

Fall salmon run majestic Margaree



JOE FITZGERALD CHASING PISCES

A phantasmal shroud of morning mist rose above the river, dissolving into the trees towering over the valley. Rime-encrusted grass crunched under my feet as I climbed down a steep embankment and forded the river.

The temperature had dropped considerably in the past few days, and along with the frost there had also been some rain. It was perfect conditions, and I was seriously hoping this might be the year of destiny.

I tied on a big, gaudy, marabou-winged Cardinal fly, waded out and began casting. The clear rushing water cooled my legs and fresh autumn air filled my lungs as fiery leaves dropped gracefully onto the river. My fly drifted downstream amongst them, then sank. On the other side of the river a merganser spread its wings, watching the pool more patiently than any human angler.

The Margaree River begins in the upper mountains just south of the Cape Breton Highlands, and flows down through the Margaree Valley into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The Margaree is unprecedented for its ease of access,

its breathtaking scenery, and its fall run of Atlantic salmon. Its clean, pebble-bottomed waters are ideal for spawning, and anglers from Canada, the U.S. and Europe arrive every year to fish the more than 40 classic pools, pockets and runs that line the lower reaches of the river.

I thought of European nobles fishing the rivers of Scotland and Ireland centuries before, the same Celtic colours inspiring their dreams of glory. On my second cast, my now-soaked fly sank immediately, and came through the fast water at a greater depth. When it swirled into a calm eddy, I stripped the line and was greeted with a pull that felt

like a giant's handshake. I lifted the rod to set the hook, and seconds later, a salmon soared out of the water, hung for an eternal moment, then crashed back into the river. I reeled in my slack line as the fish jumped again. Now I waved frantically to my father, who was still in the car, as the salmon leaped yet again.

After a heart-stopping battle, I managed to "tail" the salmon. Its silver colour and elongated snout, or kipe, showed it was a male

that had just recently entered the river from the sea. It was my first salmon, and as my father took a photo from the opposite bank I pumped my fist in triumph. After removing the hook, I watched the regal fish disappear upstream to fulfill its destiny, and then basked in the glory of fulfilling mine.

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FACTS ON ATLANTIC SALMON AND THE MARGAREE

- Atlantic salmon spend most of their lives at sea, but return to spawn in the same rivers in which they were born. Unlike Pacific salmon, Atlantic salmon do not die after spawning. They return to the sea, although some stay in the rivers until spring. These salmon are known as slinks. Atlantic salmon that spend only one winter at sea and then return to spawn are called grise.
- Fishing for salmon in Nova Scotia requires a separate licence and tags distinct from a provincial sportfishing licence. Atlantic salmon are regulated by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and you can only fish for them using fly fishing tackle. Regulations on times vary from river to river.
- The scientific name for Atlantic salmon is *Salmo salar*, which means the leaper. They live up to their name, making spectacular leaps and runs when hooked.
- Some of the rivers in Nova Scotia that have salmon runs include the Wallace, the Salmon (Guysborough) the South and West Rivers (Antigonish) River Philip and River John. The Aspy, Baddeck, and Middle Rivers in Cape Breton produce salmon, but the Margaree is the largest and most productive river in the province.
- Much has been written about the pools of the Margaree. The fall run in October is most productive. Flies used include the Ross Special, Green Highlander, Cosseboom Special, Big Intervale Blue, Micky Finn, General Practitioner, Cardinaline and the Orange Muddler.