

# Green Scene: Welcoming Back the Salmon

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, November 7, 2008, page 24)

[photograph]

[caption: Participants in the annual Hyde Creek Salmon festival in Port Coquitlam listen to a presentation from federal fisheries biologists. The next festival is next weekend.]

[Title in Tri-City News: Welcome back, salmon]

Like people all across Canada this time of year, we are enjoying the spectacular colours of autumn and the crunch of fallen leaves beneath our feet when out for a stroll. Here on the west coast, we can also enjoy another seasonal treat – an opportunity to view large salmon moving upstream in small creeks. We may even get a glimpse of a pair spawning.

Now that the rains have returned in full force, salmon should be nosing their way up many of our local creeks. For weeks, most of these salmon, returned from a long ocean journey, have been holding at the mouths of these creeks, waiting in the shadows for a pulse of rainwater to trigger their movement upstream. The rainwater acts as a signal; when the rains come, mature salmon instinctively know there will be sufficient water for them to swim upstream, find a spawning place and then die, their life cycle finally and perfectly complete.

You might be lucky enough to see a pair of salmon spawning in your neighbourhood stream. As is the case with some other species, it is mostly females who do the housework. They are the ones who dig the redd, i.e., the nest, in an area where they can find sufficient gravel of suitable size. This can be a challenge in urban streams as many are often deficient in gravel. The females dig redds by facing upstream, turning on their side, arching their backs and displacing gravel with sweeps of their tails. Sometimes, competing females in adjacent territories attack each other. A female preparing a redd will attract the attention of males who move in beside her, stay slightly downstream and sometimes make half-hearted attempts to dig. There can be competition between males as well.

When a pair is ready to spawn, they make quivering motions and release their eggs and milt, i.e., sperm. Fertilization takes place in the water and must happen within seconds as the eggs quickly “harden” and can no longer be penetrated by sperm. The female will make a few more digs to cover the eggs and may move on to lay more eggs slightly upstream. Knowing that all this activity is happening in our local streams right now should remind us to keep children and pets out of streams to avoid damage to delicate salmon eggs. Although we are in the habit of calling the buildings beside streams in which we artificially rear young salmon as “hatcheries”, it is really the streams that are the hatcheries; the buildings we construct are simply the fallbacks in case the real thing is harmed.

We are fortunate to have so many creeks in the Tri-cities area with salmon in them. In large part, this is due to the diligent work of many volunteers who have restored stream habitat and protected riparian forests. Most small creeks can be expected to have at least a few large chum move into the lower reaches to spawn. Chum are the true small stream specialists amongst the several species of Pacific salmon. Because young chum move downstream into estuaries as soon as they hatch in the spring, chum

can take advantage of streams that don't even have water in them during the summer. Year-round streams with more reliable flows are likely to have a few coho spawn in them as well although coho populations, in general, are diminished now for reasons that are not completely understood. Larger rivers like the Coquitlam River offer a greater diversity of habitat and, thus, can attract more species of Pacific salmon including chinook and pink as well as chum and coho. In the Fraser River system, pink spawn only in odd years which means there will be no pink salmon in the Coquitlam River this year.

One of the best places to view spawning salmon is in the lower reaches of Hyde Creek which flows from Burke Mountain into DeBoville Slough. On Sunday, November 16 between 11 am and 3 pm at the annual Hyde Creek Salmon Festival, the public will have an opportunity to tour the hatchery, view the creek and, at the Hyde Creek Recreation Centre, visit displays from a number of environmental groups. It's a great opportunity to enjoy one of the special fall features of the west coast.