A veteran Alaska fly fisherman offers reasons why this food fish should be elevated to fighting-salmon rank

Sockeye Salmon

LANI WALLER

IT WAS THE AMERICAN ichthyologist Suckley who in 1861 pronounced that the salmon of the Pacific Northwest were in fact of a different genus than the Atlantic salmon, the famous and long-celebrated *Salmo salar*. Prior to this most authorities believed both fish to be of the same general grouping.

Suckley chose the word *Oncorhynchus* to describe the new genus, a word taken from Greek that means "hook" and "snout" and refers to the obviously hooked snout that male Pacific salmon typically display as spawning time draws near.

There are six to eight species of Pacific salmon depending on whose classification system you are looking at. The genus includes the pink salmon, the chum, the coho, the chinook or king and the sockeye.

Of all Pacific salmon only two species are commonly considered of significant value as fly-rod gamefish: the coho salmon whose tradition has been firmly established from Oregon to British Columbia and as far east as the Great Lakes; and the chinook salmon, which was first fished for seriously with a fly rod by a handful of eager Californians in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Recently, however, interest among fly fishermen in another species has been growing: *Oncorhynchus nerka*, the sockeye salmon.

Sockeye inhabit most of the temperate and sub-arctic waters of the Pacific Northwest from the tea-colored waters of California's Klamath River north to the frigid waters of the Yukon River in Alaska. Sharing a fate common to most Pacific salmon, the sockeye has been considered primarily a food fish and has a long history of commercial exploitation. There is, to be sure, much more to the game than this.

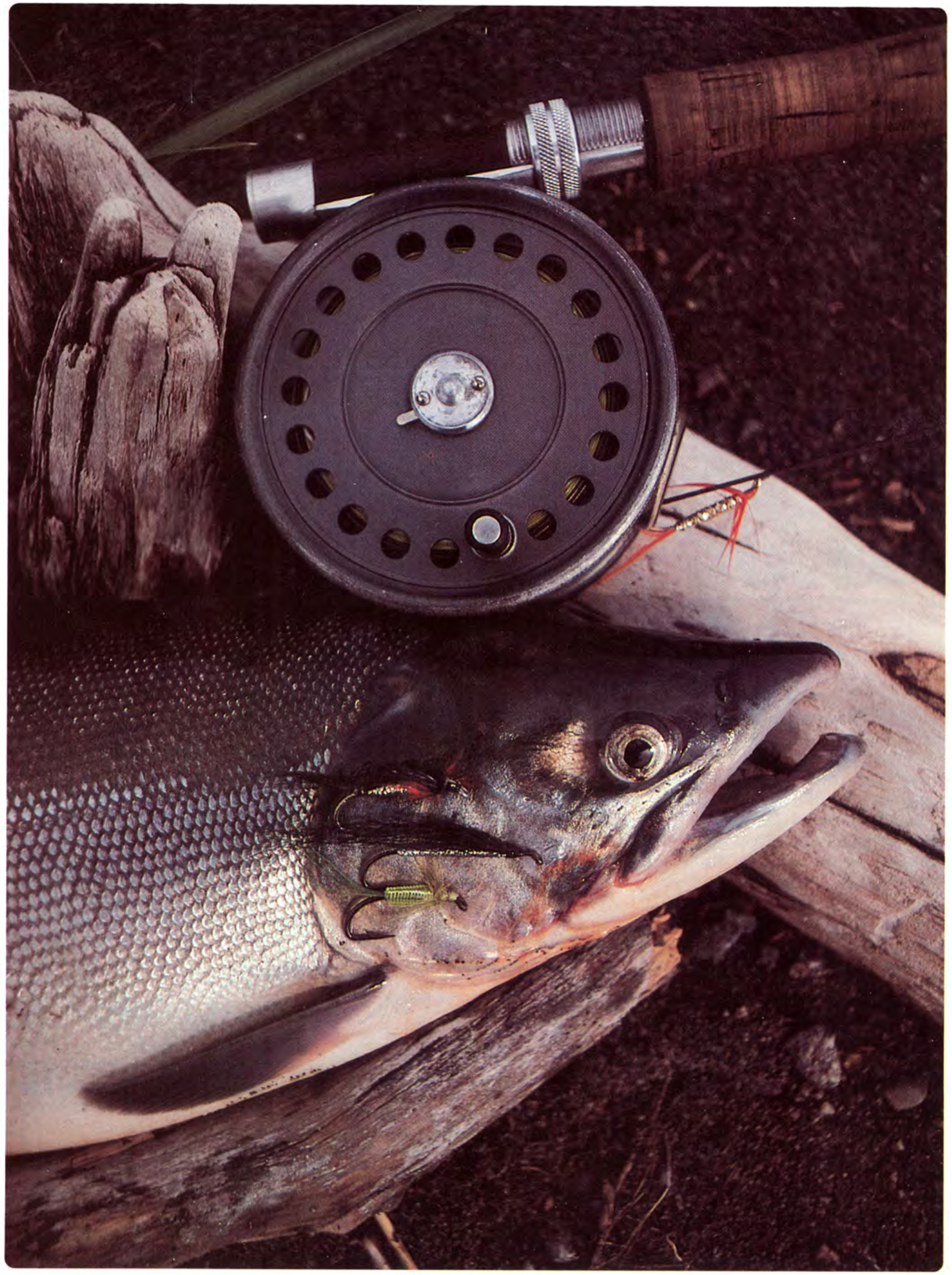
Sockeye are not large salmon. Averaging between and ten pounds, they lack the imposing size and weight of the chinook; yet when fresh, sockeye are extremely powerful for their size and are a tremendous light-tackle gamefish. They are quick and agile, capable of maneuvering through heavy currents with ease. Their surface struggles are often powerful and explosive.

Like most salmon, sockeye are smooth, sleek and well formed. Bright fish—fish that are fresh from the sea—are especially striking, displaying subtle combinations of color that seem to blend together in a strange, almost kaleidoscopic fashion—brilliant silvers, pale blues and soft pinks. The sockeye's stomach is clean and smooth, ranging from light gray to pure white, and its back exhibits a color range that runs from smokey grays to soft shades of olive. In general appearance they are not unlike some strains of wild steelhead.

This appearance changes markedly, however, as spawning time draws near. The bright-silver sides of both sexes dim and are gradually replaced by an overlay of delicate pink that continues to develop in intensity until the sockeye is completely clothed in its spawning dress: brilliant red sides with an oddly contrasting head colored a bright shade of olive.

The male sockeye normally develops the hooked snout typical of all Pacific salmon—although not always in the exaggerated proportions of some other species—while the female sockeye retains more of her original grace and form. The individual color and form will vary, but all sockeye exhibit some degree of this description. Their presence in the spawning tributaries is obvious and powerful as the scarlet sides of the spawning fish provide a dramatic contrast to the subdued colors of the surrounding habitat. It is an unforgettable sight.

THE SPAWNING CYCLE of the salmon is an old story. Told and retold by generation after generation in many cultures around the world, these legends have raised the salmon from the realm of the ordinary and given it a symbolic status among migratory creatures. The ability of salmon to navigate trackless seas and locate the river of their birth, however, continues to evade explanation by modern to navigare trackless seas and locate the river of its birth, however, continues to evade explanation by modern science. The fact that salmon undertake such an arduous journey in order to spawn and then die is a mystery that we can comprehend only in part, and whose unfathomable nature provides us a glimpse of the vague and untrammelled forces that continue to resist our efforts to create a



Lani Waller photos

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Spawning-run sockeye fill a stream bank-to-bank in Alaska's southwest region. The most fertile sockeye fisheries in the world are found in the drainages of this region.

rational, controllable environment. Perhaps this is where much of our fascination ultimately lies.

Driven by powerful instincts and impulses, the sockeye leaves the comparative safety of its parent stream or lake and journeys long distances to complex and often hostile oceanic environments where it feeds and travels extensively until the time comes to return. In response to some primordial impulse the sockeye begins the long, arduous journey back to the stream of its origin, often reaching the exact location of its birth. Like the other species of Pacific salmon, the sockeye's fate is sealed, and the journey inevitably terminates with its death in the privacy of the Alaskan wilderness.

Sockeye normally spawn in late summer or early fall. Their eggs are deposited in gravel nests, or redds, chosen and prepared by the female. The young sockeye emerge from the gravel in early spring, sometime after ice-out.

At this point the life cycle of the sockeye differs from that of other Pacific salmon. The young sockeye require a lengthy residency in a freshwater lake. According to R. E. Foerster in his classic book, *Sockeye Salmon*, the young fry "quickly migrate to the nearest lake just before or during an increase in plankton supply in the lake. Often they will spend the first few weeks feeding on small crustaceans, insect larvae and some terrestrial insects before moving out into deeper open water where they feed primarily on plankton." They will remain there until it is time for their journey to the sea.

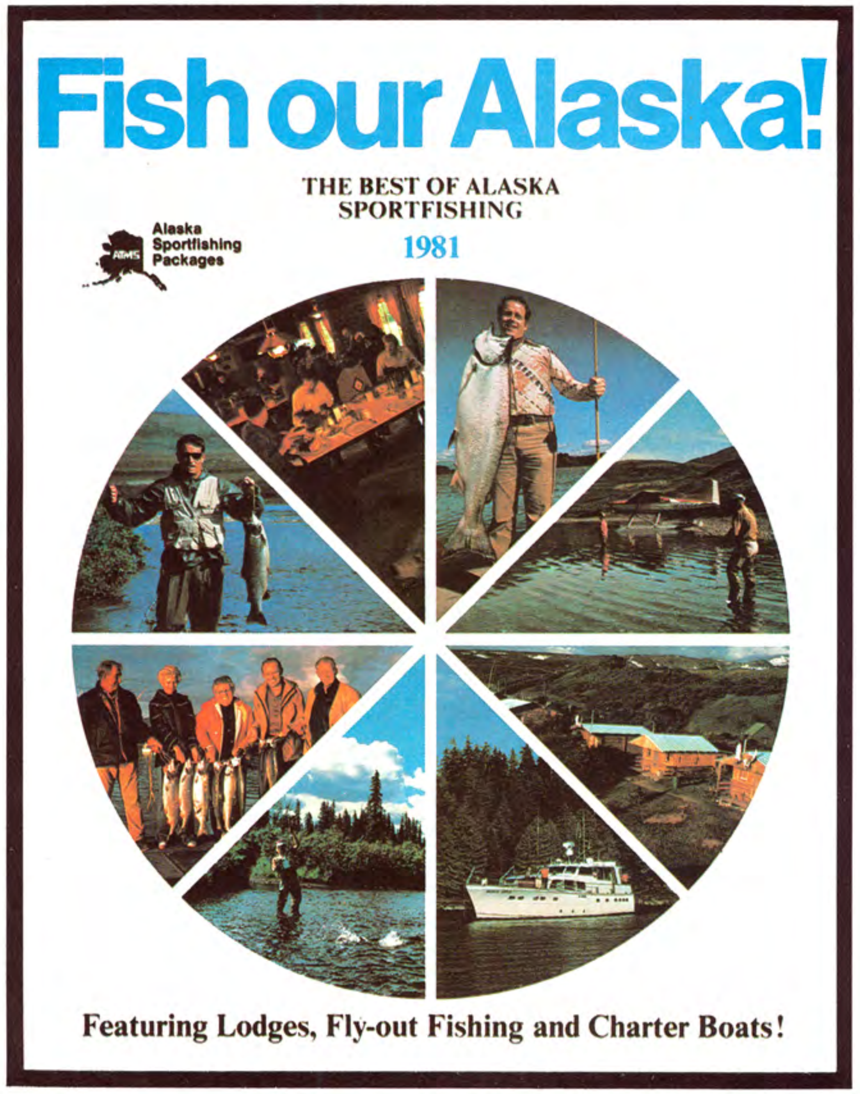
MOST ALASKAN SOCKEYE range while at sea throughout the great expanse of the Bering Sea and the waters off the coast of Russia. Biologists believe that in August and September, when Arctic waters are at their warmest, the migrations extend to the northern boundaries of the Bering and Okhosk seas, turning back to warmer, more southerly waters with the coming of winter.

During the annual spawning runs, extremely large schools of salmon enter a particular river or river system and quickly move upstream, eventually occupying several key tributaries that are a considerable distance from the lower river. The angler should concentrate either on the lower portions of such rivers, or on short coastal streams, as both types of water will be more likely to contain fresh sockeye. Locating sockeye in Alaska is not a problem since virtually any suitable stream will host a run of fish. But bright salmon require more planning.

Also, some areas of each stream will hold few fish while other sections will be full. It seems as though the fish favor certain lies at certain times, and holding fish seem to come to a fly much easier than do schools that are hurriedly passing through. Normally these favored lies are dependable from season to season, and they usually produce the best fishing.

All anadromous fish follow certain time schedules, and understanding these movements is absolutely critical to angling success. Rivers and streams that are barren of fish one day, may be rolling with fresh salmon the next.

THE LURE OF ALASKA



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An angler brings a sockeye salmon to his net on a southwest Alaska stream

Despite regular and predictable cycles there always seems to be some seasonal variation, sometimes only a matter of a few days, other times as much as two weeks. The wisest strategy is to plan a trip during the peak spawning-run periods, allowing sufficient time to be flexible.

The peak season for sockeye varies from drainage to drainage, but late June through mid-July usually produces the best fishing for bright salmon.

FLY PATTERNS FOR SOCKEYE are still in the early stages of development. Although sockeye do not feed actively while spawning and are not in any case "selective feeders," many anglers I've encountered say they have a few "really killing patterns" in their boxes. More often than not these flies represent a fairly wide selection of styles, to say nothing of color and size. In all probability the critical variable that causes a sockeye to strike a particular fly pattern lies elsewhere.

Most sockeye are taken on wet flies and streamers, although I have observed three incidents where bright fish rose to a dry fly, were fair-hooked and landed with the hook lodged inside the jaw, right where it should have been.

Most West Coast steelhead patterns are effective, as well as traditional and hair-wing Atlantic-salmon patterns. Bucktail and feather-wing streamers also produce well, either with a white wing and dark topping or a dark wing over a silver body.

Nymphs are still largely untested on sockeye, but first indications suggest that they are most productive in calm-water situations such as the shallow shorelines of lakes or calm pockets off the main currents of the stream. The salmon can be spookier then, and nymph patterns lend themselves to more delicate presentations and slower retrieves.

Choosing the proper fly line can be critical when fishing for sockeye as the fly must be presented at the proper level, which is not always on the bottom. It is a difficult point to prove, but many experienced Pacific-salmon anglers believe that a salmon will rise up from his holding position to take a wet fly that is moving slightly above him, but will rarely turn down to take a pattern that is being presented too deeply. I believe that for sockeye in relatively calm and clear water the slowest sinking line that will reach the suspected lie of the fish is the superior tool, since it will remain in the strike zone for the longest period of time. Lines of greater density may reach the salmon quickly, but they pass through the holding position and into dead water just as quickly, allowing only a few pulls before the retrieve becomes useless.

Shallow, moving water is the easiest to cover, and all that is normally required is that the fly swing through the current at a moderate depth and at the correct speed. This may require that the angler carry several densities of line (shooting-tapers are excellent) in order to deal with varying depths and current speeds, but there is no doubt in my mind that the choice of the proper fly line is far more critical than the choice of fly pattern or tippet diameter.

FOR CENTURIES SOCKEYE have been harvested rather than angled for, and this is a shame. They are a challenging quarry to hook and are energetic fighters whose quick runs and frantic leaps should excite most fly fishermen. And they are abundant, especially in Alaska. During the spawning runs in the Bristol Bay area (the Woods River/Tikchik Lakes drainage) and in the rivers of the Katmai Monument region, you will see literally thousands of them in the clear-water rivers, a spectacle that is no doubt unique in the angler's world. Perhaps this very abundance has contributed to their peculiar lack of status as a gamefish: Too frequently we fail to treasure a commodity until it becomes scarce. Yet I believe that a single experience with this great fish—one magnificent, showering leap, or a fast, cross-current run that makes you wonder if you have enough backing—will convince fly fishermen that a sockeye should be imagined surging through a wilderness river with a streamer fly tucked in its jaw—not just piled on some cannery platform as is presently common.

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