TACKLING TAIMEN

Hunting the world's largest salmonids

Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter fished Eg River, Mongolia, with a group of friends in late Sept, 2013. This is his story of the rivers, the people, and the fishing.

Photo | **Matthew Ramsey**

I FIRST VISITED MONGOLIA IN SEPTEMBER 2001, WHEN WE MET WITH THE PRESIDENT, PRIME MINISTER, AND OTHER OFFICIALS TO ASCERTAIN HOW THE CARTER CENTER MIGHT BE OF HELP IN ENHANCING THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS THERE, AND TO SEE IF ANY OF OUR PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMS WERE NEEDED BY THE HERDERS IN THE GOBI DESERT. We found the political leaders very proud of their commitment to democracy, but concerned about possible excessive political and economic influence from Russia and China, their two mighty neighbors. We wanted to learn as much as possible about the country, and after a few days in Ulaanbaatar we flew to Dalanzadgad, about 320 miles to the south, in the heart of the Gobi Desert. Our goal there was to learn about the families involved in the production and marketing of cashmere wool, one of Mongolia's major exports.

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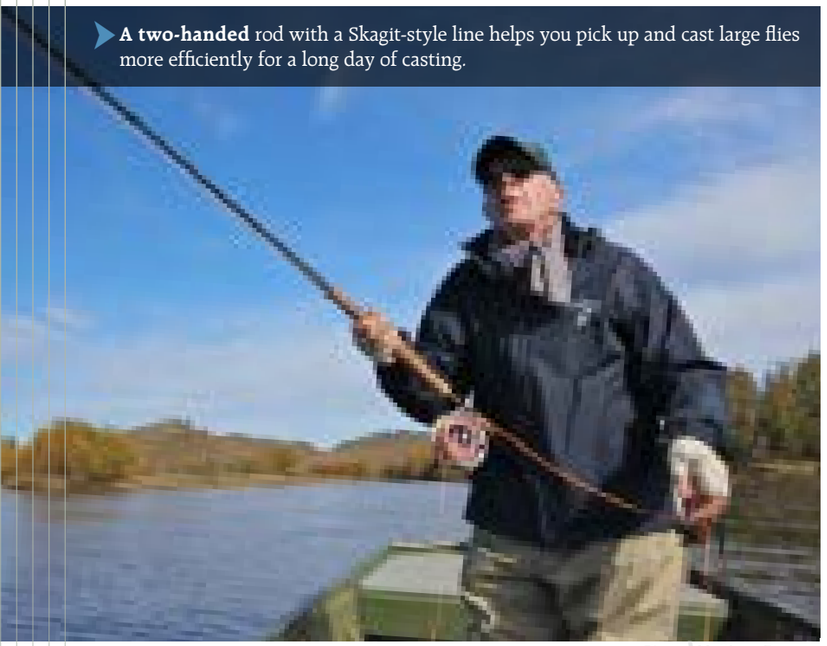

A two-handed rod with a Skagit-style line helps you pick up and cast large flies more efficiently for a long day of casting.

Photo | **Matthew Ramsey**

I loved Mongolia, and when we entered the Ulaanbaatar airport to fly home, I was already thinking of an excuse to return when I saw a man carrying what was obviously a fly-rod case. I asked him what he hoped to catch, and told me about a monstrous salmonid called taimen in the mountainous northern region. That trip was doubly memorable because that was the day I decided to return to fish for taimen, and the morning after I arrived home, we watched with horror as suicidal terrorists flew planes into the Pentagon and the Twin Towers.

Fishing Friends

Rosalynn and I have a close group of friends: Bob Wilson and Ineke Van der Muelen from North Carolina, Dr. Carlton Hicks from Georgia, Wayne Harpster from Pennsylvania, and John and Dianne Moores from Texas. I have fished with these companions in Venezuela for peacock bass and bonefish; for sea-run brown trout, dorado, and rainbows in various places in Argentina; rainbow trout on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula; bonefish and permit in Honduras; and on regular excursions to favorite streams in Pennsylvania, Alaska, Colorado, North Carolina, and Georgia.

This year we were finally able to arrange with the Vermillion brothers (*sweetwatertravel.com*) for a week of fishing for taimen (*Hucho taimen*) at one of their camps on the Eg River in Mongolia. Our quarry was the largest "trout" in the world, with an IGFA record specimen 62 inches long, and weighing 93.5 pounds.

We flew from Alaska to Ulaanbaatar on the third Monday in September, 2013, and crowded into a large helicopter with four other fishermen. Mongolia is more than twice as large as Texas but has a population of less than 2 million, with almost half living in the capital city.

Expecting to see a desert similar to what I saw on my previous trip to Mongolia, I was surprised to see many forests on the way, in addition to large but isolated cultivated fields.

Photo | **Matt Harris**

Taimen are voracious predators with proportionately enormous heads and mouths for consuming large prey. The biggest specimens feed almost exclusively on lenok, grayling, ducks, birds, and small mammals.

Other than an occasional ger—the traditional movable home of the nomadic herders—there were few signs of human habitation. After a two-hour flight, we landed in a field of wild marijuana adjacent to the Sweetwater camp on the west bank of the Eg River, which was larger than I had expected. We were assigned to our gers, which were comfortably warmed by small wood heaters.

Mongolia taimen fishing is strictly catch-and-release with single barbless hooks. The Sweetwater camps are fly-fishing only. The river was at a fairly high but fishable stage, with the water level falling a few inches each day. We would be fishing up or down the river within 10 miles of the camp, almost exclusively with a surface fly.

Our camp location had been in use since 1998, and our host, Dan Vermillion, said one of their guests from Australia held the camp record with a

Meet the Mongols

While in Mongolia we slept in gers, the superbly designed nomadic homes made of folding walls, like lattice fences, wrapped in a layer of homemade felt. They can be disassembled in about an hour, folded into a small package, loaded on camels, and erected on a new grazing site. On my first visit to Mongolia in 2001, I was accompanied by the provincial governor, and we drove over dirt trails to visit some of the herders. The grass was stunted and almost undetectable, since that particular area receives only about 2 inches of annual rainfall, so the livestock has to be moved more than a dozen times a year. One of the most prosperous families we met had 1,200 "cattle," which included cows, sheep, goats, camels, and horses, and about half were cashmere goats. We dined in their ger, which was equipped with a television set powered by solar energy. Their previous attempts to use a windmill had been foiled by the strong winds that tore off the blades. Fine cashmere was their most important source of income, with each goat producing about $8 worth a year—and about enough cashmere to produce one sweater. A similar amount of sheep's wool would bring about 30 cents. Although there is no private ownership of grazing areas, the governor said he had never known of an argument between families over grazing rights. Medical care was almost nonexistent, and their diet was almost entirely meat, cheese, and curdled milk. The extreme winter cold killed many animals, but made cashmere grow well and apparently controlled troublesome organisms, so the people seemed healthy. They were extremely hospitable, not timid with us strangers, proud of their accomplishments, self-sufficient, immersed completely in their environment, and fully at the mercy of the seasons, local markets, and the threats of overgrazing. Their top priority seemed to be the education of their children. None of our host families had been to Ulaanbaatar or any major city during the past 20 years, but all their children were being educated in the nearest villages with boarding schools.

Photo | **Matt Harris**

Rural Mongolians are mostly herders, and they live a nomadic lifestyle. They call their tentlike folding homes "gers." In America they are often called yurts, but that's a foreign name adopted from the Russian term for them, "yurta."

Sweetwater Travel first developed its Mongolia fishing program in 1995. They have two camps in the Eg-Ur watershed, and are deeply involved in preserving the world's last thriving populations of *Hucho taimen*. Dan Vermillion is cofounder of the Taimen Conservation Fund, a nonprofit scientific organization that has been involved with tagging, studying, and promoting sustainable recreational use of this native fish.

Photo | **Matt Harris**

taimen that measured 60.5 inches and weighed more than 80 pounds.

Matt Ramsey, an Oregonian, was our guide for the first day. He wanted to inspect our gear, and I assured him that I had fished for decades, tied my own knots, and had confidence in them. He asked how my leader was secured to the fly line, and I said, "I always use a nail knot with seven turns." He pulled on the leader with all his strength, and I was somewhat embarrassed when it separated, as the coating stripped off the fly line.

"Taimen pull harder than that," was his retort. I retied with an Albright knot and 25-pound tippet, which survived his next test. We then motored upriver a few miles, beached the boat on islands and peninsulas composed of small stones, waded out about knee deep, and cast toward the center of the river.

We were using a fly designed by Ramsey that he called a Cyclops, a 3-inch-long white Gurgler-style surface fly with a multicolored tail. [*The Cyclops is a new addition to the Umpqua Feather Merchants catalog in 2014.* The Editor.] Most of the flies used on the Eg and the Ur are waking surface flies similar to what's used in British Columbia for steelhead, but much larger. For taimen, no fly is too large, as these enormous fish have proportionately gigantic heads and mouths, and feed nearly exclusively on other fish, birds, and small animals.

Dissections of dead taimen have revealed entire adult muskrats, consumed whole. The waking/skating surface disturbance of your fly is what draws predatory strikes from the taimen, and the more "noise" the flies makes at the surface, the better.

Large flies are difficult to cast, and our second day on the Eg, the wind was strong and constantly shifting directions—similar to what I've experienced in Argentina's Tierra del Fuego. With the wind and large flies, I had trouble controlling the line with my single-handed 10-foot 8-weight rod, so our guide suggested that I switch to his two-handed, 13'4" Echo3 rod with a Skagit floating head, and on the second cast the line went out twice as far as on my own rod.

I used that two-handed rod the rest of the week, while Rosalynn preferred a smaller two-handed switch rod, also with a Skagit line. Skagit-style lines are heavily weighted toward the front of the line, and provide the energy you need to pick up and cast extremely large flies. I can't stress enough how important this type of tackle is for taimen fishing.

In most instances, we cast 90 degrees across the river, and watched the fly swim and churn across the surface on a tight line. The Cyclops performed beautifully if I kept the rod tip low, and pointed directly toward the line. Most of our strikes came in the middle of the swing, often over deep or bouldery holding water, although some vicious strikes came closer to shore on the "hang down." Most of the fish hook themselves using this method, but just to be sure, we pulled strongly with the line hand—with a low rod—to bury the hook.

Taimen strike with great ferocity, and they run hard, using the relatively swift currents to great advantage. Although the largest specimens have a reputation for a dogged, down-deep fighting style like brown trout, most of the fish we encountered ran fast into our backing with high-flying leaps and acrobatics similar to Atlantic salmon.

I landed a total of nine taimen, with five exceeding 30 inches. My largest was 36 inches, and our companion Bob Wilson netted the largest in our camp, at 40 inches. I firmly hooked three much larger taimen that I failed to land, but which we could see clearly as they leapt. Our guide estimated one of them to be 48 inches.

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Anything over 40 inches is considered a trophy on the Eg and the Ur, and specimens this size can be 25 years old or more. Giants like this are caught and carefully released nearly every week at the Sweetwater camps, and the biggest of the 2013 season was 55 inches long. [*The 51-inch taimen on the cover of this issue was caught at a Sweetwater camp on the Eg River two days after President Carter left.* The Editor.]

Any taimen of any size is both memorable and significant, as they have been extirpated from 90 percent of their native range mostly by overfishing, and they face future threats by placer gold mining and hydro projects in a country looking toward development. Mongolia is prospering from an explosion in mining activity, which has provided the world's highest increase in annual national income of 17 percent.

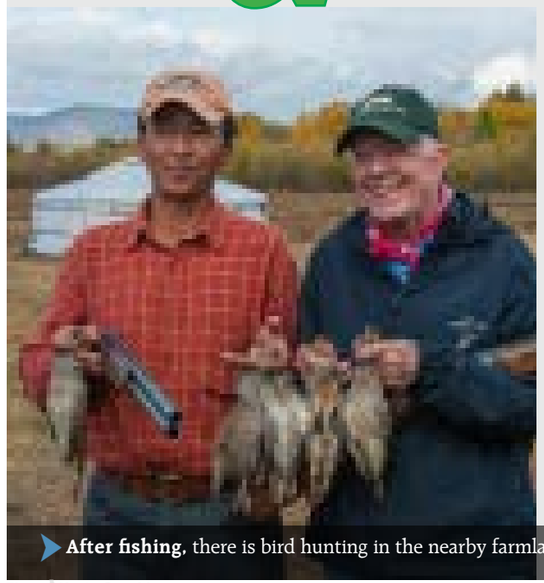
The fishing was somewhat strenuous, varying from wading along the bank or casting from the boat. During our stay, the water was 18 inches higher than normal for that late in the season, making wading difficult, so we often cast from the boat, and the guide either walked along beside the boat or dropped the anchor and paid out a long anchor line.

While taimen require a great deal of dedication and perseverance, there was plenty to see between-times, as all of us caught numerous lenoks, which are closely related to brown trout and said to be the oldest trout species in the world. Most of them ranged from 16 to 28 inches and would have been sources of pride in most streams and with lighter tackle, but I have to admit that we were somewhat disappointed each time a fish struck, and it wasn't a taimen. After all, even a 22-inch lenok is just a tasty snack for a giant taimen. There were also grayling to surprise us with grabs from time to time.

I look forward to another chance for a truly large Mongolian taimen. In the meantime I'll still be thinking of that 4-foot-long giant that arched high into the air, and twisted free of the hook as he crashed back into the river.

Former president Jimmy Carter was 89 years old when he traveled to Mongolia in September of 2013. He married his wife Rosalyn in 1946, and they recently celebrated their 67th wedding anniversary.

Cast & Blast



After fishing, there is bird hunting in the nearby farmlands and grazing areas.

Photo | **Kevin Gerold**

While in Mongolia, I wanted to learn as much as possible about the people and surrounding area, and asked many questions of the camp manager, Odkuu Magsarsuren. He suggested one afternoon that Wayne Harpster and I go partridge hunting west of the river, and I sat in the front seat of his Toyota Land Cruiser while we drove up a steep hill, descended into a valley of big larch trees, forded a stream, wound through deep ruts and mud holes, and finally emerged onto a vista of broad grazing lands and cultivated fields.

We had no bird dogs and there were thousands of acres to cover, so Odkuu just drove in and around any place that might conceal birds—abandoned cattle pens, both sides of washes, next to cliffs, or through patches of weeds. We watched the birds flush, and then land again, and Wayne and I loaded our over-under Berettas. Odkuu was often able to flush the birds again, and we harvested some tasty partridge for his wife, Monkhsaikhan (Mogi) to prepare for the camp supper. On another night, Mongolian camp workers took us on a search for wild boar, using a spotlight, but there was a full moon, and the deer, foxes, and other wild game that we spotted could see us and run away before we could get close to them.

Although I fished every day, Rosalynn and some of the others decided to take a day off, and made a round trip of five hours to the nearest village, where they visited the local school and a small but very clean hospital. Students began learning English in 5th grade, and all of them reported that they owned a cell phone and had a television set at home.