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Cutthroats home from the sea

FALL HARVEST

PAT TROTTER

AUTUMN IS A BEAUTIFUL season in the Pacific Northwest. We get our share of rain, it's true, but usually there are weeks of clear days sandwiched in between. Just pause and look around on such a day; the atmosphere has a soft, golden glow no other season can match—resulting, perhaps, from the lengthening rays of the sun playing off the brilliant golds and reds and oranges of the hardwoods grouped among the evergreens.

Autumn is a time of harvest. For the fly rodder of this region this is especially true, because it is the season when the sea-run cutthroats come home to spawn in the coastal rivers of their birth. Because they enter the rivers during the season of harvest, these beautiful fish have come to be called "harvest trout."

The coastal variety of cutthroat, *Salmo clarki*, is the native trout of our upper creeks and beaver ponds, and in streams open to salt water—from northern California to Alaska—it is

a sea-run fish. The cutthroat is distinguished by a pair of red slashes under its throat, markings that have given this trout its common name. These slash marks are sometimes so pale as to go unnoticed on fish taken in salt water or on fish fresh in from the sea. Fresh fish are mint silver on the flanks, shading to silvery blue-green on the back and faintly amber or yellowish on the belly. They are heavily spotted, especially between vent and tail. The colors deepen after the fish enter fresh water; the backs become dark olive-green, the sides take on an amber or pinkish-orange wash and the throat slashes become vivid, fiery red. A mature harvest trout in fall colors is a breathtaking sight—an easy rival to the beauty of the autumn foliage.

Sea-run cutthroats survive the rigors of spawning very well. In the case of steelhead only about 1 percent of spawning fish ever make it back again, but it isn't uncommon for cutthroats to spawn three or four times. McClane's *New Standard Fishing Encyclopedia* describes a 10-year-old tagged cutthroat caught on a spawning run by an angler in Sand Creek on the Oregon coast.



The estuarine reaches of streams, creeks and rivers are often good spots to locate cutthroats beginning their upstream migration in the fall. Pat Trotter photo.

Sea-run cutthroats are relatively abundant over most of their range. They spawn in January or February, and young fish go to the sea in the spring of their second or third year, mingling with the seaward migration of salmon and steelhead as they go. But unlike salmon and steelhead, cutthroats do not migrate far out to sea. Instead they spend the one to two years of their saltwater lives close inshore. They forage in the estuaries, along gravel beaches and oyster beds and off the mouths of rivers.

Fly fishers around Puget Sound and Hood Canal and a few anglers in other districts up and down the Northwest coast fly-fish the salt for cutthroats almost every month of the year. The fish move into the shallows on the tide, rummaging in the gravel and eelgrass for herring, candlefish, sculpins, scuds, sand fleas, shrimp and other foods. You can fly-fish from the beach if you can gain access, but most anglers use small boats. The fish are nomadic, however, and a good deal of prospecting goes into this kind of angling. The trout normally move about in small schools of 5 to 15 fish, although I recall hearing Ed Foss of the Washington Fly Fish-

ing Club tell how he and Steve Raymond once watched a run of some 200 cutthroats pass beneath their boat.

In the spring when the downstream migration of salmon and steelhead is at its peak, the bigger cutthroats will move into tidewater to meet them. They feed actively on the small fish. Fly-fishing with bucktails and streamers can be productive in this situation, but here, too, you must be willing to prospect and take a few skunks now and then.

Because they will not be spawning until January or February, the late-summer and autumn cutthroats are in prime condition. These wild fish are not large by steelhead or salmon standards; most will go from about 10 inches to about 16 inches. A harvest trout better than 18 inches is a real trophy, yet there are enough of these bruisers around to make fly-fishing with light tackle very interesting. Harvest trout normally take freely, and they're real brawlers once the hook is set.

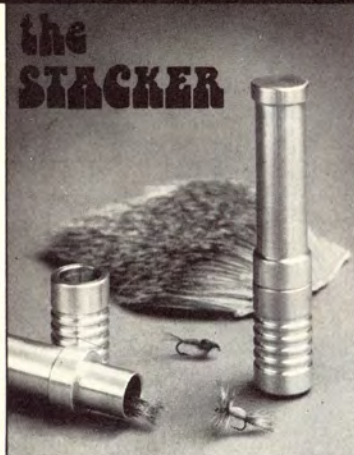
Yet despite the wonderful fishing to be had, most anglers seem to forget all about the cutthroats when they enter the streams in the fall. I've encountered local fishermen—good an-

glers who had put in years in the district and should have known—who would stare curiously at a catch of cutthroats and ask, "What did you get the jack salmon on?" Or simply, "What kind of fish are those?" When I'd answer, "Sea-run cutthroats—harvest trout," their looks would change to enlightenment, and some would even say, "Gee, I'd forgotten we had fish like those around here!"

TO FLY-FISH SUCCESSFULLY for sea-run cutthroats, you must be able to recognize the stream waters that these fish prefer. In a recent article, Bill McMillan of Washougal, Washington, had this to say about the water cutthroats prefer: "Water that suits sea-run cutthroats has a certain predictability. They prefer dark, quiet, lagoonlike lairs, especially with overhanging limbs and a studding of boulders."

Although I don't completely agree with the term *lagoonlike*, this description is pretty accurate. Harvest trout do like the deep, quieter water—especially if there are obstructions present, such as a log jam, overhanging trees or brush, or a steep drop-off along the deep side. Also important in McMillan's description is the point

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Harvest Trout . . .



The photo above, by the author, illustrates typical cutthroat water; the sea-run cutthroat at the bottom of this page was photographed by Walter C. Johnson.

about predictability. Once you learn to recognize the makings, you can hit every piece of water with those characteristics and be sure that you are fishing cutthroat water. This will stand you in especially good stead if you fish an unfamiliar stream—the need for local knowledge is not great if you can recognize the basic kind of water cutthroats prefer.

However, you should not take any piece of water for granted. What you

see on the surface is not always an accurate indication of the nature of the water. The revised edition of Lenox H. Dick's book, *The Art and Science of Fly Fishing*, contains excellent sections with photographs and simply written descriptions of the different types of water you'll encounter on coastal rivers. He tells how to recognize these waters and how to fish them. If you learn to read the unobvious features of a stream or



river, it will add a new dimension to your ability to locate fish.

You should not forget that these are migrating fish. Cutthroats retain their oceangoing characteristic of moving in small schools—so where you find one fish in a stream, more often than not you'll find others. But on the other hand, you may be successful in one pool on a particular day and the next day the fish are gone. You may have to cover some water in order to find them again.

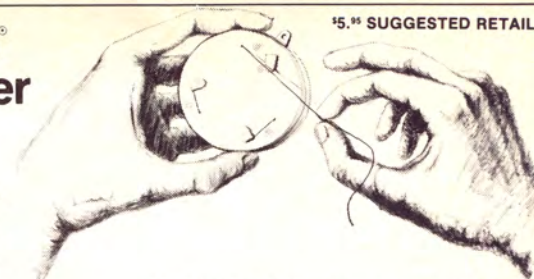
I've kept a comprehensive diary of my fly-fishing trips almost since I started fly-fishing. My diary tells me one thing loud and clear about cutthroats: Fully 70 percent of the strikes I've gotten from sea-run cutthroats have come in the lower parts of pools—right down to the tail-outs themselves. I usually fish all the water in a given stretch—both because I like to and because I don't want to miss out on the possibility of discovering one of those unobvious, hidden pools. But even so, 70 percent of my strikes come in the tailwaters—that's a pretty graphic indication of the most productive part of most pools.

THE TACKLE YOU CHOOSE for sea-run cutthroats is pretty much up to you. There are no special requirements; the gear I use might not suit the next guy, and perhaps that's the way it should be in such matters. For my own fishing I use an 8 1/2-foot rod and a floating, double-tapered, 8-weight line. Even though I fish primarily with sunken flies, I don't find any disadvantage to fishing with a floating line. One of my partners uses a 6-weight, sinking-tip line, and another uses a full-sinking, high-density, 9-weight outfit. Over the years that I've fished with these fellows, I'd say we're all about even when it comes to getting strikes. The only recommendation I would make is to avoid using too light an outfit—coastal streams typically require long casts, and also there is the chance that while fishing for cutthroats you'll hook up with a salmon or late-summer steelhead, and the lighter tackle may not be able to handle a large fish effectively.

A list of suitable fly patterns for harvest trout might include a broad range of patterns and sizes, but the most effective flies are usually attractor wet flies and streamers such as the Kalama Special, Royal Coachman, Conway Special, Spruce, Silver De-

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Harvest Trout . . .

mon, Gray Hackle, Black Gnat, McGinty and Muddler Minnow. Most anglers fish these patterns on #6 and #8 hooks, although many will use flies as large as #2 or #4, reasoning that the larger the fly, the larger the fish that will take. I haven't discovered that reasoning to be particularly true, however, with sea-run cutthroats. My selection includes several patterns as small as #10 or #12, and I even carry a few #16's for those rare occasions when the fish prove selective.

My experience concerning dry flies leads me to believe that sea-run cutthroats rarely take flies on the surface, responding much more favorably to flies in or below the surface when they are actually rising to imitations at all. About 90 percent of my fishing is done with sunken flies, although there are occasions when dry flies may be in order. One occasion is during the orange-brown caddis hatch that typically occurs during the fall on coastal rivers. This caddis, *Discosmoecus atripes*, is very large, and locally it is known variously as the orange sedge, autumn phantom or golden caddis. Appropriate dry-fly imitations should be orange-brown in color—but even during this hatch I have had more success fishing with subsurface pupal imitations than with dries. The second situation concerns terrestrials, including wood termites, grasshoppers and bees among other land-born insects that may be present in good numbers on the streams during the late-summer and fall months.

EVEN IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST, where we are fortunate to enjoy a varied and exciting fishery, I find myself most excited by the fall harvest of sea-run cutthroat trout. To me the finest reward of fly-fishing is to cast to a husky fall cutthroat, decked out in its autumn colors that complement so well the splendor of the surroundings. This gamefish captures perfectly the essence of the autumn season in this region. When fall rolls around my pulse quickens with anticipation—for the best time of my angling year is just ahead.

[Veteran West Coast angler Walter Johnson describes the development of a fly pattern for these fish in this issue's Fly Tier's Bench on page 67.]
THE EDITORS.]

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