



## *Dolly Varden fishing in Sitka*

**D**olly Varden are one of Alaska's most sought-after sport fish. They have a very adaptable life history and are found in nearly all streams and anadromous lakes of Southeast Alaska. They live in lakes and large rivers during winter and migrate to sea in the spring. Salmon Lake and Redoubt Lake near Sitka are two favorite overwintering areas. A recent ADF&G study estimated that 35,000 Dolly Varden spent the winter in Salmon Lake.

Anglers who know the migratory habits of Dolly Varden can more successfully target on them. Because Dolly Varden migrate in springtime from freshwater wintering grounds to the sea, a lake outlet, stream mouth, or nearby beach makes an ideal fishing location from April through May. Good Dolly Varden fishing is also found in salt water during May, June, and July.

The earliest and most intense fishery for Dolly Varden occurs in salt water along the roadside, when they appear after overwintering in lakes and larger rivers. This fishery starts late in March and continues through May. Favorite fishing locations are off stream mouths and points of land which extend into salt water. A 1989 ADF&G creel census of this fishery showed that anglers caught over 1,600 Dolly Varden on the Sitka roadside that spring, most of which they released (about 730 were kept).

In spring, Dolly Varden usually strike readily at almost anything the angler has to offer. Favorites are small spinning lures in the lake outlets and saltwater areas. Streamer flies, resembling small fish, can produce excellent results when fished along saltwater beaches in spring and summer.

After leaving their overwintering sanctuary Dolly Varden spend the summer feeding and traveling in the ocean. Marked Dolly Varden have been recaptured at sea nearly 100 miles from their home streams. Anglers trolling for salmon often catch Dolly Varden as a bonus. Fish that have been at sea for awhile are unsurpassed in quality. The flesh is pink, firm, and full of flavor. Try smoking some of your catch or cook them in the hot coals of

a beach fire wrapped in foil with a little butter, salt, pepper, and lemon juice.

As the mature fish return to their home streams to spawn and feed in August and September, nearly every stream provides good fishing. Most Dolly Varden mature at 5 or 6 years of age. At this age they are 12 to 16 inches long and may weigh  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 1 pound. They may reach ages of 10–11 years and weigh up to 8 pounds. Favorite fishing locations for



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**1985 world record Dolly Varden—from the Nakwasina River, Baranof Island.**

these returning fish are near the creek mouths of larger streams and rivers at incoming tides. The larger rivers like Nakwasina and Katlian often have good fishing for large Dolly Varden by early July.

Streams along the Sitka roadside again provide a popular fishery after July, when the fish begin entering the streams along with salmon runs. This fishery is very popular with nonresidents who are visiting the area. Dolly Varden entering fresh water after their growing season in salt water are in prime condition. Try fishing near spawning salmon and in deep holes just above salt water.

Lake fishing for Dolly Varden is usually best after mid-August, when the sea-run fish arrive at their respective wintering grounds. Schools of these large fish can often be found concentrated near lake inlet and outlet streams. A sea-run Dolly Varden caught on light spinning tackle or fly rod will produce a fight not easily forgotten.