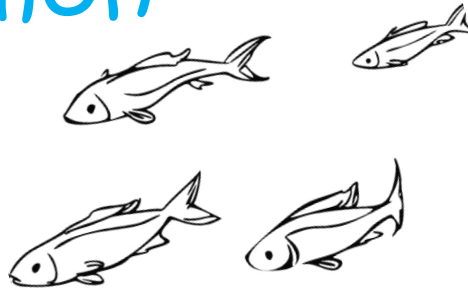


Learn about:

Atlantic Salmon

As Gaeilge: Bradán

Scientific name: *Salmo salar*



What is it?

There are several species of salmon fish, but the one we get in Ireland is the Atlantic Salmon. Young salmon live in freshwater rivers, but as the salmon grows it migrates into the ocean where it feeds and puts on weight, before returning to to the river of its birth to breed.

What does it look like?

The salmon changes colour in different stages of its life cycle. As a juvenile salmon it is quite colourful with red spots; but as it matures it becomes a solid silver-grey colour. Breeding adults are a browner colour and the males often look quite red. The longer a salmon lives, and the better it feeds, the larger it will grow.



Image: NOAA, 2017

Life Cycle

There are seven stages in a salmon's life cycle...

The salmon starts its life as an **egg** buried in gravel on the riverbed, usually far up the river where the water is cold and fast. The eggs are laid between November and January when there is the most rainfall. In Spring, the egg hatches and the baby salmon (called an "**alevin**") emerges but stays in the gravel feeding from the yolk of its egg. After a few weeks it develops into a "**fry**" and swims freely in the river feeding on tiny invertebrates over the summer months.



In the Autumn, the fry grows into its next stage and is called a "**parr**". The parr has stripes to camouflage it and feeds on insects. After 1-3 years the parr has developed into a "**smolt**" and is more like a smaller (10-25cm) version of the adult fish: it is more silver in colour and has special adaptation that will allow it to live in saltwater. At this stage, the smolt migrates downstream and into the Atlantic Ocean. It swims with the North Atlantic Drift current north to colder waters, feeding on small fish and growing larger.

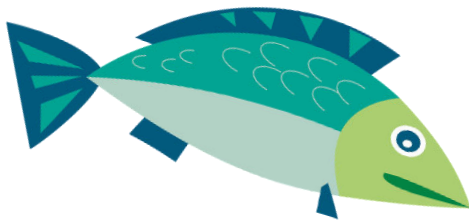


After a year, the smolt has grown into an adult (called a "**grilse**") and adult salmon usually weigh about 4kg but this varies greatly. The adult salmon migrates all the way back to the exact river where it hatched from; during this time, it doesn't eat at all. It must swim and jump very vigorously to get far enough upstream to the right conditions. This is called the "**salmon run**".

Once back at the spawning ground, the adults dig shallow nests in the gravel (called “redds”) and deposit their eggs there. The female salmon may lay **15,000 eggs** (the number depends on her size) but **less than 1%** will survive to adulthood!



After breeding, the adult salmon is called a “**kelt**”. It is weakened from the effort of getting upstream and not feeding and may die, but some survive to complete the migration process again and breed the following year.



Fact: Salmon may travel 3,000 km in their ocean migration before returning to their home river!

Threats:

Salmon are threatened by dams, weirs, locks and other structures that block them from swimming upriver to nest. These are major obstacles that prevent salmon reaching their spawning grounds. Some rivers have special “fish passes” in place so that salmon are able to get up-stream. Freshwater and marine pollution and overfishing also impacts on salmon populations.

Salmon are farmed in fish farms. This takes the pressure off wild salmon populations but there are also environmental problems associated with fish farms.

Links:

Read more about the salmon life cycle at the Marine Institute:

<https://www.marine.ie/Home/site-area/areas-activity/fisheries-ecosystems/salmon-life-cycle>

Learn more salmon facts here:

<https://onekindplanet.org/animal/atlantic-salmon/>

Watch this great NatGeo clip about salmon:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPf4qtCDRtE>

Your Turn - Quick Quiz:

- What's the first name a baby salmon gets when it hatches from its egg?
- What is the name of the young salmon when it turns silver and it adapts for life in saltwater?
- True or False: young salmon swim south to the warm tropics when they enter the ocean?
- What is the migration of adult salmon upriver to their spawning ground called?
- Approximately how many eggs does a female salmon lay?



If you're stuck for an answer, read back over the fact sheet!

Colour in an Atlantic Salmon

Print off the Atlantic Salmon colouring sheet on the next page and bring it to life with your favourite colours! If you don't have a printer, you can copy the drawing yourself or come up with your own salmon sketch altogether 😊

