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Great Lakes 4H Fact Sheet – Coho Salmon

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service

4-H Club Bulletin

Michael F. Masterson, Donald L. Garling, Shari L. McCarty, Fisheries and Wildlife

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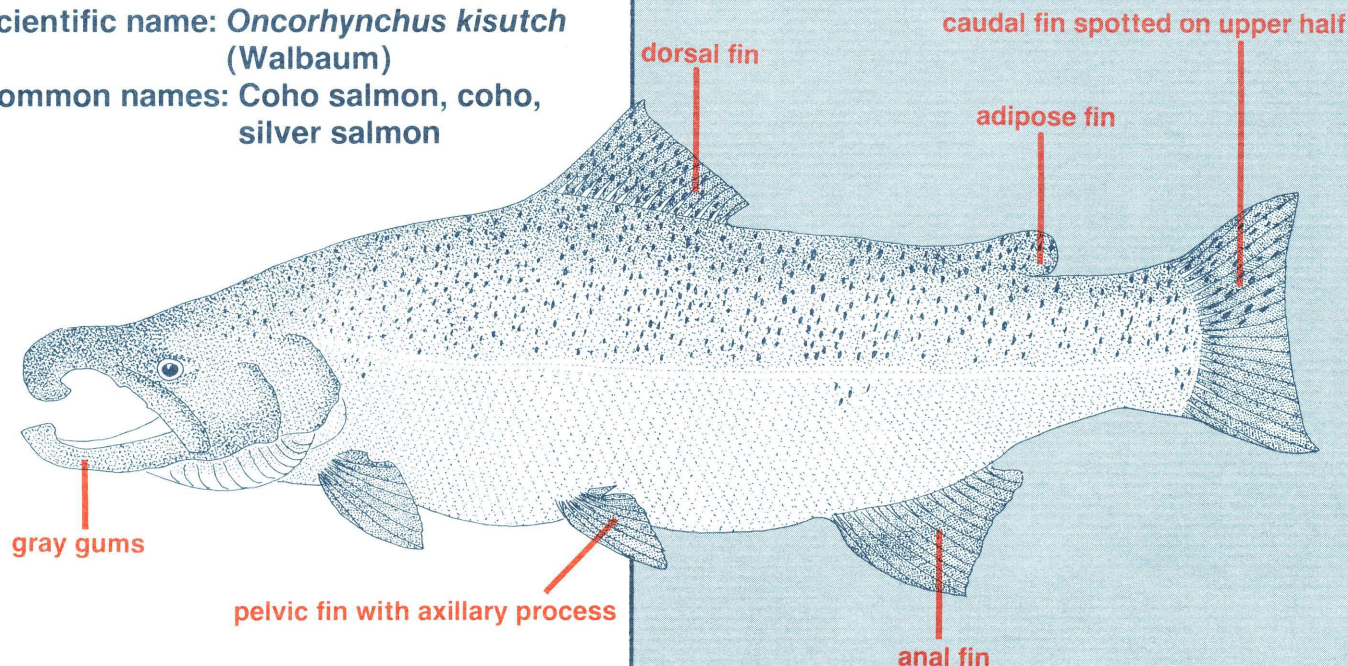
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NEWAYGO COUNTY  
817 S. Stewart  
Fremont, MI 49412  
(616) 924-0500

# Coho Salmon

Scientific name: *Oncorhynchus kisutch*  
(Walbaum)

Common names: Coho salmon, coho,  
silver salmon



## Description

**T**he coho salmon is an important Great Lakes fish. This streamlined salmon makes an excellent dinner. Coho average only 8 to 12 pounds in the Great Lakes and are not as large as chinook salmon. However, the Michigan state record is 30 pounds, 9 ounces.

The coho has two fins on its upper back. The front fin, called a **dorsal fin**, is largest and is soft, not spiny. The other fin on the back is small and fleshy; it is called an **adipose fin**. The **caudal fin** (or tail) is square with pointed tips. A pair of **pelvic fins** protrude from the coho's belly. Each pelvic fin has an **axillary process**, a dagger-like ray. A single **anal fin** having 13 to 15 rays is found between the anus and the caudal fin.

An adult coho salmon in the Great Lakes is a steel-blue to slightly green color on the back. The sides are bright silver, and the fish is white underneath. There are small black spots on the upper back. Spots are also found on the base of the dorsal fin and the upper half of the caudal fin. A breeding male has a dark blue-green back and has a red stripe along each side. The inside of

the coho's mouth is black, but the gums are a lighter gray.

To identify the coho, first check for salmon characteristics. Look for the adipose fin and the axillary process. Coho are often confused with smaller chinook. Coho are slightly less spotted and have 13 to 15 anal fin rays and gray gums.

## Life History

**A**dult coho are found in the open waters of the Great Lakes. Once coho reach age 3 or 4, they return to their home rivers to spawn (reproduce).

Coho make spawning runs upstream beginning in early September and continuing through early October. The female coho digs a nest called a **redd**. Spawning occurs in the redd. A few days after spawning, the adults die.

The eggs hatch early the next spring. The young fish, called **sac fry**, stay in the gravel until their yolk sacs are absorbed. From March to July, the young coho emerge from the nests to feed. Some of the young fish will migrate to the Great Lakes immediately, but most will stay in the

stream for a year or longer. When they enter the Great Lakes, they will stay close to shore for a few months and then move to deeper water to stay for about 2 years.

The coho's diet changes as it grows and migrates. While still in the stream, coho feed mainly on insects. Once they become large enough and move into the Great Lakes, they will eat small fish such as smelt and alewives.

## Fishery

**B**eginning in the 1870's, attempts were made to stock coho in the Great Lakes. It wasn't until 1966, however, that the plantings were successful. Today, stocking programs keep up the coho numbers in the Great Lakes.

The coho is an important fish to Michigan's tourist industry. This fish attracts **anglers** from many states. Most coho that are taken by anglers in the open waters of the Great Lakes are caught while anglers' boats slowly pull lures through deep water (**trolling**) using **down riggers** (weighted fishing gear). Still-fishing near the shore with spoons, spinners, or spawn bags during migrations is also a successful method. Coho are also taken by specially licensed commercial fishermen at **weirs** (structures that stop fish passage) on their spawning runs. Most of the fish caught are sold fresh, but much is smoked and canned.

### Written by:

Mary Ann Crawforth, Graduate Assistant  
Donald Garling, Fisheries Specialist  
Shari McCarty, 4-H Youth Specialist  
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife

### Illustration by:

Maureen Kay Hein

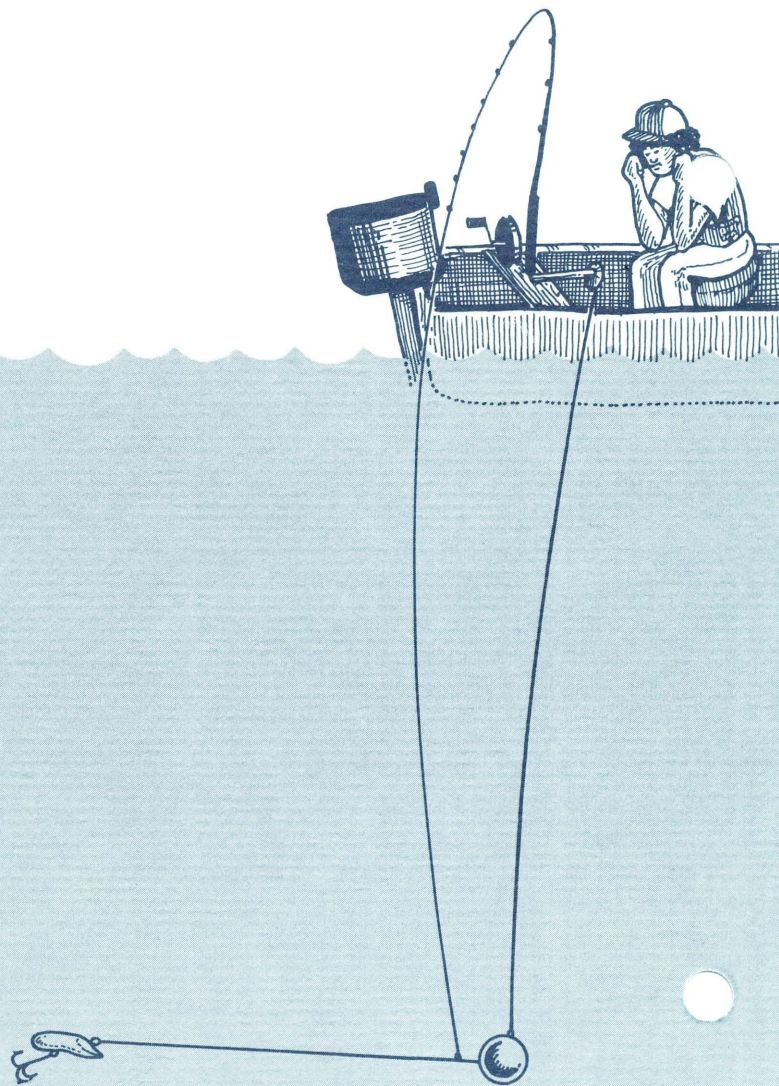
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## Glossary

**Adipose fin**—a fleshy fin on the back behind the dorsal fin

**Anal fin**—a fin on the middle line under the fish behind the anus

**Angler**—one who fishes

**Axillary process**—a dagger-like projection at the base of the pectoral or pelvic fins

**Caudal fin**—the tail fin

**Dorsal fin**—a fin on the back, usually central in position, with rays or spines

**Down rigger**—weighted fishing device used to keep fishing lures down in 25 to 100 feet of water

**Pelvic fins**—paired fins below the pectoral fins or between the pectoral and anal fin

**Redd**—the gravel nest

**Sac fry**—a young fish that still has a yolk sac from which it draws its nutrients

**Trolling**—slowly pulling a fishing lure behind a boat

**Weir**—a temporary obstruction placed in a stream to prevent fish from swimming further upstream