

# The Sea-Run Cutthroat

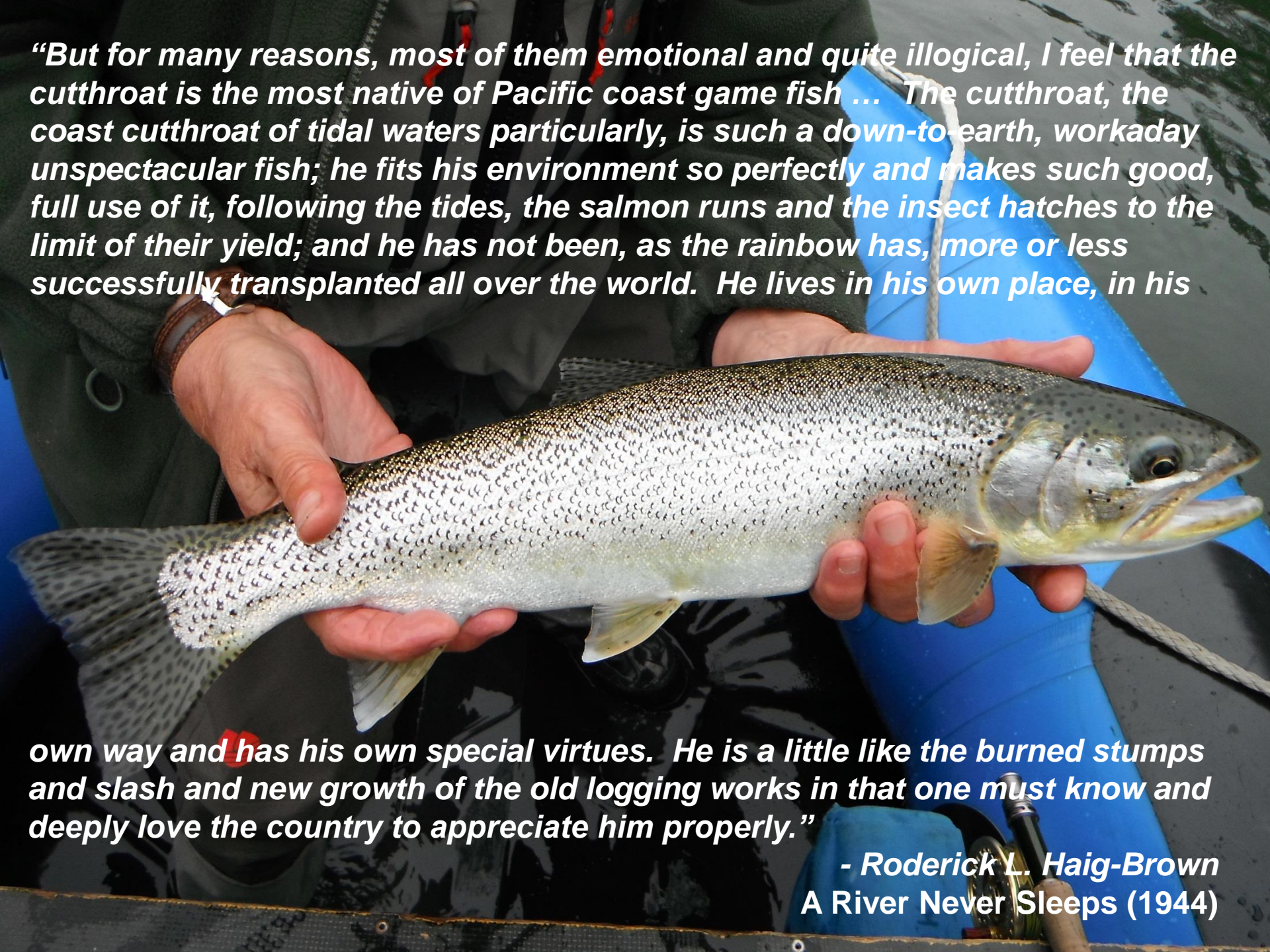
A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a large sea-run cutthroat trout. The fish is held horizontally, showing its full length. It has a silvery-blue upper body with dark spots and a white belly. The person holding it is wearing a brown sweater and a watch. In the background, there's a blue boat deck with a white bag and a yellow object. A ruler is visible in the bottom right corner, showing measurements in inches and centimeters.

*His Life and Times in Fresh Water and Salt*  
*By Preston Singletary*

***“But for many reasons, most of them emotional and quite illogical, I feel that the cutthroat is the most native of Pacific coast game fish ... The cutthroat, the coast cutthroat of tidal waters particularly, is such a down-to-earth, workaday unspectacular fish; he fits his environment so perfectly and makes such good, full use of it, following the tides, the salmon runs and the insect hatches to the limit of their yield; and he has not been, as the rainbow has, more or less successfully transplanted all over the world. He lives in his own place, in his***

***own way and has his own special virtues. He is a little like the burned stumps and slash and new growth of the old logging works in that one must know and deeply love the country to appreciate him properly.”***

***- Roderick L. Haig-Brown  
A River Never Sleeps (1944)***

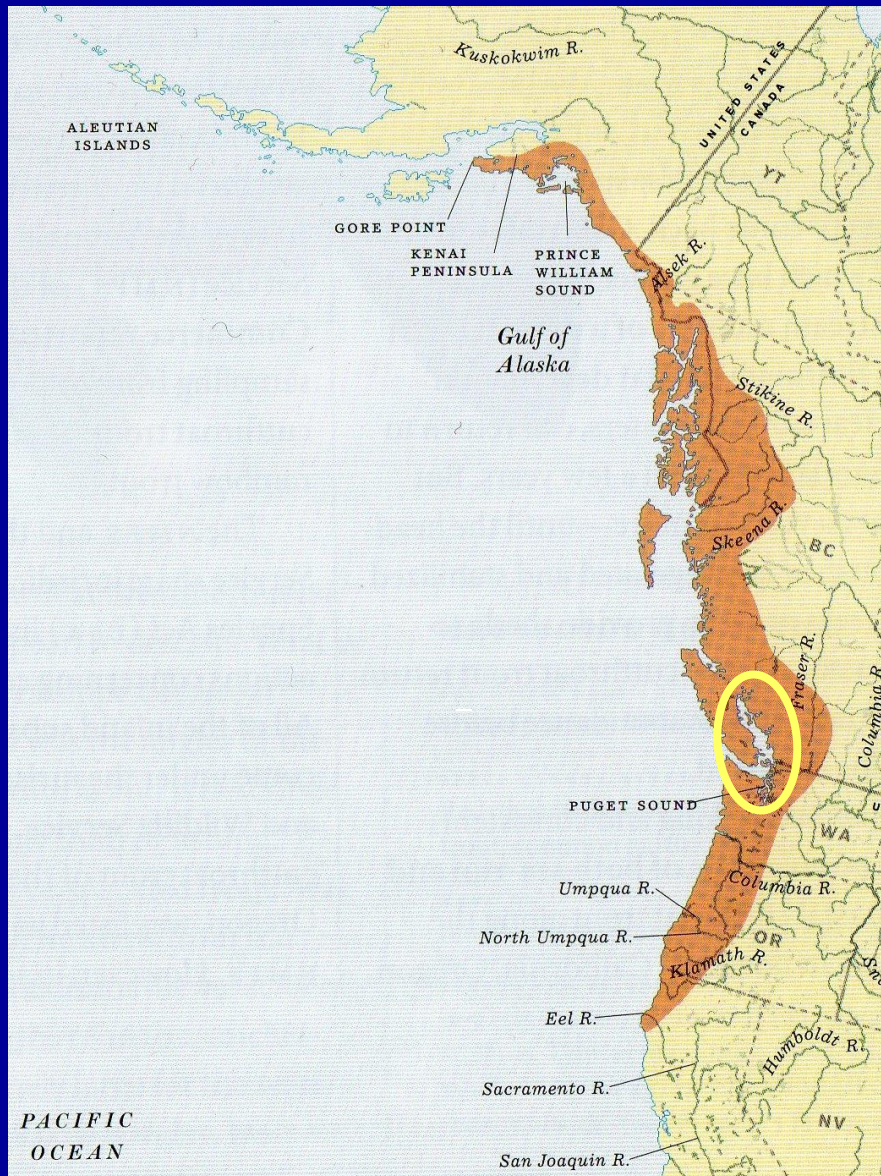


# The Sea-Run Cutthroat Trout



The sea-run cutthroat is the semi-anadromous (or *amphidromous*) form of the coastal subspecies (*Oncorhynchus clarki clarki*) of the cutthroat trout. The coastal cutthroat was long believed to be the original cutthroat species, from which the other subspecies evolved; recently studied fossil remains, however, seem to indicate that the actual origin of the lineage may have occurred in the Great Basin.

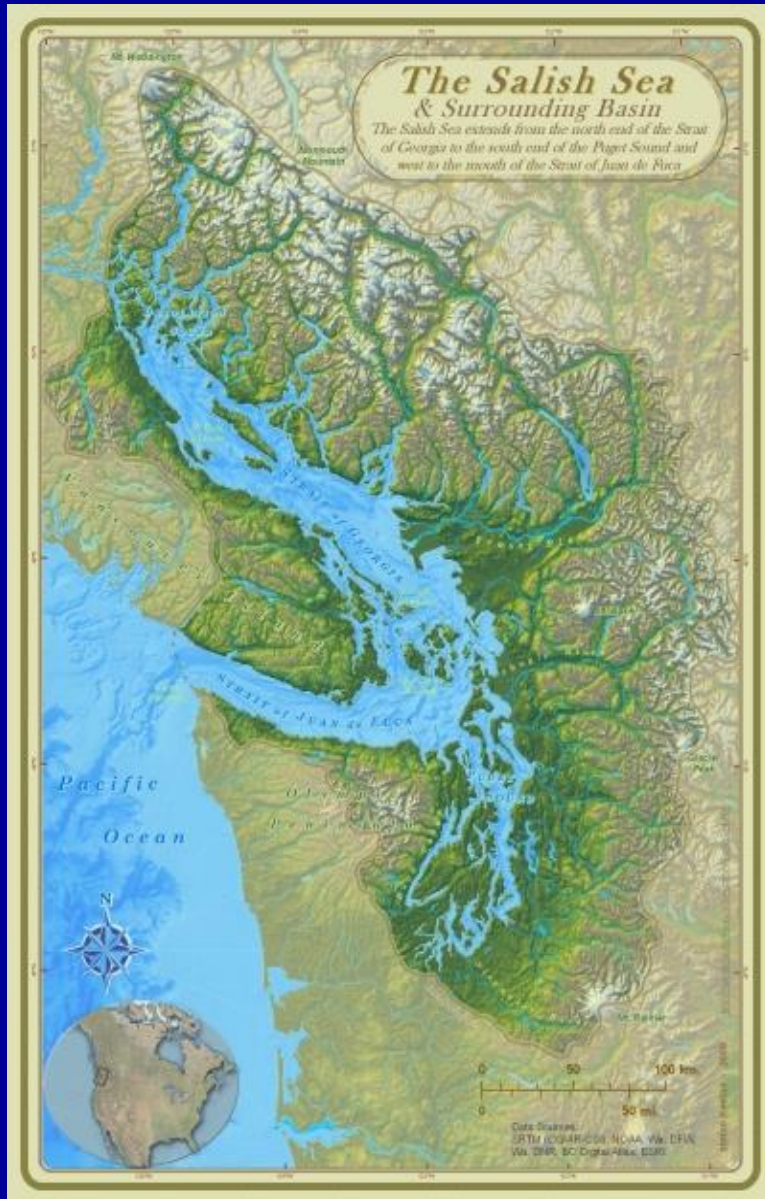
# The World of the Coastal Cutthroat Trout



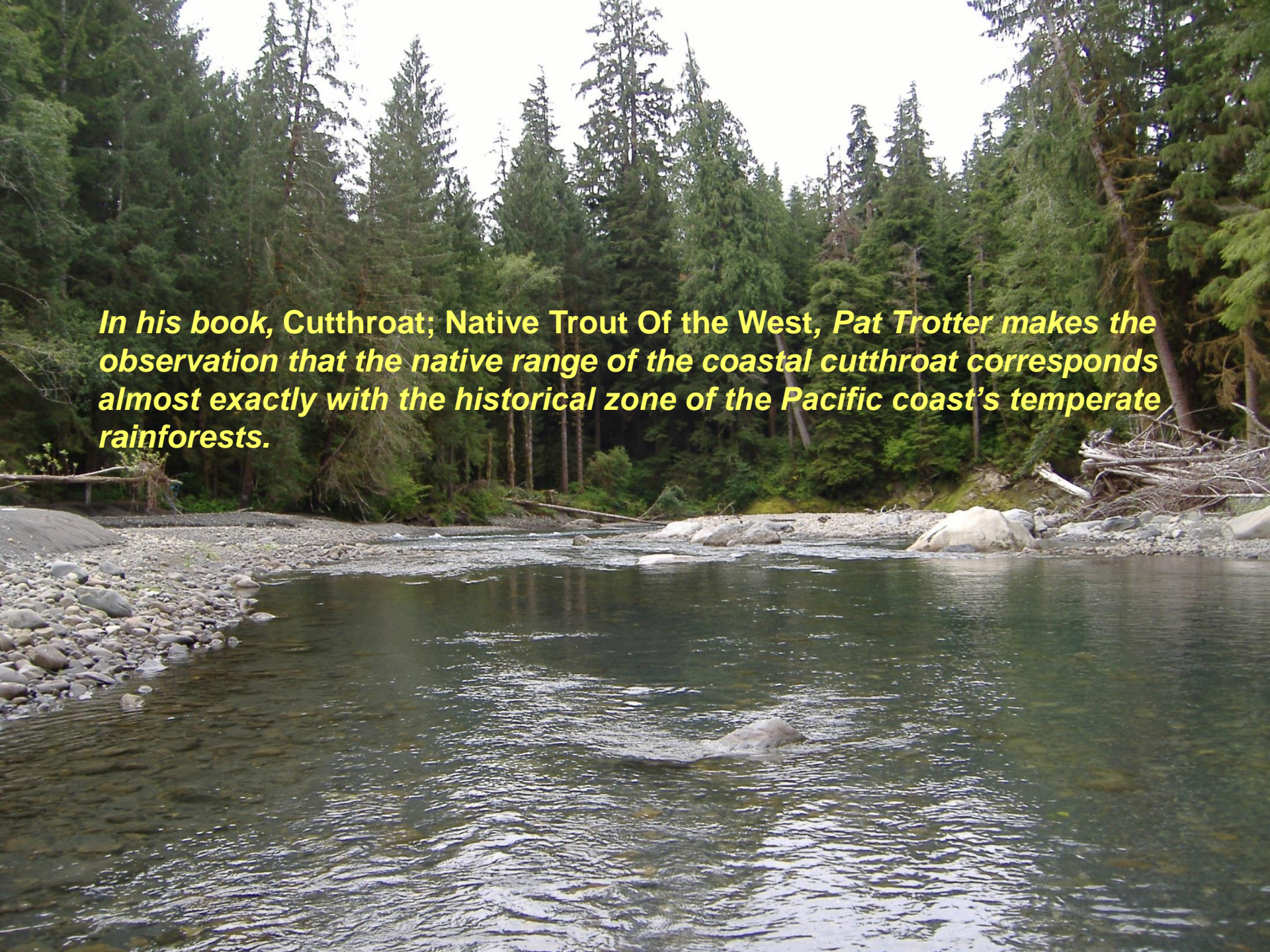
The native range of the coastal cutthroat extends from the Eel River in northern California to Alaska's Prince William Sound including the Queen Charlotte Islands (now Haida Gwaii) and west along the southern coast of the Kenai Peninsula.

Wherever access to salt water is readily available to them, many coastal cutthroat will adopt the semi-anadromous lifestyle of the sea-run and spend some months of each year taking advantage of the rich opportunities for feeding which the migration to salt water affords. Located near the middle of the coastal cutthroat's range, the sheltered and relatively calm waters of Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia (The Salish Sea) offer some of the finest and most salubrious habitat available.

# The Salish Sea



In 1990 this 7,000 square-mile region incorporating Puget Sound, Hood Canal, Admiralty Inlet, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the waters north through the San Juan and Gulf Islands and into the Strait of Georgia and its adjacent bays and inlets, was designated the Salish Sea. The shorelines of this large area of sheltered waters offer unique opportunities for sea-run cutthroat fishing in saltwater.



***In his book, Cutthroat; Native Trout Of the West, Pat Trotter makes the observation that the native range of the coastal cutthroat corresponds almost exactly with the historical zone of the Pacific coast's temperate rainforests.***

# In The Beginning



Eggs deposited during the spring in four-to-six-inch deep redds in the pea-sized gravel of small, low-gradient, tributary creeks will incubate there for six to seven weeks, and the newly-hatched cutthroat *alevins* will spend another week or two ingesting the contents of their egg sacs before struggling up through the gravel to emerge as free-swimming fry at a length of about one inch.

The cryptic coloration of the fry offers some degree of protection from predators as they take up their places in the stream's ecosystem. Feeding at first on the tiniest of invertebrates, they will begin to seek out larger prey as they grow.



Some cutthroat take up permanent residence in these small tributaries while those who may choose to migrate to salt water will rear here, or sometimes in larger downstream waters, for typically two to rarely as many as five years, where they will grow to a size of six to ten inches before undergoing the process of



smoltification in order to venture downstream to salt water for the very first time.



# Finding The Way to Saltwater



In the springtime, having undergone the physiological processes which will allow them to survive the change from a fresh to a salt water environment, the cutthroat *smolts* begin to move downstream, often following and feeding on the newly-hatched, downstream-migrant fry of the pink and chum salmon which spawned the previous fall. Older, sexually mature cutthroat who have completed their spawning

activities, also take advantage of this moveable feast and will begin their return to salt water, creating the historical spring cutthroat fisheries for which the lower reaches and estuaries of some of the large rivers are known.

Since even very small creeks can contribute a few cutthroat to mixed populations during the saltwater phase of their lives, WDFW's catch-and-release-in-all-marine-areas regulation, introduced in 1990, provides important protections for sea-run populations of these small creeks, which may harbor only a few spawning pairs.





Black Oystercatchers

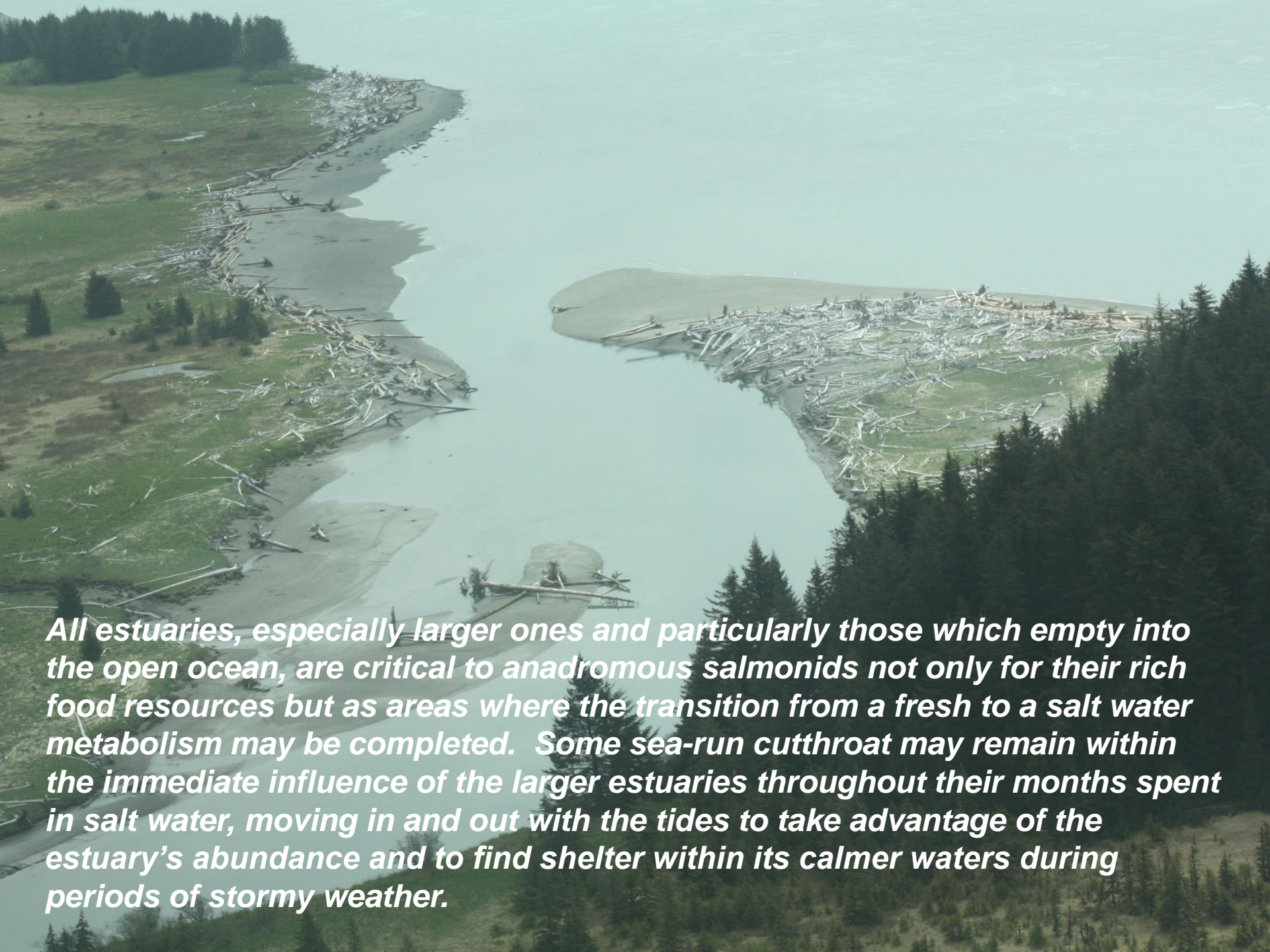
Estuaries, whether large or small, where fresh and salt water blend, provide important resources in food and habitat, not only for fish but for many birds and other inhabitants of, and even occasional visitors to, the littoral zone.



Coastal Blacktail Deer



Great Blue Heron



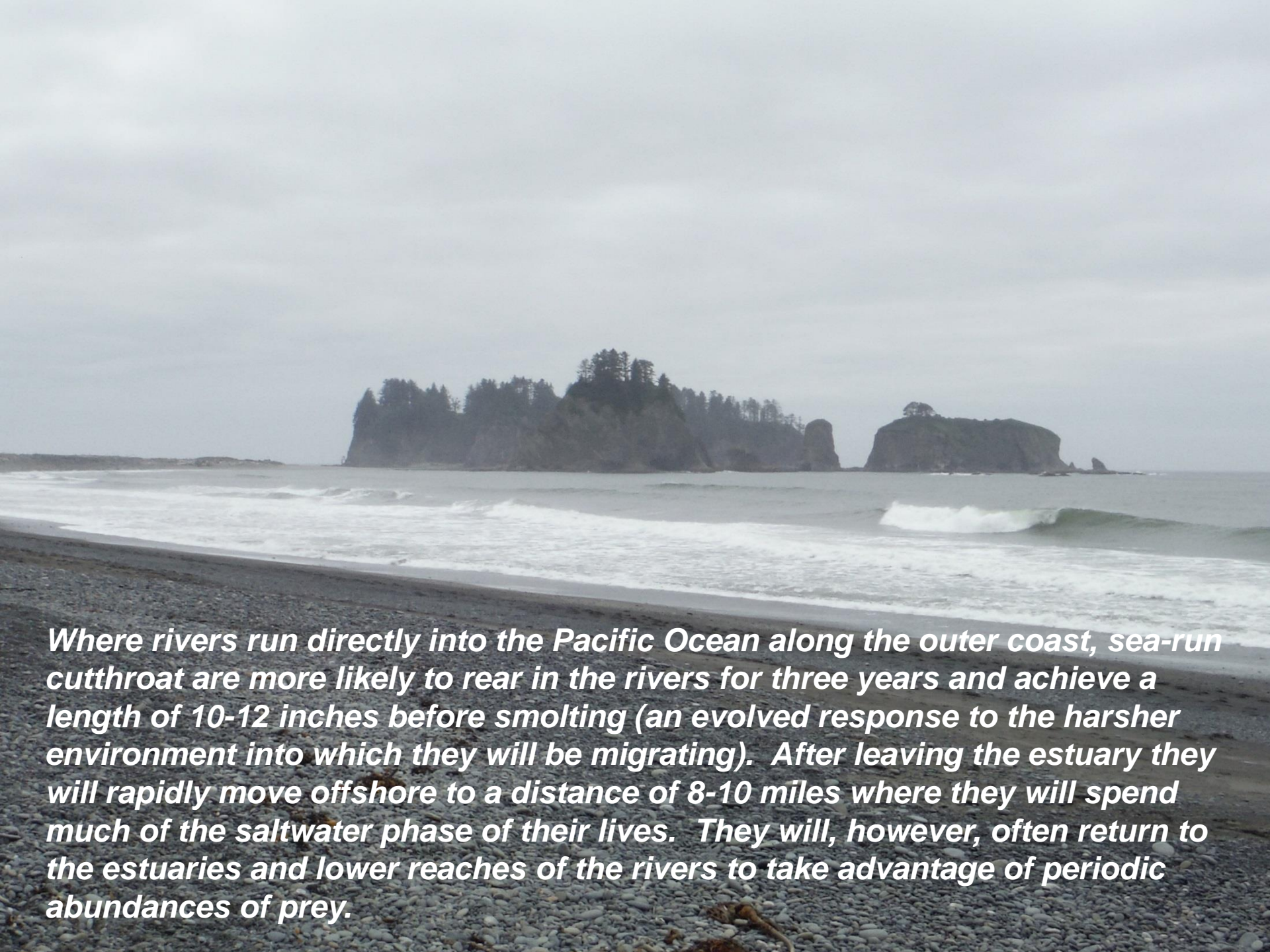
*All estuaries, especially larger ones and particularly those which empty into the open ocean, are critical to anadromous salmonids not only for their rich food resources but as areas where the transition from a fresh to a salt water metabolism may be completed. Some sea-run cutthroat may remain within the immediate influence of the larger estuaries throughout their months spent in salt water, moving in and out with the tides to take advantage of the estuary's abundance and to find shelter within its calmer waters during periods of stormy weather.*

# The Cutthroat's Saltwater World

Unlike the epic, ocean-girdling journeys of the steelhead and salmon, cutthroat rarely travel more than thirty miles from the mouths of their natal streams, usually remaining close to the shoreline and showing little inclination to cross areas of deep water.



Throughout the spring and into summer, cutthroat feed on a wide variety of baitfish and invertebrates, growing rapidly (as much as an inch per month) and putting on weight in anticipation of their return to the rivers.



*Where rivers run directly into the Pacific Ocean along the outer coast, sea-run cutthroat are more likely to rear in the rivers for three years and achieve a length of 10-12 inches before smolting (an evolved response to the harsher environment into which they will be migrating). After leaving the estuary they will rapidly move offshore to a distance of 8-10 miles where they will spend much of the saltwater phase of their lives. They will, however, often return to the estuaries and lower reaches of the rivers to take advantage of periodic abundances of prey.*

# The Return

Within only a few months, sometimes as early as July some cutthroat begin to feel the urge to return to their natal streams, even though many of those preparing to do this for the first time are not yet sexually mature and will not spawn on this their first return to fresh water.

Already, these fish returning for the first time will have grown to a size of nine to eleven inches, while those which have repeated this annual cycle as many as four or more times may have attained an even larger size.

Unlike steelhead and salmon, the sea-run cutthroat will continue to feed aggressively during much of this sojourn into fresh water, fasting only when the exigencies of reproduction begin to intrude.



There are differing patterns among sea-run cutthroat regarding the length of time spent in salt water versus that spent in fresh water. There are two broad basic categories, which have been designated as “early entry” and “late entry”. Early returning fish are most common in larger streams, while late returning fish occur mostly in small streams draining directly into marine waters. In one of my favorite



larger cutthroat streams, these migrants may begin to return as early as July with their numbers peaking in September and October while smaller numbers of fish continue to enter the river as late as February. Many of the streams entering the southern part of Puget Sound and Hood Canal fall into the second category; there the cutthroat will continue to feed in salt water through the fall, not returning to their natal streams to begin to prepare to spawn until December and into March. Actual spawning may take place at any time from January through June and in many Washington streams this activity will peak in the month of March.



**Biologists have been able to apply streamflow values to this early/late entry phenomenon: Streams with minimum summer flows of 70cfs or more tend to host mostly early-entry cutthroat while those with flows of less than 20cfs host late-entry fish. Some streams with summer flows falling between these numbers may exhibit separate runs of early and late-entry fish, with a distinct break between the two**

**A WDFW study placed smolts of both early-entry and late-entry cutthroat in net pens in the salt water of Puget Sound for six months and it was observed that, during that time, 95% of the early-entry fish died while only 50% of the late-entry fish did so.**

The heaviest documented sea-run cutthroat weighed 2.7 kg (5lb, 15.24 oz.) and was 615.9 mm (24.25 inches) in length. It was caught by Bud Johnson in Puget Sound's Carr Inlet in 1943 and remains the Washington State hook-and line record. The oldest recorded sea-run cutthroat was from Sand Creek on the Oregon coast and was either 13 or 14 years old depending on its age at smolting.



Any sea-run cutthroat of twenty inches or more should be regarded as a very exceptional fish, less likely to be encountered than a 20-pound steelhead.

# Fly Fishing For Sea-Run Cutthroat in Salt Water



Fly fishing for sea-run cutthroat in salt water, either from the beaches or from a boat, has become an increasingly popular sport which has grown dramatically over the last decade and is unique to the sheltered waters of Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia between Vancouver Island and British Columbia's mainland. Cutthroat cruise along the shoreline following schools of baitfish and other sources of food and can cover considerable distances, appearing one day and gone the next.

When they *are* in the vicinity their presence is often revealed by jumping or rolling, or by the sprays of baitfish leaping out of the water to escape their attacks from below.


# Tackle For Sea-Run Cutthroat in Salt Water

When fishing for sea-run cutthroat in salt water, my personal preference is for a 9-foot, 6-weight rod and the only lines I use are a floater and an intermediate-sink. A leader tapered to 3X offers ample protection.

Remember to rinse rods and reels thoroughly in fresh water at the end of the day.



The stripping basket is an invaluable tool when fishing from the beach, keeping the line from tangling in the action of the waves and away from barnacles and seaweed underfoot; it also helps to reduce the snarls that so often occur when shooting line.



*The combination of salt crystals, long retrieves and the textured surfaces of some fly lines can result in abrasion of the skin, even to the point of bleeding. Tape is the simplest solution and duct tape works as well as any.*

Even when they don't make their presence obvious, sea-run cutthroat will frequently hunt close to the beaches, often in water that is a foot or less deep. In order to cover these shallow-water feeders, many experienced beach anglers, wading only ankle-to-knee deep, adopt the method of "fanning" a regular series of casts, starting at forty-five degrees out and working around until the cast comes parallel to the beach.



Life along the beaches can be harsh not only to the cutthroat but to other species as well. The sculpin at the left apparently chased three shiner perch into shallow water, anticipating a good meal, where all were stranded to be left high and dry.





The most important factor influencing beach fishing is the tide, and one of the most frequently asked questions is “what is the best stage of the tide to fish?” The answer, of course, is that it all depends. The constantly changing combinations of tidal height and volume coupled with the physical configuration, both vertical and horizontal, of any particular beach can cause wide variations in the

speed and direction of tidal currents, and thus, in the movements of baitfish and other food items. Some beaches seem to fish best on an incoming tide while others appear to fish best on the outgoing. That said, most anglers seem to prefer an incoming tide and *it is*, of course always still possible to catch fish, even at the high and low slack tides. As folk wisdom has it, the best time to fish is whenever you can.



Beaches with strong tidal current flows and, particularly, points or bays that form those currents into gyres and tidal rips which can concentrate schools of baitfish, are likely places for the angler to ply his efforts. Large-cobble beaches, eel-grass and kelp beds, and even oyster beds, provide the varieties of cover that will ensure the presence of forage, baitfish and invertebrates, which will, in turn, keep schools



of hungry cutthroat working the neighborhood for their daily sustenance.



***Saltwater cutthroat fishing rarely lacks dramatic land and seascapes.***



Misery Point boat launch near Seabeck on the eastern shore of Hood Canal

Traditionally, when trolling for sea-run cutthroat, anglers were advised to keep the bottom in sight on the beach side of the boat.



Fly casters usually adopt a similar protocol, cruising a comfortable cast's length offshore and casting *toward* the beach.



# Some Cutthroat Flies For Salt Water

Invertebrates make up a significant part of the cutthroat's saltwater diet. At certain times of the year, *amphipods*, *euphausiids* (*krill*), *isopods* and *mysids* figure largely on the bill-of-fare. *Polychaete* worms (pile worms) are eaten when and wherever they are encountered.





One of the first patterns tied to imitate downstream-migrant pink or chum fry was Ken McLeod's Skagit Minnow; developed in the 1940s for the spring cutthroat fishery on the lower reaches of the Skagit River.

A popular modern chum fry imitation is the late Doug Rose's subtly-hued Keta Rose



Another modern fry imitation, Bob Triggs' Chum Baby is highly effective in the spring when schools of fry are beginning to move out of the rivers and to migrate along the salt water beaches.

*One of the real pleasures of fishing the beaches is the opportunity to experience relative solitude; an increasingly rare commodity these days.*



Letcher Lambuth's Candlefish (lower left) is an early example of a saltwater baitfish pattern for salmon and cutthroat. Leland Miyawaki's Beach Popper (lower right) is a modern example, deadly for salmon as well as cutthroat. The sparsely-tied fly at the upper right could pass for any number of small baitfish, from chum or pink salmon fry to young candlefish.





A handful of flies from the estate of the late Bruce Ferguson. Bruce, with Les Johnson and Pat Trotter, co-authored *Fly Fishing For Pacific Salmon* and was a seminal figure in the development of fly fishing patterns and techniques for cutthroat and salmon in salt water

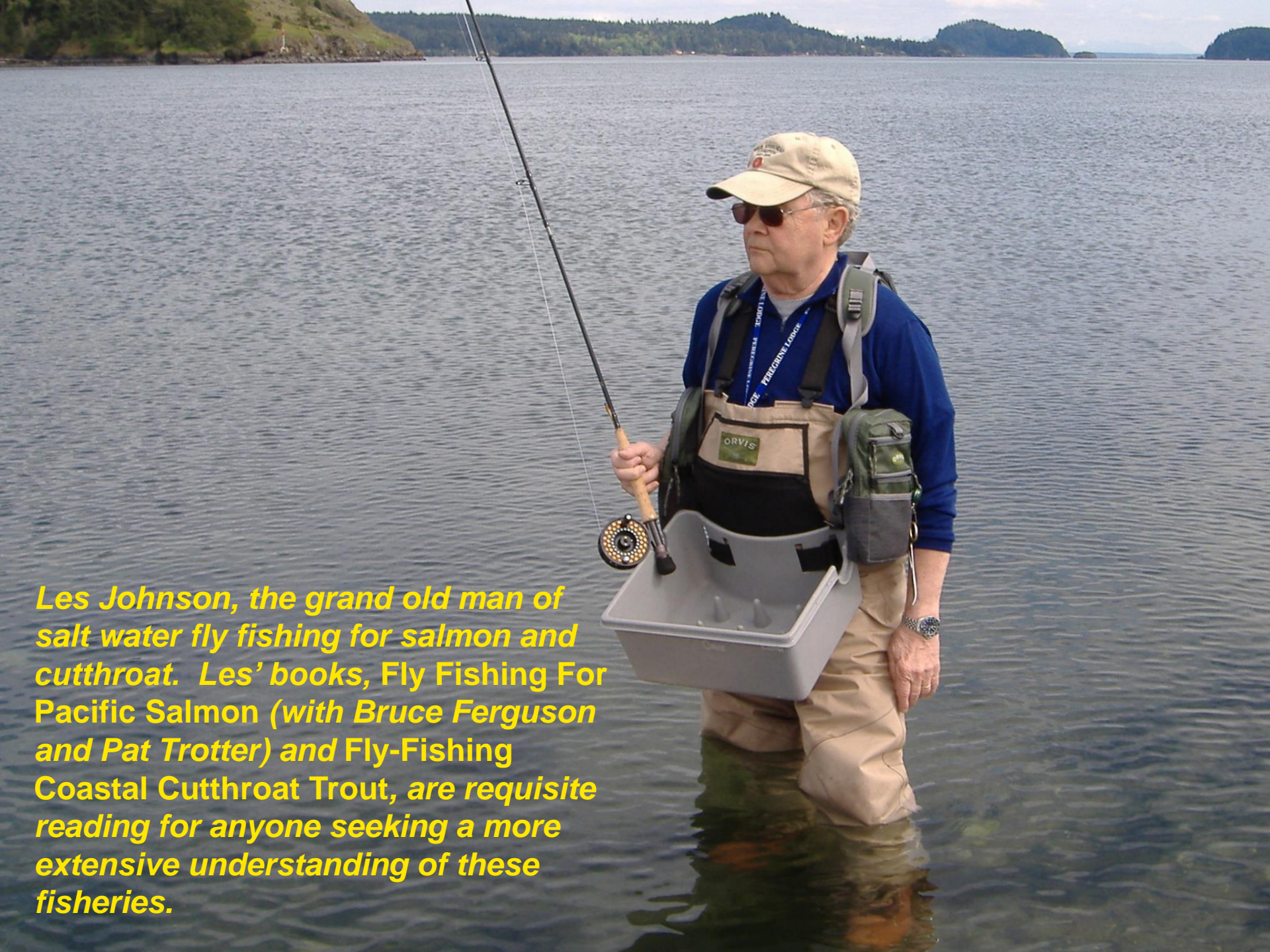


*Even on relatively sheltered waters, inclement weather can present the boating angler with some tough and potentially hazardous conditions.*



A variation of Jack Gartside's Gurgler, Al Knudson's familiar Spider pattern, Mike Kinney's Reverse Spider and a selection of saltwater streamers; all highly-effective patterns for sea-run cutthroat in the salt.





***Les Johnson, the grand old man of salt water fly fishing for salmon and cutthroat. Les' books, Fly Fishing For Pacific Salmon (with Bruce Ferguson and Pat Trotter) and Fly-Fishing Coastal Cutthroat Trout, are requisite reading for anyone seeking a more extensive understanding of these fisheries.***

Cutthroat patterns may run the gamut from accurate imitations to highly imaginative attractors. In salt water, the cutthroat is a highly aggressive feeder, apparently determined to eat any living thing smaller than itself.

Bruce Ferguson's Green and Silver has been a longtime favorite of many anglers, my Hubert Humpy, originally designed for pink salmon, has taken plenty of cutthroat in both salt and fresh water, and generic baitfish patterns are always worth a try.



The Rolled Muddler is a favorite Canadian saltwater pattern for sea-run cutthroat. According to its originator, Tom Murray, it was tied to imitate the 1 ½-inch long salt water Sticklebacks common along beaches both there and here, but its spun deer hair head, “clipped in an arrow-head shape”, would appear to give it a more than passing resemblance to a sculpin.



*Waiting for the tide; sometimes just sitting and watching can pay dividends.*



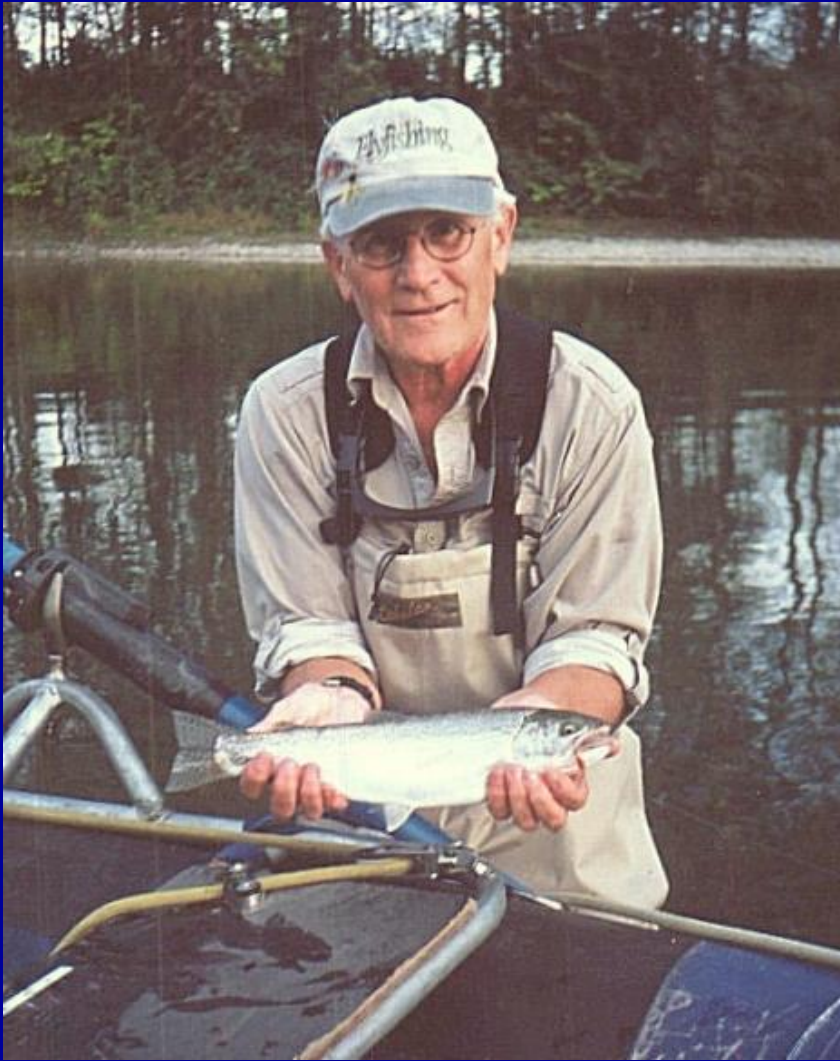
# The Unexpected Fish



Fly fishing for cutthroat in salt water can result in unexpected catches. Some may be more, and some less, desirable; like the hefty bull trout on the right or the large sculpin on the left. Salmon are a common by-catch, either resident coho or mature fish returning to the rivers.



# Fly Fishing For Sea-Run Cutthroat in Fresh Water



Sea-run cutthroat return to many rivers in the summer and fall even though they will not spawn until the following spring; the timing of their migration gives rise to the common nickname “harvest trout”.

Moving upstream in a leisurely fashion, feeding as they go, and sometimes lingering in a particularly favorable spot for a week or more, they show a marked preference for slower-moving water, especially when it is combined with plenty of cover in the form of big rocks, downed logs, snags and overhanging branches.

The long days and warm weather at this time of year can turn cutthroat fishing trips into enjoyable, dawn-to-dusk enterprises.



# Tackle For Sea-Run Cutthroat In Fresh Water

A 9-foot, 4- or 5-weight rod fulfills my requirements for sea-run cutthroat in fresh water. For many years a weight-forward floating line was my line of choice with a 9-foot leader tapered to 3X; only in the past few years have I added a weight-forward Type II or III full-sinking line to my arsenal and I find it to be useful, particularly when fishing very deep pools.

I use spring-and-pawl reels almost exclusively for my freshwater cutthroat fishing and find them to be perfectly adequate to the task.



# Some Cutthroat Flies For Fresh Water

Popular flies for sea-run cutthroat in fresh water include attractors as well as patterns tied to represent actual food items. The Alaska Mary Ann appears to be a fair imitation of the young-of-the-year sucker and Roderick Haig-Brown's Silver Brown was tied to simulate a cutthroat or coho fry.



The Yellow Sally stonefly and the October Caddis are important in the summer and fall, and Mike Kinney's Reverse Spider was, for many years, my go-to fly for sea-run cutthroat and remains one of my favorites.





As in most salmonid species, male cutthroat are easily differentiated from females by the configuration of their jaws; the males exhibiting a longer mandible and maxillary while females have a more snub-nosed appearance and generally smaller mouths. The difference can be so pronounced that some refer to larger males as “alligators”.



## Mike Kinney's Reverse Spider



Mike introduced me to the Reverse Spider many years ago and for a long time it was not only my go-to sea-run cutthroat fly but almost the only fly I used.

The Reverse Spider is one of the best-known and most productive of local patterns for sea-run cutthroat. As a *style* of fly rather than an individual pattern it can utilize many different colors of chenille for the body, while the highly-mobile reversed hackle, largely responsible for the fly's fish-attracting ability, is usually waterfowl flank or Golden or Lady Amherst pheasant tippet.



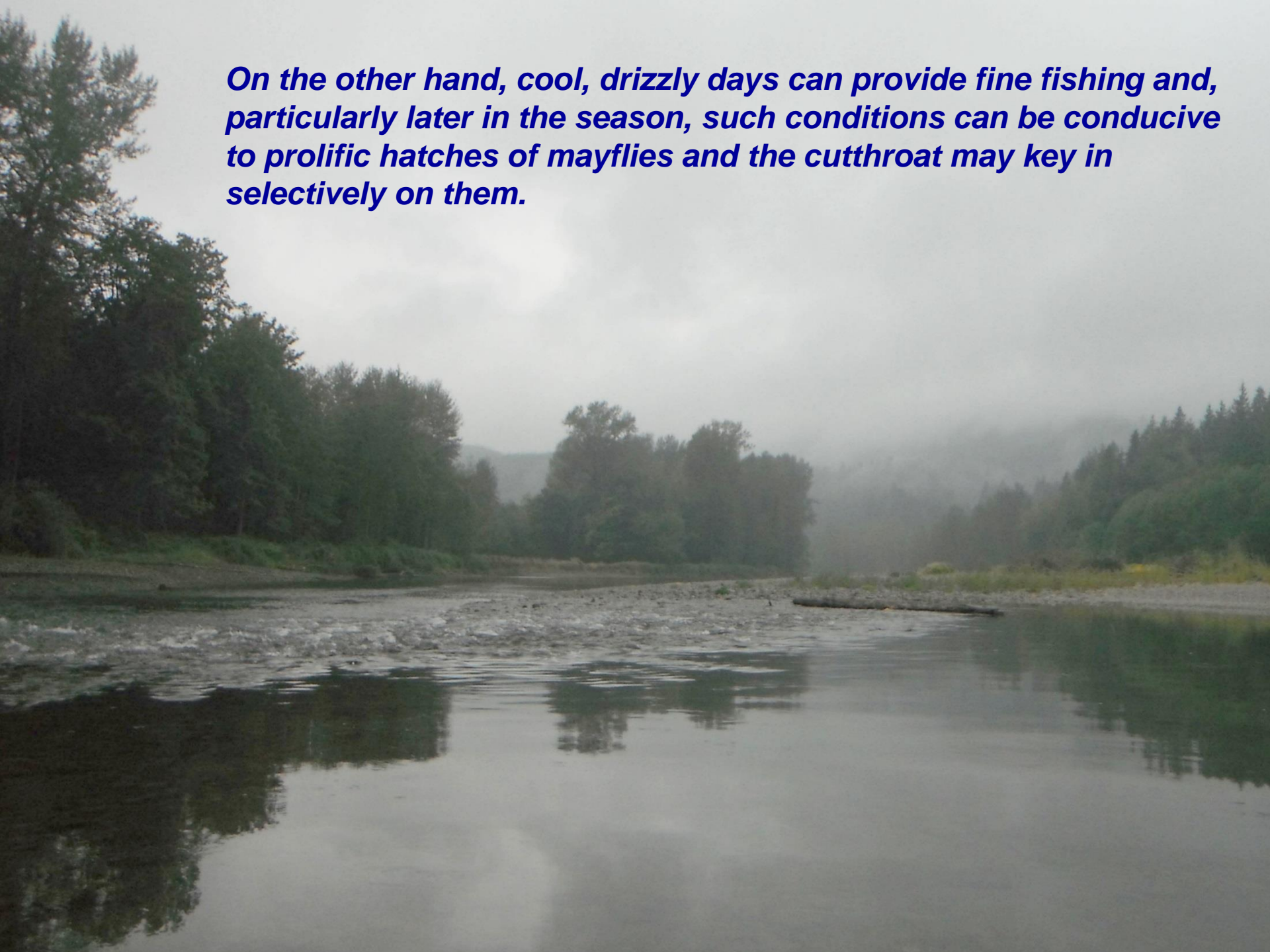
Sometimes cutthroat show a willingness to follow the flashy, brightly-colored spiders but seem reluctant to actually take the fly. I've found that, after such a refusal, presenting a smaller, neutrally-colored soft-hackle pattern as a follow-up fly will frequently draw an immediate strike and a solid hookup.





*When the sun begins to burn away the mist of a summer's morning over the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River is a good time to be on the water and a good time to be fishing for sea-run cutthroat.*

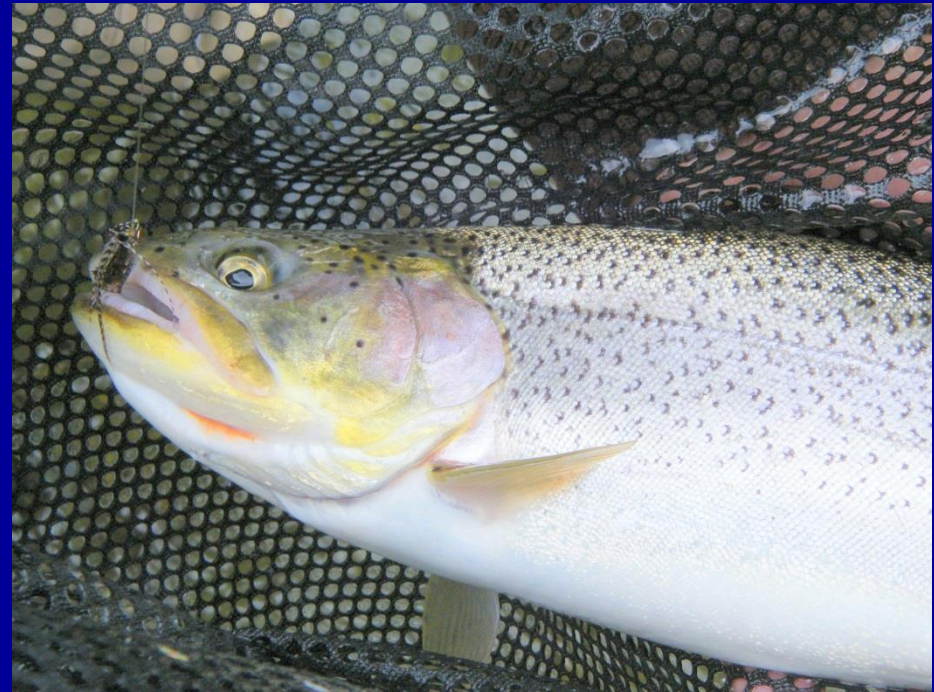
***On the other hand, cool, drizzly days can provide fine fishing and, particularly later in the season, such conditions can be conducive to prolific hatches of mayflies and the cutthroat may key in selectively on them.***





My “spider-heavy” fly box from a few years back. Today you’d see a greater selection of patterns; more dries, soft hackles and even a few waking flies.

Sea-run cutthroat offer western Washington’s finest stream trout fishing; they are hard-fighting, wild, beautiful, aggressive and highly responsive to fly-angling techniques.







The coloration of the sea-run cutthroat can be quite variable, changing not only with its level of sexual maturity but also between strains native to different watersheds. This post-spawning, downstream-migrant Naselle River cutthroat was heavily spotted, even on its belly. Note, too, the extraordinarily brilliantly-colored ventral fins.



***Older and larger specimens often develop a beautiful golden sheen, and are known to some as “yellowbellies”.***

Another option for the angler is to tie and fish nearly any steelhead fly in sizes 6-8. Steelhead and cutthroat share a predilection for reds, oranges and yellows.



*Polar Shrimp*



*Stillaguamish Snowfly*



*Red-Winged Blackbird*



*Brad's Brat*

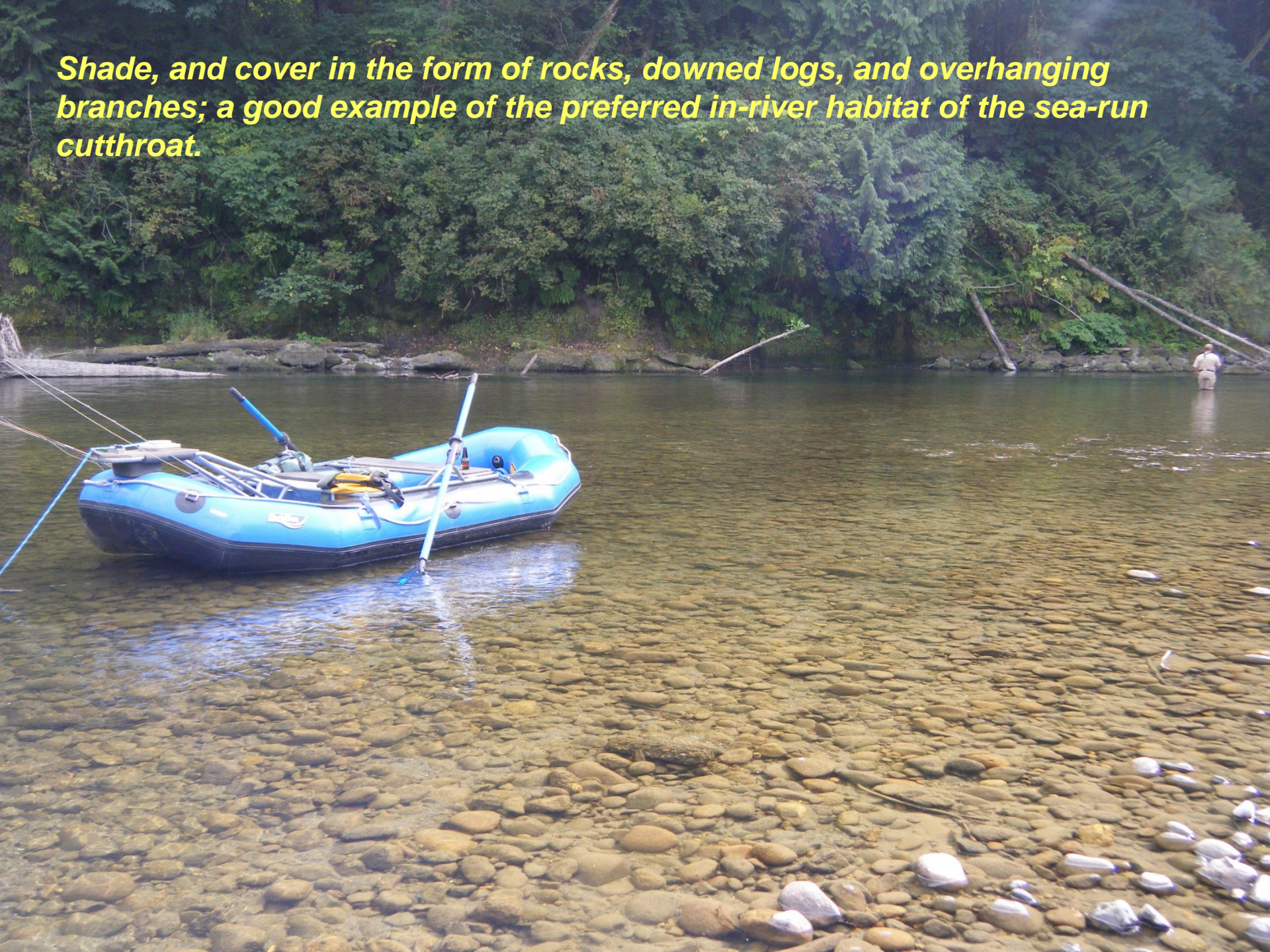


*The typical cutthroat “slash” sometimes becomes indistinguishable in salt water but will begin to grow more prominent again in fresh water as the time for spawning approaches.*

Some old patterns have remained popular and effective over the years; the Godfrey brothers, Cap and Milo, developed the Spruce Fly in Oregon in 1918. The origin of the Dead Chicken is unknown but this simple, old pattern has been a favorite for many decades. Al Knudson developed his Wet Spider (commonly known today as the Knudson Spider, and now tied in many colors besides the original yellow on the Umpqua River and brought it to the Stillaguamish River when he returned to Everett in the 1930s, where it quickly became one of the most popular of sea-run cutthroat flies.



***Shade, and cover in the form of rocks, downed logs, and overhanging branches; a good example of the preferred in-river habitat of the sea-run cutthroat.***



# The October Caddis

The October Caddis, hatching from late September into November, is of major importance to the sea-run cutthroat fly angler. The pupae, well-imitated by many excellent patterns, can spend several days swimming and crawling about before coming ashore to molt into the adult form. The adults, both male and female, may live for a week or more and must return frequently to the water to drink. Their clumsy efforts to accomplish this and the egg-laying commotion, created by the female, will often attract hungry cutthroat.





A wide variety of sculpin imitations can serve the angler well.



As the cutthroat settles into its freshwater environment its appetites can become more “trouty”, reverting to consumption of many of the things it ate as a juvenile. Craneflies can elicit a lot of interest as can the October Caddis. The Blue-Winged Olive (*Baetis* sp.) mayfly, in sometimes surprisingly small

sizes, or the larger *Drunella flavilinia* (Lesser Green Drake, or “flav”) can become selective targets.



A photograph of a river scene. In the foreground, a cutthroat trout is visible, sipping a floating fly. The fly is a size 20 Baetis imitation. The river is surrounded by a dense forest of evergreen and deciduous trees. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery. The text is overlaid in yellow on the left side of the image.

*Leaving only the most subtle of indications, a 17-inch sea-run cutthroat delicately sips a floating, size 20 Baetis imitation.*

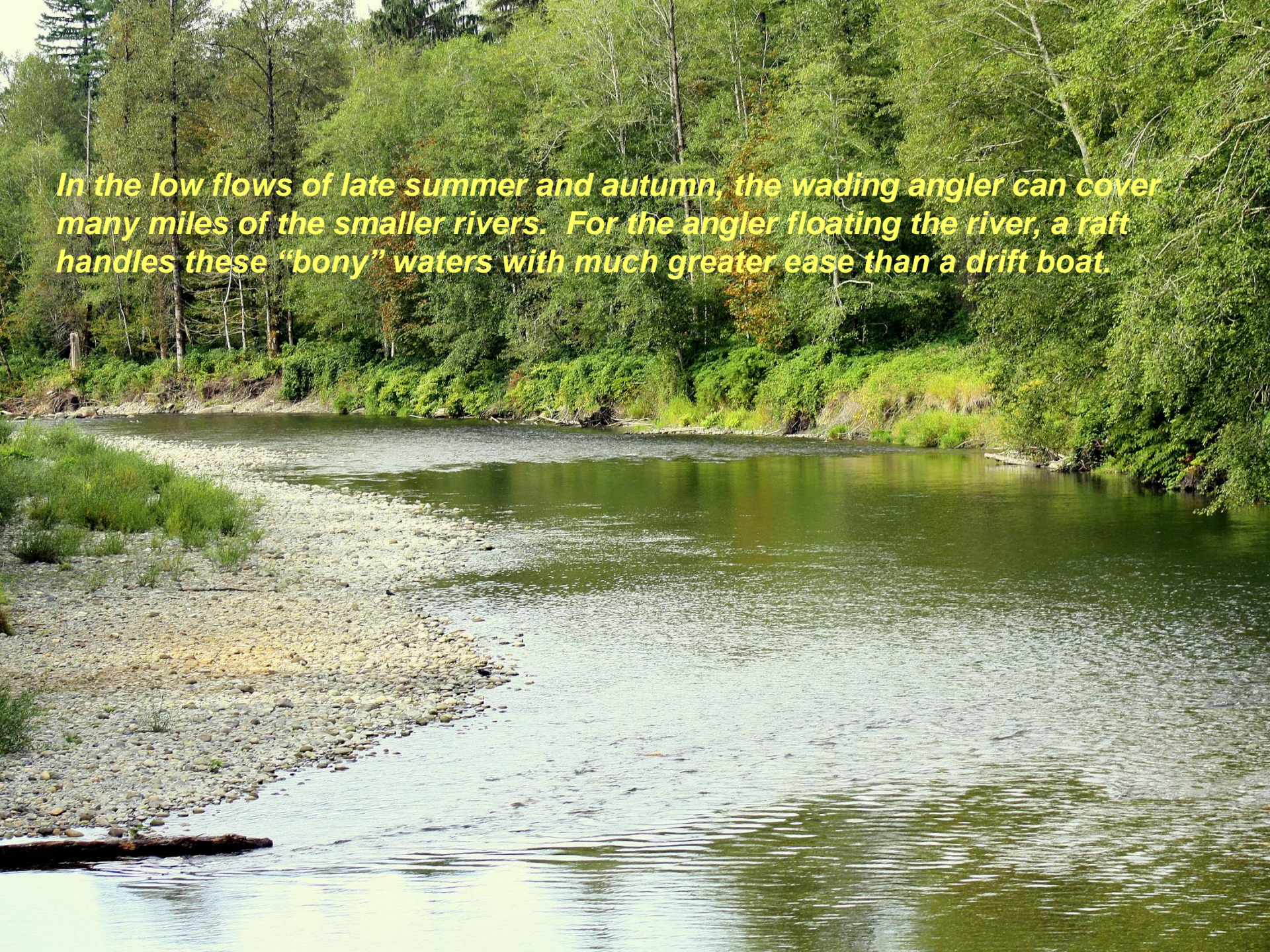
***The deep “slots” that form at the base of steep claybanks often represent prime sea-run cutthroat holding water:***



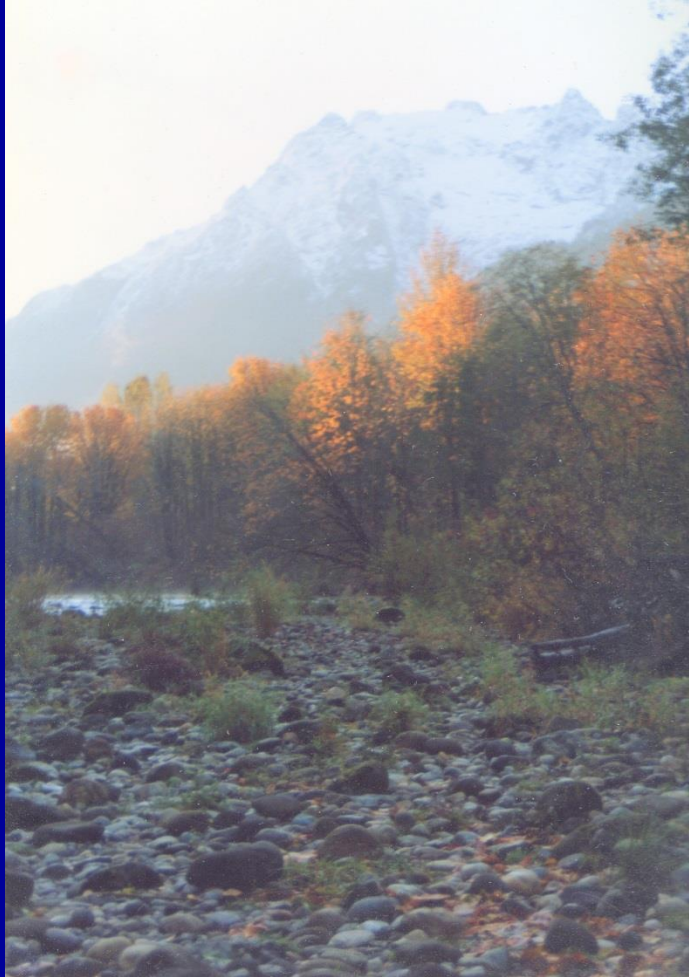


**From midsummer and into fall, returning salmon can aggressively push the cutthroat out of their favored lies. Pink salmon in particular, returning in their enormous numbers during odd-numbered years, can chivy the poor cutthroat from pillar to post making fishing for them difficult and sometimes nearly impossible.**

*In the low flows of late summer and autumn, the wading angler can cover many miles of the smaller rivers. For the angler floating the river, a raft handles these “bony” waters with much greater ease than a drift boat.*



As summer begins to wane, the asters bloom and the Cedar Waxwings prepare to head south; soon the leaves will begin to turn while sea-run cutthroat continue to move into the rivers.





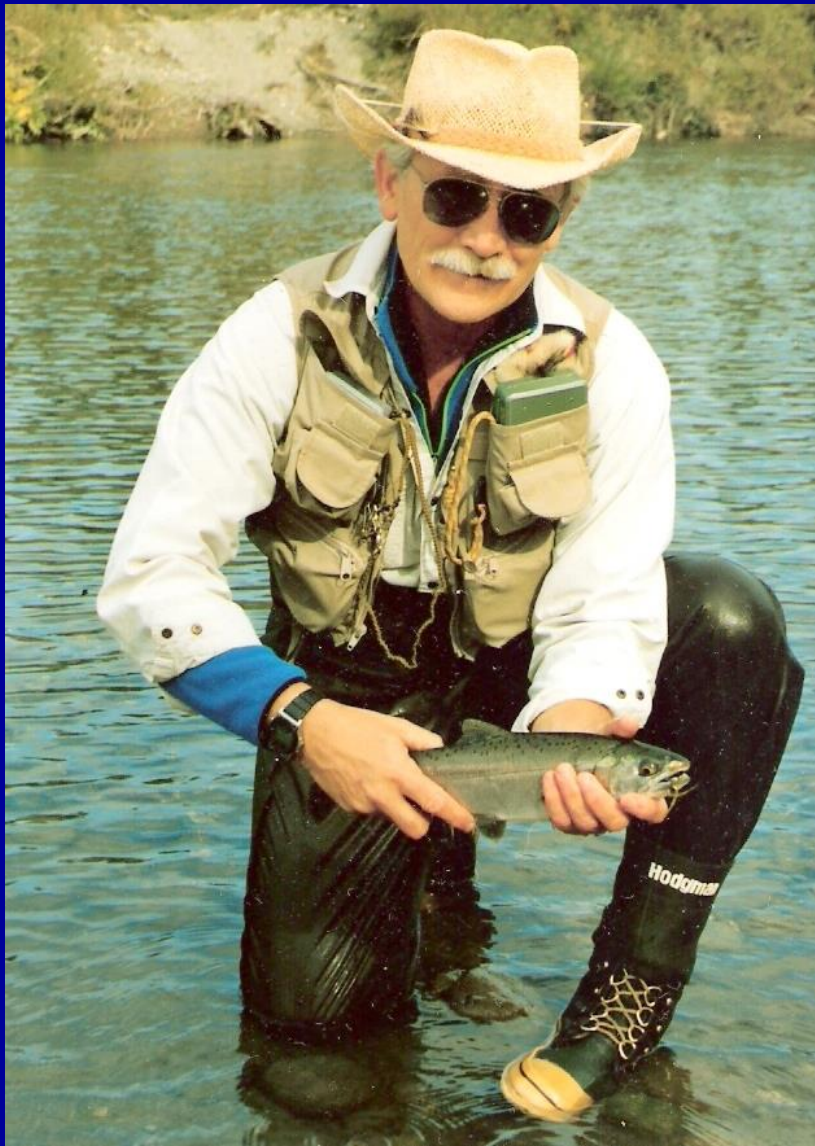




# The Unexpected Fish (reprise)



As in salt water, hooking the unexpected fish, often a coho or, as here, a summer-run steelhead, on light cutthroat tackle, can concentrate the angler's attention to an amazing degree.



Resident rainbows, sometimes surprisingly large ones, and even bull trout are also occasionally encountered.

I've sometimes been surprised to find small chinook jacks feeding avidly alongside similarly-sized sea-run cutthroat and seemingly enthusiastic about attacking the same fly patterns.



Although the first snows begin to dust the mountains, as long as the rivers stay in fishable condition, cutthroat fishing may continue to be good. In a dry year, if the rivers remain low, sea-run cutthroat fishing can hold up well into winter.





*The greater size and cachet of salmon and steelhead have overshadowed the importance and the value of the sea-run cutthroat to the sport angler. Even in the scientific community it has remained little-known and less understood; only in the last decade or so have studies begun to enlarge our knowledge of this still-mysterious fish and its ways. These are the best among the very few available books addressing the coastal cutthroat and, more specifically, the sea-run cutthroat:*

*Fly-Fishing Coastal Cutthroat Trout – Les Johnson*

*Fly-Fishing Guide to the Olympic Peninsula – Doug Rose*

*Cutthroat; Native Trout of the West – Pat Trotter*

*Fly Fishing for Sea-Run Cutthroat – Chester Allen*


*The Estuary Flyfisher – Steve Raymond*

*Trout and Salmon of North America – Dr. Robert Behnke*

*Sea Run Cutthroat; California To Alaska – Richard K. Stoll*



[WWW.COASTALCUTTHROATCOALITION.COM](http://WWW.COASTALCUTTHROATCOALITION.COM)

A person is standing in a shallow lake, fishing. The water is clear, and the background features a range of mountains with snow-capped peaks under a clear blue sky. The shoreline on the left is covered with dense evergreen trees.

The Coastal Cutthroat Coalition is a relatively new organization, consisting of WDFW staff and volunteers, whose aim is to improve our understanding of the coastal cutthroat in all of its forms in order to provide a solid basis of scientific knowledge for their management and conservation.

For more information contact Greg Shimek, PSFF VP ( [gregs47@icloud.com](mailto:gregs47@icloud.com))



***“But I admire him most in his sea-running form, when he can be as bright as a rainbow and wild as a rainbow but with a sulky power all his own at the last.”***

***- Roderick L. Haig-Brown  
In Search Of Trout (1968)***



That's all, folks