

The Stream Comes Alive at Night

I'm nervously berating myself before the first shift. Sitting in the brush, in the dark, for hours with a guy that's a complete stranger, sounds like the start of a cautionary tale my mom would have told.

A lesson in foolish decisions.

I remind myself that my Leatherman is on quick draw, my car is nearby and I'm sporting an non-permeable garment possessing (as the label advertises) the "most durable seam technology available."

Though apprehensive at the start, as soon as I meet the team all fear dissolves. The streambank, I learn, is where real, quality people come out of the woodwork.

The sound of raking rocks bounces off alder and cottonwood trunks as the light inches toward a deeper darkness on the gradient of gray. Another volunteer and I stand mid-stream amidst a steady sprinkle of rain, examining the trap with determined focus. Gears shift as hands crank the unruly metal trap slightly up or down, racing to get the equipment to sit level before darkness falls.

Tonight, the goal is frustratingly elusive. We rake, crank, examine. Crank up, rake again and discuss options. We're aiming to have a knuckle of water flowing evenly across the trap, but we may have to compromise for a little more on the right side, a little less on the left.

A dog walker peers curiously down from the sidewalk above. Our hip waders and layers of fleece and Gore-Tex are a bit out of place in this million-dollar neighborhood on the shores of Lake Sammamish, a half hour outside of Seattle. After a bit more tweaking, the trap is "close enough" and we begin to measure efficiency, which changes each night depending on the water swiftness and depth. We drop a net full of carefully counted PowerBait upstream where, months earlier, a spawning salmon was spotted nesting.

The neon green marshmallows swirl in eddies, slowly floating and bobbing downstream. If the PowerBait was “clear pine needles with eyes,” as Mark Taylor of TU’s Three Rivers chapter described the baby salmon during training, how many would we catch?

Camp chairs emerge from a locker box on the riverbank. A worn pencil jots down stream flow, water and air temperature, weather and trap efficiency.

Hérons fly high above, heading home to roost. Bats flash by in unpredictable zoomy-wiggles. Fingers are silently crossed that the kokanee fry, which swim at night to avoid predation, will emerge soon.

Like the splashing stream headed down from the mountains towards the lake, the conversation bounces around various topics, advancing and bending, becoming stronger and more connected as time goes on. Though we are from different walks of life (retirees, college students, mid-career professionals, housewives), in many ways we are all the same. It is a special, beautiful kind of soul that is drawn to this, that is excited to sacrifice sleep to sit for hours in the dark, cold and rain to count baby fish.

People who love creation, who rest in the peace and satisfaction that responding to the call of stewardship brings.

Tens of thousands of kokanee, a unique freshwater salmon, historically lived in Lake Sammamish, yet in 2018, only 19 returned to spawn. The Lake Sammamish Kokanee Work Group formed 15-years-ago to conserve the “little red fish.”

Each spring, a collection of gentle souls emerges, logging thousands of volunteer hours running traps at three streams feeding the lake.

The first hour comes and goes. The trap remains empty.

We record a row of zeros in the log, switch off headlamps, and settle back into riverbank conversation.

Laughter rises above the rushing water as we nerd out over our county’s excellent COVID-19 graphics. We all watch the same nature documentaries

and are delighted by caddis fly larvae art.

An older gentleman recounts his winding career journey. Each job is like an arrow shot at a target, he says. As you get to know the tools, each successive arrow comes closer to center, that elusive bullseye of impactful, loving work. He eventually hit it.

I will, too.

Another hour somehow passes. Nets come off ledges. A counter slips into a pocket, just in case there’s a full trap this time.

It’s been completely dark for hours. Pedestrians on the street above have long returned home. All is quiet, save the splash of boots entering the creek. A crank turns and the large, rectangular, open-topped box begins rising above the swirling surface. Headlamps focus. Between bits of bark and alder flower debris, teeny flashes dart away from the light, lurking in shifting shadows and cold metal corners.

Success.



This haul, the trap holds over 50 kokanee fry.

“Come here little guy” a soft voice calls as a baby fish is gently counted, scooped out and released downstream. The fry will be in the lake in minutes, where they’ll be up against larger hungry fish, rising lake temperatures and pollutants from ever-increasing urbanization.

Each subsequent hour passes more quickly. We talk of other fry evenings.

The night of 200 fry.

The year nobody saw a single one.

The sculpins using the trap like a buffet.



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The lamprey’s mesmerizing mode of motility.

No evening is complete without hearing the story of the trapped angry beaver.

Like a great campfire tale, it’s never quite clear when the beaver appeared, who actually witnessed it or how the ordeal ended. Everyone just knows it happened.

Yawning, the old guard declares it past his bedtime, leaving the 11:15 p.m. pull for the youngsters. A few minutes after his car pulls away, an energetic splashing silences conversation. Alerted ears expectantly listen.

Visions of beavers flash briefly through our minds.

A light shines into a still stream.

After a moment, a boot-sized fish is spotted. We return to our chairs, phones in hand, googling to ID it. Peamouth

chub. A native minnow. The name rings a bell. There was a story at the training, how on certain nights they takeover, spawning.

It is as if our imaginations somehow conjure it into being.

The splashing sounds resume.

We leave the bank to shine a light down from the sidewalk. Peamouth are everywhere. The creek is suddenly alive with fish, stacked together, pressing upstream.

We decide to pull the trap while there’s still a chance of reaching it. The peamouth are not afraid, bumping against feet and ramming into the backs of legs, tickling. We count two

kokanee fry and release them into a perilous looking stream now appearing equal parts water and chub. As the trap cranks up, masses of fish surge into the vacated streambed real estate.

Chairs are folded and returned to the locker, the logbook photographed and emailed to the coordinator.

Pulling off gear in the glow cast from open car doors, we contemplate the mysteries and wonders witnessed, the stories we now have from our night on the stream.

Fry trapping kept me up well past bedtime, yet each night I left feeling energized. Satisfied.

A peculiar magic comes from

volunteering. A sense of complex beauty, of restored hope in humanity.

Hours after my last fry night, I felt compelled to schedule my waders for new adventures.

Now I’m catching invasive frogs. 🐸

List of Sources

Aaron Kunkler. “Low numbers of Lake Sammamish kokanee raise fears of extinction” *The Bellevue Reporter*. May 17 2018 <https://www.lakesammamishfriends.org/blog/2018/5/21/low-numbers-of-lake-sammamish-kokanee-raise-fears-of-extinction>

Lake Sammamish Kokanee Work Group <https://king-county.gov/services/environment/animals-and-plants/salmon-and-trout/kokanee/kokanee-workgroup.aspx>