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A Whole Generation Ends On The Spawning Beds Of Taylor Creek

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One of nature's mysterious compulsions has gripped the Kokanee salmon of Lake Tahoe and a whole generation of the fish is beginning its last trip up the river of its birthplace, to spawn and die.

The fish are doomed. Most of them have already stopped feeding and will die within the next few weeks. They have turned a bright red--and some, who have stopped feeding early, are turning white underneath and the external portions of their body--the fins, tail, and jaws are already disintegrating.

They live a short life--four years, some three and others five. They all are limited to one life cycle.

Because of the low level of water this year in Taylor Creek, their principal spawning river, the California Fish and Game Department is helping them to spawn.

Led by Jack Bell, fisheries manager No. 1, the department has placed a weir across Taylor Creek. They trap the salmon in wire cages. Then, one by one, they spawn the salmon into pans, two female and two male per pan, and throw the fish on the bank to die.

Those that aren't quite ripe, are placed above the weir where they will continue up the river to spawn naturally.

Yesterday morning during the first heavy run of Kokanee, the men spawned 195 and sent 40 others upstream by noon. They expected the total to equal or better last year's total of an estimated 2,600 salmon.

From this number, they expect several million eggs, the large portion of them being brought to San Joaquin hatchery. During the first morning, they had taken about 96,000 eggs.

In a hatchery, they will achieve close to 85 per cent fertility with the eggs they've taken.

Those fish that get past the weir will continue up the river where they will pair off and



MOMMA AND PAPPA -- These two fish are full grown Kokanee Salmon thrown on the bank after artificial spawning. The male is slightly larger with a bigger mouth and hooked upper jaw. He has also changed to a brighter red than his mate. Both are between 16 and 18 inches long and weigh less than two pounds. This typical Kokanee couple, if they are true to instinct, have lived out their life cycle in four years. ---Tribune Photo

find a gravel bed for their nest. It's crucial that they find fresh water running over clean gravel. The running water gives the eggs the needed oxygen. The gravel gives them protection from other fish and from the river itself.

The female finds a likely spot, fans out a little hollow, and deposits the eggs. The male then covers them with milt, a thick white substance like condensed milk.

The parents then cover the eggs with a thin layer of gravel and hover over the nest for several days, gradually grow weaker, and die.

The eggs hatch in about 90 days, depending on the temperature of the water. When they first hatch, the fish have the egg yoke attached to their belly like a big sac. For a time, they cling to the river floor and feed off this sac.

As the food is used up, they take on the appearance of a minnow, gain their sense of balance, and begin moving down stream toward the Lake that will be their home for about four years.

When they're mature, they'll head back toward the river where they were born and undergo the same demise that overtook their parents.

By this time, they are generally 16 to 18 inches in length and weigh close to two pounds. Until the spawning urge hits them, they are blue-green on the back and silver on the sides--pretty much like a rainbow. Then they turn a bright red. The Kikanee are a landlocked form of the Sockeye salmon.

They were taken from Idaho and planted in Lake Tahoe and Donner Lake in 1947 as a forage fish for trout, with the hope that they would also become a sport fish.

The spawning run is about a month early this year, Bob Morris, Eldorado National Forest ranger explained. The run should continue through the greater part of this week.

Taylor Creek in recent years has become the focal point for Kikanee spawning in the Tahoe Basin, Morris said. None of the other creeks emptying in the lake seem to have the same allure as Taylor Creek, and the other creeks spawn very few of the famed salmon.

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