

PART 1:TRAVEL/PLANNING LOGISTICS

Alaska is big, and deciding where to fish, what fish you are targeting, and what is the best time of year is a daunting task. Learning how to learn or knowing where to start can be a little overwhelming. So this article will serve as an introduction for the backcountry fly fisher-person interested in floating and fishing the Alaska Wilderness. The focus will be on a float trip in the Bristol Bay area, targeting Silver (aka Coho) Salmon.

Agenda:

1. A few notes about DIY
2. Where is Bristol Bay
3. Resources
4. Planning your trip
5. FAQs

1. A few notes about DIY

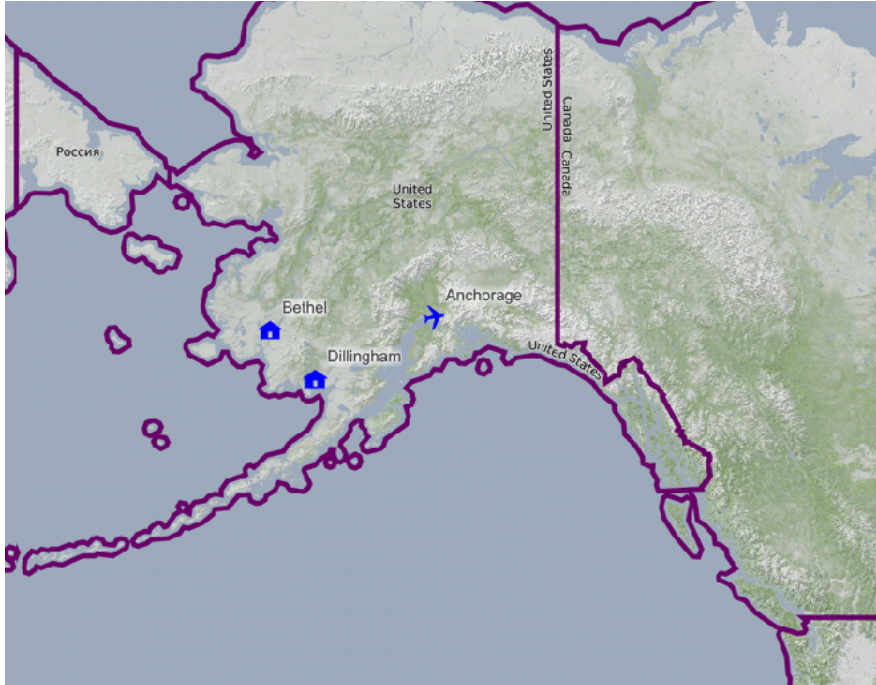
A word of caution to the beginner backcountry fly fisher-person. If you've never camped and/or floated in the Wilderness of Alaska, it is well worth having an experienced outdoors person along, for some guidance on setting up campsites and rowing techniques. A great alternative is to use a reputable guide service. I highly recommend "Wild River Guides" <http://www.wildriverfish.com/>. An alternative to a fully guided trip is our local fly shop, "The Laughing Grizzly" <https://www.laughinggrizzlyflyshop.net> that also sponsors **semi-DIY trips**. These are great options for the "first-timer" who wants to experience a backcountry float trip.

Rowing generally isn't very technical as most of the rivers in the Bristol Bay area are easy/tame waters. Generally avoiding sweepers (trees crossing the river) or submerged trees are the biggest challenge. Trees are not your friend! Research the presence of rapids and the difficulty of the rapids. There are, of course, rivers with some white water. Call the guys at Alaska Fly Fishing Goods and they'll give you all the details. The Alaska wilderness isn't the place for an entire party to learn to row. Make sure someone in the party is competent on the oars!



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

Bigger isn't always better. Limit the size of your group to a reasonable number of people. A DeHavilland Beaver can carry three fly fisher-persons and gear with raft & oars (limit weight to 125 lb each for personal + camping gear). For reasons of safety, having two rafts with two or three fisher-persons on each raft is a good idea. A larger party size means more flights and with the variability of Alaska weather, getting everybody out on the same day isn't guaranteed. Also, bigger parties mean bigger gravel bars to set up camp, but more about that later.



2. Where is Bristol Bay?

Where is Bristol Bay and how do you get there? Bristol Bay is in the Southwest portion of Alaska. The rivers of Bristol Bay are nestled in the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge & Togiak Wilderness area, serviced through Bethel and Dillingham, both of which have direct flights to and from Anchorage.

3. Resources

Before getting into the details of planning a backcountry float trip into the Alaskan Wilderness here are some resources to call or email:

- **Alaska Fly Fishing Goods (AFG)** - <https://www.alaskaflyfishinggoods.com> **(HIGHLY recommended)**
 - Brad Elfers - brad@alaskaflyfishinggoods.com
 - Mike Cole - mike@alaskaflyfishinggoods.com
- **Renfro's Alaskan Adventures** - <https://www.renfrosalaskanadventures.com> **(HIGHLY recommended)**
 - Wade Renfro - renfrosalaskanadventures@gmail.com
 - Sharon - sharonr@seward.net
- **Tikchick Airventures** - <https://www.tikchickairventures.com/about.htm> **(HIGHLY recommended)**
- **Wild River Guides** - <http://www.wildriverfish.com/> **(HIGHLY recommended)**
- **Papa Bear Adventures** - <https://www.pbadventures.com>
- **Alaska Rainbow Adventures** - <https://www.akrainbow.com/deluxe2.html>

HIGHLY recommended - Indicates I've used the company and was pleased with their level of service

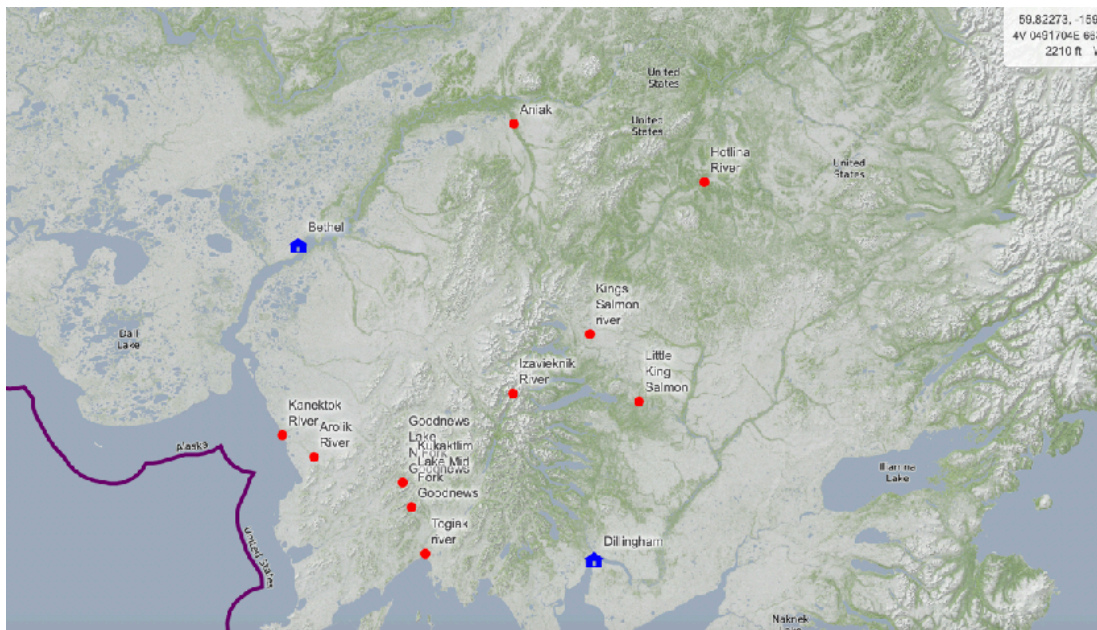
DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4. Planning your trip

- 4.1 Pick the species: Pick the river: Pick the time of year
- 4.2 Map the river
- 4.3 Decide how many nights on the river and mark potential campsites
 - 4.3.1 A few notes about camping
- 4.4 How much gear and food to take?
- 4.5 Gear lists
 - 4.5.1 Camping list
 - 4.5.2 Fishing list
 - 4.5.3 Fly fishing list (targeting Silvers)
- 4.6 What about meals?
- 4.7 Plan the trip logistics
 - 4.7.1 Decide what to mail and what to carry on
 - 4.7.2 Fly to Anchorage (spend the night)
 - 4.7.3 Fly to Bethel or Dillingham (pack for the float plane)
 - 4.7.4 Fly to the river
 - 4.7.5 *** FISH *** THAT IS WHY YOU CAME!
 - 4.7.6 Pickup and fly to Bethel or Dillingham
 - 4.7.7 Fly to Anchorage
 - 4.7.8 Fly home
- 4.8 Let's talk about the latrine
- 4.9 Equipment (Rental and your own)
- 4.10 Bear Safety
- 4.11 Cost Estimates

4.1 Pick the species: Pick the river: Pick the time of year: Deciding on the species of fish will help decide on the timing and narrow down the possibilities for rivers. Below is a list of rivers in the Bristol Bay area

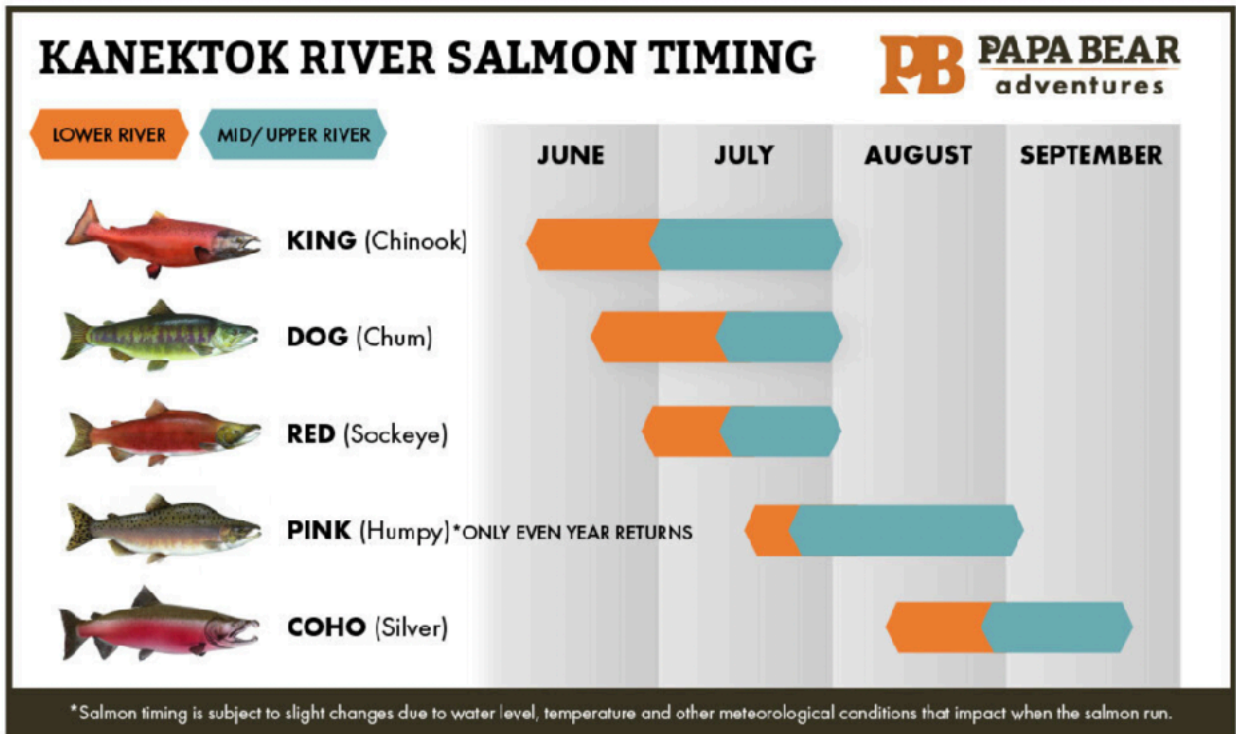
- Aniak River (Bethel) Arolik River (Bethel)
- Goodnews [North & mid-fork] (Bethel / Dillingham)
- Holitna (Bethel)
- Izavieknik (Bethel)
- Kanektok (Bethel / Dillingham)
- Togiak (Dillingham)
- King Salmon River (Bethel / Dillingham)
- Upper Nushagak River (Dillingham)
- Little King Salmon River (Dillingham)



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

My first call is always to [Alaska Fly Fishing Goods](#), [Brad](#) and [Mike](#) are fantastic resources and will share their knowledge on fishing the Alaskan Wilderness. The air taxi services also have abundant knowledge of the rivers; give them a call or send them a note.

Now that you've picked the river and picked the fish, you will need to decide where you are going to fly out of and pick the air taxi service. Bethel (pop:6270) is slightly larger than Dillingham (pop:2203), but proximity to your chosen river can be a driving factor in the decision-making process. I was extremely pleased with [Tikchick Airventures](#)



([Dillingham](#)) and [Renfro's Alaskan Adventures](#) (Bethel) and will continue to use them on future float trips. In this example, let's target Silver Salmon on the Kanektok River. The middle of August appears to be an excellent time for Coho and the upper Kanektok will contain Dolly Varden, Rainbow trout, and Arctic Grayling. This late in the season, King salmon, Sockeye and Chums will have spawned and be "red". During even years Pink salmon (aka: Humpy) will be prevalent in the river.



King Salmon



Grayling

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay



Sockeye Salmon



Rainbow



Chum



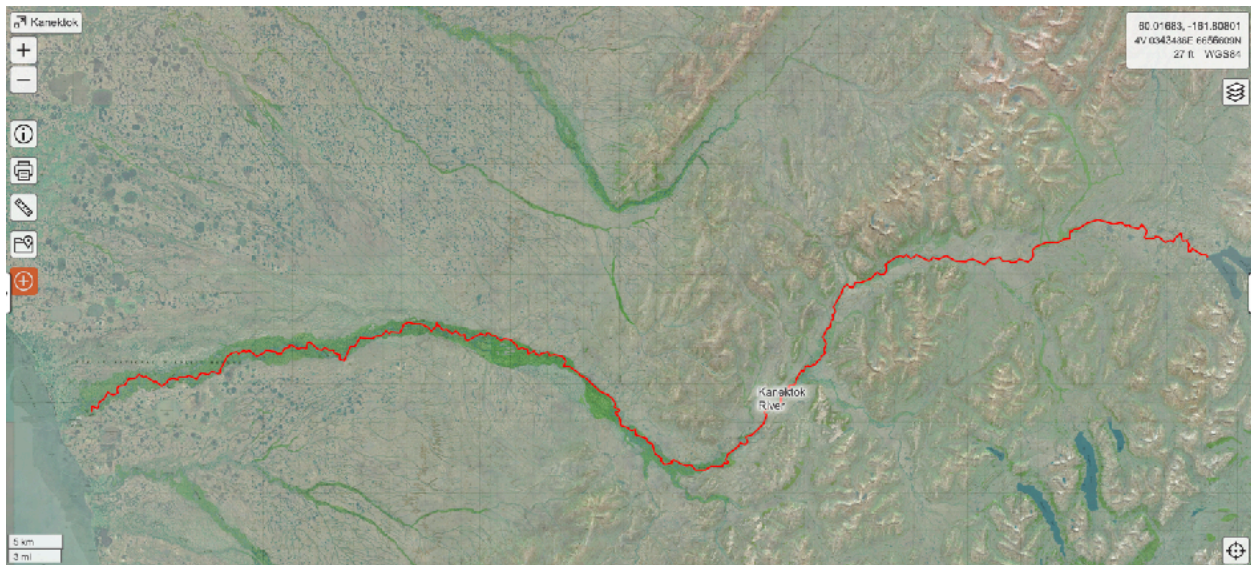
Silver (Coho)

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4.2 Map the river: Knowing where you are on the river is critical for a successful trip. The online mapping software Caltopo @ www.caltopo.com is an excellent tool for mapping the river. The basic subscription of \$20.00 per year allows for access to the mapping website, printing maps, and creating waypoints routes and tracks. The yearly subscription includes access to the mobile app which allows the user to download maps and waypoints to a mobile phone and use the phone as a GPS in the wilderness. Training videos for using Caltopo can be found on YouTube.



When creating the river path, in Caltopo, first trace the river using the global imagery layer. Note, rivers change, and using global imagery over the topo layers is probably a little more current than the forest service topo maps.

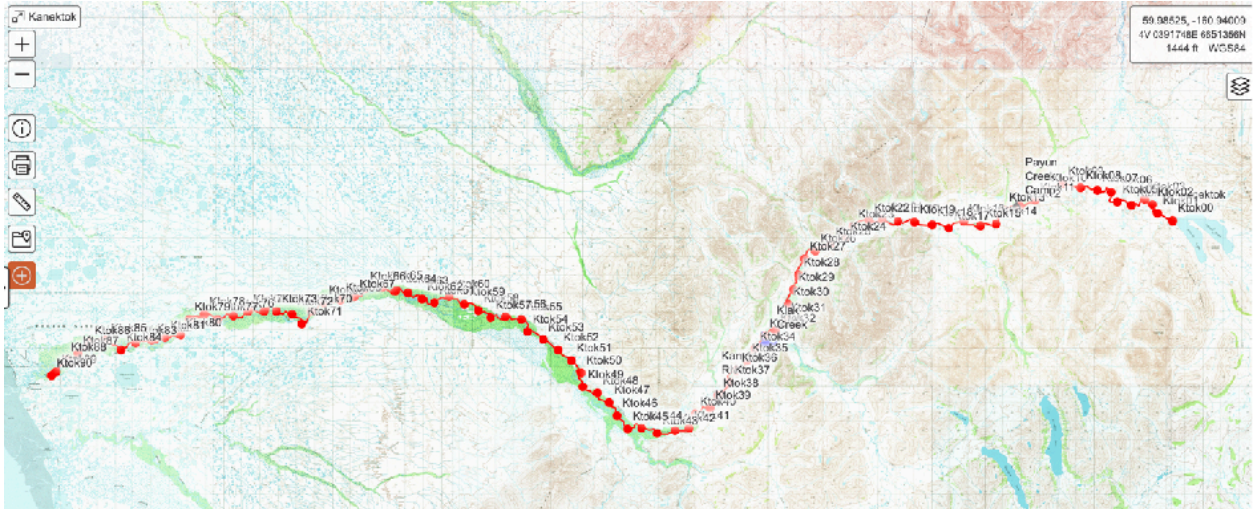


Trace of the Kanektok River

After having traced the river, waypoints are created every mile along the river path starting with 0. This is an automatic function in Caltopo. Having a waypoint every mile

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

allows for the backcountry angler to see their current location, within a mile while on the river. The waypoints can be downloaded to a .gpx file which in turn can be loaded into a mobile app or GPS using the appropriate software. When printing maps for a backcountry adventure make sure and purchase waterproof paper.



Create waypoints every mile on the river
(This is an automatic function in Caltopo)

After having traced the river the user can also create waypoints at significant points of interest, the “put in”, the “exit” and possible **campsites** along the way.



Waypoints created at points of interest, the input, possible

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4.3 Decide how many nights on the river and mark potential campsites

With the waypoints created you will be able to pace your trip. Rowing aggressively downstream plan on about 3 mi/hr. Rowing while fishing, plan between 1.0 mi/hr and 1.5 mi/hr. The Kanektok is about 100 miles and we have decided to stay 10 nights on the river. We would like to have two nights that we don't have to break camp, so we are planning four 15-mile days, four 10-mile days, and two 0 miles days. Zooming in you can see the confluence of Payun creek at mile 12 has the potential for good fishing, so we are planning to push our first day of floating for 12 miles. At Payun creek we will evaluate the campsite potential and fishing prospects and decide either to make camp or move on. Flexibility is key! Be prepared to either push a few extra miles if required or cut a day short if a phenomenal campsite/fishing hole presents itself early.

4.3.1 A few notes about camping

There are a few things to discuss regarding campsites.

First and foremost you will be making camp on gravel bars. The more open space the better. Bears frequently walk along paths on the tundra and making camp along a bear's path is a bad idea.

Second, since you're sleeping on gravel and rocks, **have a good therm-a-rest**. The new therm-a-rest pads are amazing and light. The old self-inflating foam pads that I used to backpack with just don't cut it for a night on an Alaskan gravel bar.

Third, a gravity water filter is worth its weight in gold. Setting up the oars in a triad (shown below) will make a solid stand for the gravity water filter. The water filtration crew will thank you mightily for this little bit of luxury.



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

Setting the raft up as a wind break with a tarp serves as a shelter from the elements and creates a solid base camp. This space provides a dry area to assemble the tents when the rain is coming down and serves as the central camp area where the group can congregate for meals and socialize. A hot cup of coffee under the tarp with friends warms the chilled bones.



4.4 How much gear and food to take?

The answer is how many flights you want to pay for. Weight is king. The Beaver floatplane: useful load is 1200 pounds (Your bodies & your gear- not the pilot). Three guys & gear with one raft is a normal load (Plan on limiting gear to 125 lb per person).



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

For planning, purposes figure the useful load of a Cessna 185 floatplane is 650 pounds (Your bodies & your gear). Perfect for 2 Guys traveling light who can go places those larger groups can't get. You can expect to pay \$600-650 / hour for the Cessna and \$750 / hour for the beaver. (prices have gone up since the pandemic) So if it'll take the Cessna 1 hour to get you out then you pay for 2 hours so the pilot can return home. An hour of flight time (at 100 knots) will get you to some damn fine rivers in Bristol Bay...Doing the math for 2 guys dropped off and picked up and it'll average \$1,500-3,000. for the round trip (remember the plane has to fly back after dropping you off). **This floatplane charter is where you want to allocate your precious \$\$**. Your pilot is going to put you into the river/fishing that is worth traveling all this way for.

PART 2: GEAR LISTS (WEIGHT) AND MEALS

4.5 Gear Lists

"An example itinerary and gear list with weights can be found through the following link.https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1iolxjAFbydno_VvTBur_XR9A9GEIdIOJ-fE8I48U-Pnl/edit?usp=sharing The gear lists are quite comprehensive, covering camping gear, kitchen gear, fishing gear, and more."

4.6 What about meals?

Breakfast: Consists of a couple of cups of coffee (I use Starbucks Via packs) and a Cliff bar or a couple packs of oatmeal or Kind bars

Lunch: Lunches are made up of a bread (either tortillas or bagels, something that won't crush) with peanut butter & jelly or with a tuna pack with the condiment of choice

Dinner: Dinners consist of a freeze-dried meal supplemented with cooked fresh fish (either a chrome salmon or char, Dolley Varden, or Arctic Char).

Sushi and Sashimi are off the menu.

Fish tapeworm, or *Diphyllobothrium spp.*, is acquired by eating raw or

undercooked freshwater or anadromous fish (ie, sea fish that spawn in freshwater rivers, such as salmon). Marinated and smoked fish can also transmit the worm.

With a little creativity, there are low-cost options to freeze-dried dinners. Check out this article from Alaska Fly Fishing Goods "**Eating in Style on Your Alaskan Float Trip.**"

<https://www.alaskaflyfishinggoods.com/how-to/do-it-yourself/float-trip-food/>



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4.7 Plan the trip logistics

4.7.1 Decide what to mail and what to carry on

It is strongly recommended to avoid packing critical gear in checked luggage due to the risk of delays or loss. Instead, it is suggested to pre-ship essential equipment such as camping gear, freeze-dried food, fishing gear (including boots, waders, fishing equipment, and flies), and other items. It's important to check with the air taxi service regarding their preferred method of receiving shipped equipment, such as USPS, UPS, FedEx, etc. In the case of Renfro's, USPS is preferred. While UPS and FedEx

leave packages at the hangar door, the post office requires packages to be picked up if no one is available to receive them. The weight limit for Priority Mail items is 70 lbs, and the maximum size is 108 inches in combined length and girth. Plastic storage bins such as the Rubbermaid 35 Gal. Action Packer Storage Bin are a suitable option for packing and shipping equipment as they meet the USPS dimensional requirements and can be locked for added security.



The basic trip logistics are provided below

- **Fly to Anchorage** - Spend the night at the Holiday Inn. Pick up alcohol to take to Bethel
- **Fly to Bethel** - Renfro's (Air taxi) will pick us up. We will go to the hangar and repack our stuff in dry bags for the float plane trip the next day.
- You MUST have paid Renfro all due prior to arrival OR pay in cash. They will not take a credit card, Venmo, or any other electronic form of payment. Up to this point you have been paying for ONLY the air taxi. We will be renting other equipment from Renfro, raft, shotgun, chairs, cots, etc. Again, you will either have prepaid for everything or pay cash in Bethel
- There is a grocery store in Bethel. You will pick up some supplies, tortillas and other food items, and toilet paper
- Have dinner in Bethel. There is a good pizza place that has beer. You will pay for your room when we get there. The B&B will take a credit card.
- **Fly to the river** - We will most likely be taking a Beaver de Havilland. We will pack as if there are two flights taking 3 passengers + a raft and gear. You need to be on the plane with your gear. It is about 1 hr flight to the river.
- The first group will be putting the raft together and packing while the plane goes back for the second group.
- When the second group arrives we'll put the second raft together and load it with gear. Depending on when we arrive will depend on how far we go down the river.
- **FISH & FLOAT** for the next week or so... **that's why you came** :-)
- **Take out at a small Inuit village** - You will need \$50.00 cash each to have the natives take us and our stuff to the airstrip

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

- **Renfro's will pick us up at the airstrip** - This will not be a float plane and I'm not sure how many trips, maybe one maybe two.
- Repack camping equipment back in the Rubbermaid containers. You can either check the Rubbermaid container or mail it back home
- Spend the night in Bethel. There is a good pizza restaurant with beer
- **Fly from Bethel to Anchorage and you're on your own**

4.8 Let's talk about the latrine



The toilet kit should consist of a **trowel** or **foldable shovel**, **toilet paper**, **biodegradable hand wipes**, a **lighter** and **hand sanitizer**.

Back country camping tip... A mosquito coil broken into small pieces can help keep the mosquitos and “no see um’s) off your ass while doing your business.



Basic Latrine Set Up...

- Set up your latrine area around 200 ft away from the river.
- Dig a hole 6” to 12” deep
- Set up an “in use” indicator. Hang an old rag or some article that is visible so that if the indicator **isn't** in place, that means someone is using the bathroom. Hang the indicator back in place when your business is done.
- Burn your toilet paper
- Fill in your hole and tamp down the dirt when you break camp

Back country camping tip... Having a place to sit is another luxury option to consider. A simple seat over the latrine hole is well worth the weight and will give you time to think.



Back country camping tip... I take two bottles with me on back country trips. A small mouth Nalgene bottle I use as my water bottle and a large mouth Nalgene bottle I use as a pee bottle for the middle of the night. On a cold rainy night having a pee bottle next to you is a luxury.

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4.8 Equipment (Rental or your own)

You will have the option to rent some of the necessary equipment or bring your own. Please note that you must bring your own sleeping bag. For rafting, we always rent the raft and all equipment necessary, such as the frame, oars, personal flotation devices (PFDs), and the raft cooler, which doubles as the oars person seat. Additionally, we rent firearms, sawed-off shotguns for each raft, and bear spray for each person on the trip.

In general, we prefer to bring our own gear and accommodations, such as tents, stoves, and kitchen kits, as our equipment is of higher quality and lighter weight than rental gear."

A list of rental equipment (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dhrf9z9XmZvVSmAKtsqPa0BeCEHRf73O/edit>) for rental is listed below:

Rental Equipment from Renfro

Raft+accessories+cooler+life jackets	White gas
Satellite phone	Spot / InReach
Coleman Two-Burner Stove (Propane)	Propane Bottle
Shotgun w/ shells	Bear Spray
Folding Chairs (large)	Folding Chairs (small)
Kitchen Kit	Roll up table
Sleeping Cot	

4.8 Bear Safety

Grizzly bears are prevalent throughout the area and precautions must be taken. These links are excellent resources on Bear Safety :



- 4.8.1) Everyone should carry a can of bear spray & an air horn at all times
- 4.8.2) Each raft carries a firearm onboard at the ready
- 4.8.3) Food is packed up in bear vaults or stored in coolers and kept ~100 yards from the camp.
- 4.8.4) Bear fences are available although I've never used one
- 4.8.5) Food, toothpaste, and other "good-smelling toiletries" are never to be brought inside the tent.
- 4.8.6) Minimize fishing alone, always use the buddy system.

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

4.8.7) Always make noise and be loud. (shout “hey bear”) when walking on river

4.8.9) Clean fish close to the water so the entrails can get washed away

4.8 Cost Estimates

The cost savings of a DIY float trip are substantial. A comparison of fishing costs of a DIY trip is approximately \$210 /night on the river compared to \$1000/night for a guided trip (plane fare, lodging, flies, and incidentals not included). The DIY option also allows the freedom to travel at your own pace and camp in your chosen locations. The “almost all in” for an 11-night trip on the Kanektok river is approximately \$4000.00. This includes room, flights, and rental equipment. It does not include food or flies

	\$ / person		Summary
Flight to Anchorage from Denver (round trip)	\$868		Flights \$1,149
Lodging Anchorage	\$105		Lodging \$405
Flight to Bethel from Anchorage (round trip)	\$280		Fishing trip \$2,031
Lodging Bethel	\$150		Fishing lisc \$105
Renfro rental equipment	\$461		Shipping costs \$330
Renfro flight to river	\$1,520		Total \$4,019
Boat Agent pick up fee	\$50		
Lodging Bethel (RETURN)	\$150		
AK fishing Lisc Nonresident 14 Day Sport Fishing License	\$105		
Shipping equipment early	\$250		aaaaaaa
Return (assume check bags)	\$80		
Total	\$4,019		
Costs in Orange are estimated			

5. FAQs

5.1 Question: Do you freeze the fish and send them home?

Answer: No because this is a float trip we don't have the facilities to freeze the fish or ice in the cooler to store them.

5.2 Question: Do you eat fish?

Answer: Yes. We eat either a Dolly Varden or a chrome Silver. We never eat a rainbow and I've never eaten Grayling

5.3 Question: What do you do when your batteries run out?

Answer: I take a battery power bank that can be purchased on Amazon.



DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

5.4 Question: What flies do you use?

Answer: I'll defer this answer to the guys at Alaska Fly Fishing Goods. If you have a group of six or more, they are likely to create a shopping cart on their website. Here is the shopping cart AFG made for our group: <https://www.alaskaflyfishinggoods.com/component/triprec/recommends/esbu02spoi64uepda0u0ddgq2r3braww752texo2ywaorlmrp/>

5.5 Question: Do you take your phone?

Answer: Yes. I use my phone as a backup to the GPS AND I carry the InReach mini which interfaces with my phone for communication to the "outside world".

5.6 Question: Why don't you rent a Satellite Phone?

Answer: The Garmin InReach has SOS capabilities and allows us, via SMS TXT, to communicate with our families. I'll activate my subscription for one month (while we are on the river)

5.7 Question: Do you use the tracking feature of the GPS or InReach?

Answer: No. I find tracking burns precious battery time. We turn on the GPS, InReach or phones only to see where we are or communicate back home or take a few pictures. In general we keep our electronics turned off.

Safety \$14.95 USD/month	Recreation \$34.95 USD/month	Expedition \$64.9 USD/month
<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Unlimited SOS✓ 10 text messages/month✓ Unlimited Check-in messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Unlimited SOS✓ 40 text messages/month✓ Unlimited Check-in messages✓ Unlimited tracking at 10-minute intervals or longer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Unlimited SOS✓ Unlimited text messages✓ Unlimited Check-in messages✓ Unlimited tracking at 2-minute intervals or longer
Learn More	Learn More	Learn More
Reactivate	Reactivate	Reactivate

5.8 Question: What rods do you take?

Answer: The answer to that question is contingent on the species of fish you are targeting. In our case, I'll take two 6wt rods for trout, grayling, and char and two 8-weight rods for Silvers. It is worth mentioning when setting the hook in a Silver, use a strip set, NOT the standard trout set by lifting the tip of the rod. These large salmon will break an 8-wt rod if given the chance.

DIY Float Alaska Bristol Bay

5.9 Question: What kind of sleeping bag should I take?

Answer: My sleeping bag is a synthetic bag rated at 20 degF. The problem with down is that when it is wet it loses its insulating properties. It will make for a very uncomfortable night, but once it dries it will be fine. Getting wet won't hurt it in the long run. If you are concerned about the down bag becoming wet, consider using a bivy sack. It is a waterproof (often Gore-Tex) sack that covers your sleeping bag. If it starts to rain there is a head cover you can zip shut and sleep dry.

5.10 Question: What kind of bags do you take on the raft?

Answer: You will need dry bags for all the equipment. We have two large dry bags for community gear (kitchen, toilet, etc...) a large dry bag for each person on the raft, and a small dry bag for each person that carries their camera, InReach, or other items to keep dry.