

I am the **Walrus** *by Todd Tanner*

*Sitting on a cornflake, waiting for the van to come.
Corporation tee-shirt, stupid bloody Tuesday.
Man, you been a naughty boy, you let your face grow long.
I am the eggman, they are the eggmen.
I am the walrus, goo goo g'joob.*



They are the eggmen.

Todd Calitri, Scott Sabol and the other guides at Alaska Sportsman's Lodge have distilled the essence of early September fly fishing into a mantric expression of total simplicity.

Cast the egg. Mend the line. Set the hook.

Then, if you're a Beatles fan, you just might find yourself singing, "See how they fly like Lucy in the Sky, see how they run."

Cast, mend, set the hook. Run, jump, fly. Rainbows as long as your arm. Longer. Unbelievable.

I have to be honest. I've never really spent much time thinking about huge Alaska rainbows. As someone who loves to wallow in the dense mental territory where logic meets intuition and masking hatches are a puzzle to be savored as much as solved, a trout that feeds behind spawning salmon just isn't very challenging.

Hell, it's eating eggs, so give it an egg. How hard is that?

But – and this is one mother of a "but" – I hadn't taken

into account the "after the hook-set" factor. I doubt John Lennon ever fished the *Kvichak* – it sounds more like Kwee-jack when you say it aloud – but it's almost as if he wrote, "I Am The Walrus" as a double entendre for anglers headed north for Bristol Bay trout.

"See how they fly like Lucy in the Sky, see how they run."

Never, not in a million years, did I expect such huge, pyric rainbows; fish that rocket from the water as if they've been feeding on saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal (gunpowder, for those of you who skipped chemistry class) rather than proteins and amino acids. You don't hook the *Kvichak's* trout so much as you light their fuse and then wait for the inevitable explosion. It's crazy stuff, and I actually started to focus on the fight, on the knuckle-busting runs and the amazing aerial displays, instead of the hook-set.

Yeah, I know. Hell just froze over.

They gave me Calitri, the guide, the head guide and "director of Fishing Operations," for most of the week. I'm not sure what Calitri had done to deserve such a grim fate, especially since Brian Kraft, the lodge's manager, seemed like a heck of a nice guy. (I'm a reasonably good judge of character, and Krafty, as the guides called him, didn't strike me as the vindictive sort.) But whether Calitri was suffering for past transgressions or whether he merely drew the short straw, the results were the same. He had to produce fish, lots of big fish, for the guy who showed up with three different 5-weights in his quiver.

Let me be perfectly frank. Unless you're fishing the *Kvichak* for grayling, you probably want to leave your



Chinook salmon in the 50-pound range (left) and silvers (below) weighing 15 or more are caught in the waters off Langara Island. Below: Anglers head out to the fishing humpback whales are familiar sights during the angling season from early May to late September.



5-weights at home. Your 6-weights, too. And you definitely won't make any points if you follow my lead and tell a robust assemblage of guides that your trusty old 9-foot, 5-weight is up to any challenge the local rainbows are likely to pose. Because it's not. The Kvichak is 7-weight country, pure and simple.

Fortunately, I also had a couple of 7-weights along for the trip, and the chef's delicious Volcano Shrimp was far tastier than the crow I had to eat when I hooked my first fish and realized it would have broken my favorite 5-weight in half.

Brian Kraft was in the boat that morning, Calitri was on the oars and the day, which had dawned overcast but relatively warm, was barely underway when I set the hook and realized that fishing a 5-weight on the Kvichak was like hunting griz with a .22. Theoretically possible, but not highly recommended.

Hell, I wasn't sure that my 7-weight was going to be able to handle the berserker on the end of my line. And that's where things actually get a little sad.

Why? Well, my memories of that first gorgeous rainbow, which would have been the fish-of-the-year in Montana or California or Idaho, and which should still be incredibly clear and vivid, were obscured by my second trout, and my third, and my fifth, and my tenth and so on. I don't know exactly how many rainbows I hooked before lunch, but with a tip of the hat John Gierach, it was way more than I deserved. Way more.

And they were big and beautiful and so incredibly hot that . . . well, a rather stunning young woman I once knew used to climb into bed at night, moisten her finger with her lips and then touch it to the exposed skin of her breast while making a noise that sounded like butter on a frying pan.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss.

That's how hot those fish were.

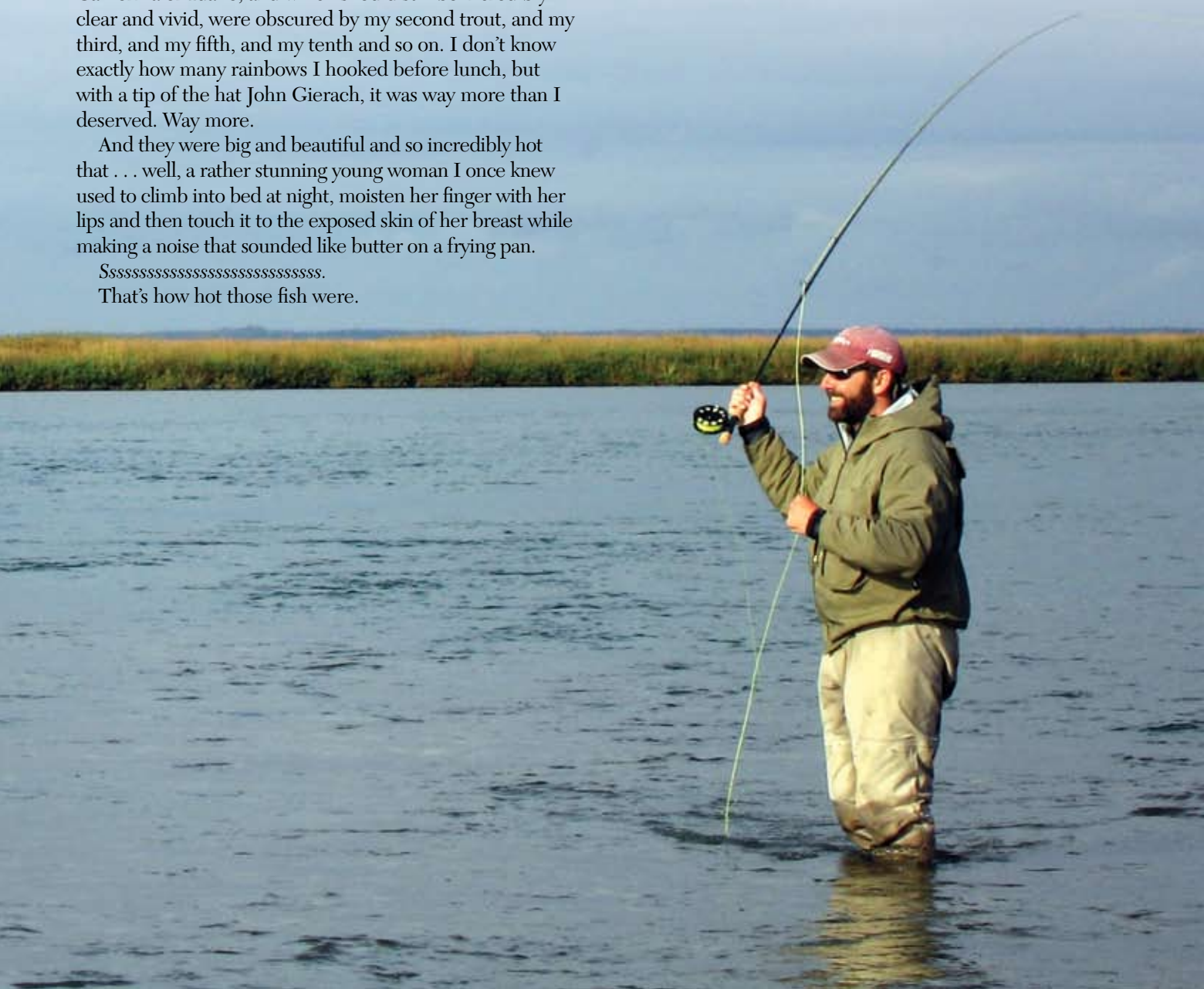
We dropped off Kraft back at the lodge before lunch and then it was just Calitri and yours truly. That particular arrangement lasted for, oh, maybe ten minutes or so, and then Calitri the Guide became, reluctantly and under threat of death, Calitri the Fisherman.

You're right. Guides shouldn't fish. We all know that. But I needed someone to photograph and write about, while Calitri, knowing full well that I was at the lodge for a story, needed to keep me happy so I didn't say nasty things about him in print. That, my friends, is how great partnerships are born.

I can't say I was too surprised to find out that my guide was a stud with a fly rod in his hand. After all, competent guides tend to be competent anglers, and Calitri was a great guide, with all the requisite skills and just the right balance between professionalism and camaraderie.

He also turned out to be an excellent fishing partner.

We anchored off the edge of an island just downstream from the lodge, where we jumped out of the boat and tied on articulated flesh flies the size of . . . the size of . . . well,



let's just say that Calitri's streamers looked like they'd started out extra-large and then responded to one of those television ads for natural male enhancement. They were big bastards, with huge lead eyes, and the thought of hitting myself in the back of the head with one of those puppies literally made me cringe.

Calitri, though, didn't even think twice. He just walked upstream, waded out onto a flat five times the size of a football field and started ripping fish.

The next day, if you can believe it, was even better. Kraft, Calitri and I had a great morning drifting eggs from the boat – lots and lots of big trout; a five-pounder wouldn't even raise an eyebrow – and then early in the afternoon, as the wind started to come up, I landed one of the largest freshwater rainbows I've ever hooked. Calitri measured her at 27 1/2 inches, and we both figured she'd go 10 pounds or better. She wasn't quite as big as a 'bow I'd lost the day before – when that fish jumped in front of us, it was literally scary – but she was strong and hot, and she pushed my 7-weight right to the breaking point.

If you'd seen her, you would have sworn she was a steelhead; dime-bright, with just a hint of rose on her flanks and gillplates. I've fished an awful lot of places, but I've never seen rainbows like Kvichak rainbows. They're in a class by themselves.

Later that same afternoon, Todd and I bailed out of the boat in a side channel that was maybe 70 feet across, hoping to find relief from a wind that was threatening to blow us back to the Lower 48. But wind or no wind, it didn't matter. The fishing was great. We were casting eggs, or, as the locals call them, beads, and the rainbows were stacked up behind the salmon, holding in three feet of water. About every third or fourth cast, my indicator would dip, I'd set the hook and a turbocharged two-footer would go absolutely ballistic – exploding into a 40-mile-an-hour gale and sending sheets of spray halfway across the channel.

Actually, I may have used the wrong word. The fishing that afternoon was beyond great. It was unbelievable, transcendent, Elysian. As for Calitri the Guide, if I told you how many big trout he caught in that side channel, you'd swear I was lying.

Now some folks, and especially those of you who don't have the angling bug quite as bad as I do, are probably wondering when I'm going to mention the food, the accommodations and the service at Alaska Sportsman's Lodge.

Well, on one hand it's more-or-less irrelevant. If Kraft's guides had thrown my luggage on an old army cot with a piece of cardboard overhead to keep off the rain and then served up a can of Dinty Moore beef stew for dinner, I'd still tell you to go. The fishing was that good.



On the other hand, the lodge is, to choose a word from the youthful vernacular, epic. It's perched on a bluff looking out over the river and it features wonderful food (Chef Rene earned every accolade I can throw her way, and then some), comfortable beds and the kind of outstanding personal service that no human being truly deserves. I could go on and on, but let's just tie things up by saying that Alaska Sportsman's Lodge is as well-run and comfortable a fishing lodge as I've ever experienced.

If you go there and find yourself disappointed, then it's likely your expectations are completely out of line with reality and you'll need to have a little heart-to-heart with the man in the mirror.

Wednesday was a fly-out day. I didn't need to fly out, mind you; I would have been just as happy fishing the Kvichak. But variety is the spice of life, so off we went.

It was a quick, half-hour jaunt to the Moraine River, where we landed the floatplane on a small lake and then hauled our gear a quarter-mile or so down to the river's edge. I ended up in one raft with a pleasant fellow by the name of Bob and our guide Scott Sabol, while Walt and Charles and their guide, Scott Williamsen, were in the other.

I don't think I ever got the complete story, but Bob, Walt and Charles were old friends and had fished most, if not all, of the area's rivers over the years. They'd certainly floated the Moraine before. Now you might guess that such experienced anglers would eventually get tired of Alaska and decide to try Russia or Chile or New Zealand instead. Yet I didn't detect a single whiff of boredom or of the "Been there, done that" whine that plagues some longtime fly fishermen. Quite the opposite. If there's any truth to the old axiom, then those three gentlemen were happy as clams.

Not that they had all that much choice. The temperature was perfect, the sun, which had hidden behind the clouds for the last few days, was shining, and the trout were both large and extremely cooperative. You couldn't ask for a better day of fishing. Or even if you could, you shouldn't. It would be like asking for a fourth slice of your grandmother's fresh-from-the-oven pie, and your sheer gluttony would no doubt be rewarded with an upset stomach.

Those Moraine rainbows were beautiful. They may have averaged an inch or two shorter than the Kvichak fish – most were in the 22- to 23-inch range, with the occasional trout up to 25 or 26 inches - but while the Kvichak bows were silver

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as steelhead, the Moraine's trout had brilliant, purple-tinged crimson stripes and an amazing number of spots. I wouldn't have guessed that rainbows living in such close physical proximity could look so different, but they did.

And then there were the bears. I never saw a brown bear on the Kvichak, not one, yet we must have bumped into 20 or 30 that day on the Moraine. They were literally all over the place.

One bear in particular decided that it wanted to hang out on the bank and watch Bob play a dandy trout at the bottom end of a long gravel bar. He (or maybe it was a she; I never went over and asked) waited around for a good 15 minutes until Sabol finally decided that it was getting too bold and ran it off. I'm not kidding. No rifle, no shotgun, no pistol, no bear spray; yet Sabol told that bear, which outweighed him by at least 500 pounds, to get lost.

Memo to Brian Kraft: I don't know what you're paying your guides, but it's not nearly enough.

Thursday was another Kvichak day, and it started out with both Calitri and Teal in the boat. Teal is Calitri's . . . well, I'm not quite sure how to describe their relationship, but I suspect it's far more serious than boyfriend/girlfriend. In any case, she works at the lodge and spends her winters with Todd on a bonefish flat, and while she's invariably sweet, polite and helpful – not necessarily the traits we associate with top-of-the-line anglers – she out-fished me all morning long.

She was also responsible for one of my biggest trout. Calitri was on the oars and we were drifting through a long, salmon-laden flat when Teal hooked a dandy of a rainbow. I was fishing the same side of the boat, so I flipped my rig back over my shoulder to get it out of her way. No point in having her trout, which was going absolutely nuts, get tangled in my line, right?

Well, as embarrassing as it is to

admit, my 7-weight was pointing backwards when a hell of a fish slammed my egg, nearly pulling the rod out of my hand. I eventually recovered and landed the rainbow (which was simply gorgeous), but I can't take any credit. It was all Lady Luck.

Later, after we'd dropped Teal back at the dock and a 'bow bigger than your average BC steelhead had broken me off, Calitri and I ditched the boat and hit a tiny little side channel. The channel, which wasn't more than 15 or 20 feet across, was framed by chest-high grass and was absolutely chock full of crimson-colored sockeyes. Even better, if you took the time to look, you could see rainbows sliding back and forth behind the spawning salmon; silver ghosts moving aggressively for those little protein orbs bouncing downstream in the current.

We had a blast in that channel, sight-fishing to huge trout while crouching on the grassy banks. The only thing that would have made it better is if . . . no, scratch that thought. If those fish had been willing to eat dries, I'd have been forced to sell my little slice of Montana heaven and move north to the Kvichak.

A word to the wise, though. If you ever find yourself hanging out with Calitri the Guide and he suggests jumping out of the boat and fishing a certain small side channel, the response you're looking for is, "Yes, that sounds like a fantastic idea!"


Now I suppose I could go on regaling you with tales of bent fly rods and oversized rainbows, but at some point the sheer number of fish we hooked starts to overwhelm the senses. I was a guest at the lodge for six days and I caught so many trout that it was ridiculous. Literally ridiculous. Nobody deserves such incredible angling; certainly not for the better part of a week. So rather than finishing up my story with an 8-pounder that jumped more than a dozen times, or the 26-inch rainbow I took on my very last cast, I'm going to switch gears and mention something

that we often tend to overlook.

Those of us fortunate enough to visit places like Alaska Sportsman's Lodge are blessed. We're gifted not only with amazing fishing, and with the presence of other sportsmen who share our passion for the outdoors, but with experiences and memories that we'll cherish for the rest of our lives.

With those gifts, though, come responsibilities. Unless we work to protect the Kvichak, and rivers like it, they may well succumb to the never-ending onslaught of "progress."

If you love wild country, please give something back. Your time, your money, your signature on a petition, your vote – whatever it takes to protect the places we hunt and fish.

The Kvichak is one of the rivers threatened by Alaska's proposed Pebble Mine. It would be a shame – no, a tragedy – if one of the finest wild trout fisheries on the planet succumbed to human greed. You can learn more about the threat to the Kvichak, and about how you can help the river, at www.sportsmansalliance4ak.org and at www.savebristolbay.org 

IF YOU WANT TO GO

I visited Alaska Sportsman's Lodge right after Labor Day, but regardless of whether you fish in June, July, August or September, you'll want to dress in layers and have plenty of warm clothes along. I used Patagonia gear – Capilene as a base layer; R-2 fleece or wool over top; Watermaster II Waders and a Stretch SST Jacket on the outside – and I stayed dry and comfortable for the entire trip.

I also brought along my Filson Heavyweight Merino Wool Socks, which are just about the best investment an outdoorsman can make. A little free advice. Cut corners someplace else; don't skimp on your socks. Cold feet take the joy out of life.

As for rods: Winston loaned me a 9-foot, 6-inch Boron IIx 7-weight for the trip. It handled both nymphs and streamers with ease and it was absolutely perfect for the Kvichak's rainbows. In fact, there may not be a better rod for Bristol Bay trout.

