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JOY OF FISHING

Denali National Park in Alaska tops anglers' dream trips.

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Guests paddling at
Tonglen Lake Lodge

KIT BERNARDI

ALASKAN CASTING CALL

The joy of fishing
Denali National Park

BY KIT BERNARDI



Camp Denali guest Alice Sherwood casts at Wonder Lake

Salmon fishing in Southeast Alaska and the Kenai Peninsula tops the list of many anglers' dream trips. But so should fly fishing for native Arctic grayling in the clear, cold waterways of Alaska's rugged interior and Denali National Park and Preserve.

"Many anglers consider Alaska's Arctic grayling a 'bucket list fish' because they are native to our pristine waters," says William Bentz, owner of Denali Fly Fishing Guides based on the national park's southwest edge in Cantwell, which is 210 miles north of Anchorage.

Bentz says that while other game fish including rainbow and lake trout live in the Denali region's lakes, rivers and streams, feisty Arctic grayling attract anglers to the middle of the state, a lesser-

known area for visitors to fish.

"Native Arctic grayling are increasingly rare, nearly extinct in the Lower 48 due to overfishing, introductions of other species to their habitats, and water temperatures getting warmer," he says.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, grayling can live up to 32 years in swift-moving, mountain-fed rivers and streams free of silty glacial runoff. Fish size, typically 1 to 3 pounds, and their iridescent coloration depends on their habitat. Grayling are indicator species of a clean, well oxygenated, cold-water system's health. Voracious top feeders, Arctic grayling are called the "sailfish of the north" because of their large, fringed, colorful fan-like dorsal fin sporting red, orange, blue, green or purple dots. >



Paddling at Tonglen Lake Lodge

“It’s fun to fish for Arctic grayling because they are beautiful, smart and super hungry fish that go crazy during Alaska’s four-month-long summer eating all they can before migrating to their overwintering deep pools,” Bentz says.

WAIST DEEP

During our two-week, adventurous trip through Alaska’s interior, my husband, Bob, and I joined Bentz fly fishing. I’ve fished in Newfoundland, Montana, Idaho and Colorado. This was Bob’s first time.

Outfitted with hip waders and four-weight rods with four-weight line, we hiked a mile through tundra to our secluded fishing spot on the Alaska Native Athabaskan Ahtna people’s land just outside Denali National Park and Preserve. Ahtna have lived and fished in the Denali region for more than 5,000 years.

Bentz picked a piece of water at the braided confluence of Fish Creek and the



Camp Denali co-owner Jenna Hamm shows fireweed flowers during her welcome tour of the lodge’s garden.

Jack River, a tributary of the Nenana River in the glacial river valley of the Alaska Range. He expertly coached us on

casting technique and pointed where to aim our dry flies. Nymphing and small streamers also attract Arctic grayling. >

But the fish didn't need a bait buffet to bite.

In Alaska summer's round-the-clock sunlight, anytime is a good time to fish. Honey-colored light warmed our shoulders and reflected off the chilly clear water rushing past our knees. Its steady shushing sound quieted my jumbled thoughts.

Bob reeled in his first grayling within minutes. And I, shortly after. Cast. Catch. Release. Repeat. A golden eagle wheeled overhead, eyeing our success.

The next day, we told our fish tale to fellow guests at Tonglen Lake Lodge over coffee and fresh baked scones. Guests stay on lakeside lodge owner Donna Gates' 5-acre homestead at 11 rustic luxe log cabins and guest house. An artist, former backcountry ranger and dog breeder, Donna Gates opened her lodge in 1980. The authentic Alaskan retreat tucked into boreal forest also serves as the local community's vibrant cultural hub.

A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE

The lodge is 10 minutes from the national park's main entrance and close to flightseeing company Denali Air's private airstrip. For our next adventure in Alaska's interior, we boarded a five-passenger Cessna 206 aircraft to fly into remote wilderness lodge Camp Denali in the western portion of 6 million-acre Denali National Park and Preserve.

Because the 2021 Pretty Rocks landslide has closed the park's only public road until 2027, flying in is the only way reach Camp Denali. From the air, we see the massive rockslide that obstructed half the road stretching 92 miles deep into the park's interior. Visitors to Alaska's most popular park cannot travel beyond mile marker 43. Camp Denali sits at mile marker 89.

If weather cooperates, flight passengers may get a glimpse of Denali, North America's highest mountain soaring 20,310 feet in elevation. The name Denali meaning "the tall one" stems from an Alaska Native Athabaskan word in the Koyukon language. Generally, only 33% of park visitors see the behemoth mountain on any given day.

We got lucky. During our thrilling hourlong flight, the jagged peaks of the Alaska Range, sprawling Muldrow Glacier, and towering, snow-cloaked Denali filled the small plane's windows. We landed on

a dirt airstrip carved from boreal forest in Kantishna, a former gold mining district inside the national park.

Situated 90 miles from the nearest power grid and just 25 miles from Denali's base, Camp Denali has welcomed guests for 75 years, which predates when Alaska gained statehood in 1959. Owned and operated by Jenna Hamm and her husband, Simon, the wilderness lodge has been in Jenna's family for 50 years.

During the road's closure, Camp Denali guests enjoy unprecedented opportunities to experience the park's raw wilderness and wildlife without crowds. Isolation affords virtually private viewing at safe distances of megafauna headliners moose, wolves, caribou, Dall sheep and grizzly bears. And, anglers don't share waterways teeming with native Arctic grayling.

FISHING IN SOLITUDE

We spent a week experiencing the storied lodge's signature blend of expert naturalist-guided wilderness hikes and some independent outdoor activities, such as mountain biking, canoeing, and catch and release fishing.

Trout and grayling live in 280-foot-deep Wonder Lake. The 2.6-mile-long, glacial lake about 2 miles from Camp Denali is usually a popular stop on park

bus tour routes. But now, you'll likely be alone casting from the pier or in a canoe with Denali looming large over your shoulder.

Camp Denali's remoteness, assortment of outdoor activities for all ages, and promise of catching native Arctic grayling lured Wyoming-based, serious fly fishers Alice and Christopher Sherwood to book their stay. They fished for grayling at Moose Creek every day.

From the guest cabins, it's an easy 1-mile hike to Moose Creek. The trail meanders through boreal forest and tundra. Spiky purple fireweed and spruce trees flank the narrow trail that in some parts is wet and squishy underfoot because of the layer of permafrost.

Moose Creek's swift current drags water over slick rocks into deep, cool pools so transparent you can see crowds of grayling hugging the bottom. Christopher says, "Completely unpressured and very hungry, the fish went crazy for our caddis, hopper, beetle and ant flies, no matter what time of day we fished, sometimes till after midnight."

Alice says, "There is nothing else like being the only anglers on the water to disconnect from devices and connect with each other in this immense, beautiful and pristine land." ■



Denali National Park in the distance behind Camp Denali's Nugget Pond