

Shooting Salmon

by Matthew Sullivan

Freshwater photography used to be much less mainstream than it is now. Freshwater aquatic realms and creatures have seen a boom in popularity, hopefully leading to greater awareness and protections for these imperiled environments and their inhabitants.

Often, when we decide to shoot pictures underwater, we fly off to far-flung tropical destinations for spectacular reefs, or mucky paradises, or adventures with megafauna like sharks or whales.

Recently I've found myself drawn to a different pursuit. Take the salt out of the water, ditch the scuba gear, and focus on the usually overlooked world of freshwater photography and, more specifically, on salmonids.

My obsession began in Alaska in 2018. During a trip to Ravencroft Lodge in Prince William sound, ostensibly for salmon sharks, we got skunked on said sharks. Though they were the main target of the trip, we didn't let that stop us and decided to pursue some other interesting wildlife. To salvage our time, one afternoon we decided to explore a small mountain creek that was holding a decent sized school of massive chum salmon. This was my first experience photographing a salmon run and I was hooked right away. It was a surprisingly physically exhausting experience. The chums were gathered in a plunge pool with a ripping current and while the fish had no problem hanging in place as they waited to move upstream, my only option to hold myself steady was to wrap my legs as tightly as I could around a fallen tree. Despite



Pink Salmon- Vancouver Island, BC, Canada. Nikon D500, Nikonos 13mm RS, Nauticam Housing, 1/10, f9, ISO160. Healthy pink salmon surrounding a male that is beginning to rot. It is remarkable what these fish live through before they die and the worse the fish look, often the more interesting subjects they make.

that and despite the frigid, fast-flowing water, it was an absolute blast. The fish mostly ignore you - they surround you and, once in a while, they'll take a chomp at you or your gear in the heat of their hormonal rages. Salmonids in general will largely ignore a photographer during spawning season. Typically you just become another object in their environment and making images is like shooting fish in a barrel (pun intended).

Since that first chum salmon experience in Alaska, I've been lucky enough to experience a pink salmon run in Vancouver, British Columbia, spawning brook trout in North Carolina, and Kokanee salmon in Connecticut. Each of these shoots has its own challenges but they provide some unique imaging opportunities of not often photographed fish. So few photographers pay attention to freshwater environments despite often



Chum Salmon- Prince William Sound, AK, USA. Nikon D4, Nikonos 13mm RS, Nauticam Housing, 1/40, f13, ISO250. A male Chum Salmon turning his aggression towards my lens. He wasn't going specifically at me. They'll attack anything that is even remotely close to their mouths. He bit another male, a rock, my leg, and my port in the span of 3 seconds.



Mated Pair of Pink Salmon - Vancouver Island, BC, Canada. Nikon D500, Nikon 10.5mm Fisheye, Nauticam Housing, Nauticam 140mm Dome 1/10, f11, ISO250. Salmon are one of the best subjects for natural history and behavior images. Here, two pink Salmon guard their redd. The male kept himself positioned on the protective side of the female and viciously attacked any fish that drifted too close.

having to travel far less to access them.

For the shoots featured, I used either a Nikon D4 in a Nauticam NA-D4s housing, or a Nikon D500 in a Nauticam NA-D500 housing. When photographing salmonids, the action comes fast so taking your eye from the viewfinder wastes time and image opportunities. Having intuitive ergonomics is crucial so you don't have to look away and fumble around with housing functions. The LED Flash

trigger (separate for the D4, built-in for the D500) is also crucial for allowing rapid fire triggering of your strobes to make sure you don't miss time waiting for on board flashes (which neither the D4 nor D500 have anyway) to recycle.

For freshwater shooting I've found a small port to be most conducive. Often you are in quite shallow water and don't have a lot of space to maneuver so a large dome would hinder image-making. That said, if you have the right spot, a large



Brook Trout - Great Smoky Mountains National Park, NC, USA. Nikon D500, Nikonos 13mm RS, Nauticam Housing 1/10, f10, ISO100. More skittish than salmon, but no less photogenic. Trout are beautiful fish and during breeding season they develop spectacular colors.

dome would be great for split level pictures. For all the images featured, I used either the Nikon 10.5mm fisheye behind the Nauticam 140mm dome port, or my Nikonos 13mm which works flawlessly with Nauticam with the proper adapter. Optics like the Nauticam WACP or WWL may also be suited for salmon shooting as the flexibility and slightly narrower field of view vs a fisheye can be hugely beneficial and allow for a greater variety of pictures.

I encourage people to go check

out their local creeks, lakes, ponds, or rivers. There are some amazing things down there to shoot. Just because there isn't any salt in the water doesn't mean there aren't worthwhile subjects. Perhaps that will also lead to protection of special freshwater areas that would otherwise be degraded or destroyed.

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