

The 2020 Atlantic salmon season on the Miramichi was marked by record low water and warm temperatures. The fishing season, thanks to Covid was canceled altogether for Americans. The notable exception to the negatives this year was that there was a strong early run of both grilse and salmon, and then a solid fall run of salmon. We'll never have a good statistical handle on the run because due to Covid the Department of Fisheries and Oceans did not operate their trap nets at either Millerton or Cassilis except for a few weeks this September and early October, and then they were only fished for 4 days a week.

In the words of Mark Hambrook, outgoing president of the MSA, it is "hard to interpret the counts from this abbreviated effort." There were, though, 139 MSW salmon captured on the NW at Cassilis with that brief netting effort. That is more than the 95 captured for the entire 2019 season when the net was tended daily for the whole season. Remember that these trap nets are only about 5% to 10% effective. The percentage of effectiveness varies between Millerton and Cassilis, and is different for salmon than grilse. While the apparent increase in the run wasn't as dramatic on the SWM at Millerton as it was on the NW at Cassilis, the count of 80 salmon was also quite good considering again the small period of effort measured.

The first good sign for the 2020 was that Jason Curtis, fishing at Campbell's Pool in Blackville caught what he estimated to be a 12-pound, 32-inch bright salmon on May 31. It has been close to 10 years since Campbell's has produced a May salmon, but for a number of years either side of 2010 it happened regularly. Some experts feel that the year's salmon run resembles a classic bell-shaped curve. The lead and trailing edges of the bell represent the beginning and ending periods of the season. The bigger the overall bell the greater that both the early and late catches will be. It makes sense that the leading edge is the first indicator of what the coming season may produce.



***12lb salmon taken by Jason Curtis at Campbell's
on May 31st 2020***

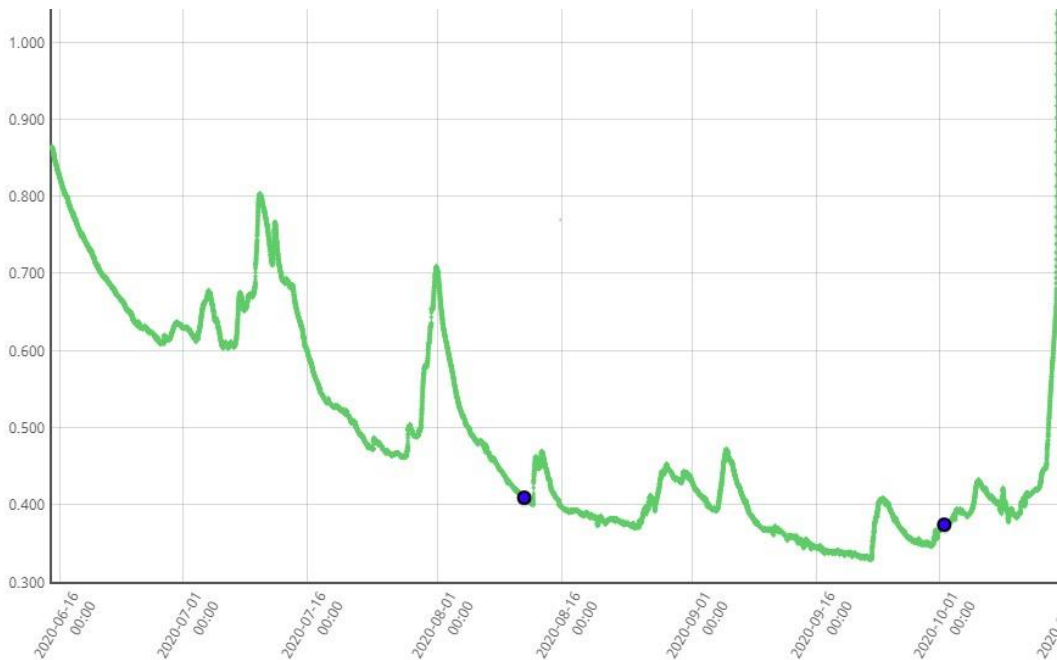
With Covid keeping people home, and with the outfitters more or less out of business in the early season, there wasn't much fishing effort compared to a normal year. In early July, just when you expect the grilse run to really hit, it did. During the first two weeks of July 2020, Jason Curtis, sometimes fishing with his wife Jenn, caught as many salmon just fishing an hour or two a day as 4 of us caught fishing long days every day in 2019. On top of that he was only allowed to release two each day instead of the historic four. Most days in July those two were caught quickly bringing an end to the fishing. I remember Jason calling me on the phone. He was genuinely very excited about the large number of fish in the river.

David Donahue lives in a house overlooking the river just upstream a very short distance from Doctor's Island in Blackville. From his house he can see the schools of fish jumping and waking as they go over the bars at the top of the island. David's father guided at Doctor's Island, and David has lived right there and followed the fish his whole life. One day just before the middle of July David texted me to say that the number of schools he was seeing were only equaled in recent years by the excellent season that took place in 2011. After the very tough 2019 season, when there was no point during the season in which the fish were really abundant, it was truly uplifting to see the Miramichi come back so strongly.

The pattern that has historically characterized the timing of the Miramichi salmon run is for good fishing for largely MSW fish beginning around the middle of June, and then larger numbers of MSW salmon plus lots of grilse to show up in early July. Sometime between the first and second week of July, though, the heat of summer sets in and water temperatures combined with low flows slow down the run and send the fish into the pools that are buffered with cooler brook and spring water. The fish can survive in those pools, but they quickly become stale and unwilling to take flies.

Even during this warm part of the summer, if we get a big rain, it can revive the fish in the river and coax in a fresh run. The larger volume of water offers some cooling, and because of the volume the water is more resistant to heating up. If we don't get that rain – and we haven't in recent years – we are pretty much out of business until around the first of September when the weather cools enough for the fall run to begin. This year was another example of that pattern. I remember years in the early 2000s when we had frequent rains creating almost constant high water in late July and August. The fishing at those times was as good as it gets – even though the water was warm - but it did come at the expense of the fall run.

The low water part of the summer this year was of record proportions, and while it was warm, the warmth was actually not exceptional. I've been analyzing the records from a site near Gagetown, NB that has been operating since the 19th century. I've been keeping track of the mean July temperature. This year it was 20.1C. Last year it was 19.2 and the year before that it was 21.1. The average July from and including 2014 is 19.8. What was exceptional was the incredibly low height of the water. The Southwest Miramichi was several inches lower than anyone I can find had ever seen it



Main southwest Miramichi Water Levels 2020

The story goes about a rock down at Mountain Channel that came out in extreme low water about thirty years ago. The manager at the time - allegedly Vince Swazey - ordered the guides to beat the top off the rock with a sledge hammer so that fly lines wouldn't get caught. The rock hadn't been seen since until this year when it was several inches above the surface of the water.



'The Rock' at Mountain Channel, late summer 2020

As always, in late August temperatures started to moderate, and whenever there was even the slightest amount of new water a pulse of salmon would enter the river. There were fish in all the pools that held any water. On August 22nd Jason Curtis tried salmon fishing for the first time in a month and hooked 6 on bombers landing a nice 8-pound fish.



Jason with his 8lb fish

Wayne O'Donnell, the manager of Rocky Brook Camp, about 20 miles upriver from Boiestown, e-mailed me in late September to say that there were a somewhat above average number of fish holding in the camp's extensive water. And around October 7th Byron Coughlin of Country Haven sent me this message: *"Brad, there are so many big salmon from Black Brook to Quarryville now that in a way I don't like to tell you since you can't come up, but I know you will be happy that there are lots of fish in the river. Kenny said tonight that it's been a long time since he has seen so many fish in every pool he goes to."* Byron was speaking of Kenny Vickers who has been guiding on the Miramichi for about 50 years. Byron was constantly sending me pictures for my blog like this one of Moncton fisher Deirdre Green celebrating the release of another great Miramichi salmon.



Deirdre Green releasing a salmon

As the season closed on October 15th the Miramichi was experiencing a full meter raise in height. Nothing exceptional in a normal year, but it was the biggest raise to take place all summer. It came just in time for the spawning to take place. So ended a tough year for a lot of us salmon addicts, but hopefully one with a good count of healthy salmon spread over the Miramichi's spawning gravel, and one that has the potential to provide anglers with some excellent spring fishing come April.

Brad Burns