

Adams River Salmon Run
Canadian Places feature
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Crimson salmon struggle in the light blue water under a canopy of golden-leaved trees lining the banks. The October sky above ranges from cloudless cobalt blue to overcast gray.

After swimming more than 400 kilometres along the Fraser River from the Pacific Ocean, after surviving a gauntlet of killer whales, seals, drift-nets, sport anglers, native fishermen and crushing rapids, the salmon complete the odyssey to their birth waters by creating new life and then giving up their own. Their rotting bodies provide life-giving nutrients to the ecosystem that nurtures their young.

It's a dramatic, colorful and emotional event – and it never fails to draw a crowd.

Up to 150,000 people are expected to show up at Roderick Haig-Brown Provincial Park near Squilax, B.C., in October to celebrate the Salute to the Sockeye festival. The Adams River Salmon Society, along with federal and provincial government officials, co-hosts the event. It takes place every four years when the cycle of nature brings the largest sockeye runs.

“We get people from around the world and they are all so excited,” enthuses society president Vic Calvert, 66.

“It's a spectacle they never forget.”

On a cool and sunny late afternoon last September, Calvert, a retired police officer, walked along a riverside trail in the park, about 70 kilometres east of Kamloops.

Calvert stops frequently to bend his imposing six-foot, six-inch frame for a better view of red sockeyes finning peacefully in the clear, shallow water. Several other visitors stroll past, talking in reverent tones as they scan the river in hopes of spotting spawning action. But although there's an above-average number of three-year-old male salmon in the river, numbers are relatively low because 2005 was the third year in the species' four-year spawning cycle.

It will be a much different scene this autumn, which is the peak, or dominant, year of the cycle in terms of salmon numbers. In the last dominant run, in 2002, 3.6 million sockeyes spawned and died here.

The primarily four-year-old salmon that show up in the Adams River look a lot different than when they started their journey about three weeks before. When they leave the ocean, they are strong, sleek and silver-grey and weigh from three to seven kilograms. But then they stop eating and live off their body fat as they travel upstream an average of 25 to 30 kilometres daily.

By the time they reach the Adams, they have turned bright red with pea-green heads, their bodies weak and ravaged. Males have developed grotesque Quasimodo-like hump backs and prominent hook-like snouts with protruding teeth.

Females fight for position in the riverbed to spawn in shallow riffles. They use their tails to excavate small holes in the gravel into which each lays about 4,000 eggs.

Males aggressively chase away rival suitors before returning to the spawning bed to fertilize the eggs. Mission accomplished, the exhausted fish bury the nests with gravel and stand guard. Occasionally males will find another female to breed with.

After spawning, the fish waste away - fins moving slowly, gills weakly opening and closing- until life finally leaves them. Then they tilt onto their sides and sink to the bottom or float downstream. As the fish decompose, they become food for gulls, black bears, bald eagles and other wildlife. In death they also give life to their young by injecting rich nutrients into the river. Insects and other microscopic organisms feed on the rotting corpses, and are in turn eaten by baby salmon – called fry – that emerge from the gravel towards April.

It's fitting that the Salute to the Sockeye celebration – which this year runs from October 1-22 – is held in a park named after one of Canada's pre-eminent conservationists, Roderick Haig-Brown. The late writer, judge, conservationist and fly fisher from Campbell River, B.C. spent his lifetime lobbying for the protection of wild fish stocks and the rivers they inhabit. The park and the festival itself are a tribute to his efforts.

Thanksgiving weekend will likely be the busiest period, with a peak of 15,000 visitors expected each day. True to Haig-Brown's mission, public education is key to the event. Guided tours and displays are provided by federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, with guides from Thompson Rivers University and the B.C. Wildlife Park.

Visitors can hike or mountain bike along 26 kilometres of trails starting from the mouth of the Adams River at the west end of Shuswap Lake. Salmon can be seen all along the bank-side trail. Wooden platforms with guardrails have been erected to make it easier and safer for families to view the salmon. Picnic tables are set up at more popular stops.

Among the visitors this year will be a young family from nearby Blind Bay, a Shuswap Lake community along the Trans-Canada Highway just a 20-minute drive to the east. Nicole Jean-Williams is excited at the prospect of witnessing the spectacle with husband Rod Williams, and children Nolan and Lauren.

On the first day of October last year, she and Nolan, who had just turned two, picnicked in the park, periodically looking up from munching sandwiches to peer at spawning sockeyes. The active toddler happily chucked stones into the river in between talking enthusiastically about the big red salmon and how he'd like to fish for them. Nolan had started fishing a few months earlier and is hooked.

Jean-Williams came to the Adams River for the first time in 2001. Rod brought her and she was awed by the blanket of scarlet fish that covered the riverbed in spots. "You could have stepped across the river on them," she recalls.

Now the couple is eager to return this October to give their children their first look at millions of spawning sockeyes, and to share with them the stark testament to nature's power and vulnerability. Jean-Williams plans to use the experience to explain the circle of life, that death is a part of life and the species lives on despite of – or sometimes because of – it.

It's an unavoidable truth for both people and salmon.

IF YOU GO:

To reach Roderick Haig-Brown Provincial Park, turn south off the Trans-Canada Highway at Squilax, about 70 kilometres east of Kamloops, and follow the signs. There is no admission charge, but a minimum parking fee of \$5 will be charged during the Salute to the Sockeye celebration from October 1-22. Weather can vary from cool and rainy to hot and sunny, so plan accordingly. For more information, including a map of the site, visit www.salmonsociety.com.