



A STEELHEADER'S DREAM STREAM

ALASKA'S SANDY RIVER LIVES UP TO ITS BILLING AS ONE OF THE BEST STEELHEAD RIVERS IN THE U.S. *By Pat Hoglund*

JERRY SWANSON HAS AN 'OH-SHIT' LOOK ON HIS FACE. HE'S THIGH DEEP IN THE SANDY RIVER. THE NORMAL TALKATIVE "SWANNY" HAS GONE EERILY QUIET. WHICH IS WEIRD IF YOU'VE SPENT ANY TIME AROUND HIM.

He's walking backwards to shallower water concentrating on not falling and maintaining some semblance of control on a steelhead that is charging downriver toward the Bering Sea. I'm watching this all unfold in front of me from the opposite gravel bar. Eventually he gets the fish under control and Swanny lets out a scream when the fish rolls. It's filled with excitement and profanities, all of which is understandable after catching a glimpse of the fish. Back to his normal self, Jerry's giving me a play by play as he fights the steelhead. "You gotta see this mother (expletive)," he yells across the river. "It's a (expletive) pig!"

Trevor Covich is standing by with the net. He's not-so patiently coaching Jerry on what to do. Swanny gives him a look like, "Really?" It's not his first rodeo, that's for sure. But Trevor is understandably excited. And nervous. Maybe apprehensive is more accurate. It is, after all, a big (expletive) steelhead. This is the first week on the Sandy and if this fish is any indication of what's to come for the remainder of the season, Trevor has every right to be giddy. By now I've strung up my fly rod and have attempted to cross the river in three different places. Each time I'm met with a current that's either too fast or water that's too deep. Or both. My goal is to get a photo of the fish. Eventually Trevor nets the fish and in concert they both scream "Holy Shit!" They slap backs and fist bump.



Jerry Swanson, right, and Trevor Covich with Jerry's second steelhead from the same run. The big buck left Swanny momentarily speechless.

PAT HOGLUND PHOTO



ALASKA SANDY RIVER



Pat Hoglund with an average-sized steelhead from the Sandy River. TREVOR COVICH PHOTO

With the steelhead resting safely in the net, Trevor jumps in the jet boat and races across the river to pick me up. I step into the boat, grab my camera and within a few seconds I'm on shore taking photos of Swanny and Trevor and the fish. I look at the steelhead and it's an honest to goodness 17 pounds. Maybe even bigger. Jerry is like a kid who skipped his Ritalin dosage. He's talking a mile a minute and his voice is at fever pitch. I take a couple more photos and Jerry releases the fish. The three of us reflect on the swing, the grab, the fight, and the fish. It's what every steelhead fishermen comes for when they fish the Sandy River. After he catches his breath, and collects his thoughts, Jerry, being the gentleman that he is, offers up the

run to me.

"There might be another one in there. Why don't you fish it," he says to me. Deep down I wanted to take sloppy seconds, but I play my own gentleman card and insist that he fish it again. "It's your pool Jerry. You finish it out."

He steps in and makes another cast. And just like a movie script, he sticks another fish. And like any good sequel, this one is bigger than the first. This one is an honest to goodness 18 pounds. Maybe even bigger. Like the one before, it's a big buck that has a cherry red cheek plate and a slight hint of green on its back. Swanny is laughing like a kid again. Trevor nets it and he's beside himself. It's a guide's dream come true. It's an angler's dream come true. Back

to back trophies. I am a spectator with a camera and I'm every bit as happy as Jerry. When he releases the steelhead, he lets out a sigh like a marathoner who just ran 26 miles. "I'm done," he says. "Pat, you finish it."

I look at the pool and then look at Jerry to make sure he's sincere. Trevor looks at me and gives me a look like "you'd be a fool to not fish it". So I step in. Three casts into the run and a steelhead grabs my fly and skyrockets out of the water. It jumped so high that it landed on the river bank below me. It muscled its way back into the river and raced downstream. Once it hit the gravel I was convinced it would throw the hook, but somehow it stayed firmly embedded in its jaw. I suspect that had as

The Sandy River Lodge's reputation is well-earned thanks to the guides: Bill, Trevor and Jason.
PAT HOGLUND PHOTOS



much to do with how hard it slammed my fly as the pressure I put on it. Jerry is now giving me a load of good-natured crap because the fish I hooked is only 10 pounds. "It's a dink," he chimes in laughing.

Sometimes sloppy thirds are better than nothing. After a brief admiration session, I release the steelhead and the three of us are still in awe of what just transpired.

Welcome to the Sandy River, a Dream Stream if there ever was one.

As I survey the situation, and the week I spent here, I don't think it's a stretch to say the Sandy is arguably one of the best steelhead rivers in the U.S. That sounds like hyperbole, but outside of British Columbia I can't think of a river that yields more steelhead to the swung fly, in as favorable conditions, than Alaska's Sandy River. In five days of fishing, Jerry and I landed over 40 steelhead, most of which ran between 8 and 12 pounds. That doesn't count the drive-byes, grabs, pulls and whiffs that happen in a course of a week. The two behemoths were certainly the highlight of the trip. To a fish, each was a textbook example of what a gamefish is supposed to be: healthy, aggressive, hard-fighters with bodies like professional athletes. Each one was a reminder that steelhead are special fish worth traveling for.

It just so happens that the Sandy River is one of the most remote rivers in the country and therein lies part of its attractiveness. Any river that is accessible only by air has a certain level of sex appeal. Located 600 miles from Anchorage, the Sandy is part of the Aleu-

tian Islands, the chain of islands that makes a dog-leg left from Alaska's mainland and fades into the Bering Sea. The river itself is located between the towns of Port Moller and Ilnik, towns so small that they're officially called boroughs.

It is one of several rivers on the Alaska Peninsula with documented steelhead runs. To find yourself wading the river means one thing: You are willing to travel to faraway places to experience a river, and its fish, that are both unspoiled and hard to find. Which brings me to why I'm fishing here. I have a sweet spot in my soul for steelhead. They are a transforming fish, and I've had an affliction for them ever since I caught my first one three decades ago.

Fed by a series of glaciers from Mount Venjaminof, the glaciers empties into Sandy Lake, a large, shallow lake that sits at the headwaters of the river. Immediately below the lake the river is at its widest point stretching some 500 yards. It slowly necks down to a smaller river that is 100 yards at its widest point and 20 yards across at its smallest point. The river flows for approximately 18 miles before it empties directly into the Bering Sea. As it breaks away from the lake the Sandy meanders through gently sloped terrain where it divides itself into a series of braids. At its deepest point, you'll find the occasional slot,



a few buckets and a deep pool here and there. Mostly, you'll find classic steelhead runs where the river evens

out and the depth is consistent before a tailout empties into the pool below. The river substrate is a combination of small boulders about the size of coconuts that gradually give way to smaller rocks that sit atop a bed of black sand. It is that sand that gives the river its namesake and it is a direct result of the volcano looming in the distance. Still very much active, Mount Venjaminof last erupted in 1995. It is a massive heap that contains a 25-square mile cupped ice field, the largest crater in North America. It is the only known glacier on the continent with an active volcanic vent in its center. The fact that it erupted two decades ago is an indication that this region is every bit wild as it is volatile.

Steelhead were first documented in the Sandy River in 1985 by the state of Alaska. The first official study was conducted in 1991, but there have been little studies done since. Biologists for the ADF&G conduct extensive studies on the salmon runs (biologists construct a fish weir each summer at the head of the river), but aside from a few redd surveys little is known about Sandy River steel-

ALASKA SANDY RIVER



Left, Remote and chock-full of steelhead, the Sandy River is a Steelheader's 'Dream Stream'.

PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

Bottom, Jason Fee prepares to release a steelhead from one of his favorite runs on the upper river.

PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

Right, Trevor Covich loads up his rod in preparation to swing his fly through the tailout.

PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

head. What is known is derived from fishermen. We know that steelhead return in late summer, spawn in the fall and over winter in the river before returning to the ocean in the spring. The winter survival rate is good thanks in part to the relatively mild temperatures in the Aleutians. Many of the steelhead are two-salt fish, with the occasional three- and four-salt fish. Most steelhead weigh between 8 and 10 pounds with a respectable number of fish in the 12- to 16-pound range. The odd 20-pound steelhead is caught every year.

There are two fishing lodges that operate on the river and their steelhead seasons run from the last week in September through the month of October. It is essentially a six-week season. The Sandy River Lodge was first built by Mel Gillis, who started guiding moose and bear hunters in the 1970s and it remained a hunting lodge throughout the '80s and '90s. The story goes that one of Gillis's customers having already filled his moose tag wandered down to the river and hooked a steelhead. The proverbial light went on and Gillis hired a couple steelhead guides the following year, which started the steelhead fishery on this river.

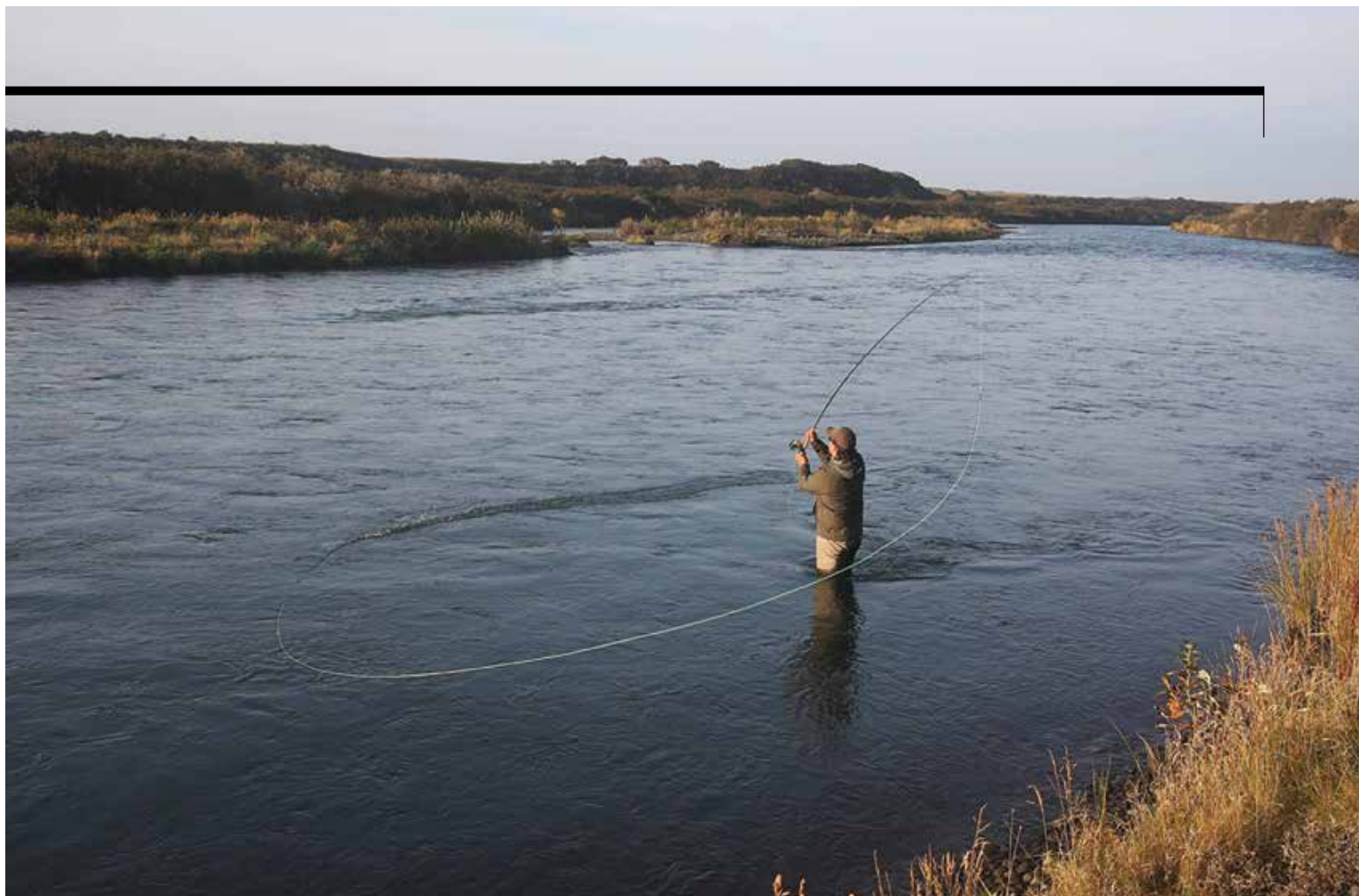
"When I showed up on my first day of guiding 15 years ago my guys hooked seven and landed five and I had no idea where I was going. No idea whatsoever," recalls Jay Robeson, head guide at the Sandy River Lodge. "I came home that night and I was thinking that was a pretty good day. I came from Washington state where hooking seven steelhead is a good day. I came back to the lodge beating my chest. Guess what? I was low boat. I knew then that this is a special place."

In 2015 Gillis sold the lodge to Aleutian Adventures, and he operated the lodge until last year. When he sold the lodge, Aleutian Adventures maintained the program as if Gillis never left. They retained the same guides, kept the fishing program consistent so that clients returned to the same program. And like any good steelhead lodge, it is measured by its guides. The guides here are as legendary as the fish. There's Bill Stahl, who goes by the name New York Bill. Stahl is a New Yorker by birth, but lives in Montana in the off season. His accent and mannerisms are all New York, which might lead one to think he's rude, abrupt and crass. Spend a



day on the water with him and you'll know his tough exterior is paper thin. He cares deeply about his clients and wants nothing more to see you hook a steelhead. He's a guide's guide. Jason Fee is the analytical thinker. He's more quiet and reserved with a wealth of knowledge. He's guided bear and moose hunters over the years but knows more about one fish holes than anyone on the river. Which is to say if you're looking for a single steelhead holding in a solitary lair, he'll put you on it. Then there's Jay, who is legendary for his story telling and passionate about his life as a Sandy River guide. And finally there's Covich, the young gun. He calls everyone Mate, is an expert fly caster and a veritable steelhead bum. He's equally passionate about steelhead and walks and talks the biz. Collectively they all make up what's great about the Sandy River Lodge.

"We arguably have what I think is the best staff, ever, in this part of Alas-



ka," says Jay. "It's an eclectic staff for sure. Jason fishes hungover better than anyone. Bill is the best burger in town. Trevor? I call him the predator. He'll catch fish all day long. Myself? I'm the old man and I still catch them. No one catches fish like we do."

Each morning after breakfast we dressed in our waders, loaded our fly rods and backpacks onto an ATV and drove to the river (less than 5 minutes) where the jet boats wait. Each guide and his clients stick to a beat that helps spread out the anglers for the day. After lunch, everyone becomes more mobile as they intensify their hunt for the second half of the day. Throughout the day, whether you fish high, middle or low, you'll find so much good water that you'll keep yourself occupied until dinner. Most days you're back at the lodge between 6 and 7 p.m.

The river's make up is tailor made for a two-handed rod. There are long, sweeping runs where placing your fly with a long cast is needed. And where

the river necks down, a well-placed cast will put your fly on the opposite shoreline eliminating the need to wade down onto the fish. At times fishing the opposite river bank plays to your advantage, but most times you'll be wading down to the holding water where your fly will swing through the fish. And that's where a two-handed rod is nice to have.

I brought a 6-weight and a 7-weight, both of which were adequate. My 13-foot 7-weight wasn't overkill, but I primarily fished my 12 ½-foot 6 weight. It was plenty of rod for the river and the steelhead I encountered. I think any rod in the 12- to 13 ½ -foot range will cover all your needs on the Sandy.

With me I brought a variety of lines in different weights, but I relied primarily on a Skagit head. There were times when a Scandi head fishes best, but I think most people who fish here will agree that 90 percent of the time you'll want to fish a Skagit head. The heavier fly line will allow you to fish a variety of tips, which is most important here. I

found most the water I fished had some depth to it and a good selection of tips made all the difference in the world. As a reference, I fished MOW tips from RIO that had five-foot sections of T-11 and T-14 behind a 10-foot section of floating or intermediate line. This proved to be a perfect setup in most situations. Fish that with a three-foot length of 20-pound leader (Maxima is my preference) and you're in business. Steelhead here are not leader shy, so fishing anything lighter is like going to a gun fight with knife. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Running line is a matter of personal preference; my choice is RIO Slick-Shooter (25#). Be sure to have a good supply of backing on your reel. Just ask Swanny.

Fly selection always makes for good discussion at the dinner table, and while opinions vary, I think all the guides at Sandy River Lodge would agree that flies with black, blue, red, purple and pink (or combinations of those colors)

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Jerry Swanson with the first of two big steelhead taken from the same run.
PAT HOGLUND PHOTO



will pique a steelhead's interest. I fished a lot of Intruder patterns, along with my favorite go-to steelhead fly—a size 6 purple Silveynator with a pink head. Size 2 and 4 Intruders are the norm. I would avoid fishing anything smaller than a size 6.

Your approach is like any other river: Cast at a 45-degree downstream angle and let it swing through the holding water. For obvious reasons, be sure to cover the tailouts judiciously.

Much of the water you'll find on the Sandy is relatively easy wading. It's rare that you'll wade in water deeper than your knees. If you find yourself fishing with Jason, that will change because he likes to fish water where steelhead are holding in deeper water. Keep in mind, he knows all the hidey-holes that don't always fall into the 'classic' holding water. My advice is to trust him. Yes, I'm speaking from experience.

The lodge, or camp as it's sometimes called, started out with a single structure and has since been upgraded to six buildings, of which can accommodate eight anglers a week. The main lodge consists of an open kitchen, a large dining table, a TV room, a bunkhouse that sleeps six, and an upstairs loft that sleeps two. There is internet available, and cell phone coverage. The guide shack sleeps six, and there are two cabins, each with separate bedrooms and a shower. The accommodations are lean, but comfortable. The one variable is the food as keeping a cook seems to be the biggest obstacle. Patrick Murphy and his wife Sopidta were employed when I fished there, and the meals were excellent. The menu ranged from prime rib, baked ham to ribs. Breakfast was made to order and packed lunches consisted of sandwiches and chips that we

Good things come in pairs. PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

ate on the river. At the end of each day we gathered around the kitchen table where we tied flies, enjoyed a cocktail, ate appetizers, and shared stories.

The collection of characters that you meet at a steelhead lodge is always interesting. Most folks are there for the very reason you're there: They all have a deep connection with steelhead so it's always enjoyable to break bread with a new group of people. Husband and wife team, Dan and Josie Owen, own Alaska Air Transit, the charter flight company that brings anglers to the lodge each week. Both Dan and Josie have an infectious attitude that oozed happiness each night at the table. A retired military and commercial airline pilot, Dan



always had a good pilot story to share. Mark Gambee, a retired doctor from Florida, was solo and was preparing to spend the next six weeks on the Bulkley River. A hard-core steelhead bum if ever there was one. His list of rivers fished equaled John Jenkins' list. Both are traveling steelhead bums. And then there's Swanny, who I had the pleasure of fishing with all week. He owns Fish Head Expeditions, a fly fishing travel company that specializes in placing traveling anglers in places like the Sandy. He was busy doing his own R&D.

After we strung up our fly rods for

Dan and Josi Owen doubled up on steelhead.
TREVOR COVICH PHOTO


Wildlife is abundant on the Sandy. Red fox, moose, and brown bears roam the banks of the Sandy River. PAT HOGLUND PHOTO



the last time, we had one more night before the next group of anglers was flown in. We ate an excellent meal, finished Swanny's supply of wine (the guy knows how to travel) and stayed up a little too late. As the evening came to a close the weather took a turn for the



worse and it was questionable whether the plane would be able to land on the 1,800-foot gravel runway, which by the way is maintained by garden rakes and weighted rollers drug behind a small riding mower. The next morning Dan communicated via radio with his pilot. I was quietly hoping the plane would have to turn around and head back to Anchorage. I wasn't ready to leave. The crosswind was whipping in at 35 miles per hour and the runway wind socks twirled like an ice skater. As the Pilatus PC-12 came into view, the pilot touched down on the runway like a U.S. Navy pilot landing an F-16 on an aircraft carrier. Just so happens he's a retired Navy pilot and landing in a 35 mph crosswind is second nature to him. When the plane came to a stop in front of the

lodge, the next week's guests piled out of the plane. My group loaded our gear and reluctantly said our goodbyes to the staff. The plane jumped into the sky and was on a course for Anchorage. With one last view of the Sandy River—this time from several thousand feet in the air—I watched the river snake its way from the lake to the Bering Sea and couldn't help but wonder how many steelhead were waiting to introduce themselves to the fishermen who just arrived. Knowing what I knew I suspected when it was their time to leave, the Sandy would tear at their heart-strings just as it was doing to me. 

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"The Sandy River of the Alaska Peninsula is a special magical place. Be it Kings or Steelhead on the Spey swung fly, The Sandy is a one of a kind playground."

—George Cook, 3-time guest

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