



FRESHWATER FISH OF AMERICA

COHO SALMON

Onchorhynchus kisutch (Walbaum, 1792)



Coho salmon. Photo credit: Roger Tabor/USFWS

Natural History

Coho salmon are a species of Pacific salmon which inhabit the Pacific coast in California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska. These fish are also known as silver salmon. The average size adult coho is around 24 inches and 8-9 pounds, but can range up to 20 pounds. Coho salmon have dark metallic blue or greenish backs with silver sides and a light belly and there are small black spots on the back and upper lobe of the tail while in the ocean.

The species was historically distributed throughout the North Pacific from central California to Point Hope, Alaska, through the Aleutian Islands, and from the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia, south to Japan. Coho inhabit most coastal streams in Washington, Oregon, and central and northern California. Some populations are believed to have migrated hundreds of miles inland to spawn in tributaries of the upper Columbia River in Washington, and the Snake River in Idaho. Coho exist throughout Alaska wherever they have access to both freshwater habitat and the Pacific Ocean.

Conservation

A variety of conservation efforts have been undertaken to protect, restore and enhance coho salmon throughout their range. These include hatchery stocking, removal or modification of dams and other infrastructure, restoration of degraded habitat, acquisition and protection of critical habitats, improved water quality, and enhanced instream flow. Coho salmon are an important fish for commercial fishing, recreation angling, and Tribal harvest throughout their range. North American tribes consider Pacific salmon, including coho salmon, to be a critically important for their culture, diet, and ceremonies, and economic support. As such, the tribes of the Pacific Northwest are leaders in protecting, restoring, and enhancing coho salmon throughout their range in the U.S. and Canada.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Size: Coho salmon average 24 inches long, but some adults have been recorded as long as 43 inches. On average they weigh between 7 and 11 pounds, but can reach up to 36 pounds.

Range: Coho salmon are widely distributed in the North Pacific Ocean. They range from the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia, southward towards Hokkaido, Japan. In North America, coho range from Point Hope in Alaska, southward to Chamalu Bay in Baja California and all the way into Mexico. These fish were also introduced into the Great Lakes in the late 1960's to help control alewives, an invasive fish. Although they are still stocked in the Great Lakes in large numbers, wild populations of coho salmon have become established through natural reproduction.

Habitat: Coho salmon often inhabit smaller rivers and tributaries along the Pacific coast. They can reside in rivers and streams that are too small for other species, such as chinook salmon. As adults, coho salmon often forage in shallow coastal waters but can also migrate thousands of miles in the North Pacific Ocean before returning to their natal streams. Spawning habitat is small streams with stable gravel substrates with cool, consistent water flow.

Diet: Young coho salmon which inhabit lakes and rivers eat mainly insects. When migrating to the sea, the young salmon dine on plankton and small crustaceans. As they grow and move further out to sea, they begin to eat larger forage such as anchovies, sand lance, herring and squid.

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Migration Behavior

Coho salmon begin life in freshwater tributaries all along the Pacific coast. Coho spend approximately the first half of their life cycle (18 months) rearing and feeding in streams and small freshwater tributaries. The juveniles migrate to the ocean in the spring. The remainder of the life cycle (another 18 months) is spent foraging in estuarine and marine waters of the Pacific Ocean. The adults return to spawn in the river where they were born, usually in the fall (September to December). Spawning habitat is small streams with stable gravel substrates and cool water temperatures. Like all Pacific salmon, coho spawn only once and then die.



Coho salmon. Photo credit: Roger Tabor/USFWS