlantic Salmon Reserve, which includes the Kharlovka, Rynda, Zolotaya and Litza rivers. **kharlovka.com**

At the **Kola Lodge**, you'll find fishing on the Kola and Kitza rivers with opportunities of hooking fish in excess of 40 pounds. **angleradventures.com**

**Varzina River Lodge** specializes in fishing on the Varzina, Penka, Drosfovka and Sidorovka rivers. **varzina.fi**

At the **Umba Lodge**, anglers are treated to fishing on the Umba and Varzuga rivers. **lax-a.is**

## Rates:

For a week on the Kola Peninsula fishing for Atlantic salmon, anglers should expect to pay between $4,000 and $12,000, depending on the week of arrival. Guide tips, drink tabs and flights to and from Murmansk, Russia, are in addition to that weekly fee. ■