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Salmon Diplomacy

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# Glasnost on the Ponoï

○ An open discussion of Russia's greatest salmon river

▲ PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER

**D**URING THE COLD War there were two centers of Soviet naval activity that were of intense concern to me. I studied the maps frequently of the Kamchatka Peninsula on the east coast, and of Murmansk at the northwest corner of the enormous Soviet Union. Both of these strategically located naval bases provided the Soviets with year-round access to the seas within which their nuclear-powered submarines could threaten the American mainland and our military forces around the world. I knew that the nuclear warheads on just one of the equivalent submarines under my control could have destroyed every Soviet city that contained more than 100,000 people.

More recently, these two areas have been of more peaceful and pleasant attention, as we made fishing trips with our regular group of friends for large rainbow trout in the Zhupanova River in Kamchatka in 2004—where we were closer to New York than Moscow—and for salmon in the Ponoï River east of Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula ten years later.

As usual, Rosalynn and I were joined by Wayne Harpster from Pennsylvania, Carlton Hicks from Georgia, John and Dianne Moores from Texas, and Bob Wilson and Ineke Van der Meulen from North Carolina. Our visit to the Ponoï River was early in July, seven weeks after the winter ice broke up and permitted fly fishers access to the flowing stream.

We flew about nine hours from Albany, Georgia, directly to Murmansk, Russia, and then traveled 225 miles by large helicopter to the fishing site, located about 55 miles upriver from the mouth of the Ponoï. The Kola Peninsula is a vast area, about the size of Kentucky or Ohio, and almost completely uninhabited throughout the mainland east of Murmansk. The nearest village to the camp is about 25 miles away, and has fewer people than the fishing camp.

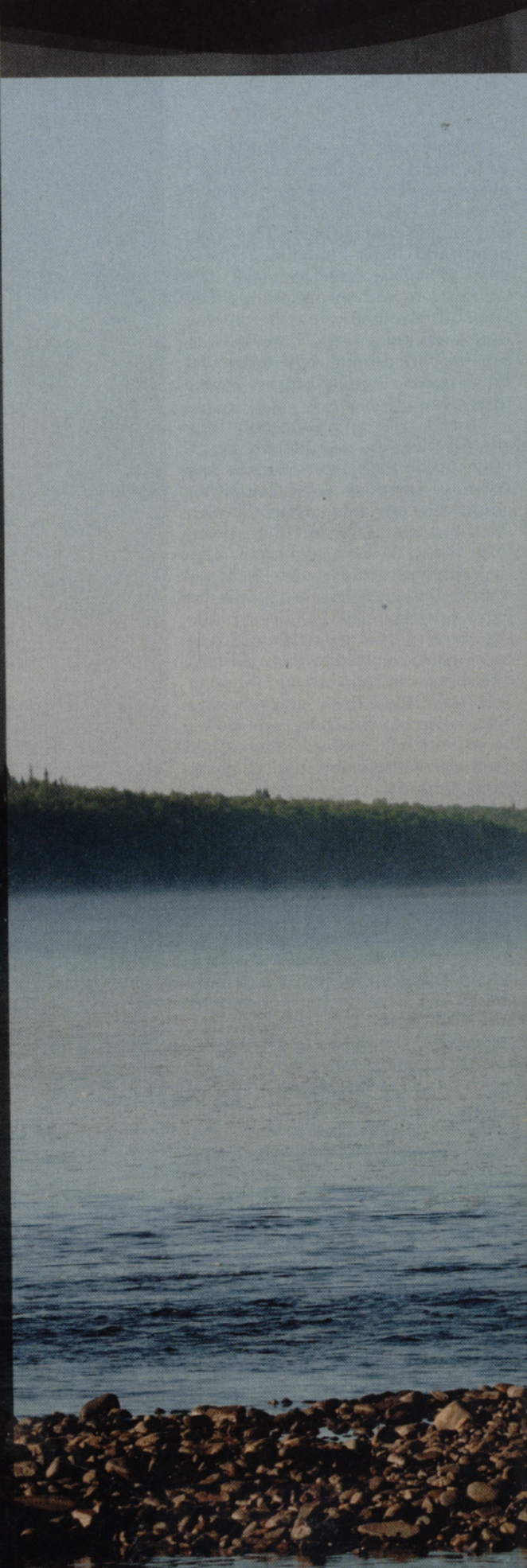




Photo | Cathy & Barry Beck

▶ **While many** pools on the Ponoï are best fished by casting from a boat, there are just as many wading pools where it's best to practice your Spey techniques on foot.





The Ponoï is above the Arctic Circle, 23 degrees below the North Pole, so the sun never sets during much of the summer. The stream flows roughly from west to east, entering the White Sea on the east coast of the Kola Peninsula. The river is more than 250 miles long, and originates in a large tundra plateau, a moisture reservoir that tends to buffer the river from sudden fluctuations in water levels.

The Ponoï is a big river, sometimes more than 500 feet wide but quite shallow, varying from 3 to 7 feet deep and with few rapids and no waterfalls. This gives Atlantic salmon relatively easy access to their fertile spawning grounds.

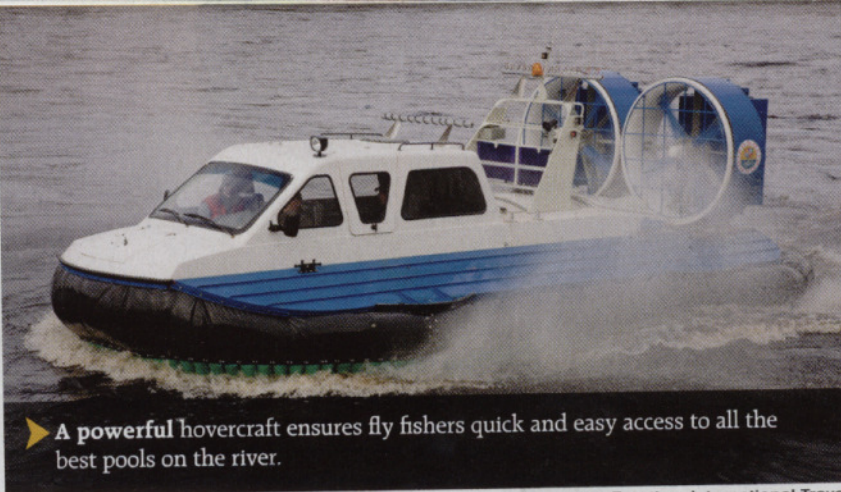
Until 1994, about 120 tons of fish were harvested annually with gill nets at the mouth of the river. At that time, an agreement was reached between private investors and the government to concentrate on sport fishing in the river, and within a few years all the inhabitants of the local village were moved to other, more hospitable places. Now there are no people living between the fishing camp and the White Sea, and no commercial or sustenance harvest.

After multiple ownerships, the sportfishing rights on the Ponoï were acquired in 2007 by Ilya Sherbovich, a wealthy young Russian (and avid fly fisher), who has greatly improved the Ryabaga campsite and its facilities, named after the adjacent creek. Our party paid a little extra to stay on a

hill above the river in a building with private rooms, a lounge, and kitchen; and new luxury cabins were completed in the fall of 2014 to replace the tents that have been in use by most guests since 2007.

During the fishing season there are 12 guides from more than a half dozen countries, and a total staff of 42. There is only one caretaker at the site during the winter. The camp is run by Steve Estella, the CEO of the Ponoï River Company, and Frontiers International Travel ([frontierstravel.com](http://frontierstravel.com)) is the exclusive booking agent. I fished with Estella for a half day, and also fished one night after supper with Ilya until 2 A.M., and I plied them both with questions about their operation.

The total catch varies each season depending on conditions, and salmon in the 20-pound range are taken each week. The camp guides now tag and weigh, and collect scale samples from about 1,500 fish each year to catalog population trends.



▶ A powerful hovercraft ensures fly fishers quick and easy access to all the best pools on the river.

Photo | Courtesy Frontiers International Travel

The camp is totally isolated, except for access by boat or helicopter, so there are logistical challenges, and some of them are solved the “old-fashioned way.” For instance, in the spring, the lodge floats large logs 12 to 16 inches in diameter from a logging area about 70 miles upriver, and saws the logs in camp into firewood for the camp.

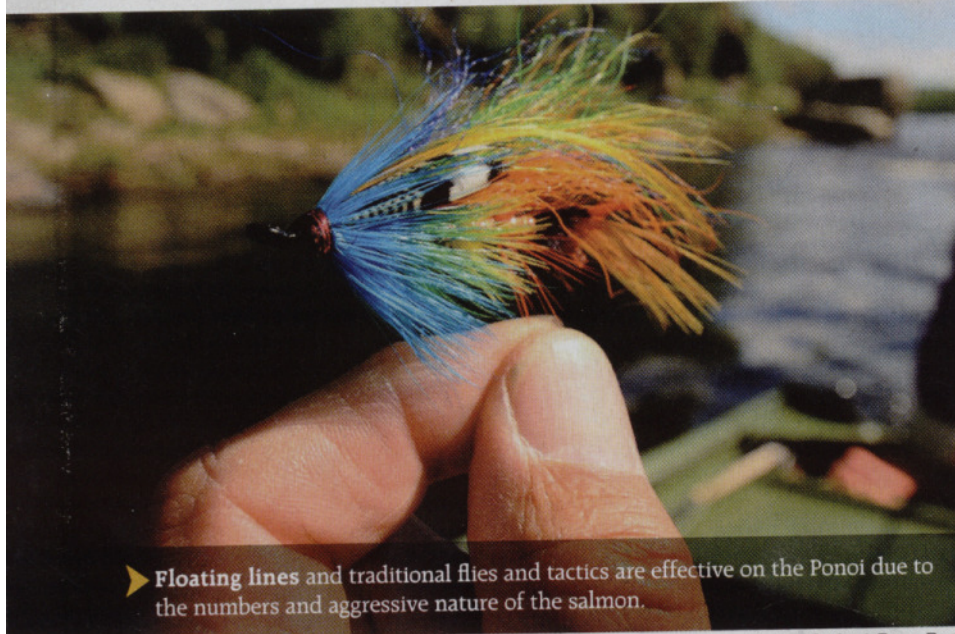
Fresh supplies are flown in by helicopter and stable goods are hauled annually from Murmansk by a large tracked vehicle over the frozen tundra with five trailers in tow, one usually filled with spare parts and the others carrying fuel for the boats and helicopters. Estella estimates that each gallon of gasoline for the boats has a net cost of more than \$30 per gallon. There are no roads, so the route for the tracked vehicle is in a straight GPS line over the tundra. The trip takes about four days, with the temperature often at -50 degrees C.

## Return from the Sea

The pristine Ponoï River is one of the world’s natural treasures, with an immense population of Atlantic salmon. There are two runs of fish from the ocean each year, one in the fall and one in the spring. The salmon spawn in late fall, and after the eggs hatch, the parr stay in the stream from two to four years before going to sea.

The grilse in the Ponoï, first-year fish from the sea, weigh up to 7 pounds. Mature fish that stayed in the salt for two years or more are in the 13- to 25-pound range.

In comparison, in the Kola River near Murmansk, and in some Canadian streams, mature fish are about 10 pounds heavier. My largest Atlantic salmon from the Matapedia River in Quebec was 29.5 pounds, and Rosalynn and I caught several others in the 25-pound range in the Cascadepedia and Restigouche, but most fly fishers on those rivers are happy just



▶ Floating lines and traditional flies and tactics are effective on the Ponoï due to the numbers and aggressive nature of the salmon.

Photo | Cathy & Barry Beck

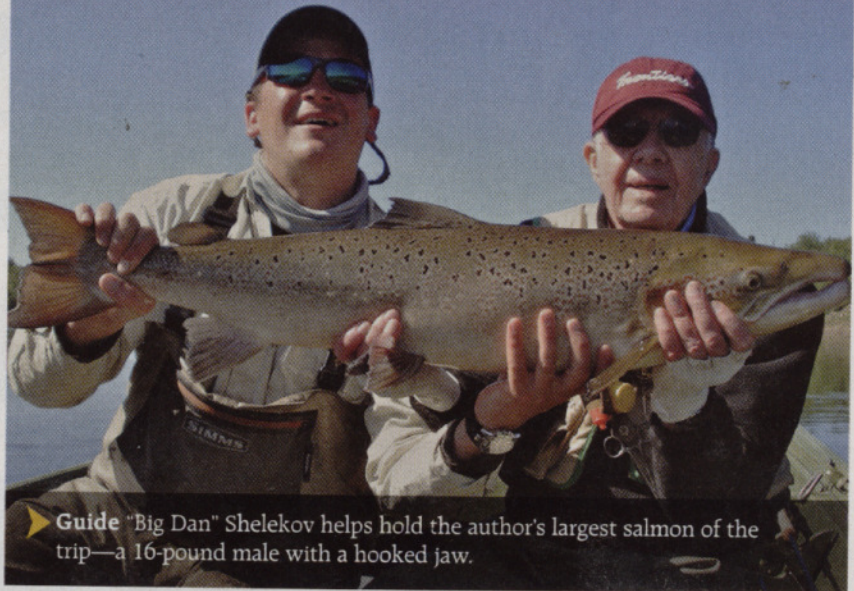


to land two or three fish per week.

When Rosalynn and I fished together on the Ponoï we caught 51 Atlantic salmon, plus a countless number of grayling and sea trout. We netted several salmon that weighed above 12 pounds, and two 16-pounders. There were 422 salmon caught during our week with 16 rods, and the highlight was when Bob Wilson landed a beautiful salmon that weighed 23 pounds, the largest of the season. The week before ours was even better, with 860 salmon landed by 18 fly fishers.

Dry weather can reduce stream flow at times, and in years past this has made it sometimes difficult with regular boats to make the long runs to the farthest beats, which are up to 25 miles in each direction from Ryabaga Camp. Now the camp has a powerful hovercraft to travel quickly and efficiently to the best fishing grounds no matter what the water levels are.

The river was divided into eight beats to accommodate the eight



▶ Guide "Big Dan" Shelekov helps hold the author's largest salmon of the trip—a 16-pound male with a hooked jaw.

Photo | Courtesy of Jimmy Carter

boats in service, and each time we arrived at our beat, the boat was anchored at the head of a promising pool and an extremely long anchor rope was slowly played out by our guide while we cast from both sides. Using Spey rods, two fly fishers per

boat can collectively cast over a substantial area using this traditional anchor-drop technique.

On each beat there is a tent with a table and chairs, a wood stove, some protection from mosquitoes, and a campfire where the guides can grill

# Dave Scadden's 2016

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## THE MIGRATION



► **Camp owner** Ilya Sherbovich presents Jimmy Carter with a mounted replica of a fish he caught on the Ponoï River, with Rosalynn in the foreground.

Photo Courtesy of Jimmy Carter

a salmon. Two of the fish I caught were bleeding, and we ate one of them on shore.

The food overall was the best we have ever had on our many fishing expeditions. One of my favorites was Russian borscht served in bowls made of delicious camp-baked bread.

Weather conditions were comfortable, normally ranging from 42 degrees F. in early morning to 60 degrees at noon, although Rosalynn and I weathered through one particularly cold 35-degree day with a whistling wind and intermittent showers. The only real discomfort was from

mosquitoes on shore, and then only when the breeze died away.

Ilya and our other Russian hosts were graciously hospitable, and travel to and from the region was perfectly safe. There was only one indication of the political strain caused by the Russian intervention in the Ukraine: I had agreed to numerous news media interview requests at the end of our journey—just about our fishing experience in Russia—but the interviews were cancelled by Russian authorities without explanation.

Beyond that small hiccup, our group of friends agreed that we have never had a fishing excursion that exceeded our visit to Russia's Ponoï River, either in accommodations, hospitality, or in the size and number of fish caught. 🐟

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Former president Jimmy Carter was 90 years old when he traveled to Russia in July of 2014. He married his wife Rosalynn in 1946, and they recently celebrated their 68th wedding anniversary.