

title RIVER OF THE ANGRY MOON
Seasons on the Bella Coola

authors Mark Hume with Harvey Thommasen
Mark Hume is an award-winning journalist and former senior correspondent with the *Vancouver Sun*. He is the author of *Run of the River* (reviewed elsewhere on this web site) and *Adam's River* and has published articles in the *Boston Globe*, the *Toronto Star*, *Equinox*, *Reader's Digest* and *Fly Fishing*. He lives in Vancouver B.C.

Harvey Thommasen has lived and fly-fished on the Bella Coola for years and provided information about the natural history of the region. He is the author of *Grizzlies and White Guys* and *Bella Coola Man*.

category Commentary; Impacts to Rivers; Fishing

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of note Won the 1999 BC Book Award – Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize
<http://www.bcbookprizes.ca/winners1999.htm>

who will be interested in this book?

Readers interested in BC rivers and the changes occurring in river ecosystems.

why read this book?

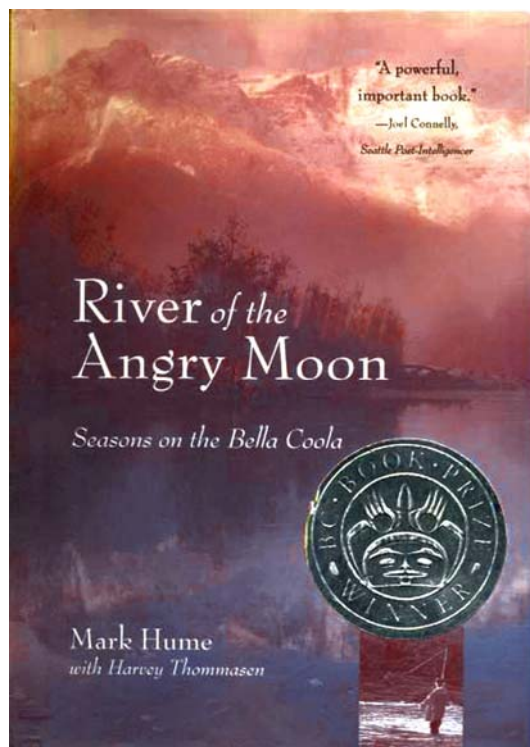
Although the backbone of this narrative is a year in the life of the Bella Coola River as seen through the eyes of a fly-fisher, along the way Hume weaves in descriptions of the beauty of the area, examines much of what has, and is, going on in the Bella Coola valley, from ecosystem changes, historic Native life, and effects of commercial and Native fishing. While clearly a book of choice for fishers, all will enjoy this account of this major BC river.

Do not overlook this book thinking it only for the sports fisher!

review / outline by Lance Brown, vistadelsol@telus.net

Overview

Hume clearly has a passion for fly-fishing - and a writing talent to match. He entices the reader right into his hip waders as he seeks the elusive fish, all the while giving us a feel for the ecosystem and the historic Native life in the valley. Thommasen, also a fly-fisher, is credited with providing much of the natural history derived from his many years observing, researching, and cataloging everything from aquatic insects, bird songs, and Native medicinal plants.



Hume does not shy away from discussing the possible impacts of commercial and Native fisheries to the continued survival of various fish species in the Bella Coola River.

Twelve chapters, each describing a month on the river, are sub-titled with the Native Nuxalk name for the moon of that month.

There are eight pages of Field Notes with information on various fish, aquatic insects, trees, berries and fruits, and birds of the area.

Chapters & Points of Interest

1. *January – Angry Moon*

- few hours of sun light, cold east wind at times
- environmental richness of the river and valley
- evolved timing of various fish species use of the river – 6 months of year fish spawn here
- Bella Coola has two main tributaries, the Atnarko and Talchako Rivers

2. *February – Moon When There Is Nothing*

- longer sunlight hours, no new fish runs, plants yet to grow
- a time for waiting for life to begin again, but active time for aquatic insects
- mountain whitefish is a pioneer in the watershed
- high production of aquatic life in Atnarko supports a large fish production

3. *March – Moon of the Herring Spawn*

- a time when life surges back into the valley
- until 1980 herring were abundant -0 now no longer in Bella Coola estuary
- how does herring loss affect salmon population?
- will the new (1990) krill fishery affect the herring?
- eulachon arrive, but are now in decline
- the Grease Trail (eulachon trade) to Interior followed by Alexander Mackenzie in 1793
- sea-run Dolly Varden return – are they a threat to salmon as thought by some people?
- early spring birds arrive, sap-suckers followed by humming birds and others

4. *April – Moon for Making Eulachon Nets*

- worms, beetles and other insects stir in the soil – ground-feeding birds and bumble bees arrive
- long extinct second-run eulachon ran in April (hence Nuxalk name)
- sea run cutthroat and pink salmon
- human impacts; beaver dams and fish movement
- Native fishery issues, catch and release issues

5. *May – Moon for Making Salmon Weirs*

- before runoff, stone fly hatch, steelhead
- record 25 lb steelhead catch in 1976 started interest in Bella Coola steelhead sport fish
- intense steelhead fishery in 1980's diminished stocks

6. *June – Spring Salmon Moon*

- spawning Spring salmon, Tyee, Chinook into river, following out migration of Chinook fry
- reduction in commercial fishery by 1990's
- river is high and dirty which suits Chinook as they are powerful swimmers and like the cover the silt provides

7. July – Sockeye Salmon Moon

- river rapidly filling with salmon which divide the river by species
- lead weights in the river bottom – an environmental problem like lead shotgun pellets?
- Tweedsmuir Lodge and Park
- sockeye fishery and canneries, sport fishing sockeye

8. August – Dog Salmon Moon

- Bella Coola estuary is pristine, undeveloped, protected
- pulp mill proposed in 1970's didn't go ahead
- pink salmon and chum (dog) salmon

9. September – Coho Salmon Moon

- birds leaving the valley to go south, Coho arrival peaks
- Coho smolts feeding on pink fry have made the Bella Coola pinks a fast-growing species
- timing hatchery salmon releases into river to lease effect wild stocks

10. October – Moon When Fern Root Is Gathered

- hunting season – should commercial fishing go the way of commercial hunting? leaving only sport fishing as only sport hunting remains
- traditionally, Natives gathered plants at this time

11. November – Moon of Dances

- late running fish diminishing, logging from late 1800's, Ocean Falls pulp mill in 1900's
- nearly 70% of nutrient and energy for juvenile salmon comes from terrestrial sources
- the River runs brown from soil erosion

12. December – Moon When the Sun Rests

- winter steelhead fishing

other review **BC Book World**, summer 1999
Mark Forsythe

Descending Highway 20 into the Bella Coola Valley is like experiencing free fall without leaving ground. Locals may scoff, but the nearly vertical 'Big Hill' warrants a five star white knuckle rating.

The road links dry, grassy Chilcotin plateau with a rainforest so rich and verdant it reaches out to embrace you. Separating them is the mile-high Coast Mountain Range, a barrier so steep and rugged that the provincial government refused to spend money on a road. Residents of Bella Coola and Anahim Lake built a road themselves in the early '50s.

The Bella Coola River and its tributaries, tumbling from the same mountains, are revered for unsurpassed fishing: steelhead, cutthroat, coho and chinook. But the pulse of the river grows ever fainter. A ban on steelhead fishing—the most treasured of sportsfish—was recently imposed

"Nature is resilient and salmon are incredibly fecund," says Mark Hume in *River of the Angry Moon* (Greystone \$26.95). "The waters should abound with fish. When they do not, it's a sign of terrible mismanagement, not by fisheries bureaucrats, but by society as a whole."

Born in Victoria in 1950, Hume is a veteran reporter who's covered B.C. for the Vancouver Sun and now the National Post. One of five boys, he was the only one to catch the fishing bug as a child in Penticton.

"It's almost like a fishing gene you inherit", he muses.

As a young teen he stumbled across the writings of Roderick Haig-Brown in a Victoria library. He eventually decided he wanted to fly-fish and write like the Campbell River lay magistrate.

The seeds of a strong conservation ethic were planted. In both of his previous books, *The Run of the River* and *Adam's River*, Hume argue for better stewardship of rivers and more responsible fishing.

Hume gravitated to the Bella Coola River after friend and physician Harvey Thommasen moved to Bella Coola. Thommasen, who wrote *River of the Angry Moon* with Hume, previously compiled and edited two bestsellers about the life and times of Clayton Mack, *Grizzlies & White Guys* and *Bella Coola Man*.

Hume and Thommasen spent many hours walking, talking and casting into its pools and riffles. Over the years Thommasen catalogued much of the ecosystem's flora and fauna and collected stories from elders about the way it used to be. He realized the Bella Coola and its tributaries were under siege; a meat fish mentality in the sports fishery and a relentless commercial fleet were wiping out the most valued runs. As well, some Nuxalt natives used river nets, targeting the weakest stocks. Silt oozing from clearcuts choked the finest spawning streams.

Hume and Thommasen resolved to write a book that would alert people to the river's plight and counter a local belief the fish "would always come back." *River of the Angry Moon*, subtitled *Seasons on the Bella Coola*, is part lament for what was, yet it also celebrates what remains and what could be again. There is an undercurrent of optimism throughout.

The wild Bella Coola River carves a mesmerizing path through each chapter, linked to the moons of the Native Nuxalt calendar. In spring, yellow stone flies dance off its surface, in winter silvery steelhead rest in deep pools conserving energy for the spawn. We catch the husky scent of skunk cabbage, hear the wwoof of an agitated grizzly and watch light caress rainforest. Hume captures the river's own poetry.

"The river is fed by the sky. It runs over a bed of shattered mountains, through the dreams of a great forest and into the mouths of ancient fishes. It starts in clouds as grey and heavy as the sea and ends in a windswept estuary haunted by ghosts. It is a place where white swans dance on dark mud flats and salmon lay fragile eggs in nests of stone."

Fly-fishers will appreciate Hume's delight at reading seams and currents, casting the perfect fly imitation - rewarded by the electric surge of fish on line. The two men pull on scuba masks to float the river in neoprene sailboarding suits encountering ghostly columns of dark chinook and rainbows feeding in rapids. Hume seems to become the river itself.

"Hanging listless, drifting where the current takes me, I lose touch with my body and start to melt into the green light. Only the sound of my lungs brings me back."

Old timers' memories and newspaper accounts reveal how overfishing on the Bella Coola was a significant problem even 75 years ago. On one fishing excursion, three men killed 732 fish. By the mid 1990's what appeared to be a limitless bounty was virtually exhausted - steelhead stocks reduced from 10,000 to a mere handful. Chinook and coho stocks are also in crisis, the same sombre story played out on river systems from Alaska to Oregon.

Hume reminds us that wildlife managers in the last century outlawed commercial hunting of animals to save them from extinction; he says nature can't keep up with today's industrial harvesting and similar action is required for at-risk fish stocks.

Writing the book was a welcome change from newspaper reporting. "It allowed me to put myself in the story," he says, "tap into my feelings and express myself. As a reporter I can't do that." The late British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes also provided unexpected inspiration. Hughes had written about fishing B.C.'s famous Dean River and while attending a Steelhead Society fund raiser he was interviewed by Hume. The poet remarked how much he had enjoyed Mark's first book *The Run of the River*. Shortly before his death, Hughes sent a letter encouraging Hume to complete the *Bella Coola* book.

Hume paid tribute to Hughes at this year's B.C. Book Prizes when he accepted the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Prize awarded to the book that best contributes to the understanding and appreciation of B.C.

other review **Card catalog description**

Flowing through the stunning richness of British Columbia's temperate rain forest, the magnificent Bella Coola River is one of the world's celebrated fishing streams. In this poetic and powerful book, Mark Hume describes a year in the life of the river as he fly-fishes for the fairylike whitefish, the legendary bull trout, the spirited cutthroat or the elusive steelhead. Along the way he describes the incredible beauty and fecundity of the valley ecosystem through the seasons, examines what has happened to that increasingly endangered ecosystem and its inhabitants in recent times, and encounters other anglers, old-times who have fished the river for decades, and an abundance of wildlife.

The Bella Coola River is now closed to steelhead fishing because the stocks are endangered. *River of the Angry Moon* is thus a story of loss, human imperative, greed and shortsightedness, as well as a story about the changing seasons an angler experiences. Most of all, it is an eloquent and stirring tribute to a wild and beautiful river.