

ATLANTIC SALMON ANGLING ON THE PENOBSCOT

By John Burrows

For thousands of years, tremendous migrations of sea-run fish migrations defined the Penobscot River. For many people, the most revered of all of these fish was the Atlantic salmon. A species that has long held a special position in human cultures, both in North America and in Europe, the Atlantic salmon was ordained as “the King of freshwater fish” by Izaak Walton and nicknamed “The Leaper” by many an angler. The sleek, silvery fish has amazed and awed people for millennia, both for its wondrous life history and its pure beauty and grandeur. The Atlantic salmon is also a great symbol of all that is wild. Its presence in our rivers and streams signifies a healthy environment, for the salmon requires the cleanest, clearest, coolest waters in which to spawn and to rear juveniles.

Historically, the Penobscot River held Maine’s largest populations of Atlantic salmon, with annual salmon runs estimated at upwards of 100,000 adults prior to the construction of the first dams on the river in the 1830’s. The annual salmon runs supported a lucrative commercial fishery in the river until its closing in the late 1940’s. Salmon were also an important source of food to the Penobscot Indians, and the species remains a valued part of tribal culture. The Penobscot River harbors this nation’s largest remaining run of Atlantic salmon, but with roughly only 1,000 adults returning every spring and summer, today’s runs are a small percentage of what they were historically.

The Penobscot Valley’s rich tradition of Atlantic salmon angling dates back to the early 1880’s. Before this time, there was a common and widespread belief among anglers that salmon in Maine’s river and streams would not “take a fly.” According to many reports, the first person to catch an Atlantic salmon on an artificial fly in Maine didn’t do so until the early 1860’s. Fly fishing for Atlantic salmon in Maine slowly spread across the state and in the summer of 1880, *Forest and Stream* reported the first confirmed taking of an Atlantic salmon with a fly in the Penobscot. Almost immediately, folks from Boston, Hartford, New York, and even as far away as Chicago began flocking to Bangor for a chance to fish for Atlantic salmon. From that date forward, the Penobscot River became the mecca for Atlantic salmon angling in the United States

Today, the Penobscot’s long-standing Atlantic salmon angling tradition is personified by the Penobscot, Veazie, and Eddington Salmon Clubs. Organized in 1884, the Penobscot Salmon Club was the nation’s first salmon club and its founding members included some of the region’s most prominent citizens. For more than a century, the Penobscot club has sat on the eastern shore of the Penobscot River, just north of downtown Brewer. The small, rustic clubhouse was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.



However, salmon fishing on the Penobscot was never just for the affluent. It was an activity enjoyed by everyone, rich and poor, young and old alike. Salmon angling, for sport and for sustenance, became engrained in the culture and traditions of the communities throughout the Penobscot River Valley. One of these traditions was that of the annual 4th of July dinner consisting of fresh-caught Penobscot salmon and green peas.

Another tradition on the river is that of the “Presidential Salmon.” Since the dawn of the recreational salmon fishery on the Penobscot, there has been an informal competition every spring among anglers to be the first to catch the season’s first bright salmon. Local hotels paid top dollar for the first salmon angled from the river and undoubtedly there was great pride in being that first successful angler. A twist was added in 1912 when Karl Anderson decided to send his salmon to President Taft. The Presidential Salmon Tradition was born, and from that

Photo: Two brothers proudly display a 22-pound salmon they caught in the Bangor Salmon Pool in April of 1912. Photo appears with permission of Ed Baum, author of *Maine Atlantic Salmon: A National Treasure*, 1997.

day forward the first salmon caught in the State of Maine (often in the Penobscot, but not always) was sent to the President of the United States. What Mr. Anderson began as a way to generate civic pride and to show respect for the President soon grew into a spirited annual competition among anglers to land the year's first bright salmon.

The tradition endured until 1954 when salmon runs and the sport fishery began to decline rapidly. By 1980, improved fish passage facilities, increased water pollution controls, and a more intensive restoration program resulted in a substantial increase in the number of returning adult salmon to the Penobscot River. With them came a rejuvenated recreational fishery and ultimately the reinstatement of the Presidential Salmon Tradition in 1981. It was also during this time that the Veazie Salmon Club (1978), the Eddington Salmon Club (1982), and the Northern Penobscot Salmon Club (1982; now defunct) were formed.

Salmon runs in the Penobscot continued throughout the 1980's and into the early 1990's with annual returns averaging around 2,500 salmon per year counted at the Veazie Dam. Interest and enthusiasm in salmon angling and the area's salmon clubs remained strong during this period. Several thousand people were members of the clubs during those days and while fishing for salmon was what initially brought people into the clubs, it has been the social and community aspects that have sustained the clubs during those times when there has been no fishing. Atlantic salmon angling is as much about the camaraderie and the social interaction as it is about the actual fishing. It is about the relationships that are forged and the chance for a grandparent to take a grandchild out on to the river for the first time.

The early 1990's brought a precipitous drop in returning salmon, a decline that only grew worse as the decade progressed. This decline occurred simultaneously across the southern range of Atlantic salmon in North America and in Europe. Marine survival and adult returns fell to



record lows. Dozens of theories abound as to the cause of the decline; the reality is that there are cumulative effects of several factors at play. In 1992, President George H. W. Bush was the last President to receive a Presidential salmon. In late 1999, the State of Maine decided to close the Penobscot to all forms of salmon angling.

The latest chapter in the Penobscot River's rich and detailed Atlantic salmon fishing history was written this autumn when anglers were once again allowed to fish for Atlantic salmon

in a 3-mile stretch of the river below the Veazie Dam. This "experimental fishery" was strictly catch-and-release and fly fishing only. Anglers were further restricted to using single, barbless hooks on their flies and were prohibited from removing any salmon from the water.

The opening of the salmon fishery was marked by the Penobscot and Eddington Salmon Clubs on Saturday,

September 16th when they hosted the traditional opening day breakfast at the Eddington Clubhouse. More than 160 people—anglers and non-anglers, young and old—turned out to celebrate the opening of the river, to share stories with old friends, and to share their hopes and expectations for the river's future. Among them was Governor John Baldacci, who thanked everyone for their ongoing efforts to restore the Penobscot River.

The best hope for the future of Atlantic salmon in the Penobscot River, and in the United States, rests with the Penobscot River Restoration Project. The removal of the Great Works and Veazie Dams, construction of a natural bypass channel around the Howland River, and improved fish passage at four other dams in the watershed will allow populations of Atlantic salmon and 10 other species of diadromous fish to grow to numbers not seen in generations. Fisheries biologists estimate that the Penobscot's annual salmon run will become self-sustaining and grow to be between 10,000 and 12,000 adult fish.

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Photo: Salmon fishing at the Eddington salmon pool. Photo by Sally Gilbert.

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