



## A Tale of Two Fishermen

*Two fly rodders, a rookie and a pro, make their first attempt at taking Lake Michigan tributary salmon.*

By JOHN BETH

Salmon snagging is no longer legal in Wisconsin; it's history, water over the riffles, so to speak. Unfortunately, though, a good number of fishermen continue to believe the rationale underlying the folly that continued on Lake Michigan tributary streams for so long — that salmon, once in their migratory, breeding condition, could not be caught by anglers using conventional hook-and-line angling methods.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Anglers on the Pacific Coast and the Atlantic Coast had been catching migratory salmon in rivers and streams, using conventional angling gear, for years before the first salmon was ever planted in Lake Michigan.

It is true that salmon, once they enter tributary streams to spawn, do little if any feeding.

They do, however, take lures and baits. What triggers the strike reaction in these fish, as in many other species of fish, both in the Great Lakes and in our warmer, inland lakes, need not be hunger. Curiosity, aggression, or reflex may be the cause, but whatever the reason is, it is really not important to the angler as long as he knows the fish will take his bait.

I have many friends who enjoy catching king salmon in Lake Michigan tributary streams each fall. Still, many anglers are reluctant to even try this type of fishing. Only recently I was able to convince two more fishermen that salmon in our Lake Michigan tributaries offer one of the most exciting angling opportunities available in Wisconsin.

Mike Hansen had never caught a salmon in a Lake Michigan tributary water. This may not sound unusual, except for the fact that Mike is best

known and respected as the DNR's Great Lakes Sport Fishing Specialist. In his position in the DNR, Mike is largely responsible for the fact that this type of angling is even available to state outdoorsmen.

A few years back I walked into a cubicle at the Madison DNR headquarters to meet the replacement for another old fishing buddy, Chuck Krueger (one of the best yarn fishermen I ever met). Mike was sitting behind what once was Chuck's desk. After introducing myself, I immediately tried the "do they bite?" question on him.

Fortunately, in this somewhat serious, initial meeting, Mike was quick to share information on his father's success in fishing

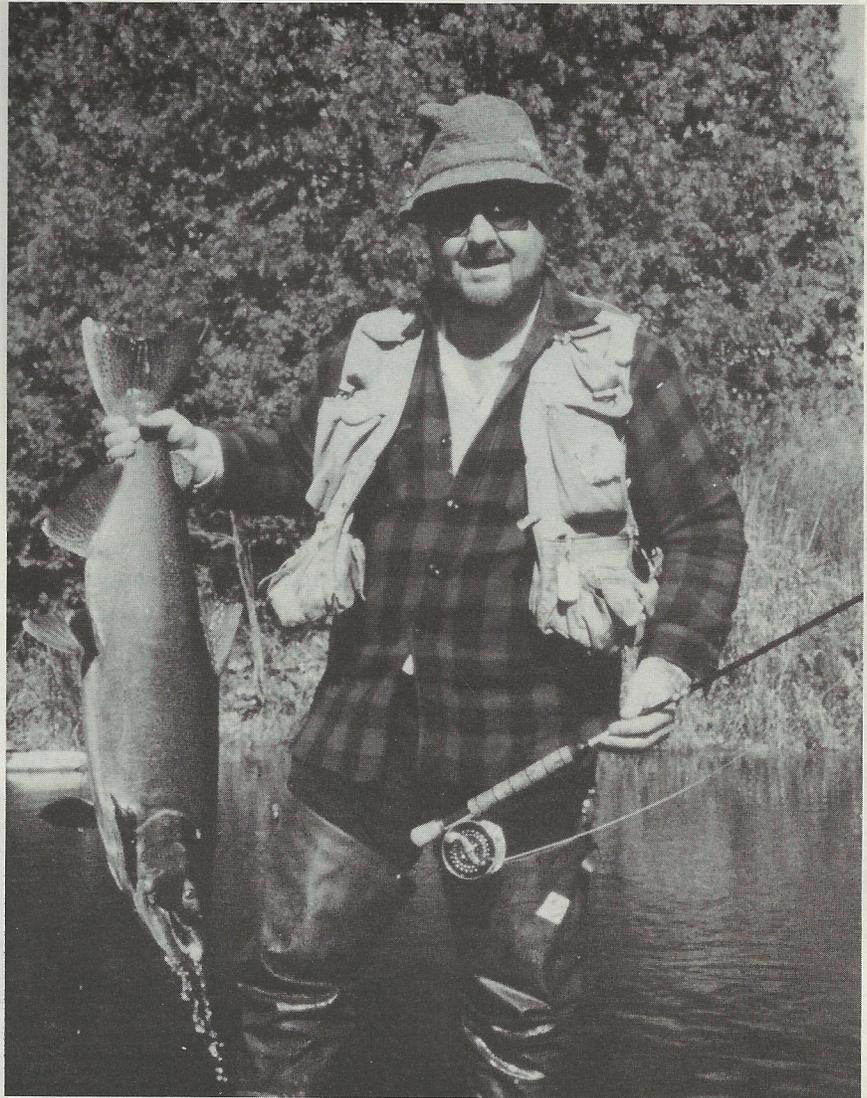
*Above: Gary Berger, a world famous fishing author and video producer, plays a king salmon on a Lake Michigan tributary stream.*

salmon with a fly rod in Alaska. I felt I was halfway home already. He was also well aware of the controversy surrounding tributary snagging.

In the year that followed, Mike and I spoke at length of the many aspects of the fishery, and I finally decided he had been doing enough paper work and needed to enjoy the fruits of his labors. Instead of being waist-deep in paperwork, I told him, he would look better waist-deep in a river. I offered him the use of a fly rod, reel, and flies, and told him I would take him fishing when he could find the time to go.

So it was that one cool autumn morning near Lake Michigan he picked up one of my fly rods and, smiling at me, admitted, "I really don't know the first thing about this, John." I instructed him that when the king grabs the bait and takes off, "Don't drop the rod, don't fall down, and, by all means, don't get nervous." Mike's face tightened and then gave way to a full-fledged smile. "Don't worry," he assured, "you've already made me nervous."

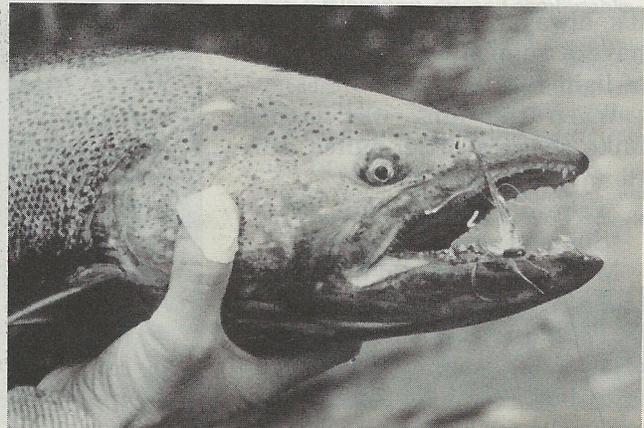
Our day started out filled with anticipation. Mike was patient and understanding as I showed him the fine points of using the equipment and how to present the bait. I told him to not waste time by casting to anything but dominant male salmon. These fish are readily evident in the clear shallow water, where they can be seen aggressively trying



*Author John Beth is a long-time advocate of tributary trout and salmon fishing. Over the last several years he has written about this type of fishing and extolled its virtues at many fishing seminars. He has caught hundreds of trout and salmon in Lake Michigan tributaries on conventional fishing gear.*

*Gary Borger Photo*

*Left: Gary Borger muscles a king salmon during a fall trip with the author. Right: The big salmon is finally subdued. The bandage on Borger's thumb is evidence of the care that must be taken when removing hooks from a salmon's toothy mouth.*





*Flash-a-bou streamers are some of Beth's favorite fall patterns for king salmon. A variety of brightly colored spoons and plugs fished with spinning gear will also take migratory salmon in tributaries.*

to obtain or defend females.

Mike retained the conserved, scientific demeanor I had expected of him throughout his tutelage. Later that morning, however, after we had separated a short distance to fish, I heard his voice, clearly excited, over the rush of the river and the splash of his first king salmon. As the fish ripped down the rifles, tight on Mike's line, hysteria and elation became one.

"Hold on!" I yelled. "Keep the rod tip up! Get back slack line when you can! Keep it away from that tree on the left! Follow it downstream! Watch your footing! Wait 'till I get below you with a net! Don't try to land it too soon! RELAX!!! DON'T PANIC! . . . Have fun!"

I know he never heard a word I said. But I knew he wouldn't — it's always like that when you have a salmon on the other end of light tackle.

When the king was landed, Mike shook a little, puffed a little, and smiled a lot.

"Take my picture with it?"

"Sure," I said.

Mike's fish was lip-hooked; he had already learned how to avoid foul hooking salmon in this situation. Foul hooking is a frustrating but common occurrence, especially for beginners who drift

a fly or bait through a congregation of kings and simply wait to feel a "bump" on their line. Un-

fortunately, all too often that bump is caused by a fish swimming over the line or leader, thereby falsely indicating a strike. The inexperienced angler will then set his hook, invariably hooking the fish in the fin or in the body.

Controlling a foul-hooked salmon is a ridiculous task at best and will not only waste fishing time, it will spook potential "hitters." The easiest way to avoid foul hooking is to simply sight-fish for a specific king and exclusively give it your attention, never taking your eyes off your fly or bait. Much like hunting, sight-fishing demands careful stalking, and in this case, good casting and line control, and concentration. This allows you to see exactly when to set the hook, and besides, if you deny yourself

## PACIFIC SALMON ON THE FLY?



The snagging mentality prevalent over the last decade here in the Lake States has caused many anglers to believe that Pacific salmon cannot be caught fairly by conventional sport fishing methods. But to the thousands of anglers who fish from California to Alaska and fair hook hundreds of thousands of salmon each year on such equipment, this type of thinking is ludicrous. Pacific salmon will take a fly or a lure, and will take them quite well. In Alaska, I've had all five species of Pacific salmon rush to grab the fly from as far away as fifteen feet. I've found

the kings, silvers (coho), and pinks of the Great Lakes to be just as eager.

But like salmon everywhere, the fish of the Great Lakes are spooky and will not take a lure or fly if they've been chased around and flogged with every snagging device known. They have to be fished to as you'd fish to any wild fish. Stay well back and out of sight as much as possible. If the fish become nervous from your casting, stop and wait until they settle down before casting again. Fish the dawn and evening hours when the salmon are more active and are less likely to see you.

Give our Great Lakes salmon a fair try, and when a 25-pound king rushes your fly, seizing it like a terrier grabbing a rat, and then dashes off 100 yards downstream in wild-eyed abandon, you won't believe the old snagger's tale either!

— Gary A. Borger

## LIKE FATHER . . .

As I drifted the large streamer fly across the current in front of the seemingly indifferent salmon, my thoughts drifted away. I recalled my boyhood when I listened to my dad's stories of fishing salmon in Alaska with a fly rod. A series of old black-and-white photos and a nine-foot bamboo fly rod with a broken mid-section were testaments to his adventures and fuel for my imagination. I would often dream, as I grew up, whether I would ever get to experience the thrill of catching a salmon on a fly as my father had. He would not live to see me realize my dreams, yet I wondered how the scene before me compared to his experiences in Alaska.

The great fish acted intimidated by the gaudy fly, feint-



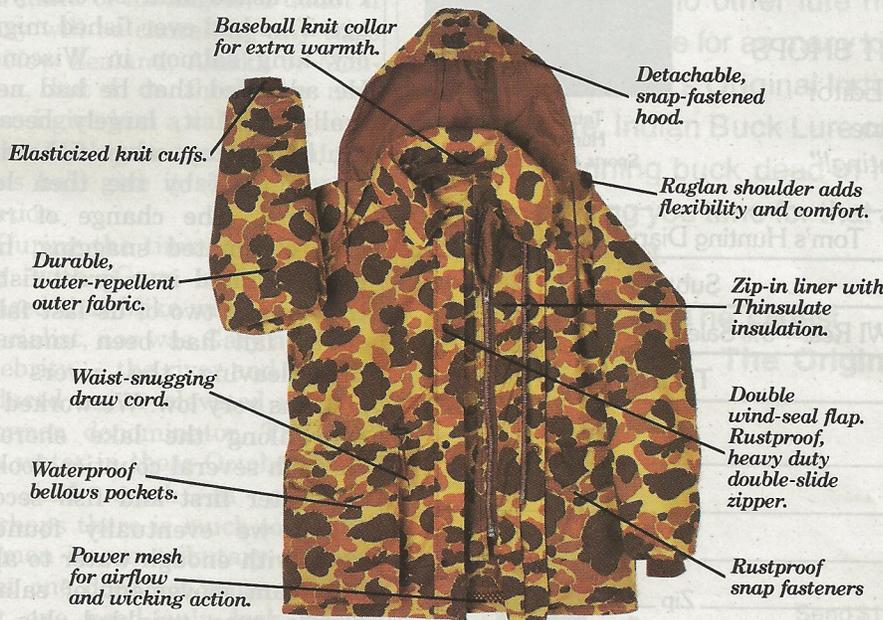
ing and moving away whenever it approached too closely. I had caught many salmon in Lake Michigan and always been impressed by their power and ferocity, yet now this one seemed meek and timid. It struck me how spectacular the scene was, as dozens of salmon were engaged in the spawning ritual. I smiled to think that the young salmon which had been stocked when I first started working for the DNR in 1984 were now full-grown

adults attempting to spawn in the Kewaunee River in 1987. One of the greatest spectacles in all of nature was actually being played out in a rural Wisconsin stream, and only John and I were there to see it.

The salmon struck my fly so deftly and quickly that I nearly fell into the stream head over heels trying to set the hook. I scrambled off of the bank into the stream channel and began to play the fish as John coached me on. In an instant I was hooked on fly fishing for salmon and knew why John wrote so passionately about it. I also sensed that there was not much difference between me at this moment in a Wisconsin stream and my father 45 years earlier in an Alaskan stream.

— Mike Hansen

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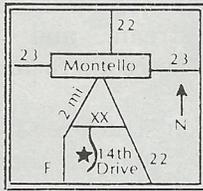
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seeing the king crush your fly in its jaws, you have cheated yourself out of the most exciting visual element of this sport.

Since our initial fishing trip, Mike has improved his technique and has acquired a fine rod, reel, flies, waders, and all the other equipment indicating a fisherman who, himself, has been hooked.

But if Mike, who was an inexperienced river fisherman, can get hooked on this type of angling, what about veteran fishermen who have never tried tributary salmon angling? That's where the second angler in this story enters the picture.

If it can be said of any fly fisher that he has "done it all," Wisconsin's Gary Borger would come as close to fitting that description as anyone I know. Gary works as a college professor, but in fishing circles is known for his fly-fishing articles and books, producing fishing videos, and for his innovative fly and other fishing equipment designs.

So, how would a man of this reputation, who has fished the finest waters in the world, respond to the opportunity of fishing a Lake Michigan tributary? He found the idea quite exciting. I had asked him several years ago if he had ever fished migratory king salmon in Wisconsin. He admitted that he had never really tried it, largely because he, like many other fishermen, was put off by the then legal snagging. The change of rules that eliminated snagging, however, resulted in a great fishing trip for the two of us last fall.

The fall had been unusually dry, leaving the rivers and streams very low. We worked our way along the lake shoreline through several counties, looking for water first and fish second. When we eventually found a river with enough water to allow upstream movement of salmon, Gary's eyes twinkled, his lips tightened, and his favorite expression told it all.

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"Holy cow! Look at those fish!"

Watching him adapt to "my" type of salmon fishing was a treat. He casts with clockwork precision and impeccable style, even though the heavy salmon flies on what I would have guessed to be a bit undergunned 6-weight rod might have given the average caster problems. He moved like a heron in the river and carefully approached each new fish-holding area.

For the next few days we stalked the river's salmon. It was always a treat to hear his fly reel drag screeching, followed by an excited "Holy cow!" each time he hooked a fish. His enthusiasm for this type of angling, considering his vast experience, was amazing.

Gary commented on how the river environment, water conditions, and fish behavior compared to his regular salmon fishing areas in Alaska. With the incredible abundance of fish and rivers there, it is understandably a bit more spectacular. Still, many of our own tributary rivers and streams have a singular beauty all their own. Each river has its own charm, mysteries, challenges and rewards, and each etches its own memories in the mind of an angler. I doubt if Gary will be cancelling any trips to New Zealand, Alaska or Montana, but I do think the next time I give him a call about some Lake Michigan trout or salmon runs he'll give it serious consideration.

During the times I spent fishing with Gary and Mike, I sensed that Mike was not a DNR specialist, nor was Gary a fishing celebrity — the river and the fish reduced us, or elevated us, to a common denominator. There on the water in those October hours we had much in common. Perhaps there is much to fishing salmon in our tributary streams that one does not sense at first, but one need only look closer, longer and deeper, and into themselves to find it. 🍷



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