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SOPHOMORE SEASON ON THE LAXA I'ADOLOL: A TROUT FISHERMAN'S SEARCH FOR ATLANTIC SALMON

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“I Felt the Strong Tug of a Salmon...”

The evening was cool with lightly overcast skies. Sunlit streaks of light rain could be seen bathing the neighboring plateaus. As my guide drove us to Beat #6 in his tired Volvo sedan, I wondered if I would remember and apply the lessons learned in my first year of fishing for Atlantic salmon exactly 12 months ago. Minutes later, above a break of rapids near the little red farmhouse, my fly eased across the current of a deep lie. The strong tug of a salmon bent my rod tip. This was the moment I'd waited a year for!

“God save the Queen!” I muttered under my breath, then forcefully raised the rod tip to set the hook. The powerful fish turned upstream, swimming easily in the depths of the pool. Repeated headshaking was followed by a steady run across river. Suddenly, the unseen fish turned downstream and angled back toward me so quickly that the line went completely slack. I stumbled back toward the bank, stripping the slack line as quickly as I could, reeling between strips, trying frantically to regain tension.

“Is he gone?” yelled Steini, my guide.

“I don't know!” I yelled back.

As I watched my line, it tightened, moving upstream and across the river with great power.

“He's still on!” I cried. Just into the backing he surged to the surface.

“He's going to jump!” yelled Steini. “Salute him if he comes!” The salmon jumped headlong across the current, revealing a broad silver side and a length that took my breath away.

“He's a big one!” yelled Steini. Now well into my backing, he cruised upstream twenty or thirty feet. Once again he jumped high, and I again “saluted” this beauty by dropping my rod tip to the water. His crash back into the river was accompanied by a sickening tug on the line as he landed on the leader, breaking the fly off in the process, and he was gone...

So began my “sophomore season” on the Big Laxa, Iceland's fabled Laxa I'Adolol River.

“Rookie Season” Fishing For Salmon

I'm a trout fisherman, reared on the waters of Yellowstone National Park by a father who spent countless hours at my side teaching me about trout, fly hatches, rivers, wading, rods, leaders, fly reels, flies, and, well ... life. I'd always heard that fishing for Atlantic Salmon was one of fly fishing's greatest thrills but never had the opportunity to actually try it until the summer of 2003, when my good friend Alfred Taubman invited me to join him and six others for a week of fishing on Iceland's Laxa I'Adolol on the northeast coast of Iceland. My 45 years of fly fishing for trout had ingrained in me a set of simple truths that I had also applied to fly fishing for bonefish, snook, red fish, striped bass, blue fish, small mouth bass, and other fishes:

1. Fishing is often best in fair weather on a rising barometer.
2. Low water calls for extra long, fine leaders and great care in approaching the fish.
3. You set the hook as soon as the fish takes the fly, lest he/she spits it out.
4. Fly pattern is determined by time of year, fly hatches, feeding patterns, and other readily measured biologic properties.
5. Fish are caught when you convince them that your fly is a food choice that they simply cannot pass up.
6. Two-handed rods are for bait fisherman!
7. The greatest thrill in fly fishing is getting the fish to take your fly.

You can imagine my frustration when a week of salmon fishing in 2003 was spent “unlearning” these foundations of my fishing past, as I struggled to understand Atlantic salmon, their journey, and the art of catching them on a fly. By week's end I was thoroughly unglued, ready to see a “trout therapist” to put my fish-

ing ego back together! Although I caught a few fish that rookie season, I was frustrated. When Al invited me to accompany him to the Big Laxa again in 2004, I was beside myself with anticipation and determination.

Fly fishing has captured me from my earliest days. Born into "A River Runs Through It" kind of family in West Yellowstone, MT, there is no other pastime that totally removes me from the rest of my universe like fly fishing. Like my father Wally Eagle, and his father Sam, I literally grew up in Eagle's Fly Shop, learning as much about fly fishing for trout as I possibly could. Those boyhood days were filled with the wonder of fishing for trout on a fly.

In the interlude between the summers of 2003 and 2004, I became completely immersed in trying to understand Atlantic salmon, their life cycle, and how best to fish for these marvelous creatures. In quiet evenings, searching book after book, I learned that unsettled weather brings better fishing; that leader size and length probably don't matter very much; that striking a salmon quickly is a sure way to lose it; that repetitive casts on big rivers in big winds demand a big two-handed rod; that fly pattern is both a mystery and art form, not holding to any clear biologic order; and that hooking a big salmon is nice, but that landing it successfully is the greatest thrill of the pursuit.

Sophomore Season on the Laxa l'Adolol

As we drove from the airport in Akureyi, Iceland, to the fishing lodge, the unique beauty of Iceland enveloped us. The soft green meadows gave way to mountain foothills dotted with waterfalls, hay fields, red-roofed farm houses, sheep, cows, Icelandic horses, and glacial streams. As we passed one-lane bridges, bikers, hikers, and the occasional automobile, I fell at once into the slow, unhurried trance of this unique country.

After arriving at the fishing lodge, we unpacked and prepared for an evening of fishing. My guide was "Steini" Stefansson, a strong, seasoned fisherman who had taught me much the previous summer. Our transportation hadn't changed, either. His old Volvo sedan boasted more than 250,000 miles of fish finding, and a generous measure of Icelandic dust. As we drove to Beat #6, I alerted Steini to what I'd learned during the year.

"First, I'm going to set the hook very deliberately this year," I said. "Al taught me that a good tactic is to mutter "God save the Queen" before I set the hook." Steini looked at me and laughed out loud.

"Iceland has no Queen!" he cried, shaking his head.

"I know, but this will help me not to rush the strike,"

I exclaimed. "I brought a two-handed rod, too."

"Good, maybe your arm won't get sore this year," laughed Steini.

"Also, I want to learn more from you about the river, how the fishery is maintained, and how we can help keep this such a great river," I said.

"I'm happy to show you what I know," mused Steini.

The two-track dirt road took us through grassy meadows teeming with ptarmigan, golden plover, and snipe. Several groups of ducks raced upriver as we approached our starting point. The warm afternoon had receded, replaced by a light overcast and cool north-westerly wind. As I looked to the far mountains, I saw shrouds of light and rain, and I smiled in anticipation.

From 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. we had wonderful action, hooking five salmon and landing three. After losing that large fish earlier in the evening, I worked a long deep pool above a second break of rapids. A strong fish came to my fly, and out of the water came a marvelous Atlantic salmon. After a spirited battle, she came to the net.

"She's a full-bodied female! She weighs 16 pounds" yelled Steini. "Come on, we'll put her in the box!"

"What do you mean? I want to release her!" I said.

"Don't worry, we will," Steini explained. He ran to the car while I held her in the water. Panting heavily, he returned with a long, slender plastic bag nearly five feet in length. "Here, I'll fill the bag with river water, then you'll hold it while I put the fish in it!"

I had no idea what we were doing and neither did the salmon. Steini hoisted the fish carefully by the tail, then inserted her into the water-filled bag, head first, where she was completely immersed nose to tail, head side down, in river water.

"Okay, let's go!" he cried. "Get into the passenger seat, and I'll put her between your legs!" Steini tied the free end of the bag, now containing many liters of river water surrounding the 16 pound female Atlantic salmon, and carried her to the car. I got in, and we carefully placed the bag between my legs in the front seat. The fish's tail moved easily back and forth in the bag, her sides occasionally bumping softly against my waders.

"Have you ever seen a salmon swimming head-side down in a Volvo?" I wondered. We sped a half-mile downstream to lower Beat #6. We hit a bump in the road, and I lurched forward as Steini applied the brakes. I looked down at the salmon and she was easing herself back and upward toward me in the bag! Her tail feathered the water, and her ventral fins elevating in unison as she re-centered herself in the water bag, perfectly vertical. I looked down further and her gills were working softly back and forth. I was thinking this is the

River Laxa l'Adolol Iceland Fish Log

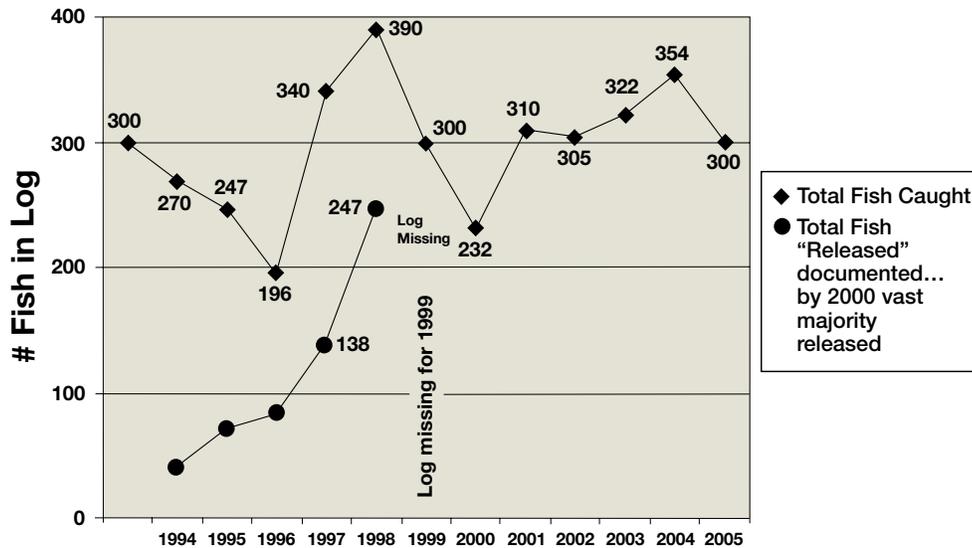


Figure 1. The fishing logs suggest that an excess of 90% of Atlantic salmon caught on the river have been released since 1999. The number of fish caught per year has stabilized in recent years.

most amazing thing that I’ve ever seen. The salmon is swimming freely in a plastic bag, head-side down, in a Volvo sedan, going 40 miles an hour on a bumpy back road and not even bumping the sides of the bag! Then I caught myself in another thought. She’s survived scavenging brown trout as a fertilized egg, avoided trout, mergansers, gyrfalcon’s and other prey as a young parr and then smolt. She somehow managed to find her way to the ocean, and survived eels, sea lions, seals, sharks, and other predators for several years. Then she travels hundreds of miles to get back to her river, jumps three large waterfalls to get “home,” and finally reaches her destination.

“She’s a superstar among fishes,” I thought. Why should I be surprised if she can swim backwards in a plastic bag traveling 40 miles an hour in a dusty old Volvo? I sat there in total silence and watched her levitate in the river water. “What a fish,” I whispered.

Steini explained to me that the “box” is a submerged cage in which the salmon is kept in the river until the hatchery foreman comes with a truck containing a large tank of river water, allowing safe transport to the hatchery a few miles down river. There, she will be milked for her eggs and returned safely to the river. Her eggs will be fertilized artificially and the resultant parr will be raised until they are 4-5 inches long, then released at various locations in the river. This allows all of her fertilized eggs to survive the earliest stages of a salmon’s life. It is estimated that for each 1,000 parr released, roughly 7 will survive the early days and weeks in the river. By selecting the largest, strongest females to take

to the hatchery, the program hopes to increase the numbers of larger, stronger salmon returning to the river.

I asked Steini what else the “river keepers” were doing to maintain the fishery.

“We’re encouraging the release of all Atlantic salmon caught on the river,” he explained. “Also, for two years now there has been no worm fishing allowed.” He suggested that more than 90% of the salmon were now being released, and the lodge’s fish logs confirmed this (Figure 1). On this stretch of the Big Laxa, the number of salmon caught had stabilized in the past few years (Figure 1).

Later that evening, we would hook three more salmon, landing a six-pound grilse and a scrappy 10-pound male. Another very large salmon (Steini estimated over 20 lbs.) stayed on for two jumps and a long run before the hook pulled free. As we drove back to the lodge after quitting at 10:00 p.m., I silently reflected on that remarkable evening. In an entire week just a year before, I’d caught just three salmon. Yet on this night, with unsettled weather and fish on the move, we hooked five salmon, landing three. I was especially excited that I’d been able to suppress my “trout” reflexes to set the hook too quickly, which had been so frustrating the year before. I also remembered what Al Taubman told me on the way to Iceland.

“With Atlantic salmon of size, the greatest challenge is not hooking them, it’s landing them,” he said. I began to see that he was right. Two very large salmon had come to my fly this night, and both found a way to elude me.



Figure 2A. A beautiful 23-lb. male salmon makes it all worth it!



Figure 2B. Reviving the Atlantic salmon after a strong fight. This salmon needed easily 10 minutes of resuscitation after a 40-minute battle that included a dozen jumps.

Over-the-Waterfall Salmon

Late that evening, as the sun set over a gorgeous dinner of local lamb and crayfish, Al Taubman related his evening's fishing highlight. He was fishing on the cliff at Beat #7, a deep pool above a 10-foot waterfall where the road goes right over the falls. Al hooked a marvelous salmon at the tail of the pool.

"It went immediately over the falls," laughed Alfred. "The line and backing was screaming off the reel."

His guide, Vallie, yelled, "Give me the rod and meet me on the other side of the bridge!" Al stumbled up to the road, over to the other side, only to find his guide tip toeing along the bridge's pylon as the torrent rushed over the falls just inches away. Having negotiated this treacherous 15 feet with both the rod and his life intact, he handed the rod to Al, who calmly fought the fish to the net 10 minutes later! In 26 years on this river, he'd had many fish stories to tell, but this one was right up there with the best. The twinkle in his eyes, that great big belly laugh, and of course the "coup de grace."

"I told you, the greatest thrill with these fish is the fight," he bellowed. At 22 pounds, his "under-the-bridge, over-the-falls, see-you-at-the-other-side salmon" would end up being the biggest of the trip.

As the evening went on, after several bottles of Bordeaux had softened our tired muscles, more stories came forth from the other guests about the last two days of fishing. Raymond Floyd provided his "blow-by-blow" of fighting and almost landing a very large salmon. Unfortunately, just as his gillie was stretching to grab the fish, the hook pulled free! One of the anglers asked Ray what was worse: missing a 10-foot winning putt on the final round of a big golf tournament, or losing a 25 lb. salmon at the very last moment after he thought he'd won the battle? Raymond's answer was perfect.

"I've had the opportunity to make a number of putts to win tournaments, so from that point of view, losing the salmon was exasperating since this is the largest salmon I've ever had close to the net. On the other hand, how would you feel about losing a 25 lb. salmon on national TV?" he chuckled. "I guess what's more important is to be in a position to have the putt or catch the salmon. A lot of the sport is in being there, having the chance to participate, not always just in the finish." I thought to myself, "Wise words from a great sportsman." As I went to bed that night, my mind was full of images of the day and stories of my fishing partners with whom I was fortunate to share this week.

For me, 2004 on the Laxa I'Adolol was an epiphany in my fishing life. I decided that the Laxa was a perfect river with perfect fish, in a perfect place.

How do young Atlantic salmon find their way, hundreds of miles, to the ocean tide where they grow and mature? How do they find their way back to the river to perpetuate the cycle? Why does a salmon decide, at 9:50 p.m. on a cloudless sunset night, to strike a fly? These and many other thoughts touch my fishing soul. I have fished for trout my whole life. With Atlantic salmon, I'm like I was when I was a boy, marveling at the flies, the rods, the reels, the fishing stories, and mostly the fish and the rivers they swim in. What is it in me that so appreciates this aspect of nature? To wade in it, to breathe it in, to touch its sides and fins, to release it on its way ... Whatever it is, fly fishing totally surrounds me, pulling me into a place where simplicity, beauty, wonder, and joy all coalesce into a fulfilling fascination that continues to surprise and nourish me. Like the salmon, I am drawn back to the river, where I sense my origins and reach to touch my maker.