

Spawning Revelations

by Loren Bell

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MONDAY: Traffic jam at Margaret Creek fish pass. Thousands of horny humpies fight the current, driven by some primal urge to push upstream against all odds. Gill to tail — they are stacked back to the ocean, waiting hours for the chance to kick a few feet closer to the spawning ground.

We are still unclear as to what signals salmon to swim to fresh water after a year or two in the ocean. Yet they do, as they have done for thousands of generations. They do not always return to the site of their birth, that part is a myth, but many do — compelled to journey upstream by the ticking of their biological clock. Do some decide not to spawn? Concerned about overpopulation, do they choose to live a hedonistically long, childless life roaming the ocean: anadromous anarchists, on the road less traveled? After all, spawning is a one-way journey. The salmon are dying from the moment they start up the path to parenthood. Without eating, some may travel hundreds of miles while their bodies deteriorate. They consume themselves from the inside for the energy to keep moving. Once they find a gravel bar and a suitable mate, they drop their load, and die.

How do they choose their partner while fighting the current and dodging hungry bears? Do they scan the crowd, looking for love, kicking their stride up a notch to catch a promising set of fins? “So ... first time running ... the Margaret Spawn? Me too! ... I’m not worried about time ... I just want ... to finish without walking ... Next year I plan to run Naha Creek ... I hear that’s a fast spawn ... Say, you’re cute ... what’s your name? ... ”

Even without the added stress of bear’s teeth, jagged rocks and waterfalls, it is hard to find a woman to die for.

TUESDAY: The daily flow of tourists begins again. With their practical sneakers and digital cameras, they transform this intimate corner of the woods into a Disneyland exhibit. This is just another attraction to check off their Ultimate-Alaska-Adventure itinerary. Ride a floatplane! See bears catch fish! Experience Alaska ... The tour even comes with an “I rode in an Alaskan floatplane” certificate to prove it to the folks back home.

These same people consider themselves desert explorers after riding to the bottom of the Grand Canyon on a mule train. They have the certificate to prove that too.

I ignore them for as long as possible, staring into the river of fish below. We have not had rain in three days and the waterfall is impassible. Occasionally, a salmon stumbles upon the current spilling out of the fish ladder and kicks his way to the resting pools above. The ladder was installed in the late-’90s to boost the commercial fisheries by increasing available spawning grounds. The fishing industry is still on the decline, and many locals have turned to harvesting tourist dollars instead. The soul of southeast Alaska is reluctantly evolving.

“Where are the bears?” one woman wearing a head scarf and waterproof mascara (thank God) asks, visibly disappointed. “Are there usually bears here at this time?” She is probing – hoping I will admit that I never see bears at this time, and that her tour guide has ripped her off. Arguably, that is the case regardless.

Instead, I offer some joke about the bears ignoring my memo on appearance times. Tourists love that kind of sarcasm. We both laugh, for different reasons. Everybody wins.

WEDNESDAY: Fat Albert, a regular, wanders upstream coming into view around the bend. The 400-pound black bear rarely exerts more effort than necessary. While his contemporaries dart along the bank, chasing the salmon in the eddies, Fat Albert drapes himself over a rock in the middle of the creek and waits. The fish soon forget he is there. An exhausted pink salmon, which ducks into the eddy to gain a moment’s respite from the uphill battle, is plucked expertly from the water in Fat Albert’s dripping teeth. If the fish is female, she is dispatched quickly, belly slit open, head bitten off. Albert slowly gets drunk off roe shots with a brain chaser. The males he inevitably catches get tossed back whole, bleeding to death from the wounds in their side.

Little Orphan Ernie, a first-year cub left motherless by trophy hunters, watches Albert from his perch in a tree on the far bank. Without a mom to teach him how to fish, he survives off the leftovers of others. He will not likely live through the winter on his own, and the biologists have told me that no other bear will adopt him. Still, he tries. He does not lay awake at night bemoaning his lot in life, or begrudging Fat Albert’s opulence.

THURSDAY: Today’s tourists have been here for five minutes out of their 45 allotted at the bear viewing platform, and already they are bored. They have worked all year for this one week of vacation, and standing around bearless was not part of their plan.

Although there is spawning going on down there at this very moment, they were sold on bears. Fish sex is no substitute. They thumb through the maps and bear facts on my table, making small talk with the fellow cruise ship passengers about the “must sees” of the Inside Passage.

Actually, there is a bear sleeping in the tree above them, but they never look up. They come from a world where everything is handed to them.

On the creek banks below the platform, the million maggot march boils inexorably over the piles of week-old salmon carcasses. Only polished yellow bones remain in the wake of the writhing mass. The maggots are slow but thorough, consuming the seconds that even the scavengers will not touch. It is a tidy finish, which hopefully will help with the smell around here. We need rain.

For four weeks now, I have stood through all types of weather staring into the waters below, trying to understand what it must feel like to spawn. Watching the silvery bodies performing the timeless race of survival, I imagine struggling against the current mindlessly, over one obstacle after another, going until you can fight no more. It must be like that itch we cannot help but scratch: It feels so damn good to destroy ourselves.

FRIDAY: A large, clean-shaven man wearing a freshly pressed North Face rain jacket leans

against the rail next to me. He is a stockbroker from New York, he tells me despite my not asking. The week of unseasonable sunshine has finally melted into a light drizzle. The bears have finished breakfast and left. The salmon never leave.

“Those fish are pretty dumb,” The North Face jacket says. “All this effort wasted for what? To die up there ... You always think of nature as being efficient, but this defies logic. Do they know it’s a dead-end journey?”

We watch the salmon struggle for a moment before I reply carefully: “I once read that the average person only lives one year beyond his or her retirement, regardless of how old he or she is.”

Loren Bell lives in Flagstaff. This is [his] first piece for the Gazette.