



BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

SALMON HIGH



IN MIRAMICHI, STUDENTS FEEL A STRONG CONNECTION TO THE RIVER THAT FLOWS BY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL.



MARTIN SILVERSTONE (2)

Brian Doyle gets ready to thread his bobbin, while ASF's Geoff Giffin helps out student Mackenzie Clark (top). Above, Matthew Morris adds some dyed red squirrel tail to a yet to be named creation.

GET OUT OF YOUR CAR IN THE PARKING LOT OF MIRAMICHI Valley High School and the first thing that hits you is the smell. Not of fast foods or suburban flower beds, or, like too many schools these days, of cigarette or cannabis smoke. No, it's the delicious scent of wilderness black spruce. That's only the first sign you are not at an ordinary North American high school. The next is the numbers of school buses that arrive to pick up students at day's end and return them to their homes all over the Miramichi watershed. MVHS draws its students from all up and down the Miramichi River Valley, from Burnt Church, Tabusintac, Douglastown, Newcastle, Eel Ground, Sunny Corner, South Esk, Red Bank, Millerton, Renous, and many more towns and villages. Few students live further than several minutes from the world's greatest salmon river, yet I couldn't help but wonder if any were aware that 60,000 salmon were beginning to rush into the river just as the student body sat down to write final exams.

That was my first thought on a late March afternoon as I slipped into the seemingly empty school. Does the proximity of forest and fish permeate into school culture? Or do the youths of MVHS suffer from the same syndrome of teenagers the world over, that is, if you can't text it or download it, it doesn't exist?

There's an Atlantic salmon on the giant, golden school crest in the main lobby, so I have to figure some students are probably remotely aware of the Miramichi River and its most famous resident. Then, lost in the maze of hallways, I turn a corner near the gym and run smack into a six-foot high salmon, with boxing gloves. I learn later that this painting on the wall is Samoo the Pulamoo, and that Pulamoo is an ancient Micmac word for salmon.

It's 4:30 p.m. and the halls are empty. All the kids have gone home; even the school gym is deserted. I'm still a little lost in the hallways and begin to wonder if I've made a mistake. Then, down the darkened corridors light spills from an open classroom door, and there is a burble of conversation. As I approach, I am warmly welcomed by a dozen friendly teenagers. What keeps these students away from Facebook, videogames or vampire television, to stay after hours in a darkened school?

Samoo is a clue. It is the mascot for all the school's athletic teams. You see Samoo the Pulamoo everywhere, cheering at hockey and basketball games, painted on the walls, on sweaters, and, most certainly, in the hearts and minds of the members of what must be the coolest extracurricular activity in any educational institution—the Miramichi Valley High School Fly-Fishing Club.

Math teacher, Ashley Hallihan, runs this afterschool program for a group of around 20 girls and boys. Turnout is pretty good when you consider that the fly fishing club draws more than the chess, mountain bike or photo clubs, and actually competes with some school sports teams.

The welcome is warm, but brief. The kids are quickly back at their vises. The complaint that not enough of the younger generation is taking up outdoor pursuits like fishing, camping and conservation doesn't hold much

water in this room. I walk between the desks, pausing to look at the kids' green machines, rusty rats and their own creations, which are only to be named when they hook into a salmon. There is no need to ask if anyone is aware that the world famous Miramichi River runs through their backyards.

What brings this keen group of youngsters here? Friendship, sure. They kid each other as they concentrate on following the instructions of Hallihan, who ties at a vise that is projected onto a SMARTBoard, a 21st century teaching tool. Yet, his flies and the spell that *Salmo salar* casts over the group of students, is as old as the venerable traditions of fly-fishing. Now and then, the chatter stops and the room goes quiet; the kids seem lost in their own private thoughts. Likely they are imagining themselves on a favourite Miramichi pool, the fly in front of them swinging over bright, giant salmon.

The goal of the club creators—Hallihan, professional guides Jason Curtis and William Basco (a well known Miramichi elder guide who passed away in the Spring of 2009)—was to expose youngsters to the sport of Atlantic salmon fishing. But there is much more going on here now.

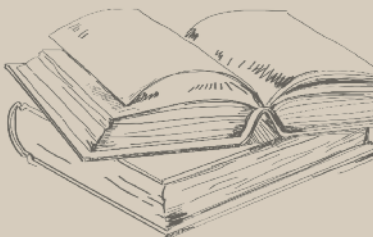
All through the winter months, and into early spring, club members participate in workshops on the anatomy and life cycle of Atlantic salmon. ASF's Geoff Giffin assisted in demonstrations on the proper way to release a fish. Information on fishing regulations and fly-fishing etiquette were hot topics of discussion.

And that's not all. If you were plunked down on a river, could you set up your rod, tie the right knots, pole or paddle out to a suitable pool? Once there, could you cast to just the right spot? Know the rules of the river

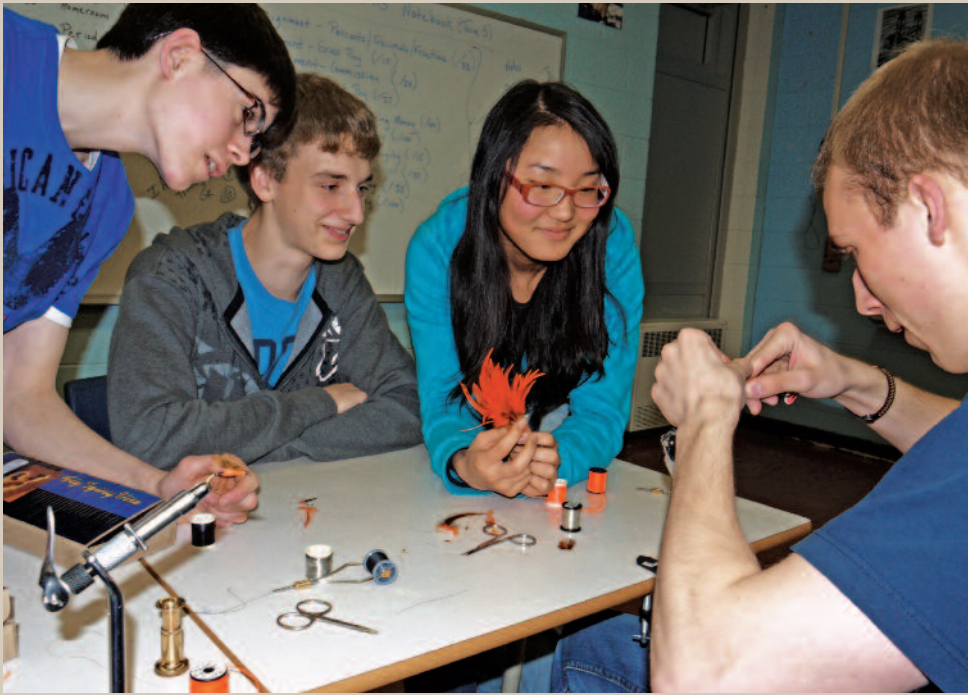


MARTIN SILVERSTONE

Getting immersed in his work, Ashley Hallihan clammers out of a canoe to help Jason Curtis (with net) as he instructs student Chris Urquhart on how to land and release his first Atlantic salmon.



COURTESY OF ASHLEY HALLIHAN



Student involvement: MacKenzie Clark, Cody Landry and Sara Oh watch Travis Cowan finish a fly. Below, Samoo is a local celebrity.



MARTIN SILVERSTONE (2)

and practice fishing etiquette? Possibly, but how many among us are lost without a guide? I know I am.

The Miramichi Valley High School Fly-fishing Club leaves nothing to chance. Sessions on equipping a rod and knot tying were held previous to this one on fly tying. Later, in the gym and on the rugby field, students will practice fly-casting techniques, including spey casting. In the school swimming pool they will work on canoeing techniques and even achieve a certificate for “Introduction to Canoeing Skills – Tandem” from Paddle Canada.

The school year is long and the salmon season short, but Hallihan had no trouble keeping his charges fully engaged. He arranged for Mark Hambrook of the Miramichi Salmon Association to give the club a tour of their facility and operations in South Esk. As well, he gave all the students’ memberships to the MSA and when Geoff Giffin spoke, he made sure everyone received a student membership to the Atlantic Salmon Federation. Linda Gaston of the Miramichi Salmon Museum opened the doors for the club and her husband Bev gave the members a historical tour of their river. A lot of Miramichiers seem to remember where they went to school, and as a result the museum’s doors are not the only ones that swing open when the club comes knocking. George Routledge (of George’s Fly shop) donated fly tying materials when the club first started and provided salmon flies for fishing trips. Wade’s Fishing Lodge also donated unused fishing gear.

Now, that the days stretch out and the ice is long gone from the river, the kids are not just ready, they are prepared and primed for the main highlight of the club’s

activities. There have been good laughs, friendships have been forged, yes, some have even fallen in love amid the feathers, fur and flash of the fly-tying vise. Most other school clubs and sports teams have ended their season by this time, but in early June, along with adult guides, the Miramichi Valley High Fly-fishing Club members are off to fish any number of pools, certainly, hook into some brook trout, and maybe a salmon.

For four seasons now, members haven’t just added to their fishing knowledge and improved their technique, but they have also gotten better at organizing fishing trips.

An earlier short outing might have been to the Northwest Miramichi at the beginning of June, when salmon would be rare. The last two years they have been able to fish private water because clubs like Wade’s, Hershey’s and Campbell’s on the Main Southwest Miramichi donated a day in July when the water conditions were prime. On one of these days, club members and alumni tightened up on 13 fish in one day. Many were the first salmon for rookie anglers.

What’s this about alumni? Only graduating club members (and special guests) receive the exclusive Pulamoo pin (designed by local fly tier Darryl Tucker) at the school’s awards ceremony each June. Many alumni continue to participate on the club fishing trips each year. In 2011, one alumnus, Eric Gilliss, finally landed a salmon on his new rod, a graduation gift.

Ashley Hallihan and Jason Curtis try to instill fly-fishing ethics in their charges, mainly that the goal isn’t the number of fish caught. Instead, they tell them, any day on the river is a day well spent. The teaching doesn’t

go only one way. Hallihan is continually amazed and inspired by the energy and excitement of the students when it comes to fly-fishing.

Ahhh, June 23 across Canada. Who can forget the day when the calendar dates turn from black to a steady stream of red? School's out! You know: "No more school, no more books, no more teacher's dirty looks." Maybe a student will come in for marks and beat it out of there quicker than a released salmon. The last thing you'd expect any student to do, would be to seek out his math teacher. But that's exactly what Kyle Ross did this past June 23. He had big news he wanted to tell Hallihan. Earlier that morning, he'd gone fishing with his dad and hooked and released a bright salmon on a fly tied in the Miramichi Valley High School Fly-fishing Club.

Kids in the fly-fishing club are more likely to look forward to school, than those not involved in a club or athletic team. Few, if any, will drop out. More students in school is a good thing. More young, live release anglers on the river are good for salmon conservation, which is good for all of us.

It's no surprise then that Hallihan wants to see the number of school fly-fishing clubs spread. When the MVHS club started up, it was the only one in New Brunswick. Since last year, new clubs have been launched at North and South Esk High School in nearby Sunny Corner, Fredericton High School, Saint John High School, St. Stephen High School, and Hampton High School. Perhaps one day, photos of fly-fishing clubs in high school yearbooks will be the norm throughout the province and across the continent. "The clubs represent a bright future for our rivers, our salmon and for the many local volunteer groups dedicated to protecting

both," Geoff Giffin told me as we parted ways under the spruce in the high school parking lot.

The realization of this vision would be a testament to the dedication of volunteers like William Basco. Basco had been a big help in getting the fly-fishing club off the ground and out of respect, the members of the Fly Fishing Club were instrumental in nominating "Willy" into the Atlantic Salmon Museum Hall of Fame. Many travelled to Doaktown to the Atlantic Salmon Museum to attend the ceremony that saw Basco (posthumously) inducted into the Hall of Fame. They felt it was important to honour someone who embodied the ideals that the Miramichi Valley High School Fly-fishing Club stood for. All of the club members were inspired by Willy's in-depth knowledge of the sport, the salmon and the river. The students quickly adopted Willy as a role model and were always captivated with his abundance of fishing knowledge. Most can quote one of his favourite sayings: "A man has to believe in something, I believe that I will go fishing!"

William Basco helped show them how protecting the environment meant they would be protecting their own futures. How concentrating on the fishing experience was more important than the fish. And how, in the end, respecting the river and all the fish in it, as well as the people that live along it, meant a better future for everyone.

And they say that kids don't learn anything in school these days.

For more information (and some terrific video footage) on the Miramichi Valley High School Fly-fishing Club please visit: <http://mvhs.nbed.nb.ca/clubs/fly-fishing-club>. To contact the club you can e-mail Ashley.Hallihan@nbed.nb.ca 🐟



ASHLEY HALLIHAN (2)

The MVHS Fly Fishing Club at Wade's Fishing Lodge on the Main Southwest Miramichi River. The Pulamoo pin (above) was designed by local fly tier, Darryl Tucker.

