



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIAN KIROUAC

MOMENTS OF BEAUTY

"THE LUNATIC FRINGE" IS A CLUB WITH MEMBERSHIP PRIVILEGES OFTEN DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN.



A proper live release is easily done when a barbless (or pinched) hook is used. Gentle handling and never removing the fish from the water are two other key steps for ensuring a caught salmon will be able to continue upstream to spawn.

CARDS WERE BEING SHUFFLED AND ONE SENIOR MEMBER of my bridge club remarked "We missed you last week, were you away?"

"Yes," I replied, "I was in New Brunswick fishing."

"You went all the way to New Brunswick to fish, aren't there any fish in Cape Breton?"

"Sure," I continued, "but I was after salmon."

"Salmon," he mused as he examined his hand. "I had a lovely piece from the fish man today. It was a bit pricey but you must have spent a lot more for your fish when you count in the cost of gas and license and food and everything else! Seems like a bit of a waste of money."

"Well, as it turns out, I didn't catch any and, even if I did, I would have put them back. I practice catch and release."

There was a pregnant pause: only the sound of the cards being shuffled could be heard.

"You travelled all the way to not only not catch anything but, if you had, you would have put it back? Seriously? That is unbelievable! You need to see someone!"

On an intellectual level, perhaps it truly is hard to explain. Sometimes even harder to rationalize to myself. Live release is the purview of what I like to call the "lunatic fringe," an exclusive, but expanding, club of which I have been a charter member for over 50 years. The privileges of membership are many—days spent in blistering heat or freezing cold trying, usually in vain, to catch a fish that even if I am successful, after countless hours,

LIVE RELEASE

I will return oh-so-gently to the river, without even removing it from the water.

Even in my infrequent lucid moments, I don't completely understand it myself. At times like this, I think of the very popular Governor General of Canada, John Buchan, (appointed in 1935), who authored the book that the early Alfred Hitchcock film "The Thirty-Nine Steps" was based on. The passionate angler once said, "The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive but attainable, a perpetual series of occasions for hope." It's a quote my golfing friends react to in the same way as my bridge club. Golfers pursue a sport that requires only a set of clubs and a decent tee off time. There is no time spent praying for rain, cooler temperatures, or cloudy skies. Golfers don't worry about the effect of double hooks, going barbless with a wet or dry fly, or whether to use a sinking tip line. They just tee it up and go, no talk of Greenland's interceptory fisheries, declining runs, predators, or poachers.

Everyone who salmon fishes does it for different reasons. Perhaps it's just a desire to be outdoors, or as an escape from everyday pressures like family crises, money worries, or declining health. Another author, Roderick Haig-Brown wrote, "You never see a worried man fish."

For some, it could simply be something they are good at, effortlessly throwing a line in perfect synchronicity. Whatever your poison, it's impossible to explain to the unknowing or uninitiated. The joys derive from an internal, very personal place, there is nothing like it. For me, and for many women and men, it is a passion with no equal and as long as it makes sense to you, that is all that matters. To paraphrase the founder of *Esquire* magazine and angling author, Arnold Gingrich, "A salmon is a moment of beauty known only to those who seek it." While I ponder all this as I cast, suddenly (it is always suddenly), there is a sharp strain on my shoulder and a taut line pulls away. As my heart rate

accelerates like a dragster at "The Big Go" in Indianapolis, I think "What was the question?"

Salmon fishing is not a sport that requires anyone else to understand it to make it special. How many you have caught, where you have fished, be it Norway or Nova Scotia, none of it matters, other than a deep, inexplicable satisfaction. Some years, (yes years!) you stand up to your waist in a cold, rushing river, swatting away flies or wiping snow and rain from the brim of your hat. And right about when you start thinking that maybe, just maybe, you will purchase that new six iron and move on, there is an intense tug on your line and all hell breaks loose.

I have been fortunate enough to fish steelhead in B.C, Chinooks in the Pacific Ocean, striped bass in New Brunswick, groupers in Florida, but there is nothing like that first pull of an Atlantic salmon, regardless of season or size. Probably because it is so hard to succeed, regardless of skill or level of knowledge, that when one finally grabs your fly, it is always unexpected, always thrilling.

A lot of time is spent discussing what fly to use, how much leader, to strip or not, or whether to use the hitch. Salmon fishing, with its poor success rate, creates its own army of insecure, neurotic fishermen always looking for an edge. Countless books have been written on the subject, many proposing to know what you have to do to be a good angler, whatever that means.

The harsh truth? Most of it does not matter. In the end, it is the most personal of activities, and yet, each one of us can be part of that unique club who fish only to let every salmon go. The Lunatic Fringe. After all these many years, I still feel fortunate and proud to renew my membership. 🐟

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