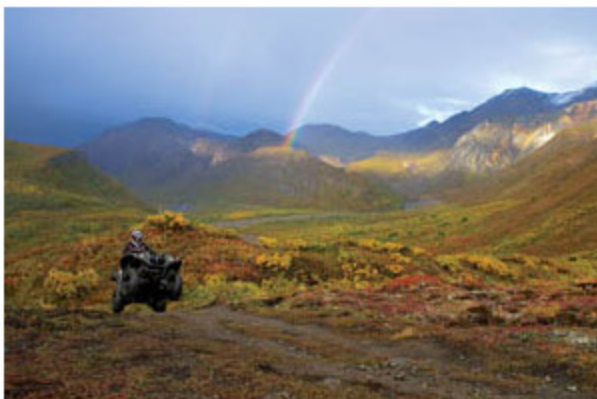


## FEATURES



Adventure: Alaska

Photo: Keith Mulligan

### Adventure: Alaska

By John "Doogie" Howell  
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We touched down in Anchorage and I could smell the adventure taunting me. It was daring me to try and make this trip better than last year's epic Alaskan journey. Not only was I up to the challenge, but I brought an entire posse with me to tackle the wilderness, the trails, and maybe even the bears (though we really hoped we wouldn't have to wrestle a grizzly). Speaking of wildlife, we hooked up a deal for some Grizzlies (the 700cc, four-wheel kind) and Rhinos (the 660cc kind) for our crew. Helping us secure the machines were some heavy-hitters from Yamaha, Steve Nessl and pro rider Pat Brown.

After getting out of the airport, Keith Mulligan (photographer extraordinaire), Glenn Milligan (our video guy), the Yamaha guys, and I joined up with contributing editor Kirk Deeter from our sister publication Field & Stream. Since Alaska is home to some of the best hunting and fishing in the world, we invited Kirk, who, in addition to being a writer for F&S, also happens to be a professional fly fishing guide from Colorado. The deal was he'd teach us the fine art of fly-fishing, and in turn we would pass along the finer points of how to properly navigate an ATV around the rugged Alaskan backcountry.

I called our truly awesome guide from last year, Tim Cook from Alaska ATV Adventures, and told him we were ready for our journey. With the details all sewn up and the quads fueled, it was time for us to make the long trek south towards Homer, which is a quaint little fishing town on the southwest side of the Kenai Peninsula. Homer is the halibut fishing capital of the world, but on this trip we would be attempting to land something else—Coho Salmon (also referred to as silver salmon).

It was raining when we left Anchorage and it was still raining when we got to Homer later that night. We found some really cool cabins on the side of some cliffs just north of a little town called Anchor Point. The cabins overlooked the Cook Inlet, but it was so rainy, we couldn't see much beyond the waves crashing on the beach. We all sat around and told some good "fish that got away" stories (the lies were starting well in advance). It was late summer in Alaska, so the sun still came up early and went down late. We wanted to get out early to catch some silvers, so we hit the sack.

The next morning, I was woken up by the sound of Keith tapping on the outside of the window in front of my bunk. The sun was up and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I was a bit tired and I thought that he was trying to point out how clear it was. He must have noticed my lack of enthusiasm for the brightness. "No, look out over there," Keith shouted through the glass. As I looked out over what was previously a rain and fog covered bay, there was not one, but two massive snow-covered volcanoes off in the distance across the bay (the Iliamna and Redoubt volcanoes). For a moment, I was speechless (and not because I had just woken up). I had never seen a volcano, let alone two sitting side by side. I hoped it was a good omen for the day ahead.

And man, was it ever. We drove the machines down to the beach, and Tim guided us up to an area where a river forms alongside the sand. It was there that we would start fishing for silver salmon as they left the ocean on their spawning run.

Kirk began the morning session with a quick lesson in fly-fishing. Luckily for us, it's a little easier than it looks, but it definitely requires a bit of finesse. Once Kirk was confident we had the basics down and weren't going to hook our ears, we began putting some flies on the water. We had a bet that whoever caught the first fish would be buying the first round down at the Salty Dog in Homer later that night. As soon as we confirmed it, Pat Brown called out "I got one!" And did he ever! That sucker must have been about 50 pounds! Actually, it was closer to two inches long, and probably weighed no more than a potato chip. But technically he did catch the first fish, so the drinks were on him that night.

It only took another minute or two for us to get down to some real fishing. If I hadn't been there to see it, I wouldn't have believed it. Kirk only cast once and he got a bite immediately. I was standing right next to him when the salmon hit, and almost instantly he called for me to step in closer. Kirk turned to me and said, "here you go Doogie, reel it in." Kirk handed over the reigns on the first real catch of the morning and for a split second, I didn't think I was ready...until I felt the fish fighting the line. At that point, it was on! Talk about an addictive rush—it seemed like it took an eternity (realistically it was three or four minutes), but I landed the fish. It was huge. Kirk said it looked like a good 12-plus-pound fish. It was a whopper! Of course, by the end of the night at the Salty Dog, that fish grew to be about 25 pounds and the fiercest finned monster ever to swim.

We fished the rest of the day and into the next. We caught tons of salmon, some Dolly Vardens, and even a rogue Steelhead (which we threw back). At night, we prepped some salmon fillets and grilled them next to our cabins. Busted out some salsa and fresh peaches and spread them on the fish while they were cooking—it was the best salmon dinner of my life.

When we were done with all our salmon fishing, we headed north on a little 339-mile jaunt up past Anchorage to the Talkeetna Mountains. We stopped in a small town called Sutton, which is just north of Palmer, and checked into a little place called the Sheep Mountain Lodge. Owned by Zack and Anjanette Steer, the lodge offers spectacular mountain views and has some of the best buttermilk pancakes I've ever tasted. Zack races dogsleds in the Iditarod and has all his dogs right there on the premises. Interestingly, he uses a quad during the off-season to help train the dogs. One morning we woke up to the sounds of Zach running his dogs, towing his Yamaha quad behind them. It certainly was one of the most unique uses of a quad I've ever seen.

But we weren't there just for the local hospitality—there were Rainbow Trout in the local lakes and we were there to get 'em. We went to a nearby lake later in the evening as the sun began to set. According to those in the know, this time is considered "golden hour," when the fish bite the most.

It seems that Kirk knows a thing or two about when to fish and when not to, which is good, since he was our expert. At first I thought we were going to get skunked, as the wind was whipping around a bit, but Kirk told me to wait until the lake settled. "They strike more when the water is calm," Kirk added. As soon as the wind subsided and the water calmed, I caught three rainbow trout in under 10 minutes! We fished a bit more and caught a bunch of small rainbows and then packed it in for the night.

The next day, we switched gears to focus on riding. Kirk seemed excited to put in some extra seat time, not the quick little trips back and forth between fishing spots that we had been doing over the past few days. Tim had set up an afternoon of authentic gold panning at a friend's place high in the mountains. His old buddy "Bones" lives in the middle of nowhere—and I really mean nowhere. It took us a long time to reach his cabin on our quads. It was definitely a throwback to older times—he had a generator for power and an outdoor refrigerator that was kept cool with mountain ice runoff. Let's just say Bones definitely doesn't live in the technological age—to him, a Blackberry is something that grows on bushes.

In exchange for letting us pan for a little gold, we brought Bones a couple cases of Budweiser (a good trade for some gold nuggets). Like Kirk with the fly-fishing lessons, Bones gave us some quick tips on how to find gold. And it's not as easy as it looks. But Bones knows his stuff, and by the end of the day, each of us had found some tiny nuggets. Funny enough, at one point, Keith and I were standing next to each other grumbling that we weren't finding anything. Bones, standing nearby with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, walked over to help us when his eyes lit up. A small sliver of gold was sitting on the ground, literally right between us. "That looks like one," Bones said. Keith and I knelt down and just shook our heads. It's easy to see how people get gold fever up there. Tim told us that at one point, he managed to dig up about \$4,000 in gold one day up in the mountains.

After we said our goodbyes and thanks, we continued on riding down the riverbed past Bones' cabin. It had been raining for a couple of weeks and the rivers were running fast and higher than usual. We didn't know there was a big storm approaching the head of the river further upstream that would greatly impact our ride.

As we carved our way through the canyons and multiple river crossings, we stopped to take pictures and appreciate the surrounding wilderness. Around every corner we saw Grizzly tracks, moose prints, and a few wolf tracks, as well. We were approaching the end of our ride when the first of two "incidents" occurred. As one of our members (who shall remain nameless) tried crossing a fast-moving stream, he caught a rock and the current got under the machine, flipping it and sending him tumbling. Fortunately, the machine eventually got stuck sideways and didn't carry down the river. Unfortunately, the quad sucked in tons of water when it was trapped upside down and the engine hydraulically locked up.

One of our Rhinos was equipped with a winch, which made it considerably easier to retrieve the stricken machine. After an hour or so of drying out the machine (and rider), we managed to get it running again. We started making our way back, and that's when we noticed that the river was much different than before. Every crossing that was difficult as we originally went downstream was now treacherous as we worked our way back up. There were a few times when we all got a bit puckered up trying to get out of the ragin' river, if you catch my drift.

It took some crafty riding, but we got out safe and sound. Well, sort of. We had one minor crash that inflicted some cosmetic damage to one Grizzly, but the rider emerged unscathed and he was ready to teach us some more fly-fishing tricks the next day (sorry Kirk, you didn't remain nameless!).

Speaking of the next day, it was our final day of the trip together, and Tim had saved the best for last. We started the morning off by fishing for Arctic Grayling in some nearby streams. Kirk said the fish would be biting like crazy since it was late summer, and he was right—like with the salmon our first day out, he also caught a Grayling on his first cast.

The most interesting part of the morning, though, was watching our guide Tim. He was more cautious here than anywhere else we had been. As a matter of fact, his shotgun was out and it never left his side. I asked him why he was more nervous here—especially since we were relatively out in the open. "Bears like to sleep in this tall grass by the streams. They'll be napping and the next thing you know, you're walking along and you might step on a grizzly," Tim somberly replied. We all made sure to stick by Tim's side from then on. And watch our step.

Glenn, however, swore he would just kill the Grizzly bare-handed with his new knife he bought on the trip (we were hoping he was talking about the four-wheeled Grizzly and not the animal). When we explained to him he'd need a vertical leap of about six feet to get to a Grizzly's jugular, he simply shrugged and said, "I guess I'll need a longer knife." Kirk just shook his head in sadness...possibly pity.

After Kirk caught his fill of the little Graylings, we packed up and headed out for the last long ride of the trip. Tim took us into the heart of the Talkeetna Mountains to a place called Raptor's Roost—an amazingly rocky mountain formation. We had to navigate through slow, swampy mud, fast river crossings, and even faster wide-open-throttle dry river beds. But in the end, we rode up to the edge of the craggy rocks and were surrounded by a double-spiked rainbow on each side of the surrounding valley. It couldn't have been timed any better and was certainly a fitting way to end the trip.

If you want to fish and ride in one of the most rugged, most beautiful places on earth, we highly recommend Alaska. And if you want to go there with a guide who knows his stuff, look for Tim Cook at <http://www.alaskaatvadventures.com> and tell him the guys at Quad sent you.