

Natural Planet

Ep.17 – Greatest Shows on Earth: Salmon

Salmon. A fish we so commonly find at our dinner tables. It is therefore hard to believe that these fish are one of the most dedicated and driven of all animals that can be seen on our world. The drive is to reproduce, to lay eggs and give life to the next generation of salmon. However, they will only lay their eggs in exactly the same stretch of stream that they themselves were hatched in.

Along the western seaboard of Canada and the United States, begins the journey of a life time. The five main species of salmon from the Pacific include; sockeye, chum, coho, pink and chinook. These five species have spent the past two to eleven years roaming the 85 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean and finally have found their way back to a single river. How the fish find their way back is remarkable, in the way that scientists are still unsure of how they do it, geomagnetic navigation? Following chemicals only found in that stretch of river? Even smelling their way to their old breeding ground? We have yet to find out.

The salmon are an incredibly numerous and important species. They are a Keystone species, one that holds an entire ecosystem together. When swimming up the river, bears wait waist deep, jostling and fighting for the best positions, even at the top of waterfalls just waiting for the salmon to jump. The fish have to get past certain barriers on their way to the spawning ground, one of them being waterfalls and so they leap, they leap up to five metres to clear waterfalls and dams. The wolves wait at the sides ready for the fish that get a little too close or jumps ashore. The fish eaten are so many they can be measured in tonnes, but due to the numbers, sometimes only the most nutritious parts like the brain and eggs are eaten. The rest of the body is left on the side on the river, and here it provides the entire forest. Countless numbers of beetle and flies feed on them, birds fly in for the feast presented and all the precious minerals the fish contain, drain into the soil, fuelling the spruce and pine trees, already hundreds of years old, for another year.

At the end of their journey, after months of travelling and facing bears, wolves, otters, and fishermen, the salmon arrive and lay their eggs. Here the baby fry will spawn and within a few weeks make their way down to the sea like their parents did all that time ago. The parents themselves however have no strength left. They die. Here the forest grows densest and thickest supporting hundreds of species, and all down to the migration of the salmon.