SILVER TIGER TAIMEN

One salmon to rule them all

BY **RYAN PETERSON**

PHOTOS BY **JOHN SHERMAN**

THE AUTHOR'S BIG, SEA-RUN TAIMEN.

On the hundred-and-first cast the first strip felt dull, the second heavy, and the third came tight with a thuggish throb. Silver and pink flashed underwater a split second before the river broke in a shower of water ten feet across. "Taimen! Taimen! Taimen!" yelled Victor Voydilov, who was popping up and down on the rocks behind me waving his hands. "Set the hook! Hard! Harder!" Adrenaline. It felt like the line was connected to my spine. A phrase looped in my head: This is a sea-run taimen.

I first became aware that such a thing existed nine years earlier during a midnight vodka tête-à-tête with a Russian biologist. Like many flyfishers, I've long been intrigued by the river taimen of Mongolia and Siberia, with their circus-freak size and reputation for squirrel eating. My curiosity comes less from a desire to catch one, though, than from fascination over their place in the universe.

Meanwhile, I'm a slave to the silver dash of a sea-run fish. Those of us who follow them, trancelike, from cold creeks rimmed by fog and conifers to grey oceans underneath the wings of pelagic birds, find heroism in their wanderlust and style in their shape, beauty, and indomitable strength. If these qualities were to somehow be infused into a taimen?...*the largest salmon thing on Earth*?...I could feel my heartbeat in my ears.

Seven years later over drinks, John Sherman, a photographer friend, was describing an ambitious book he's been working on for years, based on his attempt to catch and document all the world's sea-run salmonids. I suggested a truly completist effort ought to include taimen and fed him the buzzwords: silver, huge, Russia, eats whole salmon, tiger. He committed to a trip on the spot. "OK," I said, "let's stay in touch."

"No. You don't understand," he said, sensing my bar-talk radar, "I'm the guy who will do this."

Around 23 million years ago there was one salmon to rule them all. Its home on the Eurasian continent was warm and stable. Then the planet began slowly to cool and there was a great cleaving of the *salmonidae* family tree. Half the trunk went far and wide, jumping continents and taking over fresh- and saltwater environments of all arctic and temperate zones, splintering into what we now call salmon, trout, and char.

But the other half stayed resident to its birth-continent and has not changed much in the mega-annums since. When forced to put it into popular perspective, scientists talk of *Hucho* as the grandfather of all salmon. The Polish call it, *glowacica*, which means *head*, referring to the creature's gigantic head, but possibly also to its position atop the riverine food chain. In English we borrow from Russian to call it *taimen*.

There are actually five species called taimen. Four can be thought of as close relatives, inhabiting different parts of Asia and Europe. The Siberian taimen spans the largest range, from the Ural Mountains in the west to the Sea of Okhotsk on the Pacific, in between crossing the political boundaries of Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, and China. All taimen have the potential to reach immense size, but the Siberian taimen is the biggest of the big. They're the fish that put the taimen name into the consciousness of anglers in the 1980s and '90s, when photos emerged from Mongolia and Siberia showing specimens weighing more than 200 pounds.

In Europe, the Danube taimen—*huchen* in German—has been extirpated by humans from much of its native range but still swims in a few tributaries of its namesake in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Romania, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Slovakia.

In China, a desperately small number of Sichuan taimen cling to the headwaters of a single tributary of the Yangtze River. "Panda land. It's where Pandas are," says Pete Rand, a taimen expert at the Wild Salmon Center (WSC) in Portland, Oregon. "And then there's an extremely mysterious one in North Korea," he says. A colleague of his claims to have seen a Korean taimen two years ago on a survey, but the anecdote makes up the entirety of what is known about its status. It may already be extinct and opportunities for proper assessment are not on the horizon.

"You certainly could not pay me to go there," Steven Weiss, a taimen geneticist at Karl-Franzens University in Austria wrote to me in an email. "Maybe I should have asked Dennis Rodman?"

The fifth species of taimen is not a taimen at all. Or, more accurately, its lineage lies not with Hucho, but on the other, footloose half of the trunk, on which it is the sole member of the genus, Parahucho. "They float around," says Weiss, "somewhere going back to the common ancestor between *Salmo* [Atlantic salmon] and *Oncorhynchus* [Pacific salmon]." Its home waters surround a highly fertile sliver of the Pacific from Hokkaido, Japan, north along the Russian mainland to the mouth of the Amur River, and throughout Sakhalin Island, after which it is named. The Russian mainland portion of their range is tiger land. It's where Amur tigers live.

But their story has something extra. Sakhalin taimen share with their salmon cousins the fascinating trait of anadromy.

Very little is known of its habits and life cycle and over the next two years, countless phone calls and emails shot the Pacific as we honed in on an expedition. Along the way it became clear that even with the best available intelligence, catching one would be tough. Following a drastic range-wide decline over the last 25 years, Sakhalin taimen are today listed as "critically endangered" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Overharvest has been the primary culprit in the chaotic aftermath of the Soviet period; both by local people acting out of genuine need, and by more nefarious, organized poaching interests that sell to black markets outside the area. Habitat in the region is still more or less intact, though, and the conservation hope is that if poaching can be controlled, Sakhalin taimen stand a chance of recovery.

To this end the WSC is at the forefront of taimen conservation in Russia. In 2010, working with Aleksander Kulikov of the Khabarovsk Wildlife Fund, they played a key role in the establishment of a regional wildlife refuge along the Koppi River.

Protecting any wild land under law in the 21st century is an extraordinary achievement, but the Koppi stands out, Mariusz Wroblewski at the WSC told us, because, "it is the best sea-run taimen river in the world."

The refuge's charter evolved out of ten years of hearings at the local, regional, and federal levels that sought, Wroblewski says, to answer "the central question of, 'How can the community that relies on the resource somehow protect it?'" If an area could be set aside not just for its ecological credits, but for a small-scale, strictly controlled economy that relies on the viability of the same, a long-term future could be envisioned, where an added level of protection comes from stakeholders who act out of owner-interest. Included in the vision is support for sustainable tourism concessions, including catch-and-release sportfishing.

THE SAKHALIN TAIMEN'S RANGE INCLUDES THE STUNNINGLY BIODIVERSE SIKHOTE-ALIN MOUNTAINS.

Within this framework Wroblewski introduced us to a man on the river who may be the only sea-run taimen guide in the world.

We flew from Anchorage on Yakutia Air, crossing the Bering Sea in four and a half hours, touched down briefly on Kamchatka, and continued three more to the city of Khabarovsk on the Amur River in the Russian Far East, fifteen miles downstream of China.

Those unfamiliar with the geographic magnitude of Russia sometimes assume that everything outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg is Siberia. Siberia does account for a majority of the country's landmass, but it isn't the rest.

If Siberia is the long part of Russia's middle, the Russian Far East is the tall part of its Pacific right, extending from Kamchatka at the top to North Korea and China at the bottom. It shares much with the broader North Pacific Rim fishing culture, and has a lush ecological dynamism, we'd heard, that is unique in the world. To see what this meant, exactly, was as much of a draw for us as were the taimen.

Fishing is the perfect reason to go somewhere you'd never normally go, and the muggy, cramped 26-hour overnight train that took us out of Khabarovsk on an offshoot of the Trans-Siberian Railway was just such a place. Our little team had expanded on arrival to include our interpreter, Igor Snitsky. He is 64—a kind, gentle man, and not a fisherman. We were prepared to not catch anything in the next two weeks and I wondered what he would make of such a grand, elaborate snipe hunt.

The next morning we met the end of the track at Sov Gavan, a small port city on the Tartar Strait, and stepped off into sweet sea-air and brilliant sun, where Victor Voydilov was waiting with a gold-toothed smile. Voydilov strikes a strong first impression. He's type A all the way—a risky, if always interesting disposition. He is 61, tall and weathered, with the lean, muscular build of a mountaineer. Deep lines of character traverse his face and a shock of fine brown hair sits beneath a gray beanie that he wears all the time, no matter the weather. He extended a hand to shake. It was absurdly large and rough, as if he wore thick gloves designed to look exactly like hands.

He moved with hurried efficiency between train platform and car park, loading our bags into a dusty SUV. This, we would learn, is Voydilov's mode. The stillest we saw him sit in nine days was the ten minutes he spent one night sharpening a skinning knife.

He looked at us with outstretched arms. "Ready?! Let's go!"

THE EXPEDITION EXPLORED THE KOPPI RIVER FROM SALTWATER TO HEADWATERS.

The Koppi's watershed is a little smaller than Yellowstone National Park, and lays in the heart of the Sikhote-Alin Mountains. Through it, a single road leads to the river—a relic of logging in the 1970s and '80s. The road climbs steeply through lush second-growth valleys and along ridges where 3,000-foot, tree-covered summits crowd views to all horizons. As we crawled deeper in, the road deteriorated into a potholed dirt track that demanded a tight grip on the rig's oh-shit handles, and bounced our heads off its ceiling. Snitsky translated a boisterous exclamation from Voydilov: "The worse the road, the better the fishing!"

Our plan for the days to come would be to cover sixty miles of the drainage, from the sea up, staying a few days at each of three camps Voydilov maintains along the river. This would give a good impression of the diversity of the watershed, he said, but it would be in the upper river, among rocky pools inside the Koppi Wildlife Refuge, where we stood our best chance to catch a big taimen.

It all sounded wonderful, but though we were getting closer by the minute, the Koppi was still an abstraction. We'd uncovered few photos in our prior research and none that gave a sense of its character. A major question loomed: What, exactly, did it look like? Would it be shallow, wadeable, and suitable to flyfishing, or would it be an off-colored, deep, froggy-water affair?

The road intersects the river in its middle reach and there, finally, it appeared, as perfectly sculpted as any river we'd ever seen. It has a mellow gradient, clear water, and a gravel bottom, with braids that cut through dense deciduous forests to form islands, seams, glides, and riffles that looked just like those of our home rivers across the Pacific. The glimpse alone made the trip worth it. A line had been drawn.

We loaded into Voydilov's self-made spruce skiff and launched with the plan to fish our way downstream and end that night by his camp at the sea.

In a long straightaway, Voydilov cut the motor midstream, stood up in the stern and took control of the boat with a long wooden pole. Sherman and I grabbed rods and instinctively scanned for holding water. None was obvious. "Taimen," Voydilov said, "are very wary animals." The sound of the motor would put them off. We needed to approach silently. He pointed to a deep pool pushing against a logjam two hundred yards downstream. We'd fish there.

As we cast, he checked the pole off the bottom to ease us back and forth in the current, finding the sweet spot where boat and cast meshed to present the fly where he wanted it. While working with a "guide" in places beyond flyfishing's cultural frontier, I've always found it best to set expectations low, with the hope to merely tap their knowledge enough to level an otherwise steep self-guided learning curve. But Voydilov was impressive. He'd never worked with flyfishers before, he said. But his intuition and technical skills were remarkable, allowing him to quickly adjust to our methods.

He was sizing us up, too, and expressed doubt that any adult taimen would take a fly. The few people he takes out each season gear up with heavy spinning rods and 10-inch long spoon-billed plugs called wobblers—which he pronounced "vobbler"—and even then a fish a week cannot be expected. "Little taimen are like kids," Voydilov proclaimed, "easy to trick. Big taimen are like men."

On seeing our nine-weight rods, tungsten lines, and gigantic hooks, however, we seemed to pass his masculinity test. As we cast he gave a short speech, which Snitsky translated as, "He says you might have a chance to catch the big taimen."

From that point forward Voydilov was on the team, and we got into a rhythm that held through the trip. We'd fish alternately from shore or from the boat, covering the water methodically as one would for salmon or steelhead. Often there would be a particular zone that he insisted we cover especially well, explaining it with an anecdote of past taimen he'd seen. There were very few stories of fish actually being caught.

We'd heard that taimen, unlike salmon, not only eat while in the river, but that their favorite prey is adult pink salmon, and briefly considered how one might tie a six-pound baitfish imitation. Ultimately, though, we pinned our hopes on castable flies.

Sherman was swinging one such eight-inch striped bass monstrosity through a tailout from the boat early in the day when the first taimen took—a fish of five pounds. Voydilov netted it and we asked to go to shore for a photograph. For all we knew it would be our only fish of the trip. Voydilov winced. "It's tiny." We would catch bigger ones, he said, maybe even in this pool, and he didn't want to disturb it by running to shore. We deferred, as we would so often in the days ahead, to his unwavering confidence and enthusiasm.

Later we got our first look at the true stature of what we'd come for when two adult taimen flushed from a tailout. In an instant their four-foot bodies disappeared into a shadow. We looked at each other and, with the usual expletives, laughed.

In its last mile the Koppi's current slows into a tidal estuary a few hundred yards wide. As we cruised by, grey herons, Eurasian teal, and an enormous white-tailed sea eagle flushed from flooded reed marshes at the edge. Where the river finally merges with the sea its banks splay sharply north and south, turning to rocky coastlines the color of charcoal.

On the south point of the mouth, a small cluster of buildings stuck out against the skyline, remnants of a once-vibrant commercial fishing industry. Among them

KING CRAB FROM THE TARTAR STRAIGHT BOILED OVER A BIRCH FIRE. THE FLAVOR OF THE PLACE.

VICTOR VOYDILOV'S UPPER CAMP SITS INSIDE THE KOPPI WILDLIFE REFUGE, FAR FROM HUMANS, CLOSE TO TAIMEN. PHOTO BY RYAN PETERSON

Voydilov maintains a small base for his commercial fishing crew during pink salmon season in August. It was late evening when we pulled onto a hard sand beach in front of camp. Voydilov showed us to our cabin and then asked if we'd like to go back out with him to "check the crabs?" We weren't quite sure what that meant, but were absolutely on board.

A full moonrise reflected long on the water as we motored out into the Tartar Strait. A mile offshore Voydilov came off step and a buoy materialized. We heaved at its line until a pot the size of a dump truck wheel came over the gunwale. Inside swarmed two-dozen red king crabs, their spiny legs spanning nearly four feet. We took out eight, re-baited the trap with a chum salmon carcass, and sent it back to the bottom.

That night over crab, salmon, red caviar, and vodka, Sherman and I set to work prizing out Voydilov's knowledge of Sakhalin taimen. We'd heard much mysterious and contradictory information from scientists and others along the way. Little, it seemed, has been studied to the point of clarity. In Voydilov, though, was man who has probably spent more time than anyone observing them directly.

He'd had two shots of vodka and, uncharacteristically for a Russian, was a happy lightweight: "Ahh! I've been fishing this river for 35 years and I still don't understand them." He went on to tell that adult fish spend winter in the river, in pools under ice with access to food fish. In May, after ice-out, they migrate high in the drainage to spawn. This is an assumption, though, as spawning taimen have never been observed in the Koppi. They don't eat during this time, and after spawning move downstream, feeding and rejuvenating. Most go into the sea for June, July, and August. They don't travel far and wide but rather stay close to the river mouth to feed on both pink salmon and cherry salmon—a rare western Pacific native resembling a mini-chinook, so named because they run in spring when the cherry blossoms bloom in Japan.

In September, taimen again move into the river for winter.

There are, however, many variations to this pattern. Adult taimen can be seen year-round both in the upper river pools, and as bycatch in brackish and saltwater. Meanwhile it is thought that all juvenile fish rear exclusively in the lower river, but it is not known when or what triggers their first saltwater migration.

Like Hucho, Sakhalin taimen are long lived, taking five to eight years to reach sexual maturity, and have been documented to 27 years old. Once of age, they may not spawn every year, or even every other year. Furthermore, taimen expert Pete Rand told me, after chemically analyzing six adult taimen he found in a poacher's camp in 2005, none showed any sign of having been to saltwater at all.

AT TEN POUNDS OR MORE, THE SAKHALIN TAIMEN TAKE ON A DISTINCTIVE LOOK. FLAT, ROUND HEADS, SHARP TEETH, AND SLENDER FINS RECALL LAKE TROUT AND PIKE. DENSE, TINY BLACK SPOTS COVER THE FRONT THIRD OF THE BODY, AND MAY EXTEND BACK AND DOWN, TOWARD A LONG, DEEPLY FORKED TAIL.

This reoriented our thinking. Though they go to the sea, Sakhalin taimen are not "sea-run" according to the salmon and steelhead dynamic. Rather, as a species it can be said they move between fresh and saltwater environments based on spawning in spring and sourcing food in both sea and river through the rest of the year. Yet each individual can and does break from the pack. It's as if Nature has given them long life enough to relax and figure it out for themselves. There's no rush.

"But if you knock them down," Rand points out, "they take a long time to come back."

Convinced now that we should be trying to provoke a predatory rather than curiosity response, Sherman—a technical fisherman who prepares for every conceivable situation—found that a fast-stripped fly produced hard strikes from increasingly larger fish, the heaviest approaching ten pounds.

At that size Sakhalin taimen carry a fat girth throughout, and their flat round heads, sharp teeth, and slender fins recall lake trout and pike.

The marine environment of the lower river was charming, but Voydilov was anxious to move. There are only small taimen by the sea, he said, and if we were serious about catching a big one, we needed to head far upriver, into the most remote and pristine part of the Refuge.

We set off after breakfast the following day. A couple hours in, Voydilov eased off the throttle and pulled over to where a small creek entered the main channel. A poacher's gill net was strung across its 30-foot mouth. Voydilov lifted at the floatline's center. Two chum salmon came up; one dead, one twitching. He bunched the mesh against the line, pulled a knife from his belt, sliced it clean in half, dropped it back to the water, said nothing, and motored away.

Farther on we met two scientists from the university in Khabarovsk camped on a gravel bar. They'd been floating and fishing the river for a week, trying to catch and tag taimen. They were using "vobblers" and had caught no adult fish. Farther still, we met Wroblewski and a visiting US Forest Service team he was hosting on a forest survey. Over a riverside lunch he told us how earlier in their trip they had been at a pool upriver at dusk when a huge taimen put on a show by thrashing the surface repeatedly while hunting yellow-spotted grayling. "Fish late," he said.

The old growth of the upper Koppi is spectacular. There, inland from the sea, cooler fall temperatures had brought the full rainbow of postcard colors to the trees. Russia has over one-fifth of the world's remaining frontier forests—more than any other country—and the richest of them grow here. Oaks, maples, willows, cottonwood, aspen, birch, and larch shone all the brighter in contrast to spruce, pine, fir, and cedar among them.

Underneath the plants the angles of the Sihkote-Alin come steeply and immediately to the river. Cliffs of old granite and new conglomerate pinched at the Koppi's corners, framing riffles and pools flowing over a complex of bedrock, boulders, and spawning gravel.

Each day we'd fish early and late and rest in the middle. One afternoon Voydilov led us up a hillside behind camp to a bird's eye view of the watershed. Snitsky stayed in camp and left us to my hacky Russian to take it all in. As we wove uphill through a jungle of aspen and scrubby Siberian pine, Voydilov pointed at things that needed no translation. Here were elk tracks, and a few meters farther, deer. Here were moose droppings. Here was where boar snouts rooted for acorns. Earlier in the trip we had seen a sow brown bear and her two cubs cross the river, and on a grassy hillside a Himalayan black bear had grazed. Voydilov said he could show us a marking tree downstream into which the local bears have scratched their identities for decades.

We never saw sign of a tiger but a few of the river-folk we met had. There are fewer than 400 Amur tigers left in the wild today. (The species is commonly—though incorrectly—called "Siberian" tiger.) From tracks they leave in snow, biologists and trappers keep tabs on at least seven individuals known to hunt the Koppi.

Voydilov's son, Ivan, had the best tiger story. He'd been hunting far upriver in the fall when his friend was bitten by a poisonous snake. He got him into a boat and sped downriver toward help. Along the way they passed two tigers sunning themselves on a sandbar. They flicked their tails like house cats, he said, but there was no time to stop and admire them.

Sable, lynx, wolverine, wolf, and a strange canid called the raccoon dog—which looks exactly like a cross between the two—also prowl hillsides exactly like the one we were on, as does the endangered Blakiston's fish owl, the largest owl on Earth, with a six-foot wingspan and long, sinister ear tufts. It specializes in hunting salmon at night by wading in after them from shore.

As we climbed, we grabbed at blueberries growing at hand-height and at one point Voydilov perked at something a few meters away, disappeared into the trees, and came back with a handful of nuts. I didn't recognize them by shape, nor by the Russian word he used, but the flavor was unmistakably hazelnut. Grape vines had also been growing around the base of their tree, he said, and held up a bunch. They were delicious.

Here was the richness of the Sikhote-Alin we'd heard so much about. In fact, if you were to walk around the earth along the Koppi's latitude of 49°, through Mongolia, Ukraine, Germany, Quebec, and downtown Vancouver, British Columbia, you would not encounter more species of plant, animal, fish, and bird life living together in one locality. This stunning biodiversity is generally attributed to the region being skipped over by the last ice age, which provided a refuge for species of previous, warmer times and promoted a fantastic evolutionary variety.

We reached a high granite outcropping that poked out above the forest canopy. Voydilov blew a long, sonorous elk call over the valley. It was hunting season and he had a rifle. No one answered. Thirty-five years ago, he said, game would have scattered before us everywhere we went.

In the river, we began to see giant taimen from the boat daily, some of which appeared nearly as long as us. We also saw, as bycatch, the occasional grayling, sea-run dolly varden, and kunzha—a native char like a gold-colored bull trout—but there were no small taimen. In the upper river, as Voydilov had predicted, there were only men.

Moral stayed high enough. We had achieved our main goals. We'd caught sea-run taimen to ten pounds, seen their elders, and photographed the rare species. Yet while we were completely fine with not catching more or bigger fish, we couldn't get over the puzzle of why they wouldn't bite. Supposedly they were hungry and aggressive, but at least a handful had undoubtedly seen and rejected our flies.

On the penultimate evening we held a stakeout on the bank of a taimen's lair at the head of a long glide. We'd seen the dragon-like fish from the boat three hours earlier and had crept back in as the sun went down. There was no seeing into the pool from our position on the bank, but Sherman's strategy would be to assume the fish was still there and to give it as much time as it needed. We would cast until it either got hungry or got so dark that we couldn't. He cast at least fifty times from the poll-position. Nothing. "You're up," he said. I made fifty more casts and decided to change the fly. As I clinched the knot on a flashy five-inch black and red baitfish, grayling started to rise to a mayfly hatch.

The hundred and first cast was the same as the previous hundred, except this time a big sea-run taimen took it. It thrashed and threw its head, spinning like an underwater bronco, but took no line from the reel. I have hooked pieces of wood that staged a more formidable fight. It didn't seem to be in a hurry. After a few minutes it came to rest on its side in the shallows and we all leaned in; a male, 107 centimeters in length, 42 inches. Voydilov estimated it at 26 pounds.

He was the most special fish I'll likely ever catch, both by the strict definition of rarity, and on my personal scale in the quadrant of my brain set aside for flyfishing. He crystallized a feeling of connection with much that two weeks earlier I had not known, and made Sherman and me both contemplate that we'd never been on a fishing trip that was so light on fish, yet so full of life.

The moment passed. He swam away. Sherman had been filming and I realized I was supposed to say something profound, but words didn't come. Voydilov and I hugged.

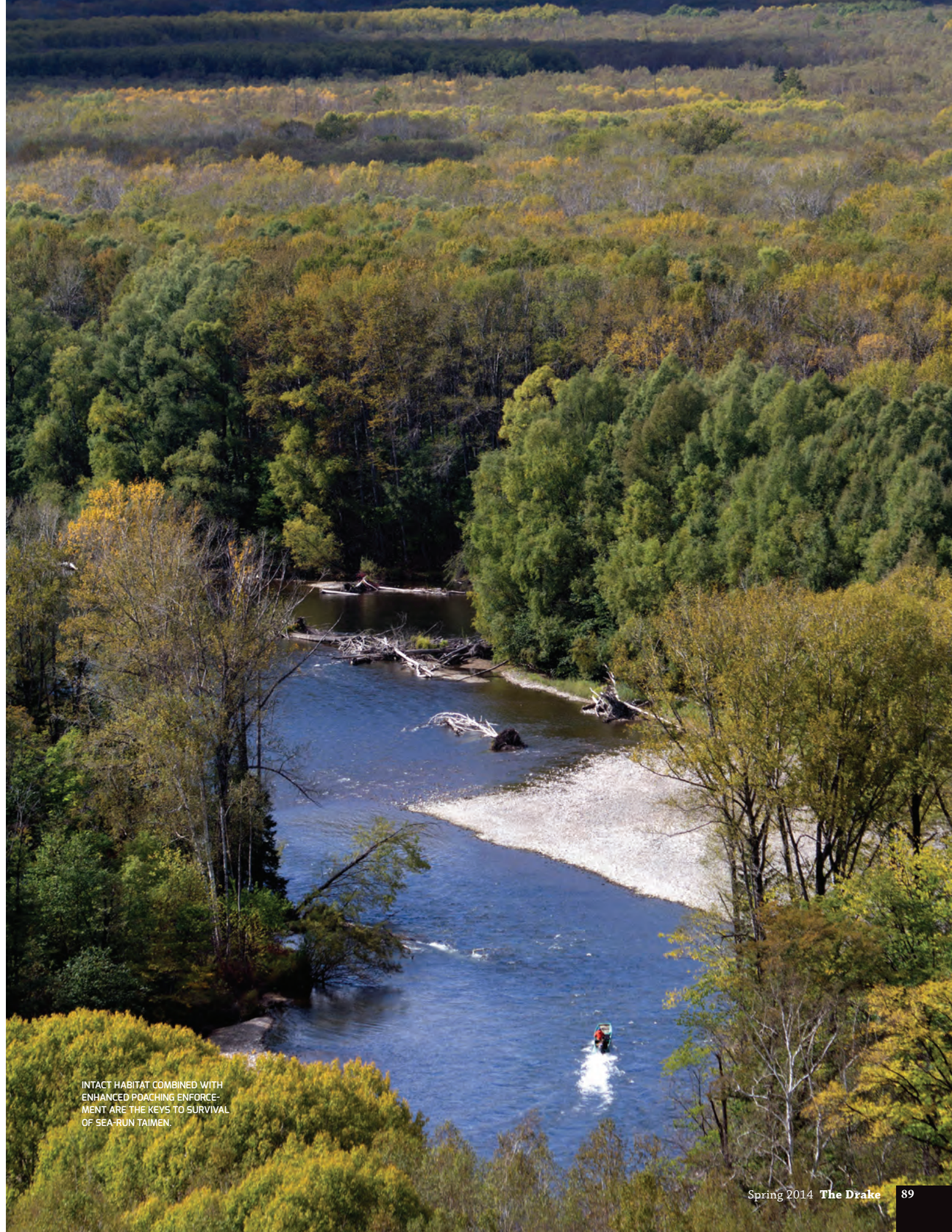
It was a 45-minute run back to camp and there, after the requisite vodka dose, Snitsky started to tell me something, but then shied off. I got the impression he wasn't quite sure how best to express it in English and didn't want to screw it up. I egged him on and he began, very sweetly, "You know how when someone is really happy, like they just won the lottery or something?"

"Yeah."

"They always have this stupid look on their face. Not like a happy look on the face of a girl in the shop or something—*'Can I help you?'*—but a look like the person is genuinely happy."

"Yeah."

"You had this stupid look all the way back to the camp."



INTACT HABITAT COMBINED WITH ENHANCED POACHING ENFORCEMENT ARE THE KEYS TO SURVIVAL OF SEA-RUN TAIMEN.