

Bristol Bay: Protecting the Backcountry's Abundance

Story & Photos
by Matt Miller

'We know that
Bristol Bay is
more precious
than gold.'

A float plane delivers anglers to a run of silver salmon. For many, the abundance of Alaska is a given. But is it?

Wherever you find large congregations of critters, you'll find predators to eat them. Picture the African Serengeti, with a million migrating wildebeest and zebras providing a moveable feast for lions, cheetahs, hyenas, wild dogs and crocodiles.

In Alaska's Bristol Bay watershed, that abundance plays out underwater. Millions of migrating salmon, drawn from the ocean to the streams and rivers of their birth, swim home to spawn and die. On the way they become dinner for brown bears lining the stream and their decaying bodies in turn draw bald eagles, black bears and gulls.

But underwater there's a feeding frenzy happening, too, one every bit as dramatic as the nature show on the African plains.

To experience the wildebeest migration, I brought binoculars. But to experience Bristol Bay, you need a fishing rod.

My wife Jennifer and I were traveling as guests of Scott and Nicki Hed to Rapids Camp Lodge, located just outside of King Salmon. Scott is director of the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska, one of the organizations on the front line of

the fight to protect Bristol Bay from the proposed Pebble Mine. If constructed, it would be the largest gold mine in North America, located in the headwaters of the watershed I was about to experience in all its glory.

Every evening, guests at Rapids Camp Lodge are presented with a menu of fly-out fishing options for the next day. It felt like going to a microbrew pub with 50 varieties on tap.

Catching silver salmon as they run fresh from the ocean? Check. Hike in for Dolly Varden? Of course. Halibut in the ocean? Trophy rainbow trout? Grayling on dry flies? Yes, yes – and yes.

We arrived at the lodge in the afternoon, meaning the planes were already out. We donned waders and headed out with guide Taylor Wells to fish on the Naknek River, Rapids Camp Lodge's home waters.

Within minutes it was fishing pandemonium.

Looking over the boat, we watched bright red king salmon fining in the current. They were laying eggs, more than a few of which caught in the current and drifted downriver.

Those high-calorie eggs created a feeding frenzy. Large numbers of finned

predators lined up below the king salmon to gulp as many as they could.

We drifted egg patterns below the king salmon and thus began two hours of the most memorable fishing of my life. Nice rainbows – many pushing 20 inches – came with startling regularity. For one stretch, we reeled in jack kings, smaller king salmon that migrated early and were still feeding. We caught grayling, char and sockeye salmon.

One of us had a fish on the line about every other minute. When a five-minute stretch passed without hooking something, it was worth noting – and it didn't happen again.

"This isn't fishing," Taylor said. "This is catching."

That might sound like a throw-away line from a Saturday morning fishing show. Still, I can find no better way to describe that day.

A month later, I'm grilling a silver salmon caught on that trip. As the smells of salmon drift from our patio, I'm back on a sandy beach, bear tracks at my feet, silver salmon on my line.

On that day, my wife Jennifer caught two silvers on our first two casts. Minutes later, I hooked my own silver. Looking down the beach, I saw four bent rods.

That frenzy didn't last – the fish soon moved on – but it gave us plenty of fish to take home, to have salmon to compliment the deer, ducks and quail in our freezer.

As I share meals or stories with friends, the reaction is invariably the same: That must have been a trip of a lifetime. What an incredible place for a fisherman. You must have been in heaven.

It's all true. But it got me thinking about how we see Alaska and how we see the abundance of fish and game.

For many, the abundance of Alaska is a given. The state is wild, it's special and it's going to stay that way. Or is it?

On that point, I'm less sure.

When we have an abundant resource, we always think it's going to be in perpetuity. But the truth is, this continent – for that matter this planet – once brimmed with the abundance of Bristol Bay. Every step of the way, humanity has taken that abundance for granted. And then it was gone.

Everyone knows the story of the bison and the passenger pigeon, but the loss of abundance is true for rivers, too. My family owns a piece of property in central Pennsylvania. Shamokin Creek, which flows through that land, runs orange with mine drainage. No one will list it as one of the last great wildernesses on earth. No fish has lived there for generations. It's dead water. But once it supported millions of shad and cels, enough to sustain commercial fisheries. Never again, at least not on any time scale humans can appreciate.

Mark Twain once wrote a list of his favorite American foods, a story well documented in Andrew Beahrs' book *Twain's Feast*. Twain considered the signature food of Philadelphia to be terrapin soup; the signature dish of Baltimore to be roast diving ducks, particularly canvasbacks. Both items were an inexhaustible wild bounty, or so it seemed. Try finding either on the menu today.

People once complained about splashing salmon keeping them awake at night in Boise. Today, salmon conservation in Idaho often concerns dozens of fish, not millions.

The abundance of Bristol Bay is still here, in all its glory. I count experiencing it as one of my most cherished outdoor experiences: The running silver salmon,



Arctic grayling are one of many fish that line up behind spawning salmon to feed.

fishing for halibut in an impossibly beautiful bay, the rainbow trout gulping those eggs, the haunting volcanic activity of the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes.

It's one of the largest remaining backcountry areas on earth. Yes, it's still here. Already, though, the proponents of Pebble Mine are asking us to assume this abundance will last forever. They are asking us to ignore a tailing pond full of toxic chemicals and up to 10.8 billion tons of mine waste that will, by their own assessment, require perpetual remediation.

That means: forever.

They are also asking us to trust that *this time* things will go as planned, that there will not be unforeseen technological failings – the kind that have occurred at every other mine site in the world.

They are asking us to believe that even though this mine will be twenty times larger than all of Alaska's existing mines combined, it will not affect salmon.

They are asking us to believe that salmon will just persist in Bristol Bay, because, hey, we all know that Alaska will always have salmon, right?

Just like the Great Plains will always have bison and Pennsylvania coal streams will always have shad, and the Chesapeake Bay will always be able to supply Baltimore with an endless supply of canvasbacks. Yeah, just like that.

Maybe this time we do know better. Maybe this time, with sportsmen and women leading the way, we know that Bristol Bay is more precious than gold.

We can get this one right. We can ensure that the largest wild salmon fishery on earth continues to provide, contin-

ues to inspire.

The Pebble proponents are counting on us to quietly forget the abundance of Bristol Bay. They're banking that we'll accept the loss of the largest wild salmon fishery on earth just as we have accepted the loss of passenger pigeons.

On the last day of our Bristol Bay trip, we drifted the river one final time, catching grayling and jack kings and rainbows. As our final minutes on the water ticked too rapidly away, I hooked a truly giant rainbow—an early arrival, having just shown up to dine not on eggs, but on the chunks of decaying salmon.

Just like that, I lost the fish. But how could I feel disappointed? Another cast and there would be more fish. It seemed like it could go on like this, forever.

And it can. But Bristol Bay still needs our help. Let's get it right this time. We owe it to the salmon. We owe it to the future. 🐾

BHA member Matt Miller is senior science writer for The Nature Conservancy. His stories have appeared in SPORTS AFIELD, BUGLE, LIVING BIRD and many other publications. Read more at science.nature.org

What You Can Do To Help

More than 800 hunting and angling groups and businesses have signed a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, asking that Bristol Bay's productive waters be protected from inappropriate large-scale mining projects like the proposed Pebble Mine. To lend your group's or business' support, contact BHA member Scott Hed at scott@sportsmansalliance4AK.org.

Tell President Obama, the EPA and your members of Congress to protect one of the planet's truly iconic sporting destinations. You can take action at www.SaveBristolBay.org.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video must be worth more, right? Watch the award-winning documentary film *Red Gold* (www.RedGoldFilm.com) and share it with others who love the outdoors.