



The notorious Def Leppard streamer. Movement, flash, and weight are the keys to building a good coho fly. © Joe Jackson

Top Right: Handle these fish with care. They deserve it. © Emmie Jackson



# DEF LEPPARD & CLEARWATER COHO ON THE FLY

STORY BY  
JOE JACKSON

It's the first week of October in interior Alaska. The air is thin—so thin that you can see clear to the escarpments of the Alaska Range bathed in alpenglow—but thick with the scents of decay, of closure, and of Labrador tea. You can feel the autumn around you, not just because your fingers and toes already tingle, but because you can see it in the rippling currents before you.

It takes the form of brilliant red arcs, appearing and disappearing, multiplying and dividing like phantoms. These apparitions are why you are here, why you stuffed yourself into insulated chest waders and the thickest wool jacket you could still fit the fly vest around.

These are the last hoorahs for the year before open water closes up shop; these are the coho.

You tie on a sink-tip and from that you secure a two-foot section of 20-pound-test monofilament. This ain't finessing trout on the South Platte, after all. Then you sift through the fly box, a littered array of marabou and tinsel, until you find the one you're looking for. You tremble as you pay out the first cast, your teeth chatter in the electricity of that first swing. The fly slaps hard and you feel the gentle pull of the sink-tip gliding downward. You strip the fly in methodically, rhythmically, and there comes a moment when you think the line might just be stuck on your hand from friction, but as you strip harder to correct it, something pulls back. Cue the Def Leppard, because things just got wild. The coho launches itself like a warhead and bulldogs into the deep middle of the river. After a fight worthy of any chromed salmonid, the buck coho comes to hand, his eyes moody, his maw inky and his teeth ragged as a mako's. A quick look and you release him—there'll be plenty to keep later, if that's your thing—and then you begin dealing another cast.

The water continues to flow by at a crisp 39 degrees, and you know you'll find a similar temperature here whether it's June or December. That, more than anything else, contributes to the richness of this stream: the strength of the salmon run before you, the abundance of trophy-sized grayling throughout the summer, and the myriad mayflies and caddisflies that will rise like fireweed cotton when they hatch come afternoon.

The Delta Clearwater River (known locally as Clearwater Creek) is both a famous and familiar place to Alaskans. With the river's characteristic gold- and green-carpeted banks and emerald-blue flows, most of us can probably pick out any photos that have been taken there (and perhaps even pinpoint which bend they were taken on). The Clearwater is one of the few road-accessible streams in the state that is both spring-fed and hosts runs of salmon, making it an epicenter of recreational activity in the fall. Aside from the coho run, though, which offers a last chance at open-water angling for most of the Interior's devotees, the river offers premiere grayling fishing all summer long for specimens up to and sometimes surpassing 20 inches, as well as a relaxing setting in which to paddle or drift a canoe. In short, the Clearwater is everything you could wish for in a watershed, with an added abundance of waterfowl and boreal wildlife throughout the year to keep things interesting.





In a good year, pools of the Clearwater will be stacked with hundreds of salmon. © Joe Jackson.

These insects, in turn, provide reliable food sources for salmon smolt and Arctic grayling alike.

The run of spawning salmon begins around the last week of September in the Clearwater, and numbers peak in the first and second weeks of October. Heather Scannell at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) explains that the number of salmon can be anywhere between 4,000 and 40,000, and that this abundance can be cyclical to a large degree. In 2003 the run saw over 100,000 salmon, while just last year the peak was a dismal 1,900. ADF&G's escapement goal for Clearwater coho is between 5,200 and 17,000, making the Clearwater unique in another way: It's the only drainage in the entire Yukon River watershed with a coho escapement goal. This fact alone makes managing the salmon a bit like playing darts in the dark, as the only data Scannell and her team have access to before the salmon arrive in September is from commercial fisheries' studies centered near the mouth of the Yukon—1,000 river-miles downstream. If the run is early or late, large or small, they can't really get a gauge on it until the salmon have arrived. ADF&G must then employ count surveys throughout the season to get a measure on the size of the run. Generally, coho numbers meet the department's escapement goals, but occasionally, as seen last fall, the fishery must be closed by Emergency Order. Scannell attests that the department waited as long as they could to initiate the closure, especially since commercial fisheries data suggested the run would be late, but close it they did.

The best spot to access this Eden is off Remington Road at the Clearwater State Recreation Site, roughly 12 miles from Delta Junction. Here there's a boat ramp, a state-maintained campground and public-use facilities, and the privately-owned Clearwater Lodge, which boasts cold beer, tasty cheeseburgers, and a charming view of the river as it meanders by.

Being spring-fed, the Clearwater provides a nourishing perennial environment to its host of residents. This is critical in the rearing of juvenile coho salmon, which have an ice-free realm in which to hatch, grow, and ultimately spend a couple years before they migrate to the Bering Sea. The Clearwater's springs also lend themselves to the river's consistent flow, which shields the watershed from the detriments of flooding and allows silt and gravel to accumulate in ideal substrates for the egg-laying of salmon and aquatic insects.

We are never tired of fishing for coho. © Joe Jackson





As perhaps the most aggressive of the Pacific salmon, coho are certainly a fish worth managing. They're powerful (even at the end of a Homeric voyage), they're pugnacious, and they attain respectable sizes. How can a person not become smitten with the sight of dozens of blushed red shapes moving through the water, each a harbinger of winter and a dying season, each a river soldier in their own right that's weathered hundreds of dangerous river miles just to be here? And how can an angler, I ask, not be kept awake at night by those crimson flanks, that jet-black kype as gnarly as a nocturnal brown trout's, that dazzling splash of chilly water as they shoot from your hands back to the depths like comets?

Perhaps there's more romance associated with the king salmon, what with their titanic sizes and relative rarity amidst the other Pacific salmon; but as Scott Haugen has pointed out, the coho is "Alaska's salmon;" hard-fighting, abundant, and delicious on the dinner table.

Coho, like all Pacific salmon, stop feeding at the onset of their spawning run. Instead, they rely on whatever energy deposits they've built up over their tenures in saltwater to carry them to



Coho are very susceptible to well-swung flies.  
© Emmie Jackson



Incidental grayling, which can top 20 inches, are welcomed bycatch on the Clearwater. Especially when they smack giant streamers.  
© Emmie Jackson

their destination. This does not mean, of course, that an angler cannot catch them; it just becomes a matter of irritating over enticing. Coho become pretty single-minded upon entering freshwater, but rest assured, anything that threatens to obstruct their sole purpose is slated for destruction, especially in a tributary stream like the Clearwater where salmon are actively spawning and seeking to protect redds.

In vexing a coho, particularly with a fly, all it takes is to think about rock bands. What makes a good rock band? Let's take Def Leppard for example. They were flashy, they were smooth (well, most of the time), and they were loud. Coho like (or hate, depending on how you look at it) their flies the same way.

Nearly any weighted streamer with some flash or bright colors tied in will do the trick, though I've migrated to a few tried-and-trues. These include the Hannah Montana (a local pattern that casts about as well as a small dumbbell but catches the heck out of fish), the Intruder (best in electric-blue and fire-orange), and finally—insert sales pitch here—my own cherished creation, the Def Leppard. Whatever you use, you want it to have enough weight to get down fast. The Clearwater can be deep in the pools that

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salmon stage in, and even upstream casts with poorly-weighted flies can fail to get in the zone. For this reason, don't be afraid to use a sink-tip or even a full-sink line. Heck, add some split shot to the leader if you have to. It's as John Gierach once said: "One thing about the Alaskans: unlike the Scots, they fish for salmon as though they actually want to catch them, with sink-tips and lead." When in Rome...well, you know.

That being said, if you're a true Puritan of the fly, the breed that fishes nothing but split-cane and gut leaders and considers anything below the surface immoral, I don't think you'd have that hard of a time getting a Clearwater coho to take on the surface. I've had fish launch at streamers as soon as they hit the water and nearly wrench the rod from my hands. It can be done—you just gotta catch 'em in the right mood. As I write this, I find myself longing to try a Pollywog or a bass popper this fall.

Even the best streamers, tied and named after the best rock bands, can fail to produce. Once you've caught a few fish, the remaining members of the school get pretty cagey. At this juncture, it becomes a choice between waiting it out, finding another school, fishing for grayling, or switching to a bead rig. Personally, I choose the bead option, and have come to enjoy using a bright pink, 10 mm bead pegged above a #8-or-so octopus hook. Usually an 8- to 10-foot length of leader (6 feet of 20-pound-test mono attached to 18- to 24 inches of 2X tippet) between the hook and the indicator is sufficient, and a few BBs of split shot are necessary about 18 inches above the hook. If you get refusals, simply downsize your bead and try a more natural roe color. You might even intercept a zealous grayling.

On the Clearwater, the distinction between those who boat and those who wade is pretty stark. I myself subscribe to the latter club, and for the sake of self-assurance, of course I find it superior. For one thing, you earn your fish, and for another, you'll warm yourself up pretty quickly hiking against those spring flows. Granted, if you have a boat you'll be able to access more water more quickly, and probably see more salmon in a



Emmie moved away from the camera for a while to nail this hefty coho. © Joe Jackson

day than I will all season, and if you catch a few fish and spook the school, it doesn't really matter because you can just hop upstream to a fresh pod. Given the fragility of the Clearwater's silt and gravel substrates, please, for the love of all that is salmon, keep your speed down. I don't care if you're listening to Def Leppard and just got a new Johnson outboard; take care of what we have. Be courteous, watch out for other boats and the occasional sluggish merganser, and we'll all be hunky-dory.

Tributary fisheries like the Clearwater, where much of the sportfishing is catch-and-release, can become stages for ethics debates, but I'm not going to add my iron to that fire. Yes, the coho have come a long way to be here, and yes, they are working

hard to make the next generation of fish, but I justify my own actions as enjoying these salmon in the least intrusive way possible. This includes using only barbless, single hooks, using heavy lines and fly rods to limit fight times, wetting my hands when I handle fish, and returning them to the water as soon as possible. Heather Scannell assures me that the Clearwater has received no significant harm from catch-and-release, and if we all keep up responsible practices, it will stay that way and we'll have salmon for our grandchildren.

No one's saying you can't bonk your daily limit and throw them in the smoker, though.

At the end of an October day, at the end of a long and fruitful fishing season, the Clearwater is probably the hardest river you'll ever know to say goodbye to. Sure, by the time you get back to the truck in the campground parking lot, you can't feel your toes and you're seriously wondering if they've incurred a bit of frostbite; sure, all of your hand-tied Def Leppards are torn to shreds and your waders are glazed with salmon slime; and sure, your muscles are probably rioting against you for putting them through that mile-long hike against the current. But you remind yourself otherwise. Whatever this river takes, it's usually pretty good about giving back.

The wind picks up from the north and carries the first shards of Alaskan snow. You look up into it and wonder when it will start sticking, then you wonder how long the winter will be, and if this place will still be around to meet you on the other side. You smile as you put the fly rod away, because you know it will. A pair of sandhill cranes lumber overhead, their woody croaks echoing through air that seems to get colder by the second.

This is your last-chance stream—the sip of whiskey at the end of a glorious summer—and you sit quietly in the truck mulling it over as the heater hums to life. Then you turn out of the campground, heading due west into the growing blizzard, and you crank some Def Leppard.

*In addition to Def Leppard, Joe Jackson is a fan of blushed coho, boreal owls, and trophy-sized grayling, all of which the Clearwater offers in spades. He's written for Fish Alaska, The Drake, The Flyfish Journal, and Northwest Fly Fishing. For instructions on tying the Def Leppard streamer, check out this link: [bit.ly/2yjZFD9](http://bit.ly/2yjZFD9).*

Bringing another to hand. Barbless hooks, wetted hands, and quick handling ensure that these salmon will live to swim and spawn another day. © Emmie Jackson



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