

THE SPAWNING SOCKEYES OF SKAGWAY

by J.R. Warnet

Around the many swerves and dips of the Skagway White Pass and Yukon Trail lies a miracle of life. Through the Canadian Rockies and around the clouds that seem to ascend forever is a rite of passage worth dying for. Despite the rough terrain and the ultimate demise, this sacrifice is the most noble of causes on the planet, the spawning of the salmon.

Several years ago I traveled to the small town of Skagway, Alaska, with its population of 800 and change and found something incredible on my trip. Skagway is most known for the Gold Rush in the 1898, which, oddly enough, never actually happened in Skagway. Today it is the land of floatplanes but still holds much of its old-time ways. This small, pristine town was lost to time way before the cruise ships and jewelry stores moved

in. My quest here was to find gold, but I wasn't looking for rocks or minerals.

Each year the annual salmon run speeds through the local rivers and streams. All species of salmon invade Puget Sound in Seattle and travel into various parts of Canada and Alaska. Massive king salmon choke the shallow rivers, while coho salmon straggle along through bays and lagoons. Several fine lodges populate the coastline and can cost a great deal of money when all is said and done. But if you ask me, the price is worth every penny.

Whether you float a tapered line in a stream or troll in open water, salmon are highly regarded as a top sport fish. My main weapon of choice for this trip wasn't a pole, but a lens. I was in Alaska on a photography safari to catch a glimpse of the luxurious waterfalls and mountain ranges that cascade through one of the most beautiful places on earth. On my extravaganza, I filmed mountain goats navigating impassable terrain and bald eagles catching a quick breakfast. To be honest, I think the eagle can out-fish me any day, but I had to bring at least one pole along for the ride. I knew my excursion would

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pass a few rivers along the way, so I packed a lightweight, foldable fishing pole in my daypack. It was no St. Croix, but it would have to do.

Many anglers travel far distances just to say they were spooled by a 50-pound missile, but most of the large kings were farther south by now. On this trip, however, Skagway was home to a sockeye population which was near the end of the spawning season. My trip was pushed back a few weeks, so I missed the better known species of salmon. All that was left was a red and green fish with a wicked mouth, which, to me, is still as glorious as any other fish.

Two days before I had visited Skagway, my tour stopped off in Juneau, where I filmed orcas and humpbacks. When I hiked through Glacier Bay National Park, I witnessed sockeyes spawning in small, crystal clear waters. These fish had no intent on taking a lure; they were there to perpetuate the life cycle. I watched them for a while and thought it might be nice to catch a sockeye since it was one of the only salmon I hadn't caught before. So, since my train tour stopped in Skagway, I was ready to test my luck.

After a wonderful train ride through the Canadian Rockies, I had a few minutes to stop along the river and cast out a line. The Skagway River was far too silty this time of year for sockeye to spawn, but a few tributaries off the river are clean enough to see fish. A few minutes passed as I cast out my silver Blue Fox spinner, like I would use for rainbow trout in early spring. My train tour guide said the lures didn't have to be fancy, so a plain silver Rooster Tail or Mepps was good enough. I worked the small stream for about ten minutes until I saw a sockeye swim blindly past me.

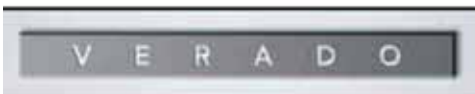
Judging by the color of it, this sockeye was towards the end of its life. The once vibrant red and green colors were nothing more than a faded hue, and it was swimming lazily in no apparent rush for anything. My first few casts in front of it were useless. I didn't think it had enough energy

to swim, and soon enough, it had slowed its pace to a crawl. Three more casts in front of its jagged jaw proved just as feeble since its tail barely swayed from side to side. I can still remember the slow up-and-down movement it made with its mouth. Two, maybe three seconds passed as it pulled water past its gills, all the while seeming too tired to stay afloat.

My next stop of the tour was quickly approaching, so I hastened my casting in an effort to catch a sockeye. Cast after cast, I had no luck until finally its dull green jowls snapped down and it was hooked. I reared back, set the hook and reeled it in. It had no fight left in its body and soon I was alone in the fight. My joy slowly turned into sadness as I pulled the fish to shore.

Halfway through the fight, the sockeye was lifeless and limp; it had given up on its path, and with exhausted gills it died on my line. I had no need to continue reeling as the fish coasted onto the bank and came to a halt. No pliers for this removal, I thought to myself as I bent down and pulled a small silver lure from its now motionless mouth. I should have been excited to catch my first sockeye, but I was filled with pure hatred and rage. To think, its last action on earth was a half-hearted fight with a tourist and a rod. Here I was, in a serene and heavenly place, catching dead fish.

I was so angry at myself for being so selfish and crude. After its long journey up the river, avoiding the jaws of grizzlies, the sockeye died at the hands of man. It's almost cliché if you stop to think about it, but I heard the train whistle blowing, so I made my peace and pushed it back into the current. I had plenty of time to think about what had happened on the two-hour trek back to the boat. That was one of the longest train rides I had ever taken and the breathtaking pictures I was there to capture seemed boring to me now. The only thing I could think about was if that fish had had a chance to spawn before it died. A good part of me wants to think it did. Someday, on my next visit to Skagway, I hope to run into its offspring, but then I'll use a camera instead of a rod.



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