

# KOLA CHROME

*Matt Harris explores an extraordinary new  
salmon fishery in Arctic Russia, where  
eating bear meat is optional*

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT HARRIS

Kola Reserve  
owner Yuri lands  
a beautiful osenka  
salmon on the  
Lower Kachkovka.





**RIGHT**  
On the rare occasion that the Sunray was refused, this Franc N Snaelda was taken with gusto.



**MATT HARRIS**  
is a professional photographer whose fly-fishing images from all over the world have won numerous awards.

**FAR LEFT**  
Gleb's second fly-caught salmon.

**ABOVE**  
Autumn colours on the Lumbovka.

**LEFT**  
The smart new livery of the Kola Reserve.



**T**HE AUTUMN RAINS ROLLED DOWN THE window like tears as our bus rumbled into the craggy concrete city of Murmansk. The grey streets were littered with the last golden leaves of the Arctic autumn, fading in the relentless deluge. It was the last day of September, and my long Arctic adventure was finally coming to an end.

As the bleak old city rolled past the window, I thought back on the unforgettable salmon-fishing rollercoaster ride that I had experienced over the past few months.

The epic saga had started six long months before.

I'd been asked by my friend Mike Michalak, CEO at The Fly Shop in California, to join another good mate, The Fly Shop's Justin Miller on a trip to evaluate a fledgling new operation on the Kola Peninsula.

The prospect was exciting. The Lumbovka and Kachkovka rivers flow off the uttermost north-eastern corner of Russia's Kola Peninsula, high in the Arctic Circle.

This put them in an intriguing location.

Just to the west, the mighty Yokanga provides to my mind the best and the most challenging trophy Atlantic salmon fishing available anywhere in the world. Russia's PINRO study group have definitively designated the river's fish as the largest strain of Atlantic salmon on the Kola Peninsula.

Lying just to the south and east, lies the Ponoï — one of the most prolific Atlantic salmon rivers on the planet — with a huge run of good-sized fish, and a special run of autumn fish that provide wonderful fishing in the late season.

The rivers of the Kola Reserve couldn't be in a better place.

Mike had been in touch with the owner Yuri and his son Gleb about possibly representing the operation. Mike is hugely experienced, and although he recognised that the fishery could not have a finer pedigree, he knew that the rivers hadn't seen anglers in a very long time, and they needed to be properly evaluated by experienced fly fishermen prior to offering the fishery to the salmon-fishing community.

**ABOVE**  
Matt shows off one of five salmon on a special day on the Lumbovka.

**RIGHT**  
Justin Miller on the Lumbovka home pool.

Mike had chosen Justin and me to go and check out the rivers and report back.

So it was that in early June this year, Miller and I clambered aboard a big Mi8 helicopter to head out to the new fishery. We were joined by our host, Gleb, an instantly likeable and engaging young Russian, who's father had charged him with developing the Kola Reserve and overseeing our exploratory trip.

Also squeezed into the helicopter were my friends Stephan, Paolo, Greg, Tobias and Erik from Flyfishing Nation, who would also be assessing the new fishery and making a promotional film to promote the reserve.

There was febrile excitement as we peered down on the tundra, waiting for the rivers to roll into view. Despite scouring the internet for long hours, there was little information available on either of the two rivers, and none of us really knew what to expect.

When I finally glimpsed the Lumbovka for the first time, I felt goosebumps creep up my forearms.

Be in no doubt. The Lumbovka is a proper salmon river — a brawling, boulder-strewn stream, crashing down off the tundra and rushing to the Arctic Ocean. It is perhaps the perfect size — a good long cast will cover almost every pool that we flew over, yet it is substantial enough to provide challenging fishing.

But did it have a good head of fish? And were they trophy fish like those of its illustrious neighbours to the west?

Well, after one full day on the river, we knew the answer.

Wandering downstream from the embryonic building site of a camp where we were based, Miller and I discovered endless magical fly water.

Powerful rapids were interspersed by pool after seductive pool...

And fish. Miller and I were immediately into fish.

Everybody was.

Big fish. Fish of 15lb, 20lb, even in one case (for my friend Paolo Hoffman) 30lb. Stunning, deep-bodied creatures that crashed on to our flies with unfettered rage.

Despite the water hovering at well under 10 deg C, I know how aggressive Kola fish can be, and decided on a bold, fish-finding tactic, employing a floating line, the lightest of sink tips, and a big Sunray Shadow so that any interest was clearly visible on the surface.

My plan was to change to a slightly heavier, sub-surface fly should my Sunray fail to convert any interest, but in truth, I rarely needed to do so.

For anyone who hasn't caught the Atlantic salmon of the Kola, let me tell you — they are different — more violent, more aggressive, more thrilling...

*“Big fish. Fish of 15lb, 20lb, even in one case 30lb”*

The Lumbovka salmon were spectacularly savage, rushing up through the golden, tannin-stained water to explode on the Sunray with primal aggression before rampaging off downstream.

After Miller and I had pulled three sparkling salmon out of one pool, Gleb asked earnestly what we thought of the fishing. He looked almost bewildered as two grown men babbled like excited schoolboys, and it soon became apparent that Gleb had never caught a salmon on fly.

Miller and I decided we had to put that right.

We soon had Gleb spey-casting, and later that same day, he pulled a handsome salmon out of the river. Tragically, the fish wriggled out of Miller's clutches before we could get a picture, but Gleb soon had another. I was so thrilled for him. As he held the second fish up for my camera, I captured a very special image of a proud young salmon fisherman who had joined our ranks and become one of us.

That day was special but all were memorable.

The following day, we awoke to soft drizzle and a low cloud base that made helicopter flight impossible.

Most of the team decided to fish around the camp, maximizing their “fly in the water” time, but I chose to embark on an epic downstream exploration with cameraman Greg Hegel. Greg is great company, and we laughed our way along the bear-tracks and across the endless boulder-fields and wild birch scrub. While Greg's video camera was incapacitated by the relentless rain, I was rewarded with a fabulous five-fish day that I will not soon forget.

The first four fish were magnificent: gleaming, chrome-bright and sea-liced, but the last fish was perhaps the most exciting of them all. The fish still sparkled a lustrous silver, but it was flushed with a deep magenta sheen, and its head was much darker than its compatriots.

The fish was an osenka.

Osenkas are the almost mythical salmon that run some — but not all — of the Kola rivers. These heroic fish arrive in September and October, and then stay under the ice throughout the long, savage Arctic winter. They wait until the following autumn before spawning, fully one year after they first entered the river.

If you can find them, osenkas are considered one of the most exciting fish to catch on the Kola. On the Ponoï, they are the most prized fish of the year, and autumn rods fetch a premium price. They come into the river like rugby balls, packed full of the fat and muscle required to see them through 18 months and more without a scrap to eat. Only those who've caught them can tell you how incredibly powerful they are.



## SALMON IN RUSSIA

That night, examining images of some of the other fish that we'd caught, we were convinced. The Lumbovka and especially the Kachkovka clearly had a substantial osenka run.

I had to leave the following day. It was hard to drag myself away, but I did have the consolation of heading to the Yokanga just a few short miles down the coast, where I was lucky enough to catch fish of 32lb and 37lb — my personal best — the following week.

However, those osenkas had me thinking all the way home, and when we met in London to review what we had learned on our exploratory, I urged that we simply had to head back in the autumn to investigate the possibilities.

Sadly, prior commitments in Kamchatka meant that Miller couldn't make it, but a smaller team of Stephan, Paolo, Greg and me geared up to return to the Kola Reserve in late September to assess the potential for autumn fishing.

On arrival, I couldn't help but feel that all the hours tying flies, packing thermals and queuing for a Russian visa may have been for nothing. The Lumbovka was running high and cold, and it looked like a bleak prospect.

We fished the river hard for a few days, but in the tough conditions, we could only attract a few dark, stale fish. Without the use of a helicopter, we were compelled to walk the river or travel in a remarkable, quintessentially Russian six-wheel tundra-mobile, a monstrous vehicle that seemed capable of travelling up and down almost sheer inclines, through streams and bogs, almost anywhere.

Our driver Sergei and his lovely young daughter Alina would laugh as we bounced around in the back, trying to pass around the whisky as we tumbled back home to our camp fire and a supper of beer-butt chicken or fresh sea-trout, cooked over a fire that we had constructed in an old oil drum.

We enjoyed some great all-night parties, looking up at the Arctic skies and hoping in vain for the aurora. However, three days in, as we sat in the camp kitchen, laughing with our friend Roman, the cook, drinking black tea and mulling despondently over online reports cataloguing unusually tough fishing reports from the normally benevolent waters of the Ponoï, a few short miles away, I thought perhaps our trip would be a bust.

Then, our salvation arrived, quite literally out of the blue.

Gleb's father Yuri descended from the sky with his pilot in his gleaming Eurocopter.

Yuri is a warm, friendly man and a passionate fisherman. He treated us to a delicious supper featuring, among other delicacies, some surprisingly good canned beaver- and bear-meat. He fortified us with fiery horseradish vodka, and then, the following day, flew us south and east over the glorious golden carpet of the autumn tundra to fish the Kachkovka.

I had only spent one short day on the Kachkovka during my summer visit and that had mainly been spent on the upper river, high on the tundra. The lower river was a revelation. A sheer canyon opened out at its lower end to reveal a clutch of magical pools, surrounded by high cliffs and studded with big, fish-holding boulders.

Action was almost immediate. Initially, we caught a few dark old stale resident fish but then I hooked something different. Something wild. A stunning silver salmon that fought like a tiger.

It was a mint-fresh, autumn-run fish.

An osenka.



**LEFT**  
The Lumbovka's beautiful Horseshoe Pool.

*“We enjoyed some great all-night parties, looking up at the Arctic skies and hoping ... for the aurora”*

We caught three more that day, all in the teens, and Yuri lost a really good fish, substantially over 20lb, right at the net. Naturally, we returned to camp that night brimming with excitement.

The following day, we returned to the Kachkovka, and while the rest of the team fished the pools that had proved so productive the previous day, I decided to go exploring. Wandering a few hundred yards upstream, I came to a long pool that was as beautiful and as beguiling as any that I've ever seen.

I put down my heavy pack, replete with cameras and tripod, took a long draft from my water bottle and took in the scene before me.

The river was dropping and clearing, and finally, after long days of incessant rain, the low Arctic sun lit up the golden autumn landscape and sparkled on the foam-flecked water.

I tied on my favourite Kola fly — a simple Willie Gunn tied on a size 4 gold double, affectionately known as the Bobby Clarkson, after its creator — and waded in.

Three casts later and something magical happened. ➤

**MAIN PICTURE**  
Matt landing a good fish on the Kachkovka.

**BELOW**  
Stephan shows off an osenka from the Kachkovka.





## SALMON IN RUSSIA

Halfway through the swing, the line drew smartly tight, and I was suddenly looking at a stunning silver berserker — a 14lb fish that went flying into the crisp autumn air before careering downstream in a blur of golden spray.

The fish was a classic osenka — deep-bodied, muscular and almost impossible to subdue. It danced on the lip of the pool, and then thankfully ran back upstream and crashed around like a wild thing while I just looked on in genuine astonishment. The fish fought every inch of the way, with the strength of a fish almost twice its size, but finally I managed to draw it up on to the soft grass. Even as I tried to prize out the barbless hook it was intent on fighting me. I finally had the fish back in the water, and as it thrashed its tail angrily and sped upstream, I was left soaked and elated, with a smattering of iridescent silver scales on my hand and a memory to last a lifetime.

Two casts later I was into another, and it too went dancing off downstream.

In the next hour and a half, I experienced absolute salmon-fishing nirvana.

Almost every cast was met by a grab; not an inquisitive tap but a full-blooded wrenching take that snatched the running line up through my fingers and had the reel spinning even before I had a chance to even think about lifting the rod.

I'll admit it. I didn't want to share this magical experience with anyone.

However, we were here to do a job, and after three fish... maybe four... I fired a bear banger skyward to alert my pals. Yuri was into a lovely fresh fish too, and by the time my friend Paolo had helped land and photograph it before yomping upstream to see me, I had hooked no fewer than seven salmon, and was in the process of landing my sixth.

Paolo helped me photograph the fish — a big brawny cockfish that was the only one of the six that wasn't chrome-fresh and covered in sea-lice. In return, I offered Paolo my magic

*“Even as I tried to prize out the barbless hook it was intent on fighting me”*

**RIGHT**  
Matt with one of six osenkas caught during a hectic 90-minute spell.



talisman of a fly and bid him fish the pool down.

Don't tell him I said so, but Paolo fishes beautifully. However, it was soon apparent that the party was over. The river was now rising fast, and the fish had either pushed upstream or had simply gone off the take.

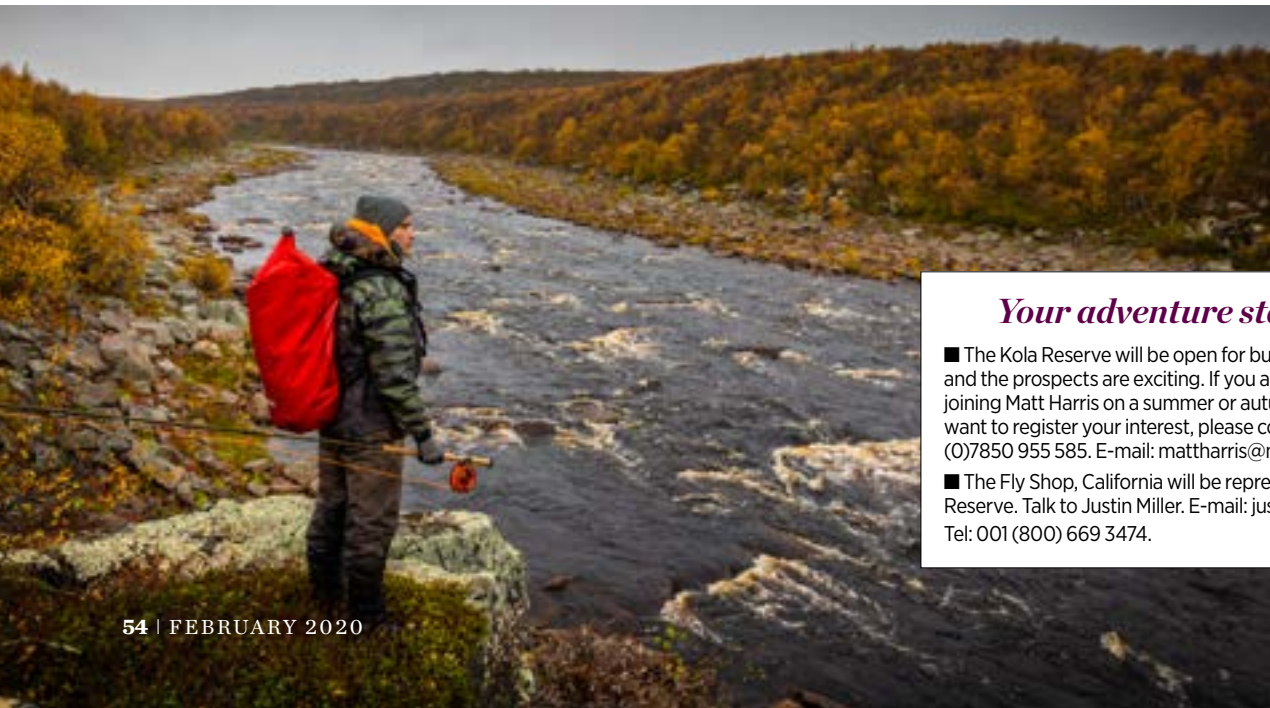
The river continued to rise, and the fishing was finally over. Two days later, we were rumbling back into Murmansk with battle-scarred fingers and a million golden memories.

As the bus pulled up at our hotel, I gazed again at the last of the leaves, drowning in the grey puddles of Murmansk. They were washed out and faded, but there was still just a little gold left in them.

While Atlantic salmon fisheries seem inexorably to be deteriorating in the face of man's ugly, savage and relentless pursuit of commercial profit, the wild rivers of the Kola Peninsula still allow us to see what salmon fishing can and should be. To see the sort of salmon fishing that our great grandfathers — and great grandmothers — experienced is inspiring and heartbreaking in equal measure. Believe me, it really is worth fighting for.

It is early days, but Gleb and Yuri are passionate about their project, and they mean business. I think that the Kola Reserve is going to be one of the Kola's very special salmon-fishing sanctuaries.

Come and join me next year. The adventure is only just beginning... [TRIS](#)



**LEFT**  
Greg surveys the Lumbovka.

### *Your adventure starts here*

- The Kola Reserve will be open for business next year and the prospects are exciting. If you are interested in joining Matt Harris on a summer or autumn trip, or simply want to register your interest, please contact Matt. Tel: +44 (0)7850 955 585. E-mail: [mattharris@mattharris.com](mailto:mattharris@mattharris.com)
- The Fly Shop, California will be representing The Kola Reserve. Talk to Justin Miller. E-mail: [justin@theflyshop.com](mailto:justin@theflyshop.com) Tel: 001 (800) 669 3474.