



SWIMMING *with salmon*

A watery adventure in Campbell River

BY • HANS TAMMEMAGI

Encased in a wetsuit and a life jacket that the guide has cinched up too tight, I'm bobbing in an inflated raft on the Campbell River on northern Vancouver Island. The river drains into Discovery Passage at the northwest end of the Strait of Georgia at the City of Campbell River, a destination accessed via Central Mountain Air.

It is a perfect, cloudless day in late September and the river is running

fast. I'm nervous because I'm about to snorkel downstream among spawning salmon, which are headed in the other direction.

Lowering myself onto a rock ledge, I adjust to the shock of the cold (8 degrees C) water and then push into the river. The visual horizon shortens to about seven metres. Shafts of light angle down through the bluish, silty water like an array of laser beams. Large fish flit into view

and then quickly exit. These are Chinook, the biggest and sportiest of the five salmon species; they range from two to three feet in length and from 20 to more than 50 pounds. I'm in ecstasy.

I start down the river floating along like a cork; the raft hovers close behind like a mother hen. With recent rains, the river has swollen and the flow is more than 80 cubic metres per second, about three times

faster than usual. This is definitely not placid Caribbean snorkelling. There is an edge, a rush of adrenaline. Seaweed on the river bottom all point downstream like weather vanes showing the direction of the river's flow toward the ocean. I float quickly past cobbles and boulders.

Our destination is the estuary, about four kilometres downstream. Occasionally, my guide from the local rafting company that organized



this adventure, hauls me into the raft so we can traverse a particularly fast-tumbling stretch of water. Then I plunge right back in.

Hundreds of Chinook pass by, some right underneath me.

About 8,000 spawn in the Campbell River each fall, explains the guide. "But that's nothing," he continues. "In August about 800,000 pinks cram the river."

Floating along, I ponder this amazing phenomenon. At this very moment, salmon are struggling up thousands of streams and rivers along the entire BC coast. Often, they swim hundreds of kilometres inland, where they begin and end their life cycle, with their bodies providing vital nourishment to the forest and its creatures. Salmon are indeed the lifeblood of the province. I feel as though I'm swimming inside the artery of some giant living organism.

We pass the piled stones of an abandoned fish weir, one of several where Indigenous people once used cedar nets to capture salmon. Today, fly fishers cast their lines sinuously into the river, pursuing the elusive Tye (a Chinook weighing more than 30 pounds).

Through the bushes I glimpse the home of the late Roderick Haig-Brown, a notable conservationist, magistrate and writer. An avid fisherman, he was one of the first to snorkel the river to investigate what damage dams were causing and, of course, to find the best places to fish.

Tall, stately, dark-green Douglas firs line the shore, interrupted by the

bright fall yellows of bigleaf maples. An eagles' nest and then a herons' nest are contrasted against the blue sky. A hawk soars. The guide describes the black bears he saw on a previous outing. "Bears," he says, "are relatively common here, especially during spawning season."

I'm glad to be moving with the river's current.

It's so easy floating with the current, I can only marvel at the work the salmon do to fight upstream.

As we approach the sea, the heads of harbour seals occasionally poke above the waves. They must be looking for a Chinook dinner. A seal passes underwater, slower and more languid than the Chinooks, but still smooth and graceful, making me feel like a hippo trying ballet.

Too soon it is over. Lying in the raft, I strip off the wet rubber suit, grinning and happy to have been part of this vital coastal heartbeat.

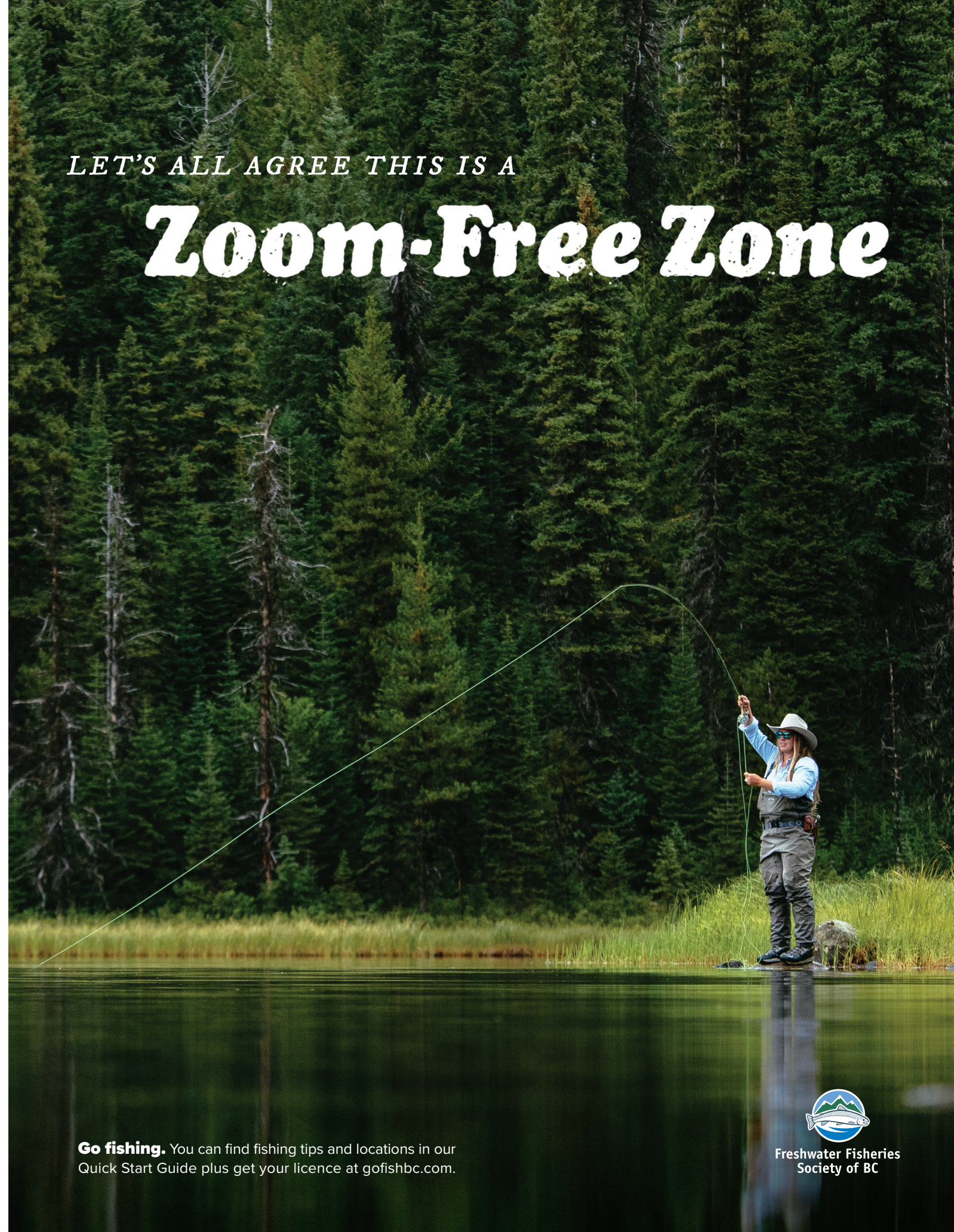
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