

V: an alaskan unease

Our last day in the Alaskan bush. The previous day, we briefly fished Goose Creek and bagged a silver salmon that I killed for my girlfriend's cousin, to whom I felt I owed something since she'd put us up in Los Anchorage and thus she had to put up with *me*. However, that one fish wasn't enough - the cousin had two kids, one 15 and the other 11, and that called for three fillets, which required two fish. So we decided to give our cute, bountiful stream one final fling the following morning.

Next day, in dawn light at the head of the confluence wedding the big river and our small stream, on river-left - our side - where a shallow eddy slid slothfully behind a fallen paper birch. We investigated the water on either side of the tree immediately, and, given the wood cover and slow water, expectedly found many salmon, but all were chums, and while I adore and exalt chums, they weren't the target. We then proceeded downstream and worked the turbidity line between the mainstem and tributary for a few hours, and while many sea-runs came to hand, they were all the wrong flavor, all pinks and chums. Dejected, we decided to leave the confluence and ply some upstream pools that'd held silvers a few days previous...except that something whispered to me to look into that water by the birch one final time. Now the river-left side had a sweet cut-bank about 12 feet tall that was shielded from the water by bushes, and if you got on top of that bank, you gained a good vantage point for peering into the eddy area while being screened by the vegetation. I slowly, smoothly climbed up there and saw 'bout 10 nice-sized fish upstream of the tree, and about 15 more in the eddy - glittering, emerald-ruby, 6-10 pound fish, but they seemed to all be chums, the lovely chums with whom the romance had ended.

All except one. Centered in the chum mass upstream of the birch was a fish, a fish with a scythed snout, a blackish tail, and a red-silver body - a manly silver salmon, ONE silver, a fish that I desperately needed. The cover and vantage point provided a clear lane for getting casts with a jig in without spooking the fish; however, the chums, the beautiful chums, the chums I love, were, in this instance, a nuisance - they, just like the silvers, LOVED the tube jig, and I knew that the numerous chum satellites orbiting the sun of the silver salmon would devour the tube before the silver could take a swing and a swallow. And if I ended up hooking a chum? The ensuing fight would no doubt scare the rest of the fish, chums and lone silver alike. Therefore, I had to wait and hope that the silver salmon would separate just far enough, for just long enough, to give me a shot of getting the tube jig close enough to him to where he could gnaw it before the chums.

The chum clouds parted three times. I had my first shot after about two minutes of watching 'em. The silver edged closer to shore, accompanied by two chums. I flipped my tube out to 'em but missed by a foot, a foot a mile too much - the two chums chased the lure down, but I yanked the jig out of the water before they grabbed it. Several minutes later, the school expanded, creating more space between the silver and the chums. I chucked my tube and hit the target this time - the silver slashed at my lure, but either he missed the jig or I missed setting the hook on time. Regardless, my lure came back fishless. The silver and some chums then moseyed to the eddy. I felt the clock ticking - I still needed to hit those upstream pools, plus the lady and I needed to get back into Los Anchorage at a reasonable time - so I allowed myself only one more shot to get that fish. After an agonizing quarter-hour had drifted by, the clock time-bombing down to zero, finally, *finally*, the silver sidled closer to shore while the chums ambled towards the thalweg. Separation, isolation, and my last chance. I pitched the tube about four feet away from the silver - distant enough to where the lure's splash wouldn't scare him, but close

enough so that a few twitches would attract his attention - and he swigged it. This time, on point, I set the hook instantly, hard, rushed down to the water's edge, fought him to shore, landed him, then killed him with three sharp blows from a rock at the spine-skull joint. *Success.*

Of all the copious fish I caught in Alaska, this one silver was the most memorable, the most meaningful. It was my most elegant hunt of the entire week: I spotted the fish without him seeing me, due to my choice of perch and slow, smooth movements; I had an awesome approach, having an unencumbered shot at the fish while being concealed by the bushes; I had a kick-ass presentation, placing the right lure (a purple tube jig) in the right place (close, but not too close) with the right cast (a smooth flip-cast); and we had a furious, short fight that ended with a quick, clean kill. Given those stages, it was the perfect hunt; however, a solemnity, a sadness permeated the interaction after the light left his eyes. I'd singled that fish out, out of all the others, out of all the chums and pinks, I'd marked that fish for death - I was judge, jury, and executioner. I had a stronger relationship, a more intimate tie, with that salmon than with any other - I hadn't focused on any other fish as much, I hadn't connected with any other fish as deliberately as I had with that buck silver. The moroseness was partly because, despite the union the buck and I shared, that of predator and prey, I killed him for someone else - I brought a third party into what was supposed to be a two-party relationship, almost *cheating* on that fish. The other part: the silvers, though just beginning their run, were getting hammered - on our creek, I'd only known of one silver salmon released, a hen I caught. Consequently, I felt killing that buck might've been excessive, and though I killed our salmon, including that buck silver, ethically - bonk 'em quick and clean - the proportion of caught silvers that were killed felt too high for the small stream to absorb. Still, the chance that my salmon-killing harmed the population was likely low - we were at the run's beginning, so many, many more silvers probably would've entered the stream after we departed, a sufficient proportion of which should've been enough to saturate the stream with new, little coho. But of that, I can never be sure; and because of that, I'll never kill a fish again when unease shakes my heart.