

OUTDOORS; Step by Polite Step, Fishermen Take Turns at the Salmon

By NELSON BRYANT

GUYSBOROUGH, Nova Scotia -- With my newly purchased three-day Atlantic salmon fishing license safely tucked into a pocket in my waders, I joined eight other fly fishermen who were moving down the shore of the Salmon River just upstream of where it empties into Chedabucto Bay.

Fly lines gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight as they curved up and over the high banks of sand and gravel behind the anglers, whose measured descent to the bay -- a cast or two or three, then a few steps downstream -- was a ritual that may be seen on any of the province's salmon rivers, all of which are open to the public. This ballet of salmoneers gives each fisher a shot or two at all of the water in a run or pool. When the person at the bottom of the stretch finishes casting, he or she walks back upstream to the beginning and comes down through again.

I was elated to be on the river. For a time that day, a Sunday, it seemed as if I would not be able to fish for salmon until the morrow, but John Dobson, who works out of the Guysborough office of the province's Department of Natural Resources, graciously opened the office and sold me a license. I immediately headed for the river, knowing, because I had driven past it a half hour before, that the tide would be falling until shortly after sunset. A Crucial 300 Yards

When the Salmon River is low, as it was for most of the summer and when I was on it, angling for its salmon is confined to the last 300 yards or so of its tidal portion. At high tide, this stretch is drowned, but as the tide begins to fall, the river's channel emerges, and at extreme low tide the river is less than 90 feet wide in some places. It is on the falling tide that most salmon are caught, although I was told by local anglers that a few fish are sometimes taken just as the tide begins moving in.

The south bank of the river is all sand and gravel; much of the opposite shore, which fewer fishermen utilize, is boulder-strewn and terminates in a rock jetty that extends out into the bay.

When I completed the course the first time around, I stopped to chat with a local fly fisher who told me that salmon anglers from all over the province were coming to the Salmon River.

"We've got fishermen from the St. Mary's and the Margaree" -- the province's prime salmon streams -- "here. There's no water and no taking fish in any of the other rivers."

During my second pass down the Salmon River, I saw one grilse (a small salmon that returns to its natal stream after only one year at sea) and one large salmon jump, but I had yet to raise a fish -- to induce one to make a pass at my fly -- and the same was true of the other fishermen. I asked another angler if any fish had been caught in recent days and was told that two had been brought to the net the previous day.

"There are plenty of fish here," he said. "It's just that the takers are remarkably scarce." Recalling a Glorious Day.

There had been, he and others said, one glorious day about two weeks before when at least 13 salmon, including grilse, were caught and many more hooked and lost. One could only speculate that a fresh run of fish had come in from the sea and joined the others in the river mouth and estuary to wait for a substantial rain that would bring a spate of fresh water and send them surging upstream to their spawning beds. New arrivals tend to respond to a fly fisherman's offerings.

No fish were caught and only two or three were raised that first afternoon and evening, and watching the relentless casting of my fellow anglers -- many fishing dry flies -- I realized that I could probably never become a first-rate salmon fisher, lacking both the persistence and the seemingly inexhaustible optimism that drives the best of them. I was also impressed by the good manners these Nova Scotia anglers displayed both toward each other and the questioning stranger among them, even when at the end of my last day of fishing, I momentarily forgot where I was and entered the line of anglers out of turn -- the recollection of which still makes me cringe with embarrassment.

Although I had seen three or four salmon and an equal number of grilse jump before the tide was all the way out that first afternoon, I was not prepared for what happened at full ebb. Salmon and grilse began jumping or rolling everywhere and some of those fish would have gone over 30 pounds. They cavorted for a full half-hour in the last 50 yards of the river and toward the end of that time other salmon were rolling or jumping in the bay out beyond the jetty. On two occasions, leaping salmon actually splashed water on me.

When this happened to a fellow next to me, he muttered, "I should have brought my shotgun with me." I witnessed this phenomenon three more times in the next two days, once at the end of the flood, twice at the end of the ebb. One grilse was caught the second day by an angler who immediately gutted it, announcing that its capture had been nothing but luck, and headed for home wearing a wide grin. No fish were caught the third day, the day my Nova Scotia license ran out, and I could only hope that what I had envisioned as a successful finale for my salmon fishing in 1992 would be brought to fruition during the next few days on the Miramichi River in the neighboring province of New Brunswick.