

BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE

Marlon Bessie casts into the waters of the Chilkoot River at Haines, Alaska. Photo by Ari Slatkol.

Tatshen Lake: If you're travelling north from Whitehorse and heading towards Carmacks, you're also heading towards Tatshen Lake. Keep going on Highway 2 about 10 kilometres past Carmacks. When you reach the lake, start casting for pike. Ideal for road-side fishing.

Million Dollar Falls: Head south from Haines Junction on the Haines Highway. As you near the Alaska-Yukon border, you'll come across the turn-off for the Million Dollar Falls campground at the Takhanne River. Besides excellent views of the St. Elias mountains, you'll also find good fishing opportunities for grayling and dolly varden below the falls. The Takhanne River is also known for king salmon in early July. Since you're in the area, try your luck on the Tatshen-shini and Klukshu rivers, both of which are known for their salmon runs. Be sure to check the fishing regulations. And do be careful. This is rizzly bear country.

Alaska Salmon: A Reflection

BY SCOTT DUKE

We fly into Whitehorse from wherever we happen to live — Yellowknife, Calgary, Vancouver. We pick up the rental cars and our Alaska sport fishing licences from Glen at Sport North. Then we start driving. We have escaped our jobs on what is usually the last warm day of September. The leaves are turning and the sun is high as we head west towards the mountains of Kluane and then south from Haines Junction to Haines, Alaska.

The road between Haines Junction and Haines is sometimes thick with people down to the States for a weekend of sightseeing and shopping. But we don't want to shop. We want to fish for one, maybe two weeks straight, far past the point of boredom and exhaustion and giddiness and disgust. We want to be out there, standing on the edge of the river, fishing for salmon.

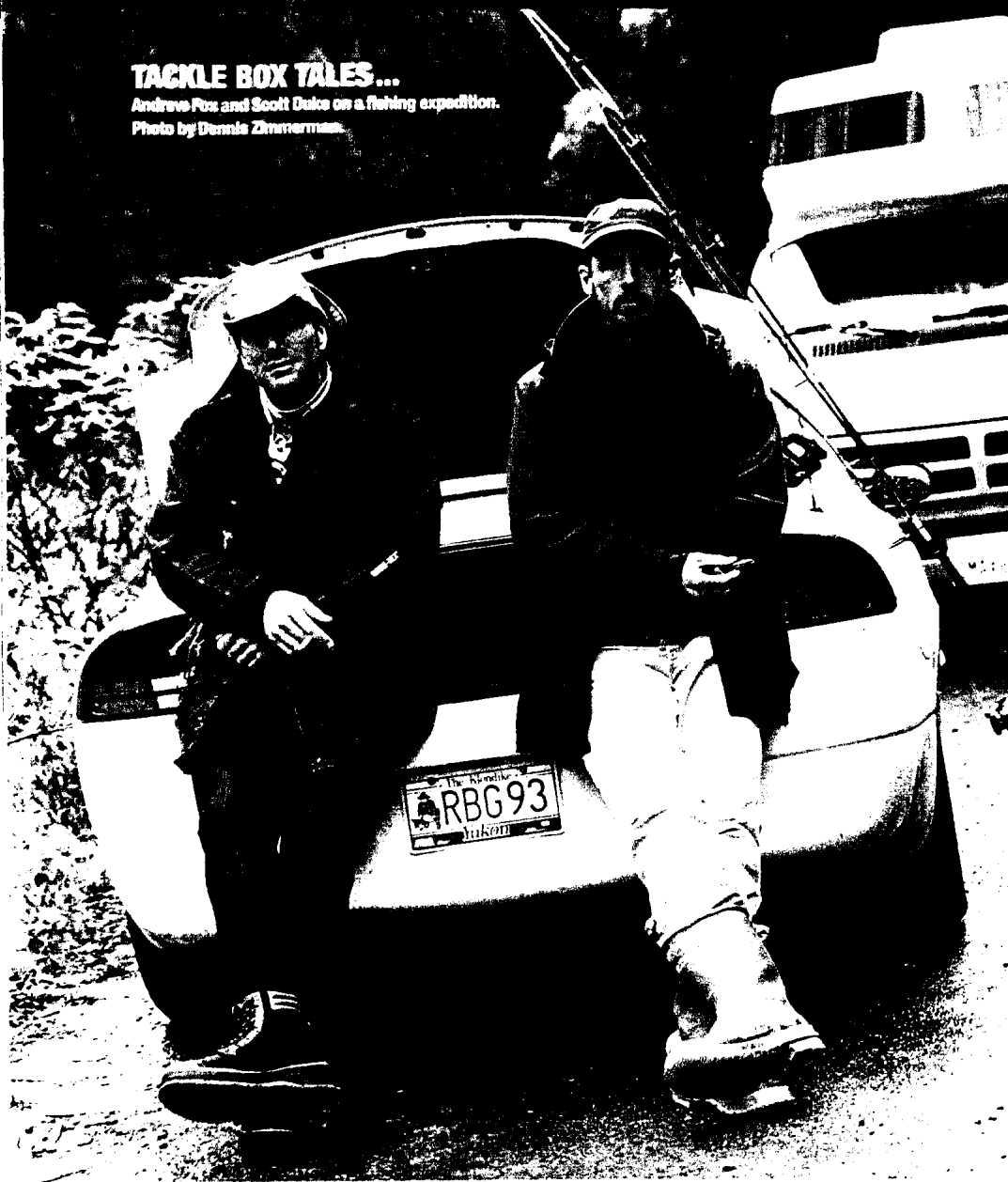
Marlon originally discovered Haines for us. Eight years ago, a friend from Whitehorse told him about the fishing, drew him a crude map and

pointed the way. Marlon soon turned the rest of us on to what is some of the best fishing in the North, if not the world. Since then we have returned to Haines every fall to fish for coho salmon. Marlon, Andrew, Ari, Ray and Robin and I come from Yellowknife, Calvin and James from Vancouver, Mike and Brian from Calgary, Dennis from Whitehorse. New guys come along every year, eager to share the trip and the excitement of catching that first salmon.

Alaska is a wilderness of water, but Haines is located at a particular convergence of rivers and ocean that offer some of the best stream fishing anywhere. The town is situated on Portage Cove, Chilkoot Inlet, on the upper arm of the Lynn Canal. Both the Chilkoot and Chilkat rivers flow past Haines and their many tributaries are central to the salmon spawn in southeastern Alaska. We could come to Haines throughout the summer and fall and be guaranteed at least

TACKLE BOX TALES...

Andrew Fox and Scott Duke on a fishing expedition.
Photo by Dennis Zimmerman



one salmon run. Sockeye run in the Chilkoot River late June through August. Pink salmon return to Lutak Inlet and the Chilkoot River in August and September. From mid-September to late October the coho run in the Chilkoot and Chilkat rivers.

There are cutthroat trout year-round in the Chilkat and Mosquito Lakes, dolly varden and the occasional rainbow trout in the lakes and rivers from early spring to late fall as they follow the salmon spawns.

But we come for the coho. There is something about the coho, some combination of size and strength and

poise that few other fish possess. They are spectacular fighters and the most acrobatic of the Pacific salmon. Coho are the reason that, like migrating birds, anglers flock to Haines every autumn. Coho are the reason that we will set aside work and wives and children to stand in cold rivers for long hours extending a line to the unknowable.

The Chilkat River runs along the highway into town, and there are many places to fish accessible from the highway. Locals and visitors alike each have their own secret spots scattered through the bushes along the road. One of our favorite spots is just

before the airport, near a stand of aspens, where the Chilkat forms a wide sandy tidal flat criss-crossed by ever-changing channels and pools. The Chilkoot River is a short drive north of town, along Lutak Inlet past the ferry terminal to Chilkoot Lake Campground, a state park. The road to the park follows a stretch of the river for about a mile until it ends at Chilkoot Lake. The river can be fished only a few feet from the road pretty much along its entire length from the lake to the inlet; the lake can be fished from boats and canoes.

Coho come into the rivers with the tides; we find fishing the best in the early morning at first light, and then later in the afternoon. Once in the river, the coho tend to rest deep in pools where the current is light before moving on to spawn. They seem to strike more out of irritation than hunger, and the strikes can be gentle.

We have all learned the hard way that catching coho involves a combination of skill and perseverance and dumb luck. I have spent days lashing casts in the rivers and catching nothing, then one morning Calvin stands three feet away from me and catches his limit before breakfast. Finally catching a coho is one of life's pure ecstasies, an event that transcends the usual frenzy and exoticism of angling. Few other experiences can match the joy, the jolt, the open-mouthed wonder, the flashing silver at the end of your line, the reel singing and spraying as a salmon comes alive at the centre of your world.

Then again, not catching coho in Alaska is almost as good as catching them. Sometimes, when the rain is cold and my back sore and the fishing slow, I put down my rod and sit on a rock by the river and sip Irish whiskey. There are salmon in the river but I am not going to catch the salmon. I am going to watch the river and the mountains and a bald eagle in a tall fir tree. And I try not to think about anything at all. ✪