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In the Great White North

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► **KEN MORRISH**
Text and Photography

► **The perfect** Chinook salmon river would be easy to wade with inviting pools for swinging flies, and clear water close to the ocean. It would have rolling, chrome-bright salmon with daily possibilities of fish over 50 pounds. This perfect river isn't a dream. It has been found 6,000 miles south of the Columbia River.

Kingdom

The dream river that became a reality



▶ **Alex Trochine** (in the foreground) discovered the perfect Chinook salmon river running through a temperate rain forest in Chile.

IT IS THE LAST FISHING SESSION OF THE TRIP, AND OVER THE PAST TWO HOURS I HAVE BECOME ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN THAT I WANT A GOOD PORTION OF MY ASHES DUMPED INTO THE RUN THAT SPILLS OUT BEFORE ME. It is an immaculate piece of water—a taylor as sweet as any I have fished, located above a long rapid, and it's the first major piece of holding water above the reach of high tide. I am standing in a multicolored alluvial fan of polished granite boulders in the shallow rushing waters of a tributary that is pouring into the river all around me.

The swing is rich and smooth, and best of all, there is a continuum of big, new Chinook salmon rolling into the pool. They aren't shy about showing themselves. Most are in the 25- to 35-pound class, but some are larger. The majority of them are standard chrome-bright models, but certain individual fish radiate a metallic green sheen, while others look to be a light, bright golden tan. The main river is clear and green with 15 feet of visibility, and I have landed one beautiful fish with a green cheek, and straightened a small saltwater hook on another. They roll in, and roll through, and then more roll in behind them.

Time is both suspended and racing past me . . . I have never been more engaged, hopeful, or content. It is a waking dream that these kings are 6,000 miles south of their natal range in the north Pacific. I look above the tangled rainforest to where the glacier-polished peaks pierce the swirling backlit edges of clouds. I am overcome by my good fortune of being in the midst of a natural miracle that just 20 years ago was unimaginable, and with gratitude I make another cast.

Japanese Ranchers

When it comes to nonnative and invasive species, our attitude generally

▶ **When the water** is extremely clear, small flies and especially shrimp-like bonefish flies become most effective.



▶ **Chinook salmon at** Austral Kings average 35 pounds, but fish over 50 pounds are caught weekly. More important, there are huge numbers of salmon visibly rolling through much of the prime season and they are chrome-bright and full of fight near tidewater.



varies in direct relation to our fondness for the species in question. When trout were introduced to New Zealand, Chile, and Argentina, virtually no one complained, and likewise when Washington State Chinook salmon smolts were released and eventually naturalized in the cold, clear waters of southern Chile, it was seen more as a gift from the gods than a commercial venture gone awry. Today, Chile's Chinook salmon (also called king salmon) returns are among the world's most robust and have ushered in a new era of opportunity for fly fishers clever enough to find the systems where all the conditions come magically together.

In Chile, efforts to establish naturalized returns of Pacific salmon go back as far as 1924. Since that time, there have been many attempts with multiple salmon species, all of which failed until Japanese "fish ranchers"

sought to make their fortunes in Chile's river and estuary systems. From 1978 to 1989, these ranchers released hundreds of thousands of Chinook salmon smolts from the lower Columbia's Cowlitz Hatchery into the Petrohué River and the adjacent estuary systems of the Reloncaví. Their plan was to release the smolts into the rivers and capture/harvest them when they returned.


For multiple reasons, including the long saltwater life cycle of Chinook salmon, the Japanese abandoned their efforts before the salmon returns ever amounted to much. While the business venture failed, there was one success—the eventual establishment of a naturalized Chinook salmon spawning population that would change the face of South American fly fishing forever.

By the early 2000s, rivers like the Tolten, Puelo, and Petrohué were

receiving large runs of Chinooks, many of which were over 40 pounds. At the same time, this new race of southern kings was aggressively expanding its range, from the 39th parallel south all the way to Tierra del Fuego and even into southern Argentina's mighty Santa Cruz system. For whatever reason, our northern Chinooks found a home away from home in South America. Today there are certainly dozens and likely hundreds of river systems of all sizes and types that support wild returns of these nonnatives. Some see fish as early as November and others get their last bright fish as late as early April.

The Perfect River

In 2014, brothers Alex and Nico Trochine set out to find the ultimate program for targeting Chilean kings on the fly. The only problem was . . . where? They had already explored



► **The Austral Kings Camp** has double-occupancy tents, a main dining tent, flush toilets, and hot showers.

and fished a great many of Chile's most-prolific rivers, but due to their size, clarity, or distance from the ocean, all the rivers fell somewhat short of ideal. Their criteria were simple. They wanted big chrome-bright fish, clear water, and a system that was relatively remote with the right structural elements for swinging flies. They were looking for the perfect river for king salmon fishing in Chile.

They pored over maps and Google Earth and made trips to a multitude of potential river systems. Then, in the middle of the 2015 season, Alex and his girlfriend Laura got off a boat near the mouth of the last promising river on their list. Donning heavy backpacks, they covertly hiked up the system, surreptitiously camping and fishing the runs they could bushwhack into without a boat. After landing several chrome-bright fish in the 30-pound class and later introducing themselves to the landowner, they knew they had finally found what they had been searching for.

Alex and Nico worked with the landowner, selected a spectacular site, and built an elaborate tent camp. They named it Austral (meaning southern) Kings, and I was lucky enough to visit the camp the following year in mid-February 2016. It was an incredible trip with angling challenges, epiphanies, stunning scenery, and the biggest, brightest kings that I had ever encountered—and I have chased these giant fish throughout their native range from California to Alaska.

In the 2017 season (happening now) there are two parallel programs: the Austral Kings Camp (which I visited), and the Austral Kings Lodge. The camp, which is located several miles above tidewater in the heart of the upper river's prime pools, takes four anglers a week. They share comfortable canvas tents and have access to a main dining tent, flush toilets, and showers. It's perfect for fly fishers who are all right with roughing it a bit.

Austral Kings Lodge overlooks the lower tidal reaches of the river/bay, and also takes only four guests per week. At the lodge, fly fishers have their own single-occupancy rooms with attached bath and shower, and enjoy a rustic but comfortable Chilean lodging experience that is a step up from the upriver tent camp. The lodge and the camp share all the beats of water, rotating between them.

Due to the sheer number of fish that enter this system, there are a wide variety of angling opportunities, ranging from traditional step-and-cast Spey fishing, to swinging flies from the boat, to stripping flies with single-hand rods through deep, slow pools. More often than not these fish are rolling, so you will know when you are onto them, and that makes this some of the most exciting king fishing imaginable.

Tackle and Techniques

There are two basic schools when it comes to fly fishing for king salmon: the northern school and the southern school. The northern school is

practiced throughout most of Alaska and British Columbia and favors large flies, heavy sinking tips, and strong, short leaders. These basic principles have also become the core of the Spey fishing movement for Chinook salmon and are what most think of when targeting these great fish. [See "The King's New Crown" by Jeff Bright in the April-May 2014 issue for details on these techniques. The Editor.]

The southern school is older and in many ways more refined and technical. It was developed in the 1950s in California and evolved rapidly through the 1980s. It continues to be practiced and refined in Northern California and in Oregon, especially in tidewater and in the lower reaches of coastal rivers. It relies on single-hand rods, a wide range of 30-foot shooting heads, monofilament running lines, long leaders, and small flies that are retrieved while fishing from prams. It has long been my belief that the farther north you fish for Chinooks in North America, the more aggressive and grabby the fish are, and as you move southward, the more reluctant and shy they become. Both techniques are well suited for where they are practiced and closely match the attitudes of local fish.

In traveling to Chile, it was my assumption that we would use northern methods with 14-foot, 9-weight rods, Skagit heads, and relatively large, bright flies. The day before I boarded my flight, however, I heard that the river was low and clear, the sun was shining, and that there were lots of fish rolling but few of them biting. So, as an afterthought, I threw in all of my small bonefish flies, as well as some Clousers and Comet-style flies. While we caught fish both ways, it seemed that as the river dropped and cleared, and visibility increased to over 10 feet, fishing small flies on 12-foot leaders produced better than standard Spey tactics with large flies. My guess is that over time, both methods as well as new ones yet to be discovered will help establish Chile's reputation for the best Chinook fishing in the world today. 🐟

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