

Explore the Salmon Life Cycle!

The five species of salmon in Alaska have fascinating life cycles. They hatch in freshwater rivers or streams, migrate to the ocean as young adults, and spend several years in the ocean. As adults, they migrate back to the place where they were hatched to lay and fertilize their eggs.

Image from Alaska Department of Fish & Game.

Explore the salmon life cycle with the links below!

Watch a video explaining the salmon life cycle:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtrC7rvetH0

See

Pacific Salmon Life Stages



A salmon begins its life as a fertilized egg, laid in gravel at the bottom of a river. As the salmon grows inside the egg, it develops eyes, a spine and a tail.



After hatching, the salmon is known as an alevin. They receive nutrients from a yolk sac attached to their body. Alevin hide from predators in the gravel at the bottom of rivers.

Fry look like tiny fish. They begin to swim around in search of food. Most salmon fry have vertical stripes on their bodies called parr marks which help camouflage them from predators.

Smolt are ready to live in the ocean. They are larger than fry and have lost the parr marks. The young salmon start to adjust their bodies to saltwater, allowing them to swim out into the ocean.

Adult (Ocean Phase) salmon live in the ocean for one to six years, depending on species. They are a silver color, and feed on zooplankton, small invertebrates, and other fish.

Spawning adults change colors as they return to freshwater. Males develop hooked noses and some species develop humped backs. The salmon return to the stream where they were born to lay and fertilize eggs. After spawning, the salmon die, completing their life cycle.