



FISHING TALES

BY JENNIFER BAIN

"Salmon are a key link in our food chain, not just with humans but with bears and wolves and birds — even the health of the forest is driven by salmon. They also play an important role in the BC economy, not just with commercial fisheries but with Indigenous and recreational fisheries, with communities, with tourism, and with all the businesses that support the commercial salmon fishery." — Dane Chauval, BC Salmon Marketing Council





FOR THE LOVE OF SALMON

Angling for the perfect catch in the Strait of Georgia.

IT'S THE MOMENT MOST ANGLERS LIVE FOR — those first few euphoric seconds when a fish, hopefully a chinook, tugs on the line deep in the ocean, causing the rod to bend and twitch and jerk.

Conversations on the boat come to a stop, and I jump to my feet, ready for action. My travelling companions watch eagerly.

Blake Phillips, our Unreel Fishing Charters captain, pulls the rod out of the electric downrigger

and sets the hook before handing it to me. He stands by with a net as I quickly reel in about 150 feet of line without giving the fish slack to wiggle off. I know it's not a fish until someone sees it, lest it turn out to be seaweed or tangled lines. I know it doesn't count as a catch until it's in the boat.

The pounding rain and fierce winds that cancelled another fishing trip from our basecamp in Nanaimo the night before have given way to June

➤ sunshine. One major perk of fishing here, between Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia, is that it's just a 20-minute journey from Nanaimo's public boat launch to the salmon fishing grounds, so we didn't waste much precious time on travel. Today it's so calm we could be fooled into thinking we're on a lake instead of the ocean. And the blissful lack of fog means we can marvel freely at the coastal mountains.

We are here for chinook, the largest of the Pacific salmon species and the one nicknamed "king" or, when it tops 30 pounds, "tyee." Coho would also be a great catch — it is feisty and delicious. This isn't a sockeye spot, and pink and chum don't excite most anglers.

And we want to feel like most anglers. We've all bought Tidal Waters Sport Fishing Licences (purchased online from Fisheries and Oceans Canada), and paid \$6 extra for Salmon Conservation Stamps that help the Pacific Salmon Foundation conserve and rebuild salmon populations, and let us keep a select few fish.

I soon land my first and only salmon of the day. It's young, but we cheer anyway.

"That's alright — that's a fish," Captain Phillips says soothingly, pausing before breaking the news that it's a wild coho and must be released.

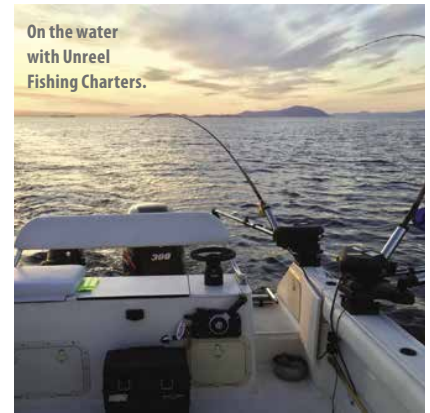
The government protects wild coho in this area to help their depleted numbers rebound. Only hatchery coho can be kept, and they have obvious marks where their adipose fins have been clipped. An interesting twist, we learn, is that the hatcheries don't have the resources to clip all the salmon they release, so what looks like a wild fish might actually be from the hatchery. Still, we must release any coho with intact fins and do our part to protect them.

As we float serenely on the soft waves, we fish with just two rods — since any more are bound to get tangled in these depths — using barbless hooks, flashers and small spoons that mimic wounded bait fish. We politely take turns catching four more salmon. They are all wild coho and go straight back into the sea.

"They're not monster fish," the amiable Captain Phillips concedes, "but it's nice to see some action."

Speaking of monsters, I try fishing for lingcod, but the unattractive creature that's said to taste like "poor man's lobster" isn't biting.

Our fishing expedition is over too soon, but we are grateful for the many happy hours on the ocean. The sunshine is intense. The conversations are spirited. The area isn't packed with anglers so we feel like we've got the spot to ourselves.



On the water with Unreel Fishing Charters.

ON THE ROLE OF THE GUIDES...

"Fishing guides can play a big role in educating people [who] come here and visit. When we catch a fish over 25 pounds, I try to educate people to release a fish of that size, if it's healthy. We tell clients and guests to release big fish so they can hopefully make it back to the rivers and spawn and keep those genes going for larger types of stocks."

— Blake Phillips, captain at Unreel Fishing Charters

ON FISHING HUMANELY...

"Pacific salmon is part of BC's original culture — it's part of our entire history. Respect the [fish]. If you have a daily [catch] limit, where you might be allowed to take one or two fish a day, then try to land the fish as quickly as possible, bring it in, minimize the handling and remove the hook within the water. [If you can't keep your catch], remove the hook and return the fish to the salt water as fast as possible."

— Dr. Brian Riddell, CEO Pacific Salmon Foundation

5 PACIFIC SALMON



CHINOOK

Nicknames: Spring, king, tyee
Distinguishing features: Largest species, large spots on back, dark mouth, black gums, v-shaped, silvery tail
Age at maturity: 3 to 7 years



COHO

Nickname: Silver
Distinguishing features: Swift and active, spots on upper part of body, white mouth may have black edge, square tail
Age at maturity: 3 years



SOCKEYE

Nickname: Red
Distinguishing features: Best tasting, no spots on back or tail, glassy eyes, white mouth with white gum line, small teeth
Age at maturity: 4 to 5 years



PINK

Nicknames: Humpback/humpie
Distinguishing features: Smallest species, large spots on back, white mouth, black gums, v-shaped tail but no silver
Age at maturity: 2 years



CHUM

Nickname: Dog
Distinguishing features: No spots on back or tail, white mouth, tongue may be black, large teeth
Age at maturity: 3 to 5 years

This page: Pacific Salmon illustrations: Timothy Knepp/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; chinook: Alamy Stock Photo; top photo courtesy Unreel Fishing Charters. Facing page: Alamy Stock Photo

THE LIFE OF A SALMON

All Pacific salmon are anadromous, which means they start in freshwater (streams, lakes, and rivers), migrate to the ocean, and return home to spawn and die.

THE BEGINNING
Females and males court and breed. Using its tail, the female digs a nest (called a redd) in natal waters and releases thousands of eggs as the male releases a cloud of milt that floats to the bottom. The female covers the nest with gravel layers.

TIME TO INCUBATE
Fertilized eggs are fragile and incubate over winter. Each egg contains an embryo and yolk that feeds it.

HATCHING
The embryo develops and hatches as an alevin. The alevin still carries its yolk sac, which contains food for several months.

FREE-SWIMMING
Once the alevin absorbs all the nutrients in its yolk sac, it becomes free-swimming fry and must move up into the water. Fry are a favourite snack for predators, so they hide in protected spots and dart out to eat. At this time, they have an urge to migrate to the ocean.

SALT-WATER READY
Fry ready to enter salt water are called smolts. They develop a silvery coating over their scales to camouflage themselves from predators as they travel from fresh to salt water.

ADULTHOOD
Salmon enter the ocean as young/ juvenile adults and leave as mature adults (length of time varies per species). Once they are sexually mature, they travel upstream to natal rivers so future generations of salmon can repeat this cycle.

ON SUSTAINABLE METHODS...

"Culturally, [Pacific salmon] are significant to all First Nations peoples along our coast. It is who we are. [As a result,] sustainable fishing is a key concern. Take only what you can eat — that's a principle that's been instilled in First Nations culture and sustainable fisheries alike." — James Cowpar, co-owner and operator of Haida Style Expeditions

"For us to catch coho, which is an iconic BC salmon, is kind of cool," one of my friends says as we head back to shore.

We make a short stop at Entrance Island to marvel at bellowing seals and a couple of sea lions, and Captain Phillips informs us that, occasionally, these seals jump into boats to avoid hungry transient orcas.

A few months later, I follow up with Phillips, who lets me know he saw "a huge amount" of wild coho throughout the fishing season (April to the end of

October), often catching 10 to every hatchery coho. This is good news for the species. Plus, one of his clients caught (and released) a chinook that was well over 40 pounds.

"It just shows you that any time you go out you have a chance to catch a once-in-a-lifetime fish," says the captain. "But I really try to make it about the overall experience, enjoying the wildlife and the ocean. Not many people even get a chance to go out on the Pacific Ocean." ■



Thunderbird Returning the Salmon, Quw'utsun' Cultural and Conference Centre, Duncan, BC.

DEEPER CONNECTIONS

BC's Indigenous Peoples have had an important relationship with salmon for centuries. Not only have these fish been a vital and long-respected source of food, they've also played prominent roles in the art, economy, and mythology of many Indigenous groups. In some First Nations stories, salmon are celebrated as returning relatives, demonstrating a deep connection between human and fish, and an age-old reverence for the cycle of life.