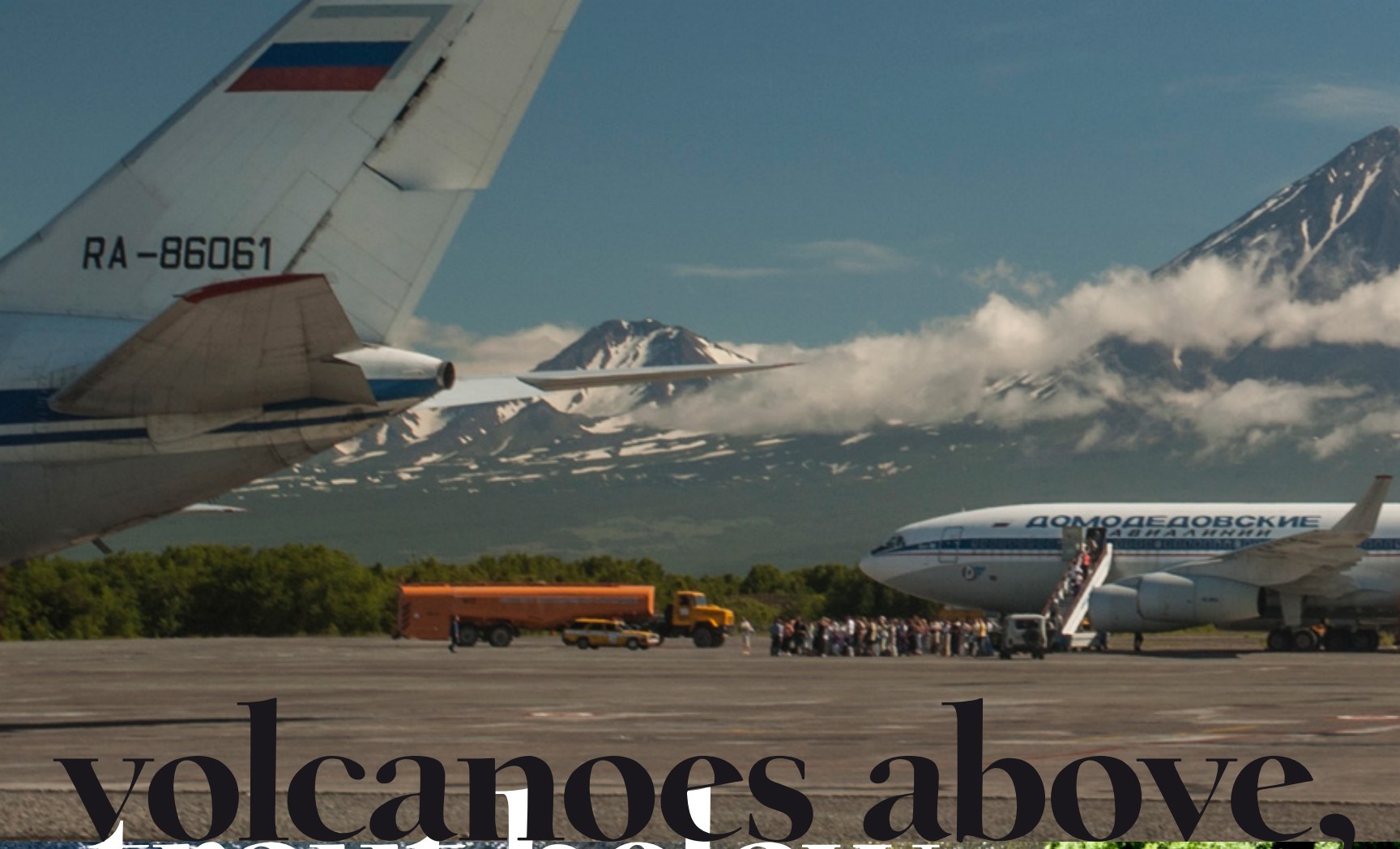
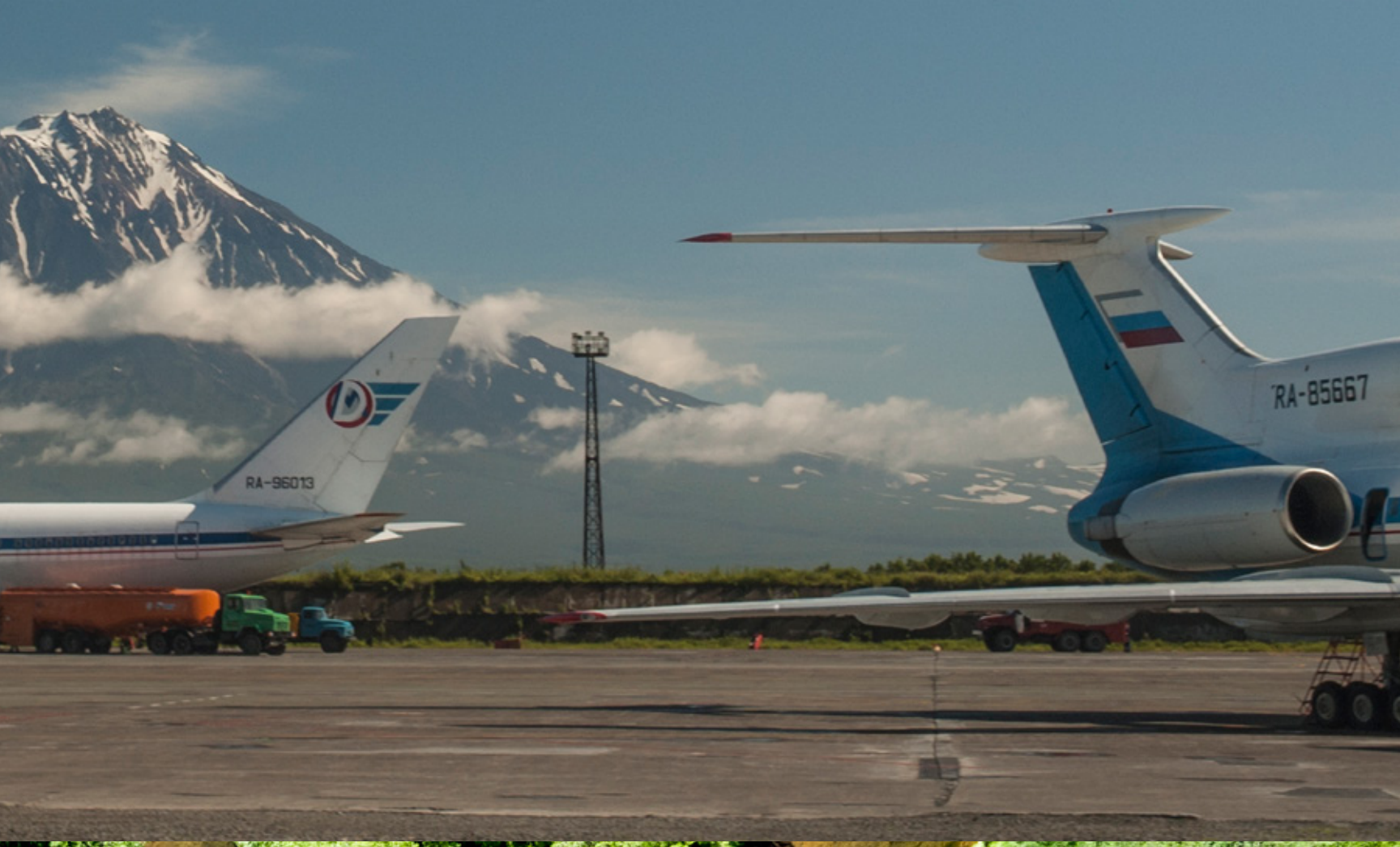



# volcanoes above, trout below.




# Trout by helicopter in the Russian Far East

by Kirk Deeter

photo Tim Romano (above) Rolf Nylinder (below)

# I'll be perfectly honest with you,

I didn't want to go to Kamchatka. Truth is, I'd been to Russia once before, albeit nearly 10 time zones west from Kamchatka. Back then, I was Atlantic salmon fishing on the Ponoi River. And after the Russians had lost my passport when I applied for a visa, all my luggage—my rods, reels, waders, and everything else—got stuck in Amsterdam. Faced with the "go or no-go" decision to proceed into Russia on the charter flight without my gear, I pressed on, shuffling through customs in Murmansk with a backpack containing just my laptop computer, six pair of underwear, and a bottle of Scotch I bought at the duty-free shop in Helsinki.

Borrowed guide gear helped me catch sick numbers of salmon. It was stupid-fantastic. Got a Russian stamp in my passport, eventually reunited with my luggage in Helsinki, and then flew home. Russia was officially off the bucket list.

Then Will Blair—owner of The Best of Kamchatka, who has been guiding and kicking around that part of the world for years—asked me at the F3T stop in Denver last year to visit Kamchatka with him later that summer.

"Really?" I asked. "Okay, I guess, and thank you very much." But deep down, I'm thinking: *We'll see what happens. Why in the heck would anyone fly through Anchorage, and then over all that wonderful Alaskan fishing, to merely experience the Russian version of Alaska?*

*For rainbow trout? Yeah, they're great, but you've seen one eat a dry fly and you've seen them all, right?*

*And those helicopters. Do I really want to get in an Mi-8 again? At first glance—and whiff—those things smack of something that flew out of a Jules Verne novel. You almost look for the pedals that drive the rotors somewhere in the cockpit.*

But seven months later, and much to Mr. Blair's credit, the trip logistics did eventually come tight (my new visa application was flawless), and I found myself seated amongst a group of Safari Club sheep hunters on a sleek, modern 737 charter flight descending through the clouds, staring gap-jawed at the enormous volcanoes toward Petropavlosk-Kamchatsky.

Blair slid into the open row behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, we had someone cancel on the 'Rainbows from Above' trip," he said. "Maybe we can get you on that trip. You fly on a helicopter to different rivers every day!"

"Great," I smiled, teeth clenched as I checked my Global Rescue insurance card. Inside, I'm thinking: *I've definitely out-kicked my coverage.*

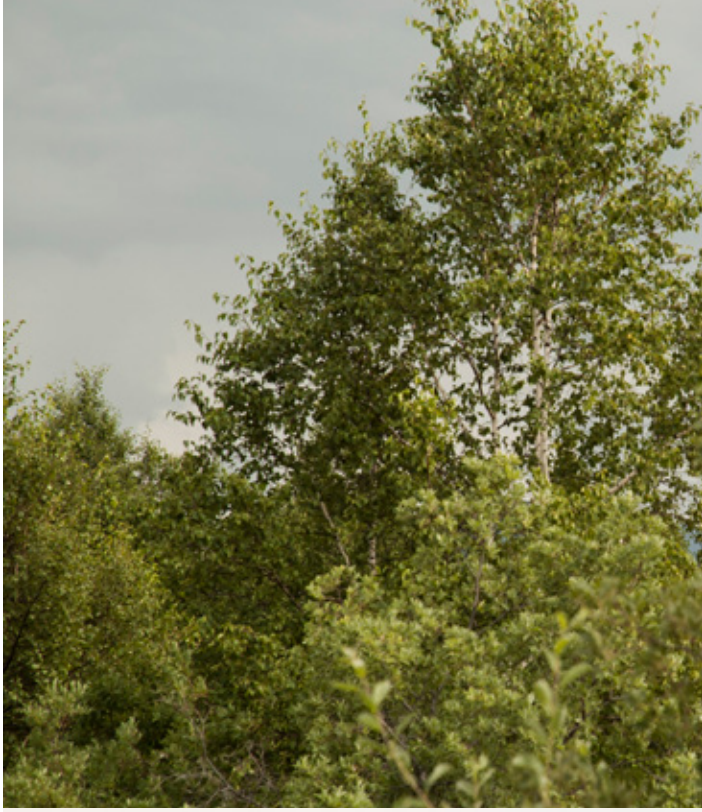
"Okay, I'm game. Let's do it, if it works."

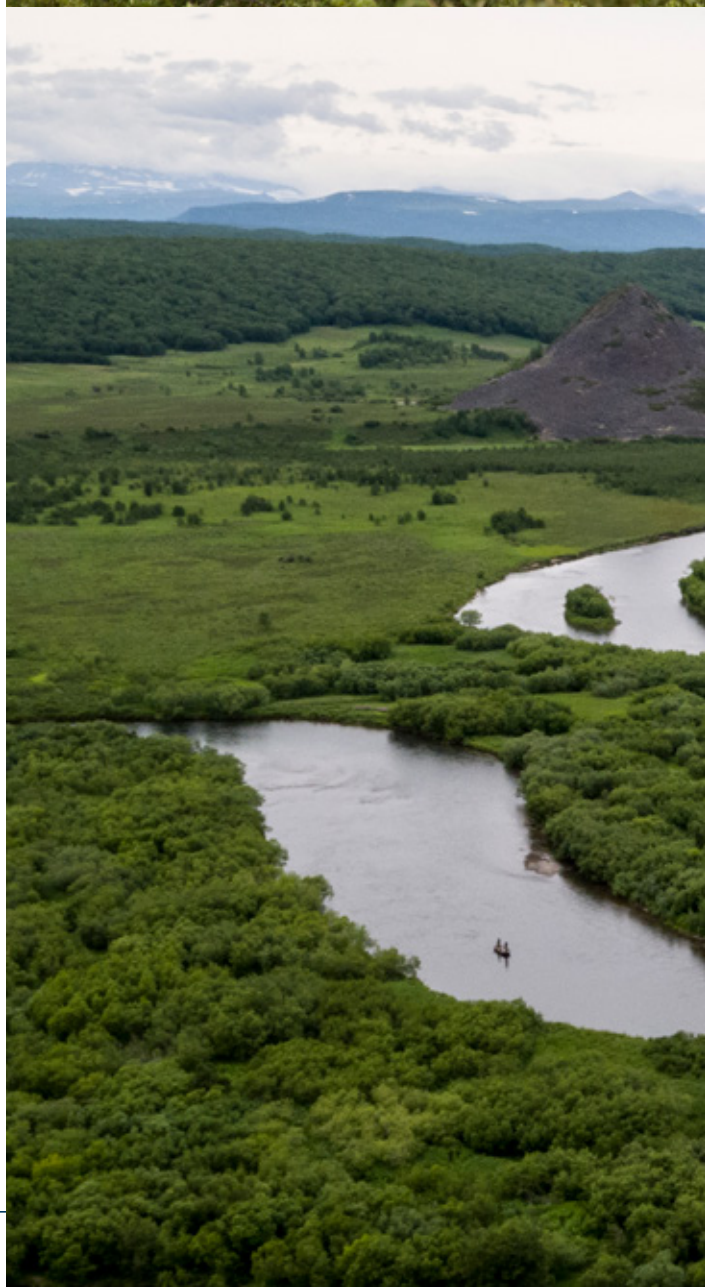
It worked, and it turned out that I had never been more wrong in terms of my preconceptions. I'll click off a few: Geography and climate. Late August, and I'm ready for the Alaskan tundra, 45 degrees and rainy, with a steady wind. Wrong. It was 70 degrees and sunny (with some showers). Deciduous forests, poplars and birches, with tall green grasses. I spent most of the week in a T-shirt, with 20 pounds of thermal underwear piled on a cot in the cabin.

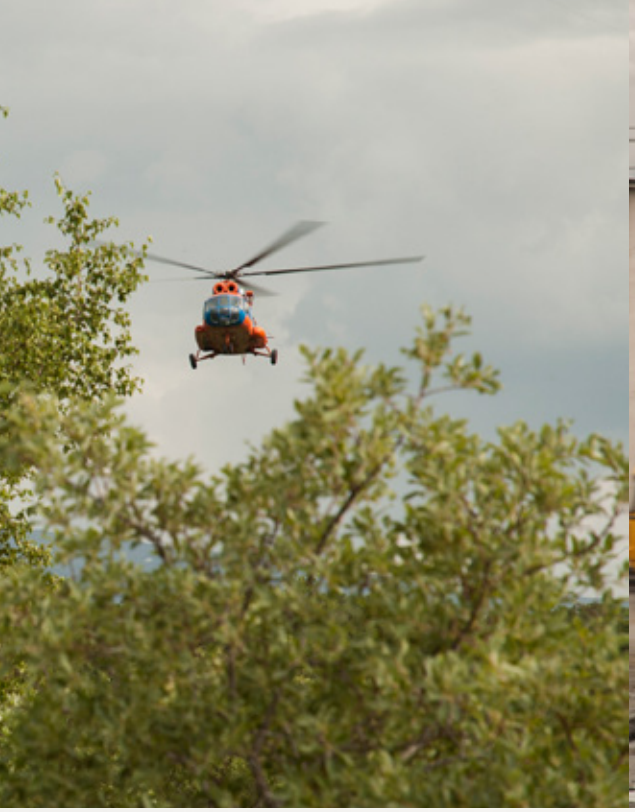
The bears. No problem. The camp where we stayed is primarily a bear hunting camp. The Russians hunt them so hard, in fact, that the bears go the other way as soon as you see them. The guides carry AKs, and the "bear dogs" it turns out, are pretty cuddly for the most part. Sadly, it turns out that every once in a while, one doesn't come home to camp at night.

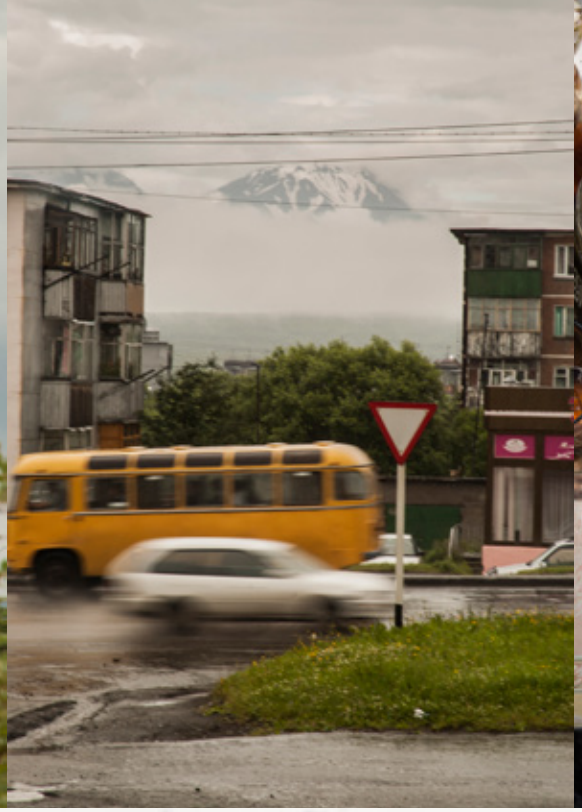
The helicopters. Again, no problem. Turns out the "Rainbows from Above" trip uses an Mi-2 chopper, which is smaller (seats six plus the pilot) than the workhorse Mi-8, which can carry an infantry platoon and three artillery pieces (or something like that). What I didn't expect was that our Mi-2 not only came with a skilled pilot, who could probably land on a picnic table in a 20-mph crosswind if you asked him, the camp also had a dedicated mechanic who would labor over every detail of that bird day and night. Smooth, beautiful sailing, every trip. Put it this way, now I'd rather be in an Mi-2 than in a de Havilland Beaver in Alaska with some of the bush pilots I've flown.

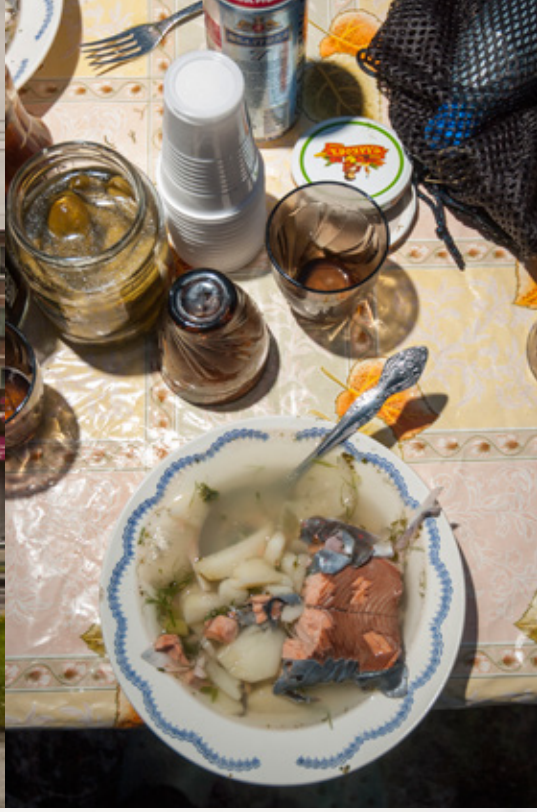
The food was incredible. Moose stew. Crepes with fresh berries. One of our travelling partners, David Vignes, is French, and he was good for a dozen crepes made every morning with wild blueberries from a jug filled by the helicopter pilot as we fished. Borscht (of course). Grayling sashimi. Bring your own wine; vodka they've got.

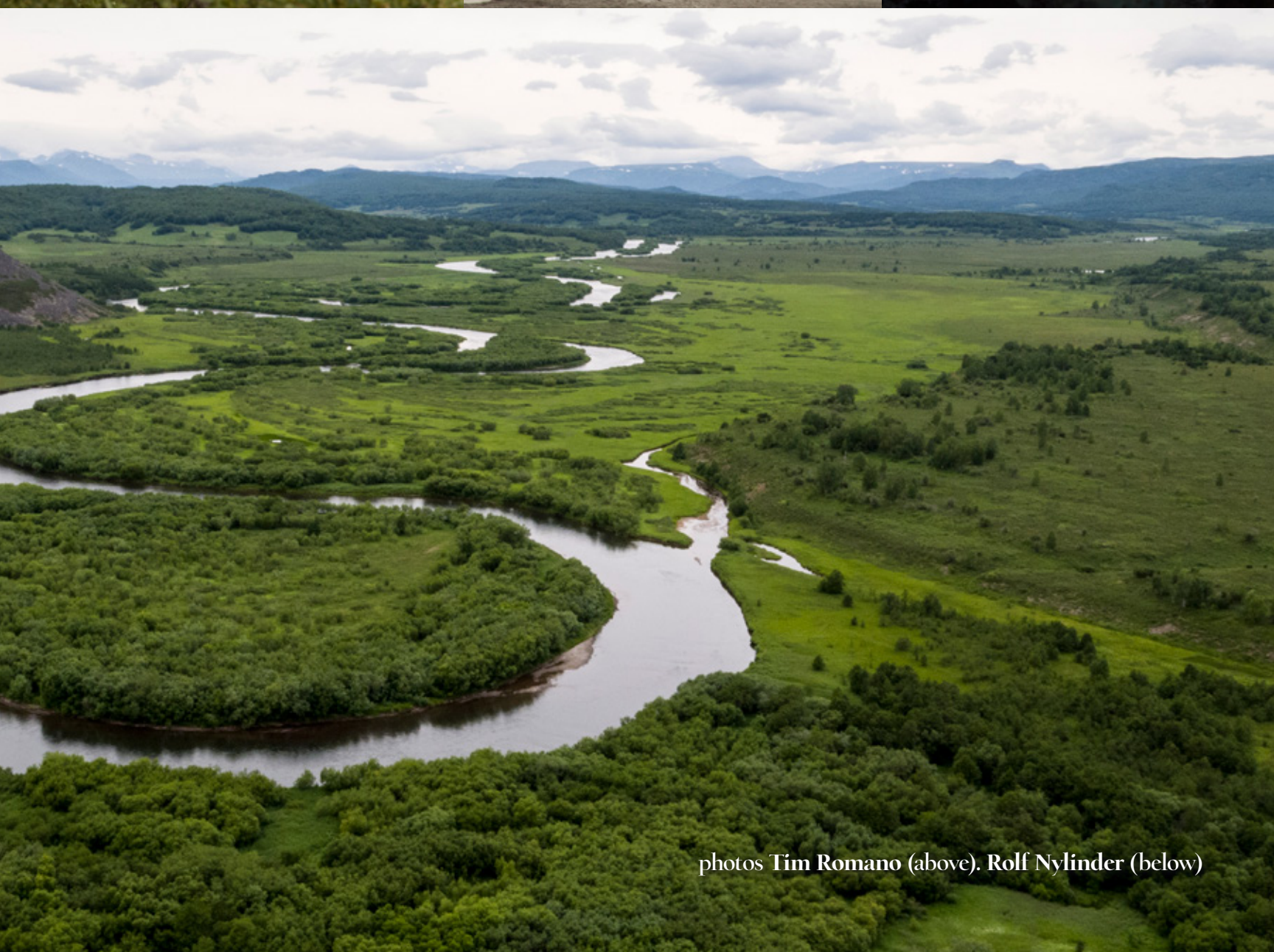












photos **Tim Romano** (above). **Rolf Nylinder** (below)

# Close your eyes and imagine your greatest fishing memory.

## Is it the grip-and-grin image that's hanging on your wall? Or is it what happened before that photograph was snapped, at the instant the fish ate your fly?

I have long thought that the countries that have the most acrimonious political relationships with the United States are often the places where you find the fishing hospitality to be warmest—Cuba, Bolivia, and Russia. Kamchatka is certainly no exception. About the only thing I was almost right about regarding Kamchatka was the fishing.

**Kamchatka is a large peninsula** that hangs off the eastern edge of Siberia like a finger testing the water of the Pacific Ocean, north of Japan and Korea. At the bottom of the peninsula is the industrial harbor city of Petropavlosk. A tall mountain range runs a spine south-to-north through the center of Kamchatka. Most of the famous rivers, like the Ozernaya (the "Oz") are on the eastern, Pacific coast, but there are great rivers on the western Sea of Okhotsk side as well. I'm not going to mention publicly the name of one of those rivers, it's just too good.

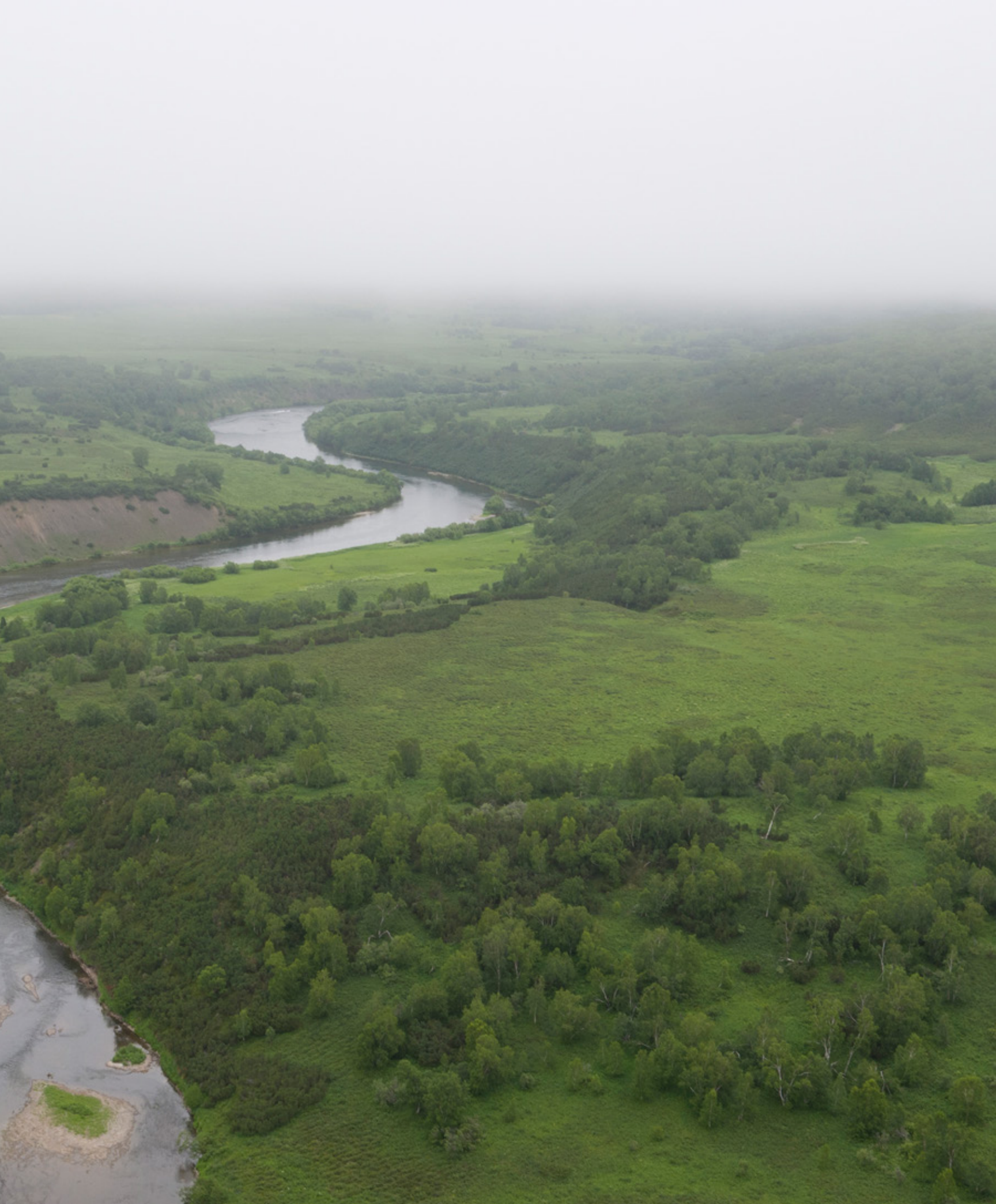
It's a logistical slog to get to camp. After the plane lands, you drive in a bus for three hours. Then the big chopper flies you north for a couple more hours. But there's apparently a direct correlation between remoteness of water, and eagerness of trout to eat mice. I've seen trout eat mouse flies, many times. I've never seen them eat mouse flies like they eat mouse flies in Kamchatka. If you're like me, the reason you're stark, raving mad about fly fishing really boils down to one thing: the eat.

Close your eyes and imagine your greatest fishing memory. Is it the grip-and-grin image that's hanging on your wall? Or is it what happened before that photograph was snapped, at the instant the fish ate your fly? The eat is the holy moment. It's the most sacred element of fly fishing, when the reward for all your effort is crammed into a flash instant, when human connects to fish. It's sublime.

All eats are wonderful, but some are more wonderful than others. Watch a native rainbow trout totally destroy a mouse fly bobbing on a river's surface. See that happen just once, and you'll replay it in your dreams, over and over, like a highlight reel.



photos **Rolf Nylinder**



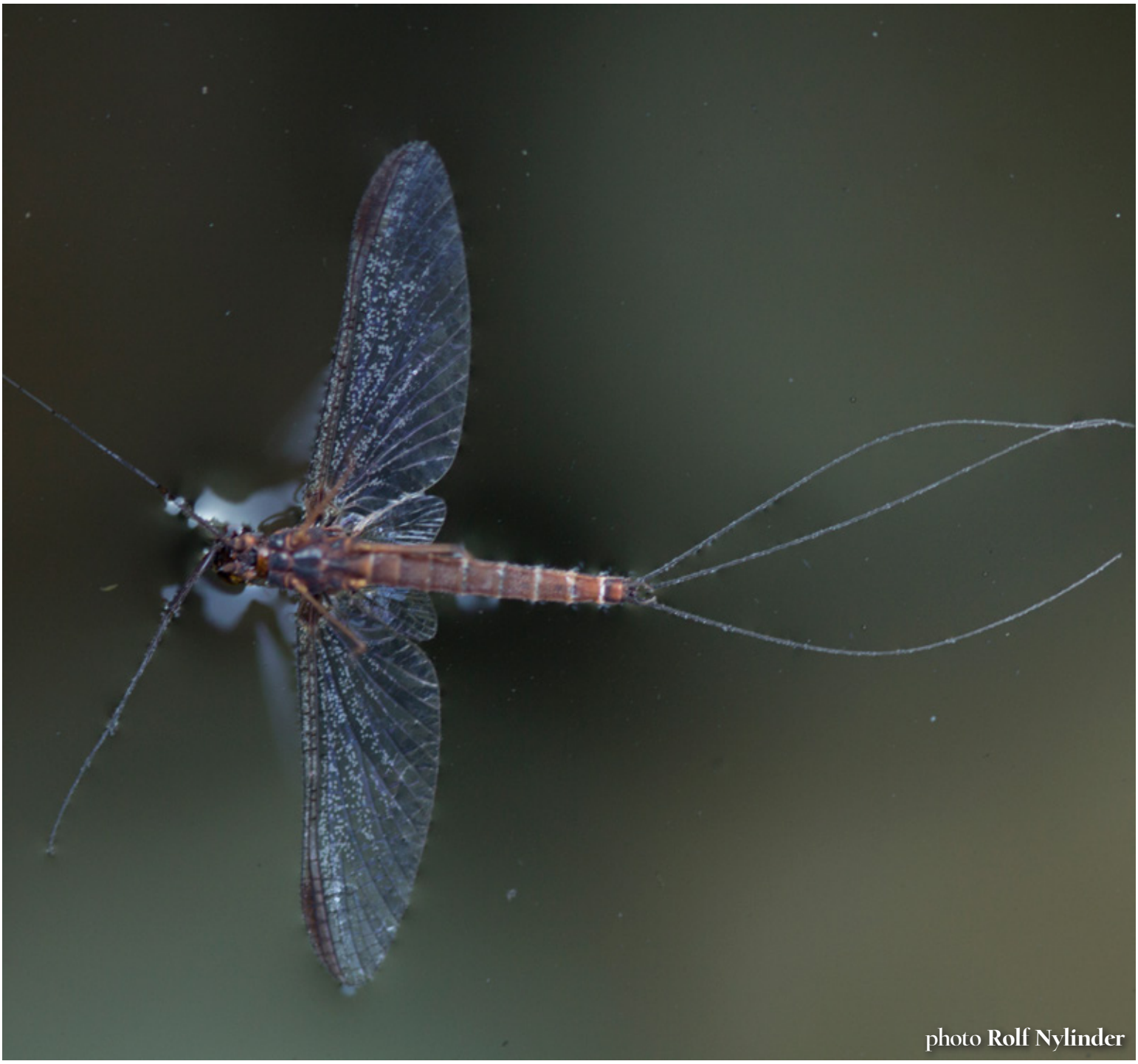


photo **Rolf Nylinder**

**Aside from David Vignes and his wife Donna,** my other travel partner, and cabin bunkmate, was Jim Dawson. Jim has a house on the Madison in Montana, and he can cast like a machine. He can also tie flies with the best tiers I know. He cracked open his box of home-spun goodies when we first made camp, and I was shocked by the gaudiness.

I produced my own store-bought beauties, and Blair started thumbing through them, weeding out the "fish killers" with the wrong types of hook. They're very serious about preserving the fishery here, so hooks that might sink to the gills or gullets are unacceptable. After Blair's vetting process, I was left with about six qualifiers, and had about $200 worth of flies sent to the penalty box. So I had to beg Jim.

On the first day, it rains. Low ceiling. All the chopper could do was ferry us across the lake by the lodge, and drop us at the inlet of the Dvukhyurtochnaya River, known as Two Yurt. Three casts with Jim's mouse pattern, and bang! An 18-inch rainbow. Really? Jim casts in the riffle. Bang. Another 18-incher. *They're eating the mouse fly with no fear.* Bang. A two-foot rainbow inhales the mouse fly. We collectively laugh.

The scene repeats itself all day. The next day we check out another nearby river, about 30 miles away. Then when the skies clear, and the chopper pilot is able to bust through the divide, he takes us to the west side of Kamchatka. We touch down softly near a spring creek.

Donna casts first. Bang. David follows. Bang. Jim and I cede water and march a quarter mile downstream. Jim casts. Bang. I follow in his wake. Bang.

*My goodness, this is silly. So this is what rainbow trout do when they don't get hammered by anglers. In some places, you don't have to feed them a size 20 RS2.*

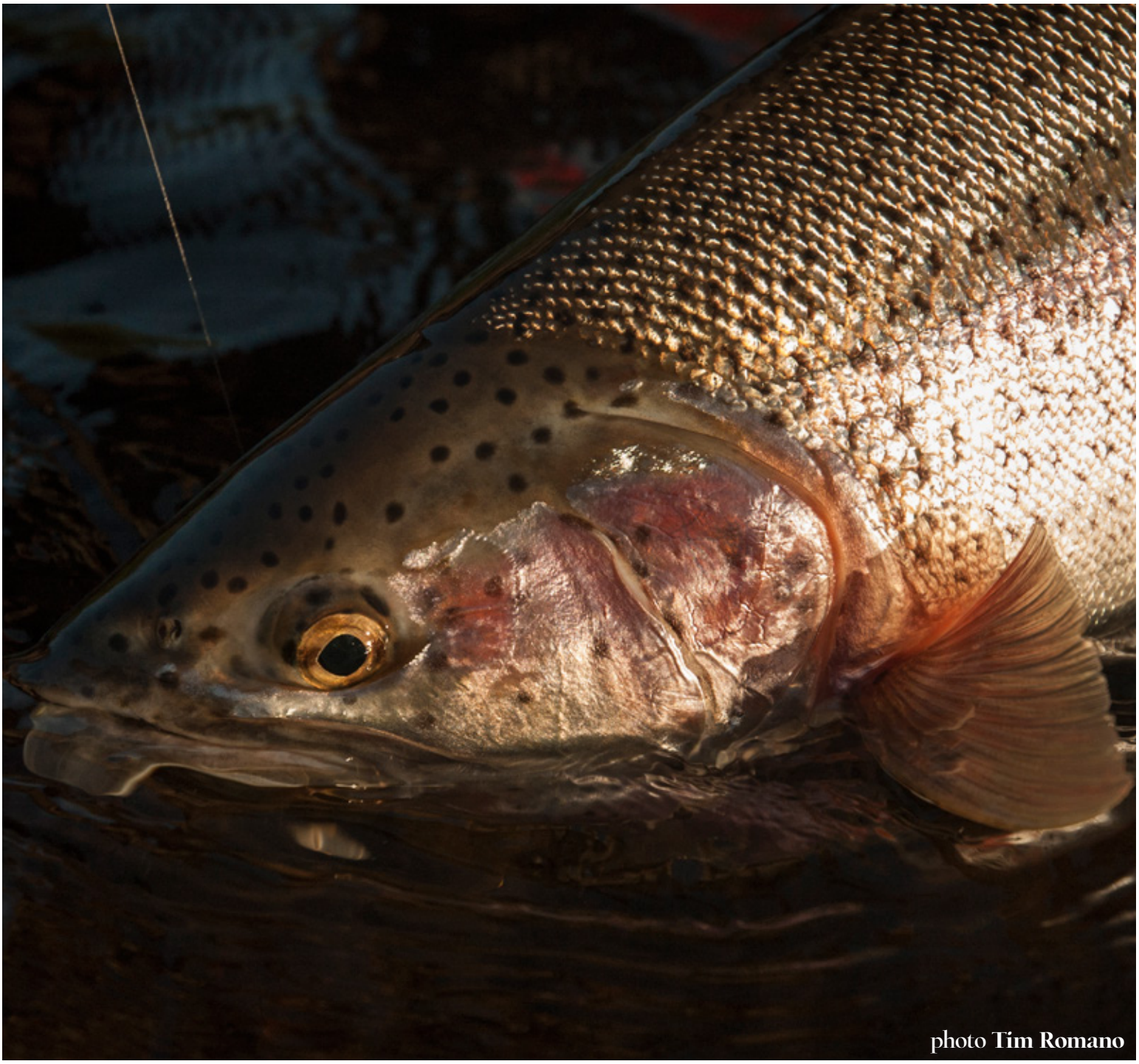


photo **Tim Romano**

It got to the point where one of us would throw one of Jim's mouse patterns in the middle of the river, and we'd just twitch the fly and watch. Inevitably, a rainbow would lock onto the fly dangling in the current and charge. The fly went plop followed by a silent pause. Then a wake appeared and built, like a torpedo launched from the bank. The bulging water zipped straight at the mouse fly, followed by a crash and splash. Sometimes, the fish ate the fly on the first swipe. Sometimes, it missed, but if we left that fly twitching and dangling, the trout would turn a dramatic button hook and swipe at it again.

These weren't just baby rainbows; they were full-grown predators. I lost count at 25. I'm sure Jim landed more than me. When all was said and done, I landed at least 30 healthy rainbows on the mouse. I'll conservatively say that the smallest was 18-inches long. The largest tipped the scale on our improvised Boga Grip-net system at well over 10 pounds.

As Jim cranked on another trout, I looked over at Will, who simply nodded and smiled—the classic, "I told you so" look.

"This is just plain wrong," I said, shaking my head.

I'd been wrong about so much else with Kamchatka, it seemed the appropriate thing to say. And besides, I'd never felt so good about being wrong in my life.

*End note: In the airport I met with other angler friends headed back to Anchorage. Apparently, not all Kamchatka rivers produce the same. I heard many reports of a few big fish a day. So do your homework before going all that way and research the trip. "Rainbows from Above" is an over-the-top trip, and worth it. thebestofkamchatka.com*

*Editor's note: Rolf Nylinder's images are courtesy of the film* At the End of a Rainbow.