Coho Salmon (*Onchorhynchus kisutch)*

Status -- Federal: Threatened; California: Endangered

Photo: David Blevins

Coho salmon belong to the family Salmonidae. They are one of eight species of Pacific salmonids in the genus *Onchorhynchus*,and the second largest of the Pacific salmon, with typical weights of 7 - 12 pounds. Coho salmon are anadromous, that is, the adults migrate from the sea into fresh water streams and rivers where they were born. They spend the first half of their life cycle rearing in streams and small freshwater tributaries. The remainder of the life cycle is spent foraging in estuarine and marine waters of the Pacific Ocean prior to returning to their stream of origin to spawn. In the ocean, coho salmon have dark metallic blue or greenish backs with silver sides and a light belly. There are small black spots on the back and upper lobe of the tail. The gumline in the lower jaw has lighter pigment than that found in the chinook salmon. Spawning coho salmon

California Department of Pesticide Regulation
Endangered Species Program
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in interior rivers (as shown in this card) are dark with reddish-maroon coloration on the sides. Males develop a strongly hooked snout and large teeth. Most returning adults are three-year old fish, however, some precocious males known as "jacks" return as two-year old spawners. A returning adult may measure more than two feet in length and weigh an average of eight pounds.

Reproduction: Like other salmonids, they are semelparous, which means they only spawn once and die. When salmon enter freshwater to begin their spawning migration, this process is called a "run". Most migration and spawning occurs between December and February in cool, well aereated streams with gravel bottoms. The female digs several gravel nests, called redds, and deposits between 2,400 to 4,500 eggs in them. Eggs generally hatch in 4 to 8 weeks, and the fry emerge from the redd after an additional 2 to 7 weeks. Juveniles stay in fresh water a little more than a year before migrating to the ocean, although a few spend two years. Coho salmon smolts tend to stay close to shore at first, feeding on plankton. As they grow larger, they move farther out into the ocean and switch to a diet of small fish. Coho salmon can stay at sea for two to three years. A few males mature at age two and return to spawn.

Distribution: In California, there are two regions defined as Evolutionarily Significant Units (ESUs) for coho salmon, covering the shaded area in the map included in this card: Southern Oregon/Northern California (Threatened) and Central California Coast (Threatened). An Evolutionarily Significant Unit is a population of fish that is substantially reproductively isolated from other populations and represents an important component in the evolutionary legacy of the species.