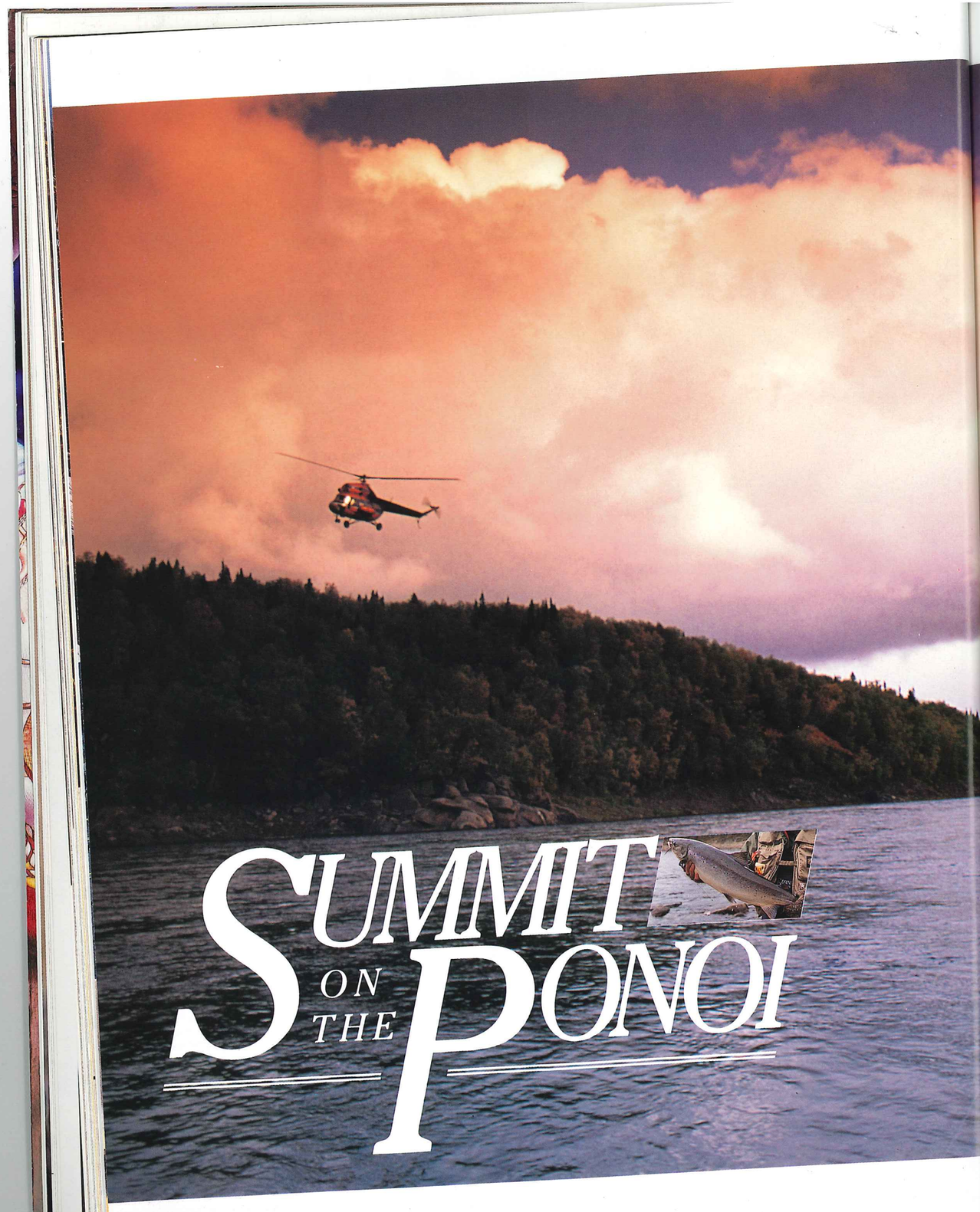
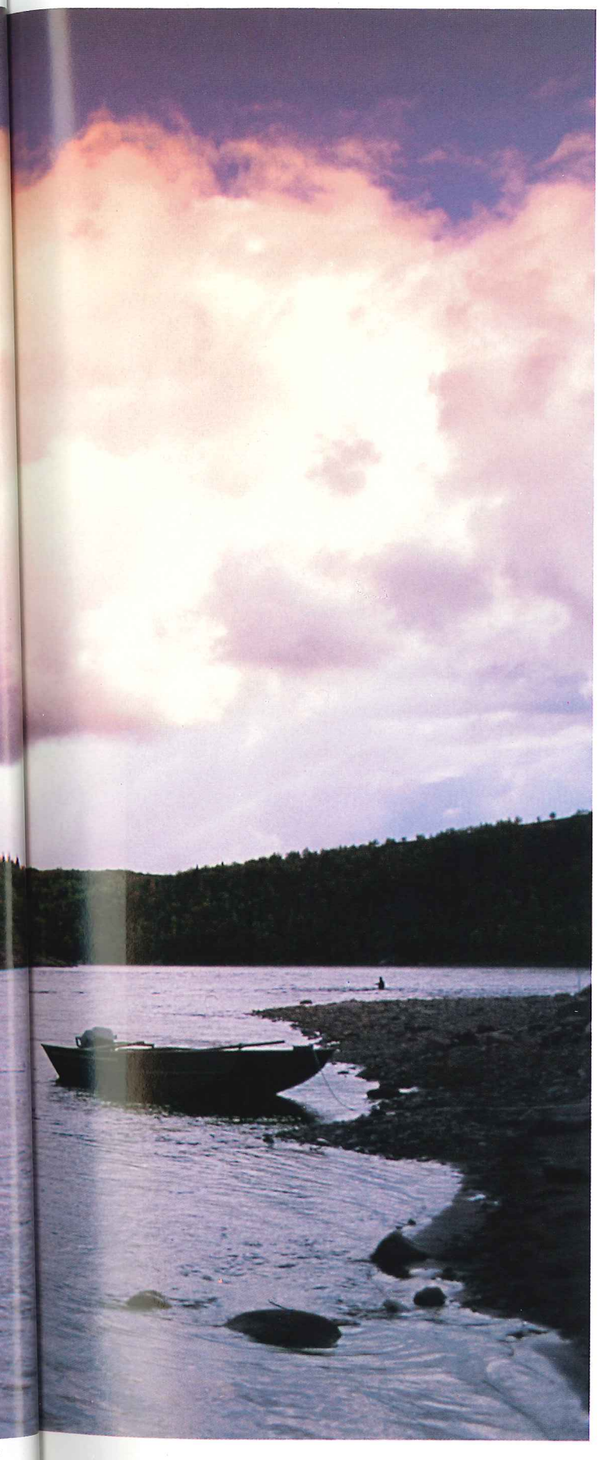


# SUMMIT ON THE PONOI







Born in 1946 I am the quintessential baby boomer. Throughout the formative '50s, I was taught to respect my elders, that the United States government could do nothing wrong, and that the only good red was a dead red. In school I was subjected to the standard curriculum – math, history, science, the physical properties needed for a good spitball, and geography. But it was geography I remembered most and the teacher pulling down that giant world map above the blackboard. There it would be, covering in red what seemed to be most of the world, the United Soviet Socialists Republic. The Russians. The enemy, Krushchev, that ugly little man with an even uglier wife, the man with the missiles. Russia, the Red menace, that brought us air raid drills, practiced evacuations, and a fallout shelter to our next door neighbor's backyard. Nuclear disaster.

Our teachers pointed to many countries on the giant map but Russia was the only one that caused me to flinch. The Russians were a mean and sneaky people – my parents said so.

Then came the '60s and I learned: to mistrust those same elders, an elder being anyone over 30, that the government was capable of mistakes, and the political opinions of my parents were archaic doggerel. Only one thing remained a constant: them Ruskies were nastier than ever. In Brezhnev, the Soviets had found, and no one thought it could be done, a man even uglier than Nikita. I mean the boys around Red Square were threatening my education, hell, my life, by supplying arms to the North Vietnamese. They also were a threat to my VW bus, free rock concerts, and my newest passion which was dragging me out of the classroom with entirely too much regularity – fly fishing.

So I fine-tuned my hatred of Russia and its people to the Kremlin. For I had learned one thing in college – it was that people don't make war, governments do – the Masters of War. Bob Dylan said so.

During the '70s I learned, by becoming one, that people

*Russian fishing guide Dmitri Semushin had the answer for bringing peace to the world. 'Leaders always hold summits in the wrong places. Big cities. No good. They should meet on river, spend day fishing in small boat. No TV. No newspaper. No CIA. No KGB. Just fishing. Together. There comes much peace from fishing.' And if Dimitri had to pick just one river in all the world, it would certainly be the Ponoi.*

*by Scott Waldie*
*Photography by R. Valentine Atkinson*


*In Tim Rajeff and Katherine Hart, the Loomis Co. found the perfect team fo running a fishing camp in Russia. The camp (map and opposite) is situated along the Ponoi River, a short flight from Murmansk, the naval base city of Red October fame.*

over 30 weren't so stupid, that our government wasn't as bad I thought, but needed watching, and that my parents had learned a lot in ten years. The Russians however, hadn't changed a bit. Their nuclear stockpile doubled ours. There were global flare-ups, and while the doomsday sabres rattled over Nicaragua and Pakistan, none of them went off.

Meanwhile, I was fishing and guiding in the Rockies, loving the trout fishing but beginning to daydream of exotic waters. I fantasized of bonefish, dorado and tarpon. But most of all I fantasized about the greatest, the toughest, the most prized fish of them all – the Atlantic Salmon. Lee Wulff said so.

In the '80s everything changed. All of a sudden a man named Gorbachev came roaring into the world. We were facing a Russian leader who wanted change. Wanted treaties. Wanted peace. Perestroika. Glasnost. Russia opened to tourism and recreation. Fly fishing.

In the '90s came the coup. No, not the Gorby kidnapping, but the one Gary Loomis of G. Loomis Outdoor Expeditions pulled off. Working in conjunction with Frontiers Travel International, Gary worked, without question, the ultimate deal in the fly fishing adventure world: a joint venture with the Russians and neighboring Finland giving Loomis exclusive rights to the Ponoi River.

The Ponoi (Puh-noye), a wild river just above the Arctic Circle on the Kola Peninsula, rolls 180 miles through total wilderness, save the tiny village of Kanifka, into the Barents Sea, and I think that qualifies as extreme desolation. And one more extreme, and the one that lures the angler – the Ponoi is the best Atlantic salmon fishery in the world.

From the moment I heard fly fishermen were making inroads into Russia, I had been wanting to go. So when I met with Mike Fitzgerald, Sr. at the Frontiers offices in Wexford, Pennsylvania, and the conversation turned to Russia, it went something like this. Oh, and you should know, in case you haven't met or fished with Mike, he has a slow and easy manner. Me? I'm a little more excitable.

"So, Scott, I'm going to fish the Ponoi in September," Mike began. "The river at the time of year should be spectacular, the fish won't be as plentiful, but certainly plentiful enough, and the fall fish are much larger. It should be great sport. Would you care to go and do a story about it?"

"Are you kidding? Russia? I've been wanting to. . . the Ponoi. . . I've been hearing about. . . why I've always dreamed about landing an Atlan. . . You're not kidding are you? Man! Russia! . . . Serious? Wow, I've been waiting for. . ." My body stayed in my chair, my mind went around Mike's office like Daffy Duck.

Mike sat back and waited for an opening, then calmly asked, "I'll take all that as a yes?"

It was a most emphatic yes.

A few days before departure I left my fly shop and walked next door to the Winston Rod Company. My friend Tom Morgan, who had fished the Ponoi the summer before, outfitted me with several of the rods I was going to need, seven and eight weights. He also walked me over to the Beaverhead River and showed me some techniques he'd used and gave me a piece of sage advise, "Don't set the hook on the strike, set the hook on the pull."

"I'll know the difference?"

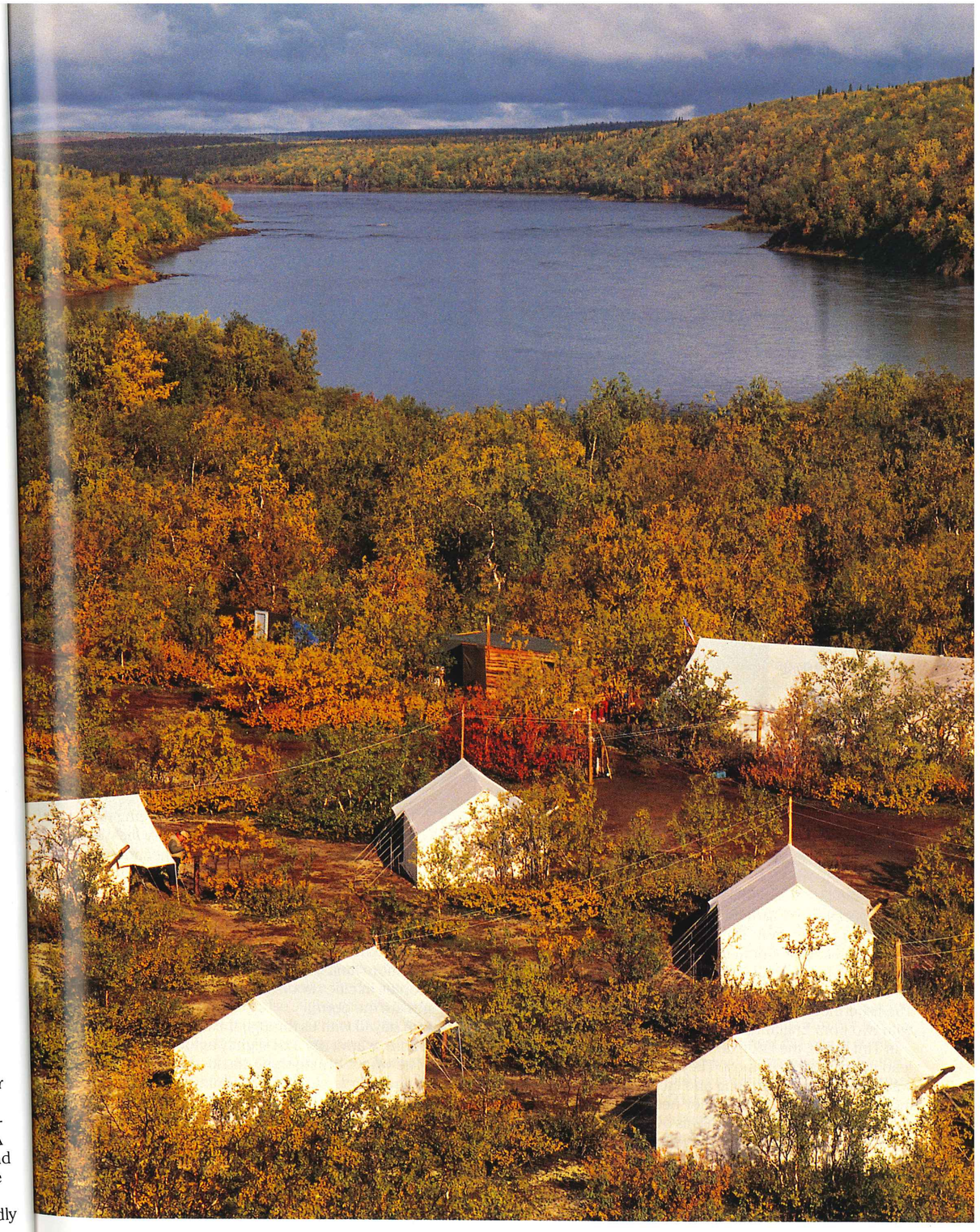
Then Tom, with the patented Morgan smile which read of experience, explained, "You'll learn."

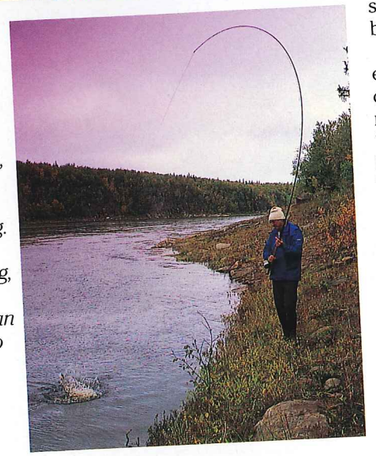
The morning of my departure I was as nervous as a turpentined cat. I was going to Russia. The home of the KGB, gulags, Siberia.

I flew out of New York on Aeroflot to Leningrad, then to Murmansk. I went this way for easier connections later, as I planned another four days in Leningrad after the fishing. Mike and the others in the Frontiers group flew Pan Am to Helsinki/Murmansk. Murmansk, the naval base city of *Red October* fame.

The next morning, by giant helicopter, our Atlantic salmon entourage made the two-hour flight to the Ponoi. We flew low over isolated tundra and dwarfed stands of evergreens. We flew through mist and rain. We flew to our tent encampment and home for the next six days.

The helicopter settled down on the pad, and we disembarked to a view of tents overlooking the mighty Ponoi. A giant slash of river appeared in the distance before a bend took it behind a display of fall colors that rolled in gentle slopes from the edge of my feet to the horizon: yellows, reds, golds and greens muted by the storm. Fall was solidly





*John Russell, of the Orvis Company in England, selects a fly for the Ponoi's big Atlantic salmon. Right, his Brit companion, Bo Ivanovic, plays one of the 31 salmon he caught in a week of fishing. The anglers are adept at spey casting, a technique in which the fisherman uses both hands to cast a 15-foot rod. A good spey will launch the fly 80 foot or more.*

here, and so was its first storm. A good spate, Anglish for a heavy rain, is a good omen, for fresh water brings the salmon to the river.

Mike and I were bunkmates and were assigned to our tent. We unpacked, changed into camp attire, and were down to the main tent where Tim Rajeff, the camp's director, was about to hold a welcoming.

The camp crew, guides, cooks and fishermen gathered under one roof, and we introduced ourselves all around. The fishermen were ten in number from all over the states, with two from England.

In Tim Rajeff, the Loomis Co. found the very best man to lead in this remote outpost. They needed someone who was experienced in guiding and camps – Tim worked as a guide in Alaska for years. They needed someone with practical know-how – Tim has his own construction company in San Francisco. They needed great fishing skills – Tim was an international casting champion. Now here comes the clincher, Tim speaks Russian. How many people do you know who speak Russian? Probably the most qualified man in the Western Hemisphere, coupled with a great presence and demeanor. It was a pleasure to get to know him.

We met Katherine Hart, Tim's better half, who was in charge of the kitchen and a jillion other things. All the superlatives one could say of Tim, one could match in Katherine: ex-restauranteur, worked on a commercial fishing boat for years, a wonderful cook, beautiful, with a style in laughter worth the airfare.

We met the guides, both American and Russian, and the rest of the camp crew, all Russians, all with names that needed to be either written down or memorized, but preferably shortened. And I met up with my old friend Valentine Atkinson, whose photographs color these pages.

Mike Fitzgerald joined Val and I by the bar where naturally the talk was of fishing. In fact, the talk of fishing echoed 20 anglers strong up and down the walls of the long tent in an excited staccato patter to match the sound of a rain, now heavy on canvas.

Speculation and theory filled the air, but Mike, who had been here the year before and knew the ropes, led Val and I over to the tally sheets where Tim kept his records of the season's catches. Speculation and theory are one thing, but nothing speaks louder than stats.

Mike has fished all over the world, at least twice, but his easy-going manner was visibly excited, as he lifted the clipboard from the wall and thumbed through the summer's numbers. "Last week, the fishing was slow," he explained, "with anglers averaging five salmon a day. Now that would be world-class fishing on any other salmon river in the world, but slow on the Ponoi. This rain will surely bring in the start of the fall run, the biggest and strongest fish of the year. Gentlemen, I believe we are about to have some fishing."

Mike was excited, Val was excited, I was looking around to see who he was calling gentlemen.

Mike thumbed through the summer's numbers and here comes the proof of this fishery, promised two pages back. The weekly average was eight fishermen in camp and sampled like the following: the month of June – 690 salmon per rod, July – 50 salmon per rod, August – 35 salmon. Then Mike showed us the peak week of the summer, the last week in June; 13 fishermen landed 839 fish, averaging ten pounds, about half of which were taken on dry flies. That transcends salmon fishing and borders on the indecent.

Dinner came after a wonderful cocktail hour where Mike introduced me to Russian vodka, a most wonderful encounter. That first evening Katherine's entree was a delectable reindeer stroganoff. Katherine, empress of the wilderness kitchen, her meals were always fabulous, a feat made more amazing given the logistics of shopping by helicopter, in cities hours from camp in which food shortages are the norm.

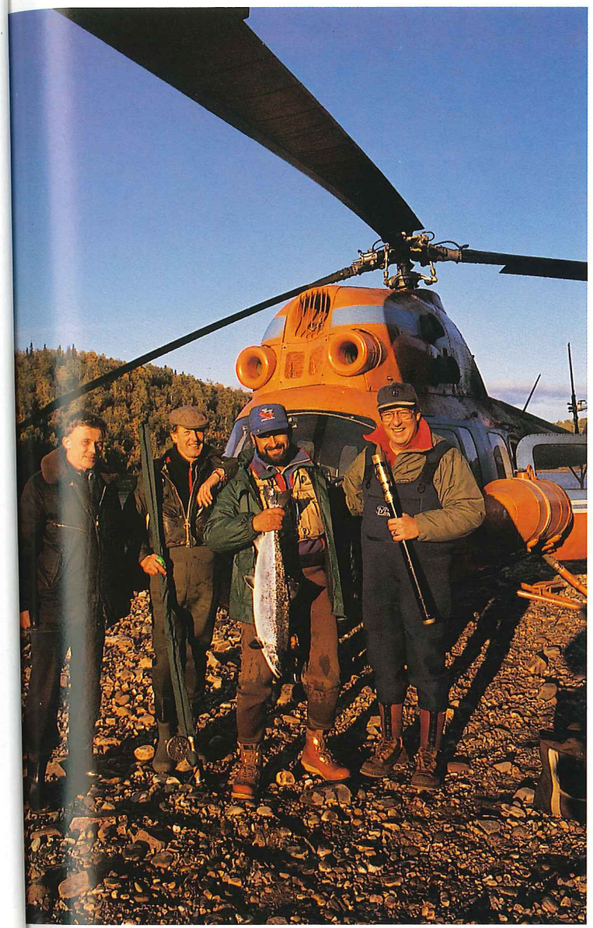
The rain stayed with us through the night. Mike and I were in our bunks, warm, dry and slightly aglow with Russian vodka. The woodburning stove crackled in the corner of the tent, and the canvas fluttered against a strong wind.

That night I dreamed of salmon rushing into the river, elbowing each other out of the way to get at my fly, of bright salmon porpoising about my line, of blue skies and warm breezes, of mermaids delivering limed Coronas to where I was wading – a man should never limit his dreams.

I awoke to Mike's snoring and a serious rain.

Then it was breakfast and Tim teamed everyone up into





*Framed by the blades of a big Russian helicopter are (l-r) pilot Sasha, English fisherman John Russell, guide Velodia Rifkin, and Mike Fitzgerald, Sr., of Frontiers.*

twos for the week. My partner for the next six days would be Mimi Starzinger, a small and feisty New Englander, who had been in camp a week already.

Mimi and I met with our guide, Ron Meek, at the helicopter. We flew, skimming the Russian landscape, at times winding with the river, otherwise slightly above the trees, cutting off the bends. Helicopters, defiers of gravity, tilting into the autumn colors, rain streaming on the windows; a Russian pilot flying me to primitive waters, over a once forbidden country, to fish for the King of Fishes – talk about your E tickets.

The pilot feathered the chopper down to our day's beat, a rocky beach at the confluence of a small creek and the river. Mimi, a veteran to procedure, took off upstream while Ron, an ex-Alaskan guide and avid steelheader from Washington State, showed me to the likely spots, imparted some general tips, then went to check on Mimi who had moved around the next bend and out of view.

There I stood in the great Russian alone. Sensing the value of this moment, I waded in; the culmination of a dream, the reality of all that was, the anxiety of what could be. I'd fished for salmon before in Ireland, but never hooked a thing. I began fishing with a Green Highlander, size six; I was fishin' Winston and a floating line. The ran intensified.

I quartered my casts downstream, letting the fly swing into the melding currents of the sidestream and the Ponoi: the buffered water, where a salmon could take a breather after swimming against the fast water a quarter-mile below me. My first strike came and I missed it. I didn't wait for the pull. I worked my way down so that my fly was swimming the currentline, ending where the currents meshed, slowed and began to boil. The pull came, then came the fight.

There are few things that match the rush of a fish well hooked, but when it's the first fish, and it happens to be your first Atlantic salmon, and your landing it in Russia. . . man, there is *nothing* like a first time.

The fish jumped, making a leap for fast water, then turned herself to the river, working the current with her great body, making tremendous leaps, and fighting hard in short powerful runs. More acrobatic in her fight than aerobic, not long runs, just vaults and twists, sounds and breeches.

She was strong in the fast water and high in the air, and she struggled hard in a long fight. Ron, in the meantime, had made his way down the beach and stood ready at my side with his net. By the time I had edged her into his reach, the fight had seemed forever. Ron scooped her up, and there was that moment of excitement deserved of brandy and cigars. I settled for a handshake and a shared memory with a most pleasant fellow.

We eased the ten-pound female into the river, her sides chaotic in spawning colors – reds, blacks and silvers – guiding her back into the wilds, letting her free to go about her purpose. The rain stepped up its tempo, going from downpour to deluge. The wind blew, and it was nasty cold. The river rose four inches that afternoon, the side creek doubled.

That first day my name went on the tally sheet as two caught, missed two. Mimi, who had been into the salmon all week, hit a streak of brown trout, and entered the tally with one salmon hooked, five brown trout landed. (These brown trout, both sea-run browns and the natives, are tremendous gamefish; five pounders, and just because they are in parenthesis, they are no lesser fish.)

That was my first day and my first salmon. The rest of the story will concern highlights from the third and sixth day. But, before I skip ahead, I need to tell you of our second night, a key player to the remaining days.

The storm became a tempest that evening, and delivered rains and winds of unequaled proportions. Tim nor the Russians had ever seen anything to rival it. I could go on about the drama, but the river level bespeaks it all. By the following morning, the Ponoi, swift and deep during normal flows, a river averaging 200 yards wide, rose two and one-half feet. What had started out as a good natured and fortuitous spate, turned into floodstage, and the fishing would suffer.

Day three differed from our other days in the fact that Mimi and I didn't go by chopper, we went by boat, guided

*Continued on 162*

## PONOI

*Continued from 65*

by Dmitri Semushin. Dmitri represented my first chance at an extended time with a Russian; a man of my age, a writer, a fly fisherman, who spoke English well. He had visited the States the year before, so was well versed on our culture.

We talked of life in general and the things that mattered: the qualities of life, its inequities. The coup that barely was, finally a peace after all that fear, communism and Dosteyevsky. I found the stories of his life to be fascinating. We talked of war. Afghanistan, Vietnam. And the irony of our meeting, wielding fly rods when there were times it could have been bayonets.

In the last part of the afternoon we saw a bear crossing the river at a great distance, in some way certifying the wilderness. It was the Russian version of the Alaskan brown bear, Dmitri explained. "They are different from the Alaska bears, they don't want to come close. They don't like humans. Then smiling in reference to our previous conversations about mankind and its follies, he wryly added, "you cannot blame them."

I ended up with my daily average of two salmon, one of them 14 pounds. I also came away from the day with added insight to the globe and its workings.

That night before dinner, Dmitri and I continued our talk of fishing and geopolitical matters, treating both with equal import, while taking time now and then to listen to the general hum of fish-talk throughout the main tent. Despite the bad conditions, everyone had taken salmon, but as always the most delightful conversation of the evening was that between our Brits in residence, John Russell, and Bo Ivanovic. Spey fishermen both. (For those readers who are unfamiliar with spey casting, it is fly fishing with 15-foot rods. Casting with both hands, the spey cast is quicker and covers more water than casts made from our 9-foot, one-handed rods.)

John, who had just landed his largest salmon of the trip, a 15-pounder and sea bright, was telling Bo, the camp's high rod who usually doubled the catch of the closest competitor, about his fish. The English are marvelous when they talk of salmon. . .

. . .so there I was," John explained to Bo, with Mike and Val leaning in, "I had no more stepped from the heli, actually, it was possibly my seventh or eighth cast, a splendid offer, really, landing right of a great stone. I felt a knock at first then an extraordinary surge. Brilliant fish, he was in the air for eight jumps. He was particularly strong and took me deeply into my backing; running perhaps a hundred yards. Incredible sport. There were a few moments of peril when my line hung briefly on a stone, far too exciting there, but everything worked out well and perhaps after a fifteen-minute struggle, I had him close enough for a proper tailing."

Val, trying to prod the story further, asked Bo, "And to what do you two attribute your success?"

Bo, who landed five salmon on the day, explained with a wink, "Well, while you Yanks are out there casting your line about, time and again, back and forth, sending that fly through the air a half a dozen times to get the line to the distance needed, only to strip it all in and start the whole silly process over again, John and I simply lift our rods, and with one good spey we are out there eighty feet or more. Simply put, then, Americans cast, while we English fish."

And Bo proved it over the remaining days, landing 31 salmon for the week. Bo knows fishing.

I am going to skip you now to my sixth, last, and most thrilling day; a climatic coincidence befitting a fishing story. But in so doing, I will have to leave out some of the memories and highlights from the interim days. They are in brief: Larry Luppi, a doctor from Michigan, nearly landed a 25-pound-plus salmon, had it going into the net when it shook free. . . fresh-water seals. . . my other salmon. . . a bunch of brown trout, a bunch of grayling. . . grayling soup. . . Val Atkinson's two chrome salmon coming within an hour of one another, the last hour of the last day. . . my helicopter flight over the reindeer herder's village of Kanifka. . . the skill of our Russian pilot. . . the camp's hot-water shower. . . the camp sauna. . . the laughter. . . the blueberries . . . the sea eagles. . . the hundreds of waterfalls. . . the four hours of sunshine. . .

Day six. Mimi and I were guided by Dave Goodhart, a guide by way of Missoula, Montana, and it was great to spend the day on foreign soil with someone from the home turf. Dave had arranged our day as following. First to the helicopter, then to a waiting boat which would be used to ferry us across to the beat named The Tomba; all week the best beat on the river. Now it was our chance.

Mimi, who had fished the beat the week before and had good luck above a tributary, headed back to her power spot. I stepped into the river, while Dave tended to a minor boat repair. The sun was making unexpected appearances through low and thinning clouds, fall colors swirling under a cloud's whimsy: the birch and red pines, brilliant and subdued under the wavering autumn light. And there stood I on the granite schists, the earth's oldest bones, in a land once held by Vikings, once called Lapland, land of the Czars, now Mother Russia; the incredibility of it all never lessened.

I began to cast. Now, normally here an outdoor writer, me included, will write of the big one, or the one that got away. And, I did catch my biggest fish this day, a 15-pound dynamo that jumped five times. Or I could write of a bigger one that got away. Instead, I want to write about this one particular strike.

The strike: the most underrated element in fly fishing; ranking far below the fight and the trophy. "I got a few, lost a few," then the angler drops his tone to a faded, dismissive voice, "Oh, and I had a couple of strikes." So, I want to defend the all-too-maligned strike. Without the strike there could be no jumps, there would be no long runs. Without the strike there would never be the singing of reels, the bending of rods. Without the strike man and fish would never meet. There would be no stories, you would never hear a fable. The strike is like counting coup, fooling your foe, without drawing blood. Me, I highly regard the strike.

A big salmon struck. WHAM! Like the WHAM! from a D.C. Comic. Like trying to make a one-handed grab on the A train. A jolt, a jar, a full-on rocker. You're dazed. Like a barroom brawl where the last thing you remember is the tap on the shoulder, your lights flicker, your lamp swings, your heart stops, all the synapses misfire, everything from your cupboards is strewn on your floor, your mouth no longer works, your waders are twisted, and your feet land facing one another. A high speed wallop, and WHAM! – he was gone.

But from that instant, from that snap encounter, I could imagine then, as I imagine now, sitting at the typewriter, the power, the force, the spirit of a bright new salmon. Sure, I would have liked nothing better than to have landed a chrome fish, but what I still have is the wonder. Wonder: equal parts imagination and curiosity. Wonder is what makes us all fish on.

The next morning we packed to leave. It was my last morning on the Kola, but not my last day in Russia. That evening, back in Murmansk, I had dinner with Sasha Starikov, head of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited, and his family. I met a Russian fly tyer, an artist and a teacher. The warmest hospitality. An incredible experience.

And then it was on to Leningrad, when I got there, Saint Petersburg when I left. I was the complete tourist: The Hermitage, the Peter-and-Paul Fortress, Saint Iassac's, the streets of Saint Petersburg. The faces. The desperation of shoppers standing in lines for nothing to buy.

Every American has his history with Russia, I've just outlined mine from grade school to visa and back again. And as I sit here looking for a closing, I think back to my last night on the Kola, a quiet night with clear skies and a trillion or so stars, listening to the rattle of the drying leaves, the breeze on the tent flap, the crackle of the woodstove.

I was watching fly tyers, Russian and American, comparing patterns over the bench in the corner. I was talking with Dmitri, Tim, and Katherine; theorizing, armchair diplomats, as to the fate of mankind and what could be done about bringing more peace to the world. If Russians and Americans could do it, why couldn't other countries?

Dmitri had the answer and the solution at once: "World leaders always hold summits in the wrong places. Big cities. No good. They should meet on river, spend day fishing in small boat. No T.V. No newspaper. No CIA. No KGB. Just fishing. Together. There comes much peace from fishing."

### If You Want To Go

For more information contact Frontiers International Travel, 100 Logan Rd., PO Box 959, Wexford, PA 15090-0959; (800) 245-1950.

## FLINT HILLS

*Continued from 81*

myself within one bird of The End.

The last one rose all too soon at the edge of a thicket of young cottonwoods under the sharp nose of the brittany. As we walked briskly back to the truck, the dogs pointed again and again, and Jerry stepped up to shoo bobwhites out of the way. The season was long, and there would be tomorrow and next year in these Flint Hills where, thanks to the whims of geology, the land will remain forever clothed in the ancient, self-renewing cover of tall prairie grasses.

### If You Want To Go

Kansas bobwhites are legal from roughly mid-November through January and hunting is good to fantastic throughout that time frame. Populations are highest in the southeast, thinning toward the northwest. The Flint Hills are a consistent producer.

Weather can vary from shirt-sleeve hot to down-jacket cold. Rain, snow and ice storms are all possible, so be prepared for anything. Nylon-faced brush pants fend off sharp-toothed thistles in farmed areas.

Nearly 250,000 acres of public hunting lands are open across the state, but not all harbor good numbers of quail and some are heavily gunned. The best shooting is often on private farms and ranches. Permission to hunt private land is mandatory. Obtaining said permission can be time-consuming, but it is possible if you knock on enough doors.

Jerry Shivers cuts through all that hassle for you. Just schedule a hunt, buy your license when you arrive and enjoy all those quail and the wonderful dog work. Council Grove is a quiet town that welcomes hunters. You'll love it.

*Contacts:*

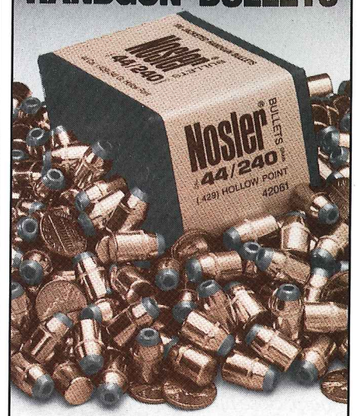
Kansas Wildlife and Parks
RR2, Box 54A, Pratt, KS 67124
(316) 672-5911

Michael Murphy & Sons
RR 4, Box 2082A, Augusta, KS 67010
(316) 775-2137

Cottage House Hotel-Motel
25 North Neosho, Council Grove,
KS 66846, (316) 767-6828

Jerry Shivers
Box 26, Rt. 3, Council Grove, KS 66846
(316) 767-5739


PREMIUM HANDGUN BULLETS




AT PLAIN JANE PRICES

High performance and high prices no longer go hand in hand. Nosler jacketed handgun bullets give you the kind of proven accuracy, consistency and game-taking expansion serious shooters need at a price that every handgunner can afford.

Manufactured on the industry's most advanced fully automated machinery, Nosler handgun bullets are designed and manufactured to rifle bullet standards, and *outperform* other handgun bullets you've shot. Available in 9mm, .38, .41, .44, .45, .45 Colt and the new 10mm in many styles and weights. Extra value in new 250 bulk packs of .38/158 gr. and .44/240 gr. hollow points.

Load a box of Nosler handgun bullets and see what high performance and low price can do for your shooting.

**What makes them better**

- Tightly controlled length, weight and shape for consistency, accuracy, proper feeding
- Precise jacket interior to enhance game-taking performance
- Knife-cut serrations in jacket mouth for uniform expansion
- Superior balance and concentricity for maximum accuracy
- Well-defined cannelure locks jacket and core tightly together

NOSLER®
Nosler® BULLETS

For a free color catalog, write Nosler, Inc., Dept. S3-5, P.O. Box 671, Bend, Oregon 97709

Name
Address
City, State, Zip