

Valley Angler

Return of Salmon Fishing In Maine

by Bill Thompson

Once they came by the thousands to just about every New England river and stream that emptied into the Atlantic. By the end of the American Industrial Revolution the great migrations of Atlantic Salmon were just a memory in all but a few systems. One of the very few rivers that continued to have a sizable return was the Penobscot River in Maine. In 1830 it was reported that as many as 50,000 to 75,000 salmon returned to the Penobscot, the second largest return in the United States. In recent times between 1,000 to 4,000 have made the ascent. For many years the Penobscot was the only river in the United States that had enough of a return to allow salmon fishing.

Angling for salmon on the Penobscot has a long and storied history. In 1880 a Mr. J. F. Leavitt and the famous fly rod maker H. L. Leonard reported catching the first Penobscot salmon on a fly. In 1883 the first salmon club in the United States was founded on the river. In 1912 the tradition of presenting the first salmon of the year to the President was begun. That tradition was discontinued in 1954 due to the amount of pollution in the river. The tradition was reinstated in 1981, but was discontinued once again in 1993 due to the declining population of the salmon. George Bush was the last President to receive a salmon. In 2003 the return was down to almost nothing and soon all fishing was stopped. This September once again anglers will have a chance to fish for salmon on the Penobscot. The season will be limited to September 15th to October 15th and all fish caught must be released immediately in the water. A special license will be required and they will be available on line by mid August at www.informe.org/moses. A limited number of dealers will also be selling the licenses. It is hoped that all anglers will purchase a license to support the on going effort to protect these rare fish.

This event will have more significance to anglers than just having a chance at an Atlantic Salmon. This will probably be the last time to fish the river the way your father and grandfather did. In the near future two dams on the Penobscot are slated for removal. Once this is accomplished the river will be changed dramatically and all of the famous historical pools will disappear.

As usual I am always the last one to learn about something new. I was unaware of this opportunity until a few days ago when a customer came into the shop and asked if I new the pattern for the Wringer fly. I couldn't remember, but I did know that it was tied for Penobscot salmon and named for the Wringer Pool. I asked him why he would want a fly pattern for a river without salmon. He quickly explained the new season and I started to make plans to take part. I did find the pattern for him, although it took some digging. If you never have had the chance to fish for salmon before and at a bargain price to boot I would suggest that you start making plans right away. Dig out that old Wheatly trap door fly box and dust off that old salmon rod and head up to Bangor this fall.

A very good friend just gave me a wonderful old Hardy St, John salmon reel. This reel will always be one of my most treasured possessions. I think I might string that old reel up with a salmon line and give the Penobscot a try. What a great way to bring that old reel back to life.

See you on the river.