



BRISTOL BAY

One of the world's greatest sockeye-salmon runs is in Southwest Alaska By Eric Lucas

Pacific commercial fishing is legendarily tempestuous, dangerous and hard, especially in Alaska. Yet here I am, basking in warm sun in a mild breeze, bobbing gently in a sturdy skiff on a placid bay that holds the world's most valuable salmon run, and it's time to fish—"pick the net," the jargon goes in Bristol Bay. David McRae, whose boat I'm on, hands me a pair of thick rubber gloves, and we motor toward the shoreward end of the net line he had set about an hour earlier.

Sockeye salmon start to appear as we run the line, hauling on the top rope—the cork line—pulling the boat westward. Not many fish; perhaps one sockeye every 10 feet. It's still early in the Bristol Bay season, late June, and McRae chuckles at the paucity of fish we harvest. Still, I manage to pluck a dozen sockeyes from the net into the boat. There's an easily learned trick to twisting the fish just right to free them from the mesh, then pulling them through to drop them down. They shimmer like wet pastel gems on the deck of the boat.

"Boy, this is really hard work," I jest, peeling off the gloves and warming my hands in the sun after rinsing them in the cool water. It's a chalky, platinum color, rippling like a cat stretching, the temperature of midafternoon lemonade.

McRae rears back and laughs. "It's always like this," he says. "Sunny and



Gillnetters, above, fish for sockeye salmon at the mouth of the Naknek River. Fisherman David McRae, top left, guides the *Jay Hammond* across Bristol Bay.



warm. Easy pickings.” He raises his eyebrows ironically. “Let’s go have lunch and rest up.”

And off we go. Our first stop is a nearby tender boat where we off-load our morning’s catch, 20 sockeye totaling 114 pounds. To me, it’s a treasure of fish; to McRae, just a little warm-up to the season. The visit at the tender is accompanied by further jesting, gossip about who’s doing what where, conjecture about the fruitfulness of the developing season. McRae holds back a couple of our fresh-caught fish and brings them ashore for our contribution as we join a local Native family for a roast-salmon midday meal.

So begins another year in one of the little-known natural wonders of the United States, the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. Here, in a 250-mile-long corner of the Bering Sea north of the Alaska Peninsula, 300



Bristol Bay is a busy place during the midsummer sockeye run as gillnet fishing boats (top) line up for their share of some 50 million salmon returning to local rivers each year. Releasing salmon from a gillnet can be a challenge (above).

miles southwest of Anchorage, 40 million or more salmon return each year to spawn in several dozen burly, cool-water rivers born in Katmai National Park, the Taylor Mountains and other wilderness areas of the Alaska bush. The 40,000-square-mile watershed—bigger than the state of Ohio—is thus home to an annual tide of salmon that represents astounding superlatives.

- Fifty percent—*one half*—of all the world’s sockeye salmon return to Bristol Bay.
- Ten percent or more of all the wild salmon on earth are from Bristol Bay. Though most are sockeye, the runs also include king, coho, chum



Plant workers at Leader Creek Fisheries move processed sockeye salmon into blast freezers.

THE FISHERMEN OF BRISTOL BAY

>> Visitors to the Anchorage Museum can explore the historical significance of Alaskan commercial fishing in the exhibit “Sailing for Salmon: The Early Years of Commercial Fishing in Alaska’s Bristol Bay,” which runs through October 2. Inspired to preserve and maintain Alaska’s economic legacy of commercial fishing, particularly salmon fishing, curators Tim Troll and John Branson collected images and stories from Bristol Bay’s sailboat period (1884–1951). Various professional and amateur photographs, supplemented by firsthand accounts, chronicle the daily activities of fishermen in their Bristol Bay double-ender sailboats—sturdy wooden two-person boats roughly 30 feet in length, the traditional vessels

used by canneries for fishing before motorized boats were permitted. Once the federal regulation banning the use of motorized boats for fishing in the area was repealed, the process of towing a sailboat into and out of the bay became outdated. As viewers wander through the exhibit, they learn about the impact and the significance of the double-ender sailboat, and the hardships—including exposure to cold and wet weather due to the boat’s open, uncovered design—it created for fishermen before the transition to powered boats. Already well-received in two other Alaska museums, the exhibit will be complemented by photographs from the Anchorage Museum archives.

For more information, call 907-929-9200 or visit www.anchagemuseum.org. —Elyse Economides



Fisherman were required to work the waters of Bristol Bay in specially designed, double-ended sailboats, as shown in this 1950 photo (top). After the motorized-boat ban was lifted in 1951, larger ships soon began to off-load massive catches of sockeye salmon at area canneries.



The sockeye’s alternate name, red salmon, becomes obvious as the fish take on their spawning colors in the freshwater streams of interior Western Alaska.

and pink salmon.

- The first wholesale value of the processed Bristol Bay salmon was placed at more than \$350 million last year.

These numbers vary from year to year, but the fishery has been commercially productive for more than a century. Unlike with salmon runs in the Lower 48, there has been no diminution in Bristol Bay, aside from natural, cyclical ups and downs. The fishery is tightly managed by the state of Alaska; in fact, for the first three-quarters of a century of salmon fishing on Bristol Bay, commercial fishermen were required to use sailboats in a now-near-mythical practice that ended in 1951.

“Frankly, I was astounded to learn how old the fishery is,” says Tim Troll, curator of a new exhibit, “Sailing for Salmon,” at the Anchorage Museum

that depicts the old days in Bristol Bay (see sidebar on page 39). Troll is Southwest Alaska program director at The Nature Conservancy in Anchorage, and a former Dillingham resident who is conducting an



JEFF SCHULTZ / ALASKASTOCK.COM

IF YOU GO

» Alaska Airlines provides daily service between Anchorage and Dillingham and King Salmon, the two gateways to Bristol Bay; for information and ticketing visit alaskaair.com.

Visitors to Bristol Bay enjoy wildlife watching, hiking, river rafting, canoeing, bicycle riding and, of course, fishing in both saltwater and freshwater for salmon and other game fish such as halibut and rainbow trout. The best times to visit are midsummer through September; once the commercial fishing season begins to wind down at the end of July, the hustle and bustle created by the influx of thousands of workers diminishes.

For more information on the Bristol Bay region, including accommodations, back-country lodges, guide services and activities, visit www.visitbristolbay.org.

Bear Trail Lodge is a delightful accommodation poised on a bluff above the Naknek River, with lodge rooms, five private cottages, a hot tub on a deck overlooking the river, recreation facilities and excellent local cuisine—not to mention years of experience in the area from owner-operator Nancy Morris Lyon. For information and bookings, call 888-826-7376 or visit www.beartrail-lodge.com.

Visitors who'd like to see firsthand what commercial fishing is like can arrange to spend a day on a boat as part of the area's "dude fishery" program. For information contact the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association at 907-770-6339, www.bbrsda.com. —E.L.

unofficial campaign to bring greater recognition to the role fishing has played in the state's history.

"The fishing industry was born in Alaska in 1878," Troll points out. "Bristol Bay started up in 1884—long before anyone had ever heard of the Klondike."

Lack of recognition has long vexed Bristol Bay advocates, who watched with some envy as other fisheries (notably Copper River) marketed themselves into nationally known food brands. Millions of gourmets eagerly await the annual arrival of the first Copper River salmon, flown fresh into restaurants and shops across the country by Alaska Airlines in early- to mid-May. Yet few Americans know of the much larger Bristol Bay run—or even where Bristol Bay is.

What's more, according to its partisans, Bristol Bay salmon are every bit as high-quality as those from any other fishery.

That lack of awareness is beginning to change. Bristol Bay fishery advocates are campaigning for market recognition so their products will be sought directly by consumers, not just sold anonymously as retail shelf and freezer items. As with most Alaska fisheries, very little salmon is shipped fresh out of Bristol Bay. Most of the catch is canned or, more commonly these days, frozen. And Bristol Bay salmon never fetches the high-dollar prices garnered by the better-known "branded" salmon runs. In fact, much of the area's salmon is packaged with little or no indication of its origin.

The marketing campaign to boost food industry and consumer recognition of Bristol Bay salmon is making progress. Among its proponents is Trout Unlimited, which flew a group of chefs to Bristol Bay last summer to learn about the fishery; the organization has also fostered Bristol Bay education events in cities such as Seattle, Portland and San Francisco.

"I have to admit a lightbulb went on for me—frozen wild salmon, which is what we serve in the off-season, is better than farm-raised," says Lisa Schroeder, executive chef and owner of two Portland restaurants, Mother's Bistro & Bar and Mama Mia Trattoria. "And Bristol Bay salmon is per-

fect for us, since we are value-oriented restaurants.”

Last summer, Schroeder declared July “Salmon Mother” month and prepared a menu featuring Bristol Bay salmon beignets and grilled Bristol Bay salmon with sesame-peanut noodles. Guests love learning about wild Alaska salmon, she says, and

“I spent two months as a deckhand ... when I was 18, made \$2,400, and I thought I was the richest guy on Earth.”

her staff is enthusiastic about promoting it.

“Salmon nurtures our region,”

Schroeder says. “I’m a citizen of the Northwest and of this planet, and I’m happy to help people understand that they can make a difference with their pocketbooks.”

“**Pocketbooks**” and “**planet**” are actually two key words when it comes to the Bristol Bay fishery: Each summer thousands of workers from around the world journey to the area to staff the fish-processing plants. One of these is Leader Creek Fisheries, on the Naknek River just 2 ½ miles upstream from the near-shore saltwater in which David McRae fishes. Here, in vast buildings where processing lines typically hum 24 hours a day from late June to mid-August, salmon are cleaned, sorted and packaged for shipment around the world. Most of the sockeye are frozen. The roe from sockeye, as well as from chum salmon, is lightly salted and shipped frozen to Japan, where it’s a treasured delicacy known as *ikura*. The plant’s pride and joy is a new vacuum saltwater pipeline that transports the fish, efficiently but delicately, 900 feet from the docked tenders up to the processing lines 90 feet in elevation above river level.

Leader Creek employs 400 workers from the United States, Russia, Philippines, Ukraine,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 134

FROM PAGE 42 Ecuador, Colombia and more—a total of 17 countries—who handle more than 500,000 pounds of fish daily, shipped principally to U.S. markets, as well as to Asia. Many Leader Creek seasonal workers are college students, as was Norm Van Vactor, the company's general manager, when he first came to Bristol Bay in 1975.

"I spent two months as a deckhand on a tender when I was 18, made \$2,400, and I thought I was the richest guy on Earth," Van Vactor recalls.

Now that he manages an entire plant devoted to the fishery, Van Vactor is more attuned to the occasional vagaries of the fishery—the runs do vary in size, from 2.4 million fish in 1973 to the record run of 62.4 million sockeye in 1980. The arrival time can vary, as well. Usually it's the very end of June, but ...

"It all depends on water temperatures in the near-shore and the rivers. If it's too cold, or too hot, the fish will school up offshore, then surge in all at once. It can be too big for us to handle.

"But that's part of the magic of it," he says.

"And, of course, with a plant full of hundreds of students, if the fish don't arrive, then the plant manager—that's me—turns into a summer camp director, trying to keep up morale."

That's not to say Bristol Bay isn't an interesting place. Wilderness fly-fishing and wildlife-watching are popular activities, and the region is colorful, to say the least. The one road between King Salmon and the river's end at Naknek—the 13-mile "Alaska Peninsula Highway"—may be the shortest U.S. road called a highway. It's a two-lane strip of asphalt with as many dips and rolls as the fairways on Alaska golf courses; it has more espresso stands than miles. Nothing resembling a new car is to be seen here; fishermen seem to actually compete to see who can keep the oldest, rust-pocked, dent-scarred pickup running.

While about 1,200 people live here in winter, King Salmon's summer population soars past 7,000 in summer—Van Vactor spends the off-season at company offices in Seattle, commuting to Bristol Bay in spring

and summer in his own 1958 Cessna 182. Most Bristol Bay fisheries workers, though, fly in and out on commercial carriers—Alaska Airlines operates daily flights in summer to both King Salmon and Dillingham, the twin-bookend main towns of the region.

McRae lives in Lake Clark and Anchorage, and in Seattle. He assures me that the average six-week fishing season is not uniformly as mild and pleasant as what I've

"Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after."

experienced on a late June morning. "I've been out here in howling winds with five-foot waves and sleet going sideways," McRae reports. "It's a little different then."

McRae started fishing Bristol Bay while in high school, to make money for college. In a good year he and his boat partner pull in 100,000 pounds of salmon.

McRae has a degree in sociology, and devoted some postgraduate time to studying architecture, but is more accurately described as a philosopher-fisherman, an honorable profession that dates back 350 years to Izaak Walton and runs from Henry David Thoreau to Norman Maclean and Roderick Haig-Brown, the great Canadian salmon naturalist of Campbell River fame.

"Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after," Thoreau observed. Apply this to Bristol Bay and I think of Norm Van Vactor and David McRae. Van Vactor came to the bay more by chance than by design and has spent his entire professional life here. McRae has deep family roots: His grandmother was Eskimo and his grandfather arrived in Alaska in the 1890s.

"A man likes to feel good about what he's doing," says McRae, the high-angle Alaska midsummer sun highlighting his ruddy cheeks. "I've always said I'll only fish as long as it's fun." He bends over to pick

up a bailer made of an old oil can and douses the aluminum boat—the *Jay Hammond*, a family boat named after McRae’s uncle, a former Alaska governor and conservationist—with seawater to keep it clean. “Looks like I’m still here.”

Van Vactor, for his part, has degrees in Chinese language studies and business, but has spent his entire adult life “following the fish”—up north in early April for a brief herring fishery, then back and forth until the end of summer. In reflective moments he likes to tell a story from one of his early years at Bristol Bay. He too came north to make money for college, and afterward was assistant plant manager at a major fish processor. One day in 1980 he was on the dock when he saw five boats headed upriver. Though the season had weeks to run yet, these boats were clearly headed home rather than fishing. He called one of the boats on the radio and chatted with a local Native leader, Moxie Andrew, traditional chief of New Stuyahok village.

“Something wrong?” Van Vactor asked Andrew.

“No, not at all. Thanks for a good season,” he replied.

“But there are thousands of fish still to be caught,” Van Vactor protested.

“Norm, I’ve caught what we need. I’ve paid my bills and put a little aside. Let’s just leave those fish for another year.”

Bristol Bay advocates like to point out that, as long as its human users and beneficiaries protect and cherish the fishery and its home, the fish will return for “another year” forever, as long as the waters run and the sun turns north each summer. ▲

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GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines provides daily service to the fishing communities of Dillingham and King Salmon. Book tickets at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Alaska, visit the Web or call 866-500-5511.