

Fly-Fishing in Russia

The icy waters of a remote arctic river have become a Shangri-la for anglers in pursuit of Atlantic salmon—hard (and expensive) to get to but, oh, the fish! **By Evan McGlinn**



RIVER'S EDGE Unpolluted and unobstructed, salmon thrive in the waters of the Ponoï.

RUSSIA'S PONOÏ RIVER IS NOT WHAT MOST PEOPLE would consider a typical fly-fishing destination. For starters, there are no long-established, luxurious lodges lining its bank like those found on other famous salmon rivers. It's located on the eastern edge of the Kola Peninsula—a 40,000-square-mile wilderness of tundra and low forest. The capital city of the province, Murmansk, is home to Russia's Atlantic nuclear submarine operations. In fact, until the early 1990s, it was virtually impossible to travel to this remote, lonely part of the world. Security was tight along the Finnish border where locals were required to report sightings of strangers to the authorities. In those days, the Kola was considered so strategically important that Russians living under the former Soviet regime were forbidden to travel to the interior without special permits.

The guard towers and the patrols are gone now, but the wilderness of the Kola, particularly in the eastern sections, remains untouched. That has been a boon for the region's Atlantic salmon. While many Canadian and United States rivers have seen extensive development over the past century, Kola waterways are comparatively wild. Because of the lack of dams and pollution, these rivers have some of the largest runs of Atlantic salmon in the world. In just over a decade, the peninsula's Rynda, Kharlovka, and Yokanga rivers have become common names in fly-fishing circles. But it is the Ponoï that is considered the crown jewel—the river where you can catch more salmon in one day than during an entire week in eastern Canada, Norway, or Iceland.

If you're not a fan of helicopters, however, you'll never make it to the fishing grounds on the Ponoï. Located 130 miles south-

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east of Murmansk, the river is accessed almost exclusively by air—which means a somewhat grueling ride in a Russian MI-8 (pronounced “me eight”) helicopter. These military workhorses (they were used in Afghanistan and more recently in Chechnya) have two massive engines and can carry 24 soldiers in full military gear or—in my experience—18 anglers and their many bags crammed with fleece-lined jackets, dozens of rods, and boxes of brightly colored flies.

The two-hour ride is cramped and loud (you are given earplugs before boarding), but as the MI-8 thunders over the tundra, passengers are treated to a stunning view of arctic wilderness. The Kola’s windswept landscape is dotted with birch trees, clumps of stubby pine, and endless bogs. It is easy to understand why, during Soviet times, escaped prisoners (criminal

river, and the Ryabaga guides—a multinational mix of seasoned pros—were quick to accommodate. Immediately after breakfast on my first morning, John Gendall, a 31-year old New Zealander, ushered another guest and me into a 17-foot boat and headed up the wide, slow-moving river.

Russians and Scandinavians have been fishing these waters since the 16th century,

At the head of a large pool, Gendall cut the outboard and released an anchor. My fishing partner, Tom Watson III, a retired lawyer from Connecticut, started casting from the stern while I worked my ten-weight rod from the bow. On only my second cast I got a solid hookup. I was so surprised that I played the fish badly and lost it. It turned out to not be a problem.

In the next six hours, I went on to catch and release five very respectable Atlantics averaging about 14 pounds each. Watson managed to land five as well.



A TYPICAL DAY ON THE Ponoi starts around 6:30 a.m., when a camp manager appears in the tents and lights the stoves. As guests rise to a crackling fire, a hot breakfast (including delicious scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and freshly made *pain au chocolat*) is prepared in the dining tent. If anyone has



and political) picked this area to hide out in. During the flight, there was not a single hint of mankind—no roads, no towns, not even a shack.

RYABAGA CAMP IS OPERATED by the Ponoi River Company, which is owned by Shackleton International, a company that specializes in unique fishing expeditions. Their base on the Kola is a tidy village of white canvas tents on platforms, located 30 miles up the Ponoi river from where the Barents Sea meets the White Sea on the eastern tip of the peninsula. It accommodates up to 20 and from late May to the end of September the outpost is filled to capacity with ecstatic anglers.

After spending days getting to the Ponoi (most people fly to Helsinki, lay over for a night, and then take a connecting flight to Murmansk), I was desperate to get on the



CATCH OF THE DAY Clockwise from top: salmon about to be released; base camp consists of tidy white tents and wood buildings; helicopters take anglers to far-flung sections of the river.

but the area has not seen the same decline in stock as Canadian and U.S. breeding grounds. The annual run on the Ponoi is estimated to be between 30,000 and 60,000 fish. In comparison, Maine’s Penobscot River, which has the largest population of Atlantic salmon in the United States, sees an average of only 1,000 adult fish each year.

been lucky enough to catch a sea trout the day before—most everyone does—the chef adds it to the morning menu. Around 9 a.m., groups of two set out to fish different sections (called beats) of the Ponoi—some in boats and others in helicopters to more far-flung locations.

Even though the camp is located 35 miles

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above the Arctic Circle, the weather during summer months is surprisingly mild, with temperatures typically in the 70s or 80s. But visit as I did in late September and it's a bit more like November in New England. Some days the mercury stayed in the 50s, while on others it dropped to the low 40s. All guests came equipped with high-tech waders and Gore-Tex fishing jackets as well as many layers of fleece, hats, and gloves that convert to fingerless models instantly in order to feel the fly line. If the weather turns ugly, each boat has a small tent with a wood-burning stove where anglers warm up and have a hot lunch. One Ponoï veteran, 65-year-old Page Chapman, told me that he preferred the colder trips. "In the summer, I had to wear mosquito netting all day because of black flies," he said. "And my tent was a furnace at night because we kept it sealed up tight to keep out the insects."

MAINTEINING AN OUTPOST IN the arctic, particularly the Russian arctic, is a logistical challenge of epic proportions. Camp manager Roderic Hall described to me a few of the expenses: The camp consumes

19 tons of fuel totaling \$60,000 annually. It costs another \$40,000 just to have it flown in by helicopter. All food—fresh vegetables, eggs, meat, and numerous cases of Spanish wine—is flown from Finland and Murmansk. Even obtaining firewood is an ordeal. The trees in this part of the Kola are stunted so the camp must have pine timbers floated down from a forest 100 miles upstream every spring. There are 32 staff members to pay, including guides, chefs, maids, mechanics, and a camp doctor. Shackleton also makes annual lease payments to the Russian government so the camp can enjoy private fishing for 50 miles of the Ponoï. Running the camp is a labor of love, says Thorpe McKenzie, a private investor from Tennessee who was a co-owner of the operation for ten years before Shackleton bought the camp. "There was never a year where we made more than \$500 pre-tax per angler."

What all this means, of course, is fishing here is significantly more expensive than, say, casting for trout in Montana. Six days and seven nights during prime running weeks in June and September costs just under \$10,000 per person, and that's not including airfare to Murmansk.

Salmon enthusiasts take consolation in the fact that any difficulty they experience getting to the Kola pales in comparison to what the fish go through. After hatching, young salmon typically spend two to three years in the river before they begin their migratory gauntlet. First they must make it downriver, dodging kingfishers and mergansers, and then out to sea where they race past schools of hungry cod and seals to the waters off the Faroe Islands, a collection of 18 windswept, treeless land masses around 200 miles north of Scotland. There they spend one or two years fattening up before making the long journey back to the exact river, tributary, and often same pool in which they were born.

What happens next is what drives otherwise prudent individuals to spend outlandish amounts of money and time just for an opportunity to be in the same water as these fish. When an Atlantic salmon returns to its native river, its sole purpose is to lay eggs. Salmon do not linger in one place for very long and, more importantly, they do not feed. But, for reasons that remain a mystery to marine biologists, if you place a brightly colored Mickey Finn, Hairly Mary, or any number of other flies exactly in the right place at precisely the right moment, they chase and strike. The sound of a screaming fly reel as a salmon performs great leaps out of the water is one of angling's greatest thrills.

"I'm always amazed to look at the vast size of the water I am covering and the small size of the fly that I am using, and that any fish is prepared to take it," says Jane Stewart, who has traveled to the Kola over ten times from Somerset, England. "It's a great privilege to get one on the end of the line."

Another inspiring factor is that there are simply not that many Atlantic salmon in the world to catch. All five species of Pacific salmon—which differ greatly from Atlantics in that they die once they spawn—are much more plentiful. For example, British Columbia's Fraser River alone gets an annual run of between ten and 20 million Pacific salmon each year. The total world population of Atlantic salmon, in comparison, is estimated to be around 4 million fish, according to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, an organization that studies marine life in the North Atlantic. That's about half of what it was in the mid 1970s. Most marine biologists believe that overfishing and deterioration of freshwater

Rigging Up for Russia

THE SEASON AND COST

The 2004 season on the Ponoï begins May 29 with the last week starting on September 25. Cost: from \$4,690 to \$9,990, depending on the week. Early and late weeks are the most expensive because they have the largest runs of salmon.

EQUIPMENT The rod of choice on the Ponoï is a 14- to 16-foot Spey rod with a nine- or ten-weight line. Rio Windcutters with interchangeable sink-tips are the preferred fly lines. Floating lines come in handy during the middle of the summer when water levels are low. Single-handed rods can also be used very effectively because

most of the fishing can be done from a boat. However, when wading, you'll be able to cast farther and more comfortably with a Spey rod. The camp's fly shop has an excellent selection of appropriate flies as well as plenty of topnotch equipment, including fishing gear by Sage, Tibor, Thomas & Thomas, and Rio.

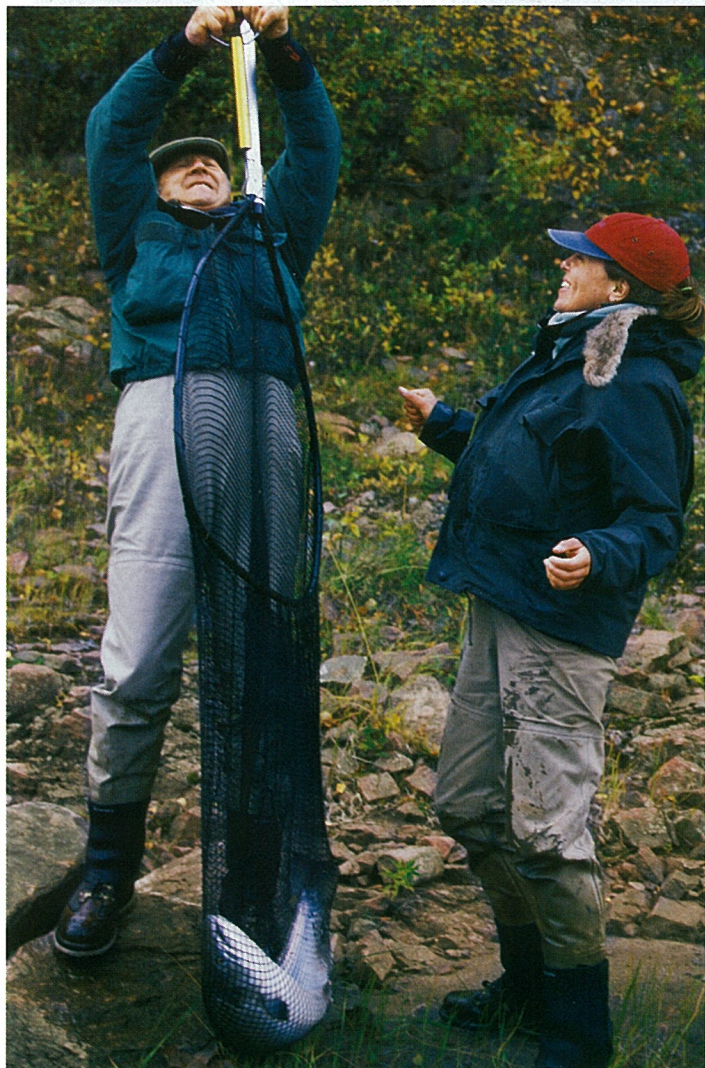
CLIMATE The Ryabaga camp is located 35 miles above the Arctic Circle, and that means the weather can change in an instant. Early in the season the temperature is typically in the 40s during the day and drops into the 30s at night. Midsummer is warm, with temperatures

around the 70s and 80s. During the fall, expect anything from the 40s to the 70s during the day and below freezing at night.

HOW TO GET THERE Travelers from both Europe and the U.S. fly to Helsinki via Finnair, spend the night, and connect to a Murmansk flight the next morning. From there it's a two-hour helicopter ride to the Ponoï.

RESERVATIONS Frontiers International Travel has been the exclusive agent for the Ryabaga Camp since its inception in 1991. Contact Frontiers at Box 959, Wexford, PA, 15090; 800-245-1950, 724-935-1577; www.frontierstrvl.com.

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WATER WORLD Weighing a just-caught salmon; pairs of anglers are taken by boat or helicopter to remote sections of river called beats.

habitats have been contributors to the decline in stocks. The good news is that many countries, including Greenland and Norway, have either put a halt to, or reduced the harvesting of Atlantic salmon. The United States and Canada have eliminated commercial fishing for Atlantics altogether. (Fly-fishing on the Ponoï River Company trip is catch and release with barbless hooks.)

THERE COMES A POINT IN EVERY fishing trip when you want to see if you can outwit your prey without the help of a guide. On an overcast, windless afternoon, I made my way along the rocky shoreline downriver to a slow-moving pool. I have been fly-fishing for most of my life and understand trout streams and bonefish flats, but I found it difficult to know where to start on such a wide stretch of river. Typically I use a nine-foot-

long single-handed rod, but on that day I was armed with a 14-foot Spey rod, which is the preferred weapon on the Ponoï. The additional length allows you to cast the line farther, up to 120 feet, and cover more water. This is key, because unlike sight fishing for trout where you see them rise, it's not always easy to tell where an Atlantic is hiding out. As with many river fish, in front and behind large boulders is always a good bet, but salmon are also happy to linger in the middle of a moderately swift current. The idea is to cast your fly directly across the current, let it swing through the pool, and hope it catches the attention of a fish.

After an hour, I decided that this section of river was a lost cause. But as I was about to pack it in, something big hit my Mickey Finn. As the water boiled, I could see the silver flicker of the fish just under the surface and knew it was a salmon. I wait-

ed a moment before raising the rod to ensure a good set. The salmon began a series of long runs. After a ten-minute fight, I pulled it up beside me and removed the hook from its mouth. It was a powerful fish that weighed around ten pounds—not a monster, but still a marvelous specimen. I held it gently, nose into the current letting it recover while the water rushed through its gills. A few moments passed, and then it snapped its tail and was gone.

I had to take three planes and a helicopter to reach this river. It was, as I learned that week, a privilege to be able to cast to these tough, determined creatures. Few game fish need the pristine, pollution-free environment Atlantic salmon must have to survive. The Ponoï River is such an environment, and it's still as it always was—wild and difficult to get to. It's the end of the line, and the Atlantic salmon like it that way. **D**