



KINGS DON'T COME EASY

Text: Thomas Woelfle



From Alaska to BC, Kings of the Pacific Northwest always fascinated me, although I stumbled into this game more or less by accident.

It all started years and years ago at the Alagnak River in Alaska when I was supposed to do a story about chum salmon, actually one of those fish that are highly underestimated in the salmon community, maybe because they are so abundant and not as rare as other salmon. As a game fish though, bright and fresh chums are really good and hard fighters with a high percentage of broken rods during the season. Anyway, I was fishing the last week of July and one day the guide was asking me if I'd like a change and go out for a "little" king fishing. "Tide is fine!" he just mentioned and so I did my first

round for kings. What should I say, I guess as always if you're new in the game I had beginner's luck and got a big fish in the first hour, an impressive fresh chinook of 38 pounds which of course took me quite some time to get close and into the boat. What a fight! The only drawback is that I cannot find the picture anymore. Well, I have it in my mind and friends still remember the dinner (hopefully) I cooked when I was back in Munich. I like the thick deep red filets which rarely get dry and you don't run into danger of overcooking it and killing the fish twice. I don't want to start a discussion about catch and release here. I know it is always present, but in my world of fishing at least one fish is always nice to bring back home to eat it. For me those filets are my gold barrels and creating a nice dinner with them brings back all the memories of a fishing trip. I am a down to earth fisherman who also likes to catch, cook and eat and has problems when

fish get more or less toys to play with. There's got to be a golden middle-way where no one blames another fisherman when he wants to take the odd fish home for dinner. Oh I wish I could have brought home the second king I hooked in that session. While the guide was telling me that the bigger fish usually come late and my week is not the worst to hook a 40 pound plus fish I felt a small pull and a split second later a second one. A deep and clear but more or less quiet take. I set the hook and what happened then was so out of hand since the fish took one of the longest runs downstream I ever experienced. A big chrome bright truck with a dark back that took his way down the river with no mercy. To make it short, I managed three runs until the fish hit the only sunken tree in the channel and tangled the leader and line in its branches. Oh man, I was young at the time and was about to drop my waders off to jump into the river and

to dive down, set leader and line free and finish the battle. When my guide saw what I intended to do, well he thought about safety first and gave me a clear sign that this idea might not be wise, in other words stupid, and so I had to say goodbye to a fish close to the 50 pound mark. Those six hours in the boat hooked me heavily and so my story about chasing kings started, always interrupted by chasing Atlantic salmon in Norway. When I was younger I had the time but was always short of money. I had to work and tie hard for all the trips but I was free without any kind of responsibility and no one who took care about money and where I spent it. And...I guess I spent a lot of money in fishing. It was a good investment in life. Everything is saved in my brain. I have it, I lived it and no one can take away those moments. Things change, life changes and meanwhile I got a good job, raised kids and my responsibilities reached another dimension. The time factor too. Weekends I spend at soccer fields, at lakes, and vacations are done somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea, catching crabs and small fish with the kids, a lot of fun too by the way. In my family business I managed 10 days where I can travel the Thomas way which means fishing with no regards to others. Although my older son has a different point of view. Lately he asked me why I like fishing so much. I told him that I got it on my way since I was born and I definitely need a certain amount of time at the river. "You can join me whenever you like!" I said since a few hours every now and then should be allowed by the family. Time for me, peace and tranquility and if some trout is cooperative... the better. "I have a life too!" I explained to him, but he just looked at me and answered: "No....you're a dad and here for us!" He said "us" but meant himself, especially when I look at his face while spending time with the younger son.



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So not to wander too much away from the subject I try to plan my trips wisely which is, as soon as it comes to migrating fish, a little bit tricky to find the right time either for big fish or a good number of them. I cannot go on short term anymore. School, holidays, does my wife have time, and much more play a part in the planning so meanwhile I start arranging trips 10 months ahead, especially if I go overseas in order to get a reasonable flight and convenient connection. I have to say I was lucky the past ten years but this year when I went to the Nakina in British Columbia, things were not as expected. I booked -a so called- Top week with a consistent run of kings over the past 20 years. A beautiful river, and the flight with the small helicopter from Altin over the mountains and lakes to the river is outstanding. We came in late so after dinner there was -as usual- a short briefing where Phil the camp owner told us that salmon are late, very late this year. Phil Timpany is, beside fishing, an expert on the Grizzly Bear front and manages to bring his guests very close to those animals. Maybe that is also a reason why I choose places like Alaska or BC to fish for kings. I like the wildlife and if no salmon is

biting you always have the chance to watch bears, moose or bald eagles. You're at the water and that is usually a place where you find animals, at certain times of course. I remember one day at the Alagnak where Tony who manages the Lodge and I were surrounded by 6 or 8 bears. They were really curious and my right foot that touched the gravel already was faster in the boat than you can imagine. In the meantime an old, fat and massive bear approached the river bank on the other side, moved downstream and stopped at a beaver's lodge. He decided to make the lodge his new toy, stood on top of it and messed it up heavily. Our boat was parked safely in the middle of the river by that time and so we just watched the spectacle since at the gravel bar 20 or

30 meters downstream we saw a female with two cubs. I'm not so much the Guinness drinker here but when Tony opened the cooler to take two bottles out to celebrate this moment in life I could not resist and it tasted great. Looks like eating and drinking has a lot to do with the situation and surroundings. I have been pretty close to bears while fishing for kings. I had bears looking directly in my lens two rod lengths away like the one on the picture. This kind of "swing the fly" gave me moments I never will forget, beside the catch of course. But as I said, if the run of

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kings is poor it is nice to have a back up. Also in fishing! At the Alagnak you can count on the chums or the sockeyes. Those runs coincidence with the kings and gives you alternatives in fishing. At the Nakina we had rainbows, bull trout and char. They got pressured pretty hard by 8 fishermen since no salmon was showing up. Two fishermen from France really were irritated. "Thomas, we fished the river last year!" "Exactly the same time!" "Yes!...and the river was full of kings. It was hard to understand and figure out why the kings were so late. One point in discussion was El Nino, which was stronger in 2016, so maybe they took another route to follow

their prey in the sea and had to swim back a different and longer route. Mother Nature fooled us and as a consequence you have to live with it. There are certain approaches to a situation like that. Some people get mad and quarrel with their fate and others accept it and try to make the best out of the situation. I belong to the second group and so I fished a little and tried to save my power for that day when the kings might arrive. The first two or three days nothing happened and the river was quiet. Poor stock of wine in the camp. We plundered it heavily, beside all the beer in the fridge and had a lot of fun, talking about fishing and life. We joked, laughed a lot while telling dozens of stories of all our fishing trips and tales.



Martin, a pharmacist, was putting his own statistics into the discussion:

“Boys, you need 3 trips to get a good one out of it!” he said, swallowed a mouthful of Sicilian red wine and finished his story with a few nightmares of a recent trip to Russia. You always can look at a subject from two sides and it can be worse....like having no wine and beer. Beside those little helpers I also took a thick and good book with me. Sometimes I just enjoyed the rustle of the river, sat on the riverbank and just let my soul dangle and my mind wander, interrupted by the occasional moose or bald eagle. I did not forget the fishing, but my approach was different. I had a favorite part at the river where it made a big bend and the current and depth were perfect to do a classic swing. This place I was fishing usually twice a day just for the fun of it or just was waiting for some signs of moving fish. I had a new Secret Taper rod from my friend Taki Alvanos he gave me to fish with, including one of his special tapered

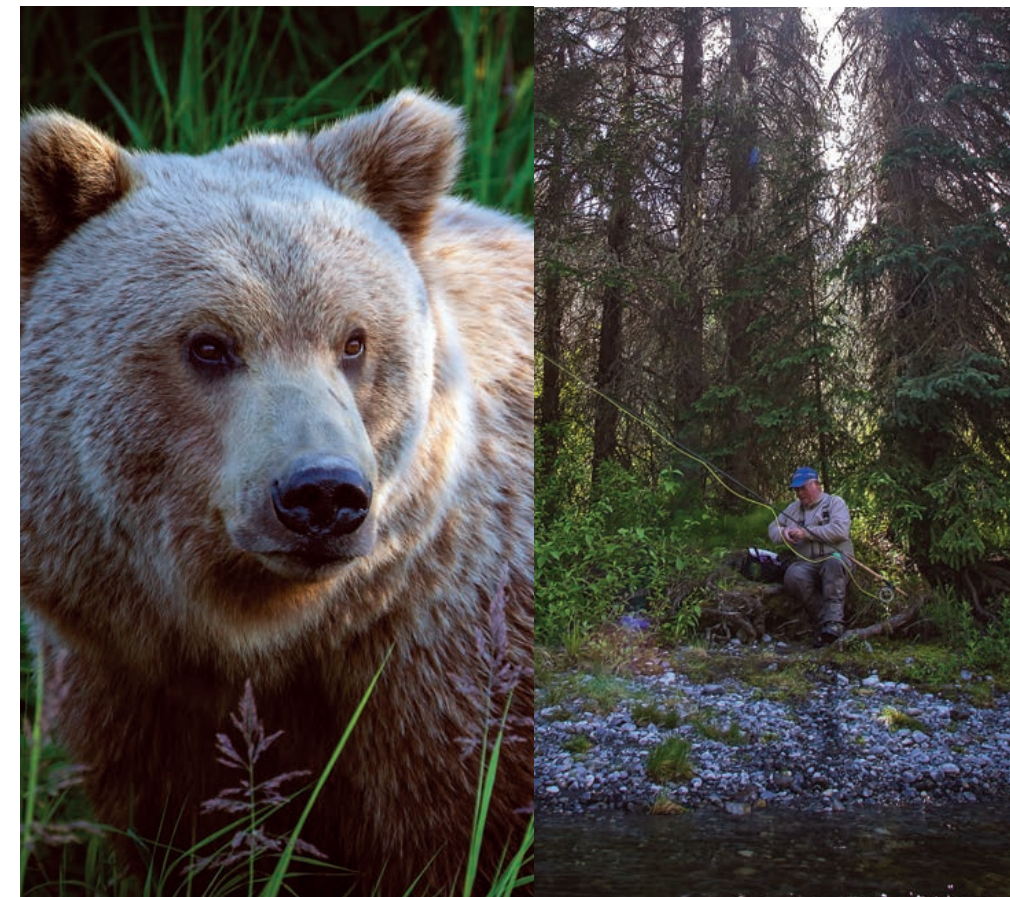


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shooting heads he usually makes with awful good-looking and tiny loops to connect it to the running line. I had to take no care about balancing the shooting head or finding the right weight. Everything was set perfectly. Head not too heavy and it was a pleasure to lift it up even waist deep in the river and to do a cast with super fast sinking leaders and big flies tied with tungsten heads. Having good equipment also helps to keep you in good humor. And with your mood every now and then things work out since all of a sudden, I saw one or two fish rolling. Not much...but better than

nothing and about 15 minutes later I was in contact with a king. A cast across, one big mend to give the fly time to sink, then a smooth lift to get in touch with the fly and a slow and steady swing until...yes I felt the tug. A courageous raise of the rod and the fish was on. A bright female of I would say about 8 kilos or so. As usual I was alone, no camera because I did not expect to get one and of course no mobile since at a remote place like the Nakina only a satellite phone works. So just the king and me! Better than no king and me. I was happy, took the Pink and Purple Intruder out of his mouth and released him. That was the first fish of my two in the whole week. The big run never showed up. When we flew back to Atlin I talked to our -I have to admit...very attractive- pilot Paula and she told me that all salmon in the area were late but when they flew over the Taco river system two days ago they saw good numbers moving up. Did not help us but following groups might have got their fishing of a lifetime. If you travel,

especially in fishing you always are dependent on water level, weather etc., runs of salmon and keep in mind that you need a lot of help from Mother Nature. Humbleness is a word you should learn, especially in good days. Don't take everything for granted no matter if it is a good fishing day or watching wildlife. The bad days actually help you judge the good days right, although I wouldn't consider my trip a bad trip, especially when I look back to it from a little distance. It is a great river which I will see definitely again, so kings of the Nakina I come back... together with my son when he is ten... that's the deal with my wife...and to watch the bears...that's what my wife doesn't know...so far. What you never should underestimate though...is one factor called luck. Or should I say timing is everything, at least in Martin's case. He had also a favorite pool, upstream from the camp, his place for trout and char. Actually he got a huge bull trout out of this pool. While he was fishing the back eddy, a big male chinook was moving up and took his streamer right away. So he stood there alone with a 7 weight trout rod and a big salmon on. He didn't overreact and luckily one of the guides was passing by with his boat. When he saw what Martin had on, he stopped the boat, Martin jumped in and they followed the salmon with the boat. About a kilometer downstream he managed to land it -a male of around 12 kilo or more- and Martin had his story and told it with a huge grin in his face which got bigger and bigger the more glasses of wine disappeared in his stomach after dinner. Now back at home the grey cells in my head are working and dancing since after a fishing trip is before a fishing trip. And preparing, thinking, organizing, tying flies is kind of fun too. I have a vision and will work on it and take advantage of a word called anticipation, but still enjoy my fishing at home, while “building castles in the air” about



upcoming big catches somewhere in the northern hemisphere. When I look back to my recent trips to Alaska and this one in northern BC I tell you...I experienced a lot and had the luck to be at places where ordinary people normally don't look at or even think about going there. I know both worlds...the beach world, incl. all inclusive resorts, the pampered outdoors and the opposite... the real outdoors which can be hard, when you freeze or fight with mosquitoes. Meanwhile I can live with the pampered version. I'm over 50 now and a nice bed and stock of spirits is not so bad at all. Somehow traveling is a privilege and I'm glad to get all those opportunities while fishing. The motor of all. The week at the Nakina put everything in its true light again. Don't take all what you catch and see naturally. In our modern digital world people get overwhelmed by all the flood of information, pictures and so on. Never forget, when you look at all the photos in Chasing Silver that

fishermen sometimes fished hard for one salmon or waited days for a picture in good light. Gerald, another guest, found the right parting words when he mentioned one evening: “Boys, a good fishing trip is like a marriage...don't put your expectations too high...and you're fine!”

A few words about the destinations

I've been to three places for kings so far. All have their own charms and are more than worth a try. You'll find more on their websites: www.alagnaklodge.com, www.wildmanlodge.com and www.nakinaadventures.ca.

To save time and use it for more important stuff like fishing at home I'll call -as soon as I have made up my mind- my travel angel Rita at Andino in Switzerland. She takes care about everything, hotels, connecting flights and, if something goes wrong I have an agency in the back to save the problem. www.andino.ch. ■