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The Shoulder of Winter

BY NICK JANS



Nick Jans reels in a Dolly Varden char from a gravel spit on the remote Wulik River.

IN THE STILL AUTUMN TWILIGHT, I stood waist-deep in the Wulik River’s cold-pouring flow, staring downward, mesmerized. The hundred-yard-long, green-tinted pool was punctuated by iridescent silver flashes, as if the river were an atmosphere ablaze with fireflies. I cast to a pocket tight against the far cutbank, and let my bucktail jig settle deep. Rod held high, reeling just enough to keep connected, I let the current carry my offering in a fluttering arc, ticking against the bottom.

An electric tap. I reared back, and an answering jolt ripped my rod tip downward. A hand-sized tail boiled the surface as I threw my arms forward and back-spoiled, trying to ease the strain on my drag. Then the line went slack. I reeled madly as the fish vaulted through

the surface, dove, and switched directions twice before I could catch up. Somehow, the single hook clung. Five adrenaline-added minutes later, I slipped my hand under the belly of an eight-pound, sea bright Dolly Varden char—one in a procession of fish I’d catch and release that evening.

Fifty yards downstream, my buddy Vic was just as busy; upstream a half mile, against a brushy bluff, I could make out the shape of camp, where our trip companions Kent, his wife Jill, and daughter Finley sat around a fire, warming up and resting their casting arms after a long day of rafting and fishing.

The Wulik, in the northwest corner of the state, doesn’t look like much—a braided, clearwater river roughly 50 miles from headwaters to its mouth on the

Chukchi Sea coast, cutting from its mountain source through sprawling, wind-raked tundra. Barren peaks and bedrock outcroppings punctuate its course, and the sky looms over a boundless horizon. Lying hundreds of miles off the road grid, access is limited to fly-in gravel bar work by bush planes working out of Kotzebue—itself a remote, frontier-feel bush hub, even by Alaska standards.

For five years, back in the 1980s when I lived in Noatak village, the Wulik was part of my extended back yard, just 30 miles to the northwest over the rolling curve of the Mulgrave Hills. But though I sometimes traveled in winter by snowmobile over its frozen course, I never wetted a line there. Then I moved 150 miles farther southwest, to the Kobuk country. It was always a river too far.

Three decades later, my friends from Juneau and I had come a thousand miles north to the Wulik seeking a species regarded by many Alaskans as bycatch: the Dolly Varden char, *Salvelinus malma*. Dollies, they say, with the hint of a sneer. A smallish, wiggly object you inevitably hook while angling for something more worthy. But the Wulik hosts a different version of the same fish—sleek, bull-shouldered specimens commonly ranging between five and a dozen pounds, with a liberal sprinkling of freakish specimens twice as large. Orange-fleshed, rich in fat, they're prized by the local Inupiat, who call them 'trout.' The last several Alaska state sport angling records for the species, all well over 20 pounds, have come from the Wulik. Little doubt bigger ones are still to be caught.

Not only does *Salvelinus malma* reach a pinnacle of perfection in the Wulik; the river serves as a vital waystation for hordes of fish whose natal spawning streams lie along the western and Arctic coasts of Alaska, and as far away as Russia. All but a resident handful of the 100,000-plus Dolly Varden counted in the river each year by biologists are anadromous—that is, like salmon, they divide their lives between fresh water and salt. Some are there to spawn over the summer, but the vast majority enter the river in autumn to overwinter near springs and in deep pools that never freeze to the bottom. In late spring, they head out to sea again.

We'd come seeking this mass of late-season fish, knowing the weather we might face. The September morning we began our float, the gravel bars crunched with frost, and a sharp north wind blustered down the valley. Vic and I, flying in a separate plane, had elected to be dropped a half-dozen miles upstream of Kent's family. The plan was to travel separately, and meet up in the evenings for camp. As we made our way downstream, gusts shoved our inflatable raft into willow-snarled cutbanks, and even though I leaned into the oars with a roiling current at our backs, we often found ourselves clawing for yards of progress. Mare's tail cirrus bled into lenticular clouds to the northwest; though the sun shone, weather was coming.

Low and transparent, the Wulik poured through a procession of braided channels.

Nick Jans displays a whopper Dolly Varden he caught in the Wulik. (For more photos of the Wulik, see his article on page 44).



At the first sizeable pool, fish scattered like birds from our raft's shadow—a mix of grayling, late chum salmon, and the unmistakable blazing reds, deep greens, and white-etched fins of spawning Dollies. The latter were summer's fish, gorgeous but gaunt; not the silver-gray, pink-flecked torpedoes we sought. And most were spooked and lock-jawed, ignoring our offerings.

Five wind-blasted miles downstream, we found our first pod of sea-bright fish,

holding at the head of a deep run. We dialed them in with small spoons and jigs, and soon lost count as the bite heated up—big fish by any Dolly standard except the Wulik's. An hour later, we caught up with Kent's family. Flyfishing egg-imitating beads under floats, they'd caught many fine fish, and Kent had lost something bigger. Vic and I fished past twilight, in that pool lit by flashes of silver. That perfect evening would be the last day camp of the four-day trip.

The remaining days became a blur of wind, cold rain, snow, aching shoulders, and despite the hard going, dozens more fish—each one glittering and perfect, forged from living steel. And I got one chance to touch a Wulik beast. After a quarter-hour fight in the shadow of a high bluff, I cradled a giant Dolly Varden, around 14 pounds, and gave it back to the river.

The last night, icy torrents of rain ripped off the Chukchi Sea, battering our tents. Only a slim lens of sky in late afternoon let our pick-up flights slip in. By the next morning, a rising flood would cloud the river, drowning our gravel bar landing strip; and just days later, the first slush ice would whisper downstream, cling and sheet in the eddies, and begin to work outward, sealing over shimmering constellations of fish. We left as we'd come, riding the shoulder of winter. 🍷