

Sayan Mountains --- Grayling on Fly

The Sayan Mountains are in Russia, Central Siberia to be exact, near the border with Mongolia. Like much of southern Siberia, the mountains are covered in dense forest, taiga. Fast flowing streams create the headwaters of the mighty Yenesei River, which flows northwards thousands of kilometres to the Arctic Ocean. Hikers, rafters, hunters and fishermen are attracted to this vast unspoilt region.

As I was in the northern summer of 2010 during a journey through Siberia and the Russian Far-East. The wilderness of the Sayan Mountains offered prospects of grayling, Siberia's trout the lonok, and even taimen, the landlocked salmon of Russia and Mongolia.



Karatosh River crossing by rope

Initially, the sheer logistical difficulty of just getting into the mountains looked daunting. An internet search revealed little in the way of guided fishing, and there would be few fluent English speakers to assist me mount an expedition. Assuming I could first get myself to the nearest city, Abakan, capital of the Khakassia Republic.

But then I recalled more than a decade previously, at an age when I should have known better, I had done some serious mountain trekking. A mountain trek might be the solution to my problem. To my relief, I found a website offering ten day Sayan Mountain treks, with the prospect of some fishing. Problem solved!

A few email exchanges with Siberia Trekking and arrangements were made. I would travel from Krasnoyarsk, where I would be based for much of my stay in Siberia, to Abakan by train. My

guide Genya would meet me at the station, then we would be on our way.

Our trekking group consisted of Genya, Genya's cousin Sasha, Genya's girlfriend Natasha, and Evgeny, a friend of his from the western Siberian city of Tomsk. Genya and Evgeny from Tomsk both spoke fluent English. Sasha and Natasha spoke about as much English as I spoke Russian.

I travelled the 320 kilometres to the starting point of the trek with Evgeny from Tomsk in Sasha's vintage Lada Sputnik. Conversation was interrupted only by the roar of the Sputnik as we negotiated winding mountain roads and the frequent lighting of cigarettes by Sasha, as he crouched over the steering wheel. It turned out Sasha was also a keen hunter of deer and wild boar, and knew the mountains well. Little chance of getting lost on the trek I thought.

Our route was to take us over a mountain, above the tree line, from where we would descend into the Ona River Valley above its confluence with the Karatosh River. Then we would follow the Karatosh upstream until we reached beautiful Posarym Lake, which had been featured on the website.

As we set off, early misgivings I had about the wisdom of the undertaking soon gave way to serious self doubt.



Trekking in the Sayan Mountains

I had been told we would each carry an 80 or 90 litre rucksack. This didn't sound too bad until we started packing for the trek.

As well as clothes, bedding and tents, we would each have to carry our share of the food for ten days, which included many cans of fish and meat. Lightweight, but expensive, dehydrated foods have yet to catch on in Siberia. After wading through a kilometre of mosquito infested swamp, climbing over a small mountain and descending to the first camp site, my veteran hiking boots were falling apart, and my shoulders as well as pretty much everything else ached from lugging the weight of the heavy rucksack. I was barely able to stand.

But next morning, after a good night's sleep, I had regained my enthusiasm as my thoughts turned to fly fishing. And my curiosity was aroused. I noticed Evgeny from Tomsk packing what looked like a long length of climbing rope into his rucksack. "You going rock climbing?" I asked.

"No", he replied. "The rope we will use for crossing the river". My initial misgivings returned.

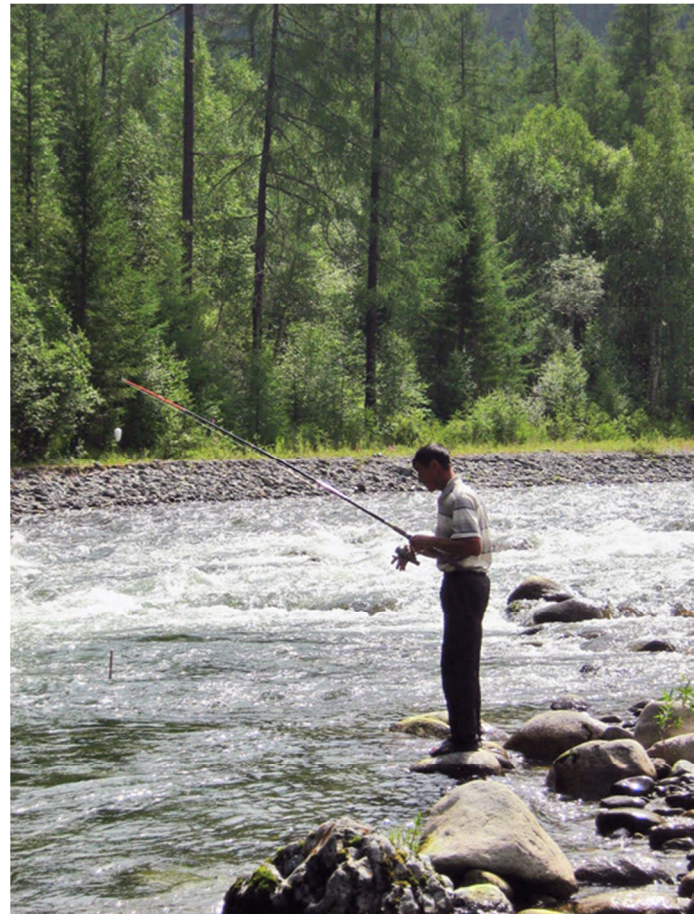
By mid afternoon we reached the Ona River, which in size and strength of flow resembled the Thredbo River in springtime. Nasty, I thought, as we worked our way downstream to a well-used crossing point. But I took comfort in the fact there would be that length of rope slung between trees on each bank, to hold onto, to prevent being swept away.

"Well, time for you to swim across the river with the rope", I said to Genya. "No, not here", he replied. "The rope is not for this little river, the rope is for the big river." I tried not to show the fear I felt at that moment. Then using my wading staff, and with help from Genya and Sasha I managed to eventually make the opposite bank.

The big river, the Karatosh, was chest deep. Huge pressure waves revealed the presence of underwater boulders. But by clinging white knuckled to the rope and, pushing thoughts of how quickly I could discard the heavy rucksack if swept away to the back of my mind, I made it across to our camp site on the opposite bank.

Sasha had already started constructing a tarpaulin shelter. My suspicions that this was to be more than an overnight stop were confirmed when Genya tactfully suggested that Sasha and I, being the fishermen, might like to stay and fish for three days while he, Natasha and Evgeny continued the trek to Posarym Lake. I accepted

his invitation, grateful for any opportunity not to have to carry a heavy rucksack for a while. I surveyed the waters before me. The extremely fast-flowing Ona River was joined by the even deeper and faster flowing Karatosh River. I wondered whether my 9 feet 6 weight fly outfit was suited to the task ahead. While I was still contemplating the best approach, and flies to use, Sasha had already assembled and rigged his outfit, assumed position on a large boulder overlooking the head of a deep pool below the river junction, and was busy extracting his fourth grayling.



Fishing conditions were indeed challenging. My attempts at fishing a single nymph up and then down and across in the raging current were futile: fly, leader and fly line were quickly gathered in, forced to the surface, and then swept to the bank. A team of three flies, the point fly a bead head nymph, received similar treatment. Pushing aside doubts about my fly fishing competence, I looked to borrow or adapt Sasha's approach. When in Rome?

I had asked Genya whether Sasha was a fly fisherman, to which he replied that Sasha was. But when I examined Sasha's tackle, I realised that fly fishing in Siberia was not as I knew it. A threadline reel spooled with stout line attached to an 8 foot rod.

I later discovered to be rated for 40 lb line and hefting 5 ounces, formed the nucleus of his outfit. A heavy torpedo shaped weight was then suspended a metre or so beneath a goose egg size styrofoam float. Strategically placed between the weight and float on short droppers were the successful flies, which looked to be short lengths of red plastic tube threaded on a hook below a red bead. A closer inspection revealed the fly dressing was indeed a short length of red plastic below a red bead.

Notwithstanding his success, Sasha shouted to me: "chornih mukha, chornih mukha." Even with my rudimentary knowledge of Russian, I knew I was being told a black fly was the likely key to future success.

Relieved at not having to borrow one of the red "tube" flies, I examined my fly box: nymphs, dries and wets aplenty, in natural and brown tones, but alas only one in black, a black pennell wet, a sea trout fly of uncertain origins.

But even with a black fly I still had to deal with the strong current. Before a knew better, I had used cubes of closed cell foam as strike indicators, which might have helped here except I had none with me.

To add to the challenge, the weather was getting worse. From the start of the trek, warm sunny weather we had been experiencing progressively deteriorated to frequent showers. "Dozht" said Sasha, pointing at the sky, "dozht". And dozht it did. The showers turned to continuous heavy rain. The temperature plunged. Within an hour I had to retire to the warmth of my sleeping bag.

I awoke next morning to better weather, and I had an idea. Perhaps matches, half hitched to the leader, would be sufficiently buoyant to serve as a strike indicator? But after experimenting and adding matches until I was using more than a dozen without achieving the desired result, I gave up on that idea.

Meanwhile, Sasha using his outfit to great effect had caught more than two dozen grayling. I had yet to open my account. Taking pity, he offered me a red tube fly, which I eagerly accepted and tied to a dropper in place of the black pennell. My team of flies now consisted of a natural hair and copper bead head nymph on point, the red tube fly, and a small green wet on the uppermost dropper.



A brace of Siberian Grayling

By moving to the head of the pool, and casting well upstream into a run to allow time for the bead head to sink and take the other flies down with it, I found I was able to fish deep down where submerged boulders provided promising fish lies. On my fourth cast, as the flies drifted through the pool, the leader stopped and I tightened. A fish! But my elation soon turned to despair. I was fast to the bottom.

I waded into the pool attempting to free the flies. A flash of silver: a fish, struggling and apparently tethered to rock near the bottom. I had hooked a fish alright, but another of my flies had fouled one of the boulders on the pool bottom.

Pulling steadily on the line, I felt the leader break. Damn! Finally hooked one only to lose it on a snag.

But then I felt the weight and movement of a fish on the line. My spirits soared. I played and landed the fish, a nice plump 12 inch Siberian grayling, my first, the natural hair and copper bead head nymph firmly embedded in the corner of its mouth. The red tube fly had disappeared, gone from its dropper.

Over the next two days I caught two more grayling, both larger than my first, one on the black pennell, which regained its place on the team, and then another which took the green wet.

Bob Beamish