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KODIAK COHO - Bucket List Fishing at It's Finest

Kodiak. Just the name ignites ones imagination into sensory overdrive. Alaska's Emerald Isle, a gem of magnificence the Lord blessed with extraordinary vision, where all the glory of nature's bounty and human habitation come to respectful crossroads. It was August of 2002 when I first set foot upon that wondrous island and like a long lost love, Kodiak had been calling my name ever since.

After a one year hiatus to umpire in the 2009 Western Regional Little League Tournament in San Bernardino, CA, I was very anxious to once again travel northward and add to my list of friendships and memories that Alaska always delivers. When Birch Robbins extended an invitation to visit his corner of paradise on Raspberry Island, I was thrilled at the prospect. It appeared my dream of returning to Kodiak was finally going to happen in September of 2010.

The Kodiak Archipelago consists of a tight grouping of numerous islands in the western Gulf of Alaska. While Kodiak Island is the largest in the group, its northern neighbor Afognak Island is also quite large. Squeezed in between the two is Raspberry Island, the home and operations base for Birch and his wife Tiffany, owners of Kodiak Raspberry Island Remote Lodge.

The islands are home to a great varied species of wildlife, but are world renowned for their healthy population of Kodiak Brown Bears. The Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge encompasses about two thirds of the archipelago and ensures for the ages protection of critical habitat for innumerable species of wildlife. The various Native Corporations control much of the rest of the land, so permits must be obtained from them to secure access.

The northern portion of the islands are covered in thick stands of Sitka Spruce, while the meadows and foothills can be a virtual mosaic of color as spring or autumn wildflowers burst upon the many lakes and streams that define the region. The general lack of commercial development and rugged mountainous terrain throughout most of the expanse leaves little to the imagination of just what a special place this is.



Kodiak Raspberry Island Remote Lodge

Let's not forget the main reason most of you reading this would love to travel here, as I'm pretty sure it's not for the flora and fauna. As one might expect, the Kodiak area is also home to some of the most prolific sport-fishing in all of Alaska. While the saltwater fishing around Kodiak is in a league of its own, my mission was to investigate the annual freshwater migration of Coho salmon. Similar to the dust kicked up by a nineteenth century cattle drive, those silver bullets plow their way into Kodiak area streams like bulls into a china shop!

While there are numerous streams accessible via the road system around Kodiak, it is the remote inlet tributaries accessible only by boat or float-plane that offer the real treasures. They are where time stands still, where Mother Nature watches over a domain relatively unchanged since the time of Jesus. Intoxicating as they are, they also serve to soberly remind us how significantly altered our home streams are from what they once were.

Upon my arrival in Kodiak, Birch shuttled me and another guest to his boat in the harbor, then ran back into town to gather a few more guests before our nearly two hour boat ride to the lodge. Rather than sit around waiting for his return, I strolled down the dock to get some great photos of the F/V Cornelia Marie, whose home port is Kodiak. Fans of "The Deadliest Catch" know that boat was famously skippered by the late Phil Harris. I love that show, so it was cool to see one of the boats up close and personal, especially his!



F/V Cornelia Marie

My first night at the lodge, I found out how wonderful the cuisine would be and how very comfortable my private accommodations were. The wall-mounted propane heater kept me so warm and toasty I barely needed any covers throughout the night! It also served to help dry whatever might have gotten wet during the day! The cabins are equipped to sleep up to five guests, with one bed being a queen size and each having their own bathroom.

Armed with a 36' Catamaran, the Gemini, and an outboard powered Zodiac raft, there are few places that Birch cannot easily access. The time of year and current weather conditions are usually the deciding factors in where you will have your best success. Throughout my stay, the weather was beyond gorgeous, something I would never have considered for mid-September anywhere in Alaska!

Before I left home, this piece was going to be all about Kodiak Coho fishing, which it basically still is. However, within a very short period of my arrival on Raspberry Island, my trip evolved into so much more than that. Birch and Tiffany have a great variety of pursuits to offer their guests, so whether you are a hard-core fisherman or a kayaking beach-comber, you will not want for things to keep you excited!

Our first morning out (Monday), we headed west through Raspberry Straight where we launched the crab pot in search of Tanner (Snow) crab before venturing along the Shelikof Straight to one of Birch's favorite Coho hot spots. After anchoring in a remote inlet and deploying the raft, he ran us upstream to the top of the tidal influence, where the Coho were piled like cord wood! Instantly, we were tangling with fat, feisty Coho on our fly rods. The stream was crystal clear, making it easy to see the hordes of Coho swarming in front of us!



Easy Targets of Coho!

After hours of fairly constant action, it was time to work our way back to the Gemini to pull our crab pot before heading back to the lodge and our waiting cocktails! To our great pleasure, we found the pot chock full of sweet Tanner crab! After weeding out the keepers, we quickly re-baited, moved it a bit and tossed it back for another long soak!

Throughout the day, I was astounded at the number of whales, sea otters and other aquatic life that inhabited the area. The wild Shelikof Strait is home to so much sea life it makes your head spin! While all those critters are neighborhood pets for Birch and his family, they are a wondrous window to life outside the box for most visitors to the area! Almost everywhere we looked we could see the tell-tale water spout of a whale's blow-hole!

Birch came to Raspberry Island with his parents when he was just five years old. His folks originally built and ran Kodiak Raspberry Island Remote Lodge, but in 2008 Birch and Tiffany purchased the operation outright and made the lodge their permanent home. They have a young son and daughter, Fisher and Sage, and a couple of loveable labs that together make a genuinely warm and inviting place to spend some quality time with friends or loved ones.

Tuesday, after a breakfast of toasted bagels with cream cheese and smoked salmon, we headed for the boat knowing our morning's mission was to slay some halibut, then try for some more Coho in the afternoon. We fished about four different spots that morning, producing three halibut, the largest of which was my 42 lb. specimen, the perfect eating size! Around 1:00 pm, we decided to reel up the halibut gear and change course for a local lagoon not far from the lodge, but vulnerable to the changing temperament of Shelikof Strait.



Birch Robbins and Author Kris Olsen

Once anchored, we again deployed the raft and shuttled to the open beach, tasting some salt-water in the process! The unseasonal lack of rain over an extended period had the lagoon very low. Even so, there was some chrome silvers stacked in the deepest part of the lagoon, so I went right to work on them.

I could not hastily get them to take a fly, so somewhat impatiently, I grabbed my spinning rod and tossed a big Flash-Glo spinner into the pool. Immediately, I was rewarded with a fierce hook-up and a righteous brawl. Over the course of the next twenty minutes, I managed five more chromers on that spinner, keeping two to haul back to the Gemini.



John Garcia at Melina Beach Lagoon

The afternoon was getting away from us, so we boarded the mother ship with hopes of finding more Tanner crab in our pot, which we definitely did. Pulling the pot became a daily ritual throughout the week and provided lots of fresh crab for those guests wishing to take some home with their salmon and halibut catch. It also made for a great appetizer for the beer-battered halibut we found being served for dinner!



Pot Full of Tanner Crab!

After dining, most evenings found us gravitating toward the spacious deck above the beach, where cigars and cocktails were a nightly ritual. Along with stories from the day's adventure and the obligatory off-colored humor that kept us all in stitches, it was this time that allowed guests to better get to know each other.

One guest that I was immediately drawn to was Roger Earle of North Scituate, Rhode Island. Like me, Roger was travelling alone and is like the older brother I never had. Retired, a cigar connoisseur and lover of Jack Daniels on the rocks, Roger has a keen sense of humor and little tolerance for BS. An accomplished and well travelled angler, he and I were like two peas in a pod. No topic was sacred as we fished and drank our way through the week! This was Roger's fifth trip to Alaska, but his first to the Kodiak region. I hope he enjoyed it as much as I did!



Roger Earle and Birch Robbins

Wednesday morning a couple of folks wanted to continue the pursuit of halibut, so I asked Birch to drop Roger and me off at our new favorite Coho stream, to which he agreed. After leaving us with some bear spray, a radio, and a promise to return later in the day to retrieve us, we found ourselves reverently alone in the wilderness. With every fishing or hunting trip, there is usually one experience that defines your entire journey. The next few hours would prove for us to be just that occurrence.

Nearing high slack tide, with zero wind and merciless sunshine, we stood on shore with a thousand fat and happy silvers lying in a glassy stretch of water completely free of the eel grass growing a few hundred yards below us. With a nod, we waded knee-deep to within twenty feet of the biomass before us and began the ritual of casting and stripping our lines.

For the next several hours, Roger and I battled one chrome Coho after another. In short order, several of my favorite Coho flies had been severely brutalized. It was a surreal experience to strip your fly above the school and with the awe of a young schoolboy, watch as individual fish would peel away from the school to follow your offering. When the time was right, you would stop stripping and witness the suicidal salmon devour your fly, setting the hook even before feeling the pull of the line!



Roger Earle

As if that drama wasn't enough, the quiet morning we were enjoying in that small river valley suddenly and violently exploded with the blood-curdling roars of two Kodiak bears fighting each other immediately upstream from us! It was a National Geographic moment for sure and brought our casting to an immediate standstill. After a brief pause, as if testing which one of us had the most testosterone, Roger and I again nodded and resumed casting! A quick examination of my shorts was also essential before continuing!

All too soon, the bears went silent and the tide began its slow but steady ebb. The hundreds of fish that were holding at our feet turned downstream and began a slow, steady retreat to the confines of the eel grass below us. We followed them downstream and kept getting good strikes, but once in the lower tidal pool they became more challenging.



Author Kris Olsen

By the time Birch and the rest of the crew returned to pick us up, it was pretty much over for the day, but it mattered little to Roger and I. We knew enough to embrace the morning we had just experienced, as each of us realized it may or may not be repeatable. We planned to return the next two days and re-live our success as the tides would be even more favorable, but as luck would have it, a change in wind direction made safe travel upon the wide open Shelikof Strait too daunting a prospect to return during the rest of our stay.

We had been saving the close-to-home stuff for those times when we couldn't get to the more far-reaching places. The last two days of our trip proved to be those days as the prevailing winds were not favorable for long journeys. The home stream held immense numbers of Coho, and Thursday we managed to catch quite a few nice fish, but by Friday the complete lack of rain and abnormally dry conditions had finally caught up to us.

Despite thousands of fresh Coho jumping almost in our waders, lockjaw had set in and almost nothing worked until late that afternoon when a short-lived bite came on. The only real excitement that last day came when a large male bear wandered out of an old dry creek bed and took a good whiff of us before creeping back into the bush! Giant King Crab legs for dinner and finishing off what was left of our booze graciously helped us deal with the challenging day we had just experienced.



Roger Earle sets the hook among a large school of Coho!

While I spent the majority of my visit chasing freshwater Coho, several guests enjoyed kayaking to close by streams and beaches. One couple took a floatplane ride to Katmai National Park for an incredible afternoon bear viewing trip! There are also some great hiking trails in the area for those intrepid souls in much better shape than I.

The Robbins family employs a great staff to ensure things run smoothly at Kodiak Raspberry Island Remote Lodge and you will find your every need quickly met. My fish were expertly processed daily upon our arrival back at the lodge, and each night when I rolled in for appetizers, my margarita glass was sitting next to my Tequila jug full of ice and awaiting my arrival. Now that is service!

Meals are second to none and rival anything the top chefs in the industry might inspire, truly delicious! Lunches are painstakingly prepared for each individual and the family atmosphere makes for a pleasant, inviting ambiance. Furthermore, if an invigorating hot-tub or steamy banya are something you enjoy, you will be pleased to know both are readily available for your nightly use! This is the perfect place to play hard and relax even harder! Late August or early September is prime time to intercept those big, numerous silvers with a fly rod!



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When visiting Birch and Tiffany Robbins on Raspberry Island, you are not so much a guest, but rather an extended family member. Overall, their fishing season runs from early May until late September. My heartfelt thanks go out to the Robbins family for making my visit everything a great Alaskan adventure should be! Check out their website at <http://raspberryisland.com/>, or look them up on Facebook!