



THE INDIAN CREEK SALMON RUN

By Douglas H. Frazer

Salmon have arrived in Indian Creek. Yes, that's right. Chinook salmon are swimming from Lake Michigan upstream through the Milwaukee River and, at its confluence with Indian Creek (located in River Hills near Bradley Road's intersection with the river), up Indian Creek at least as far as Seneca Road. No, this is not to the scale of the Pacific Northwest salmon runs, but still, for us, it's exciting.

Salmon is the common name for several species of ray-finn fish. Salmon are native to tributaries of the North Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Many species of salmon, including Chinook and Coho, have been introduced in non-native environments such as the Great Lakes.

Salmon are mostly anadromous: They hatch in fresh water, migrate to the ocean, and then return to fresh water to reproduce. However, populations of several species, like the ones in the Great Lakes and its tributaries, are restricted to fresh water throughout their lives. Legend has it that the fish returns to the spot from which it is hatched to spawn. Science has shown this to be largely true. (This



“homing” behavior is connected to olfactory memory.)

Returning salmon also may “stray” and spawn in different freshwater systems. This may be the case with the salmon in Indian Creek.

Starting in the 1960s, salmon populations were established in all the Great Lakes. Originally Coho stocks were planted to control the growing population of the non-native alewife. It worked. The salmon helped balance the ecosystem and created a multi-billion-dollar sport fishery. Now, Chinook, Atlantic, and Coho salmon are annually stocked in each of the Great Lakes by bordering states and provinces.

A study in 1984 showed the Milwaukee River was still an inhospitable habitat for the salmon. The problem was runoff from upstream cattle pastures, waste from meat processing plants, human sewage, and upstream dams.

Things have gotten much better. The North Avenue dam was removed in 1997 along with the Estabrook dam in 2018. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, together with its constituent municipalities, operate facilities (including the Deep Tunnel) and manage projects that have dramatically reduced sewerage overflows. The Milwaukee Riverkeeper, and other like-minded organizations, have mobilized residents to protect the watershed.

Given these enhanced stewardship efforts, fish numbers are consistently rising. The salmon are in the watershed, and their runs have increased in strength. The best months to see the salmon runs are September and October for Chinook salmon, and October and November for Coho salmon.

Back to those big fish in Indian Creek: it's not some kind of prank. Those fish are salmon. The salmon are spawning; once their reproductive work is done, they die. With a little luck, the raccoons will clean it all up.

The ecosystem, it seems, is never in equipoise. Prey species, including salmon, are declining because invasive zebra and quagga mussels are interfering with the Great Lakes biomass. Fishery managers are contemplating yet another rebalancing of the species they stock.

But the salmon in Fox Point, we hope, are here to stay.

Douglas H. Frazer is a Fox Point resident and neighborhood contributor as well as the village president. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of the Village, the village board, other village board members, or Best Version Media, LLC.

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