HARD TO CATCH: A MOST MEMORABLE ATLANTIC SALMON

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Dedicated to the memory of A. Alfred Taubman

I'm a trout fisherman, reared on the waters of Yellowstone Park from an early age. My grandfather, Samuel Peter Eagle, cofounded the west entrance to Yellowstone Park, West Yellowstone, in 1908. He was the first licensed fishing guide in the park, and each of his ten children grew up in the fly fishing legacy at the area's first fishing shop, Eagle's Fly Shop. My father, Wally, was the tenth child born to Sam and Ida Eagle. His father nurtured my father's fishing skills from his earliest years, as my dad did with me. By the age of 5 I was sweeping the floors of the fly shop, mesmerized by the myriad fishermen coming in and out every day with their stories. By age 10 I was tying flies and accompanying my father on countless fly fishing jaunts to every edge of the greater Yellowstone basin and surrounding waters in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Through his eyes, the rivers and lakes became a source of constant intrigue and questions: what are the insect hatches, what terrestrials are in the area, where do the trout take cover, where and when do they feed? Unlocking the mystery of finding and catching trout became a lifelong meditation and passion. It is a passion that runs deeply in my DNA, and its expression doesn't wane with the years.

The Secret Life of a Salmon

As a young trout fisherman, I read any number of books and articles on fly fishing. Through these vehicles and stories from anglers I met, I came to appreciate the excitement surrounding fly fishing for other fishes such as bone fish, tarpon, permit, and the king of them all, Atlantic salmon. How excited I was in 2003 when I had the opportunity to fish for Atlantic salmon in Iceland. In the 11 ensuing years, my annual trip to Iceland became an immersion in the unique biology of the fish, their behavior, and, most notably, the mystery surrounding their catching!

The intrigue of the Atlantic salmon begins with an appreciation for the biology of the fish and the almost impossible odds that each salmon must overcome to reach an adult size. As a fertilized egg, she has to survive endless scavenging brown trout. As a tiny parr, she must avoid trout, mergansers, gyrfalcons, and other local prey. Finally, as a young "smolt" she goes to sea for 3 years and must survive a number of predators including eels, sea lions, sharks, seals, and human beings. Then she must swim hundreds of miles to get back to her river. Finally, she has to scale three large waterfalls to reach her birth place where she hopes to reproduce. Now, as a "grilse salmon," she weighs between 5 and 8 pounds. If she survives the spawn, which happens for a distinct minority of Atlantic salmon, she'll go to sea again, coming back after 3 more years as a full-grown adult salmon weighing between 14 and 18 pounds. Once again she'll have to beat all odds to get back to her river. If she does, she'll be a magnificent creature that would be

almost magical to catch, admire, and release. By a third spawn, she will exceed 20 pounds in weight.

It is with this mind's eye that I approached my annual return to Iceland's "Big Laxa," the fabled Laxa l'Adolol River, in 2014. As we drove to the lodge, our fishing guides were buzzing with excitement. It seemed that the river was producing a banner crop of salmon, with a great number of them weighing more than 15 pounds. Thus, it was with particularly unusual enthusiasm that my guide, "Steini" Stefansson, and I began my 4 days of fishing in early August, 2014. That first evening, with cool rainy weather, we anticipated that the salmon would be active and hopefully eager to strike a fly. I was especially pleased because the two "beats" of water that I had been assigned that evening had produced more caught salmon the past month than any of the others. As we fished each holding pool, it became clear that perhaps things would not be as optimistic as we thought. We fished for 4 solid hours covering salmon lies that we knew held fish, yet not a single salmon came to the fly. In fact, we didn't see a fish anywhere on the river. That evening we learned that none of our party of eight anglers had seen a single salmon. We thought maybe this was just bad luck. Tomorrow, things might be different. But they weren't. The next day was much the same. Only a single fish was caught despite eight anglers fishing superb salmon lies for 8 hours each! Two days prior, after a heavy rain, seven anglers had landed 13 salmon in a single day. What was going on?

Dealing with Mother Nature

I have fished the Big Laxa annually since 2003. What I have learned about Atlantic salmon during these past 11 years can be captured in a single word: unpredictable! Remarkably, the storm that led to good fishing just a few days earlier may have been in part a cause for poor fishing with our group. It is widely accepted that salmon returning to "their river" congregate at the river's mouth beginning in the spring and with heavy rains move into and up the river to begin the several-month process that will eventually lead to their spawn in October. The rains of the past week had been unusually vigorous, drawing many fresh fish into the river. However, the lake from which the "Big Laxa" flows, Lake Myvatn, became so full that the effect was what the guides called a "wash out" — silt flowing out of the lake and down the river gave the water a soft tea appearance, far less clear than usual. Our lead guide, Peter, said he'd not seen this in more than 20 years, nor had I seen it in 11 years. The guides agreed that while the fish were there in large numbers, the discoloration of the river had them out of sorts and uninterested in racing to the surface to attack a little fly. The message to the anglers was clear: The river color will get better, but we're not sure when! Therefore, we would have to earn every fish until the water cleared.

Figure 1. This was a subtle salmon rise to a swinging fly below the visible fly line. Notice the heavy rapids below the pool.

So it was that I began my third day of fishing with my guide, Steini. On a gray, cool, raw windy morning we drove to Beat #4 (Oddhylur) to start our fishing. In my 11 years of fishing this stretch of river, I had actually never landed a fish here. With discolored water and a track record of fishing this beat a minimum of 40 fishless hours over the recent decade, I was not optimistic. All the anglers in our group were discouraged. Yet the thing about this fishing is that your luck can change in a single moment, and when it does, it's amazing. Large Atlantic salmon are gorgeous creatures to fish for and catch.

As I worked the fly through the lower stretches of the pool, I recognized a place just above a long lava shelf that represents a perfect holding place for one or more large salmon. Salmon moving upstream love to lie in calm waters just above a waterfall, rapids, or a stretch of fast, heavy current. In lower pool #4, there was just such a slot of water, perhaps 4 feet wide, where we had seen fish previously. As my fly straightened out and swung into this slot, a fish surged to the surface, creating a bulge under my fly! My guide Steini asked me if I felt anything, to which I replied "No." "Good," he said. "I think she'll come again!" So here I was, having now fished for 15 fishless hours over two and a half days, and when I finally raise a fish, it doesn't eat the fly. I was shaking with, what? Excitement, anger, anticipation.... When you raise a salmon, the prevailing notion is that the fish is most likely to take your fly if you present it exactly the same way and distance with your next cast.

Figure 2. This rise created a sizable bulge beneath the fly, but I did not feel anything.

Figure 3. Finally, the salmon rose fiercely with a spray of water and actually took the fly.

A Game of Bait and Switch

No one really knows why an Atlantic salmon takes a fly. Unlike trout, Atlantic salmon do not feed once they return to the river. When they come into fresh water, their entire purpose is to reproduce. The fish move from the mouth up to the stretch of river where they were born, either 3, 6, or 9 years previous, and stay there until they spawn. Why they choose a particular place to rest is not known. And why should they attack and eat a little cluster of bright-colored feathers on a hook, anyway? This salmon had probably ascended 5 to 8 feet from the bottom and pushed a small surge of water under my little #8 Nighthawk fly, then descended back to her resting place (Figure 1). Steini carefully instructed me to perfectly replicate my last cast, which I did. Once again the fish surged under my fly, then returned to the bottom. If I didn't have tachycardia before, I did now! The wake under the fly looked like a torpedo on the move. This game repeated itself twice more and then stopped. The fish no longer came to look at the fly at all.

"Time to change flies," said Steini. I asked him what we should try, and he looked in the water, at the hills and sky, and then said, "Let's try a green Highlander!"

He has this belief that if you can capture in a single fly all the colors that the salmon sees in the water, hills, and sky at that moment, your chance of catching the salmon is maximized. Since salmon don't actually feed in the river, the flies don't really match

Figure 4. Some minutes after hooking her, the fish is running deep in the pool. We have not yet seen her to know her size or that she is a female.

Figure 5. My guide, Steini Stefansson, thinks that maybe she's ready for the net. One look at him, and the second battle began!

an insect or minnow or terrestrial like a beetle or grasshopper. What's really curious is why they attack a fly at all. This fish is lying on the bottom, all 95 to 100 cm of her, and she gets perturbed by a little 1-cm fly dragging just below the surface 8 feet above? I have no idea if Steini is right. But of course he's been guiding on this river for more than 25 years, so who am I to say that his logic is flawed?! We put on a small green Highlander and once again the fish surged under my fly! And once again she didn't take it. At this point I was becoming unglued. She was clearly a large fish, and I felt like I was being teased.

And so it went for nearly 2 hours, as we tried fly after fly—smaller flies, big flies, double hooks, single hooks. The result was the same: the fish would usually move under the fly, bulge a time or two, and then ignore it. This became so predictable that we were able to photograph a dozen rises (Figure 2). I had never seen anything like it. On one hand, I wanted to give up and try some new water. On the other hand, after nearly 3 days of not even seeing a salmon, we had an active fish that seemed like she eventually might eat the fly. After nearly a dozen patterns, Steini shrugged his shoulders and asked me if I wanted to keep trying or move to a new pool. I was so exasperated that I could hardly think. While looking at Steini, I noticed a beat-up salmon fly stuck to the sheep's wool patch on his fishing vest. I asked him what it was,

Figure 7. The salmon is now in a sprint to leave the pool and enter the rapids below.

and he said that it was a beat up "Grimsa" named after another river in Iceland. I said, "Let's try it; what do we have to lose?!" He laughed, shook his head, and put it on. It was a slightly larger fly, sparse and with two hooks, so it rode lower in the water, probably 3 or 4 inches below the surface.

The first cast over the fish produced nothing. But on the second cast, the salmon surged to the fly violently (Figure 3) and took it in, rushing up river and deep. I was, to put it mildly, in complete shock. I carefully tightened the line, raised the rod tip, and felt this magnificent salmon rushing upstream deep down in the pool. Then the salmon turned on another gear and cruised out to the center of the river, where it thrashed the surface but gave away little in terms of its ultimate size. Most Atlantic salmon jump during the fight, usually multiple times. This fish, however, had not. She just seemed to sulk. More importantly, she seemed content to stay in the pool rather than go very far upstream or downstream where rocky rapids would make landing her a very formidable challenge. So, we went back and forth, up and down, deep in the pool for nearly 15 minutes (Figure 4). While we knew she was a strong, heavy fish, we hadn't actually seen her clearly and so we weren't sure just how big she was. At this point we felt that she was beginning to tire, and Steini thought that if I could just get her nose turned up a bit, she might ease to the surface to

Figure 6. The salmon explodes downstream.

Figure 8. Steini emerges from the pool to join the second battle.

Figure 9. Finally, in the net!

be netted. Acting accordingly, he waded into the pool with the net and was ready for her next pass by (Figure 5). Big mistake! As I eased the fish up, she saw Steini and simply exploded (Figure 6). The surface looked like a geyser; then, just as suddenly, she went screaming downstream, peeling line off the reel 10 yards at a clip (Figure 7). Steini yelled an expletive or two and thrashed down river. I held the rod tip high and started running down the bank. A pair of anglers above us saw the commotion and came running downstream. Two other fishermen below us saw the developing drama and started running upstream. By now the salmon was well below me and poised to go over a rapid that had large rocks and a lava shelf that most certainly could shred the leader, if not the line as well. I went scrambling down the bank trying to retrieve line, keep the rod tight to the fish, and not fall into the river! Steini was waist-deep in the river with the net, surging downstream fueled by carefully selected four-letter words. It was a hilarious scene! By now the fish had launched itself into the line of rocks, and I felt a sickening thud vibrate up through the line. I was certain the leader had been cut and the fish was off, but the line was still tight...and I could still feel her swimming! My line was clearly around a rock, because below the rock I could see it take an acute angle where the salmon had changed directions toward the center of the river. By then I was nearly to the rapid,

Figure 10. She is a spectacular female, 95-cm long and 18 pounds in weight.

Figure 11. I resuscitated her in the water for more than 5 minutes helping her to recover. Turning her free was exhilarating.

Steini had caught up to me (Figure 8), and four other anglers were on the scene. The salmon, miraculously, was still hooked. Then, for nearly 15 more minutes, we fought her. Freed from the rocks, she jumped and jumped below the rapids, showing us a truly gorgeous silver side with each leap. Finally we were able to lead her to the net, after 30 minutes of the most amazing salmon

Figure 12. A. Alfred Taubman nurtured my salmon fishing skills over 11 years. This story is dedicated to his memory.

battle that I have had in recent memory (Figure 9). As we eased her into the net, Steini finally relaxed, I was shaking with both joy and muscle tetany, our fellow anglers were all laughing, and this beautiful fully spent female salmon was lying calmly in the net. I saw a fresh bruise on her side, presumably representing the thud that I felt when she went over the big rapid and landed on a rock. After measuring her (95-cm long, 18 pounds) and snapping a brief photograph, I held her in the water (Figures 10, 11), gently moving her upstream and downstream to force oxygen into her system. For a time she was completely limp in my arms, having fought nearly twice as long as most similarly sized salmon do. She was as exhausted as I was. We were together in the water for 5 minutes as she came back to her strength. I touched her bruised side and moved her back and forth, engulfed by my thoughts of her multiple rises, her runs deep in the pool, her savage strike

of the fly after 2 hours of back and forth, and her amazing run downstream after seeing Steini. I was completely immersed in the moment, water tugging at my waders and my arms as I held her. I so desperately wanted her to recover, to live, and to fulfill her destiny to reproduce this coming fall. I was simply lost, in a beautiful way, in a place that completely enchanted me. Slowly, her strength returned and she swam out of my hands, shooting out to mid-river to pursue her plans.

Like her, I am drawn to the river—its beautiful riffles, deep pools, waterfalls, and surrounding moonscape that is Iceland. I was thankful to be alive, to be in nature, and to give a silent thanks to my dear friend, A. Alfred Taubman, who introduced me to Atlantic salmon fishing in the first place. We lost Alfred this past winter after a long battle with heart disease. He was a most magnificent man (Figure 12). Al, this one's for you.