



>> Rana crossed paths with brown bears several times during the trip.

THE IZEMBECK LAGOON

Cold Bay, Alaska

by M. CARL RANA, FRESNO, CA

It was September 16, 2011, and I was on my way back to Alaska's Cold Bay thanks to the generosity of several people from the Fresno/Clovis California Waterfowl Chapter, Four Flyways Outfitters, and Big Phil Lombardi. Ten months prior I had won the trip (donated by the aforementioned) at California Waterfowl's Fresno/Clovis Dinner. It had been 27 years since I had been to Alaska, and that hunt was for caribou near Cantwell, within sight of Denali - the "Great One" as the natives call it. The Izembek Lagoon hunt I was about to embark on was an adventure that I suggest to everyone who can to put it on their bucket list.

More than just a trip of a lifetime, I was impressed by the people who I met and the impact that I had on the native population of 65 and their extended families. Led by Jeff Wasley of Four Flyways Outfitters, my waterfowl hunt was just outside of the famous Izembek Refuge, home to over 45,000 acres of Eel Grass that ebbs with the tide and supplies nutrients for hundreds-of-thousands of waterfowl. Species included beautiful flocks of emperor geese, brant, Canada geese with at least three subspecies, pintail, teal, and mallards. And as a bonus, we had willow ptarmigan to hunt on the tundra. The feathers had just started to turn white under the torsos of the 15 ptarmigan that I brought back.

Cold Bay/Izembek Lagoon is located 630 miles west of Anchorage toward the end of the Alaskan Peninsula. Upon our

arrival we went to a transport pier to fish for cod and halibut, which made for a fresh fish opening dinner. We hunted the Bering Sea side of the island for brant, which proved an excellent, challenging target with an extremely repetitive flight pattern. Jeff made us fresh brant that evening, and I have to say that it tasted like finger steaks right off the grill.

The weather was predictable with its squall-like rains, blowing wind, and limited sunshine. However, with the correct equipment we were dry and safe. Just a five-minute walk from our lodging was Russell Creek, an abandoned fish hatchery from the 1970s. Russell Creek had plenty of action in it with Dolly Varden (bull) trout and silver salmon just waiting to bite on roe and a few spinner baits. We caught fish and had them for dinner just about every night on this six-and-a-half-day hunt.

One of the nicest things about the Alaska Peninsula is that the daily bag limits and possession limits are generous: eight ducks a day, 24 in possession; six geese a day, 12 in possession; 20 ptarmigan a day; two brant a day, four in possession. Plus, you can catch five salmon per day with 10 in possession. This is truly an outdoor paradise with brown bears included - we came across them every other day!

With the exception of me, no one was going to bring home their bag limit. So we went down to the local store and boxed up the drawn birds and sent them to the hinterlands for the elders, who cannot hunt anymore, to continue enjoying their way of life. This was one of the most memorable moments for me, to know that I was able to participate in the preservation of a culture that spans centuries of arctic living.

For more information about Jeff Wasley's Four Flyways Outfitters, call (608) 355-4580 or visit www.fourflywaysoutfitters.com. Thanks to generous donors and partnerships with many outfitters, California Waterfowl offers a chance to win a premier hunting trip at nearly every fundraising dinner. To get more information about your local dinner, visit www.calwaterfowl.org.

>> PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR



>> Waterfowling opportunities included several species of geese, mallards, pintail, and teal, as well as ptarmigan.



>> A nearby creek provided Rana and his group with daily fishing opportunities.