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Women's Fly-Fishing Classes

How Cecilia "Pudge" Kleinkauf is inspiring a new generation of women to get out and fish

BY LISA MALONEY

Cecilia "Pudge" Kleinkauf (center), a professional fly fisherwoman based in Anchorage, organizes women's-only fishing trips and instructional courses through her business Women's Flyfishing.

THE ARCHETYPAL IMAGE OF A fly fisherman is idyllic: a wader-clad man in a quiet, glacier-fed lake or stream, surrounded by mountains, forest and fish as he delicately casts his hand-tied fly out over the water. Of course nowadays, there's a pretty decent chance that wader-clad person is a woman. In Alaska, this is thanks in large part to the efforts of Cecilia "Pudge" Kleinkauf, owner of Women's Flyfishing. When Kleinkauf started teaching fly-fishing in the late 1980s, she was filling a need she says she felt herself.

"I started fly-fishing mostly because my son started fly-fishing," she explained. "When I saw him catching lots more fish

than I was catching [with a spinning rod], I decided I'd better learn to fish with a fly rod." Her son never got around to teaching her, so Kleinkauf got her first lesson from a woman she met at a party.

"It was just a matter of kind of lobbing it out there and watching it when it drifted down the river," she said of that first experience. "When it stopped or wiggled or anything, you set the hook." Within 15 minutes, she had her first fish. The woman offered to connect Kleinkauf with some fly-fishing instructors.

Kleinkauf asked if any of the instructors were women. "She laughed," Kleinkauf recalls, "and told me, 'There isn't any such thing as that.'"

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CECILIA KLEINKAUF

Numerous women's-only fly-fishing classes such as this one are offered by Kleinkauf throughout the summer, encouraging everyone from beginners to seasoned fisherman to feel empowered and learn something new.



A Sport for the Rest of Your Life

So Kleinkauf started taking classes from men. If you opened a fly-fishing book or calendar in those days, all you'd see were pictures of men—but out on the river there was Pudge. Within a few years, women started asking her where she had learned and if she'd be willing to teach them.

Kleinkauf's fly-fishing school started with just a couple of classes designed specifically for women, squeezed in around her job as a public policy lawyer. After battling a couple of serious illnesses, she faced the idea that she might not have much longer to live and decided that she liked her little fly-fishing business more than being a lawyer. It made her happy—and it still does. Today, she averages 10 to 12 trips around the state each year, plus a trip south to fish Mexico's Sea of Cortez, all

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while running a successful fly-fishing business. She also offers beginning classes in Alaska from April through June, and a yearly five-day fly-fishing school in July.

“I've been doing it for 35 years now,” she said. “There's always something new to learn. Always. For me it's a new place to fish, a new kind of fly, a new kind of technique... that's what keeps fly-fishing so interesting for people.” Turns out, it doesn't take beginners long to get the basics of how to control the line and what to do when you have a fish on.

“I love to be with people with what I call their firsts,” Kleinkauf said. “Your first fish on a fly rod. Your first fish, maybe, on a fly you tied. Your first salmon. Your first grayling on a dry fly... I get as excited as the client does when they get their firsts.”

Kleinkauf always asks in her class, “Have any of you ever done this before?” Students often say they've been wanting to do this all their lives—but there just weren't any women teaching, or any gear for women, or they'd pick up their husband's fly-fishing magazine and never see a single picture of a woman fishing.

Gone Fishing

As soon as the snow melts, Kleinkauf and her students take turns playing fish with each other in the park, practicing casts and tugging on each others' lines to get used to what it feels like when a fish bites. Though the lodging accommodations on other trips have evolved to include men,



IF YOU GO

→ Learn more about Kleinkauf's fly-fishing classes, school and trips, and read trip reports from past years, at womensflyfishing.net. You'll have to bring your own waders to ensure a good fit, or buy them in Alaska; but don't worry, Kleinkauf can tell you exactly where to go and what to look for.

→ Also, be sure to pick up a copy of at least one of Kleinkauf's four books: *Pacific Salmon Flies: New Ties & Old Standbys*, *Fly Fishing Women Explore Alaska*, *Fly-Fishing for Alaska's Arctic Grayling and River Girls: Fly Fishing for Young Women*.

→ Want even more fish? Connect with the Alaska Fly Fishers Club at akflyfishers.net, or find the Southcentral Alaska chapter of Trout Unlimited on Facebook.

these beginning classes and her five-day fly-fishing school in July are, and always will be, exclusively for women.

“They don't have to know anything. They can never have even had a fly rod in their hand. I can teach them what to do with it, how much fun it is,” she explained. Sometimes just getting to a remote fishing lodge is a big part of the adventure. And along the way students also learn a healthy collection of outdoor skills they can apply in any situation. After all, where there are fish, there are bears, moose, and all the other wild beautiful things Alaska has to offer—and Kleinkauf's classes are the perfect way to peel back the mystique around what might just become a favorite sport for the rest of your life.

“They'll ask me just like that, ‘Isn't this a man's sport?’” Kleinkauf says. “And I'd say heavenly days, no! We've been letting the men have all the fun for years now. Let's get on it!”