

Something's fishy at Ringwood

Culture station in Whitchurch-Stouffville stocks Ontario streams with almost one million salmon a year

BY CONRAD BOYCE

As you motor south down Hwy 48 near Baker Hill, it's easy to miss the little sign on your right, welcoming visitors to the Ringwood Fish Culture Station. But if you've got a few minutes some day, take the time to turn in. You'll be fascinated by what you find.

The Culture Station is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and in those years the station's biologists and technicians have stocked Lake Ontario, and the rivers and creeks that empty into it from the north, with literally millions of salmon for your angling pleasure.

As the population of southern Ontario boomed over the last 200 years, many indigenous fish species, including the Atlantic

salmon and the lake trout, succumbed to such factors as pollution, damming of streams, overfishing and the introduction of strange predatory species such as the sea lamprey.

Finally, a few decades ago, the provincial government decided to attempt to re-introduce many of those locally extinct species. The lake trout has been a challenge, but the Atlantic salmon has made a strong return, accompanied by a couple of Pacific species, the coho and the chinook.

The Ringwood Fish Culture Station was established in 1980 with a particular focus on salmon. George Bluett, its current co-ordinator, has worked at Ringwood for over 16 years.

"This spring, we'll be introducing about 900,000 young salmon to various streams

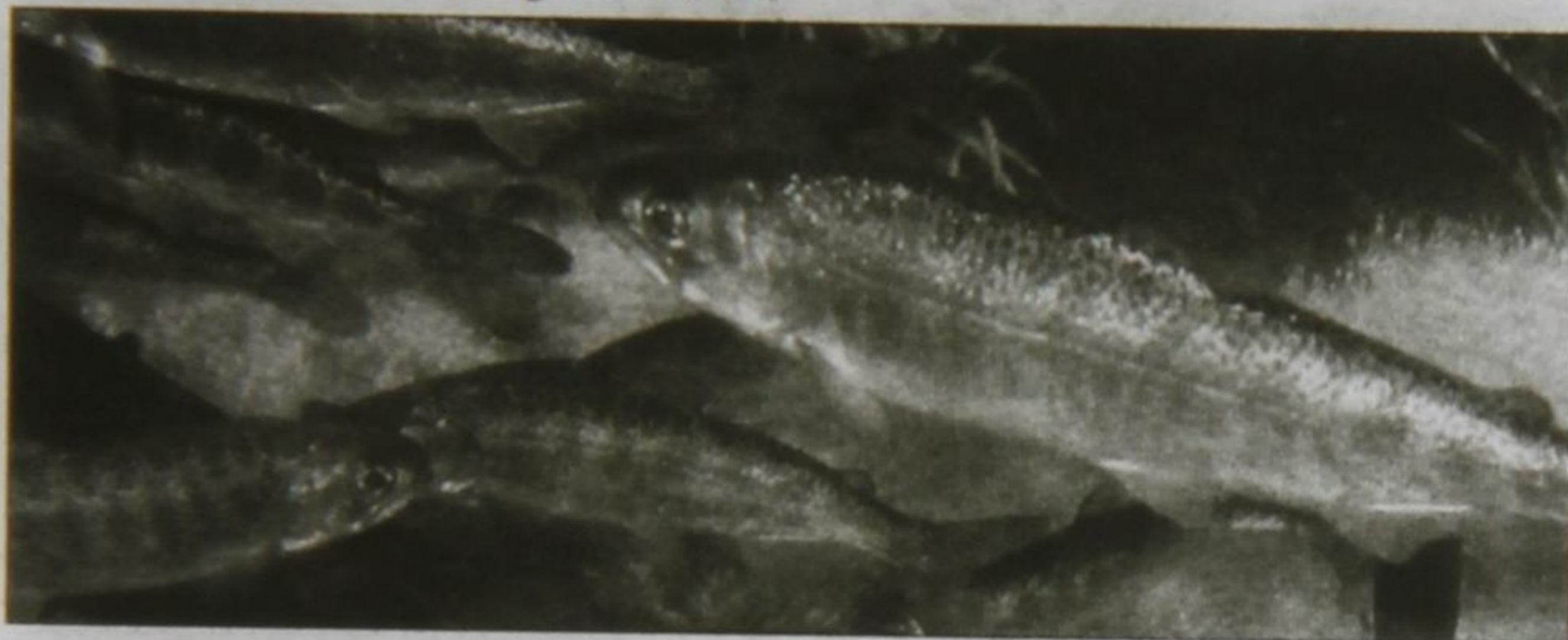
throughout southern Ontario," says George. "Seventy per cent are Pacific species and the rest Atlantic. They're at an age where they'll imprint on that stream, and that's where they'll return to spawn in a couple of years, after maturing in the lake."

The station is busy year-round. The fish-raising actually begins in the fall, when the staff harvest eggs in the wild from about 300 pairs of coho and chinook, as well as from a brood stock of Atlantic salmon. The eggs mature in large trays, 10,000 in each tray, until about Christmas time, when the rapidly maturing fry are transferred to large holding tanks with a capacity of up to 50,000 young fish. All of the station's water comes from the purest groundwater wells.

The station has an excellent self-guided interpretive centre, open weekdays from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., which takes the visitor through the aquaculture process and features aquariums with salmon at various stages of growth.

"There are other stations in the province that are working on species like lake trout," George says. "If they succeed in re-introducing those native species in a big way, we'll probably think about reducing our Pacific salmon production. After all, they're a long way from home."

Until then, thanks to the fisheries folk right here in Whitchurch-Stouffville, Ontario anglers will continue to enjoy the delicious challenge of catching a great coho or chinook.



PHOTOS BY CONRAD BOYCE

FAST FRY - These young Pacific salmon inhabit an aquarium at the station's visitor centre.



SPRING RITUAL - This truck, parked outside the Ringwood Fish Culture Station, hauls a large tank, which is being loaded by means of large plastic tubes, with 50,000 young salmon destined for the Don and Humber river basins.

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