

Smart Planning and The **RIGHT** Mindset

by Melissa Norris

Mark from Colorado was just happy to be in Alaska, fishing the Kenai River for beautiful trout. We didn't catch anything huge, but trout like this that are average to Alaskans are trophies anywhere else. We're a little spoiled! © Melissa Norris

I am pumped we are just moments away from full-blown salmon summoning, but some things are smart to plan. Feeling the air turn cool and crisp, watching leaves change colors, and eager trout anglers rendezvousing at boat launches on the Kenai are three dead giveaways that it's fall in Alaska. Right now, that may not easily compute with increased daylight, green foliage abundance, and blue skies that improve Alaska's general demeanor. Still, I wouldn't want fall opportunities to slip past me without lining up calendars in advance.

I usually like to plan a couple days for trout fishing on the Kenai River during fall. The Kenai holds some of the country's largest rainbows. Rainbow trout are native to North America's Pacific Coast, but they have been introduced worldwide and are one of the most widespread game fish. Rainbows elsewhere typically average from 1- to 5 pounds, but Kenai trout can grow much larger than that. Some even grow to exceed 30 inches and can top 15 pounds. While this is the coveted benchmark that makes dreams come true, you often need to dedicate significant time fishing for them to achieve it. Rainbow

trout and Dolly Varden thrive in the Kenai's nutrient-rich ecosystem, fueled by the river's incredible salmon runs. This year's massive sockeye run predictions should stoke fall trout enthusiasts.

I planned a September solo trip to the Kenai last fall. My lodging choice was Eagle's Eye Vacation Rentals. I booked a stay in the new Moose Cabin Ron and Katya Kruckenberg added to their riverfront recreational compound. I like staying there because their places are immaculate, have everything you need, and are located super close to some common meet up spots on the

Middle Kenai. I have gotten to know the Kruckenbergs over the last several years and have become fond of them both. They are accommodating, reliable, and kind. With the addition of the Moose Cabin there are three rental homes and one dry cabin if you have a couple extra people in your party. Each one of those dwellings is immaculately kept and has everything you need for your stay, including fully equipped kitchens, bedrooms, living room, and private baths. An added bonus at Eagle's Eye Vacation Rentals is the huge pavilion in the center of the property, vented for a large, central fire pit. There



Flexibility can sometimes reward you with memories like these. For Sean and Mark, it lead them to a whole other fishery and species. © Kenai River Recon.



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Smart planning comes in to play when you recon where to stay on your Kenai River sojourn. There are some great choices out there, including Eagle's Eye Vacation Rentals with several fully-equipped rental homes, fillet area, an amazing pavillion with a huge fire pit and riverside fishing platforms. © Eagle's Eye.

are tables and chairs for dining and plenty of space to host the whole group around the fire. Riverside platforms for unguided fishing and a spacious fillet station are excellent angler amenities. They also manage a vacation rental just off river, with space and privacy. I enjoyed the evening immensely, dining with Ron and Katya in their gorgeous pavillion with the best campfire on the Kenai.

The next morning, we met at 8 a.m. at Bing's Landing. I found my buddy Sean Smart of Kenai River Recon waiting for me in his Willie power boat. His client, Mark, was ready to go fishing for his first time in Alaska. Visiting from Colorado with his wife, Mark is an avid walk-and-cast fly angler in his neck of the woods. That sounds like a heck of a lot of fun, but I knew Mark was in for a treat.

Along the way Sean shared that fishing had been pretty good lately, but recent water temperature changes could affect the bite. Mark had smartly booked with Sean for two days improving his odds of achieving his goals. I learned quickly Mark's only goal was to experience Alaska fishing and that earned my admiration on the spot. It really is a good idea to book multiple days with your guide, whether you are coming from within Alaska or clear across the country to fish. It's even

more true for ocean adventures, if catching fish is your measure of success. Sometimes weather and fishing conditions thwart plans. More time working at it improves your odds, as does having a guide. With time on the water, many can successfully fish unguided, but if you are not privy to current conditions, hire a guide if you can.

Mark was already applaudable by having the right mindset, and by hiring a guide and booking multiple days, even though he was an experienced flyfisher. The thing is, Kenai River trout fishing is far different than the trout fisheries a Lower 48 angler might imagine. It's not A River Runs Through It, demonstrating flawless casts on the Blackfoot. This is the lines-in-the-water-so-you-can-catch-a-huge-flippin'-trout kind of fishing. Whatever cast results in a good drift is a good cast and then you just let that ride. It's fun to watch first timers get the hang of water loading on the drift. Sean sets clients up with 10-foot, 7-weight Echo Ion and Indicator rods for Kenai trout. He prefers to over line them for ease of line loading and casting, and he likes the 10-foot rod for easier and more precise mending, for covering more water, and staying further from the boat. It didn't take Mark long. He was plenty capable,

plus Sean gives easy-to-follow advice.

Fishing guides often feel pressure to put clients on fish. That affliction doesn't escape Sean, but he also knows it's fishing and he's adaptable and fun to fish with. When you truly can just appreciate the beauty of your surroundings and how amazing it is to be fishing here on this day, that rubs off on the people around you. Mark was a consummate client that way and was rewarded with several gorgeous trout that were easily the largest he's ever caught. Chatting openly, we were all happy with the day of fishing. No huge trout but plenty of beauties and a gorgeous day on the river, easily meeting Mark's goals. Mine too.

Sean gave Mark the opportunity to change the plan for the following day if he wanted. Instead of a similar day on the Kenai, they checked out the Kasilof for steelhead. Mark was game to see another river and target another amazing fish. Staying ahead of the fleet of boats that day was key, and they caught a couple really nice ones. I can't help but think there's a reward waiting for those who make smart plans far in advance and then show up with the right mindset.

Melissa Norris is publisher of Fish Alaska and Hunt Alaska magazines.

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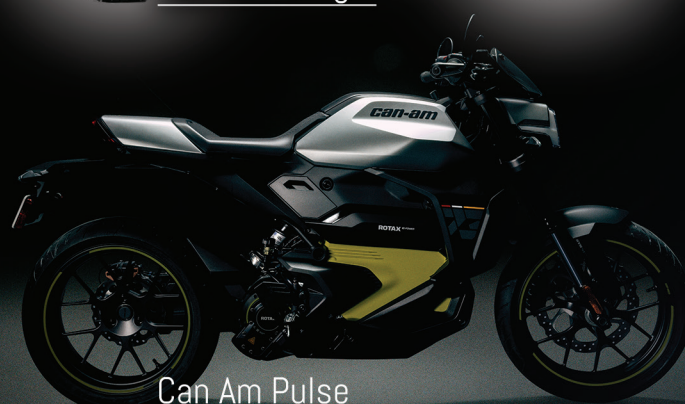
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