



## THE CONSERVATIONIST

STANDING UP FOR OUR RIGHT TO THE OUTDOORS

Fishing in the Salmon Forest, Part 4: The Waters of the Power Fish

*By Hal Herring*

*Editor's note: Conservationist blogger Hal Herring spent five days exploring and fishing Alaska's Tongass National Forest earlier this month. This is the fourth of five reports.*



*Matt Smythe holds a nice humpy taken on the fly. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.*

**The creek is about 40 yards across**, a milky green color that tells you it comes from a glacier somewhere far in the headwaters. It is hard to imagine that big fish--pink salmon, also known as humpies--are hidden in such small water, and for a while I cast and strip the big hot pink Clouser Minnow without really believing. The weird Grimm's fairytale forest--monster spruce, and some kind of fir that I don't recognize that shoots straight up for the light, limbless--is behind me, and on the other side of the river is a jungle-meadow of tall purple fireweed lit by the sun. I cast and strip, and come up short on what I figure is part of the logjam that lies just upstream from me. The line begins to move, out and up.

My drag is set too light. I palm the screaming fly reel and immediately regret it as the little handle catches my ring finger, joint-wrecked by decades of rock climbing and swinging a splitting maul. That pain will be with me for the whole trip, and for 90 percent of the time, fighting one humpy or dolly after another, I'll never even notice it.

This is power-fish fishing: long runs, heavy splashes, the feeling that you are hooked fast to some elemental power of the universe. I'm using a leader cut back to at least 10-pound test, so I have room for error, room to figure out to put the pressure on. I experiment, and the rod--an old Cortland 7 weight--groans a bit. I drop the tip and pull sideways to try and turn the run, and the fish does turn, just short of a shoal and a debris-covered strainer. The humpy that finally comes to hand is a marvel, fresh from the salt, a strange muscled form, giant hooked jaws, the odd calligraphy of black circles on its silver-green back. I unhook it and it blasts away, still headed upstream, even in the thinnest shallows--the upstream imperative, a mandate from Time itself.

I tend to be a meat fisherman, but humpies are low on the scale of culinary delights, so we are all fishing catch-and-release, for the pure joy of hooking and fighting one of the finest sport fish I've ever encountered. I move from hole to hole, run to run, with total freedom, unencumbered by stringer or cooler or worry about hungry bears. And we find fish almost everywhere. By afternoon, my hands and forearms are exhausted from catching 5 and 6 pounders, here and there a steroidal 8 pounder or so that fights and lolls in the current like a snagged sow grizzly. I feel like more of a big-fish flyfisherman than I did at daybreak.



*Big bear tracks on sandbar, Cowee Creek, Tongass National Forest. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.*

We stand on a wide grizz-printed sandbar and take a breather, try with all our mental might just to take it all in: the little homesteader's cabin fallen to ruin in the meadow across the wide smooth current, rank smell of bear and heavy blooming elderberry and cold glacial water, all of it percolating under a hot sun. Even at the end of July, a month after the summer solstice, nights are mighty short in southeast Alaska, made shorter by a group of fishermen who have just experienced some of the best fishing of their lives and have to talk about it, and everything else, until the wee-est of hours.

We meet Trout Unlimited's Mark Kaelke at the docks the next morning, and we're a little worse for wear, but ready for the journey. Mark's boat is a workhorse, a no-frills 23-foot aluminum hull powered by a Suzuki 140, with no cabin, so that deck workspace is maximized. When Heather Hardcastle was talking about the merging of the sportfishermen and the commercial fishermen, in a lot of ways, she was talking about Alaskans like Mark Kaelke. His boat is set up with a boom for pulling crab and shrimp pots, rod holders for trolling, cranks for bottom fishing for halibut and castnetting for sockeye. It's a boat for a lifestyle—personal-use fishing; hunting for blacktail deer, blue grouse and waterfowl; exploring and wandering with family.



*Killer whale in the Inside Passage, just off Admiralty Island. Photo by Earl Harper, Earl Harper Studios.*

It's a long cold run across the salt to a sheltered bay on the north end of Admiralty Island, the seventh largest island in the U.S., and part of the Tongass National Forest and the Admiralty Island National Monument. We wade ashore while Mark takes the boat back out to safety in deep water--he's hunted here and been a guide for almost 20 years, and he's seen his share of would-be mariners beached by underestimating just how low, low tide really is.

Off the wide gravel beach, salmon are breaking the water, porpoising on the flat surface. We hike a few hundred yards to an opening in the forest wall, a trail marked by a wooden plaque with the Tlingit name of the island Xootsnoowú--generally translated as "the fortress of the bears," an apt name for a place that has the most dense population of brown bears on the planet. We hope to not to meet them by surprise, whistling through the brush like a band of merry madmen. I'm packing a canister of bear spray, just as I do at home, and Mark has a .500 S&W revolver in a shoulder holster, a formidable and comforting piece of weaponry indeed. We traverse the dark forests for a mile or so without incident to a wide freshwater creek that is being absorbed by the rising tide and turned as if by alchemy into a broad saltwater estuary. The shallow water is boiling with chums and a few humpies scattered here and there. Our targets here are dollies and, maybe, a big cutthroat or two on an egg-stealing expedition from their home waters upstream. But as is so often the case in fishing and hunting, the target species are very scarce on this fairly high tide, where the salt has come in to the forest. I catch an eight-inch cutthroat on a bead, right at the mouth of a little braid of the creek, but that's it.

A gang of fishermen, in a treasurehouse place like this one, is undeterred. We switch back to Clousers and start moving downstream, catching big chums and humpies and making the still morning air go loud with line peeling off reels. Steve Duda and Chad Shmukler are the first to

decide that a more sophisticated approach is needed, and they tie on big pink topwaters, wild-legged foam popping bugs that resemble not a single living creature on this earth that I've ever seen.

The water is flat, almost motionless but for the fish stirring beneath it. I am holding off on the topwaters, watching to see how this highfalutin' method might work. A broad snake-like head appears on the surface behind Steve's nutty pink popper. The head makes eating motions and the bug disappears. Steve strikes back and the line flies at him in an airborne Rorschach pattern of loops and angles.

A series of small splashes engulf Chad's bug. Then a deep, resounding boil takes it under. I don't know if he hooked that one, because I hear a quiet and satisfied muttering from Steve, further downstream, and see his rod bow, and something big thrashing way out on the estuary. I miss most of the fight, tying on my own pink foam popper, and wading out waist-deep to where I can fling the thing at a pod of big fish near the far bank. For the next hour or so, I work that infernal foam creation. I pop it loud and gurgly. I swim it wild and swim it slow and seductive. I see heads and eating motions behind it. It disappears in polite little swirls. And I do not set a hook in a single fish. From downstream come shouts of mirth and glee, splashes that would rival a show at Sea-World. Chad, walking up, suggests that I have spent too many years as a bass fisherman, popping and halting my bugs. He makes another cast with his popper--identical to mine--and yards back on another big humpie. I never connect.

On the long march back through the forests, I ponder my failures. And dismiss them one by one. I'm on Admiralty Island, the fortress of the bears. Yesterday was a dream of battling humpies. The sky is darkening again, the salmon berries along the trail taste like the finest candies. On the long boat ride home, a tail rises from the waves, a tail like a pitch-black double-wide trailer—humpback whales, fellow predators on the prowl. A small and clean-looking purse seiner passes us, heading south, the deckhands busy at something we cannot see, bound for adventures and maybe fortunes out there in the cold ocean. Alaska!