

Trout Site – Dolly Varden Trout

In Alaska Dolly's are everywhere!
By Bob Willis

It is not often that you hear a trout referred to as a trash fish, but that was my first experience with Dolly Varden shortly after I moved to Ketcken, Alaska. They are not a fish that is particularly prized by the natives and not many fished for them. I guess the reason was that they were everywhere. There are two forms of Dolly Varden in Alaska and they are both considered abundant. The southern form ranges from the southeastern islands to the Aleutian Chain and the northern form along the North Slope to the Canadian border. There are both sea-run and freshwater forms as well as dwarf forms that co-exist with the other forms. The vast majority of Alaska Dolly Varden are anadromous and migrate each year back to the stream or lake where they were hatched.



When you fish Alaska in the late summer or early fall most of the rivers are full of Salmon. The Dolly's follow eating as many salmon eggs as possible.

In Alaska, Dolly Varden spend most of their lives wintering in freshwater and traveling to and from freshwater. The northern form spends the winter in streams, while the southern form overwinters in lakes. Since all of the southern form of Dolly Varden like to winter in lakes, this is a problem for those fish that were reared in streams. These fish search all of the streams around the ones where they were reared until they find one that leads to a lake. This unusual behavior does put a lot of fish in the streams of southeastern Alaska from August through November. The winter fish will stay in fresh water until April or May when they return to the Ocean. Dolly Varden actually inhabit the coastal areas of the Pacific Northwest from northern California to Alaska. There is also close relative known as the Bull Trout in Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Nevada. The abundance of the species increases as you move up the coast toward Alaska.

One of the most curious things about the fish is how they were named. There are several stories about "Dolly Varden" and exactly what happened to apply this name to a trout. The most plausible seems to be that the name comes from a popular dress style in the 1870's. This particular style used a shear dress worn over a bright under-dress. This fashion was called "Dolly Varden" and was applied to a pretty Pacific Northwest fish in fall spawning colors. It seems that the fish looked like Dolly Vardens, and the name stuck.

There are two basic flies to catch Dolly Varden. When they enter the streams in August they are pretty well salmon egg eaters. So from August–November you will do best with salmon egg imitations. In the spring, before they return to the ocean, they eat smolts of both salmon and trout. Minnow imitations are the spring ticket for catching these beauties. Their eating habits are one of the reasons that the fish are not well thought of in Alaska. They are voracious eaters of salmon eggs and salmon smolt, and in an industry that already suffers from lack of fish additional predation has not been appreciated.



This Dolly crunched a minnow fly that proved to be one of the best Patterns I used during my last trip to Alaska.

I think Dolly Varden are wonderful fish and if they are around I will fish for them. I remember many times fishing the streams around Ketchikan and catching small Dolly's. They were truly everywhere. It is different fishing. The fish have evolved to one that eats specific things, and in their case it revolves around salmon. I did find a terrific minnow fly that really works on Coastal Dolly Varden. I call it a Pink and White and once caught seven Dolly's in one spot on the Anchor River not far from Homer, Alaska. I didn't do it on consecutive casts, but not far from it. If you want to know more about Dolly Varden and fishing Alaska check out **Trout Adventures – North America**. The book will be available in printed or e-book form sometime in 2012 from Wilderness Adventures Press at www.wildadvpress.com.