

Tl'atii Na' fighting its way to the Pacific.
The Wrangells watch like kings to the west.

The ol' pro on the river she grew up on.

CRACKING the KLUTINA

Story by Joe Jackson
Photos by Emmie Jackson

Fighting a Klutina sockeye is a bit like playing tug-of-war with an unbroken colt. On one end of the line, you've got a perfectly formed salmonid still anodized with the luster of saltwater, weighing perhaps four- to eight pounds, and aided by a big push of glacial water to skew the odds perpetually in their favor. On the other end, you've got an angler charged on adrenaline and totally bewildered by the fact that they've hooked a fish at all. You can imagine the results of this equation: a negative outcome ushers forth what we'll call "colorful automotive vocabulary," while a landed fish equates to well-deserved whooping and hollering on the bank.

It was a mix of both for me on a drizzly June morning not long ago. I had one fish on the stringer and another two that were hooked but got off laughably close to the bank. Still, the one was good enough; more than I'd expected, actually.

The Klutina has always been a tough nut to crack, for me. Some days you win; most others you spectacularly lose. You could call it my home turf being that my in-laws live within jogging distance of both bridges, and—now that I think

about it—it was both the first river in Alaska I attempted to pronounce and officially cast a line into. Called Tl'atii Na' by the indigenous Ahtna Athabascan people, the Klutina begins as million-year-old glaciers in the deep Chugach mountains before accumulating in Klutina Lake and dumping twenty-six miles later into the Copper. In its lower reaches, the Klutina is an emerald rogue that bulldozes chunks of granite the size of trucks and maintains the general appearance of an absurd place to cast a line. My first sockeye came from these howling waters a full three years after I started trying for them, and its raw power mirrored that of the river's and scared the bejesus out of me in a way from which I haven't fully recovered. Naturally, this kept me coming back, even as the place spiraled into the hopelessly enigmatic.

Klutina sockeyes are as tough as they come. They spend their formative years in the Gulf of Alaska where they dodge salmon sharks and gillnets, and they spend the prime of their lives swimming up one of the wildest rivers in the state: the Copper. Part of their mystique comes from the unpredictable nature of their run. Some years the peak occurs in the first week of June, others it might be mid-July. You can be fishing a bonanza or a ghost-town depending on the day; heck, depending on



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the hour. This is consistent with salmon fishing, of course, but on the Klutina the dichotomy seems enhanced. The only count evidence anglers or dipnetters have comes from the Miles Lake sonar, which the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) posits is about a two-week journey from Chitina and perhaps another two weeks from the Klutina. Both figures, of course, come with ADF&G's disclaimer of being "highly variable." I swear, that could be the motto of the Klutina.

Yes, there are far larger and more predictable sockeye runs on both the Kenai and in Bristol Bay, so if that's what you're after, head there. I won't complain.

Mostly, you just say a Hail Mary and do your best to match the traditional run times (mid-to-late June), then you fish like hell in the in-between. The best Klutina sockeye angler possesses, as Tom McGuane once said was characteristic of a good steelhead fisherman, "A room-temperature IQ and a strong arm." You make cast after cast after cast, and while I haven't counted mine to determine if Klutina sockeyes are the fish of a thousand casts (or more), I know it's a respectable number. In some sockeye fisheries, you can see the fish you're casting to, which is helpful since 99% of these fish are caught by literally drifting a hook through their slightly open mouths. On the Klutina, however, you're essentially blind. You flip and floss for these fish, ticking hunks of lead against the bottom and hoping to intercept an open maw, not knowing if the pods are ten feet out or five. The best casts and drifts, therefore, are the most mechanical; the kind that can be repeated over and over.

Some people use fly rods for this job, but since flinging that much lead with an 8-weight feels about as wrong as towing a stock trailer with a Lamborghini, I go for a spinning setup instead. The rod model doesn't matter (so long as it's medium or medium-heavy and between seven- and nine feet long), but the reel certainly does. Klutina sockeyes won't let you get away with a cheap drag. Make sure the drag is smooth, the reel well oiled, and loaded with a braided line of around 30-pound-test. I like braid because I can hold more of it on a reel, and it cuts the water far better than monofilament. The only problem with braid is that it's more "tanglesome" than a rat's nest, and if you're not careful it'll give you the conniption to end all conniptions. For



Filling a couple of limits before breakfast. Notice the seam in the background below where the island provides a current break. From here to the bank is the fish-holding zone.



A good sockeye fisherman has what Tom McGuane once said of good steelhead fishermen: "A room-temperature IQ and a strong arm."



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this reason, I make my leaders out of mono.

Start with a heavy-duty barrel swivel. Using a Palomar knot, tie in a 12-inch section of 25-pound-test monofilament. On the free end, tie in a lead cinch (again with a Palomar). Add about 30 inches of 25-pound-test mono to this (tied in with an Improved Clinch knot), and secure an egg-yarn fly or a George Cook Popsicle using either an egg loop knot or another Improved Clinch knot. The knots are important because the Klutina eats a lot of tackle. The Palomars keep the upper part of my rig secure because they are stronger than the Improved Clinch knots. This is ideal because I'd rather lose the hook than the lead cinch. Once that's done, you can tie the whole arrangement to your braided mainline using another Palomar.



The idea of flossing for sockeye with something like this is that your lead gets the rig down to the bottom, while your fly is just buoyant enough to hover at approximately fish-level. Given that the Klutina is a furious artery of glacial silt, you can be sure that the fish will be running close to the bank where the current is somewhat tamed. This is where the lead cinch comes in handy. Depending on the location I'm fishing—current speed, water depth—I can adjust the amount of weight I'm using simply by clipping off lead and disposing of it appropriately. The cinches take either 3/16" or 1/4" pencil lead (which can be bought by the roll), and I usually start off with a 2 1/2- or 3-inch piece of 1/4". That's as specific as I can be given that I've never taken the time to weigh these. After a few

A limit of sockeyes. There are few things better.

casts, if I'm bumping the bottom too sharply or getting hung up, I can systematically clip small chunks of lead away until I'm just grazing the riverbed. You'll want to make these adjustments sooner rather than later, unless you would like to make a donation to what I call the Klutina Lost & Found. Again, you just want to tickle the bottom, and the amount of weight it takes to do this will vary with each run you fish. Take the time to get it right and then stick with the system. This is what I consider to be the most important factor in targeting these fish. After that, it becomes a simple matter of putting that strong arm to use;

casting to about 11 o'clock and letting the rig drift to about 2 o'clock.

You're not looking for staging pools so much as spots where the fish slow down to catch their collective breath. These areas are usually in current seams; for example, below island breaks or large rocks/logjams that obstruct the normal flow of things. I do not recommend moving around a lot to find your perfect spot. It doesn't exist, for one thing, and for another, your time is better spent staying put and making repeated drifts. Pick a spot, plant your boots, and hopefully you've got a good imagination or have invested in a decent audiobook because you'll be there awhile. Slower water on the insides of bends is good, too.

There are some good access points below both bridges (that is, the Richardson and Old Richardson ones), and if you happen to stay in some of the campgrounds flanking the river, you'll have what is essentially private water. I tend to stage operations from the Old Rich' bridge because, provided you stay in the easement that flanks the river, you can go all the way down to the mouth. There's no better time over another to target these fish; they come in pulses at 5 a.m. and they come in pulses at 5 p.m., along with any time in between. I generally get to the river as early as I can, not only to fish in the cooler weather, but to beat the circus that can materialize during normal business hours.

After a while of drifting over rocks and feeling like you're running your rod tip over a washboard, there'll be a fish. I wish there was a better way to describe the sensation, but you'll know it when you feel it. It's safe



A typical specimen from the Klutina. It's best to clonk these fish (provided they're hooked legally), bleed them out as soon as possible, and construct a "crib" out of rocks to rest them in.

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for them. Just like that. Kapow! Your reel might squeal and if you are of sound body and mind, you'll bring something out of the gloom that's as precious as the copper that was once mined here. The chrome sockeye is a handsome fish, with a gunmetal back that fades to glacial-blue flanks not unlike the water in which it swims.

Remember that to retain a fish, it must be hooked in the mouth. According to regulations, "A fish unintentionally hooked elsewhere than its mouth must be released immediately." When the run is really going, you might foul-hook a few, but otherwise I've found the length and buoyancy of my rig to be just right for catching fish in the lips. Most sockeyes in the Klutina will be between four- and seven pounds, and you can rest assured that they'll be plump and delicious when served sashimi-style or grilled low and slow over charcoal. Check ADF&G regulations, of course, but in most years the daily limit is three fish.

While you're in town for the sockeye parade, stop at Tok Thai in Glennallen or Nummy's in Copper Center. Crack open an IPA and watch the sky ignite as the sun slinks behind the Wrangells. Enjoy this majestic valley beyond the material bounties it provides. Last thing: Be kind to the river. Lest I sound like a petulant killjoy, I'm not touting these fish so that I or others can pick up larger quantities of monofilament snarls or crushed Mountain Dew cans. Pick up after yourselves. Give the Tl'atii Na' the respect it deserves. It's been here longer than any of us have, and it will be fighting seaward long after we're gone.

A few days after that drizzly June morning when I found out that I knew a lot more swear words than I thought I did, my wife

to set the hook firmly on any stop in the line. Most fish will be hooked toward the end of your drift.

When you hook a sockeye, buckle up. The first headshake will be relatively tame, so much that you might think you've hooked the bottom again. Then all hell will promptly break loose. I'm not speaking ill of Alaska's other fighting fish, you understand, but I have yet to encounter a more hard-fighting specimen than the Klutina sockeye (Klutina kings are a different story). They sear upstream like Ferraris and leap like missiles bound for low orbit. They make you instantly forget the drudgery of waiting



An improvised stringer and the sole catch of the day. As the run picks up, you might catch merely ones and twos. But if/when it hits full force, be prepared for non-stop action as the schools pass through.

Emmie and I had what I'll call a "cosmic" morning of fishing. It was one of those early July days that you take a million pictures of to remember come February. The sun was bright as a blowtorch, the sky blue like an old Ford, and the salmon were running, alright. By 6 a.m. we had two full limits, all thick fish the color of steel. This was just about the time that a new wave of anglers was coming down the trail, and they either nodded at the fish or quickened their pace, enlivened by the evidence. An older gentleman at the back stopped and smiled at me. He was carrying a fly rod and wearing a vest and dopey fisherman's hat. I had the fleeting hope that when I got to be his age, I'd be able to spend my mornings tottering down a goat trail toward the idea of something anadromous.

"Such a blessing," he said, and there in the dawn with my wife wrestling a stringer of sockeyes behind me, I couldn't agree more.

Like the sockeye that swim in it, the Klutina effectively turns Joe Jackson into a zombie come June and July. He especially enjoys fishing it with his wife, Emmie, but will go solo when she wants to sleep in.

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