



Clockwise from upper left:

Theodora Sutton of Togiak practices fly casting at Ekwok Lodge.

Sandy Echuck with Juneau guide, Chris Casey, fly fishes on the Nushagak River near Ekwok Lodge.

Sandy Echuck fly fishes.

Instructors and students at Ekwok Lodge.

Juneau guide, Chris Casey shows useful fly patterns.

Guides Randy and Ruben Hastings at Ekwok Lodge.

What the students and teachers were catching.

Student, Gayle Bartman.

HEAD OF

A week at Bristol Bay's New Fly-Fishing Guide Academy

STORY BY PAULA DOBBYN • PHOTOS BY CLARK JAMES MISHLER



THE CLASS

Steel-grey clouds loom over Ekwok as cold raindrops pelt the Nushagak River. This famed southwest Alaska river—one of the largest producers of Chinook salmon in the state—flows past this remote Yup'ik Eskimo village before draining into Bristol Bay. The river and its abundance of fish form the lifeblood of this community of 130 residents, about 70 miles from the mouth of the bay.

It's early August, the day after a de Havilland Otter carrying Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens slammed into a fog-shrouded hillside near Lake Aleknagik, not far from Ekwok, killing the senator and four others. The nerves of people flying in and out of southwest Alaska are raw today.

But despite the gruesome accident and the lousy weather, life goes on in Ekwok, 290 miles southwest of Anchorage. There's little choice. The seasonal run of silver and pink salmon is on full bore, so there's work to be done. And for nine young people from around Bristol Bay, gathered in Ekwok this week, that means mastering the art of fly-fishing

so they can later apprentice as guides.

“Fishing is what we do. It’s our life,” Luki Akelkok, an Ekwok elder, tribal chief and guide, explains to a visitor. “But these kids are learning a new way to do it.”

This week, August 8 to 15, the fishing involves fly rods, not the subsistence nets or commercial gear to which the students are accustomed.

On day two of the all-expenses-paid fly-fishing boot camp, Akelkok stands on the river banks and pulls his rain-gear more tightly around his large frame. This wind is picking up. Akelkok’s chocolate Labrador retriever paces at his feet and the Ekwok Lodge he manages sits on a grassy hill behind him. Gathered around Akelkok are a clutch of students between the ages of 15 and 22 and a small group of professional fishing guides, including Kirk Deeter, editor-at-large of *Field & Stream*.

Everyone’s there for a common purpose: to train the next generation of Bristol Bay fly-fishing guides.

“Okay, the boats are ready. Let’s go,” Akelkok said.

With that, the kids and guides paired off into skiffs and motored away in the rain for an afternoon on the river.

Recreational fishing in southwest Alaska is big business. Unparalleled opportunities to catch some of the world’s finest salmon, trophy rainbow trout, Dolly Varden, Arctic char and Arctic grayling and other species draws anglers from around the world. Sport fishing in Bristol Bay generates over \$100 million annually and provides hundreds of seasonal jobs, according to various economic studies. High-end lodges that charge as much as \$8,500 for a week of guided fishing dot the landscape. Operators hire crews of guides, pilots, cooks, cleaners and other staff to cater to well-heeled guests.

Although the angling business is lucrative, the industry’s economic rewards have not trickled down as much as they could to local residents, most of whom are Alaska Natives, said Tim Troll, executive director of the Nushagak-Mulchatna Wood-Tikchik Land Trust, a sponsor of the guide academy. Many lodge owners typically turn to non-Native workers, particularly skilled fishing guides, from the Lower 48 to build their staffs.

The idea behind the Ekwok guide academy is to create a local workforce that can fill some of the high-paying lodge jobs in a

region of high unemployment with staggering costs not easily rivaled in the United States. Although lodge work is seasonal, it has the potential to pump income into villages with little if any paid jobs. The guide academy is a small but significant step toward closing the gap between two very different worlds, Troll said.

“There’s no reason if they want to pursue fly fishing, that they can’t do it. There’s an opportunity here. It’s basic economics. If we can get local kids to be guides so that the lodges don’t have to necessarily fly all their guides in from the Lower 48, it’s an opportunity that could be a career, or if nothing else, it’s a summer job,” said Troll, who also works at The Nature Conservancy in Anchorage.

Troll and Akelkok, along with colleague Tim Bristol, who directs Trout Unlimited in Alaska, began mulling over the concept of a Bristol Bay fly-fishing guide academy several years ago. They searched for funding and eventually received cash infusions from a variety of private and government sources, including the federal Bureau of Land Management, the Bristol Bay Native Corp., University of Alaska, Alaska Department of Fish and Game and other



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Teens and young adults learn the fine art of fly fishing from professional fishing guides and outdoor writers at the Bristol Bay Fly Fishing Guide Academy, Ekwok, Alaska.

organizations and individuals.

The first academy took place in 2008. During that first year, a small group of students learned safety, first aid and CPR. They mastered fly and knot tying, casting and other fly-fishing techniques, while also absorbing lessons in natural history and learning how to incorporate Alaska Native traditional knowledge into guide work and

interactions with clients.

Trained by long-time guides and Bristol Bay lodge owners, the students left the 5-day academy prepared for apprenticeships as fly-fishing guides. One of the graduates was Reuben Hastings, 25, of New Stuyahok, who now makes part of his living from guiding.

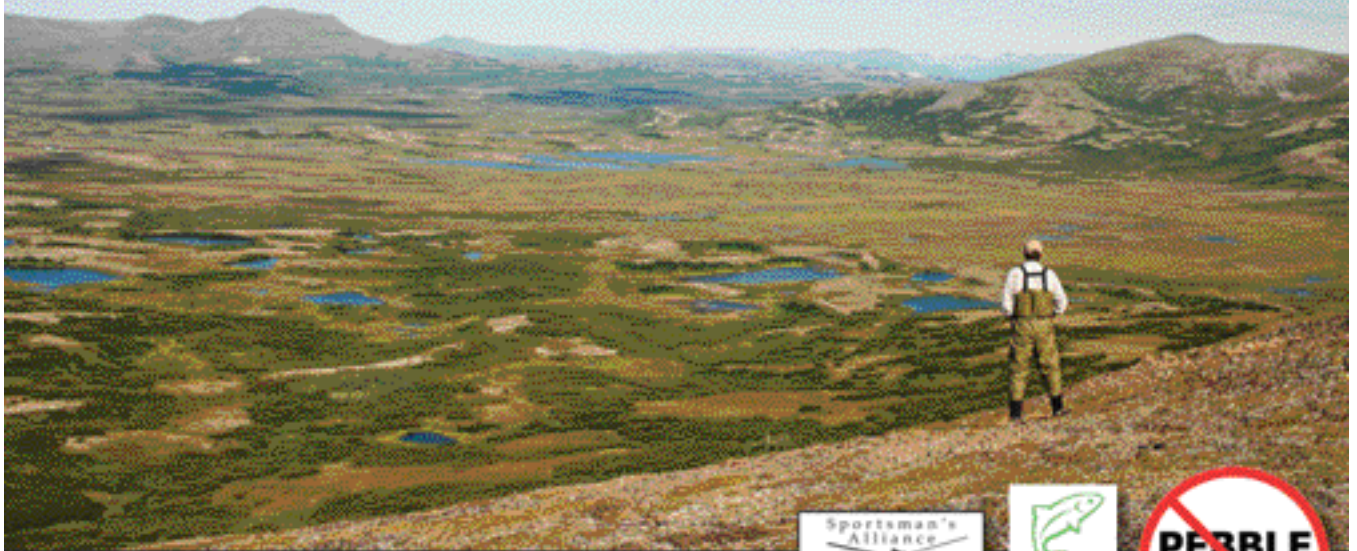
“A key part of being a successful guide is

knowing how to tell a story. The fishing might not be going too good that day. But if you can tell good fish stories and keep their spirits up, you’ll have happy clients,” said Hastings.

Kids from Bristol Bay who fish their entire lives generally have good material to work with, he said.

“They’re natural storytellers.”

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An Alaska Native who grew up in the village known as New Stu, Hastings has fished for as long as he can remember, like most people who live in the Bristol Bay watershed. Commercial and subsistence fishing have always been a major part of his family's traditions. His father, Randy, has also spent nearly 20 years working as a sport-fishing guide for Akelkok and the Ekwok Lodge.

"He's always treated my Dad with a lot of respect," Hastings said of Akelkok.

When the fly-fishing guide academy materialized in 2008 and recruitment got underway, organizers considered Hastings a natural fit. A local kid majoring in business administration and marketing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Hastings was passionate about fishing and had experience under his belt.

Hastings took to the fly rod quickly. But like many of the other students, Hastings needed time to embrace the practice of catch-and-release.

"It was weird, kind of like playing with your food," said Gayle Bartman, 22, of Manokotak, who graduated from the academy this past summer.

"At first I didn't like it. But the instructors made sure that we kept the fish in the water," said Theodora Sutton, 18, of Togiak. "They showed us how to care for them so that they can go back into the river and survive."

That's a common reaction to fly fishing from people who have subsisted on salmon for thousands of years and who continue to rely on it as a major portion of their diet. But over the course of the week-long academy, the students came to appreciate the sport aspects of fly fishing and the ethics involved of treating the fish with care, Hastings said.

Since graduating from the academy in 2008, Hastings has helped his father and Akelkok with guiding, when not attending school or commercial or subsistence fishing. In 2010 he worked as an instructor at the fly-fishing academy and next summer he plans to work as a full-time fly-fishing guide.

"I learned so much again last summer, even though I was instructing. The guides taught me so much about how to run your own business, how to conduct yourself with clients and stuff. It was awesome," Hastings said.

Deeter, the *Field & Stream* editor, guide and fly-fishing author, sees enor-

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mous potential in the fly-fishing academy.

"I've talked to a number of businesses and anglers who frequently visit Alaska, and they've shown unanimous interest and support. The value of working with a young guide who has a deep, genuine connection to the land and waters, who now also understands not just the mechanics, but also the culture of fly fishing, is a huge benefit," said Deeter, who described his week in Ekwok as life-changing. He was particularly impressed by the caliber of the students.

"I was amazed by how quickly the students grabbed onto the fly fishing. They were about as 'fishy' as any people I've ever been around. You can teach anyone how to tie flies, wave a stick in the river, drive boats, and land fish. But the inherent knowledge of where fish will be, when and why . . . it was uncanny. It's impossible to teach the passion these students already have," Deeter said.

Nelli Williams, an Anchorage-based Trout Unlimited staffer and fly-fishing instructor, also assisted at the academy. For her, watching the students' faces when they hooked a salmon sums up what the academy is about.

"Their eyes just about popped out when they finally got a fish on the line. It was so inspiring to see that kind of enthusiasm, to see them connect to the fish and river in a completely new way," said Williams.

Bartman was inspired enough that she spent a week the following the academy interning at the Bear Trail Lodge on the Naknek River in King Salmon. She shadowed guides and got some real-life experience with paying clients.

"It was really good to spend that time seeing how everything works and being with the guides and watching how they do their jobs," said Bartman, fuel sales manager at Manokotak Gas and Oil. "I want to do it again after I'm done with commercial fishing next summer."

As with many of the students, Bartman's life gets pretty busy when the Bristol Bay sockeye fishery picks up in June and tens of millions of salmon start returning to their natal rivers.

"My parents are Bristol Bay commercial permit holders. But they're not as young as they used to be. So I hope to take over the permit eventually. But I also want to be a fly-fishing guide," she said.

Next year, the fly-fishing guide acad-



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emy will take place in May at the Bear Trail Lodge. The lodge's managing partner, Nanci Morris Lyon, said she would be happy to have Bartman back next summer as an apprentice guide.

"She was great with the clients. They thought it was really cool to hear her stories about fishing and life in a small, outlying village like Manokotak. Her experiences are really unique," said Lyon.

While the fly fishing academy mostly focuses on connecting kids with a potential job or career, discussion of conservation politics and stewardship weaves its way in throughout the week. Besides boosting opportunities for local employment, the academy's sponsors also want to ensure that Bristol Bay's world-class fisheries remain intact indefinitely. And the academy is also about trying to make that happen.

It's nearly impossible to talk about Bristol Bay these days without the one word creeping in—Pebble. The hugely controversial mining project looms large over the region. Now seven years and hundreds of millions of dollars into the advanced exploration stage, Pebble is a giant copper and gold prospect near Lake Iliamna that a consortium of foreign-owned mining companies hope to develop into a massive open-pit mine. If built, critics say, Pebble would almost surely leach sulfuric acid into local waters.

Alaskans are waging a fierce debate over whether the huge environmental risks that Pebble would pose are worth the high-paying, year-round jobs that the project would offer for possibly 50 years. Because of its size, scale, geochemistry and location in the heart of the Bristol Bay watershed, many say the Pebble project threatens the future of the world's largest wild salmon runs, and with them, a commercial, sport and subsistence fishery estimated at \$400 million a year. Although the developers say they won't build Pebble unless they can prove the mine and the fisheries can co-exist, many Bristol Bay residents doubt that's possible.

"We talked about it a lot during the week in Ekwok and how it would affect the fishing. Personally, I'm against it. I'm an Alaska Native and we subsist on salmon. If the Pebble mine ruins it we won't have resources anymore. Not just

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salmon but many other kinds of fish,” said Bartman.

Tim Bristol of Trout Unlimited acknowledges that part of the rationale behind the guide academy is to develop not only fishing guides but conservation ambassadors who can educate clients about the risks of pollution and other environmental contamination that Pebble would impose on the region.

“These kids have a vested interest in the long-term health and sustainability of Bristol Bay’s fisheries. Not just the salmon but all the other species that people out here depend upon. What better conservation spokespeople do we have than local kids?” Bristol said.

The rain has let up into a light drizzle as the afternoon progresses into early evening. It’s summer in Alaska so despite the grey clouds, there’s no shortage of light. Salmon are jumping, breaking the top of the river every few minutes.

Hastings maneuvers his boat into a small estuary that promises to be a good fishing hole.

“Get your rods ready. This is a good place to get it,” he barks.

Bartman gingerly steps out, wading into some chest-high grass. One of her fellow students, Fernando Sutton of Togiak, 22, is right behind her. They practice casting and releasing hooks that occasionally get snagged on the bottom. Both are determined to catch a salmon, realizing after a couple of days of fly fishing that it’s not as easy as it looks. But that’s okay. They’ll take their rods home at the end of the week and keep practicing on local rivers. Hopefully next summer they’ll be back at it, but this time working at Bristol Bay lodges and taking home cash.

“This is definitely a different way to do it but it’s entertaining,” Sutton says. “It’s just good to be on the river. It always is.”



Paula Dobbyn is a writer and communications professional who lives in Anchorage. She’s a former print and broadcast journalist who specialized in environmental and business reporting. Dobbyn holds a masters degree in human rights law. When not working, she loves spending time with her family and sport fishing.

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