



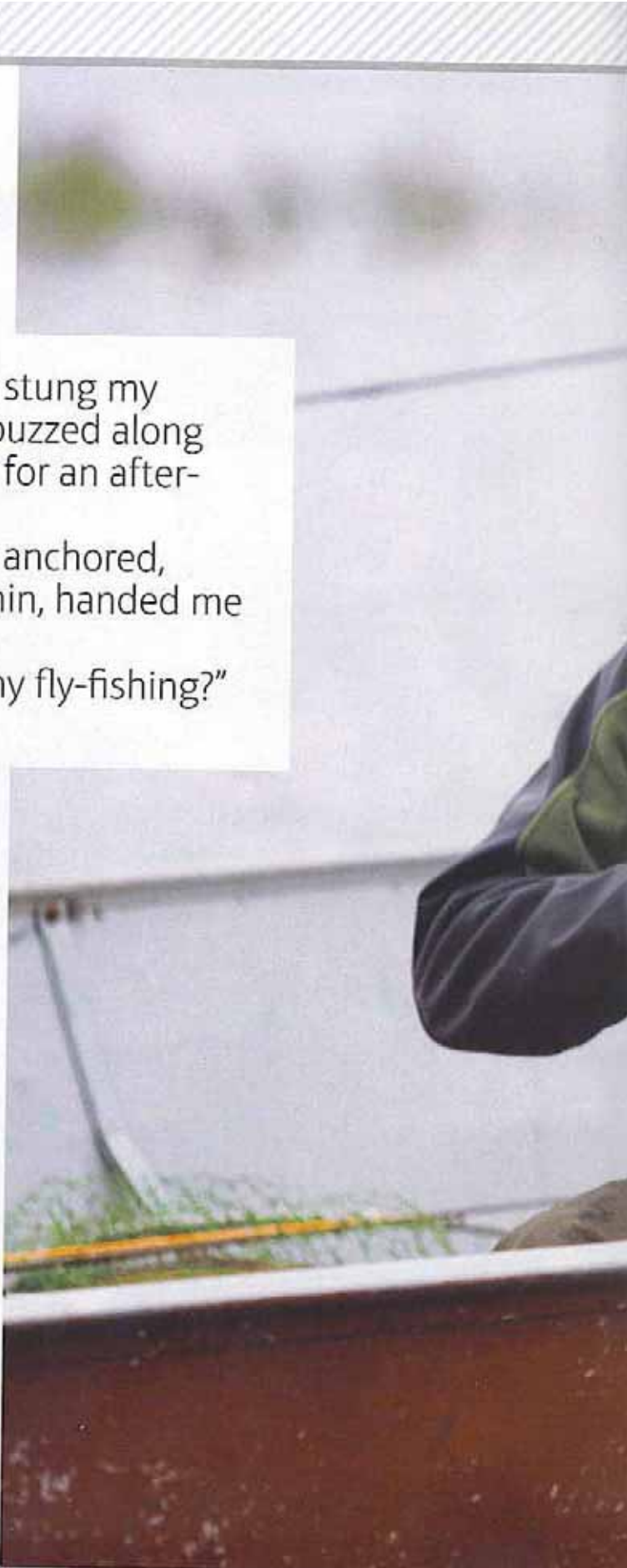
ALASKA SPORTSMAN

# Casting *for a* Career

The Bristol Bay  
Fly-Fishing Guide Academy  
gives local youths a  
fresh look at fishing

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Story and Photos by **Serine Halverson**



The crisp autumn air stung my cheeks as our skiff buzzed along the Nushagak River for an afternoon of fly-fishing.

After the skiff was anchored, my guide, Justin Zimin, handed me a rod.

"Have you done any fly-fishing?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little," I said, referring to my one-and-only fly-fishing experience.

He tied a fly to my line, handed me the rod and watched me feebly throw the rod 45 degrees behind my body, jerk it back and snag his sweater. With a knowing smile, he gestured for me to give him the rod.

"It took me a while to learn how to cast," he said.

He showed me how to hold the rod in my right hand and the line in my left; how far back the rod should be when casting; and how to pause so the line makes a loop, sending the fly jetting out into the water, instead of into my neighbor's head. Then he gave me the rod for another try.

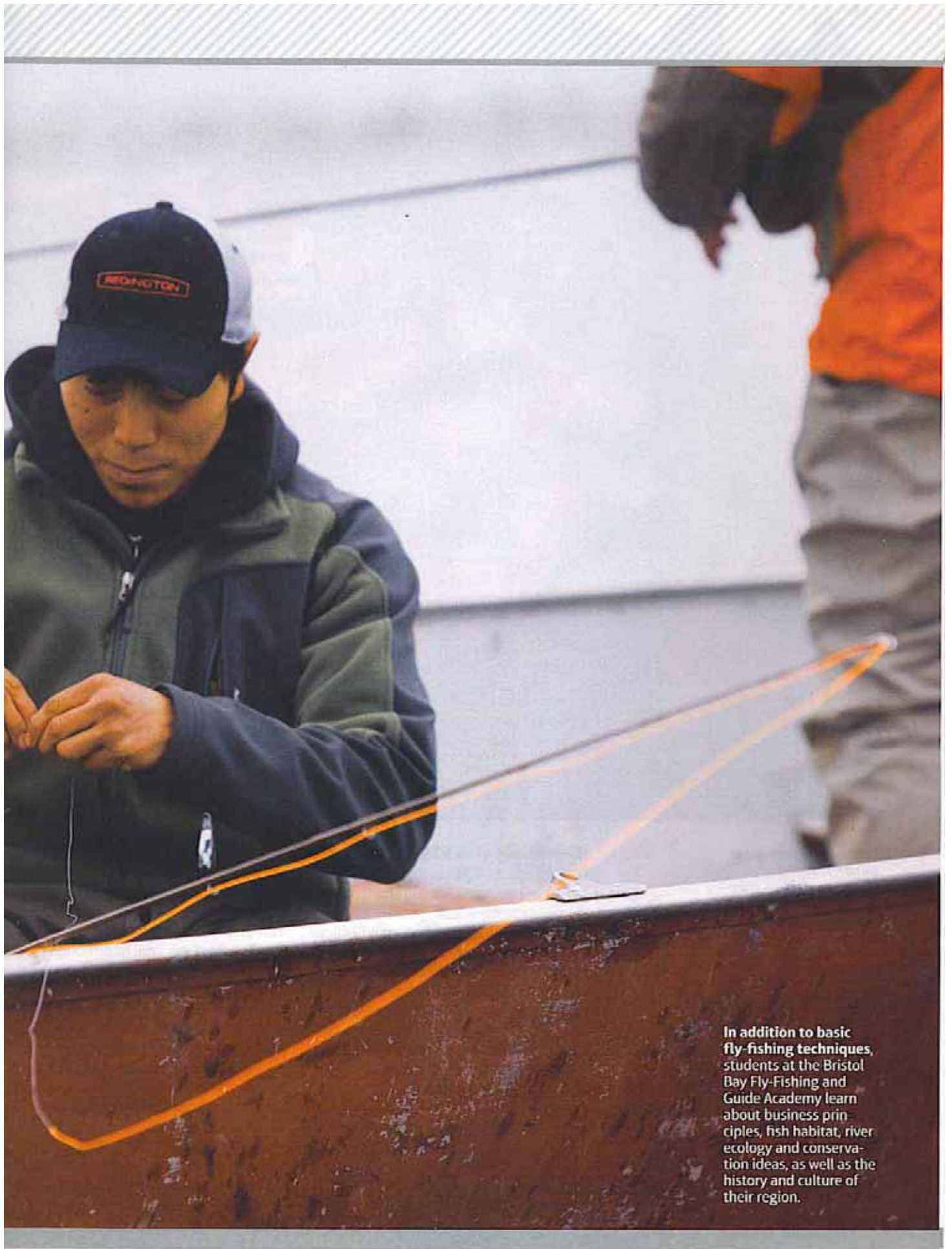
Holding the rod in my right hand and the line in my left, I lifted back, just over my head, paused and then tossed the line forward. With a *whir* and a *plunk*, my fly landed just where I had aimed. It's amazing how valuable a good guide can be.

I wasn't the only one benefitting from the guides on the river that day.

"They were humorous, gave me tips on my cast, and got me into many fish, including a huge, bright silver salmon," Nelli Williams said. "I can honestly say it was one of the best days of guided fishing I've ever had."

It was hard to believe our guides had learned to fly-fish only a few days earlier.





In addition to basic fly-fishing techniques, students at the Bristol Bay Fly-Fishing and Guide Academy learn about business principles, fish habitat, river ecology and conservation ideas, as well as the history and culture of their region.





An academy instructor demonstrates how to filet a fish after an afternoon of fly-fishing.

### **Leveling the Playing Field**

We were fishing out of Ekwok Lodge, about a mile downriver on the Nushagak from Ekwok and 43 miles northeast of Dillingham. The lodge was built 20 years ago, but these days it is used sporadically, rented by organizations for various functions. This week, it was the home of the Bristol Bay Fly-Fishing Guide Academy.

The academy began as a way to level the playing field for young Alaskans. Jobs for fly-fishing guides in the Bristol Bay area are filled almost entirely by people from the Lower 48, so a few locals decided to train their own for those positions. In addition to creating jobs for locals, the academy hopes to promote conservation and environmental

awareness in its students and the clients they will guide.

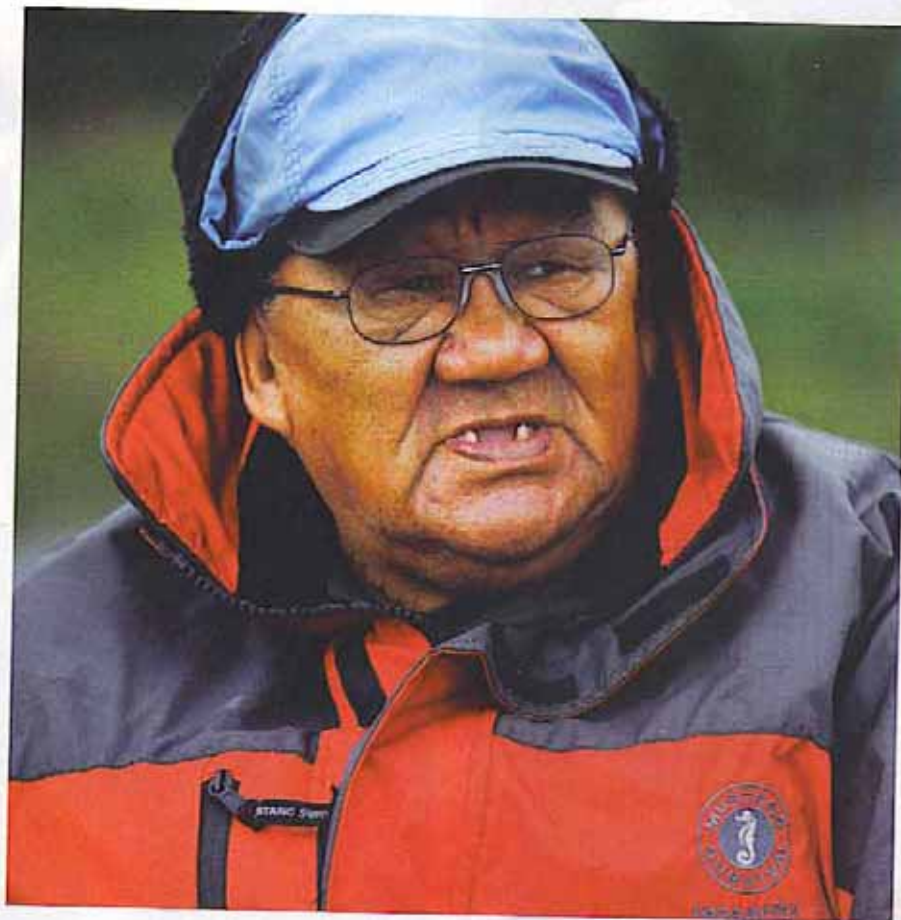
The idea for the academy was cooked up in a steam bath by Luki Akelkok and Tim Troll. After numerous phone calls for contributions, Troll had enough funding for a three-day academy.

But he needed one more element: students. After a lot of phone calls, and a lot of presentations, Troll rounded up 12 students for the 2008 academy.

"We got them there. We had great weather, and the kids just took to it," he said. "It said to me and Luki that this idea had traction."

In 2009, key grants fell through and there wasn't enough money to operate. But in 2010, Trout Unlimited and the Bristol Bay Native Corp. signed on, once





students, ages 14 to 22, who attend the camp free of charge. This year, Troll may make it easier for kids in different areas to attend by moving the camp between the east and west sides of Bristol Bay.

### It's Not for Everyone

While the academy is in session, the Ekwok lodge and Nushagak River become classrooms. In the lodge's main meeting room, four couches surround a small whiteboard where classes are taught. At the back, two huge tables sit end to end loaded with feathers and fluff, and spools of thread, floss, chenille and wire. A student fills almost every seat, busily tying flies for outdoor escapades later that day. When the class was called to lunch, the room cleared, except for two diligent fly tiers.

I asked them how the academy might fit into their futures.

"I don't know if I'll ever do it," Alex Troll said as he spun a fly, "but guiding is very appealing."

Many of the students didn't plan to become fly-fishing guides. But some

**The idea for the academy** was cooked up in a steam bath when Luki Akelkok [ABOVE] and Tim Troll realized it would help qualify locals for local job opportunities. Akelkok allows the camp to use skiffs owned by his guiding business.

again making the academy a reality. Nine students attended.

"We have continuing commitments from Trout Unlimited and the Bristol Bay Native Corp.," Troll said. "I'm optimistic. I have little doubt that the outlook is great for 2011 and 2012."

The academy isn't cheap, with most of the donations going to airfare and lodging—about \$30,000. Bristol Bay Native Corp., Trout Unlimited and the federal Bureau of Land Management each contributed \$10,000. Many other organizations and individuals also donated money or fishing gear, or volunteered employees as instructors. Troll estimates the total cost of the camp, including instructors and gear, at \$55,000.

The academy accepts 12 to 14

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—Tim Troll





## Fishing Ambassadors

The academy was created to fulfill three major goals: provide job training for local youths, promote conservation and promote awareness. The camp prepares “young local people for sustainable jobs in a recreational fishing industry that is growing ... and is based on healthy salmon runs, Williams said.

“It provides a pool of skilled local fishing guides to lodge owners,” she said, “local guides who are equipped with a lifetime of local knowledge and the ability to discuss habitat protection and other local salmon conservation issues.”

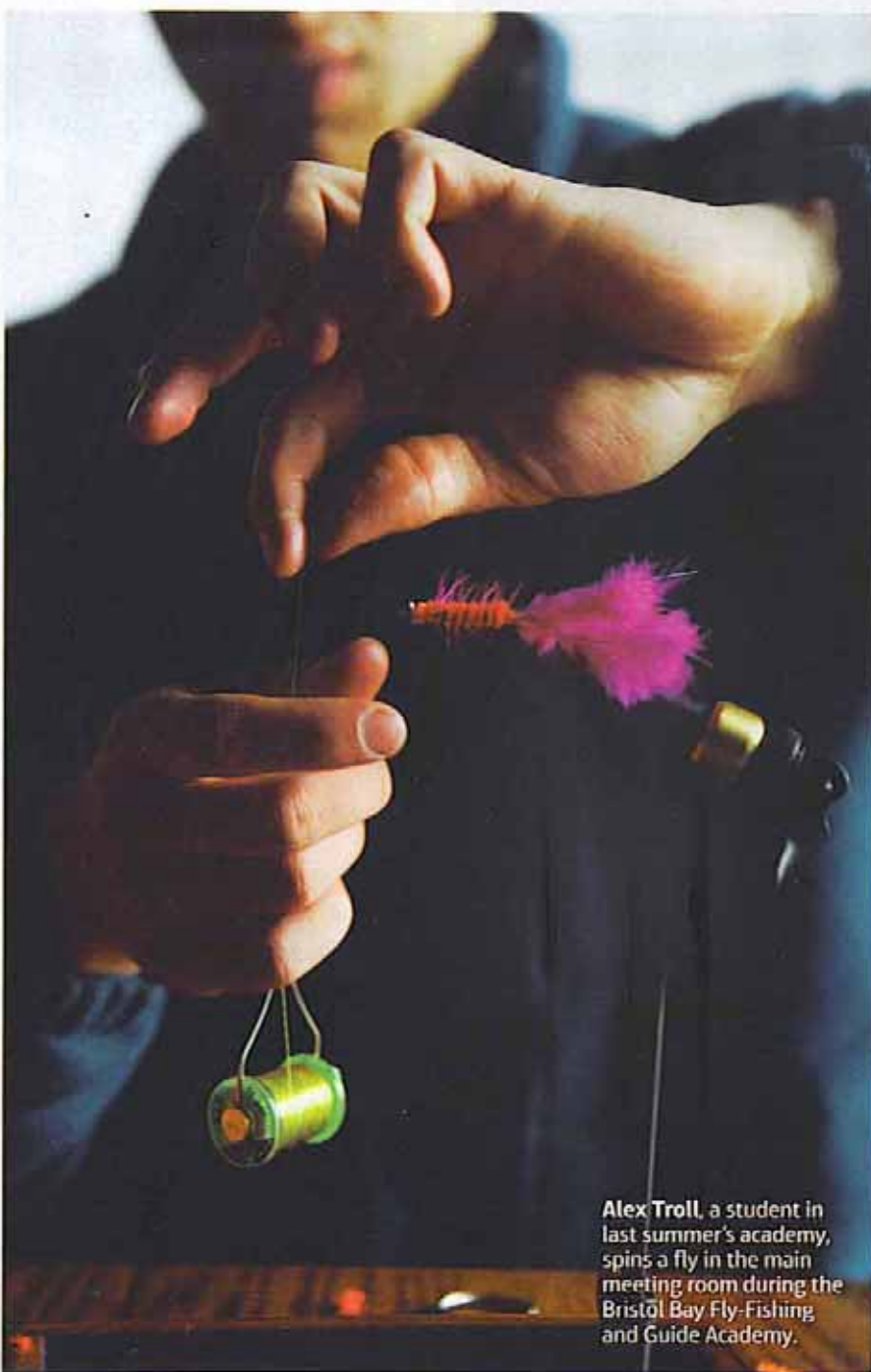
Although the academy is funded for many reasons, director Tim Troll cares about conservation.

“I’m in the conservation community,” he said. “If I have local young people who are guides, and they are in a boat with a bunch of rich people, then I have an ambassador.”

He believes that local youths represent Southwest Alaska better than guides from the Lower 48 because they were raised in the region. They can better navigate and represent the area culturally, and they understand the environment.

“They convey that to people who come to visit ... [that] have the resources to help us with those conservation issues,” Troll said. “That’s my motive.”

As for awareness, Williams said, “The guide academy was established to ... strengthen the connection between local residents and the visitors who come to Bristol Bay to fish, and while doing so, increasing opportunities for discussion and partnership between individuals and organizations, both local and from outside of the region and state, engaged in local salmon conservation projects.”



Alex Troll, a student in last summer's academy, spins a fly in the main meeting room during the Bristol Bay Fly-Fishing and Guide Academy.

aspire to open their own fishing lodges, while still others showed little interest.

“It’s not a career,” said David Williams, a 15-year-old freshman from Ekwok. He participated in the academy to learn to fly-fish. His sister attended the academy in 2008 but didn’t take a job she was offered at the academy in 2010.

Others, however, are making a go of guiding. Reuben Hastings, a 2008 graduate, has been guiding clients for

the past two years for one of the academy administrators. He also worked as an instructor in the 2010 academy.

“He can identify with the kids and they can identify with him,” Tim Troll, the academy director, said.

After lunch, the students gathered hip-waders, fly rods and other fishing gear—all donations they would take home after camp—and headed for the skiffs.



The students had learned how to use and care for their gear and the basic skills and techniques of fly-fishing, fly-casting, fly-tying, knot tying, landing and releasing fish. They also had learned how to teach others to fish, customer-service techniques and principles, fish habitat, river ecology and conservation ideas, business principles and techniques, and the history and culture of their region.

Their task for the afternoon was to act as guides while their instructors acted as clients.

"It was exactly the kind of experience they had been coached to create over the course of the academy," said Nelli Williams, an instructor, "and what thousands of anglers that come to Bristol Bay each year are searching for."

My student guide, Justin Zimin, not only knew how to introduce me to the sport, he was knowledgeable about the species we were fishing and the area we were fishing, and he was as personable and professional as any licensed guide I had ever met.

### **A Well-rounded Education**

Not long after we returned from fishing, it was time for the next lesson. The students took seats on the couches in the main meeting room as Tim Sundlov, a fish biologist from the Bureau of Land Management, started a PowerPoint presentation about the ecology of watersheds. (The academy counts as one university credit.)

"A watershed is like a factory that makes fish," Sundlov said. "Each part of the watershed serves a different purpose. That's why we need to protect entire watersheds and not just single streams."

Sundlov discussed the ecological interactions between the land habitats and the streams that run through it. After the lesson, instructors took turns giving prizes to the students who made the best guides that afternoon, and explained why those students were recognized.

After the awards, the students had 30 minutes before lights out. Some grabbed a snack, some went to their bunks, and

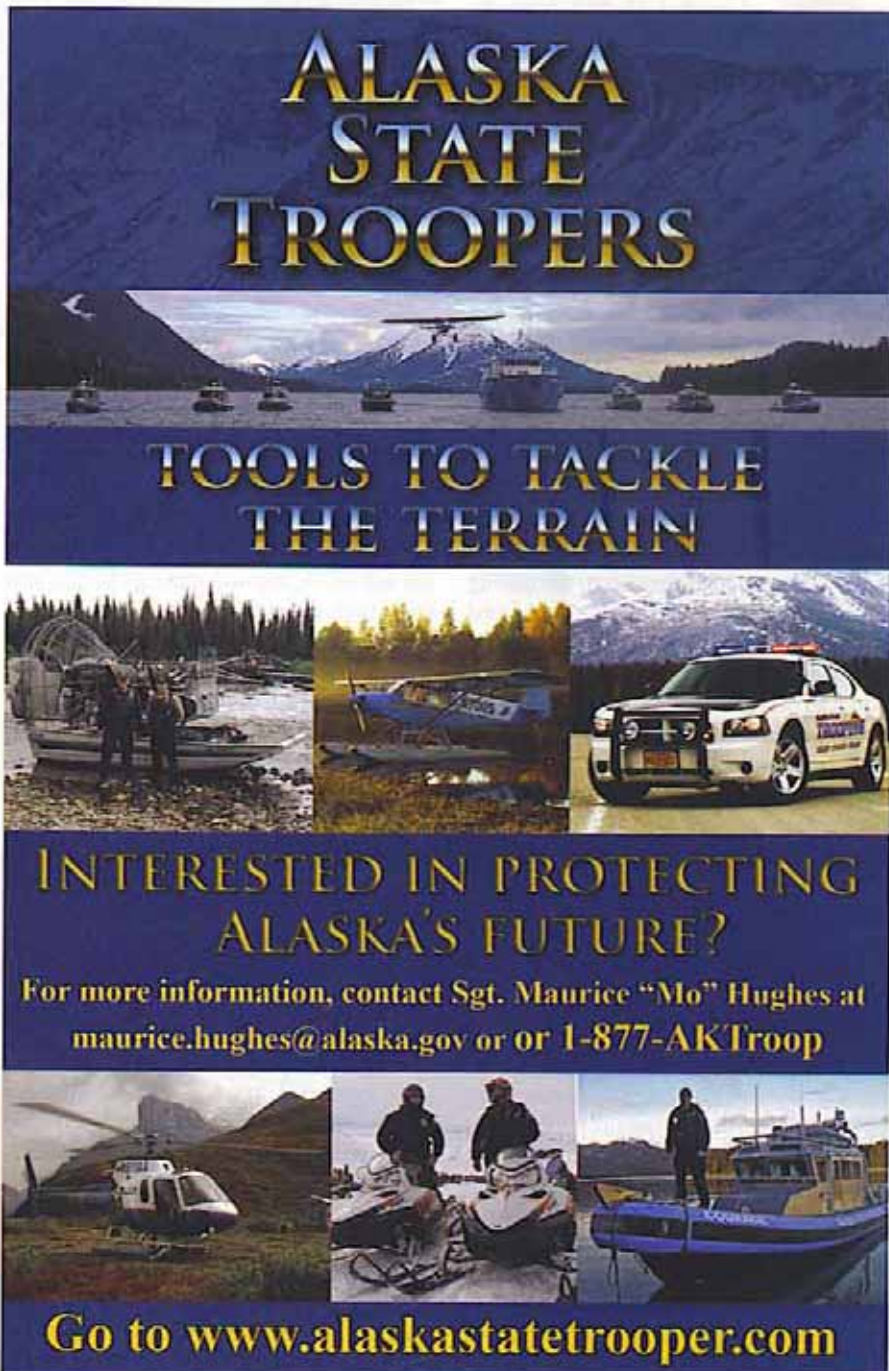
some played Pictionary while Hastings played guitar. Williams politely reminded the girls when it was five minutes before bedtime.

After some gossiping and giggling, the girls' cabin was pitch black and quiet—miles from the glow of outside lights and the buzz of motors and electricity.

But in just a few hours, students

shuffled through breakfast, then into the main meeting room for an all-day CPR and first-aid intensive course by volunteer Dave Milligan. They would leave the day's lesson with a CPR card—one step closer to becoming professional fly-fishing guides. ■

**Serine Halverson** is associate editor at *Alaska* magazine.



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