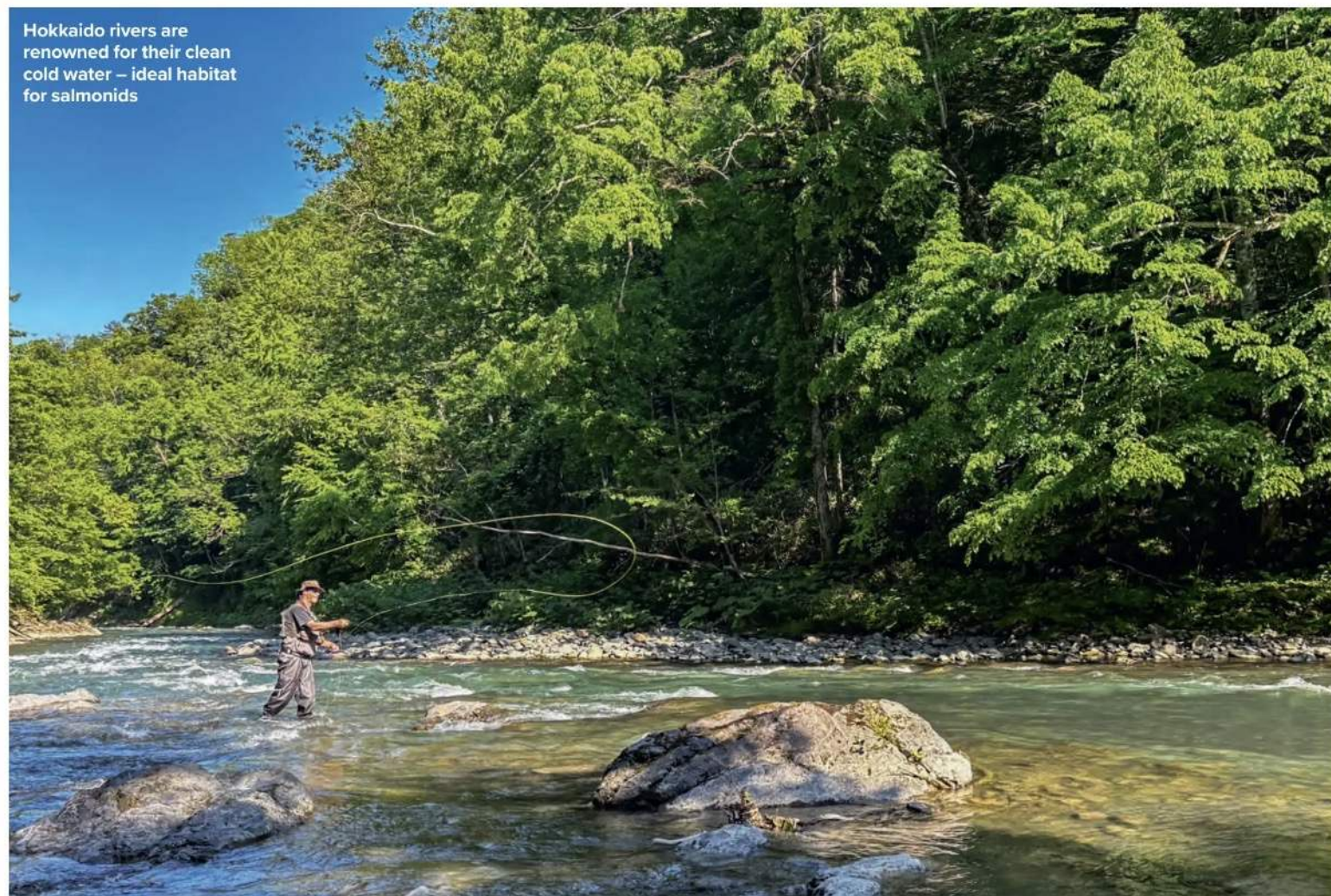


IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT SPIRITS

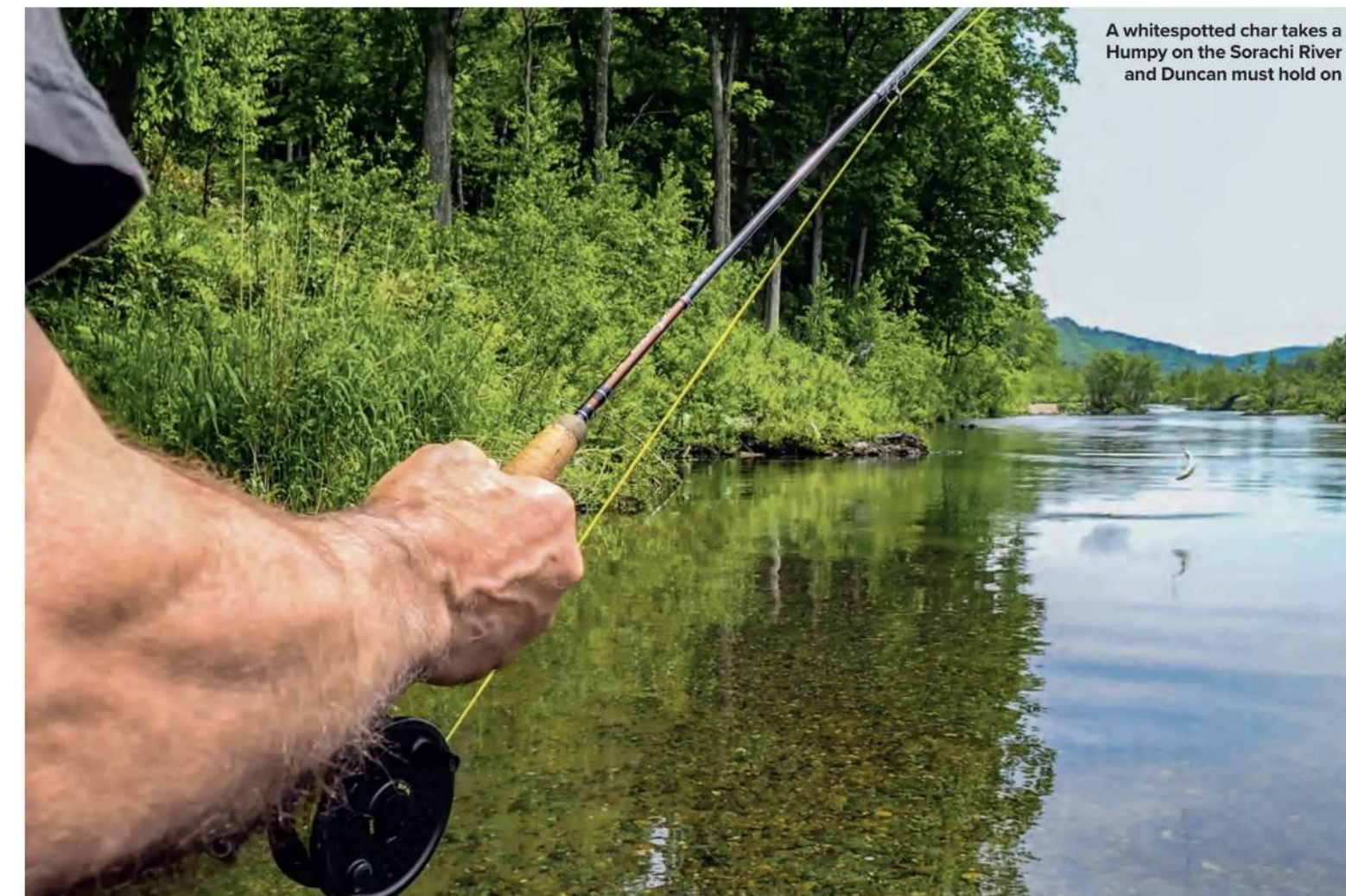
WORDS & PICTURES: DUNCAN HALL



Duncan Hall and his guide
Koudai at Lake Kanayama,
Hokkaido, Japan



Hokkaido rivers are renowned for their clean cold water – ideal habitat for salmonids



A whitespotted char takes a Humpy on the Sorachi River and Duncan must hold on

THE JAPANESE CONSUME vast quantities of sea fish, often eaten raw, a staple and abundant food thanks to a coastline of nearly 18,000 miles, stretching from the temperate north to the subtropical south. But I had not travelled there for sea fish – I was there to fly-fish the clear rivers of Hokkaido, Japan's northern island.

Two fish particularly interested me: sleek whitespotted char (*Salvelinus leucomaenis*) and the indigenous huchen (*Parahucho perryi*). This huchen is known in Japan as *ito* (pronounced *ee-toh*). Anadromous and the oldest of the salmonids, it feeds on aquatic insects when young before becoming exclusively piscivorous as it grows larger. Specimens of 30lb and more are occasionally landed.

They were once revered as god-like spirits by the ancient Ainu, the first inhabitants of Hokkaido, who referred to them as the *chirai*. The Ainu were

animistic hunter-gatherers who lived in harmony with nature, believing certain animals possessed powerful spirits, or *kamuy*. Sadly, in the 19th century, at the start of the Meiji era, their culture was destroyed and they were forced to assimilate into Japanese society. This also heralded the end of the samurai and Japan's ancient feudal system.

There are two other species in the group: Siberian taimen and European huchen (*Hucho hucho*). I had experienced fly-fishing for *Hucho hucho* a few years earlier on the snowy banks of the Sava Bohinjka in Slovenia in temperatures of -7°C. Fortunately, it was not a wasted trip, as I landed six fish over four days despite increasingly frozen fingers.

After spending ten days on Honshu, Japan's main island, I took a reasonably priced internal flight to Chitose Airport, one of several airports on Hokkaido. This is only a stone's throw from Russia, and the island shares similarly severe winters, with temperatures dropping as low as -30°C, although its

“Revered as god-like spirits by the ancient Ainu, the first inhabitants of Hokkaido”

summers are pleasantly warm. With its extensive forests and brutal architecture, I sometimes felt as though I was on Canada's eastern seaboard.

I collected a hire car from the airport using my International Driving Permit – the 1949 version, which is essential for hiring a car in Japan. Driving is straightforward, on the left, but the car I hired, like nearly all I saw, puzzlingly resembled a stubby Postman Pat van. I later discovered that vehicle tax and insurance are largely determined by a car's length and width. The car proved useful, although with Japan's excellent public transport it was perhaps a luxury.

Japan also has healthy runs of Pacific salmon including cherry, pink, sockeye and chum. I had hoped to catch the one remaining salmon species that has eluded me – the cherry – but regulations prohibit fishing for migratory salmon in rivers, although angling in the sea and estuaries is unrestricted. Sadly, when I reached a promising stretch of coastline, gale-force winds had whipped up the sea, leaving me with no chance of catching anything on my eight-weight rod.

This was especially disappointing as it was prime time for the cherry. To rub salt into the wound, I was



Koudai with a beautiful Sorachi char

served it raw every morning instead of my usual porridge. Had I not been constrained by time, I would certainly have explored more salmon opportunities. Some rivers, I discovered, also hold *yamame* – the non-migratory form of the cherry – but they did not inhabit the rivers I planned to fish.



Hokkaido should be on any global fly-fisher's bucket-list. Tenkara anyone?

“Massive brown trout gorge themselves on mayfly hatches”

On arrival in the town of Minamifurano, I met Koudai, who runs fieldscope-guideservice.com. He is a fly-fishing guide in the summer and wildlife photographer in the winter. His knowledge proved invaluable during the filming of Sir David Attenborough's BBC series *Mammals*, particularly the episode featuring Hokkaido's flying squirrels.

The fishing season began on 1 June, coinciding with my first day on the Sorachi. This beautiful, crystal-clear, tree-lined river was punctuated by deep pools and riffles, with fish clearly visible even in the deeper water. It was a warm, sunny morning, accompanied by a hatch of flies resembling March browns, with the occasional stonefly and mayfly.

The river was soon alive with rising whitespotted char, and Koudai explained that, in mid-June, massive brown trout gorge themselves on prolific mayfly hatches. He showed me a photograph of an



A char from Lake Kanayama

extraordinary 92cm brown held by two ecstatic fly-fishers after it had been caught a few years earlier.

Char, like trout and salmon, belong to the family *Salmonidae* but are classified in the genus *Salvelinus*, whereas trout and Atlantic salmon are *Salmo*. Char

tolerate colder water than trout and consequently inhabit the Arctic waters of Canada, Iceland and Greenland, as well as many deep Scottish lochs and a handful of English and Welsh lakes/llyns.

Koudai advised me to begin with a size 8-10 dry-fly. I chose a Humpy and targeted a fish rising inches from the bank. Casting with a five-weight rod, I dropped the fly gently about a foot upstream and was delighted to watch it disappear instantly. The char ripped line from my reel, charging across the river before racing upstream and then downstream. It was the largest fish I hooked that morning and fought magnificently, but after an impressive battle it threw the hook just beside Koudai's waders. Over the next few hours I landed six char and was astonished by their speed and power.

Wild forests cover much of Japan's countryside, nowhere more so than Hokkaido, where you may encounter sika deer, foxes and bears, while white-tailed sea eagles and ospreys patrol the skies.

Bears are common in Japan and their numbers are increasing. Unlike in many countries, hunting is restricted because of strict firearms legislation. Last year alone there were more than 200 bear attacks, resulting in 13 fatalities. Koudai frequently encounters bears but never fishes without bear bells and bear

Koudai's *ito* flies bear a resemblance to UK reservoir fry patterns



spray. My closest encounter came when I was offered a local delicacy called 'bear paw special' in a restaurant. I politely declined.

The following morning I was collected at 5am to fish Lake Kanayama in the hope of encountering a

Mission accomplished: an *ito* (huchen) from Kanayama



chirai (ito). Long-lived, they are often exceptionally wary and difficult to catch. At certain times of year they can be taken on dry-fly in the rivers, something I had glimpsed on my first day while fishing for char, but on the lake the streamer reigned supreme.

Fishing involved casting an eight-weight rod fitted with a Di2 sinking line, dropping the fly inches from the bank before retrieving it rapidly. Koudai had designed some superb flies featuring an enticing distended Mylar belly, silver flash and a chartreuse Zonker tail, similar to reservoir fry patterns popular in the UK. They certainly looked convincing, coming alive in the water.

Koudai explained that he usually sees *ito* driving baitfish against the bank before attacking them. Unfortunately, on my visit they failed to follow the script, so I resigned myself to hours of casting towards likely features such as bridge pylons and overhanging vegetation. Eventually I was rewarded with a savage take as an *ito* engulfed my streamer before boring deep beneath the boat.

It seemed an age before the fish surfaced. My rod was doubled over and the power transmitted through it was immense. When Koudai finally slipped the net beneath the fish, lifting it clear of the water, I knew my fishing trip had reached its zenith.

Besides the *ito*, I caught two other species: whitespotted char and more numerous, feisty dace. A species that I failed to catch, despite seeing several slowly nosing through the submerged marginal vegetation, was the large indigenous carp, which were completely indifferent to my fly.



Local delicacy: the Bear Paw Special

Japan is a fascinating country to explore, with its diverse climate, excellent transport network – from internal flights to the Shinkansen bullet trains – breathtaking efficiency, and exceptionally polite and welcoming people. And there is still so much more fishing for me to discover. ■

Duncan Hall is the author of Fly Fishing the World on a Shoestring. Visit bigsalmon.co.uk.



Dace grow big in Japan

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