

Alaska on the cheap

Fisherman who has put together his own trips to area north of Anchorage will share advice at two upcoming events

By Henry Miller
Statesman Journal

If Bob Karau has anyone to thank for getting him to go fishing in Alaska, it's Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson.

"I was going south to Medford with my wife, Lynne, and we'd just seen the movie 'Bucket List,'" he said.

It's a film in which the terminally ill protagonists played by Freeman and Nicholson catalog, and then take on, adventures that they've always dreamed of doing before they kick the bucket.

"And I said the first thing on my bucket list is fly fishing in Alaska," Karau said. "And she said, 'Why don't you go?'"

His stock answer was the same one he'd told himself for years as he longingly perused the ads for fly-in lodges and guided outings in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

"I said, 'I can't afford to go,'" Karau said. "It doesn't make any sense for me to go and spend \$3,000 to \$5,000 to have three days of fishing. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

Even the guided trips that he could afford as a one-and-done deal weren't that appealing, he added.

"Not only did the money kind of spoil my need to go, but anywhere

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we enjoy of summer ... we were getting tired of catching fish."

— Bob Karau



Bob Karau holds up a pink "humpy" salmon. They're so thick in the streams and rivers around Talkeetna, Alaska, that you can't help but snag them. PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB KARAU

AFFORDABLE ALASKA

What: Presentations by Bob Karau of Salem about putting together your own Alaska fishing adventure

March 8: 3-45 to 5-15 p.m. in Classroom 4 at the Fly Tye & Fly Fishing Expo at the Linn County Expo Center, 3700 Knox Butte Road E, Albany. Cost is \$7 to get into the Expo, \$20 for the class. Note: Admission to the Expo is free for Federation of Fly Fishers members, veterans and ages 17 and younger. Online registration: <http://stjr.nl/15cTNN2>. www.nwexpo.com

March 14: 7 p.m. at the monthly meeting of the Santiam Flycasters, 506 Church St. SE. Free. www.santiamflycasters.com

Above is the view of Mt. McKinley out of back of the cabin where Bob Karau of Salem and a group of fishing buddies stay for a week every summer in Talkeetna, Alaska. PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB KARAU

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outside of the major fly-in lodges was always focused on the Kenai (River)," Karau said about the legendary Chinook salmon water. "And every time you saw pictures of people fishing on the Kenai, it was always elbow-to-elbow. I'd look at a picture, and all you'd see is monofilament going down the river."

"And that's not what I wanted. I wanted some remote fishing," he said.

Inspired by the movie, and with his wife's blessing, he thought that there had to be a way.

"I started asking questions," Karau said. "And I said, 'Alaska's a big state. There's got to be rivers that I can drive to and fish.'"

"And I got a referral to look at Talkeetna," he said, then chuckled. "I didn't know how to spell it."

He found out that it's a small way stop north of Anchorage on Parks Highway between Anchorage and Denali National Park that sits on the delta formed by the convergence of the Talkeetna, Chulitna and Susitna rivers.

And Karau saw there was the then-newly minted, in 2000, Susitna River Lodging, a central main building and several A-frame cabins.

So Karau and four fishing buddies reserved a cabin and made plane reservations for August, bought and pored over books and maps for information, flew to Anchorage, rented an SUV, stopped at Fred Meyer for two carts of groceries and, ahem, "beverages," then made the two-hour drive up the Parks Highway to the lodge.

"All this time, I'm thinking this has gotta be a scam as far as the lodge goes," he said about the price. "Because I kept thinking that people set trips up, and they don't get it."

"Driving down the gravel driveway I was still, questioning if this was going to work out for us. But it was."

Oh boy did it.

"When we were checking in there, a guy walked by and said 'you guys here to go fishing?'" Karau chuckled at the memory. "We said, 'Yea, we're here to go fishing.'"

"He said he was just walking down by the river and saw a few fish out there, so you might want to go down and try it out."

They moved their gear into the cabin, then got on their waders and vests, grabbed their fishing rods and headed for the Susitna out their back door.



John Stubenvoll of Portland fishes on a small stream near Talkeetna in 2009. The dark cloud in the water in front of him are fish. PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB KARAU



Karau spends a week every summer catching salmon, trout and grayling. PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB KARAU

getting tired of catching fish. It was all silvers in that back-eddy, 8 to 12 pounds.

"It was insane."

During the course of the week, the five anglers fished feeder creeks and streams going into the three main rivers, catching silver chum and pink salmon, trout and grayling, daily adding salmon fillets to the stock in the lodge's freezer to bring home.

"My arms were tired the first day," Karau said.

They bunked on twin beds and a roll-away and did their own cooking barbecuing fresh-caught salmon most nights at the cabin. And all of the expenses except the beverages and licenses, were shared, right down to splitting companion air fares.

Penciling it out after returning, the per-angler cost for a week of Alaska fishing worked out to about \$1,000 each, and about half of that was the cost of the plane ticket.

They've been back, a core group of two or three that's gone every year from the start in an annual party of five and up to as many as nine anglers one year who took up two of the cabins.

They learned valuable lessons along the way, such as adding ear

ence, he said, especially with all of the information available online.

"I'd recommend anybody going up there to do this for themselves. It's not magical," Karau said. "The water's very accessible if you can just get some resource information about creeks in the area and time your trips to the average run times."

"It would be easier if you went with somebody who'd been there before, but it's certainly not necessary. We just kind of limped our way through it, and we didn't have problems finding any fish."

"It's an easy fishery. I've taken four guys who have never held a fly rod in their hands, and they catch as many fish as we do."

After a ton of "how do we?" questions back in Salem, Karau decided to put together his own presentation to help others.

He's giving one, "Alaska Highway Fishing Do-it-yourself" on March 8 at the 25th annual Northwest Fly Tying & Fly Fishing Expo in Albany.

And he's the March 14 guest speaker presenting "Alaska On A Budget" at the March meeting of the Santiam Flycasters.

Karau has had to tweak his PowerPoint presentation over the years.

Budgeting for the increased lodging costs, airfare and baggage fees, it probably pencils out to about \$1,200 a person now for that week of fishing.

Need more incentive to check it out? "If somebody would have told me that I'd ever have that kind of experience, I never would have believed them," Karau said. "I tell the story that I came back the first year, and we were trying to estimate how many fish we caught. And I figured 350. And I said, 'aw that's crazy, nobody's ever going

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They moved their gear into the cabin, then got on their waders and vests, grabbed their fishing rods and headed for the Susitna out their back door.

"The way the river ran around, there was this little back eddy. I went out and walked down the center of it," Karau said. "And what I thought were big rafts of logs turned out to be rafts of salmon."

"And we proceeded to catch a fish every cast, every cast and a half that afternoon. And the rest of the week was basically the same. In fact, we quit fishing there to go out and try other places. We were

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They've been back, a core group of two or three that's gone every year from the start in an annual party of five and up to as many as nine anglers one year who took up two of the cabins.

They learned valuable lessons along the way, such as adding ear plugs to the must-have gear list because of snorers sleeping in close proximity.

"And the first couple years, we put everything in the back of the car," Karau said, then laughed. "Then we figured out that we'd run out of beer."

"So we put all of the luggage on the roof of the car and put all of the food in the back."

Putting together a do-it-yourself Alaska trip isn't rocket sci-

ence, he said, especially with all of the information available online.

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"So the next year when we went back up there, I had a little notebook in my vest pocket and a pen," he said, paused, then grinned. "And within the first hour, I said 'Sc— this. I'm not getting in any fishing.' I'm putting check marks down of people catching fish."

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