

Coins dedicated to
smelt fishing by attracting
from the series
“Lithuanian Nature”



Denomination: €10	On the edge of the coin: STINTA-PŪKI	
Silver Ag 925		Quality: proof
Diameter: 34.00 mm		Weight: 23.30 g
Mintage: 3,000 pcs	Coin designed by Eglė Ratkutė	
Issued in 2019		



Denomination: €15		Edge of the coin: rimmed	
Cu/Ni alloy		Quality: unc	
Diameter: 27.50 mm		Weight: 11.10 g	
Mintage: 30,000 pcs		Coin designed by Eglė Ratkutė	
Issued in 2019			



Information at the Bank of Lithuania:
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Coins minted at
the Lithuanian Mint
www.lithuanian-mint.lt

Lithuanian Collector
Coins

LITHUANIAN NATURE

Smelt fishing by
attracting



Lithuanian Collector Coins
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Smelt fishing in Lithuania

When the crisp autumn wind settles down and the frost silvers the late-night landscape at the Curonian Lagoon, all eyes turn to its waters, waiting for the first ice.

Before winter sets in, countless schools of small silver fish start flowing from the depth of the Baltic Sea to the coastal waters, heading to where the Curonian Lagoon spills its fresh water into the sea – towards their spawning grounds.

Smelts are coming! Smelts are coming! Such news does not take long to travel around, attracting fishermen from all over Lithuania and even abroad. Smelt fishing brings people from far and wide and takes quite a bit of their time.

Smelts are part of the Salmonidae family. It is an oblong-shaped, flat-sided and big-eyed



fish. European smelts (*Osmerus eperlanus*), which reside in the Baltic Sea and make their way through the Curonian Lagoon to spawn in the lower reaches of the Nemunas River, grow up to 30 cm long and can weigh up to 75 g, although those most commonly caught are 14-16 cm in length and weigh 20-30 g. Smelts have a greenish-brown back, white sides and a tiny fin at the top of their tail base, typical of all Salmonidae species. Small freshwater smelts living in deep Lithuanian lakes are very similar in their appearance, yet usually grow only to 6-10 cm long and weigh about 20-30 g. Smelts are uniquely known for their rather strong scent which is said to remind of cucumbers. Drifting over Neringa municipality, the smell is caused by volatile products of amino acid degradation, characteristic to smelts during their migration period (this kind of "communication" is common to fish species flocking in large schools). Hence the Latin



genus name *Osmerus* (meaning "odorous"). The Lithuanian word for the smelt – *stinta* – is believed to originate from the German *Stintfisch* or *Stint* (meaning "stinky fish"). Be that as it may, Lithuanians claim that they are not bothered by this cucumber-like smell, quite the opposite – they even like it. In late December, when a thick layer of ice forms on top of the Curonian Lagoon, amateur fishermen make haste to catch their take. Seaside fishermen used to walk a few kilometres from the coast, pulling or pushing their fully equipped sledges. Having reached the fishing site, they would stretch sails or a sturdy cloth by their sledges to shelter themselves from the wind. Today's fishing enthusiasts set off on

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*The term European smelt (sparling) in some other European languages: fr. *éperlan d'Europe*; pl. *stynka*, es. *eperlano europeo*; it. *sperlano*; lv. *jūras salaka*; et. *meritint*; ru. *korushka*, *snetok*.

their four-wheelers and fish right from their tents. The winds blowing in the plain Lagoon are really harsh, so this is the only way to shield against the cold. To dig out ice-holes and remove the ice, fishermen used (and are still using) a special Curonian axe, known by the name of *izikas*. Now, however, amateur anglers are using drills, while commercial fishing employs high-power chainsaws.

But why do smelts travel to the Curonian Lagoon? Two year-old smelts, grown and matured in the Baltic Sea, are already able to spawn. Having entered the Lagoon, they stay there to feed and, in March or April, reach the Nemunas Delta, where each female spawns 10-12 thousand tiny eggs on pebbles, plants or tree roots. The fish spawn only if the river water is above 4-6 degrees Celsius. A larger smelt's egg is about 1 mm in size. In two weeks fish juveniles hatch and then descend to the sea to grow and mature.

The lifespan of smelts is quite short. After

spawning, they weaken, some of them die, turning into prey to predatory fish or water birds. The smelt fishing season is closed after their spawning period – this is when they lose both their cucumber-like smell and taste, and more valuable fish appear at the Lagoon.

Every year, several hundred tons of smelts are caught in the Lithuanian part of the Curonian Lagoon. A good catch of an amateur angler may reach 20-30 kg a day, let alone commercial fishermen, setting under-ice nets and catching them in high quantities.

However, the oldest method for smelt fishing is by attracting, i.e. by splitting up their schools, making them spin around and get entangled in the cast nets. In the Curonian Lagoon, this method has been used since the Teutonic Order times, but in 1510 was almost banned due to its "barbaric" nature. The ice-fishing technique involved a wooden mallet used for knocking on the end of a wooden pole, partly dived into an ice-hole to



cause underwater vibrations. Fish are very sensitive to such vibrations as they feel them through their lateral line system. They start flouncing, going round in circles, approaching the source of vibrations, until they finally are caught in the nets. Re-emerged in the second half of the 19th century, this method of fishing somewhat changed: instead of a pole used to cause underwater waves and vibrations, fishermen started using planks. Local seaside fishermen dubbed it rattle fishery (lt. *bumbinamoji žvejyba*), while scientists are still at odds, referring to it as either fishing by attracting or by frightening.

So what does fishing by attracting (frightening) or the so-called rattle fishery entail?

First of all, a rectangle ice-hole is cut with a chainsaw (in the earlier days, it used to be chopped out with an axe). After that, two or three 12 m long wooden poles with nets fastened to them are plunged into water at the edges of the ice-hole. Right in the middle of it, fishermen insert a 4-5 m long pruned spruce plank with an oak crossbar at its end. One fifth of the plank, which has to be wrapped with a rope to prevent it from slipping down, sticks out from the water surface. Local fishermen knew very well that only a spruce plank could make a good sound and, therefore, did not use any other type of wood. By the way, such equipment was only used by local Curonians and some fishermen from the town called Rusnė. After the war, Germans who repatriated from Lithuania Minor adopted this ice-fishing method in East Germany as well.

Fishermen used to sit on the side of their sledge, stool or a log, holding oval-shaped stakes or oblong mallets called *šliegiliai* or *buoželės* and beat rhythmically on the nailed oak crossbar (*kliugis*) or the edge of the plank.

Seaside fishermen say that such technique was mainly used by poor fishermen.

They could not afford large under-ice nets and had to attach small-sized ones to the poles, plunge them through an ice-hole and lure fish by playing such "music".

What kind of "music" does a fisherman play with mallets or trimmed stakes in his hands? Each of them beat their own unique rhythmical melody with its pace going up and down. The rattling used to be accompanied by the words "*stinta pūki, stinta pūki*" or a longer line "*stinta pūki, stinta pūki, lišk j tinklq, lišk j tinklq*" to lure fish into the nets. These unique phrases became part of folklore, the rattling sounds were called "music", while its performers dubbed "musicians".

Such music attracted two types of fish – the smelt and the ruffe, which had long been called *pūkis* by Curonian fishermen. Both species were a welcome catch that would follow underwater vibrations coming from the plank into the nets.

Around 1960, this luring technique started to fade away and people knew it had to be captured in photographs and video before it was too late. The simplistic rattling music was even used in some artistic films.

The tradition of ice fishery with rattling was kept by Curonian fishermen, yet, at the end of the 20th century, it stood on the brink of disappearing. Luckily, it was salvaged, albeit adapted to the present days – fishermen no longer use sledges, while ice-holes (not just one, but many of them so that more nets could be set) are cut using chainsaws. Only the luring music and its rhythm remained unaltered by time.

Undoubtedly part of Lithuanian heritage, this one-of-a-kind fishing tradition has been kept alive in the Curonian Lagoon, where one can still hear the unusual sound of rattling wooden mallets and the simple, yet distinctive song for attracting smelts and ruffes – *stinta pūki, stinta pūki*...

Selemonas Paltanavičius