

Sakhalin Silver

Text and Photos: Clemens Ratschan

Imagine the silver **beauty** and the **fighting spirit** of Atlantic salmon; the complex, unpredictable life-history of sea trout and combine with the **ferocious take** and body mass of a predatory taimen. This will give you a glimpse of what fishing for **Sakhalin taimen**, the silver of the Russian Far East, is about.

I AM PLEASED TO introduce this fish to the readers of *Chasing Silver*, because in many respects it forms a missing link between the fishery for anadromous salmon and for huchen, a big predatory non-anadromous salmonid in my home country of Austria ('Danube salmon' in English. See article "Taimen" by Wolfgang Hauer, issue 3/2010).

Sakhalin taimen is one of the least-known salmonid species among non-Russian fishermen; even many Russians tend to confuse it with the

Siberian taimen, *Hucho taimen*. No wonder, scientists also erroneously related this far-eastern species to the large-sized, non-anadromous predators of the genus *Hucho*, which is a branch of the salmonoid tree that occurs exclusively in Eurasia. In Central Europe, *Hucho hucho* is restricted to the Danube System, where self-sustaining stocks are presently only found in a handful of rivers in Germany, Austria, Slovakia and former Yugoslavia. Huchen is very closely related to the already-mentioned Siberian taimen. The latter





inhabits a distant, vast range from a few places in European Russia to the Lena and Amur rivers in the very far east of northern Asia.

But Sakhalin taimen? This fish resembles the members of the genus *Hucho* and shares many characteristics with these salmonoids: the body has a slender shape and is decorated exclusively with black dots on the body. It features a huge adipose fin, larger than in char, trout and salmon. A big mouth has developed in response to the predatory feeding

habits. But one ecological feature is unique – all members of the true huchen live exclusively in fresh water, whereas the Sakhalin taimen is anadromous. Actually, analysis of the DNA has shown that this species is in fact more closely related to trout and salmon than to huchen and Siberian taimen. Ultimately, the *Hucho*-like look is the result of convergent evolution, not of a close relatedness.

Sakhalin taimen was named *Salmo perryi* in 1856 after M. C. Perry, commander of several American

expeditions to Japan. Later, the fish was assigned to the genus *Parahucho*, with regard to some obvious differences to huchen and taimen. The common names of the species are diverse, Sakhalin taimen, Japanese huchen, sea-run taimen or 'ito' by its Japanese name.

How does one distinguish a sea-run taimen from huchen or Siberian taimen? First, the mouth of *Parahucho* is big, but not as huge as the Siberian taimen's. The jaws reach just behind the back of the eye, but they are broader and give the fish an even stronger bite. By the way, as in all taimen fishing, two or even three hard strikes – better strip-strikes than hauling the rod – are essential to successfully set the hook in the hard mouth after a bite. These carnivores clasp their prey so strongly, that a moderate tug of the line cannot move a fly in their jaws. A soft strike will fail to set the hook and usually results in a distraught fisherman losing his chance for a catch after many hours or, most often, days of unsuccessful fishing.

Second, have a look at the coloration. The dots on *Hucho* are distributed across the whole body, especially the upper part. In contrast, the dense pigmentation of *Parahucho* is strongly concentrated on the front third of the body, particularly the head. Siberian taimen, and to a lesser extent huchen, have more or less copper sides and red unpaired fins, whereas their anadromous double is bright silver most of the year. During spawning in late spring, adult males develop a very bright, red spawning coloration; a feature that is well-known from the Pacific salmon species. Have a look on the great clips of spawning Sakhalin taimen by Manu



Sakhalin taimen, *Parahucho perryi*



Siberian taimen, *Hucho taimen*



Spawning Parahucho couple; brightly coloured male left. Photo: Pete Rand

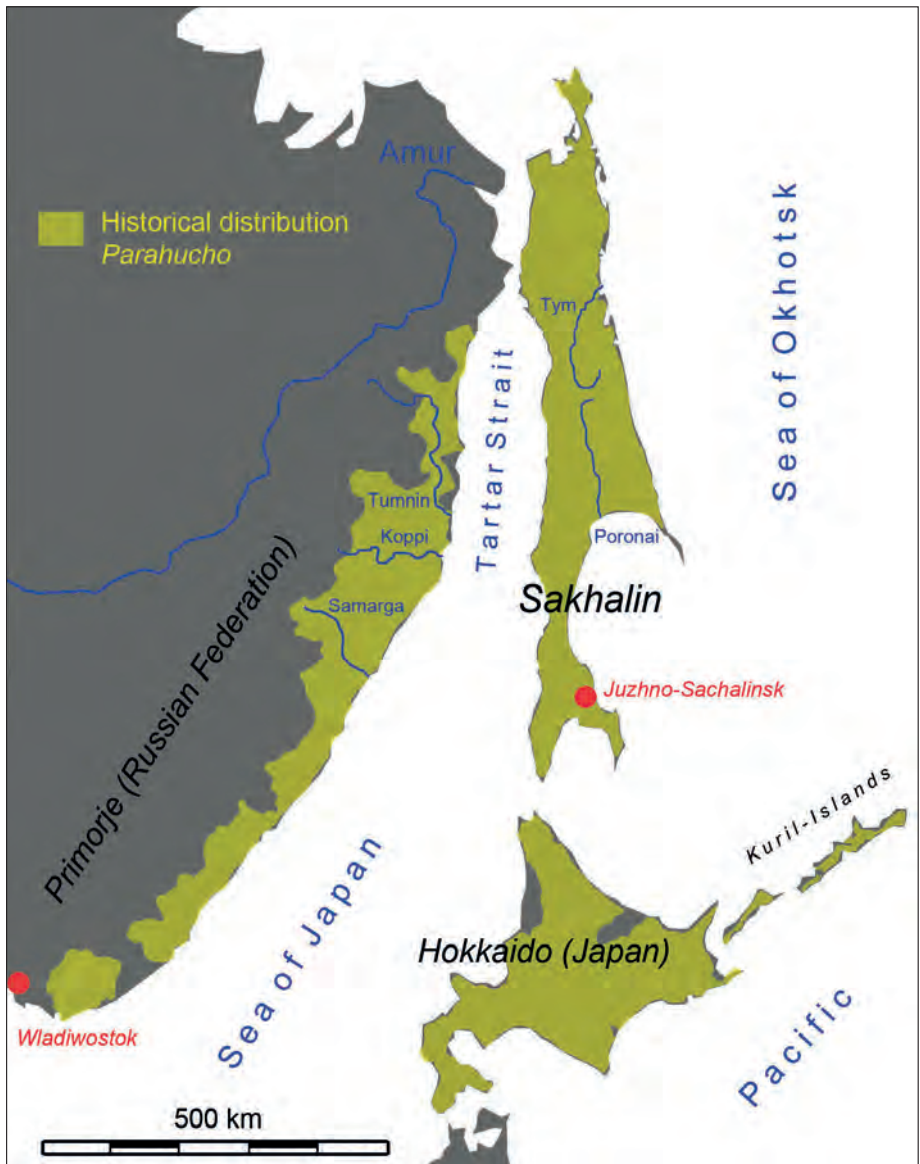
Esteve on youtube.com (search for *Parahucho*, spawning).

Thirdly, the scales of *Parahucho* are bigger, which causes a coarser look compared to the finer-scaled true *Hucho* species. Unlike Siberian taimen, that tend to get more slender at an advanced age, big Sakhalin taimen usually grow increasingly robust. Historically they were caught up to 50 kg, but nowadays a 20 kg fish is a leviathan and a 10 kg taimen a trophy.

Sea-run taimen occur not only on Sakhalin, an almost 1000 km long island that today is most renowned for enormous supplies of oil and



Too many Sakhalin taimen end this way.



gas. Its range also covers areas of the Russian mainland in the Primorsky and Khabarovsk provinces, some of the Kuril Islands, and the Hokkaido Island of Japan. Nowadays, most of this historic area is lost to the species. While on Hokkaido forest clearance and intensified land use are the main reasons for a drastic reduction of habitat and populations, in the Russian Far East it is simply due to overfishing. The complex life-cycle of the species enhances this risk. Sakhalin taimen move between spawning, rearing and overwintering habitats in the rivers and the feeding and summer habitats many times a year and many times in their lives, which gives their two-legged enemies too many chances to capture them.

On the one hand, juvenile taimen are caught regularly as a by-catch in the salmon fishing industry. On the other hand the species is also targeted by sport-fishing and small scale commercial fishing interests in the estuaries, bays and rivers. Since the species is long-lived and reaches sexual maturity rather late, approximately in its 6th to 8th year, it is especially vulnerable to early harvesting. Improved accessibility for man to formerly remote areas is a common by-product of the exploitation of resources such as oil, gas or wood and leads to an increasing pressure on the preserved populations. Today, good stocks are restricted to very few populations on the Russian mainland, Japan, and a handful of rivers on Sakhalin. The populated area has dropped to a fraction of the historical range.

The current status of sea-run taimen leads to the question of whether fishing for such an endangered species is ethically sound.



Successful fly patterns.

In practise, the question hardly arises, because there are so few rivers left where a successful rod-and-line fishery is still possible. A few do exist, and if done with care, taking part in this fishery can actually help to preserve *Parahucho* for the future. A sustainable catch-and-release fishery of paying guests can bring a lot more revenue to the locals than a Sakhalin taimen hanging in a gillnet. Unfortunately, local sport-fishermen are usually not accustomed to catch-and-release, a situation that is slowly but surely changing. If you are interested in a rendezvous with this wonderful fish, visit the Koppi River Lodge, situated in a fascinating setting on the Russian mainland, and where a good Sakhalin taimen fishery still exists alongside several other beautiful species such as white-



Sakhalin taimen are strong fighters.

spotted char and big cherry salmon.

Steve and I have been floating down a river in northern Sakhalin for several days, stopping to sample with our fly-rods every likely looking pool on the way. Our trip in October was a wet, cold and stormy experience, and only the hope for fresh, silver Sakhalin taimen ascending to their winter lies in the river allowed us to withstand the adverse conditions. In the upper reaches, our quarry consisted only of big white-spotted char, a species that is restricted to the western Pacific. Later, some silver salmon, zombie-like humpies, a few Dolly Varden, and a meddlesome cyprinid of the genus *Tribolodon* enriched the catch. We encountered a juvenile *Parahucho*, a fish of one-and-a-half to two feet in length that had not been feeding in the sea. Such



The first big Parahucho – a bright silver greeting right from the sea.

adolescent fish are darker coloured and take big streamers as well as smaller flies intended to catch char. The river meandered through flat Taiga and then cut through a ridge of old mountains, where rocks and gravel bring a welcome diversity of river structure compared to the monotone, sandy upper reaches.

In spite of Grizzly bear tracks and dead pink salmon corpses, replete with bear bites, scattered all along the shore, camping in the Taiga was free of nightmares. Unlike their American counterparts, Russian bears (except in some protected areas like parts of Kamchatka) are intensively hunted and live in constant fear of man. Usually, they avoid encounters. On this trip, we *heard* several fleeing bears, breaking sticks in their panic retreat to the underbrush. But we did not *see* a single one, despite finding fresh footprints while floating presumably un-noticed around river bends.

Only two or three days from our end-point, the place where the river crosses the road along the coast of Sakhalin, we set up our camp on a big gravel bar. I casually cast my streamer to the opposite side, a long and deep undercut bank. I plan to make only a few swings, since the pool downstream looks more attractive and easy to read. But on the third cast, the line tightens quickly just after the fly touches the water, not more than one foot from the opposite bank. I feel a tug that is stronger than any I have felt before on this trip, and the shaking of whatever is on the other end of the line dispels my doubts. A big fish is on. Sea-run taimen – like many other migratory fish – are very strong fighters, but in this case I don't want to risk a long battle



Mouth of a River in Sakhalin in autumn.



the vast bay that connects the river mouth with the Sea of Okhotsk. The flood has fallen and stranded lampreys twist out of the sand banks. We hope that the dropping autumnal spate has triggered fresh fish to migrate to their overwintering habitats in the river.

To meet the higher discharge and the deeper pools in the low-gradient lower course of the river, I change from the 11' switch rod I used upstream to a 13', class 10 spey rod, with an extra fast sinking shooting head. A good decision, as the deep and slow swing of this outfit does the trick. Several big, strikingly silver and hard-fighting fish cannot resist and hammer the tube fly. In preparation for the trip, I had figured that any catch of a big Sakhalin taimen would be a surprise, since the species is rare and the remaining stocks are in decline. Like any fishing trip for migratory salmonids, being at the

right place at the right time and confident fishing are the key to success – even more so for such a rare species.

How would you imitate a 1-2 kg pink salmon, which could be a favourite snack for a big sea-run taimen, on a fly rod? Luckily, the diet of this predator consists of smaller items as well, such as squid, crayfish, lampreys, smelt and other small prey-fish. Nevertheless, the large-sized fly patterns used for all Taimen species can pose a certain challenge, especially for fishermen more accustomed to presenting tiny flies to trout rather than tossing 20 cm streamers.

Fly-fishing for sea-run taimen is still a rather new and uncommon sport, so few experiences about successful patterns have been gained. Unlike salmon, Sakhalin taimen don't stop feeding during their fresh water life. In fact, some adult individuals

– a lot of wood in the river creates a big risk of losing this long-awaited prey. Happily, I can pull the fish to the gravel bar in just a few minutes. Here it lies – a bright, meter-long, silver *Parahucho* with dense, black dots on the head. A feast for our eyes, this is a more than adequate reward for the long and burdensome journey.

After this happy event, a cold front crosses the island, and heavy rain, stormy winds and floods force us to stay in a nearby village for several days, awaiting more bearable conditions. Back on the river, we float the section from the bridge down to



Sakhalin taimen caught on a “Huchenwaschl” with orange cone head.



even remain in the rivers year-round. Thus – any imitations of freshwater food items, like minnows, salmon parr, or in some cases even mice, can be successful patterns. A different strategy is to imitate marine food items, hoping that this triggers predatory instincts of their feeding at the sea.

Mikhail Skopets, flyfishing and flytying pioneer in the Russian Far East, reports a preference of

Parahucho for Bucktail streamers. I like this material because it gets soft in the water and gives a moving fly with a very “fishy” look, while being easy to cast in large sizes. For us, long but slender, articulated marabou streamers resembling a swimming lamprey also worked well. The Bavarian pattern, the “Huchenwaschl”, a big cone head tube fly that could be mistaken for a squid, also brought success. Any

other patterns that combine a certain size with active play in the water are certainly worth a try, in black, brown, red and several other colours. As ever – a fly has to match the river. Sinking speed, snagging, ease of casting, size and lightness in relation to the turbidity of the water are probably more important than the exact pattern.

In some places, e. g. river estuaries, fly-fishing in brackish or



even salt water can be successful. But usually you will be fishing in the lower course of a river. Search for Sakhalin taimen in running water the way you would fishing for big brown trout. Usually they hold in places with less current than classic Atlantic salmon lies. Deep pools and places with good cover by overhanging or sunken wood are hot spots. Present your fly in a way that suits your pattern and lets it sink into the required depth. Retrieve

fleeing fish or lamprey imitations in short strips, but vary it with slow, wet fly swings. I don't know which method is best, but you will see - some will convince this extraordinary salmonid to strike.

I hope you enjoyed the beauty of this interesting fish. It is a species that will disappear from the planet within the next decades, unless adequate management and protection is implemented soon. The silver of the

Far East definitely deserves a brighter future from a conservationist's as well as from a fisherman's point of view.

