Volume Four, Issue Three | theflyfishjournal.com | $14.95 CDN | $12.95 US

THE flyfish JOURNAL

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"Driving down the coast from Washington, we had been trying to get a look at sea stacks for two days without any luck. The fog was so thick we wouldn't be able to see them even if we were standing next to them. We drove into a pullout to see if we might get a short break in the fog and, not five minutes later, we had a clear view of this little stack. The view lasted for a minute and then vanished. The sun didn't come out the rest of the trip." Location: Oregon coast. Photo: Spencer Herford

SCRATCH TICKETS

TRAINING FOR CHINOOK ON THE OREGON COAST

Words: Aimee Brown

{BELOW}

One fish over the line. Regulatory limits allow for the keeping of two Chinook per day during the fall run. Here, number three is released back into the Elk River where it doesn't hesitate to head upriver toward sex and death. Photo: Mike Eaton

THEY COME ON THE INCOMING TIDE. They come on the outgoing tide. A negative tide brings them in like seagulls on trash day. They'll come when it rains. When it clears. When pigs fly and hell freezes over. The 14th is the peak. We'll see them in December. You're too late; they came in October. Try the mouth. Try upriver. Up coast. Up yours. There aren't any fish in this river. They were rolling this morning. Last night 50 moved through and the wake trailed for miles. They were getting them at the bridge, at the Grange, at the snag hole. It's like seeing Sasquatch. Pulling all cherries at the slots. Catching a unicorn. Finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It's luck. It's skill. It's scratch tickets. The Pacific Northwest's annual fall run of Chinook salmon peaks in the region's southern coastal rivers sometime between early October and late December depending on the year. Like the majority of salmon (confused, land-locked, lake-born Kokanee being the exception), Chinook hatch in freshwater and enter the ocean during their first year of life. Once there, they migrate through the saltwater, following currents and feeding on small fish and shrimp that turn their flesh so vibrantly orange Crayola could name a color after it. Then, after a time that seems to vary with each individual fish but averages four years and could likely be related to metabolic, circadian, genetic or reproductive rhythms, the Chinook return to their natal streams where they pair up, spawn and die. But before those last days of sex and death, Chinook will jump and spin and fight like welterweights with a world championship belt on the line. When caught on a fly, a Chinook becomes a junkyard dog, a washing machine stuck on the spin cycle, a Flamenco partner who just can't wait to get away. For 30 days in November 2012, I tried to learn the dance.

Day One

Walking across the pasture through shin-deep puddles and patches of thistle, the smell of cow patties and sheep shit tinges the salty coastal air. There's not much of a path, and because the river is hidden beyond woods at the edge of the field, the half-mile trip feels more like an expedition than a trudge. In the distance I can hear the Pacific crashing. I came into Oregon from Colorado in the night. Left a just-moved-into house in the Rockies packed with boxes and an unclaimed ski pass, and rented a small, furnished cabin on the south coast. Moved in with piles of fleece, extra coats, heavy-duty waders and bags of fly-tying materials. The kitchen table became a production line for minnow imitations and bugs that would make Jim Henson proud. Nets, rods and boots took over the laundry room. An email went out to friends and family: "Fall Chinook are entering the rivers. Fifteen-to-40-pound, dime-bright fish straight from the salt with sea lice still clinging to their sides, and you can target them with a single hand rod. We've rented a little place and we'll have the boat. Depending on river levels, the system should be both floatable and walkable. Come down. If you have $20 to help foot the bill, awesome. If not, still come down. We're here for a month. P.S. Bring clousers."

At the river, the water is running low and clear. It needs to rain to bring in the fish and wading knee-deep in the channel on the first day there's no reason to be optimistic. But I am, and why not? It's sunny and it's salmon fishing. It's not sitting at a desk, not slinging Happy Meals or digging ditches. I cast out. Again and again. The rod is long and heavy. The size-two hook flies like a weapon blindly behind my head. Huck. Duck. Try again. Right up until I feel the grab, I don't expect to catch anything. Then, as the fish shakes it's head and takes off into the current, I don't expect to land it. The reel screams and I fail to get my hand out of the way. The thwack, thwack, thwack tells everyone on the river my knuckles are bruising and likely to bleed. I try to give my rod away with fish still attached. No one will take it. I'm laughing and asking for advice. Getting schooled. As my arms shake, I think about needing to do more pushups. I can see the conversation at the gym: "What are you training for?"

"Chinook."

A net appears. Into it goes a 20-pound female so bright she reflects the sun.

{LEFT}

When in doubt: Clousers. According to tyer Eliot Jenkins, "I have caught salmon while swinging this fly, but most of the time the grabs come when I am stripping the fly in. If I were fishing one fly, this would be it." Photo: Eliot Jenkins

Fall Chinook are entering the rivers. Fifteen-to-40-pound, dime-bright fish straight from the salt with sea lice still clinging to their sides, and you can target them with a single hand rod. We've rented a little place and we'll have the boat. Depending on river levels, the system should be both floatable and walkable. Come down. If you have $20 to help foot the bill, awesome. If not, still come down. We're here for a month.

{RIGHT}

Slab. Pig. River Yeti. Boss. Canadians call them springs, Americans call them kings; one thing everyone agrees is that Chinook are the biggest and strongest salmon out there. This one from British Columbia's Dean River wasn't even close to the 126-pound catch record, but still gave an awesome fight. Photo: Adam Tavender

Day Seven

The weather has turned cold but still it hasn't rained. The upper reaches of the system are quiet. There's a sense that everyone is waiting for something to happen. Walking downstream through brilliant emerald waters, the bright yellow leaves swirling in the current look like flashes. With numb toes and fingers I cast to a group of four fish—a small harem. A few strips gets a follow. Did you know you can sight fish for salmon? Another strip garners a grab that I fail to cash in, then nothing. It gets colder and darkness falls.

Day 17

A seal is bobbing in the current at the mouth of the river. Like the fishermen standing in the sand, he's waiting for a sign—a roll, a flash, a wake. But it doesn't come. I think about casting into the waves for surf perch and suggest he do the same. He won't though, and two hours later when I walk the mile back up the beach with the wind whipping my hair into dreadlocks and the rain driving into my squinted eyes, he's still out there ducking under waves, searching for Chinook.

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Elk River tributaries like this one pour down from the coastal rainforest's dark mountains, providing nurseries for new generations of salmon and steelhead. It rained more than 10 inches in a week and this creek barely rose. Location: Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, OR. Photo: Russ Schnitzer

Captain Nate Stansberry and his roommate, Nick Symmonds, hike from the parking lot at Cape Blanco to the mouth of the Elk River, OR. "Nick is a two-time Olympic half-miler, but the walk in was still brutal. It paid off—as the tide came in, the entire horde of anglers cleared out. We were the last ones on the spit, water up to our thighs, alternating between casting and looking up the beach to make sure we weren't getting cut off between the ocean and the high bank. Two fish were hooked, both on a small orange comet." Photo: Matt Stansberry

It needs to rain to bring in the fish and wading knee-deep in the channel on the first day there's no reason to be optimistic. But I am, and why not? It's sunny and it's salmon fishing. It's not sitting at a desk, not slinging Happy Meals or digging ditches.

{RIGHT}

Look for the rollers, cast, pray and hold on! Chris Eaton searches for signs of Chinook in the early dawn on Oregon's Sixes River. Photo: Mike Eaton

Day 20

It's been 20 straight days of fishing with only three fish landed. They were beautiful, strong chromers as long as my leg and all caught in the first week and a half. That's 11 days with nothing more than a few takes. Now the rain is falling sideways and in sheets. Steady winds of 40 miles per hour make it nearly impossible to move a boat down the river, and the gusts, which are topping 88 miles per hour, have moved the sand from the beach to the highway making travel dangerous and slow. The river has jumped from three feet to 15 almost overnight, going from a clear green thread to a mud brown torrent that carries trees, rocks and the rusted-out frames of old cars toward the Pacific. Casting into this soup means losing flies on unseen snags, 60 feet of bird nests and 20 minutes of life that you want back. It's laughable. Ridiculous. Yet still I pick up the rod and swap out flies looking for the heaviest, brightest options in the box in the hope that two-and-a-half inches of chartreuse bucktail might be seen among the silt and wood clogging the river.

Salmon fishing on Oregon's south coast is not Norman Maclean's flyfishing. The rivers, especially in the lower reaches, are not pristine, and solitude is largely nonexistent, but there is a different kind of beauty. Instead of dry flies, size-22 midges, floating lines and delicate 9-foot-long rods, it is flies the size of your thumb, shooting heads, lead eyes and 100 casts for maybe one grab—or was that just a snag? It's a chance to catch a huge fish straight out of the ocean while standing shoulder to shoulder with 70 men, many of whom are either unemployed or have already pulled a 50-hour work week in a mill, a cannery, the local casino or the cheese factory, and most of whom are dubious about standing next to the oddballs throwing the bits of hair and feather. Catching anything under these conditions is tough. Catching a Chinook is almost magic. "The thing is, you just don't know what you're going to get," says Eliot Jenkins, a longtime fly guide on these waters. "Sometimes it's not even about skill. You have to be in the right place, under the right conditions, at the right time, and you still might go home with nothing. It can be absolutely epic, or not. There are hundreds of variables."

Between 1978, the first year of record, and 2011, there was an average of 661 fall-run Chinook caught on this water, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW). The biggest year in that window was 2004, when just more than 1,900 fish were caught. The smallest was 1991 with only 183 counted. While these numbers do not represent the complete size of the returning population, they are indicative of fluctuations and changes within the population. On comparable water to the north, ODFW district fish biologist Chris Knutsen said harvest should be generally between 2,000-4,000 fish, but in the last few years numbers have been down in relation to poor ocean conditions. It's a trend that has been seen throughout much of the region, and, according to the federal government, it is unlikely to stop on its own. In 2009, the U.S. Global Change Research Program, working under orders from the Obama administration, found that "global warming is a growing source of stress" for Pacific salmon. In addition to warming sea temperatures, which are harmful to salmon, climate change could create negative feedback in river systems where changes in rainfall and storm timing could lead to heavier floods. The trickle down from these shifts would be less available salmon spawning and rearing habitat and an increased risk of harmful parasites. Estimates from the group suggest that should climate change continue at its current rate "up to 40 percent of Northwest salmon populations may be lost by 2050." Looking at the previous year's returns, the flooded rivers and our empty nets it's hard to believe these losses are not already occurring.

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Raw power. Angler Mike Eaton dances with an armful of angry Chinook. Even after a long fight, these are incredibly powerful animals. Location: Elk River, OR. Photo: Aimee Brown

"It was one of the rare days when fish were running and everyone was getting them. A nine weight was broken and many hooks were bent straight battling chrome-bright Chinook from the beach. When the word gets out that the salmon are there it doesn't take long before the beach scene morphs into a small city of fishermen hoping to link up with the freshest of fish. It's in between these times that you want to be there with a 10 weight, intermediate line and lots of backing." Location: Elk River, OR. Photo: Eliot Jenkins

{RIGHT}

During a break in a February deluge on the banks of Oregon's Elk River, the crooked arms of vine maple are made ghostly by manes of rainforest moss. Photo: Russ Schnitzer

Day 25

After dropping more than 15 inches of rain, the storm moved off the coast and into the mountains. Ski resorts are reaping the rewards as they open across the west, and still there are no fish. The rivers are slowly clearing and because another brutal storm is called for in two days time, I line up with 80 other hopefuls to float a 10-mile stretch of water. It's a flotilla of crew cuts jockeying for position. Guided boats sit for hours in potential runs back bouncing bait and eating sandwiches. Here and there people are picking up fish, and when I feel the take, I set the hook like a fat kid grabbing the last Twinkie off the table. The motion sends a 12-inch-long sea-run cutthroat straight into the air. My fly, almost as big as its head, hangs from his mouth. The takeout comes at dusk. In the shallows, waving like flags, are carcasses. Seagulls squawk and scrabble overhead fighting to feast on the day's detritus. The river supports a large run of hatchery fish and is a prominent meat fishery in the region. Regulations allow for anglers to keep two fish per day, and many of the locals count on salmon to supplement the winter groceries. With a resident's license running $33 and salmon going for $15 a pound at the local Price and Pride it's a line of thought that makes sense. The fish sits next to venison in freezers and is given away as gifts at Christmas. In some households, it helps make ends meet. I go home empty handed. During the night, I hear the storm come in. It's early and angry. I think about powder turns and empty bellies. Clashes of culture and common desires. I think about what the takes I've had have felt like. How at first they were like rubber, as if I'd hooked into a heavy tire that then exploded, taking with it my heartbeat and my breath. For me, catching and keeping salmon is a gift, an experience that goes unmatched. For others, it's a meal ticket, a promise of protein in lean months. Regardless, for all of us, having salmon in the rivers and knowing they'll still be out navigating the Pacific 40 years from now in healthy numbers should be a necessity.

Day 30

One last morning standing with water rushing around my ribs and now it's time to go back to the mountains. The rivers are blown. The fish are still missing. I fished for a month and in total came up with five Chinook. Lady Luck never showed her face, but I kept scratching and exploring. Checking out secret little creeks in hopes something might materialize. I met one or two yahoos and dozens of hard-working, well-meaning fishermen who were excited to be out battling the weather and experiencing the season. Next year, I'll try again. I've heard Chinook like El Niño years.

Or was it La Niña?

{LEFT}

"We'd shown up a little late—after sunup. The walk from the parking area to the beach on an incoming tide seemed to take forever. Finally, we got to the mouth of the Elk, where it doglegs into a sandy lagoon. There were fresh Chinook literally crashing into the beach, surfing into the river current on waves and bouncing on the sand before they kicked their tails and sped into the lagoon." Location: Cape Blanco State Park, OR. Photo: Matt Stansberry

Before those last days of sex and death, Chinook will jump and spin and fight like welterweights with a world championship belt on the line. When caught on a fly, a Chinook becomes a junkyard dog, a washing machine stuck on the spin cycle, a Flamenco partner who just can't wait to get away. For 30 days in November 2012, I tried to learn the dance.