

Mousing in Alaska, Part 3

By Beth Jappay

This article is my third in a series of three articles about a trip I took to Alaska in 2019. Here are my links to [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) if you didn't catch them the first time around or if you want to read them again. As I promised this article is my story of a breakdown we had on our fourth day of the trip.

That morning our assigned guide was Ron, and his beat was the second highest up the river. As I mentioned, the upper lodge was not yet opened up for the year due to a severe mosquito problem, so the boat ride to get to his beat was over an hour long. The river winds back and forth with outer banks full of falling trees and wood piles, and inner banks consisting of new growth and frequent gravel bars. Sometimes the river is less than a foot deep, requiring boats with shallow drafts and fast and strong engines to make the boat plane out.



Watching for wildlife during the long drive we spotted a pair of adolescent moose, an osprey, and many pairs of bald eagles. We also passed a few of our fellow fishermen (I was the only woman in the group), waving at them as we passed. We were careful to only wave with one arm, since waving with both arms is the universal sign of needing help in Alaska. We were told that few things pissed off an Alaskan more than stopping to help some stupid tourist waving with both arms, not knowing any better.

Nearing our destination we were a ways up an atypically long straight stretch when the boat's motor just suddenly died. We coasted to a stop, then started drifting back down the river with the current. Ron had Peter, my fishing partner, throw the anchor out, but it only slowed us down some. Ron changed gas tanks without effect, then worked hard on the motor, constantly

making adjustments and then pulling on the cord to try to start the engine. It never gave a single sputter to suggest it was going to catch any time soon.

For about 15 minutes we gradually drifted downstream; the only thing on either side of the river were high banks with no way to climb up. I knew that at the end of the long stretch there was a tight curve, the outer aspect most likely full of logs and branches which would be hazardous to drift into without much ability to control the boat. I wasn't looking forward to tying the boat to one of the banks, however, waiting hours for rescue and at the mercy of mosquitos and without any way to take a bathroom break in a boat with two men (and unable to fish).

Then the right side of the river suddenly opened up to a wide gravel bar. However it was only a couple of hundred feet long before the dreaded tight curve, now visible.



Ron now decided the best course of action was to pull up anchor and paddle for the bar. Unfortunately he only had one paddle, and neither Peter nor I could help in any way.



The last bit of the bar was a peninsula. Ron had to wait until we were past this pile of wood before rowing hard for the last stretch of gravel. If we missed it we had no way of knowing when or if we would come across another such opportunity.



He made it with only feet to spare, leaping out with the bow rope to drag the boat up onto the gravel bar.



Whew!!

We huddled to discuss our options. If we didn't show up at the lodge at 5:30 all of the guides would jump in their boats and search for us, so at the latest we would be rescued by 7pm. Bruce was the only guide with a boat above Ron's but sometimes the clients choose to have the guide take them downstream from the Mid Lodge to fish for pike and sheefish, so Ron wasn't sure Bruce would be later passing our position, if he hadn't already. Ron had a flare gun with a single flare, and no satellite phone. I had brought a satellite phone on the trip with me to call my ailing mother every night, but I had of course left it in my cabin. Shortly after that a small plane flew over us. Ron contemplated using his flare gun, but decided against it, later wondering if he had made the right choice.



Ron decided to make camp and attempted to build a fire, without success. He then assigned Peter and I the task of building the fire while he worked on the engine. Fortunately, my red dry bag (which I took with me every day) not only had multiple options of clothing layers, but had an emergency kit including fire starting supplies. Peter and I got a nice fire going, then scouted out the gravel bar for fishing options, since it looked like we would be there for a while (there still were no sounds from the engine that it was going to start anytime soon).

We quickly spotted king salmon rolling in a deep slot up river, as well as good holding spots for big rainbow downstream of them. Ron advised using pink flies for the salmon and using my pink Dalai Lama flies I swung my fly under the pile of branches we had barely just passed and quickly hooked what would likely have been the biggest rainbow of the trip. However it retreated back under the wood pile and I was unable to drag it back out before it got off. I picked up a smaller rainbow in the same hole, then headed to the top of the slot holding the king salmon. I started swinging and working my way back down stream, picking up a mixture of rainbow, Grayling, and king salmon.





Ron then decided to take Peter to the far side of the gravel bar. He was of course armed with his 45 caliber pistol and had the flare gun. He warned me to keep an eye out for brown bears.

I had a great time catching king salmon. My 7 weight rod was definitely a little light for the job, and sometimes landing the fish took a while. I was alone and didn't have a net and had to drag the fish partially up onto the beach to remove the fly before releasing the fish. I kept an eye out for brown bears. I was catching Grayling, Dolly Varden and rainbow as well as salmon.

I had just hooked my fourth salmon when I thought I heard either a boat or a plane. Keeping an eye out while trying to land the fish, I shortly realized that Bruce was going to pass my position on his way to his upstream beat—just what we had been hoping for. Looking around I realized that Ron was nowhere in sight, likely on the other side of the wide gravel bar. I knew I could wave with one of my arms without losing my salmon, but that was just a greeting in Alaska. I tried to stick my rod under my arm and just hold on to the salmon with the rod in my armpit so I could wave with two arms. This was unsuccessful. I now had a dilemma and I wavered back and forth:

Release the salmon and wave both arms for rescue...

Land the salmon and wait for a 7pm rescue...

Catch the salmon...

Be rescued...

Catch the salmon...

Be rescued...

Catch the salmon...

Be rescued...

I was **still** wavering as the boat was getting closer and closer, when I was suddenly saved from making my choice by a flare arching overhead. Though Ron was on the other side of the gravel bar, he had been able to hear the engine, if not see the boat.

Bruce slowed down until he was in shouting distance, and I let him know what our situation was. He noticed I had a heavy fish and a too-light rod and offered assistance. I let him know I was fine, and had been dragging my fish onto the beach to remove the hook.

"Beth you are such a badass"

Bruce of course had two clients with him. Both disembarked and joined me in fishing for king salmon, Bruce and Ron working together on the engine. The fishing was great, but when the time came to depart for the Mid Lodge for the evening, I had "only" caught 7 king salmon and was a little (and unreasonably) disappointed, really wanting a round 10. The engine was still not cooperating, so Bruce announced we were going to see how many people we could take back on his boat. He warned us that the boat needed to go fast enough to plane to safely travel over the shallow stretches on the way back. Bruce loaded all of us and headed upriver at full throttle to see if the boat could plane out with 6 people on it. It couldn't.

We went back to the gravel bar and dropped off Ron. I announced that if we were still unsuccessful in getting the boat to plane out with 5 people, I was volunteering to stay to try to reach my goal of 10 salmon. Bruce objected, but when the boat again failed to plane out with 5 people, he couldn't think of an alternative plan. We went back to shore, I jumped out, and now with only four people he was able to get the boat to plane out, and headed back to the lodge.

Ron and I fished together and I picked up one more salmon, but failed to reach my 10 salmon goal. We enjoyed the fire and the company, exchanging stories while awaiting rescue.

Bruce arrived back 2 hours later with the head guide, on the largest boat with the strongest engine. The three of them were still unable to get the engine started, and we all headed back to Mid Lodge on the bigger boat.

I walked into the dining room about 8pm to find the rest of my fellow anglers eating dinner. They all gave me a rousing ovation for my enthusiasm, and famished I joined them at a gourmet meal.

The next day was our last fishing day and our most successful rainbow fishing of the trip, which I suspect was due to the warming of the water. Peter and I picked up 18 rainbow that day.



So that's my rescue story. I really enjoyed being able to tell one of my funny stories with pictures for a change.

I am retiring in March, and already planning on 2-3 trips to Alaska this coming summer and fall. One of those trips will be back to the Aniak for a week of mousing, but I am considering a trip there later in the summer as well, perhaps for fishing with "flesh flies" which I have never done before.