

Watching Atlantic salmon spawning in the river in Belarus autumn 2007

The river Tartak is a small, just about 4 kilometers long tributary to the river Vilia. But it is perhaps the most important Atlantic salmon water course in the whole of Belarus. According to the Belarus Academy of Sciences report there were 24 salmon spawning nests recorded within the 1 km long river stretch in 2006.

For the first time I saw salmon spawning nests in Tartak about 2 years ago. These were shown to me by Vatslav Blazhevich, local resident who assisted with the field work. I have visited the river many times since, but every time I missed that very moment when salmon spawn. This time, immediately after I was first informed that salmon appeared in the river I jumped in the car and drove 250 km to Tartak in the hope to watch the spawning.

Vatslav met me with the good news that several new spawning nests had just appeared in the river and that he saw yet another big fish. Great! We walked to the river to investigate. While we kept walking through the woods Vatslav told that beavers had become the number one problem. They built two new dams that blocked the best spawning sites in Tartak.



Beavers building dams in the Tartak river. (Photo: Nina Palutskaya)

When I saw the dam I was impressed of the beaver's construction abilities. They dammed Tartak about 300 m upstream of the confluence with Vilia. There was quite a big pond where the fast flowing clean stream used to be. Of course the water was still flowing through the dam, but it was apparent that salmon would not be able to jump over it, simply because the river in front of the dam was not deep enough.

We passed the dam and kept walking by the river heading downstream. A few meters below the dam we stopped and Vatslav showed me a quite big fish, about 70 cm long female, which was keeping its steady position head upstream. Two males, both about half of the female size, were busily moving around. The female (it's apparently the brown trout) periodically lay sideways. It looks like the fish is releasing eggs into the nest. Trying to record the whole process on video, but it was difficult. This is not an aquarium. Although the river is about knee deep and very clean, it is flowing fast creating a lot of reflection from the surface. Hopefully, at least something was recorded.

Oh, no, poor me! There was not much to see on the video, the pictures of the female turning on its side did not come out. Never mind, will try to film again later. The female will probably stay on the spot until at least tomorrow.

In the night there was the first snow this year. It was a beautiful white morning, very calm, no wind, the temperature about zero °C. The air is cool and fresh and with the late autumn scents of woodlands.

Great! The yesterday's female was still standing on the spot. And another female turned up. It was moving back and forth in front of the beaver dam, but the twigs obstructed the way and the fish could not gain enough speed to jump.

After a quick meeting with the locals it was decided to remove at least some parts of the beaver dam to make a fish passage. It turned out to be not an easy task at all. Twigs, tree

branches and logs were so tightly intertwined! The dam looked impregnable to me, but not to Voitek, strong local fellow and Vatslav's neighbour. Voitek had the power of a bulldozer. With his bare hands he pulled out a lot of twigs and tree branches from the middle of the dam. A large opening was made in the dam and the water flow nearly knocked Voitek down. A small water fall was created to make way for the fish.

Later in the afternoon Vatslav confirmed the second female got further upstream the dam and was making a nest. It was getting dark when Vatslav and I had finally arrived to the spot. Very much like yesterday's female, this one was keeping itself against the stream accompanied by two males moving around her. This time I was trying to film using a torch. I hope I managed to picture something.



Nina Palutskaya trying to capture salmon spawning on video. (Photo: Nina Plautskaya)

I think it is not just me who is interested in salmon watching. The local poachers can't wait to see the salmon coming to spawn. The river Tartak is small; one who knows the place can complete the walk along the river within an hour or two. The river Tartak is shallow; spawning salmon can be easily taken with bare hands, and especially with a harpoon.

It would be good to meet with the State Wild Life inspectors in Tartak and other spawning waterways now. I tried, but could not find one during my five days long field trip to the area. By the way the Belarus government agencies have recently put

together a joint action plan to protect wild salmon species during the spawning season. The action plan has been approved by the Minister for Environmental Protection and Natural Resources and by the Head of State Wildlife Inspection under the President of Belarus.

Apparently, there is an action plan, but there is no action. Instead of organising a regular river patrol in the area during the salmon spawning season, like it is done in the neighbouring countries of Latvia and Lithuania, two government agencies are trying to agree on the programme for the site visits. While they are doing this exercise, the spawning season will be over. And that is regrettable.

My 5 days long presence on the river Tartak scared off poachers indeed. But on the sixth day, it was Monday, I had to go back to Grodno. Vatslav, who permanently lives in the area, reported that on Tuesday, at last, Wild Life inspectors turned up. They visited Tartak and two other salmon rivers, Nidyanka and Senkanka. They told before they left that their colleagues from Grodno and Ostrovets would visit the area in about two day's time.

It has been a week since I did the field work in the area, but apparently there were no further visits by inspectors. Vatslav told that he did not see any more spawning salmon after I left. Looks like the salmon spawning season is over. We identified 12 spawning nests in Tartak. About half of what were there last year.

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