



Photos and story by THOMAS R. PERO

ABOVE THE ARTIC CIRCLE. IT'S SALMONTIME ON THE TUNDRA

HHEY! KNOCK IT OFF. WHY ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING THIS? I'm an admirer. I really am. I bring no ill intent. It's impolite—some might say downright inhospitable—to be dive-bombing a friendly visitor this way, your wings tucked back, talons extended, screeching and whining away. All I'm going is taking pictures of wildflowers. It's enough to make a guy throw his \$5,000 camera to the ground and duck into the birches. What do you think this is, anyway, the set of a Hitchcock movie?



Welcome to the northern land of summer white nights. One of the finest fly-fishing camps in the world sits at the confluence of the Ryabaga River with the Ponoj River on Russia's remote Kola Peninsula. The prize: wild Atlantic salmon returning from the Barents Sea.



Clockwise from top left: A generous 50 miles of the wide, shallow Ponoï are fished by a limited number of anglers in a series of rotating sections or beats; a bright grilse fresh from the sea; release net at the ready; celebrating a 20-pound cockfish at midnight.



during my weeklong stay here at Camp Zyabaga. In fact, I can't remember when I've been so pampered so far from home. Ten anglers fed by three chefs, looked after by four housekeepers, with five helicopter mechanics, a massage therapist and doctor on standby—30 staff altogether—evokes in one a blush of guilt coming on. But one soon gets over it. *Da*, I'll have another vodka, *spasiba*.

The Ponoï River itself is of course the main event. Four hundred and twenty-six kilometers in length and draining a vast permafrost plateau of 58,800 square kilometers, it serves up a continuous embarrassment of riches. Despite dealing with daily fluctuations that at one point sent the river surging to several meters in height above normal summer levels, my fishing partner and I stopped counting after we each had hooked and lost, or

netted and released, dozens of fish. He had never fished for Atlantic salmon before; I had, and in six days of fishing found myself tethered to more worldly rare specimens of *Salmo salar* than I had during the entire decade past.

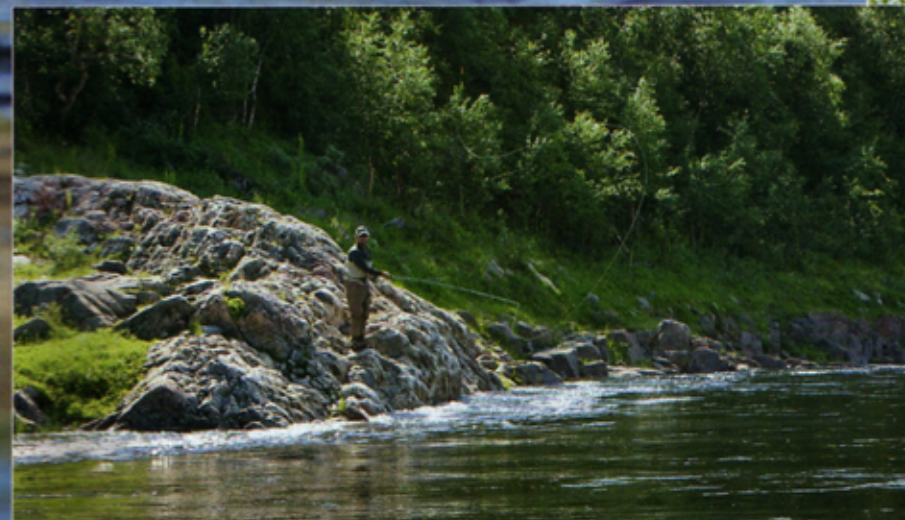
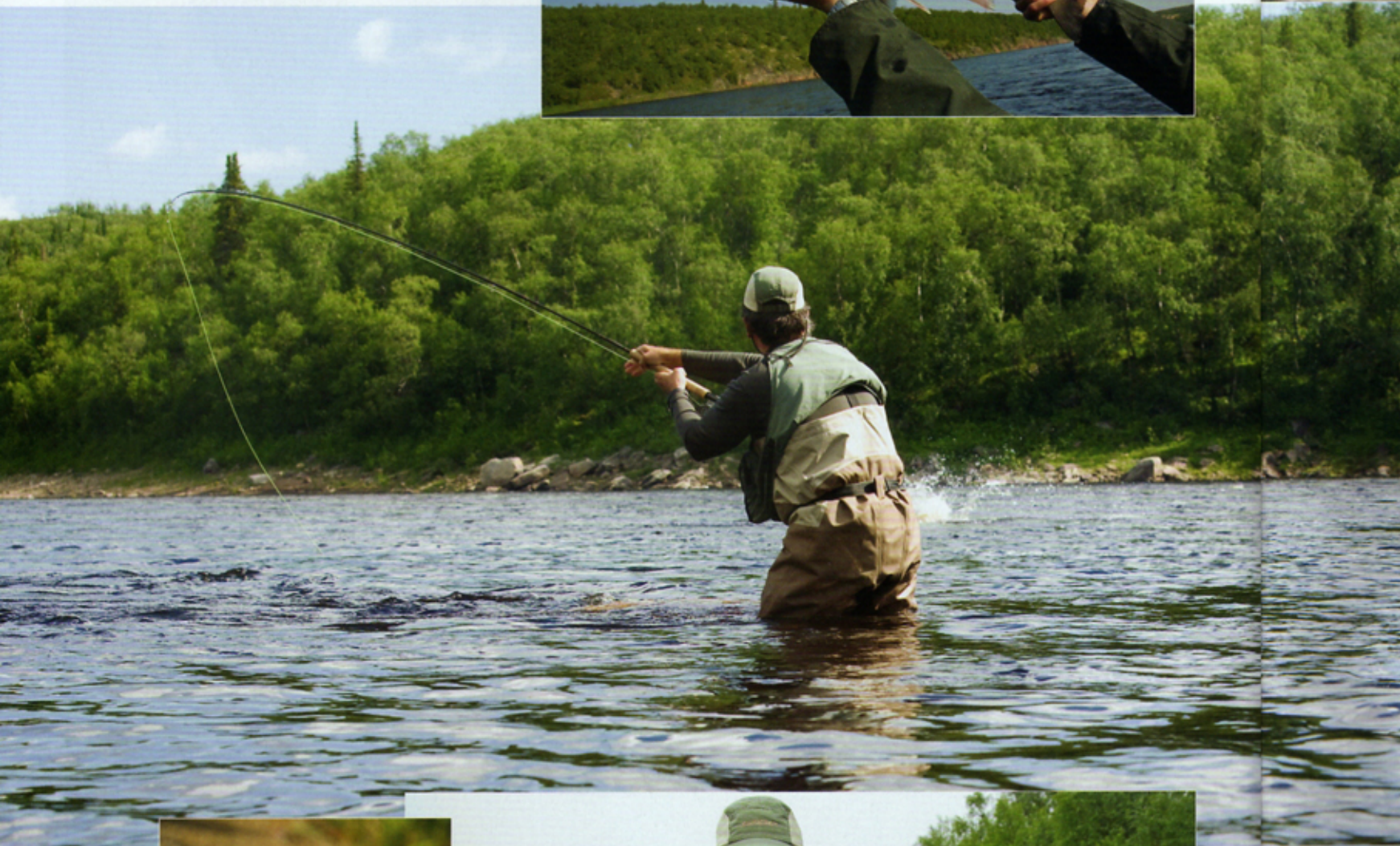
Fishing the Ponoï is not cheap. But what angler smitten with Atlantic salmon magic wouldn't trade transient treasure for the bliss of casting into this wide, wilderness home of some 30,000 wild adult *Salmos*?

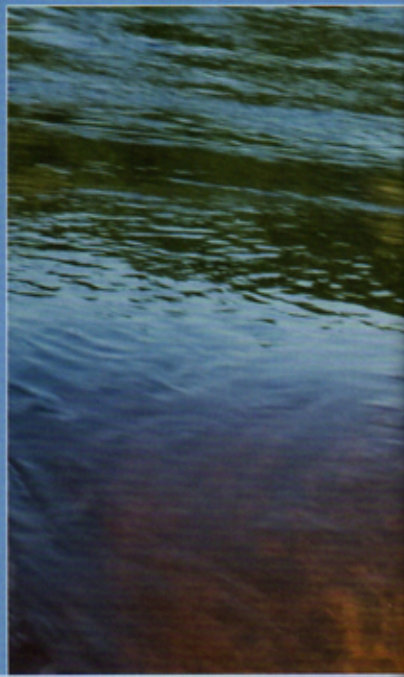
Seasons of the Ponoï: Late May to late September

Outfitter: *Frontiers*, Post Office Box 959, Wexford, Pennsylvania 15090; telephone 800-245-1950; Web site www.frontierstravel.com



Clockwise from top left: Bright henfish; musical, tumbling tributary; a hedge against the mosquitoes; spey casting the ledges; a nice 15-pounder; high-summer wildflowers; fast to a sizzling leaper.





Clockwise from top left: Spectacular rough-legged buzzards nest on rocky cliffs all along the river; even when high, the water is clear and slightly tea-tinted; saying goodbye; taking a refreshing midday dip; angler and guide toast another wonderful day on a serpentine river filled with willing takers and much magic.

