

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week!, your audio almanac of all the fish. It's Monday, March 14 2022. This year, we're excited to take you on a week-by-week tour of fish across the country with guests from all walks of life. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska,

and I'm Guy Eroh just a dude who really likes fish. We got a special guest today and encouraged me to slip out of my pajama bottoms and put on real pants, cargo pants. hope you appreciate them. They're really good for adventure.

It's my pleasure to introduce our very special guests. We've got Jeff Corwin and Jeff, you're a biologist, a wildlife conservationist, you've really made a career bridging those fields with science communication, about wildlife species from all over the world, including fish. And that said, we want to extend a warm welcome. And we're just excited to learn from you and talk with you about Pacific salmon.

Awesome. Thank you.

Okay, so out of all the fish to talk about why Pacific salmon, what draws you to that species? Or that group of species I should say?

Well, I just think salmon are so amazing. Rarely in life do you get to really witness something that is kind of the ultimate nature spectacle, the only thing that rivals the migration and the the incredible spawning events in the importance of the nutrient flow and the interconnectivity of, of species. And the various components of an ecosystem is something like the will to beast migration in eastern Africa. I think, sitting in a Range Rover and watching a million wildebeest coming across the African plains, bringing in thousands of hyenas, and lions and tens of thousands of antelope and all that incredible awe-inspiring spectacle is almost as interesting as the salmon that you find in the Pacific Northwest, specifically in places like Alaska. It's a story that I try to tell every time I go to Alaska. So on my current series, Wildlife Nation, we just spent nearly a month and a half in Alaska this summer. And to me, two stories I wanted to tell were salmon stories.

What are some of the ways that salmon connect us to the ecosystem and also how to salmon connect with other wildlife species that are kind of iconic to this area of North America?

Well, I don't think there's a species or a group of fish because there are a number of different salmon species that inhabit Alaskan waters. Of course, you have silvers - the coho salmon, the sockeye - the red salmon, you have the Chinook - the king salmon, then you have pink salmon, and then you have the chum - or the dog salmon. So if you walk up a vibrant rivulet, or stream in Alaska, you will see the branches bowing over with salmon berries and blueberries, you'll see bears giant brown bears, Kodiak bears actually come to feast. Bald eagles. Literally, the salmon is the glue that sticks that whole ecosystem together. So then when you add on to it, the recreational component, so I'm a big fisherman, Fisher person, I love to fish I fish just about every day, when I can at home. When every day if I have a day off when I'm in Alaska, and I've spent a lot of my life in Alaska over the years, I am fishing and it's often fishing for salmon. To me, nothing beats like catching a big Chinook salmon. But then when you

add the commercial importance of salmon, when you add the critical contribution that salmon make to Alaska Native communities culturally and as a resource, probably the only reason why people could survive over there is because of salmon is probably what brought people to Alaska. So Alaska is Alaska because of salmon. And it's also something that really anyone can witness. You could be getting off a cruise ship in Juneau. And if you can walk 1000 feet up a hill and not much of a hill, a little bit of a hill, you can look down and you will see three species of salmon coming into a river system surrounded by an urban environment. And it's just incredible to me. I mean, I've been walking up little trails, not far from a neighborhood going for a jog not far from a place like Anchorage. And you see a small little stream choked with big salmon and you're wondering, you know, how is this anvil size fish snaking its way up its river? It just...it's the ultimate symbol of life renewal. And I think also sacrifice. Because for all the salmon that get in, none are getting out. It's like a roach motel, they all get in there. And they make that ultimate sacrifice to secure the next generation. And by doing that they re infuse and re energize the whole ecosystem.

If you could go back and talk about the first time you actually got to experience a salmon run personally, if you could describe that. I know you're from the East Coast out in Massachusetts, where they, of course have a different species of salmon. And I was wondering if you've had any interactions with those as well.

I can remember the first time I encountered wild salmon. And it was in Geographic Harbor. And I was my first television series, which was a Disney Channel Going Wild. It was the first time I was in Alaska. It was like my second episode that I had ever filmed, I think I was like 27 years old. So this is, you know, almost 25 years ago. And I remember we went there to film the bears. And this was long before I had established a career as a biologist. So the only thing I was going to be able to do was go there and see bears and salmon and just kind of interpret that moment. But I remember it just all came together. It was like, it was like if you took the Lion King and put it in fish, it just was all the circle of life was right there. And I just remember, I believe they were sockeye salmon, just how beautiful it was. And it illustrated almost like a classic photograph that you would see where you just beautiful like, literally, behind you, you have this poster of sockeye salmon, it was like that sort of look and all the bears are right there. And I thought, "Man, this is...I'll never get to experience this again like this." Well, I've had a chance to revisit that story even in bigger and better ways. So if you compare that to the East Coast, we have one native salmon species. And I've never seen a wild one, because they're so rare. Interestingly, I have a passion for trout and native trout. And I've discovered that we actually have a very vibrant population at eastern brook trout where I live, which most people would never even know. I can take you to a tiny little creek in a little suburban neighborhood and you will see brook trout in it. And a friend of mine just got a house on a pond and I looked at the way this stream was configured. I said, I bet you have brook trout. And he didn't believe me, we went out we caught a beautiful wild jewel of a brook trout about this big [hand gestures]. So that is about the closest I've ever been able to get maybe some brown trout that have kind of habitualized. But I've never seen a wild Atlantic salmon in New England. And despite the many attempts that Massachusetts Fisheries has attempted to restore them, they've had no success. So the only salmon you could ever catch here would be, you know, a half a hatchery salmon. So I've never had a backyard salmon experience except in Alaska, where it's pretty remarkable.

To kind of build on that, how do you like how do we build appreciation for those fish? I mean, fish are obviously under the water the salmon out here in Alaska, you can see them when they do their migration, but like, what are some ways people can connect with fish in particular? I mean, is it through wildlife?

I think that really is the motivation for why I do the television shows that I do. I have probably done 50, 60 salmon stories in my career. And it's because I feel it is such a riveting story and the audience response to that story. With Wildlife Nation, we just did an amazing episode, it isn't out yet. Where we're looking at the direct connection between the loss of glaciers because of climate change, and how that impacts the survival and productivity of salmon downstream. I would say that in a place like Alaska, salmon is a big motivating factor that bring many people to Alaska, I think it's one of those things they want to see and experience. And I think that although there may be moments of conflict, of access to resource and management, which you have everywhere about, hey, I want these fish to catch and you're giving me all these rules. For the most part, you see I think a genuine attempt to manage this resource. So I think people get it in a place like Alaska where it's so important as a resource, economically, culturally, recreationally. But I think you bring up a bigger question, Katrina, and that's about our respect for fish overall. So for example, I am a passionate striped bass fishing person, I love striped bass, and I love to catch tuna. And these are species that we are concerned about. And I did a story on striped bass for Wildlife Nation last summer, where I was learning things that I had no idea about. For example, you know what the mortality rate is of catch and release for striped bass?

It's pretty high. We actually talked with someone last year about striped bass, and I was surprised how high it is, with the catch and release.

50% Yep, 50%. So out of the just under 10 million striped bass that were caught in Massachusetts, which equals well over a billion dollars of revenue for people come to catch striped bass. I mean, I have striped bass. So if I were to show you outside, I live in one of the most vibrant striped bass spawning areas in the world. So that's striped bass go from there to there

Jeff is showing us his view out his window.

So I mean, when I want to go catch striped bass, I literally walk down and catch him right in the backyard. The problem is that level of mortality really is unsustainable. And so now they're trying to come up with new ways to reduce that, you know, going from a offset hook to a circle hook, reducing barb's, all these sorts of things. But I think the biggest factor that needs to change is a cultural perception of fish, you look at a striped bass, and you're like, it's just a fish. And I watch people catch them all the time, I literally sit here and like, and have a hissy fit, watching someone, drag the striped bass down to the sand, step on it with their foot, pass it around for photos, and that fish is dead. When you take a fish out of the water, it's like me holding your head under the water. There are fish where I will catch a striped bass, and I will do everything right. And I'll hold it underwater, and I don't take it out of water and, and then I literally drive away and I just see this fish floating behind me. And it's like, we just we don't understand them the way we need to understand them. So I think it has to be an education about this, these fish about managing it, you need to look at it almost like you'd look at like a wild turkey or a deer understand that you're catching an animal, if you're catching a 30 inch fish, that

fish is over a decade old, it's just now getting into its prime. And I think you can have slots, and you can have limits and you can have changes in gear and, and all the fishing techniques. But until people look at them differently, and more respectfully, and are more ginger in how they handle these fish. That's not going to change. What if you did like a quick little six hour or two-hour video and then you get your striped bass tag? And maybe it's something like that. I don't know what it is. But I think we need to reinvent our opinion on fish overall.

I'm curious, you don't see a lot of people who get their degrees in the biological sciences go into communications. And I'm curious if that was a plan that you had from the beginning. And if it was why you wanted to do this why you thought it'd be effective or if it just was happened chance that you ended up going along this trajectory that you have.

Yeah, so I was a pretty unconventional kid in many ways. I always had a passion for animals in nature and had since I was five or six years old. But when I was 16 years old, I was spending time in rain forests. And I really developed a passion for tropical ecosystems. And I always had a big love for snakes and reptiles. And I was doing my graduate work in Central America running an NGO down there. And I was starting to have this epiphany that I did not want to be a long-term research scientist. And I thought, "Well, I kind of wanted to be a teacher. I want to be an educator", but I was getting I was at that age, my 20s where people were going into like, what would have to be to have a good career as a teacher at a university as a as a professor. I could tell that I wasn't hard wired for like going for tenure track or something like that. And I got featured in a documentary in like 1994 It was a project with sponsored by National Geographic was hosted by Bob Ballard, who was a big oceanographer big explorer. He was one to discover the Titanic. He did this big project on rain forests and featured you know, this kid from Massachusetts who was living in a rainforest study bats and snakes. I just loved that experience. I loved the idea of distilling this complex story into a way that would engage and entertain the audience but at the same time build up this level of awareness. And that I said at there's got to be a way I could figure that out. And eventually, I spent three or four years peddling this concept. The last time someone has had a show Mutual of Omaha, it's now 20 years later, and now it's time for like the MTV generation type experience. And sure enough, when they relaunched Disney Channel in '97, I think, they brought me in to have my own show. I actually did that for three years, went back to graduate school, and then went back into television, with my Animal Planet stuff and Discovery stuff, which lasted for many years, and then kind of evolved and changed. And so I've been at ABC, now for almost 11 years.

Well, that's an interesting history. And I completely agree with you that education is super important, especially this education that you're doing sort of at a mass scale, reaching out to many people, I tie us back into salmon, which is where we sort of started, excuse me,

Have I emotionally moved you Guy? You about to cry you look like it

I'm not a crier. The last time I cried...

Oh sure that's what you say, "I don't get seasick." Those are the first people who vomit on your boat.

[laughs]

You know, I mean, I was a lot like you were I, or at least what you've kind of described me here today, where even at a young age six, seven, I was playing around in the stream seeing fish and you know it was a good time. But I remember, specifically, there is a unit in our general science class back in fourth grade, where they did a whole month on the lifecycle of the salmon and everything like that. And the very end of it. Now this was out in Utah. And we don't have native salmon out there, but they do have stocked Kokanee sockeye salmon, and some of these large reservoirs, and they took us down and granted, they weren't wild fish they were hatchery fish, but they took us to the hatchery. And it was so exciting to just as you mentioned, you see all these red fish coming up these little rivulets, these little, tiny streams, and then actually even getting to see the people in the hatchery, which I thought was really interesting how they stripped the eggs, or even though it's an artificial system still propagated, and put it out for the next generation. And getting to see that really kind of sucked me in and in some ways affected the trajectory that I took in my college path and has given me a real appreciation for the fish. And so I think I was the same case for my classmates. And I've seen other stuff in Georgia and over here in North Carolina and stuff, where they bring trout into the classroom and they have them raise these rainbow trout up from eggs and stuff like that. I think that as a really great way to really connect people with these animals that they might not otherwise see. Because you know, they're living underneath the water and are harder to have access to.

Fish in particular are really interesting from kind of a public perception. Because yeah, the way people connect with them is through fishing, right? I mean, they're kind of different than some of the other species like birds where you're watching them. And not everybody fishes. So not everyone's connected in that way. But yeah, just them being in water and how important water is, and all the things that can affect water. It's just kind of a challenging class of animals, I think to work with and some degree.

Yeah, it's also it's, it's interesting about like Alaskan salmon. Again, it's one of these creatures that allows you to witness everything else. So not only could you go into a stream and see a 20-pound king salmon, or a 15 pound, big old humpy salmon, that's all marked up as it goes into senescence, but you're seeing it in like six inches of water. And then you're seeing the bald eagles. So like, if you were out in Montana, and you saw a grizzly bear 100 feet away, you may be in trouble. That's a serious situation. But you could be in Alaska and see a Kodiak Brown Bear 100 feet away. And as long as you give that bear respect, you could be a part of that moment, you could be the ultimate fly on the wall and see everything else come together. Because that is what determines feast and famine for all these creatures. And so it allows you to experience the most significant expression of nature in a very accessible way.

Do you have any tips for young people entering the conservation field who have an inclination for communication given kind of the changing landscape that you've seen over the last few years or or decade plus?

What I would say to someone who has a passion for nature and wants to be involved with some level of interpretation or communication is in addition to having that passion? You need to have the education so getting a building up a strong foundation in the biological or life science, let's say you don't want to

be a research scientist, but you really need to think about some level of graduate school. And if you can get through that, and then get some life experience, it would open up a lot of doors. And I think you can look at places everything from museums to science centers to schools, there's it, especially now there's a big interest for well trained, articulate people to help build up a strong interest in STEM, and environmental education. But also, it's about working on your own personal communication skills. And I think what has allowed me to have success in this field is really having an interest in things like theater, and singing and entertainment, that has allowed me to fine tune my communication skills. So in a way, you could be someone who's really smart, who knows a lot about something. But if you can't engage and interact with your audience in a way that's meaningful, then your success will be very limited. I also think, look at your backyard, look at your community. So much of my work is been around the world over umpteen series has allowed me to really travel which I really cherish. But I love being in New England and focusing on my backyard stories. And I think by concentrating in your own backyard, if you can not only take your passion in nature and sharing that as a communicator but focus on people within your community is always incredibly valuable.

So we're a fish show, you're primarily known as a wildlife biologist, I just want to ask you a little bit about you see everywhere from the top level US Fish and Wildlife Service all the way down to different degree programs that people get into they either focus on fish that focus on wildlife, I was wondering if you have any insights into why our society makes that distinction between fish and wildlife? And if that distinction is justified?

Well, I think because one is coastal or aquatic and one is terrestrial. I think that's what the differentiation is. One involving I think the two different ways of respiration play a part of that, I think, also the cultural nuances of how we look at these different places where resources happen. Maybe it's just because they require such vastly different types of management. And I also think we can heavily saturate the terrestrial environment when it comes to exploring it and knowing where things are, there's still largely a lot of mystery to the water, and I just think they'd become too distinctive. But I would say they should be equal measures, or branches and management and, and things like that.

Yeah, it's always kind of, you know, puzzled me maybe annoyed me a little because I always thought you do have these definite natural distinctions exist you just pointed out, but I've always in my mind thought of fish as a subset of wildlife, and that they should be treated as such. And people sometimes laughed at me when I said I'd go out fish watching, I'd sometimes go out to the streams and ponds and just watch the fish move around much like a bird watcher would. And I, we've been fortunate we've had some people on the show lately, we've talked about snorkeling for fish, I don't know if you've ever been to some of these southeastern rivers, but you get to have some really extreme color going on down there. And the people who are doing that they're not interacting with those people normally think about how people interact with fish. They're actually in it just to watch them and experience them why people typically do it, the wildlife, I think it's an interesting transition that's kind of happening. And then interesting thing to think about.

Yeah. And I think you bring up that interesting component of observation. So I could sit here and my porch and I could watch a peregrine falcon and I can see I've got Arctic eiders. And all these this thing I can, with just sitting, I can't passively sit my chair and observe who was moving. I would either have to

be scuba diving or snorkeling and have some thermal management. Or I'd have some high-end fish finder technology. That is how you access that. Unless of course, you're in a remote stream in Alaska or even an urban stream. You can see that or maybe you're lucky where you get runs of herring, or alewives like we still have rivers that have those. So you'll get that amazing spectacle. But even like I was visiting a friend of mine, who was a retired biologist who worked for the interior. I was visiting him up in Allegheny North than Maryland. And he took me to this little Podunk depressed looking stream with rusty shopping carts. And we went fly fishing, and we're catching wild, beautiful little brook trout. And it was running through a community that was certainly disenfranchised in many ways. And how many of those people know that that little stream is running through their backyard filled with wild brook trout. So there are people that have a great passion for fish and get the importance of fish. But it's, you know, we're in different worlds. It's the same thing about insects, you know, the complexities. People don't realize that, like social insects, how complex their behaviors are, and how really intricate they are as various species. And, you know, we don't always interact with them. Yeah, we don't know very well, ever, I think it requires a more sense of focus and investment, to observe fish and appreciate fish in the wild, then you could birdwatching in a park or something like that. I think that's maybe the difference.

Lots of cool stuff out there. If you're willing to look for it.

There's lots of cool stuff.

Do you have a favorite fishing story that you've experienced at some point in your life, like which one stands out the most to you?

Um, probably when my wife and I...now we have a family, we have two daughters. My oldest daughter is now at college. And when we moved here, over 20 years ago, probably 24 years ago, our house was a tiny little efficiency. We live in a little island. And then someone had told me that, "oh, you had really big striped bass and the little river behind you." And I kind of put it off, I didn't really believe them. And somebody said, "what you should do is take an eel put it on a hook and toss it out back and see if you can catch one of those stripers." I went, "Okay, whatever." So I went, I went bought a couple of eels. I put one on a hook that was running it and nothing was happened. And I just kind of left my rod perched up into some rocks, and I went to refresh my beverage at the house, and I came back out. And I see my fishing rod just going over the rocks racing towards the river. And I jumped, and I grabbed the reel, and I pulled it up. And I got a 49-inch 48 pound striped bass. And just when I pulled it up onto this, pull that up, the hook came out. And it sounds like a fisherman story, which kind of is, but it's true. The fish began to slide back, and I jumped because I thought no one would believe me that I caught this fish. And I jumped on it. And I actually reached it and I grabbed it by the lower jaw. And I just held on to it. I pulled it out of the water, and I caught that big fish. And I was like there are big stripe. And since then I thought I've caught hundreds of striped bass here. And now I never I don't even I don't even keep them anymore. Unless it's something very special. And my wife says, "you know, let's cook a fish tonight." I don't keep them anymore. I'd rather just get it back out there. There's been a lot of really cool stories with fish over the years. You know, catching giant sturgeon with my daughter in Maine and putting satellite tags and sturgeon with research folks up there or I caught I don't know if it's still the record, I caught the largest freshwater fish on record I caught a giant 700-pound freshwater Stingray and

Thailand I think I saw a picture that long river and that was pretty cool. But you know to me to like be in your backyard and catch a toad of a striped bass and be so surprised was to me pretty amazing.

So another way people connect with fish is through eating them so we were wondering if you have any favorite recipes made with striped bass or with salmon or anything? Do you have like a favorite way to eat a specific kind of fish?

Yeah, so I used to be a big sushi guy, but I once got really sick eating bad sushi. So it's hard for me to get I will you know either here or there but I never think like oh man, I want some sushi. I do like ceviche and I think that's kind of my go to white fish recipe is to VJ and it would like chilies, lime juice, cilantro, avocado and kind of do like a Peruvian version where you do the cold ceviche cold brine it in the and the lime juice and salt, chilies, onions, tomatoes, red pepper and you serve it with like steamed corn that's been shocked and sweet potatoes and avocado. But my favorite way to cook us in. For salmon, how I like to do it, is I take the salmon, I cook the whole salmon, or if I bring it home from Alaska, which I do when I go to Alaska, I'm bringing home your salmon, but I'll take a cook it, pull it all apart, and I make really great salmon cakes, which I love to me salmon cakes. But my favorite way to cook the striped bass, is I'll take the whole striped bass, and I cleaned it out and scale it. And then I stuffed its cavity with limes, cumin, chilies, cilantro, onions, and then kind of pile that up. And I roll it really tight in aluminum foil, make a fire, get it to the coals and then cover the whole thing and coals cook it for about an hour. And that you just pull that off and like wedges like black beans. Yeah, that's how I like to cook it

Dang. That sounds good.

Is there any message you'd like to share with people about why they should care about fish?

Well, I think we should care about fish, because so much of what we have in nature depends upon fish. And every way fish have a connection to the various pathways of life in the natural world. So many species are dependent upon fish. And in many ways fish are a mirror of what can happen to us when we're not good stewards of nature. When fish begin to disappear from a stream, what is in that stream that finds its way into the food web or to your dinner table. And all of the challenges we face today, climate change, plastic waste and trash, environmental degradation and pollution, issues of sustainability all have a fish connection. So by better appreciating fish by investing your interest in fish, and then wise sustainable management and conservation of fish in their environments. In the end, we're providing a better lives for ourselves. And don't underestimate the magnificence of fish mean, think of something like a little eel that will begin in a remote stream and main hundreds of miles away from the coast and then find its way to the most mysterious, deepest, unexplored parts of our oceans, or lamp ray or even herring or cod. You know, I live in an area called Cape Cod. It was built on cod. When I first moved here, I would take my fishing boat, I would go out come with cod and we eat cod. I no longer despite when you look out there, it looks perfect and pristine. And it is well managed, especially if you compare it historically. But I no longer can keep cod anymore. Because caught are no longer thriving the way they should. Yeah. And now we're at a point that no matter what we do, that may not come back because the genies left the bottle with climate change. The Bay of Maine is the



fastest warming body of water on the planet. And it's the most important spawning ground for cod. And the idea that a New Englander can't catch a cod is, I think, pretty terrifying.

Yeah, those shifting baselines are interesting, too. Because I mean, yeah, the cod fish used to be so important. And now they're kind of a distant memory to some degree.

Now there are places where caught are shifting, where you have incredible cod fisheries now that you didn't have historically, which you can see in salmon, you can see areas where salmon are going in Alaska that they didn't go just a decade ago.

Yep, up on the North Slope. Well, thank you so much, Jeff, this has been great talking to you. And it's great to hear from a wildlife professional in the communication side of the house, who's really made a career helping folks make connections with fish and wildlife. We really appreciate you sharing some of your fish experiences with us today. And thank you so much.

Yeah.

Okay, get out there and enjoy all the fish, especially the fish right in your own backyard. I'd be willing to bet there are some really neat fish nearby in places that really might surprise you.

Thanks for listening to fish of the week. My name is Katrina Liebich. And my co host is Guy Eroh. Our production partner for the series is Citizen Racecar. Produced and story edited by Charlotte Moore Lambert. Production management by Gabriela Montequin. Post production by Alex Brower. Fish of the Week! is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region Office of External Affairs. We honor thank and celebrate the whole community, tribes, states our sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists and others who have elevated our understanding and love as people and professionals of all the fish