

Salmon Fishing Terms in British Columbia*

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THIS PAPER PROPOSES to discuss the technical vocabulary peculiar to the sport of salmon fishing in the rivers and coastal waters of southern British Columbia. There are five species of salmon found in British Columbia waters, four of these much sought after by sports fishermen; as a result, a distinctive and colourful vocabulary has arisen in this area of English-speaking Canada. Each species has several common names as well as the biological Latin one, often differing from the terms by which it is known immediately to the south in the state of Washington, or to the north in Alaska; these names are frequently of local Indian origin. In addition, there are numerous names within the species that, to the devotee of the art, indicate the age, size, or state of maturity of the fish. At least two of these terms have an ancient history in the sport of angling; their exact etymology is obscure, but cognates are to be found in other northern Indo-European languages. In addition to fish names, the sport has spawned a variety of specialized methods and tackle, all carefully and specifically named, and in large part unknown to the rest of English-speaking North America.

As can be expected, there are specific differences among the various forms of Canadian and American English. The fact of such differences in the lexical spectrum can be underscored by the unique ethnolinguistic paradigm exhibited by British Columbians in respect to the sub-culture associated with salmon fishing. Indeed, such lexical differences not only provide an interesting example of variation across the isogloss boundaries already established by the American-Canadian border, but also serve as an example of western Canadian English differences from other English-speaking areas within Canada itself.

Atlantic and Pacific salmon are both of the family *Salmonidae*, but while the Atlantic salmon and the several species of trout found in the Pacific north-west all belong to the genus *Salmo*, the Pacific salmon is genus *Onchorhynchus*, so called because of the characteristic hooked nose developed during spawning. There are five species of *Onchorhynchus* found in British Columbia waters: *sockeye* (*O. nerka*),

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coho (*O. kisutch*), *chinook* (*O. tshawytscha*), *pink* (*O. gorbuscha*), and *Chum* (*O. keta*).

O. keta, which is fished only commercially because it will neither rise to a fly nor take a lure, is known in British Columbia as *chum*. The name comes from the Chinook Jargon word *tzum*, meaning "mixed colours, spots or stripes." The fish is also known as *dog salmon*, possibly because of the very large teeth developed in breeding males, or perhaps because it was once used principally as dog food in some areas. This unattractive connotation has led to its being marketed for human consumption as *silverbright* salmon. (A similar advertising approach arose in the past from the fact that the flesh of the *chum* is white, rather than the esteemed pink or red that one expects in salmon; one enterprising Victoria cannery operator advertised to good effect in the East that his salmon was "guaranteed not to turn pink in the can.") In the Pacific Coast States, but rarely in British Columbia, the *chum* is also referred to as *qualla*, from a Salishan word *kw'aluz*, meaning "striped."

Of the four species of salmon that are game fish, the most remarkable in many ways is the *pink*. This fish has the shortest life span and fastest growth rate of all the Pacific salmon, maturing and spawning as it does in only two years, at which time the male develops a large hump on his back—hence the other name by which the *pink* salmon is known, *humpback* or *humpie*.

The *coho*, called *silver salmon* in the United States, is probably the best known species of these fighting fish. The name is thought to be of native origin, but the etymology is obscure. Not so obscure is the derivation of *blueback*, the name applied to young *coho* in the late spring of their second year or early in their third; at this time, these salmon—which must still weigh under five pounds, the dividing line between a *blueback* and a *coho*—have bright blue backs and bright red flesh. Other stages in the life-cycle of the *coho* are called *grilse* and *jack*, but since these terms are also used in referring to *chinook* and *sockeye*, discussion of them will be deferred for the moment.

The *chinook* goes by many names. *Chinook* itself is an adoption of a Chehalis word *chnuku*. The fish is also called *chinook* in the states of Washington, Oregon, and California, though it is also frequently known there as *quinnat*, also from a Salishan word *t'kwinat*; the immature winter fish is called *blackmouth* in these areas. The wide spread of the name *quinnat* on the west coast obviously represents a cultural and linguistic borrowing diffusion beyond the geographical distribution of the original Salish groups situated on rivers with cyclical salmon runs, and is reminiscent of similar coastal diffusion of other items co-opted by Chinook Jargon and from there borrowed back into both English dialects and widely differing Amerindian languages of the northwest coast.

In Alaska, the chinook is called *king salmon*. In British Columbia, the chinook is commonly called *spring*, because unlike the other species it frequently starts spawning in late spring and reaches a peak in early autumn when the others are just beginning. *Wintersprings* are *chinook* (or *springs*) caught in certain feeding areas in the winter. To add to the confusion of the travelling fisherman (or *saltchucker*—*chuck* is a Chinook Jargon word derived from Nootka *ch'a'ak* “fresh water”), spring-run Atlantic salmon are sometimes called *springs* or *springers*. And what angler after Pacific salmon has not dreamed of catching that monarch of fish, the mighty *tyee*? The word comes through Chinook Jargon from Nootka *taiyi*, and can be glossed as “chief,” “boss,” “king”—anything of a superior order. Superior indeed they are, as a *chinook* must weigh over 30 pounds to qualify for this title.

The most interesting name of all belongs to the *sockeye*. This species, known in Alaska as *red salmon* and on the Columbia River as *blueback*, gets its common name by folk-etymology from Coast Salish *suk-kegh* “red fish,” probably because of its colour at spawning. A type of landlocked or residual *sockeye*, at one time thought to be a species of trout, is found in many of the lakes of the interior of British Columbia. This is the *kokanee* or *kickaninny*; the name is derived from Interior Salish *kikinee* meaning “little red fish” which it is sometimes called in English, as well as *silver*, *silver trout*, and just plain *redfish*.

As a salmon goes through the stages of its life-cycle, various names indicate its size and state of maturity. All of these terms have a long history in the language of English-speaking anglers, and at least two have developed new meanings in the course of their immigration across the Atlantic and Canada to the west coast. When a young salmon is first hatched and has the yolk-sac still attached to it, it is called an *alevin* /əliˈjvɪn/, an adoption of French *alevin* /alvɛ̃/ from OF *alever* “to raise, rear” derived from Latin *ad* + *levāre* “raise.” A little later, the young fish are *fry*, though some dictionaries define this term as young fish just hatched, apparently ignoring, or ignorant of, the *alevin* stage. *Fry*, in this sense of very young salmon, first appears in Late Middle English (the earliest entry in the OED is for 1389) as *fȳ*, meaning originally “seed” or “offspring,” although the Anglo-Latin *frium* of the thirteenth century may have had the same meaning. Anglo-Norman had *frie*, *fry* “spawn” as a variant of OF *froi* “spawn,” but the word “fry” is thought to be of Germanic origin in light of the ON *frió*, *freó*, *fræ*, “seed” and Gothic **fraiw* “seed, descendants.”

Some time in its first year, the salmon becomes a *parr*, although this word does not seem to be much used of the Pacific salmon. The derivation is unknown, but appears likely of Scottish origin. When the young fish begins to migrate from fresh water to the sea, it becomes known as a *smolt*. Anglo-Latin of the fourteenth century has *smoltus*

used in this sense, but the word *smolt* itself is first found in Scotland and northern England in the sixteenth century. In OE, an adjectival form of *smolt-* meant “calm” or “serene,” and in dialectal use “shining,” but the connection with the fish is vague, as is any link with *smelt*, a small fish with similar names on the continent. (Obs. German *schmelt*, Danish *smelt*, etc.)

We come now to a term which, because of the different life-cycles of the Atlantic and Pacific salmon, has perforce undergone a slight semantic shift on this side of the country. A *grilse* in British and Atlantic Seaboard terminology is a young salmon that has returned from the sea to its spawning river for the first time. However, since Pacific salmon spawn only once and then die, the term as applied to *coho* and *chinook* means a small immature fish in its first summer at sea. (A *chinook grilse* usually weighs two and a half pounds dressed, and a *coho grilse* must be 12 inches long to be a legal catch.) The etymology of *grilse* is somewhat cloudy; the word is first used in this sense in the early fifteenth century (the first entry in the OED is from 1417) in the form *grilles*. It is thought that the Scottish variants *girsil* (fifteenth century) and *grissil* (sixteenth century) may be closer to the original form (cp. OF *grisle* “grey” or “greyish”). There is an Anglo-Irish (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) synonym *grawls* (sing. *graul*) which may represent a Scandinavian form corresponding to the Swedish *grålox* “grey salmon.” In any case, the “greyness” of *grilse* would be an obvious connection to make, as the fish at this stage of development is in what is sometimes referred to as its *sea-bright* state.

Coho, *chinook*, and *sockeye* also produce *jacks*, precocious males that have matured in their second or third years. While the term *jack* has been in use since the sixteenth century to refer to the males of other kinds of fish as well as of animals (jackrabbit, jackass), this specific usage referring only to early-maturing male salmon is peculiar to British Columbia.

The mature fish then begins his last journey, up the river where he was spawned, to spawn in his turn and die. The salmon that has spawned is known as a *kelt*. Again, because of the short life span of the Pacific species, *kelt* on this coast is used to describe either a dying *Onchorhynchus* or a steelhead trout (which belongs to the genus *Salmo*, as do the Atlantic salmon) recovering from spawning (often called a *mending kelt*). It is interesting that in Great Britain the word seems to be used only in Scotland; it is of unknown etymology although it has been in use since at least 1340.

Catching the elusive salmon, whether *grilse*, *jack*, or fully mature fish, is a subject for endless discussion both in conversation and in print. Most of the talk covers two main areas: “where” and “how.” “Where” is outside the scope of this paper, of interest only to other anglers, and

frankly a well-guarded secret! "How" can be broken down into two more divisions—what method and what tackle, the latter depending on the former. Salmon may be fished from a boat or from land. If the angler prefers a boat, he may choose *mooching*, *trolling*, or *bucktailing*.

Mooching is done from a drifting boat by letting a whole herring drop deep into the water and bringing it back up to the surface in a series of slow jerks, then repeating the process until a fish strikes. In standard English, the verb *mooch* means "to lurk, loaf, or steal"; it is thought to be from OF *muchier* (Norman dialect *mucher*). Its use as a fishing term is apparently confined to the west coast of Canada.

Trolling is done from a slowly moving boat, and like trolling elsewhere involves pulling various sorts of *Onchorynchus*-oriented tackle on the end of a line so that the fish will think that the metallic or plastic object disguising the hooks is either a small fish or some such thing.

But there are a number of generic categories of trolling tackle in addition to the more common types (spoons, plugs, flies, etc.) elsewhere in the fishing world. Such generic categories include *planers* (flat weighted plastic squares which, when set at a certain angle, take advantage of the forward motion of the planer against the water, sinking to great depths), *teasers* (plastic harnesses for holding *strip*, a salmon bite-sized fillet of herring, minnow, and so forth), *dodgers*, *flashers*, and *slashers* (large shining metal sheets placed well ahead of the trolled item to take advantage of the salmon's predilection for slashing through a herring *ball-up* [a school of herring near the top of the water], crippling many, and feasting at his leisure), *trippers*, *flashtails* (herring- and minnow-imitations), *willow-leafs* or *ford-fenders*, both senior and junior (a *gang-troll* arrangement whose principle is similar to the *dodger*, *flasher*, and *slasher*), *hoochies* or *hoochie-koochies* (squid or octopus imitations).

Bucktailing is trolling for coho with a *bucktail*—these flies come in different patterns depending on the area, the time of year, and the weather conditions, but the basic component of all is literally a piece of bucktail (though of recent years, polar bear hair is being used a great deal).

Lastly, one can only remark in passing on the ingenuity of the commercial enterprise which has sprung up around this particular pre-occupation. It has proliferated brand names too numerous to assess, let alone mention, but note can be made of the fact that local manufacturers are often highly selective in the choice of their marketing names for the item (and it seems likely that more fishermen are hooked every year than fish). Every care is taken to keep an item easily identifiable in terms of the type of fish, the method of fishing, and/or the generic category a given piece of piscine hardware fits into. Moreover, the manufacturer must be adroit in maintaining a separate brand-name

identity, distinct from all others in the field, a name not to be forgotten on shopping trips, and yet easily identifiable as a specific tackle category. Such attitudes serve to underscore the very real dimensions of the ethnolinguistic paradigm of sport salmon fishing on the western Canadian coast.

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ANS ANNUAL MEETING 1975

Space at the Modern Language Association annual meeting in San Francisco has been requested for the American Name Society on the following dates:

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| December 28, | 8:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.
(reading of papers) |
| | 2:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.
(Executive Committee meeting) |
| | 3:30 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.
(Place-Name Survey meeting) |
| | 6:30 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.
(annual dinner) |
| December 29, | 8:00 a.m. - 4:50 p.m.
(reading of papers) |