

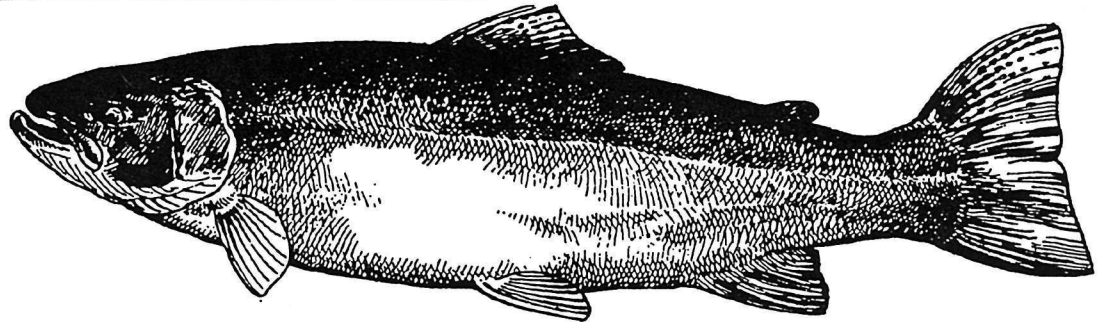
North Cascades

Ross Lake and Lake Chelan

North Cascades National Park
Ross Lake National Recreation Area
Lake Chelan National Recreation Area
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salmon:

Symbol
of the
Northwest



Natural History

Few sights symbolize the Northwest more than a wild salmon jumping ten feet into the air to get over a waterfall. Much of the Skagit River watershed provides good spawning and rearing grounds for salmon.

The behavior of salmon returning from the ocean to the tributary of their birth is referred to as anadromous (Greek for “running upward”). Because salmon return to the tributary where they were born, fisheries biologists manage each run or stock individually.

The female digs a hole, a “redd,” in the gravel with her tail and lays her eggs in the hole. The male, fighting off other males with his sharp teeth, fertilizes the eggs. Then the female covers the eggs with gravel so they won’t wash away. The fragile eggs need cool, clean oxygenated water to remain.

Five Species of Pacific Salmon

- Chinook salmon are the largest salmon. Pacific Northwesterners call them “king salmon” in honor of their great size. One race of chinook salmon on the Olympic Peninsula had individuals that weighed up to one hundred and twenty five pounds, but they typically weigh twelve to forty pounds. Chinook typically mature at four years. Sometimes large chinook are called “Tyee,” which means “chief” in the Chinook Indian language.
- Coho salmon are favored by sport fishers. Sometimes called “silvers,” they display their silver-colored sides when leaping into the air. Coho spend the first year in the stream.
- Chum salmon are often referred to as “dog” salmon, because they develop large teeth, which males use to fight off other males in their search for a spawning mate. The Skagit River chum run is very important to bald eagles, serving as their major food source during the winter.
- Pink salmon are the smallest of the Pacific salmon and live only two years. In Washington they run primarily in odd years, while in Alaska they run heavily in even years. Pink are nicknamed “humpies” for their pronounced humped back, which develops on males during spawning.
- Sockeye salmon are occasionally referred to as “reds,” because their bodies turn a brilliant red during spawning, while their heads turn an olive-green. Sockeye salmon are the only salmon to spend part of their life cycle in inland lakes. Few rivers in Washington State accommodate the special lake-rearing needs of this salmon. On the Skagit River, one small run of sockeye goes to Baker Lake and another small run goes to the Sauk River. Kokanee are a land-locked sockeye; they never see the ocean.

Local Fish Closely Related to Salmon

Two species of fish closely related to salmon are steelhead and cutthroat trout. As the salmon, they are in the Salmonidae family. Both have resident forms, which stay in freshwater year around. Resident steelhead are rainbow trout. They also have anadromous forms, spending much of their life out in the open ocean. The critical difference between trout and salmon is that they can spawn up to four times before dying. Cutthroat are small, often around fifteen inches long, while steelhead rival chinook salmon in size. The Skagit River is also home to two species of native char: Dolly Varden and bull trout. Various runs of these four fish are being monitored closely for possible listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Status of Pacific Salmon

Generally speaking, the pink and chum salmon runs are in good condition. Chinook and coho are being studied for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Sockeye are naturally less common in Washington State than the other four species of Pacific salmon. The Baker River sockeye run are also being considered for protection under the ESA.

Reasons for the decline of salmon runs stem from a lack of spawning habitat, logging, dams, agriculture, overharvesting, poaching and cross-breeding with genetically inferior hatchery fish.

A number of things can be done to help the salmon: favorable changes in the quantity or quality of any of the preceding listed activities will help. Stream restoration improves the quality of spawning and rearing habitat by returning the stream to a more natural condition. This includes replanting the streambanks with trees, stabilizing and revegetating eroding stream banks, and placing logs and stumps in streams to create better rearing habitat. Bringing the endangered runs of salmon back requires community support.

Where You Can See Salmon

The Skagit River has gained wide recognition as an excellent place to observe over-wintering eagles, which are attracted by the large numbers of winter-running chum salmon. The best time for you to see salmon is between August and January. There is no guarantee that you will see them, but here are a few suggested places to look:

- Marblemount fish hatchery: Cross the Skagit River at the bridge in Marblemount from State Route 20. Follow the signs to the fish hatchery, where salmon fry and smolts are raised. In the fall, adult salmon can be observed in the creek leading up to the hatchery.
- Cascade River bridge near Marblemount hatchery: In November chum and coho can be seen in the area below the bridge. Viewing from the bridge will not disturb the fish.
- Baker River Facility: Steelhead and sockeye can be seen swimming below you. The salmon are collected from this point, taxied above the Baker Lake dams and released back into the lakes. Turn north from State Route 20 on to Everett Street, east of Concrete. Follow until East Main Street and turn left. A visitor center at the facility provides information about the dams and fish.
- During the fall, on the Skagit any place above Rockport, where a creek enters the Skagit, is a potential place to observe salmon. Goodell Creek Campground and the bridges around Newhalem are good locations to check. Look for carcasses of spawned-out salmon washed up on the stream banks.

