

A vote for the tenacious salmon

By: Mark Blazis

Vacation time. Greetings from Labrador, home of DFW: That's short for drizzle, fog and wind. I also should add MBF: mosquitoes and black flies. It's been too cold for stouts, the tormenting local horsefly that emerges for two weeks each summer. Raw east winds coming off the nearby icebergs have minimized attacks.

Every hundred yards or so, a northern water thrush — a species of warbler from the Amazon — can be heard singing. Like terns showing us where the stripers and blues are feeding on baitfish, the water thrushes flock around emerging mayflies on the brook trout lakes. Two other Amazon species — the yellow warbler and Swainson's thrush — are singing constantly now as well. With daylight from 4:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., that's a lot of singing. They are the music of Labrador and the most characteristic sound of the northern salmon rivers.

In Massachusetts, we pray for salmon to return. Only 76 have migrated back into the Connecticut River this year. In Labrador, tens of thousands return, providing the inspiration for an annual pilgrimage to some of the greatest salmon rivers in the world.

Once a sport traditionally limited to the aristocracy, the "king of fish" used to be pursued by only a privileged few. I'm privileged this week to cast for many Atlantic salmon on the Flowers River, 20 miles from the timberline and 20 miles inland from Greenland-spawned icebergs. It may not be warm, but the fishing's hot.

Great numbers of salmon from both sides of the Atlantic gather off the west coast of Greenland to feed for a year or two before returning to their natal rivers to spawn. Here in northern Labrador, we're close to those feeding grounds. (The majority of salmon from northern Europe, though, gather instead in the Norwegian Sea and the Faroe Islands.)

A landmark event occurred when the Atlantic Salmon Federation stopped netting off the coast of Greenland by buying all commercial fishing rights from Denmark and Greenland. That saved thousands of big salmon, and the average size of caught salmon in the rivers began increasing immediately. This vital agreement remains in place.

However, the number of grilse (small salmon) in much of Newfoundland and Labrador is way down this year. Many of the salmon that get safely back to the region from Greenland are tragically netted by the Labrador food fishery, which remains a great enemy to wild salmon.

Way up here on the Flowers, the most northern salmon river in Labrador, there are no other lodges, no other people, and little evidence of netting, which explains in part why the fishing is consistently phenomenal— arguably the best in North America.

Survival is tough for salmon, even if you take people out of the equation. Statistically, the odds are that out of 8,000 eggs, only 2 will survive to return as adults to spawn. Nearly half of the eggs are eaten by predators, including trout. Out of 4,500 alevins, only 650 fry will make it to the parr stage. By their second year, only 50 will leave the river as smolts to face the rigors of the sea. Herons, mergansers, eels, osprey, kingfishers, otters, trout and salmon eat many young.

Upon entering the sea, the dangers continue. Cormorants, terns, gulls, sea lampreys, cod, sharks, seals and commercial net fishermen hammer them, killing about 48 of the 50 remaining fish. The survivors that return to their natal rivers to spawn will have attained their prodigious size and incomparable flavor on a diet of crustaceans, sand fleas, krill, capelin, herring, sand lance, smelt and mackerel.

For the future of salmon (and all our other game fish), we need to preserve these inglorious but vital bait fish stocks, and to this point, we've done a pathetically poor job of that. Without inspiration, most people aren't going to rouse their passion to fight for the bottom of the food chain.

Considering the salmon's daunting challenge to survive, I can no longer fish to kill them for a trophy on my wall or a dinner on my plate. I came to the Flowers River, arguably Labrador's greatest salmon fishery, to meet them fresh from the sea, to experience their magic runs and leaps, to marvel as they flash like silver in the sun, to briefly touch a spirit of the wild, release, and watch them swim away to spawn.

Mark Blazis can be contacted by email at mblazis@charter.net
