

Pacific Northwest
**Sockeye
Salmon**

Text and photos by David Hall



feature

Male sockeye salmon at night, Adams River, British Columbia, Canada (right and previous page)

— *Sockeye Salmon "vignette"* from *Beneath Cold Seas: The Underwater Wilderness of the Pacific Northwest* by David Hall

We walked nearly a mile along the riverbank before finding a place where we could easily enter with our heavy equipment. The rotting carcasses of dead fish lay along the banks, and the associated stench was overpowering. It was late September 2010, and we had come to photograph an enormous migration of sockeye salmon, the largest run of sockeye in a century. We had already photographed in quiet, shallow creeks, capturing images of individual fish or small groups arriving at their final destination hundreds of miles from the sea. Today, our goal was more ambitious: to capture underwater images of the huge aggregation of salmon battling the swift current of the Adams River.



Like other Pacific salmon species, sockeye are compelled to return to the same freshwater stream

in which they were hatched, in order to spawn. During a long and arduous journey upstream,

they stop feeding. Their bodies undergo extensive anatomic and metabolic changes, triggered by

their entry into freshwater. Silvery blue in the ocean, the sockeye become bright red with yellow-

green heads. The males develop sharp, curved teeth, a prominent hooked upper jaw and a





Chinook and sockeye salmon in Adams River, British Columbia, Canada

humped back. Guided to her destination by an acute sense of smell, the female excavates a shallow nest in the gravel bottom. She and her mate release eggs and sperm into the nest, then move a bit further upstream to repeat this process one or more times. Battered and exhausted, both parents die within a day or two. In the end, their decomposing bodies are consumed by various organisms, bringing significant nourishment to the forest ecosystem.

Snug in our drysuits, marine biologist Conor McCracken and I entered the chilly water, underwater cameras in hand. The swiftly-flowing river was

150 feet (46m) wide at this point, with a slippery gravel bottom. At first, we waded along near shore, where the water was knee-deep. Weaker salmon hugged the shallows, some of them bearing wounds from collisions with sharp objects and encounters with predators, but also from infighting among pugnacious males.

As we moved into deeper water, the current grew stronger, tugging at us and our cameras until I could barely stand. I sensed dozens of fish going past me now, a fleeting hint of red glimpsed through the bright reflections on the water's surface. Cursing silently, I thought of the Polaroid sun-

glasses that I had left behind in our cabin. I attempted to photograph the sockeye as they went past, but repeatedly mis-timed the exposure because I could not see the fish clearly. To make matters worse, the swift current was playing havoc with the two electronic strobes attached to my camera housing, forcefully moving them out of position. This was clearly not working and the sun would soon drop below the horizon.

I noticed that Conor had found shelter in the lee of a huge cedar tree trunk that lay in the middle of the river. I moved toward him, but soon found myself in water up to my waist.



Salmon



Male and female sockeye salmon (above); Cormorants in Hussar Bay (top right)



Salmon

The pull of the current was now overpowering, gradually pushing me downstream. Barely able to stay on my feet, I fleetingly imagined being swept head over heels and carried downriver. Seeing my predicament, Conor quickly anchored himself with one arm wrapped around a sturdy branch and pulled me into the shelter of the great tree trunk, a pool of relatively calm water in the middle of the swiftly flowing river. It was an odd feeling, perhaps akin to being in the eye of a hurricane.

I was now surrounded by salmon. I could not see them clearly in the rapidly fading light, but felt them brushing past my legs as they swam upstream. One fish leaped out of the water, striking me in the chest and almost knocking me off my feet. Uncertain what to do next, I pointed my camera downstream and made a test exposure. The image that came up seconds later on the back of the camera showed a virtual wall of sockeye facing me from just inches away. The sky had turned purple and pink, and the flash units lit up the surface of the water turning it a deep red, like an intricate oriental carpet. I began to photograph and did not stop until the light had all but disappeared. ■

David Hall is an underwater photographer based in New York, USA. His book, Beneath Cold Seas: The Underwater Wilderness of the Pacific Northwest, won the 2012 National Outdoor Book Awards Winner for "Design and Artistic Merit". Visit: www.seaphotos.com

Sockeye salmon at night in the Adams River, British Columbia