

White water and glorious sunshine are what float trips are all about.

Float Trip Fever: Going With The Flow

Story and photos by Jim Repine

The bent rod strained enough to indicate a fish larger than the angler was on the line. Richie leaned back hard. I wasn't sure the graphite could stand the strain, but I was more concerned that this 10-year-old boy—hooked solidly into his first king salmon—wouldn't survive all the advice.

"Keep the rod up and do whatever Paul (our guide) says," shouted Richie's father.

"Atta boy, Richie. Get ready to run down the beach with him," someone else chimed in.



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ionship and fishing—was turning out magic.

Float trips are usually done in inflatable rafts and involve camping each night, wonderful scenery, and sometimes include white-water running or fishing or both. But most of all, float trips provide a unique method of gliding silently through a wild environ, enjoying the creatures living there with minimal disturbance and melding, for a time, into undisturbed surroundings.

Over the years, I've seen stressed-out people from every kind of background go through healing transformations on float trips.

From Alaska's southern tip to far above the Arctic Circle, the state's 586,000 square miles offer superb floating opportunities. Prince of Wales Island near Ketchikan, for instance, has many streams accessible by logging roads for short floats. These waters have salmon and steelhead runs.

The Situk River at Yakutat, a delightful 30-mile run with two Forest Service cabins along the way, has excellent summer salmon runs, with steelhead in the spring and fall. There are countless others. The southeastern part of the state is a wonderland of rain forests with giant spruce, and rivers and streams as clear as the air is fresh. Huge glaciers, snow-capped mountains and wildlife are abundant. Bears are common, as are eagles, otters, beavers and a myriad of waterfowl.

The southcentral portion of Alaska, extending from Anchorage to the Yukon, contains a remarkable collection of river systems ideally suited to floating. Bush

"Stand your ground kid," still another voice admonished.

"Where's the net? Someone get the net!" It would be awhile before the net could be anything more than symbolic.

And that most cogent comment in all of anglingdom, repeated over and over, sometimes individually, and sometimes in what sounded like a poorly rehearsed operetta chorus:

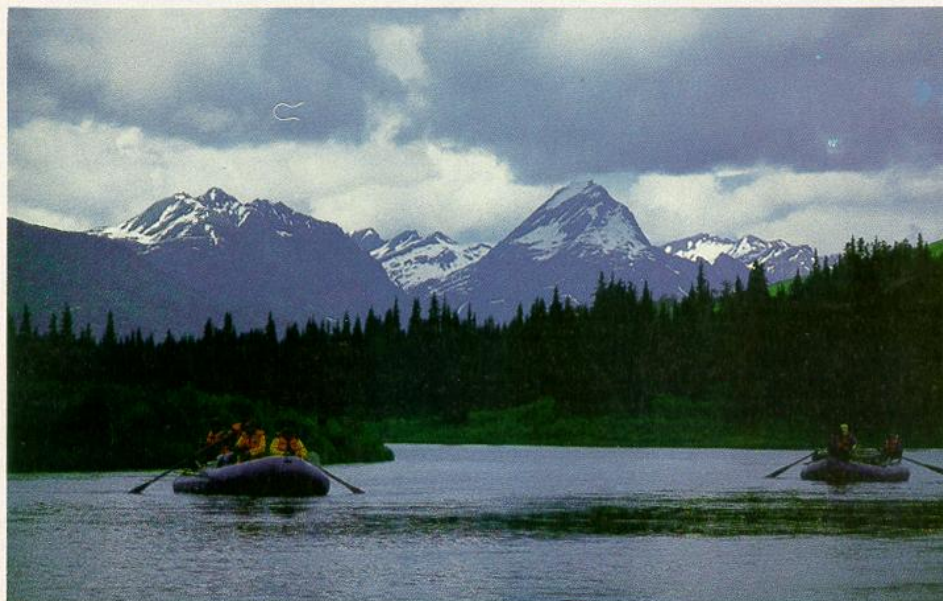
"DON'T LOSE HIM!"

We were on a mid-July float trip down a remote Alaskan river and everything—scenery, camping, weather, compan-

UPDATE



■ Ouzel Expeditions guide Paul Allred gives 10-year-old Richie Shine a hand with a monster king salmon.



A float trip down Lake Creek offers superb scenery, clear water and excellent fishing.

flights of less than an hour from Anchorage will put you on such fabled waters as the Talachulitna and Deshka rivers or Alexander Creek. Richie's first tussle with a king salmon took place on Lake Creek. The Kenai and Gulkana rivers are accessible by highway from Anchorage. All of the above rivers flow through unmatched scenic areas alive with fish and game. Most have at least some white water.

The western coast and that vast territory known as Iliamna/Bristol Bay, including the Wood River/Tikchik country, contains dozens of prime choices. North of the Yukon lies an even larger expanse of rarely explored waters. I've been in Alaska since the late 1960s and still haven't seen it all.

Though do-it-yourself floating is popular, with more people trying it each summer, guided

trips make more sense for most folks. To begin with, the equipment required for comfortable, safe outings is a good deal more involved than for backpacking or trekking. Good gear is not only costly to purchase and maintain, it is troublesome to handle and expensive to ship, especially by air to remote locales.

The best argument for commercial trips is that by placing yourself in the hands of experienced professionals, you'll optimize your chances of enjoying all a particular river has to offer. The guides will know the best campsites, fishing holes and scenic views, and what time during the season is best for travel. They also know what precautions are necessary to ensure your safety so you can spend all your precious vacation time relaxing and enjoying the ride.

Our recent Lake Creek

trip (creek is a misnomer—Lake Creek is a 50-mile river) was typical in many ways but unusual in others. The fishing was superb, which is typical, at least in Alaska. In this country, one rarely hears the line, "You should've been here last week." The weather—four days nice, two days rain—was a fair average for July. And the equipment was first quality (no leaky inflatable sleeping pads or torn tents), with copious amounts of well-prepared food and attentive service from our three-man crew.

What was remarkable about this outing was that out of 11 people, there were three father-and-son combinations, or four if you count one father and his son-in-law. Richie brought his father, Bob Shine, who was part of the crew. Bob rows rafts when he is not a practicing gynecologist in Laramie, Wyo. Philadelphia

teen-ager Rick Goldwater was with his dad, Fred, an investment researcher for an insurance company. Diver John Clark was teamed with his dad, Arthur, a retired Air Force general. Californian Bill Patterson was with his partner of 30 years, Erwin Berquist, and his son-in-law, States Coyle. And then there were the rafts.

Two things rafters learn to live with is constant bailing and never putting anything on the floor of the boat that could hit against a rock and cause a puncture. Ouzel Expeditions, our hosts, have beat the system. Their custom-designed boats have inflatable floors made of strong enough material to move over the most jagged, submerged boulders without apparent damage. These rafts also are self-bailing.

And then there is Paul Allred. Born and raised in Idaho, and rafting professionally now for 20 years, Paul is one of those unique personalities able to relate to the diverse variety of folks who show up in the course of a season. He copes well with the inevitable calamities that happen in the wilderness, and he does it with an infectious cheerfulness. It's a genuine gift. Happily, the same spirit reflects in his assistant, Rick Natter. It's hard to imagine anything but good trips from Ouzel.

The Lake Creek float stages out of Anchorage, beginning with a flyout from Lake Hood, the most active float plane base in the world.

It's about a 45-minute flight from Lake Hood to Chelatna Lake—the headwaters of Lake Creek. The scenery is spectacular. With any

luck, you'll have great views of Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak, and if you scan the ground carefully during the flight, it is common to spot moose, nesting swans and occasional bears. The rugged snow-caps of the Alaska Range extend to the south as far as you can see. Someone will invariably say, "Boy! The flight alone is worth the trip." If you didn't know what was in store, it would seem true.

We had bright sunshine at the lake, the high hopes of beginning an adventure and the stimulation of new acquaintances. Excitement buzzed by the time the boats were pumped up and loaded. As gulls cried and arctic terns swooped down on tiny bait fish, all of us were fitted for life jackets and our float began.

We weren't far along when guests started catching grayling. These small but feisty fighters are rarely found south of Canada. All the fish were carefully released. The angling we had really come for was king salmon, huge fish that could exceed 60 pounds in this drainage.

First night's camp was like a thousand others, with everyone getting the hang of pitching tents and inflating sleeping pads. The after-dinner conversation around the campfire was filled with questions about rods, reels, lures, bears and all the mosquito tales from everyone's past. Thankfully, there weren't many mosquitoes out yet. I dozed off, pleased. This was a good group.

Fred and his son, Nick, were the guests I got to know first. Neither have spent much time in

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the outdoors, though Fred has had at least one impressive adventure with some far north Eskimos. Nick is 19 and a good kid. You can tell this is an important trip for the two of them.

The second camp we made was beside a small tributary with promising-looking holding water extending in front of our tents for a 100 yards down a gravel bar. I don't remember who scored first, but camp wasn't even set up before someone hooked the first king. From then on, the action was steady, with fish ranging from 15 to 50 pounds.

The Californians were experienced anglers, but that didn't diminish their excitement at suddenly being into more big fish than most anglers find in a season. There were lots of grins, laughter, hoots and hollers.

The General had fished more than his son, John. It seemed every-time I looked up, he was running down the beach with another "fish on."

With Paul gently coaching him along, Fred Goldwater caught his first salmon. When a serious businessman catches his first salmon, something nice happens. I can't explain it, but it's all related to kids catching their first tadpoles, lizards or frogs. For some, it's their first natural indulgence of the predator instinct, which is as old as mankind. Fred's grin was boy-like.

And then it happened. Of things that matter on float trips or with any activity where adults and youngsters can genuinely join in with each other, nothing compares to a boy-size angler connected to a man-size fish. As far as number of years are concerned, Richie was our only boy, but 10 men and a 10-year-old kid became of one mind. "DON'T LOSE HIM!"

It was Richie's fish, no mistake about that. Once the 15-minute fight at the pool ended and the 50-pounder headed down river, Richie, struggling along with him from the beach, was only accompanied by Paul, now his trusted gun bearer, guide and coach; his father, now his net man; and me, his photographer. It was a reasonable retinue for an endeavor of such magnitude.

The boy's courage never faltered, even when fatigue made holding the rod at the necessary level a torture. His fish-play was faultless, but in the end, with the fish finally netted, the hook wasn't in the king's mouth. The regulations are clear. Any fish hooked other than in the mouth

must be released, unharmed. Now, it was father and son. Paul and I walked away.

Before the trip ended, everyone caught more than their share of fish. Fathers and sons grew closer. Men and boys became harder to distinguish. New friendships were made, while old ones deepened. There were marvelous white-water runs, one for an unbroken 10 miles, in glorious sunshine. Enchanted evenings of wine and campfires were nightly followed by a refreshing, peace-filled sleep I can never seem to find in the city.

That pretty much sums up what float trips are all about. I admit it, a comfortable lodge is a heady way to enjoy wild places, but things like wood smoke and night sounds are missing. And that sense of entering—totally living for a time—in an environment yet unviolated by human madness, and becoming one with nature's rhythms and flows, simply isn't available, in quite the same way, by any method other than float trips. After all this time, I can't wait until the next trip. ☆

Jim Repine, a veteran outdoors writer with 20 years experience, has been guiding sportsmen to the best fishing spots in the state for the past decade.