

## Pacific Salmon Run



*Spawning salmon.*

The salmon begins in the autumn as a tiny red egg buried in wet gravel at the bottom of what will be its own particular river.

It grows until it breaks its capsule in the spring, and it remains in the dark spaces between pebbles until the yolk is gone.

It is already marked for life—it is a member of a particular branch of the salmon family, sockeye, pink, coho, chinook or chum, and small variations in its scales show it to be a native of a specific branch of a specific river.

It will now pursue a life cycle appropriate to its kind. If it is a pink or chum it will have little taste for fresh water and will head for the sea at once. If it is a chinook it will remain in place for three months, feeding first on plankton, then on insects and smaller fish. If it is a coho it may stay at home for three years.

Some coho and chinook spend most of the rest of their lives near the eastern coast of Vancouver Island, but most British Columbian salmon go north to the Gulf of Alaska along the continental shelf. By mid-winter the majority of these will have made their way out to the mid-Pacific.

As the salmon reach maturity in the ocean they start to return home.

They retrace their migration path with uncanny precision, up the main river, then each into its own tributary.

They wait in pools at the mouth of the spawning stream as the eggs mature within the female and the milt within the male. Then the

female finds a proper place and scoops out a pocket of gravel while surrounding males compete for her attention. She outlines the general shape of the nest, and the favoured male swims alongside her. Together they repel any intruders. The female whisks the stream bottom with her tail to enlarge the nest and deposits the eggs in a deep pocket in the centre. The male joins her over the pocket, and both eggs and sperm are released together. At this point they are often jolted by unspawned males trying to fertilize some of the eggs. After spawning, the female covers the eggs with material excavated from a new nest upstream. She digs and fills one nest after another until she has deposited between 500 and 1,000 eggs.

Salmon fade rapidly after spawning, and soon dead and dying fish litter the banks. Birds and mammals gather to gorge on the remains.

### Balanced Scales

Canada and the United States have been negotiating Pacific salmon harvests for seventy years.

They began, slowly, in 1913, when a rock slide caused by railway construction blocked the Fraser River at Hells Gate and threatened the system's salmon run. The Fraser is one of North America's great spawning grounds, and both countries were concerned since American and Canadian fishermen share the fish that return to the river through the internationally divided waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.