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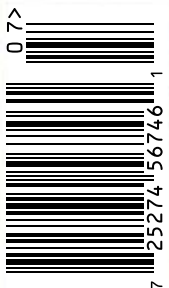
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All Around
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COVER / Andrew Gebert with a nice Kenai River sockeye.
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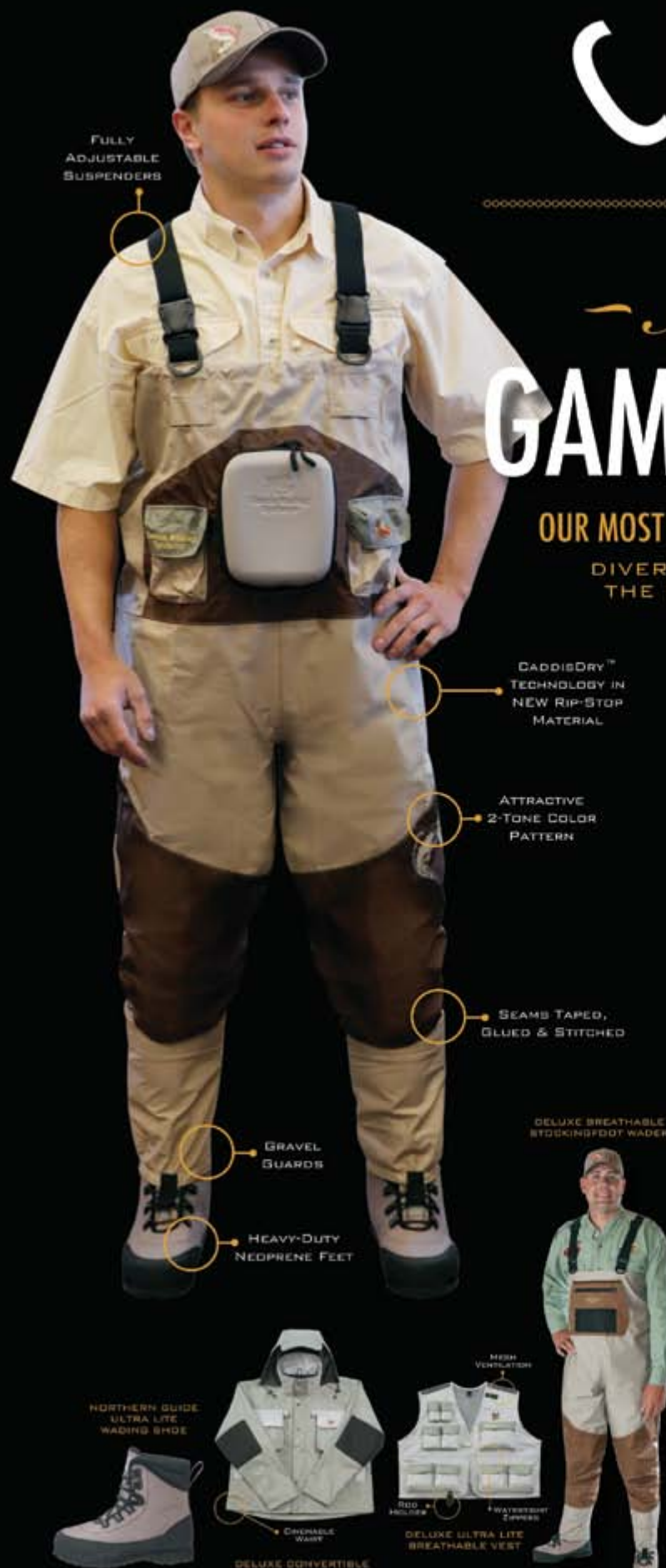
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ALASKA TRAVELER

Alaska's Wild Salmon are at A Crossroads

By Bob Shavelson, Cook Inletkeeper

What if Alaska's wild salmon disappeared?

In many ways, wild salmon define what it means to be Alaskan. They put food on our tables, they shape our cultures, they give us jobs, and they drive our local economies. Despite our disagreements over issues like politics, money and religion, one thing stands firm: Wild salmon unite and connect Alaskans like no other resource.

Today, Alaska boasts some of the last remaining wild stocks of salmon on the planet. From southeast Alaska to Cook Inlet to Bristol Bay, Alaska's wild stocks remain, for the most part, vibrant and healthy (there's one notable exception: King salmon stocks across the state have witnessed marked declines, and while there are a number of theories why, no one knows for sure).

Maintaining our wild fish stocks is not a passive pursuit. Salmon spawn and rear in our freshwater rivers, creeks and lakes, and these bodies of water are increasingly susceptible to land clearing, road building, industrial development and pollution. As our population grows, and as pressures on our coastal watersheds increase, these threats



Wild salmon like these coho require diligent protection from land clearing, road building, industrial development and pollution. © Brian Woobank

will only become more pronounced.

We don't need to look hard to understand what happens when we ignore salmon habitat protection. In his seminal book, *King of Fish: The Thousand Year Run of Salmon*, Professor David Montgomery traces the demise of once-prolific salmon stocks from Europe to New England to the Pacific Northwest. He traces the many mistakes made in protecting salmon habitat, and how the people, cultures and economies sustained by wild salmon collapsed along with the fish runs. Most importantly, however, Montgomery found that it wasn't simple ignorance which

led to the destruction of wild salmon runs across the world. Instead, he found it was willful neglect. In other words, people knew what they were doing was wrong, but they did it anyway.

Today, Alaska is repeating many of the same mistakes made elsewhere. The phenomenon even has a name—it's called the "death by a thousand cuts." It's rarely one project or activity that's the culprit, but instead, the accumulation of many smaller impacts over time. A few bad culverts here, a couple mining projects there, and pretty soon the complex ecological fabric



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ALASKANS ARE AT A CROSSROADS FOR THE FUTURE OF WILD SALMON. WILL WE REPEAT THE MISTAKES IN THE LOWER 48 THAT KILLED THEIR SALMON RUNS? OR WILL WE UPDATE OUR 60-YEAR-OLD HABITAT LAW SO OUR KIDS WILL HAVE SALMON TOO?

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that supports our wild salmon fisheries starts to unravel.

The law that protects Alaska's wild salmon habitat is now 60 years old, and it's one sentence long. It reads: "The [Alaska Department of Fish & Game] commissioner shall approve the proposed construction, work, or use in writing unless the commissioner finds the plans and specifications insufficient for the proper protection of fish and game."

But there's a big problem—the law does not define "proper protection of fish and game." So, for a large project that will destroy salmon streams, the agency has no guidance. As a result, habitat decisions often get politicized, and big-moneyed interests have an undue influence over the outcomes.

Unfortunately, efforts to protect salmon habitat have failed to materialize, largely due to opposition from special interests. For example, a bill to update our habitat protection law could not even get out of committee this past legislative session because trade groups and big business interests kept it bottled up.

These special interests say they support wild salmon protection, but they refuse to offer any meaningful revisions that would bring our laws up to date. They recite the various permits and authorizations needed for large projects as "proof" the system works to protect our wild fish. But Alaska's

permitting system is called a permitting system for a simple reason: it's designed to issue permits. In fact, in the past 23 years during which I have worked on habitat and water-quality issues in Alaska, I have never seen a state or federal agency deny a permit for a large project in or around salmon habitat. Never.

To compound matters, our current system does not provide Alaskans with public notice or the opportunity to comment on fish habitat permits. While that shortcoming flies in the face of common sense, it also runs afoul of our constitution. Alaska has a unique constitution, and it defines our wild salmon as a publicly-owned resource. Former Governor Wally Hickel rightly called Alaska the "owner state," and that's why it's all the more troubling Alaskans are left in the dark when it comes to vital decisions affecting our salmon resources.

Today, business as usual is not an option if we hope to escape the fate of salmon elsewhere. As Alaskans, we have a constitutional right to use our water—and fish resources—responsibly. But with that legal right also comes a corresponding obligation to protect our salmon fisheries for current and future generations. And that's exactly what everyday Alaskans are now trying to do.

This November, Alaskans will have the opportunity to update our old and

ineffective salmon-habitat law. The Stand for Salmon Initiative will inject science—and not politics—into our salmon habitat decision making, and ensure a predictable process that will promote responsible development while safeguarding our wild salmon for our kids.

The big question today for Alaskans and visitors alike is whether we can learn from the habitat mistakes of others, or whether we are doomed to repeat them ourselves. Not surprisingly, the big-moneyed interests prefer the status quo, and they don't like the Stand for Salmon Initiative. But Alaska's wild salmon deserve a fighting chance, and so do the countless people and families they support around our great state.

Because Alaska without wild salmon is not an option.

Bob Shavelson is Advocacy Director at Cook Inletkeeper, a citizen-based nonprofit formed by concerned Alaskans in 1995 to protect clean water and wild salmon habitat. For more information, go to: www.inletkeeper.org

Editor's note: For all who value having healthy runs of wild salmon, I strongly suggest you read David Montgomery's "King of Fish: The Thousand Year Run of Salmon." Those who do not know history are destined to repeat it.



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[CREEL]
Kenaitis Twitchitis in the Height of Summer
 Story and photo by
 George Krumm

I often think of July as the height of summer. It seems to be such a fitting phrase, though in some regards maybe not completely accurate. For example, if the sun is at its highest point during the solstice in June, wouldn't that actually be the height of summer? I guess it takes Mother Nature a little while to put the benefits of the solar energy into use. Regardless, I still think of July as the height of summer, and though the days are growing slightly shorter each day, they are still very long and there's plenty of fishing to do.

Though the world-record king was actually caught in May, the second-run of Kenai kings that enter the river in July typically produces more big fish. The sheer strength of really big kings leaves a permanent impression upon anyone lucky enough to hook one. I'm not talking about fifteen- to twenty-five-pound fish common in many drainages. No question, those are beautiful, powerful animals. But I'm talking about the 40-pound and above beasts that put the Kenai on the map. With eight of the 10 biggest sport-caught kings on record being Kenai fish, it's no wonder the impact those magnificent fish have had on the economy of Alaska, and especially for the Soldotna and Kenai areas. The returns the past couple years have not been stellar, but they have resulted in decent fishing for those in the know, and those with persistence.



Noel Estalilla could have bonked this Kenai Chinook; he released it, circa 2008.

Here's to hoping this year's run is better than last.

I made a vow many years ago that I would release all Kenai kings over 40 pounds, unless the fish is mortally wounded. My decision to do this is personal, and I don't mean to impose it upon anyone else. I know if the big fish don't get to spawn, the process of unnatural selection (anglers targeting and killing only the biggest kings) will have its way with Kenai kings eventually. The process has been happening for several Chinook salmon generations. We can point fingers all we want, but there is no question in my mind that sport anglers bonking the biggest kings they could catch for years, and thus preventing those fish from spawning, has played a big role in the decreased runs as well as decreased average size of the Chinook in the Kenai. I want giant kings to still be returning to the Kenai when my grandkids are old enough to fish it. For this reason, I will continue to release all 40-plus-pound Kenai kings in the hopes they get to spawn the future's giant kings. I applaud anyone who makes the same courageous, and righteous, stand.

The peak of the second run of Kenai sockeye also happens in July. My first experience with the Kenai red fishery was, to say the least, surprising. I think it was 1991. I didn't realize at the time that there was combat fishing in Alaska. I soon learned. I also learned that fishing in such close proximity seemed to produce a highly contagious illness of sorts. *Kenaitis Twitchitis*: An affliction characterized by a seemingly pointless, flagrant attempt to snag fish at the end of one's drift. Sometimes it's referred to as "the RIP." You can spot it from 400 yards. Uninfected, successful anglers whisper

amongst themselves, "Look at that guy, Amos. He's got the RIP." Kind of sounds like an affliction you don't want people to know you have, doesn't it? Cases of the RIP increase during the height of summer.

Flip, drift, RIP! Repeat. I watched this with confusion and mild anger. I was incredulous. Why weren't the fish cops doing anything about it? What's the matter with these people? Where is the sporting ethic? What did the anglers hope to accomplish with that RIP? Surely they'd foul hook more fish doing that than fair. Some of those afflicted were certainly hooking fish on the RIP (mostly in the tail, a fin, or in the body), but those fish were either dragged ashore to be unceremoniously released because they were foul hooked (often terribly mistreated in the process), or they'd get off before the angler could land them. The latter was often accompanied by the afflicted angler saying something like, "My twentieth fish hooked today, and it was in the mouth too—I saw it. I'll land a legal fish eventually." Occasionally, one of the afflicted would land a legal fish, but it wasn't the RIP that made it happen. More like outhouse luck.

The main symptom of *Kenaitis Twitchitis*, the RIP, is a flagrant attempt to snag a fish, plain and simple. Some will argue that it's legal to snag sockeye, as long as it's in the mouth. That may be, but you don't need the RIP to hook a sockeye in the mouth. Reds will occasionally bite, though not nearly as readily as the other four species of salmon caught in Alaska. What's more, some of the best sockeye "flossers" I know never RIP at the end of the drift. The only time they do any "hooksetting" is when the drift of their fly is interrupted by the obvious weight of a fish, and they simply set the hook when that happens. Way more often than not, the fish they hook are legally hooked. They limit easily when the fish are in, slipping in and out of the crowd somewhat unnoticed because they're never there very long.

Ethics aside, hooking reds anywhere but the mouth costs you and your fellow combatants wasted time and lost rigs. If you are afflicted with the RIP, it will take you longer to legally land a limit. Want to land just as many (or more) legally-hooked sockeye this year as you have in years past? Want to limit-out faster? Get cured of *Kenaitis Twitchitis*. Give up the RIP. Use a circle hook, and only set the hook when you feel the obvious weight of a fish. You will snag fewer fish. Your hook-to-land ratio will go way up. Trust me, you will limit-out plenty fast fishing this way if there are fish around, and you won't look afflicted doing it.

George Krumm is the Editor of both Fish Alaska and Hunt Alaska magazines. He can be reached at george@fishalaskamagazine.com.

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P-Line Pro-Staffer *Jaey Princen*

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When it comes to fishing in Alaska, nothing compares to the variety of fishing available to the angler in July. Whether it's stillwater fishing on one of the state's countless lakes, exploring a remote coastal stream, drifting the Kenai, or reeling in giants from the sea, the bounty of Alaska's waterways is at its peak this month and so is our web content, check out what's new.

July 2018 Highlights:

➤ Our mouths are watering for crab! We're featuring a recipe series starting this month from Slippery Salmon Bar & Grill in downtown Anchorage. Each of three recipes stars crab as the protagonist—creamy crab melts, crab and artichoke spread, plus a crab flat bread that is out of this world. Learn Slippery Salmon's easy method for serving Alaskan king crab in the shell for your guests.

➤ Are you new to saltwater DIY fishing or looking to upgrade to the latest Scotty down rigger with all the bells and whistles? Then check out our latest blog titled *How to Use a Downrigger* and later we will add *Tips for Downrigger Fishing in Alaska* for tricks to up your downrigger-fishing game.

➤ The angling experts at Alaska Drift Away Fishing are giving *Fish Alaska* readers another dose of their Kenai River fly-fishing know how in this month's blog titled *Swinging a Leech using a fly or float rod* by guide and co-owner Nick Ohlrich.

➤ Our fishing report is live online and it's the heat of the season. Look for reports from our own editorial staff, charter captains, lodge owners and guides from across Alaska. Follow our fishing report graphic from the home page to learn what's going on around the state.

➤ Need help planning a trip to a new location for yourself, friends or family members? Go to our Trip Planning Service at FishAlaskaMagazine.com/Trip-Planning-Service/ and fill out the form and our experts will put you in touch with the right people.

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Bonus Online Only Content

[FISHING FOR A COMPLIMENT]



Natalie Cevalco caught her personal best halibut out of Valdez.



Isaac Klosterman of Idaho Falls, ID, caught a nice red on his first trip to Alaska with his grandparents in July 2017.



Eli Springer holds a rainbow trout he caught while fishing with his sister Clara in Fairbanks.



Jay Buckley of Omaha, NE, limited out on silvers each day during his stay in Kodiak in September 2017.



Sydnie Liechty caught this Nushagak River king in July 2017.



Brent Varriale of Fruitland, ID, with a Kodiak Island steelhead in September 2017.



Ernie Stoecklin of Union City, NJ, caught and released this Situk River steelhead in May 2017.



Becky Larson and her niece Makayla Brittan during a day of family fishing in Southeast.



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Bert Barham of Auburndale, FL, caught this 240-pound halibut out of Port Lions.

Andrew Stavich pulled in this 24-inch rainbow trout during a fly-out trip to Katmai National Park with Branch River Air Service out of King Salmon, AK, in late September 2017.

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Sue Young with her 24-pound, ocean king salmon caught near Anchor Point in May 2018.

Amy Washington of Anchorage with a silver she landed on the lower Kenai River.

Marco Lueoend of Switzerland caught and released this steelhead while fishing the Situk for the first time in May 2017.

Chris and Maggie Barger of Fairbanks with their catch in Chitina in August 2017.

Terren Sugita, 16, and his dad Matt Sugita with two nice halibut caught in Kachemak Bay.

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Yarnball Rigs

Story & photo by JD Richey

When I'm fishing for steelhead, trout, dollys and salmon in rivers with spawning fish in them, I love to bust out the yarn. I'm talking yarn balls or "yarnies" here—round balls of brightly-colored yarn. They are super versatile and can be fished on drift-, float- and fly gear. Easy and cheap to make, yarnies are also cool in that you can make color schemes and sizes to match just about any river condition. Perhaps the most interesting and fun thing about yarn balls, however, is that there are so many ways to rig them—and you can get really creative here, too!

Glo Bug Style

The old-school classic way to rig a yarn egg is "glo bug" style, in which the ball is tied onto the hook. You can check

out all sorts of YouTube videos on the subject, but the basic gist is: A fly tying vise is used and the yarn is tied directly to the shank with thread and then completed with a few whip finishes and head cement. The finished product is a yarn egg that's permanently attached to the hook.

This is a timeless style of yarn ball that still works great in many situations—particularly when fished on drift gear or under an indicator on a fly rod.

Hookless Yarnies

While I have fished a million glo bug-type yarnies over the years, I mostly tie mine now without hooks—in other words, as free-standing balls. Again, the Internet is a great resource for learning how to do this. In fact, I have a tutorial on it on my website, www.fishwithjd.com. Simply search "How to tie yarn balls for steelhead" on the site and the article will come up.

There are several ways to rig up a hookless yarnie. If you don't mind the hook being exposed, you can slide a small sequin down the leader until it comes to rest atop the eye of the hook. Next, run the leader through the center of the yarnie (I use a sewing needle)

and slide the ball down so it sits on the sequin. The sequin keeps the yarn ball from sliding down over the hook. One nice advantage of this method is you can add some eggs or shrimp to the bait loop on the hook if you so desire.



Many types of fish will eat yarn balls.

Another way you can rig up is to skewer the yarnie with the point of the hook like a glob of eggs. Then, slide the ball up around the bend of the hook to the backside of the eye. Next, take a puffball and do the same, sliding it up the hook until it has the yarn pinched between it and the eye of the hook. Over time, the puffball will wear out and allow the yarnie to slip down the hook. You can simply add a fresh puffball at that point. On a similar vein, you can also use a small soft plastic bead (the squishy kind) instead of a puffball—just be careful not to stick yourself with the hook as you slide it over the point!

Though I have never tried it, a buddy of mine will slide his yarnie up the hook to the eye and then add a small dab of super glue to hold it in place. He says it holds great and you can easily tear off an old, tired yarn ball and replace it easily.

The easiest way to attach a free-floating yarn ball to your hook is to slip it inside your egg loop. Aesthetically, it won't be perfectly round after you cinch it down, but the fish don't seem to mind. Just try to center it up the best you can.

Double Trouble

One of the ways I really like to rig up is to tie a double egg loop knot on my hook (yep, again, YouTube is your friend for learning how to do it). When finished with the double knot, you end up with two loops on the hook—one near the eye and one back towards the bend. Stick several strands of yarn into the back loop and then pull the knot tight and trim the yarn into the size you want.

With your fingers, you can fluff the yarn into a roundish shape. What's sweet about this setup is you can use the forward loop to hold some bait. Even if your bait falls off or gets devoured by smolt, you know you still have a yarn ball on the hook. And, of course, that yarn will hold some of the scent from the bait which makes it all the more appealing.

There are plenty of other ways you can rig up yarn balls, but these will get you started.

JD Richey is a full-time fishing guide in Alaska, California and Patagonia as well as a contributing editor of Fish Alaska. He can be reached through his website, www.fishwithjd.com

[CONSERVATION]

Circle Hooks for Sockeye

Story by Francis Estalilla

July is a special time of year for the salmon enthusiast in southcentral Alaska. The third week of the month found my crew and I plying the tidal reaches of the Kenai River, chasing her one-of-a-kind trophy king salmon. After an extremely productive week focused primarily on catching and releasing giant kings, I finally turned my attention to gathering my personal cache of fresh meat for the table.

The undertaking would prove to be a slam dunk as the lower river was literally alive with sockeye. Nearly a million of the chrome rockets charged past the sonar counter during our eight-day stay. Within 20 minutes of parking our Predator on a favorite tidewater bar, three rods had beached a dozen glistening Kenai reds onto the exposed gravel.

Beyond the fast and furious pace of solid hookups, the most remarkable part of the morning was that every fish was hooked squarely in the jaw or around the maxillary plate as shown. In fact, not a single sockeye my crew touched that entire week was foul-hooked, thanks to my new “secret weapon” for the Kenai flossery.

Fast forward seven years, and my “new” discovery is far from secret any longer. My weapon of choice from that moment forward continues to be the 2/0 Gamakatsu “Nautilus” circle hook. I advocate this hook as a highly-efficient, fish-friendly terminal-tackle choice to drastically reduce the incidence of snagged fish and the often-obscene handling mortality we all witness on the river every sockeye season.

To fully comprehend the advantages that circle hooks offer in this application, one must first understand the fundamental mechanics of how they work. A circle hook has a shielded point oriented 90 degrees to its shank. To engage, the hook must roll into position to expose the point. It can only do this when it encounters a rigid edge. The perfect “edge” for a solid purchase is provided by Mr. Sockeye’s mouth along the entire edge of the upper and lower jawline. Because the fish is facing upstream and the gear is moving downstream, most of the hookups will statistically occur where the jaws hinge together.

Understand this . . . no edge, no hookup!

Envision the mechanics of flossing a salmon in the river. A single strand of line



A perfect sockeye hen and the perfect maxillary hookup with Gamakatsu’s Nautilus circle hook. © Keith Holtan

(your leader) is drifting downstream along the bottom, perpendicular to the flow of the current. The leader hangs up between the opening and closing jaws of a breathing sockeye salmon. As the current continues to draw your line downstream, the rapidly shortening free end of the leader slides along the hinge of the jaw until the hook finally encounters the edge of the mouth. At this exact moment, the line comes fully tight, instantaneously rolling the hook to expose the point for contact. You instinctively sweep the rod tip toward shore, setting the hook low to your downstream side . . . FISH ON!

Without slamming into that all-important continuous outer edge provided by the fish’s mouth, the hook will not roll into a position to expose the point for the immaculate connection. With rare exception, this fact virtually eliminates the possibility of snagging a sockeye’s otherwise “edge-less” body.

Over the course of hundreds of encounters, the only other “edge” I might possibly

Gamakatsu Nautilus circle hook securely locked in place. This one wasn’t getting away!
© Francis Estalilla



engage is a highly exposed pectoral fin as the sliding leader draws the dangling hook back up toward the mouth. Fortunately, these unusual pectoral hookups typically cheese-wire through in short order (most often before the fish is landed) leaving only a minor cosmetic defect when the fish escapes.

Rigging the Nautilus circle hook for sockeye is simple. Start with a stiffer leader material of 15- to 20-pound-test and snell it just like you would any salmon hook . . . either with a simple snell or a bumper-style snell where only two or three wraps are made for the “egg” loop portion of the knot. An optional small tuft of yarn can be added to help you and the fish to better see the hook. Just make sure the leader exits the straight eye on the SAME side as the hook point. Note that the leader takes off at a 45-degree angle to the shank. This off-axis tying configuration is critical to maximizing the probability of engaging an edge. If the leader erroneously exits the opposite side of the hook eye, the point will never engage and your hookup percentage plummets to zero.

If a straight eye, Nautilus circle is unavailable, an up-eye Octopus circle can be used in a pinch. This will require slipping a small bead into the egg loop portion of the snell to achieve the essential 45-degree leader-shank angle.

The advantages of switching to circle hooks in the sockeye flossery are manifold. First and foremost is a key conservation benefit to the fish. No longer must an angler needlessly battle multiple snagged sockeye for each potential keeper. These fish are extremely difficult to control and land without first exhausting them. Moreover, they are often further subjected to a certain amount of mishandling to immobilize them for hook removal. Fish snagged, spent, and handled in this abrupt, abrasive manner must then be mercilessly released, regardless of their physical condition. A significant number of them WILL undeniably perish from the traumatic encounter.

And while they may not mortally wound the fish outright, some snagging injuries are effectively just as severe. Thin belly walls in females ripped open by a hooking wound will spell certain doom for the critter’s reproductive potential. Eggs quickly become water-hardened and rendered non-viable, making them completely worthless to the spawning escapement. That fish may as well have been clubbed over the



Properly snelled Gamakatsu Nautilus circle hook. Note how the leader exits the hook eye at 45-degrees.
© Francis Estalilla



A properly snelled Gamakatsu Octopus circle hook with upturned eye can be easily modified with a 4-mm bead to achieve the desired 45-degree leader angle. © Francis Estalilla

head before returning her to the river. Circle hooks would eliminate the potential for belly-ripping any hens.

Clearly, the fish aren’t the only ones to benefit from using circle hooks. There are efficiency advantages to the angler as well. Remember that only mouth-hooked sockeye are legal to retain . . . all others hooked elsewhere MUST be released. A sockeye’s mouth provides such an exquisite continuous edge to gain a purchase that it’s virtually the only place a drifting circle hook can engage. It’s almost impossible to hook one anywhere else. Because far less time is wasted unnecessarily exhausting and releasing snagged fish, more time is made available to actually hook and land a legal keeper.

Once engaged, a circle hook achieves such a remarkably secure purchase that it’s much less likely to back out and come “unbuttoned” than a standard J-hook. This means relatively more of the circle-hooked fish are ultimately brought to hand . . . even when fishing them barbless. Their shielded hook points are also far less susceptible to dulling on the river rocks than those of J-hooks. That translates to fewer missed fish and less wasted time re-sharpening or re-tying hooks.

Admittedly, while the angler flossing with circles may not have as many total encounters in a day as the one ripping through the schools snagging fish after fish with standard J-hooks, virtually every solid hookup with circles will result in a legally retainable fish. Bottom line, the guy flipping circles will limit out faster, cycle through, and let the next guy get in there to responsibly harvest his share of the river’s bounty, too. WIN . . . WIN . . . WIN!

Francis V. Estalilla, MD has avidly fished the Kenai River since 1974. “Treading lighter on the resource” is a recurring theme in his published works.



[FLY]

Partridge & Orange Soft Hackle

Originator: Sylvester Nemes
Tied by: Brian Davenport
Story and photos by Mike Brown

Soft Hackles are a much-underrated and often forgotten-about pattern in Alaska, but they shouldn't be. They are effective most anyplace trout and grayling swim, whether in moving or still water.

In fishing soft hackles, typical water you look for would be choppy ripples, fast runs and brief pools in streams. The original method to fishing a soft hackle in streams was to fish an upstream-and-across cast with a natural drift down and around. This style is still very prevalent; they also work with a down-and-across swing as well. In lakes, fish them with a slow, pull-and-pause retrieve.

These flies are super simple to tie. You can be creative with a lot of different materials including different body materials such as floss, different thorax materials such as peacock, and different hackles such as grouse, starling, hen and others. Try various color combinations and have fun fishing them. Hope you enjoy!

Mike Brown is the owner of Mossy's Fly Shop in Anchorage, AK. He is a lifelong Alaskan with a passion for family, fly fishing and fly tying.

- MATERIALS:**
Hook: Daiichi 1510 sizes 10- to 16 (size 10 shown)
Thread/Body: Veevus 8/0 orange thread
Thorax: Ice Dub olive brown
Collar: Partridge feather



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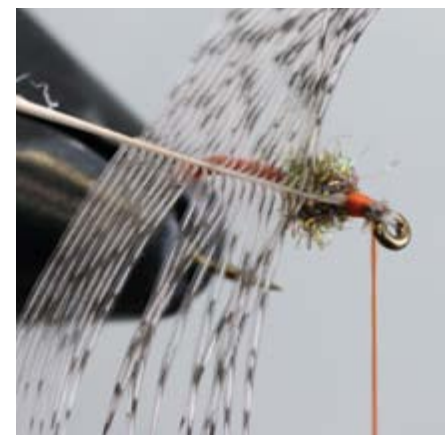


Step 1: Start your thread approximately two hook-eye widths back from the eye of the hook.

Step 2: Wrap your thread down the shank of the hook. I like to wrap down a little bit on the bend, then back forward to the start.



Step 3: Using a small amount of dubbing, wrap a small ball to create the thorax.



Step 4: Pick out a partridge feather of the appropriate size. You want the barbs to be the length of the hook shank. Prep the feather by stroking the barbs back to spread them out. Tie in the feather by the tip.



Step 5: Wrap the partridge feather forward with touching turns, only two or three turns. Tie it off. Build a small head and whip finish.

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[BOATS]

Inflatables
 Story by Troy Buzalsky

Growing up mere blocks from one of the most prolific trout-fishing rivers in the northwest is probably one reason I'm so drawn to fishing, boating and outdoor adventure passions. In my younger days, I would walk or bicycle to my favorite riverbank, carrying my eight-foot, seven-weight Fenwick fly rod with Pflueger 1494 reel as the tool of choice for plying my favorite pocket water.

In those days I dreamed of a 16-foot, Keith Steele high-side drift boat, but the price was out of my range, and heck, I wasn't old enough to drive, let alone tow a boat. My income was dedicated to rod building and fly tying and limited to the extra money I could make during the summertime. My first boating investment was a cost-driven "six-man rubber raft" which accommodated two people comfortably fishing or three people on a nice boat ride on the waters we frequented.

Inflatables today are a far cry from the "rubber raft" of my youth. They're carefully engineered in design, and made from materials that are truly remarkable in strength, weight, and on-the-water performance.

This boating column is going to explore six truly unique inflatables that are literally made by design for today's fishing-in-Alaska experience. These boats include the Pristine Ventures Legend, Jetch Jet Tunnel, Sea Eagle FishSkiff, NRS Otter, AIRE Super Puma, and the Headwater Marine Steelhead Delux with truck-bed-mounted catapult-launching system.

Sea Eagle FishSkiff

Located in Port Jefferson, NY, Sea Eagle has made quite a splash in the inflatable industry, and their boats have been used to guide expeditions down China's Yangtze River as well as India's Ganges River. They are also recognized as a leader in the industry, releasing new and improved product lines as the inflatable boat environment evolves.

New to the Sea Eagle lineup for 2018 is their patent-pending FishSkiff 16 inflatable fishing boat. This two-person



The Sea Eagle FishSkiff 16 is an ideal two-person fishing platform that will run at 17 mph and accepts a bow-mounted trolling motor for the ultimate trolling solution. © Sea Eagle

fishing machine weighs in at 94 pounds, is a full 16 feet in length and 54 inches wide, making for a tremendously stable platform. The boat is designed around three air chambers—port, starboard, and in the floor. All chambers are designed with drop-stitch technology, which makes this fishing inflatable individually unique.

The FishSkiff 16 is manufactured with 1000 Denier reinforced PVC, and is double-layered everywhere, making it the toughest Sea Eagle boat available. The boat's removable transom is rated for an outboard engine capacity of 6 HP and 100 pounds. This configuration allows the FishSkiff to run at 17 mph while just sipping fuel.

Portability is hallmark with the FishSkiff. Once deflated it folds down to 60" x 24" x 12", which makes it easy to transport in any car trunk, RV, or small plane. This makes it ideal for an Alaska adventure. Add launching wheels, and launching from the beach or the river bank is a breeze.

The FishSkiff has been sea tested throughout the Gulf Shores, easily handling five- and six-foot waves and wind chop. The FishSkiff has also proven itself as an exceptional fishing platform, allowing two anglers to troll with ease, and also stand and cast or stand and jig. Bay fishing for salmon, halibut, lingcod, and rockfish just took on a brand-new dimension, not to mention the applications for fishing lakes. For more information go to www.seaeagle.com.



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The Jettech 420 Arrow is ideally suited for Alaska's waters, from the bays to boulder fields, and everything in between. © Jettech LLC

Jettech LLC

Initially featured in *Fish Alaska* magazine's April 2018 issue, the Jettech Jet Tunnel inflatable made its debut at the Great Alaska Sportsman Show, and it's fair to say, it was quite the crowd-pleaser, named "Most Innovative," and selling out all in-stock product while taking orders for the next delivery.

Jettech LLC is owned and operated by Palmer, Alaska's Jim Bracker. After years of tinkering with ideas to incorporate a jet tunnel design into an inflatable, Bracker found a willing partner in an inflatable boat company in Russia. They had overcome many of the challenges that he had tried to work through with other boat manufacturers. However, Bracker noted that the Russian designs were not necessarily

geared directly for some of our needs in Alaska. With some coaxing, Bracker was able to convince them to help him produce a line of performance inflatables with Alaskan and North American needs in mind. His goal was simplistically difficult: Engineer an inflatable boat that could navigate the various braided-, boulder- and log-infested rivers, creeks and sloughs that make up much of the Last Frontier while minimizing the potential damage to the boat. This requires the boat to be "off-road" rugged.

Jettech LLC is currently offering models 13- to 16-foot lengths, including the Jettech exclusive Superjet series—the ultimate inflatable jetboat. The boats are manufactured with PVC material, reinforced with three layers on the bottom with the ability to add an additional one-mil-poly bottom making the boat virtually bulletproof. One of the most unique features is the low-pressure, rigid-inflatable floor. This provides longitudinal stiffness to the hull and makes for an unbelievably rigid yet forgiving floor without the need for heavy, bulky, floorboards. This technology benefits the small tender series boats as well. All boats are manufactured with four- to five air chambers for added safety and security. For more information go to Facebook and search Jettech LLC. While you are there, check out the videos of their recent sea trials.

Pristine Ventures Legend

Pristine Ventures Wilderness Adventure Company is a mouthful, but it's also a very descriptive way to introduce you to Larry Bartlett, and his company. The company's mission and instant reputation emerged in 1998 as a quest to explore Alaska's most remote places . . . the true backcountry of the 49th state.

For Bartlett, the early days guiding small groups into these secluded and authentically-Alaskan areas helped chart the path for today's business model, which is trending towards self-guided adventures. As a result, a complete line of rafts and canoes have been thoughtfully and carefully designed and engineered for the most extreme do-it-yourself adventures possible. And most importantly, they must be practical and proven.

The PR- 49 is the company's flagship pack raft, the Kork is the slightly larger and higher-payload pack raft, the Pioneer X-Stream is their all-purpose, self-bailing canoe, the Levitator is their true all-purpose raft, and the Legend is what Larry described as the ideal raft for two people fishing a multi-day, remote-Alaskan float.

The Legend, which is 13 feet in length and 46 inches wide, features twin 15-inch

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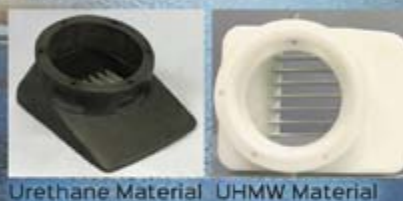
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The Pristine Ventures Legend has an impressive 1250-pound-payload capacity. © Pristine Ventures

tapered to 19-inch tubes with a total of five air chambers. The boat is constructed with 30-ounce PVC with 30-ounce chafe guards across the bottom. The Legend could be described as a hybrid canoe/kayak as it holds loads like a canoe yet handles like a kayak. For air travel, which is almost a must when floating Alaska's remote river systems, the Legend packs down to 50 pounds when the floor is removed. Ideal in the angling environment and capable of carrying two anglers and all camping

equipment and supplies for a week, the Legend has an impressive 1250-pound-payload capacity.

When fishing Alaska's remote rivers and streams, portaging around windblown logs, waterfalls, or other impassable situations is commonplace. The lightweight Legend is ideal in these settings, so much so in some cases you can leave the boat loaded with your gear and literally drag it across the tundra, bear grass, or gravel bar without the hassles of unloading and repacking.



The Super Puma is a guides' favorite, and ideal for low and bony water. © Troy Buzalsky

And let's face it, when you're in the bush, efficiency matters. For your next remote Alaskan adventure do yourself a favor and visit Pristine Ventures' very helpful website (www.pristineventures.com), and with luck, Larry can coach you through a wilderness adventure of a lifetime.

Alaska Raft and Kayak NRS Otter and AIRE Super Puma

You can't mention the word raft or inflatable

in Alaska without conjuring up thoughts of experiencing the real Alaska, and those words go hand-in-hand with Alaska Raft and Kayak out of Anchorage, Alaska. Known in the community as ARK, Alaska Raft and Kayak is a local destination for rafting and kayaking supplies and services including its frame shop and rentals. It also has a national online footprint.

Serving as dealer and distributor to some of the best names in the industry, including AIRE, NRS, INMAR, Outcast, Water Master, and Kokopelli pack rafts, as well as Clackacraft drift boats, it's obvious why guides, outfitters, and adventure seekers from all across the 49th state and beyond seek out ARK as their dealer of choice. And for the steadfast angler, the NRS Otter and the AIRE Super Puma top the charts in popularity.

NRS

NRS (Northwest River Supplies) is more than a product; it's an ensemble of products all framed around outdoor adventure. Apparel, bags, boxes, camping supplies, frames, helmets, lifejackets, oars, and paddles are all part of the ensemble, however, it's the NRS inflatables that have truly catapulted NRS as an industry leader to adventure seekers worldwide.

The NRS Otter 140 is one of the most popular and practical rafts in the lineup. Known as the "little big man," the raft is 14 feet long and seven feet wide and small enough to navigate tight rivers yet large enough to carry heavy loads on multiple day trips. The Otter is truly an outfitter-grade inflatable featuring 20-inch tubes and designed to accommodate the Big Horn II raft frame with room for a dry-box cooler and rowing seat.

Made from 41-ounce 1100 Denier Pennel Orca (Hypalon), the material is super abrasion-, UV-, and chemical-resistant. It also rolls and folds nicely, which makes it a favorite for fly-out trips.

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The NRS hanging out on the shores of a fly-in access on the Arolik River. © Troy Buzalsky



The Super Puma can help you access skinny water and catch fish like this. © Troy Buzalsky

The Otter can be equipped with thwarts or a rowing frame and features four air chambers with Leafield inflation valves. Available with either an inflatable floor or a single-layer, self-bailing floor, the Otter is ideal for the backcountry of Alaska as well as floating a local river in pursuit of your favorite fish.

AIRE

Manufactured in Meridian, Idaho, the Puma Series rafts lets you turn whitewater, big or small, into your own personal

playground. Enhanced with narrow beams, high rockers, and a continuous curved design, the zippy, durable boats are designed to play in waves and run tight lines. They provide a level of excitement to run easier Class II and III water, yet have the ability necessary to run Class V water as well as dropping through short waterfalls. Set up with a fishing frame, anglers can take advantage of their excellent maneuverability, making them ideal for fishing Alaska.

The Super Puma measures in at just over

13 feet long and 5'8" wide with an 18½-inch tube. This lightweight, go-everywhere boat weighs in at just 85 pounds. Manufactured from 37-ounce 1670 Denier urethane, it utilizes four air chambers with Leafield inflation valves. The self-bailing, lace-in floor is manufactured with double lacquered, gray PVC on the chafe strip and raft bottom for extra abrasion resistance. The boat can accept up to three thwarts or a rowing frame. And unique to AIRE, all inflatables have a 10-year, no-fault warranty, which is absolutely unmatched



Headwater Marine makes a rugged boat and incorporates an innovative system for transporting and launching the cataraft. © Ben Hill - Headwater Marine

in the industry.

Headwater Marine

Headwater Marine is a small, inflatable-boat company that builds premium catarfts exclusively for anglers searching for the ultimate fishing platform.

The company owners have spent their entire lives fishing and floating various rivers in the Pacific Northwest and wanted to create an inflatable that would work for every type of fishing and floating desired. This design goal steered them towards a

cataraft platform with a very unique and fishing-friendly frame system.

Currently available in two models, the Steelhead Delux 1410 sits on Jack's Plastic Welding Daddy Cat 14' x 24" tubes. The Delux Drifter 128 sits on Jack's Plastic Welding Big Brother 12' x 24" tubes. The frames are a true work of art, tig welded and built from 1-inch, schedule-40 aluminum and ½-inch diamond-plate floors and step decks. The frames feature an integrated aluminum seat-track slide system which allows for movable positioning of the custom-built seat-boxes and coolers.

a one-person job, it makes those difficult launches a breeze.

If you're in the market for an inflatable raft that can be rowed down the biggest whitewater and provide one of the most fishing-friendly platforms available, check out Headwater Marine's line of catarfts and catapult launching system at www.headwatersmarine.com.

Troy A. Buzalsky is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska magazine and writes the Boats column in each issue.

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[SALTWATER]

It's All In How You Brine It

Story and photos by Terry W. Sheely

There is nothing mystical about brining herring and why any saltwater salmon angler would shove-off with naked bait in the bucket is a mystery to me and Mrs. Stewart.

Go the brine step once and I seriously doubt that you'll go back to "fresh." Just too many pluses in the project, including getting an edge on the escalating price of a 12-pack of frozen. The biggest plus, though, is that you're very likely to hook more salmon.

For readers new to salmon fishing or millennially young, I'll introduce Mrs. Stewart. She is the stern-faced caricature who for 135 years has been staring at grocery-store shoppers and salmon anglers from the label of Mrs. Stewart's Liquid Bluing, a whitening agent founded not by Mrs. Stewart, but by traveling salesman Al Stewart. His/her bluing concoction is still one of the most effective brightening agents to bring out the natural flash in salmon scales. Years ago Mrs. Stewart's was the only scale shiner on the market. Lately, though, there's been an entire swamp of herring dyes, tougheners, shiners, polishers and preservers bottled specifically for salmon that now glow bright on tackle shelves. They all seem to work. Pick something

that looks pretty as long as it's green or blue. I recommend brining all herring, fresh or frozen, but especially frozen.

Brine is a salt-base that toughens fish skin and flesh, reduces scale loss and premature hook pull-outs, improves bait action and generally extends the life of herring or sardine baits. Knife work is also made easier when carving firmed-up baitfish into plug cuts, spinners or fillets. You get a neat, better-looking bait, with attractive flash and glow that will last longer on the hook. No downsides there.

Adding a splash of Mrs. Stewart, Mr. Pautzke, Mr. Pro Cure, Mr. Mike's or any number of competitive dyes, coloring agents or come-hither scents isn't necessary to brining but it is recommended. Why not get the most out of every bait you put in the water? For most fishermen the biggest obstacle to brining is that it takes a modicum of planning. Depending on the size of herring used, the process takes from four-to 12 hours to do right. But I'll confess that on those chaotic, spontaneous, jump-in-the-boat-and-go trips I'll brine on the run. Any time in a brine is better than no time in a brine, and that includes those days when the first rod goes into the water 10 minutes from the boat

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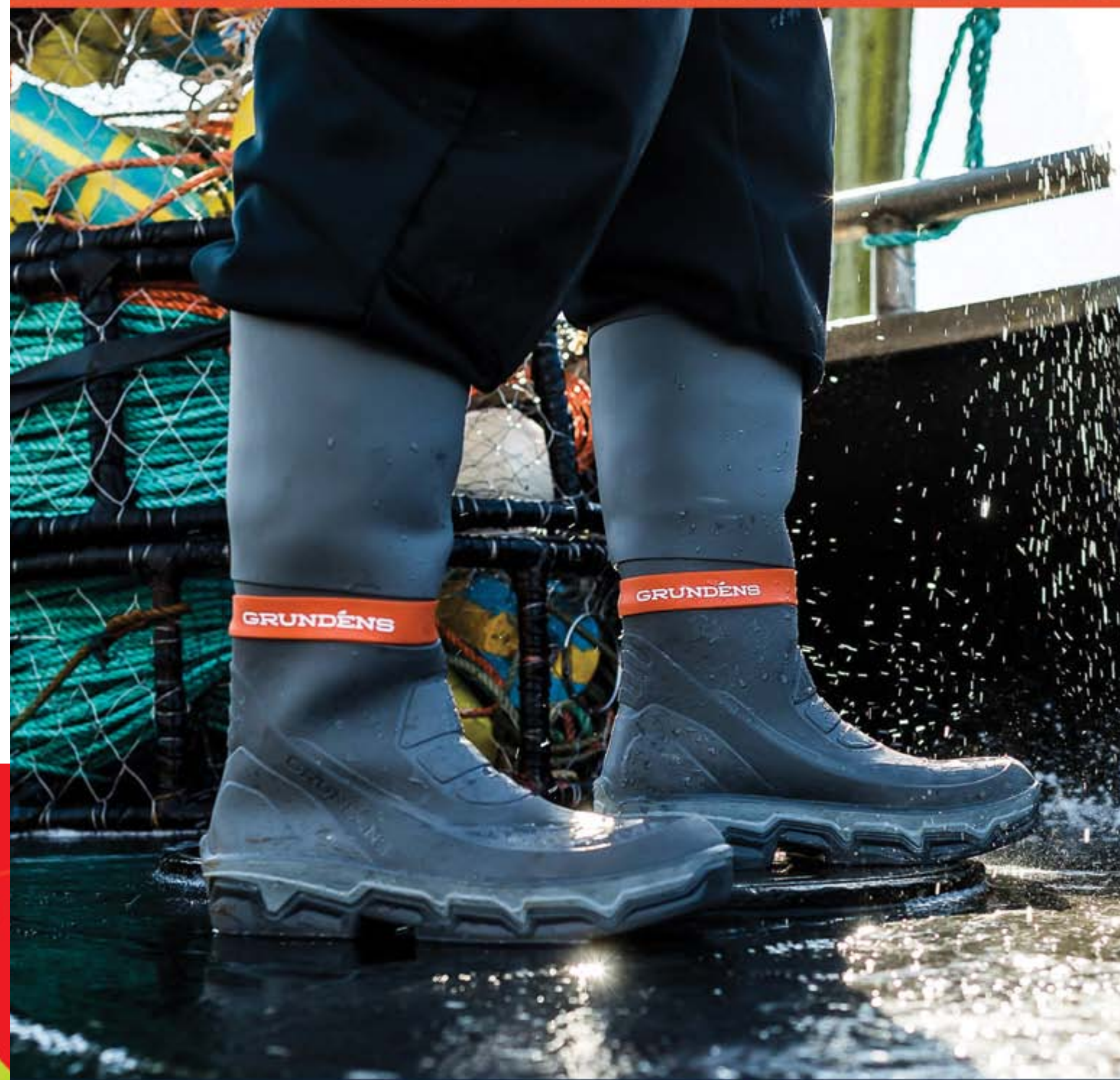
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Brine is a salt-base that toughens fish skin and flesh, reduces scale loss and premature hook pull-outs, improves bait action and generally extends the life of herring or sardine baits.

ramp. Rig it up, bait it up and put the rest of the bait in a bucket to brine while you wait for the first bite. There are several commercially-made brines on the market such as Pro-Cure Brine 'N Bite, Pro-Cure Brine 'N Bite Complete, Mike's Brite & Tight Herring Formula, and they all work well. Alternatively, you can make your own brine. Here's a basic formula and there's no reason to make it more complicated.

1. One gallon of distilled water. (Chlorinated water imparts nasty flavor. If you're stuck with chlorinated water add eight ounces of baking soda as a de-chlorinator).
2. Add four cups of rock-, kosher- or pickling salt. Stir until dissolved.
3. Add one cup of powdered milk.
4. Finish with two tablespoons of Mrs. Stewart's, or the recommended amount of commercial coloring agents. If coloring, wear rubber gloves.

5. Add baitfish. Do not thaw frozen baits. For plug cuts, remove entrails before adding the bait to the brine, then add the entrails and heads to the mixture for added scent. Some anglers, however, prefer to brine

whole and plug cut later.
6. Add artificial scent (optional).

7. Cover baits with the brine (sealable plastic bags work well), and allow to soak. 12- to 24 hours is perfect.

Note: The longer baits soak in brine the tougher the skin gets and if, by chance, you over-brine and wind up with hard, puckered herring, there's a good chance they can be rejuvenated by re-soaking in a light freshwater brine for a short period.

Once brined, herring can be frozen on cookie sheets, vacuum-packed and frozen until the kings are running or the silvers surging. Brining a few dozen herring at a time saves time and money, but before vac-packing and freezing, I'll divide the baits into packs of a dozen. If I don't use all of the dozen, if I brined it right, I can take it back home and re-freeze for the next trip. And that gallon of brine solution? It'll store just fine in the fridge for several months and can be re-used as needed.

Terry W. Sheely is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska magazine and can be reached through www.tnscommunications.net.

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[STILLWATER]

Four Techniques and Setups for July Story and photo by George Krumm

Let's face it. I'm a stillwater fanatic. I can't help it. Stillwater flyfishing lets me not only fly cast, but also tie flies, horde gear, and of course, experience quality trout fishing and the solitude I sometimes crave. July can be tough on some lakes, depending upon the number of jet skiers and water skiers. No doubt, those activities will put down the fish, especially older, larger fish. However, the conditions in July themselves will result in the fish changing their behavior, and this often means that what worked in early June, no longer works as well. The stillwater environment is dynamic, and in a constant, generally slow, state of change. By July, the surface temperature is warm—often warmer than trout like. As such, the fish will feed deeper if they can. What's more, different bugs are hatching. Of supreme importance is the annual dragonfly nymph migration. It isn't the only game in town, but you should be prepared to present dragonfly nymphs throughout the month of July. The following are the four techniques and set-ups I usually use in July.

Sliding Dragons

Since dragonfly nymphs will be migrating the entire month, this technique is a no-brainer. I use a fast-sinking fly line (type III to type VI or VII), a four-foot leader of 2x tippet, and a floating dragonfly nymph imitation such as Kaufmann's Floating Dragon. I fish this on a nine-foot, six-weight rod as the fly is sort of big and the fish that clobber it often are too. I cast this into water from four- to 12 feet deep (sometimes deeper), and crawl it back to me with a hand twist retrieve, with occasional, quick four-inch strips mixed in. Hand twist, hand twist, hand twist, hand twist. Strip! Strip! Pause . . . The sinking line slides on the bottom (hence the name "Sliding") while the buoyant fly follows just above the bottom. Fish sometimes hammer dragonfly nymphs, hence the heavy tippet. I often fish this in and around heavy weeds, too—more reason for the heavy tippet.

Intermediate Dragons

Don't have any floating dragonfly nymph imitations? You can use any other

dragonfly nymph imitation; you just need to change how you get it down near the bottom. I often do it with an intermediate fly line, with a typical nine- to 12-foot, tapered fluorocarbon leader with three feet of 3x tippet added to the leader. The flies I use are often medium-weighted, big soft hackles, along the lines of a Carey Special. My soft hackle dragons are usually size 8- or 10; sometimes bigger if the lake has big Darner dragons. For these, I can sometimes use a five-weight but I still mostly use a six-weight. I fish the same type of water as described above, but I have to count the fly down until it's just off bottom, then start my retrieve. I use the same retrieve as I do when sliding, most of the time.

Deep Leech

On some lakes that have deep water (think Big Lake, or Long and Kepler Lakes), fish will often spend time suspended in deep water, not really feeding actively. This happens most often on hot, calm days. These are fish that I pursue if I can't find willing players in shallower water. I'll use a six-weight rod, fast-sinking fly line such as Rio's Deep VII or a Teeny T-200. I'll attach a

fairly big 'bugger or other leech imitation to a four-foot leader and cast this as far as I can easily cast it. I let it sink until my fly line is nearly vertical, then start slowly kicking so that the line and fly are drawn towards the surface. Once the line angle is fairly flat, I'll stop kicking and let it settle to near vertical again, and repeat. Some may find this boring, but during the dog days of summer, this has produced some memorable catches for me, along with the occasional good-sized char in lakes that have them. A fish finder can be helpful as you will be able to spot fish with it in deep water, if they are there. You can fish depths to 50 feet with this method with the right fly line and favorable conditions.

Chironomid/Indicator

Last but not least, it is the rare fish that won't take a chironomid pupa, even if there isn't much of a hatch coming off. My last commonly used outfit in July is a five-weight rod paired with a floating line with 10- or 12 feet of eight-pound fluorocarbon for a leader, plus three feet of 3x fluorocarbon tippet. I attach a strike indicator and whatever pupa imitation I'm in the mood to use. This will allow me to fish from near the bottom in 15 feet of water to any depth shallower than that.

These four rigs aren't the only way to catch trout in July, but they are proven. Fortunately, trout in Alaska's lakes are very opportunistic and a reasonable presentation at the level of the fish will often result in a hookup. See you on the water!

George Krumm is the editor of both Fish Alaska and Hunt Alaska magazines. George is hosting a trip to Jurassic Lake Lodge—the ultimate rainbow trout fly fishing on the planet—in April 2020. If you'd like to go, contact him at george@fishalaskamagazine.com.



Dragon fly nymphs and July go together like spaghetti goes with meatballs.



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It's not just companies who purvey fishing gear behind this program. It's the anglers that love this resource everyday. It's individuals like Matt Weber who are speaking out on behalf of the Kenai. Matt has lived on the Kenai Peninsula his entire life and will do anything to help protect the Kenai River. That is why his company Weber Design donated their time to produce the Fish for the Future website to help like-minded individuals make a difference. If you want to work with a conscientious sport angler and his highly-talented team, contact Matt Weber for aid on your companies' website design, SEO and marketing.



This message brought to you by Weber Design and Fish For The Future. For more information about Weber Design, visit www.weberdesign-ak.com. To learn more about non-divisive, wild king salmon conservation, visit www.fishforthefuture.net.

It Doesn't Have to Be That Way!

Article By Francis Estalilla

Late-run Kenai River kings are NOT your typical Chinook salmon. They are unusually large, powerful fish genetically evolved to spawn in the heavy current and large cobble of the river's main stem flows. Curious anglers frequently ask, "Just what makes them SO big?"

Kenai kings tend to be older fish that forage at sea for an extra year or two. While 4-ocean kings are the dominant age-class on the Kenai, such fish are a far less common age-component of Chinook runs elsewhere. Moreover, Kenai kings are large for their age. While the odd 4-ocean king somewhere else might weigh only 25- to 30 pounds, the same fish on the Kenai is at least 10- to 15 pounds heavier. But it's the Kenai's genetically-unique, 5-ocean giants that have earned the river so much fame. Rotund hens can exceed 70 pounds while broad-shouldered MEGA-bucks can grow beyond 80- to 90 pounds. Such fish are virtually non-existent anywhere else on earth. Incredibly, the Kenai even produces a still rarer 6-ocean king!

Historically, older 4- and 5-ocean kings comprised nearly 60% of the return. Younger fish—tiny 1-ocean jacks, dinky 2-ocean males, and mediocre 3-ocean "kings"—together made up the other 40% of the run.

However, with the popularity of a size-selective sport fishery, a significant shift in age composition has gradually occurred. Today the ratio of older versus younger fish has essentially flipped. Older fish made up an average of only 43% of the run in the past five years. Proportionately, this means 27% fewer 4-ocean and 30% fewer 5-ocean kings than the historic average. Since 2012, smaller, younger fish make up nearly six out of 10 late-run kings, most of them male. The proportion of jacks has increased by 132%, 2-ocean runts by 25%, and small 3-ocean kings by 42%.

More critically, far fewer 4-ocean hens are escaping the fishery. With less of these highly fecund "egg wagons" on the gravel, there are simply fewer total eggs laid each year to produce the next brood of future kings. The lack of large spawners today also means "big fish" genes are not being passed on to the next generation of kings. Over time, the fishery has systematically exerted undeniable selection pressures to produce fewer and smaller kings. This "double whammy" has serious implications for ongoing Chinook productivity. ADFG identified 2009-2016 as a period of particularly "low productivity and low run strength" for Kenai kings. Severe in-season restrictions were emergency-ordered in RE-active fashion, including complete late-run closures in 2012, 2013, and 2014.

But it doesn't have to be that way!

Fortunately, 2017 gave us a second chance and a glimmer of hope of just how resilient these fish can be. It may just be the turning point we have all been waiting for. But this turning point could be squandered if we repeat history by continuing to focus our harvest efforts on "the biggest of the big." As concerned sportsmen, we can responsibly make the PRO-active choice to release all large kings to wisely conserve and rebuild this run to its former glory. Together we can help bring back the Kenai's BIG fish for the future.

Francis V. Estalilla, MD has avidly fished the Kenai River since 1974. "Treading lighter on the resource" is a recurring theme in his published works.

www.FishfortheFuture.net

ADF&G DATA: Table 170-2.—Percentage of total run by age class for Kenai River late-run king salmon, 1986-2016

Year	KING SALMON AGE CLASS				
	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5
1986	0.2	14.3	42.6	38.7	4.2
1987	0.8	4.6	29.0	64.5	1.1
1988	0.5	2.6	5.4	76.4	15.1
1989	0.6	10.9	13.8	63.0	11.7
1990	0.1	13.8	15.9	65.5	4.8
1991	0.6	8.8	17.1	67.3	6.2
1992	0.4	7.9	17.7	71.4	2.7
1993	1.0	8.8	14.9	69.7	5.5
1994	1.2	6.7	11.9	75.4	4.7
1995	0.9	22.0	23.2	48.3	5.6
1996	0.7	9.0	34.2	55.1	1.1
1997	1.4	5.7	23.4	67.7	1.8
1998	1.0	15.5	14.7	65.7	3.2
1999	1.0	14.3	21.9	58.4	4.4
2000	0.6	4.4	31.8	60.7	2.5
2001	1.1	14.4	18.6	63.4	2.6
2002	3.0	18.1	20.9	55.1	2.9
2003	1.5	32.1	20.4	45.3	0.7
2004	1.6	14.8	28.6	53.7	1.3
2005	0.6	10.3	18.8	66.6	3.7
2006	2.7	27.7	15.9	47.3	6.4
2007	1.2	24.0	26.6	40.8	7.4
2008	3.1	9.1	21.7	59.1	6.9
2009	2.4	32.3	11.7	50.0	3.6
2010	6.7	20.8	34.6	32.8	5.1
2011	2.8	30.2	20.4	44.7	1.9
2012	1.9	10.1	40.0	44.2	3.8
2013	9.0	22.4	25.4	41.0	2.2
2014	4.0	21.6	34.9	37.6	1.9
2015	5.5	25.6	24.1	41.3	3.5
2016	1.5	17.5	41.3	36.0	3.9
Historical Avg.	1.9	15.5	23.3	55.1	4.3
Recent 10-yr. Avg.	3.8	21.4	28.1	42.8	4.0
Recent 5-yr. Avg.	4.4	19.5	33.1	40.0	3.0

Notes: 7.5" mesh gillnets used for inriver run during 1986-2001, 5.0" and 7.5" mesh gillnets used for inriver run during 2002-2016. Nearshore netting data included in age composition after 2013. 2013-2016 estimates preliminary

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A typical-sized sockeye. With the water level where it is at, this is about my limit for the fly rod before I switch to a conventional rod and reel.

THE COMPLEXITY OF SOCKEYE SALMON IS IMPRESSIVE. UNLIKE THE OTHER FOUR PACIFIC SALMON SPECIES INDIGENOUS TO NORTH AMERICA, THEY HAVE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS THAT SET THEM APART: SPECIFICALLY THE PROPENSITY TO SPAWN IN A LAKE (THOUGH THEY SPAWN IN RIVERS AS WELL) AND SPEND THEIR FIRST YEARS AS A JUVENILE IN A LAKE BEFORE HEADING OUT TO SEA. ALTHOUGH TENDING TO BE SMALLER THAN ALL BUT PINK SALMON, THEY MAKE UP FOR IT WITH COMPACT POWER AND A DELICIOUS FLAVOR. THEY ARE MY FAVORITE SALMON TO PURSUE AND CATCH. GETTING THEM HOOKED, HOWEVER, CAN BE THE TRICKY PART.

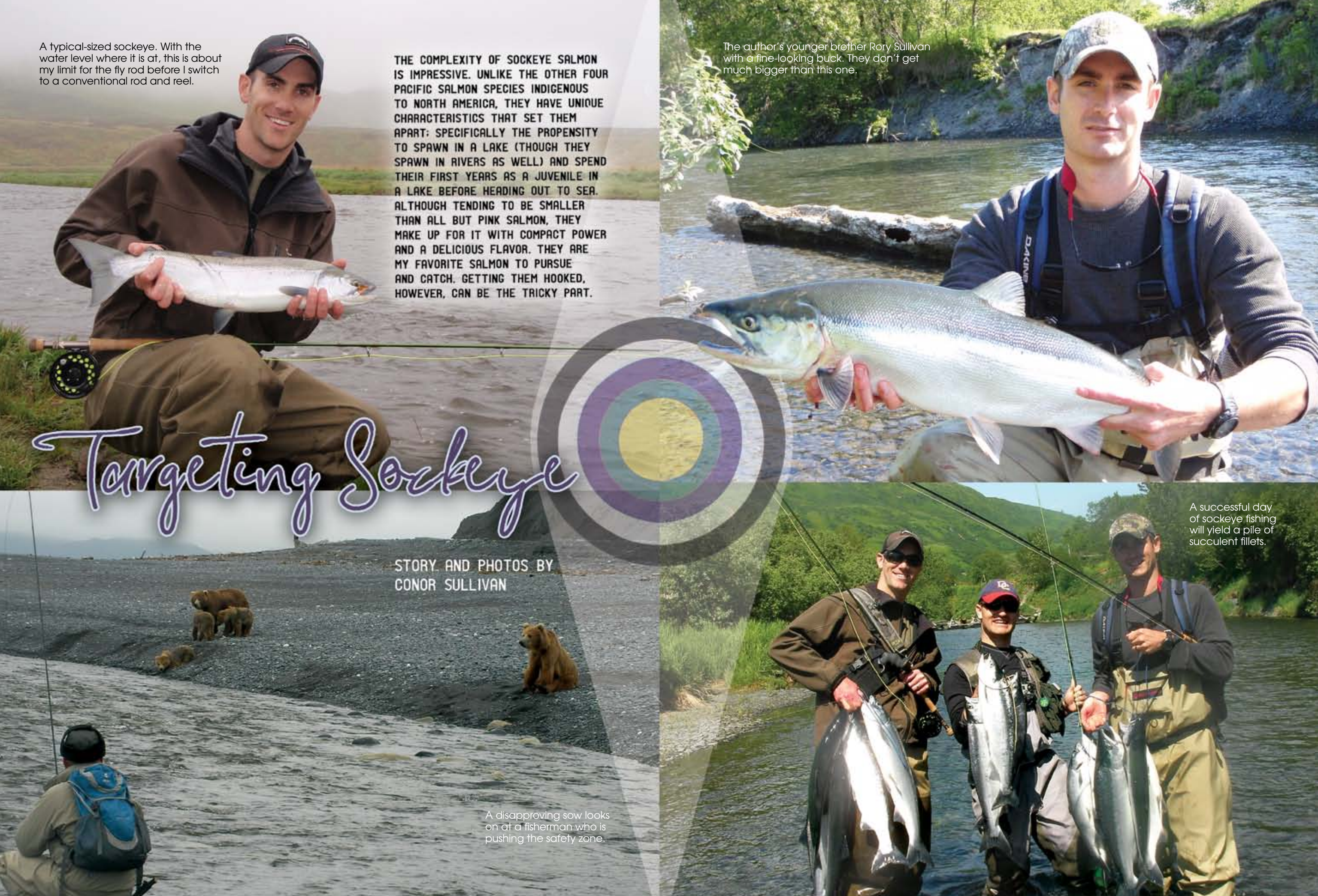
The author's younger brother Rory Sullivan with a fine-looking buck. They don't get much bigger than this one.

Targeting Sockeye

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
CONOR SULLIVAN

A successful day of sockeye fishing will yield a pile of succulent fillets.

A disapproving sow looks on at a fisherman who is pushing the safety zone.





All good fishermen like a better view of the river.

Where to find them

Reds are found throughout the state, from small Southeast streams which may support a few thousand total fish, to the mighty Bristol Bay fisheries, which supply the world with reds. In 2017, Alaska Department of Fish and Game counted 2.8 million returning to just the Nushagak River, one of several major river systems in Bristol Bay. This area is the backbone of commercial salmon fisheries for Alaska. It also supports a number of lodges which provide anglers an opportunity to fish these rivers as well and get in on the

staggering amount of fish. Moving to the southcentral part of the state, the Kenai, Kasilof and Russian rivers are the primary powerhouse systems for much of the state's residents and visitors. These rivers are easily accessible for the traveling angler by car and although they can be crowded in the more popular spots, they boast a strong and consistent run of fish.

Heading north, the Copper River and its tributaries like the Klutina and Gulkana are noteworthy sockeye producers, as are the Susitna and Yentna rivers and many of their clear-water tributaries such as Lake Creek.

Further south, Kodiak supports a comparatively modest run of reds for sport fishermen as does much of southeast Alaska. The key to finding a good red salmon river is identifying a lake somewhere in the system. Generally speaking, the bigger the lake, the bigger the run.

Getting them Hooked

If you poll Alaskan salmon fishermen, the general consensus is that reds don't bite. The ones that are hooked are "flossed" and that is that. I have gotten into boisterous arguments with friends on the topic. The

argument usually goes something like this, "I don't want to spend my day being frustrated trying to catch a fish that won't bite, let's go fish for something else." While I can't disagree that on those days when reds are being attacked by flying lead from both sides of the river, they probably are not in the mood to strike a fly. However, I have absolutely had reds take flies in the right conditions.

For me, the right conditions are first thing in the morning, with no pressure on the river, and fish holding calmly. A cleanly swung fly past the fish can result in a fantastic strike. My good friend Brooks has even caught them trolling a bare red hook. I never had a need to set a gill net or dip net for reds; I always caught enough for the family on my fly rod. "Subsistence fly fishing" is what I would call it and here is how I do it.

The Outfit

Alaska has a certain way of not-so-subtly making you buy good gear. My first salmon season I broke six rods. It was impressively depressing but the reds and silvers were big and my rods were not up to the Alaska standard. The day I broke number six, I walked into the tackle shop with my waders on, looking for something better. I went with a 9-weight Sage TCX and haven't looked back. Although it had a steep initial cost, it has more than paid for itself by landing several hundred salmon. My reel choice is a Ross CLA 5. It isn't a flashy reel but it's a work horse and Ross stands behind their craftsmanship. Spooled with floating line and spectra backing, it is ready for all five species of salmon.

Keeping it simple, I use 10-pound-test Maxima monofilament leader, which I make the length of the rod. Maxima is a hard monofilament and stands up well to teeth and abrasion. Borrowing a tip from an old friend Dave who is a phenomenal red fisherman, I position the weights by placing the fly at the top of the cork handle and putting my weights at the second guide up. I am a big fan of non-lead split shot and I use several size fives



The author processing his and his brother's catch of reds.

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The author's first red of the year.

to make it get down to the proper depth, just ticking off the bottom. My fly choice is simple: either an egg pattern or a small Flashabou streamer tied onto a size 2- or 4 hook. I like using egg patterns because I can also pick up rainbows and Dolly Varden as well. Admittedly, I have had times where I missed a red because a Dolly came charging in and hit the fly first; it keeps it interesting.

Maybe I like red salmon fishing because it is like hunting. Watching the river levels, I wait until it rains and the water begins to rise. As the level starts to fall, that is when I head out, trying to pick spots to fish where I anticipate the fish will transit up, like a bow hunter setting up on a game trail. If the weather is "too nice" like it was this past summer when my Dad and I were chasing reds, use the flood tides as a good indicator of when to hit the river if you're fishing the lower sections, as the incoming tide will ferry in the fish.

Rather than beat the water for hours blind-casting, I will stand and wait where I know fish will eventually pass through. The advantage you have over the fish is that they tend to follow their own preferred "games trails" based on depth and current. If I think fish are pushing up the river system, I have stood in the same spot for hours, just waiting for the fish. It sounds painful and cold but patience is the key and standing knee deep in a river is about the most relaxing place imaginable. I have had river otters swim past me, foxes come check me out and listening to eagles overhead never gets old.

A big push of fish will quickly shut down the relaxation party as you shift to not spooking them while making good casts. Placing the fly well above the fish, the key is to drift the fly through the fish, following your fly with your rod tip and waiting until it comes tight, similar to working a nymph-type fly. There is no

better feeling than having your fly stop and then seeing a big red come out of the water trying to shake the hook from its jaw. From there, hang on and don't try to stop them. These river tuna pack a punch and will easily take you into your backing on the first run, cartwheeling down the river in the process.

Big water fishing

Many sockeye rivers like the Kenai are deep, fast and glacially-fed so sight-fishing is just not in the cards. Additionally, you may find yourself with a few (hundred) fellow fishermen joining you. Fear not, red salmon fishing is still great, the numbers of fish pushing up can be staggering, and you just need to swap out gear. I have had great days on the Russian River with my Dad and brothers, catching our limits but having to modify the technique. Leaving the fly rods in the truck, we went with seven-foot medium-action rods with bait casting or spinning reels.

Instead of the few small split-shot sinkers, a small egg sinker was in order to tick the bottom. The heavier tackle also helped control the fish before it ran down through a lot of other lines. A lot of areas have specific hook requirements so check the regulations before you go. The concept is the same though, you just do it without seeing the fish. Work on swinging your fly through the river, keeping it just above the bottom. It helps to visualize your weight and fly, trying to keep the weight just brushing above the bottom. When you come tight on a fish, there is no nibble, just a big strike as that fish takes off.

Targeting sockeye can take some practice but the rewards are worth it. Unlike other salmon species, they don't hang out too long in one spot but they do have a patterned way of swimming and resting as they migrate up the river. Take some time

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to study the river, look at the fish counts if available and select a choice spot. After a long winter, the first sign of summer for me is the arrival of the early-run reds. Their bright, neon-red flesh is as satisfying to the eyes as it is to the palate. Enjoy these fish but treat them with a level of reverence. They had a long and complex journey to make it back to our pristine Alaskan rivers.

A lifelong outdoorsman, Conor Sullivan holds a Bachelors in Marine Science from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a Masters in Marine Affairs from the University of Rhode Island, as well as a 200-ton master mariner's license. He has been published recently in numerous sporting and fishing magazines. Look for his first book, Fishing the Wild Waters coming out soon. He can be followed on social media @Sullivan Lures.



My go-to reel for sockeye, a Ross CLA 5.

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It's all smiles for Greg Sellers after landing a nice Kenai River sockeye.



KENAI Sockeye WISDOM

Story & Photos
by Dennis Randa

I didn't know what a sockeye salmon was that early June day in 1975 when I first saw the Russian River. I was seeking trout which was mostly what I'd fished for in Oregon prior to moving to Kenai the year before. Lucky for me that I ran into a fellow angler a ways below the falls and he showed me what he was fishing for—salmon. I was hooked. Shadows in that clear water, unseen to my uneducated eyes, these salmon were five pounds or larger and proved to be what could only be described as explosive on the end of my trout rod when I finally hooked one.

I'd grown up fishing the Yakima River in eastern Washington, fishing for bass mostly. We caught a lot of rough fish too, but most importantly the fishing instilled in me a love for rivers; a fascination for moving water. I'd not known then that the sockeye runs in that river were gone long before my time, eradicated by the low-head, irrigation project dams installed by the Bureau of Reclamation in the 1930s. Later on in life I moved near the Deschutes River where I did fish for Chinook but mostly fell head-over-heels for the famous "Redside" rainbow trout and the steelhead found there.

So, there I was learning how to spot those shadows in the Russian, and it wasn't easy for a guy used to fishing waters with "garden hackle" that were most often murky, or even muddy, not that the Deschutes was always muddy. I just never learned to spot fish. I fished blind, learning to read seams, eddies, and such looking for fish. And now, wow! Looking at them you couldn't see the bottom for the fish. Really, they don't bite. Really, you have to tight line them—essentially snag them in the mouth! That's what I was told anyway.

So that's the way it was for me for those first years when we drove all the way from Kenai to the Russian and walked up below the falls for a limit of salmon. Were they ever tasty! But the kids weren't all that appreciative of toting them back to the car, that's for sure. We moved on to learning how to catch them lower down but that wasn't so easy either until a boat was obtained. After that it was a bit easier. Then we figured out that the Kasilof held sockeye too.

Time passed and I fell into being a fishing guide, another part of my fishing life history. I soon learned people wanted red salmon at times more than king salmon. I quickly had to gear up and be prepared for that, too. Then I had to learn how to teach others how to legally hook these so called "lock-jawed," no-bite fish. I also had to learn how to teach people what it felt like when a red salmon had the line in its mouth. It isn't a bite but the hook follows the line and then—game on! Don't forget to set the hook . . . hard! I'd explain that the "bite" was probably the fish shaking its head to get rid of the leader.

Kenai Sockeye Run Timing

The Kenai River has two distinct sockeye salmon runs. The first run, or early run, heading for the Russian River watershed, is primarily available to anglers after the June 11 trout opener in the upper Kenai and Russian rivers. This once insignificantly-sized run has expanded in numbers as a result of the Russian River Falls fish ladder installation project from many years ago. It has now become a dependable fishery throughout the length of the Kenai.

The second, or late run, is returning to the rest of the Kenai watershed above and somewhat below Skilak Lake. These second-run fish are larger, often up to 12 pounds (the 15-pound, three-ounce IGFA world record was a late-run Kenai fish), and are available from mid-July through the middle of August, although for the last several years the run seems to be extending almost into September in the lower Kenai River. Fishing for these fish along the margins of typical run timing can be very rewarding or it can be just another day flogging the water. Still beats working.

Rigging up for Kenai Reds

Anglers are likely to be most successful "flossing" or "lining" sockeye salmon. I like to use a medium-action fly rod. Having a tip that is a bit soft, in my opinion, allows the leader to slide through the fish's mouth to get the hook in place. Once a fish is felt to be "biting" a couple of hard "hook sets" usually gets the job done. The reel should be able to hold at least 100 yards of backing, looped to some running line for handling, typically at least 100 feet of brightly-colored, flat monofilament for visibility, which I connect with a blood knot to three- to five feet of clear monofilament leader. A good, strong, sharp hook is essential for success. Carry a file or be prepared to tie on a new hook when the one you are using dulls on a rock. Remember that when fishing the Kenai above the power lines below the Russian River and also in the Russian River there are specific hook-size rules to follow.

Sockeye Rods and Reels

For sockeye rods I use St. Croix Imperial 8-weight, 9-foot fly rods with Lamson Konic 3.5 large arbor reels. I use these rods for multiple purposes: casting indicators for trout and then switching spools for sockeye salmon when targeting them. The Lamson drags seem to work well for both purposes, allowing them to be tightened up a bit for salmon. I don't like to use heavy drag settings when fishing for sockeye, unless I'm in a crowd. What I have found is that wanting them too much, that is, wanting to land that sought-after salmon

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too quickly, usually leads to horsing them and then subsequent failure of the hook to hold or the line breaks. Besides, enjoying the battle these fierce-fighting, hard-swimming fish put on isn't a bad thing.

Where to Target Reds

It's common for people to see sockeye in pools and back eddies and want to fish for them there, but those fish are milling and are not so easily hooked. Your chances are much better when they are moving, or are at least headed upriver. When they're traveling, they will be close to the bottom, where your fly and leader will be. When their mouths open to "breathe," your

leader will eventually pass through one's lips resulting in a legal hookup.

But that is only the start. The line and hook have to move through the water at the depth where the fish are running. That is not always easy when there are big rocks and a rough bottom. The fish find the path of least resistance and you can often snag the bottom and spend too much time breaking-off and retying, over and over again. Move a bit, sometimes just enough to clear that rock or obstruction that is preventing the drift from intercepting fish swimming through. Sometimes it only takes a few inches, maybe a foot or two, or sometimes you should move until you find

a smoother bottom with less obstruction.

Sockeye salmon, along with coho salmon, typically do not swim against the strongest currents like larger, more powerful Chinook salmon. These smaller salmon often swim along the edges of channels where currents are not as strong. I commonly find sockeye where I apply my Rule of Threes; three feet of water moving three miles-an-hour, typically three feet from shore. Often anglers are fishing out beyond where fish are running up the river. These areas are just inside the stronger currents, or along the edges. Look for where the river runs over a big rock or where an obstruction edges into the river making a natural slowing of the current moving up against a faster, stronger current. That stronger current will hold fish and if it doesn't eddy, that will often cause a momentary pause of the fish's passage where it's more possible to get the line to swing into their mouth. Fish On!

Sometimes when you see someone being successful, just watch them for a bit. Stop and watch. You might not only pick up clues as to what they are doing correctly, but also what you might be doing wrong.

Weight for Sockeye Fishing

One thing to think about, especially when flossing, is the weight set-up. Folks use just about anything you can think of to get the set-up down to the fish. Three-way swivels with tubing and pencil lead is used a lot. It works well and it's easy to vary your sinker weight. Another common method to get your offering down is rubber-core sinkers which, when newly installed, are easy to remove for switching to more- or less weight. The bad part is when the slot for the line is hammered shut from banging into rocks it makes it difficult to remove them. I like to use the larger, removable split shot placed just above the blood knot I use to tie the leader to the running line or flat monofilament. I can add or remove these sinkers easily and when they become too bottom-hammered to remove, the blood knot can be cut and the sinker slides off easily. It works for me. The main idea is to keep the leader and hook in the bite zone and move it into the fish's mouth.

Select the amount of weight to balance the line and weight with the depth, speed of current and distance so as to allow the offering to swing through a breathing fish's mouth. This also entails using the rod to lead the leader and hook perpendicular to the current to present the leader across the fish's direction of travel instead of letting the leader and hook lead the rod tip so that the leader winds up parallel to the current. This often results in foul-hooking where the hook winds up in a fin or under

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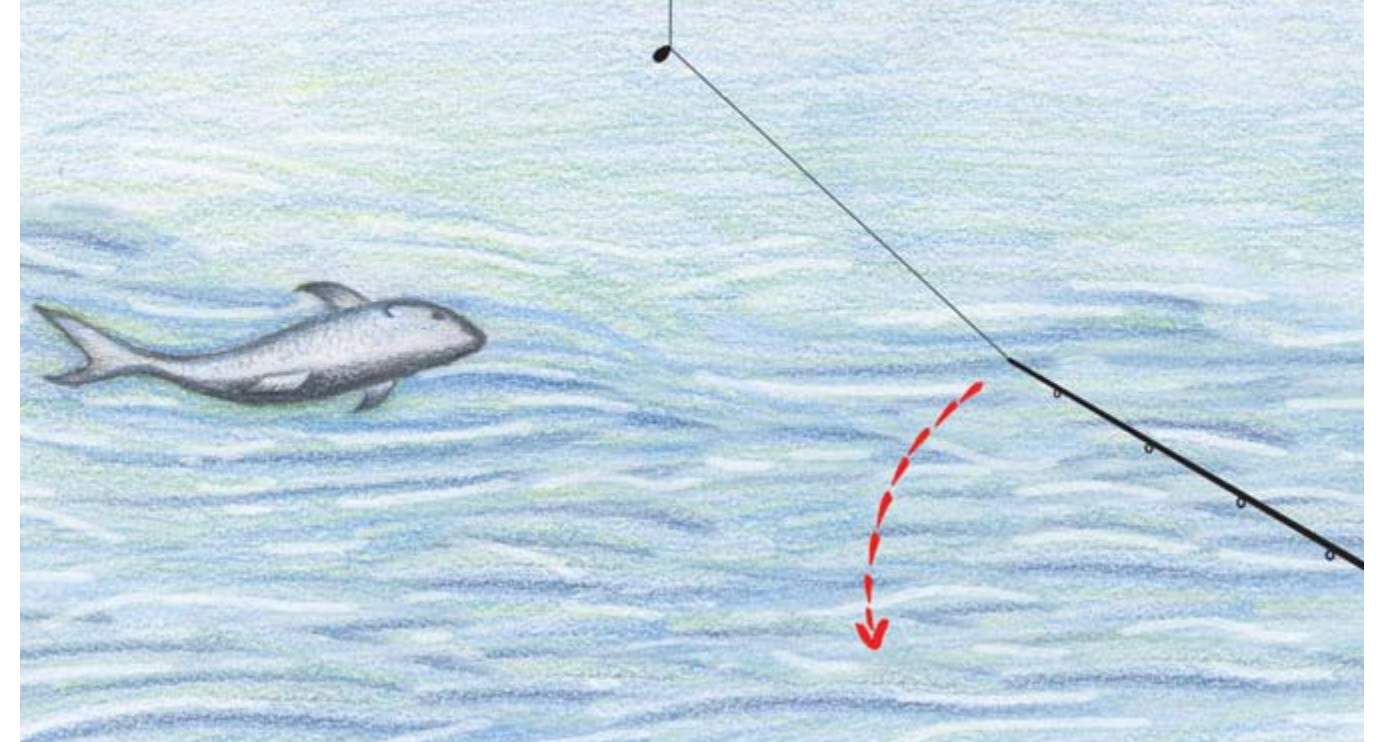
Incorrect

When an angler allows the leader setup to lead the rod tip downstream and into shore, the leader runs mostly parallel to shore (and not across the fish's mouth) often illegally snagging the fish as the cast ends and the rod is lifted for the next cast. Presentation, as with all fishing, is everything.



Correct

When the angler uses the rod to lead the set up, it maintains the leader (sinker, leader, hook) perpendicular to the current flow; as the rod is moved downriver and towards shore, it brings the fly and leader naturally to the fish's mouth.



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a scale. This part is most critical because it is here that the proper balance of hook, leader, and sinker is used to maintain the proper depth of the cast. A little too fast and the set-up passes over the fish; a little too slow and it drags under the fish often hanging on the bottom. This technique also allows the cast to cover a broader area of the bottom more effectively.

Sockeye Fishing and Fighting Tips

I do not really like to floss fish, but it is effective. Mostly, I hate what flipping or flossing for sockeye can do to my rods. It matters not if it is a lead sinker or a pair of lead eyes on an Intruder being cast on a long rod. When those weights hit the rod, and they will, it often bruises the rod itself, creating a weak spot or at least a mark in the finish. On a rod that costs hundreds of bucks, this can lead to the disaster of breakage, later. Not a good thing. I am telling you this because I've been known to use the cheapest rods I can find for sockeye, and I don't mind if they are garage sale or clearance sale. If the action is even close to what I prefer, I will use them for flipping sinkers while flossing for socks. It is way better than breaking a high-dollar fly rod intended to cast fly lines for trout. I hate sinkers. They are hard to cast and hard on the rod, but usually necessary in the flossing game.

Many fly anglers like to use more traditional fly fishing techniques for

enticing or getting sockeye to actually chase and bite. For this, I like to use heavy-sinking, level tungsten tips looped to the end of a weight-forward or level fly line matched to the rod. These tips can be made or purchased at Mossy's Fly Shop in Anchorage. I like to have a good selection of 3- to 8-foot, T-14 and T-20 tips for use depending on current speed and the depth of water fish are passing through. The loop-to-loop connection is used both to the fly line and to the leader so the sinking tip can be switched quickly and easily. Being confident that this set-up is holding or swinging through the water in front of the fish is very important. Yes, the fish will move a bit to the fly, but the closer it is the more likely they will move to intercept it.

Some people are prone to sticking the sinker. I'm no closer to identifying exactly what the angler is doing or not doing after 30 years of guiding, but some people just do, and this applies to just about any angling situation whether it is flipping for reds or indicator-fishing for trout. Others using the same rig, same gear, in the same waters never snag. I am convinced that some allow the sinker to sink into cracks between the rocks while others naturally lift it. It only takes a subtle movement to lift it from a crevice. Some days, I endlessly tie on new gear and on others we'll be using the same set-ups I tied on in the morning at the end of the day.

I tell anglers to lighten up the pressure



Guide Sean Smart prepares to put a successful client's catch in the box.

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A stringer full of sockeye means a fun day fishing and many tasty meals to come for Denis Hippert and Dennis Randa (right).



on the fish once they've set the hook. The salmon wants desperately to make it back to its school heading upriver to spawn. If light pressure is used, the fish will typically swim right back to where it was when it was hooked. This doesn't happen all the time, but often enough.

When pulled forcefully to shore, sockeye will redouble their effort to get away, often winding up on the other side of the river. This happens when they are fouled-hooked, too. That is why having high-visibility line helps anglers to see where on the fish the line appears to be coming from. If it is hooked somewhere other than in the mouth, I tell my clients to just grab the spool which allows the fish to pull the rod down straight towards itself, then you clamp down on the reel and either pull the hook out or break it off. We can re-tie and get them back after a legal one quickly. If you cannot turn that fish with your rod when it is running, it likely isn't hooked in the mouth. Not to say all of them can be turned even when they are hooked in the mouth. These fish are most like kids who don't like to be told what to do.

Sockeye Behavior

I have learned from observing and talking to anglers using other methods that sockeye will "eat" a bait that touches a memory, perhaps of the food they eat at sea. Sockeye do not typically eat other fish. I didn't say NEVER. I've caught sockeye while trolling for silvers in the ocean. They

will eat a yellow Teeny nymph, or a little bug tied like a little crustacean they'd target as food or anything that reminds them of this feeding act. I've stood with my Krystal Shrimp just hanging in the area of a school of sockeye waiting for them. I twitched it slowly, not wanting to come up behind them and stick one in a scale. I dropped it back a few inches then twitched it a bit more and then . . . wait for it! Sometimes the grab is subtle and sometimes it's hard, but they will bite it.

When sockeye go on a bite you can sometimes catch several of them before it subsides. It's a hoot. Then you can sit there for 20 minutes without another



Teaching a young angler how to catch sockeye and then watching them land one is a sweet reward. Josh and Brock Martin are all smiles.

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grab. It's salmon fishing. One day I watched a fellow hang a yellow Teeny nymph alongside a basketball-sized rock where sockeye were traveling. Within fifteen minutes and three casts of his fly, he walked away with his limit of reds. He just hung that fly in the path of the fish and they grabbed it as they pushed up around the rock. It certainly impressed me but I couldn't find a fly in my box that they'd grab like he had. Now I always have a few of those nymphs in my box should I find another rock like that.

For the most part, I like to swing little Krystal Shrimp flies through water that sockeye will be moving through. Even the turbid waters of the Kasilof will usually produce fish for me that way if I persist.

Flipping for red salmon long ago lost its appeal to me, personally. I get it. I had it. And now I prefer to fish for biters. Whether or not I was fishing the clear waters of the Russian River or the Copper River in the Iliamna Lake area, I have observed reds chasing a swinging fly, sometimes when there were many of them in a school or just a few scattered along the bottom. I have seen them burst out of the school and chase that fly that I'd just swung across above them for 20 feet, hitting it with a fury not unlike a northern pike as it ambushes it from below. That's what



As part of the spawning process, sockeye turn bright red with green heads. They also get more aggressive and will bite flies and beads more readily, but should be released as the flesh is no longer at its prime. Soldotna Inn/Mykel's Restaurant owner Alice Kerkvliet is a good fly caster and a delight to spend the day fishing with.

I'm talking about!

I have lived through the snagging battles of the 80s and 90s when the state agonized its way to the hooked-in-the-mouth rules we live under now. I see from fishing in the upper Kenai River that many of the fish that brave the gauntlet have a hook or hooks in them somewhere other than their mouth. I see the myriad of anglers out to get their fish and I'm slowly leaning back in the direction that if we just let them have the first three they hook, regardless of hooking location, it would be all right. Their mental focus is not on the fishing, it is on fish for the freezer anyway they can get it. Semantics at best, snagging any way I look at it.

The sockeye subject is as broad as any fishing subject I've ever been involved in, from the combat fishing issues, to allocation, to the methods and means as addressed by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Sockeye returns to the Kenai will hopefully continue to be plentiful and the fishing industries dependent upon them will continue to thrive.

Dennis Randa is the owner of Randa's Guide Service, offering guided fishing for salmon (including sockeye), trout, dollys and steelhead on the Kenai and Kasilof rivers as well as ocean fishing for salmon, halibut and other bottomfish. Randa's also offers B&B accommodations.



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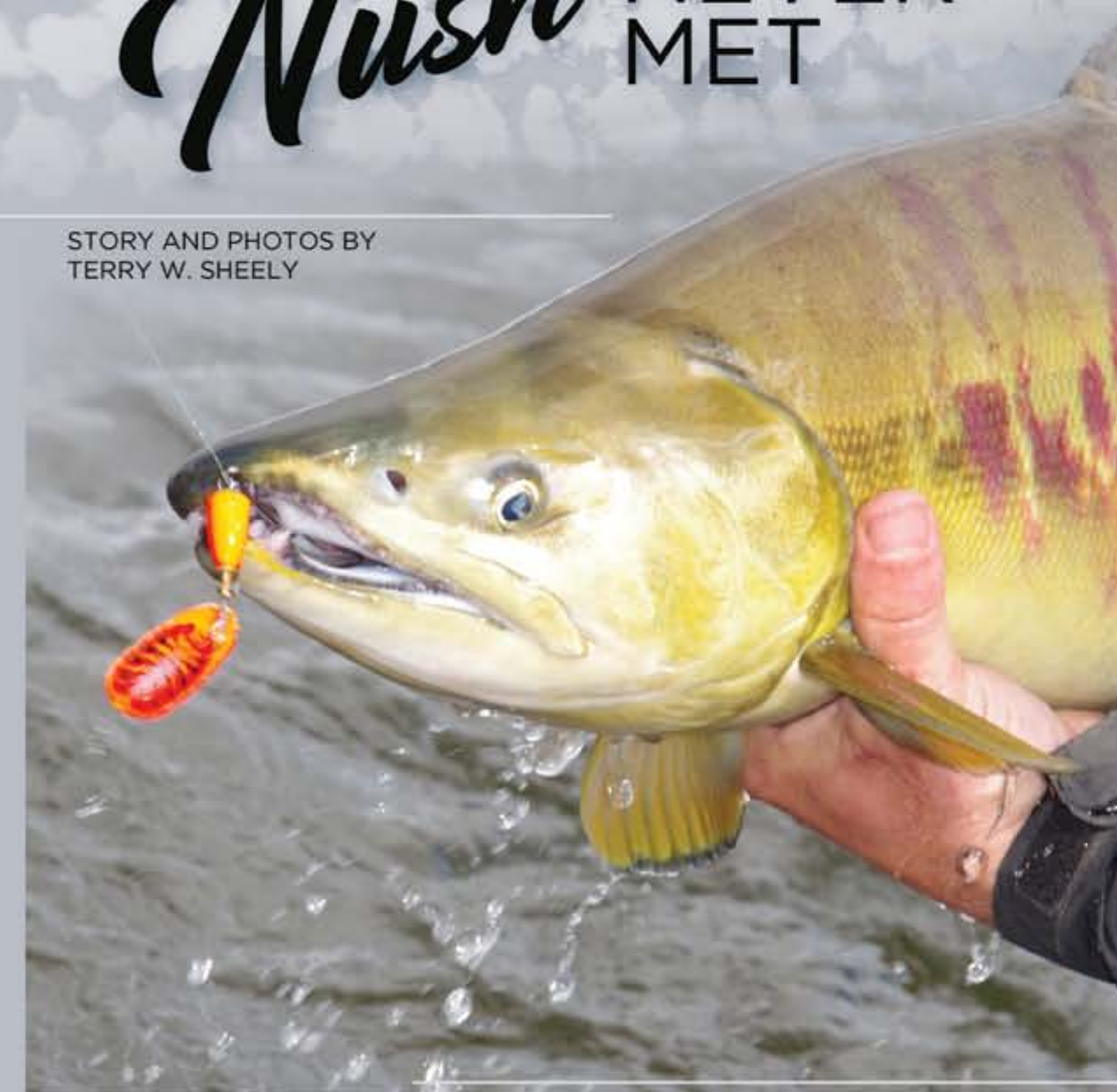




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STORY AND PHOTOS BY TERRY W. SHEELY



Clockwise from top left - Species like Dolly Varden char, Arctic grayling, coho- and chum salmon are present and often over-looked targets in the mighty Nush.

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Out of the bent marsh grass in a slough above Portage Creek a northern pike blows up on a snaky, white streamer.

Half-a-dozen nasty chum fights after dinner; sockeye of course, and nearly untouched silvers, grayling, Dolly Varden, pike . . . meet the fish of the other Nush, the also-rans, hidden and mostly overlooked in the shadow of one of the world's most spectacular king salmon runs.

The wide, rolling Nushagak, 20th-largest river in the U.S., throws a massive 285-mile-long reputation of internationally coveted sportfishing. It slides west from the icy peaks of the Alaska Range to sweep into Bristol Bay east of Dillingham, salmon commissary to the world.

Upriver, the web of wet drainages that feed the Nush cover 13,400 square miles in pristine wilderness, a monstrous basin of remote gamefish-producing water that would cover the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island and have 2,000 miles left over.

The big river's celebrated Nush Push is a month-long, six-figure fish surge of Chinook that wedges into miles of prime sportfishing water above and below Portage Creek.

Starting in mid-June, pools, seams, runs

and chains of hot Chinook just 10- to 40 miles from Bristol Bay, light up the river for 20 hours of action a day. The Nush Push is a king blow-out that dominates the big river until mid-July and attracts squadrons of day-tripping float planes from distant lodges, fills spike camps, ramps up dozens of outfitters, and books solid permanent tent/lodge operations. And it rewards sportfishermen looking for the epic.

ADF&G allows a two-a-day limit on Chinook, of which only one can be greater than 28 inches, and four kings total for the season. There is nearly always more than enough hookups for anglers to be choosy about which fish goes into the box. At the peak, around the Fourth of July, kings are typically so thick and aggressive that anglers who fish the full 20 hours of daylight wear-out long before the bite fades.

This surge of headline-grabbing 15- to 35 pounders, with a few in the 40- to 50-pound range, is so productive that it alone fills the Nush's sportfishing heart and overshadows gamefish that in other regions would be promoted on brag boards.

Gamefish like, for example, big, hard-fighting chums that come in with the kings, arriving in numbers two sometimes three times higher than the celebrated Chinook, that eat chartreuse Wiggle Wart diving plugs like popcorn. It also hosts

one of the biggest, quietest silver returns in Southwest. And that's just the cream of possibilities left on the fishing table after the kings push on and most of the annual sportfishing circus packs up.

There are also beautiful rainbows, grayling, Dolly Varden char and northern pike.

The 'other' Nush, the non-famous one, appears in public about the third week in July after the Chinook along with two- to three-million sockeye and chums have flushed upriver toward the Mulchatna, Nuyakuk, King Salmon and Upper Nushagak rivers.

Two weeks after the king show ends, around the first week of August, a slam-bam of silvers arrives, 100,000 to half-a-million strong. Water that was rich in kings then salmon-poor for two weeks, now refills with silvers. But surprisingly, there are few anglers to meet it—mostly Nushagak diehards in permanent camps or lodges that continue to fish coho deep into September.

In many, if not most rivers, the arrival of a Nushagak-sized silver run and a month of fishing would touch off a race for pink Pixees, Blue Fox spinners, Flashabou flies and pink wogs. But on the Nush, most of the seasonal fish camps close shop before the silvers arrive. A few Iliamna and inland

Rainbow trout are scattered throughout the Nushagak but are predictably found off the mouths of clearwater creeks and tributary rivers.



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CC 944TG	9'4"	2	15 - 30	1 - 8	Graphite	\$255.00
CC 944T	9'4"	2	15 - 30	1 - 8	Cork	\$255.00
CC 955TG	9'6"	2	15 - 40	4 - 12	Graphite	\$260.00
CC 1054TG	10'6"	2	15 - 30	1 - 8	Graphite	\$265.00
CC 1054T	10'6"	2	15 - 30	1 - 8	Cork	\$265.00
CC 1056TG	10'6"	2	15 - 40	4 - 12	Graphite	\$270.00

Fly patterns that imitate salmon smolt, eggs or salmon flesh are all mainstays in Alaska.



lodges station boats at the king camps for float plane day-trippers to tap into the silver lode. Even fewer anglers fly into Dillingham and book with local guides or arrange to use DIY tent sites and fishing boats.

I've seen private pilots from Anchorage beach float planes on gravel bars fronting productive runs, pay the native river keeper a landing fee then wade and fish. Others simply cast for a few hours from pontoons. Action can be outstanding on bright coho of seven- to 15 pounds with muscle enough to migrate 200 miles or more, exploding on lures and flies in three- to six feet of water!

Much of the river land is owned and managed by Choggiung Limited, a Yup'ik and Aleut native corporation. Fish-camp sites are leased to sportfishing outfitters who control access on their leases and can allow freelance camps. There is some privately-owned ground with a few permanent lodges that remain open for the entire silver season and target the Nush's "other" fish.

Jake's Nushagak Salmon Camp is one of those few actively promoting the Nushagak silver fishery, and they promote it with exclamation points. "These silver bullets run, leap and dance on your line," is their promo, adding, that, "Catching these bucking rodeo fish is as exciting as any fishing you will experience." Jake's camp is one of the few that actively targets the 'other' Nush, and maintains an upriver cabin for fly anglers after silvers, chums, sockeye, even-year pinks, surprisingly large rainbows, grayling and northern pike. He also caters to DIY anglers chasing silvers, trout and the rest of the Nush's unsung. The unguided silver trips start in late July, close off in mid-August, and include float plane from Dillingham, lodging, boat and a push in the right direction.

Nushagak River Fishing Adventures is another that actively promotes the Nushagak silver fishery. A permanent,

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When most anglers think about the Nushagak, Chinook is the first thing that comes to mind. The "other" Nush sports strong runs of all five species of salmon.

river-edge lodge, they wait for the silver run and hit it hard. They are also one of the few guide operations promoting the non-salmon side of the Nush. Rainbow trout, grayling, whitefish, and northern pike are also on their fish board along with the promise, "You will never run out of something to catch." Of the silver fishery, lodge managers say it's not unusual for guests to "catch 50-plus coho a day." Experienced anglers may double that.

Michael Addiego built Bristol Bay Lodge on a piece of the river that regularly produces 50- to 100 silver hookups a day—per angler. The silver run that comes after the Nush King Push he describes as, "A secret that most fishermen are not privy to." To him, the action "surpasses other areas due to the extremely low numbers of anglers on this huge river. When the high numbers of silvers arrive on the tides from Bristol Bay the fishing is unbelievable!"

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the radar. Some are picked up incidentally by salmon anglers in the Portage Creek area, but the best trout fishing is upriver near tributaries like the Nuyakuk above the small community of Koliganek. The confluence is promising trout water, but if you really want to find bragging 'bows arrange a day or two float on the lower Nuyakuk down to the confluence.

On the main stem Nush, trout are scattered throughout but are predictably found off the mouths of clearwater creeks and tributary rivers. King Salmon River can be a tough place to get to, but if you get there you'll find big spotted 'bows, lots of grayling and some gorgeous char.

Don't be surprised to pick up grayling and dollys on trout expeditions at most stops along the Nushagak. There are a lot of each and after the salmon pass everything eats eggs and targets beads.

The low-fish on the Nushagak popularity ladder is northern pike. But they are there, in the lower river, and in the most un-salmon like cover. Northerns are toothy predators that eat salmon and trout fry and smolts and anybody who wants to thin out a few are welcomed just about everywhere. Ask where you might catch a northern and follow the pointing fingers. No secrets here.

Frank Flannery has his kings and chums in the box and wants to pick a fight with a northern pike. Caribou crossed above camp during the night and a pair of moose

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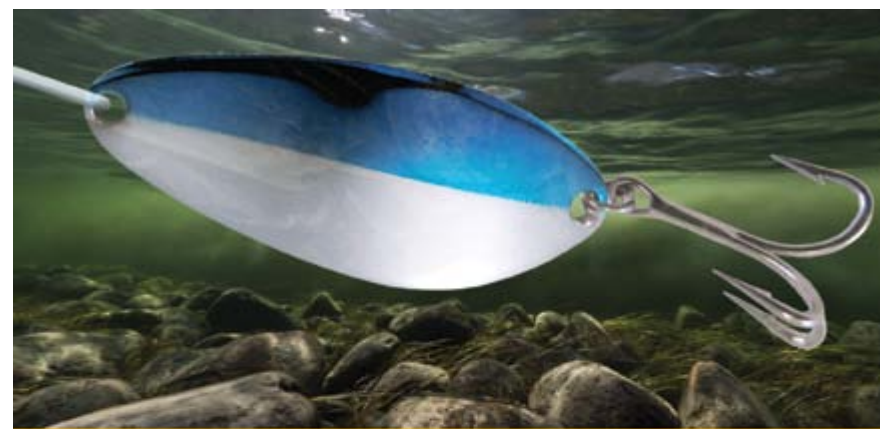
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Top: Brown bears are common on the river; show them respect and give them space. Bottom: Fiesty coho will strike many types of flies and lures, but can also get lockjaw too, so bring a range of options to help stimulate a bite.



watch us pass in the boat. We run the boat upriver, past Portage Creek to a slough, one of several with a stash of northern.

Hammer-handle-size pike rocket through the grass in front of us as we wade. We reach out and drop streamers and poppers into open holes, and chug surface lures across mats of floating brown grass. "Find a slough, you'll find northern pike," was the direction I'd been given, and it was

spot on.

A few days later below Portage Creek I beach the boat and explore a slough that cuts back into the willows. Moose, wolf and brown bear tracks in the sand along the edges. At the back of the slough is a jumble of beaver-cut willows, crumpled grass and a swarm of pike. Nothing too big, but fun on the 6-weight fly rod. Northern up to 40 inches are taken every year.

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Chum salmon are usually willing biters and put up a strong battle. Be careful when removing hooks as their teeth are exceptionally large and sharp, especially after they transform in preparation to spawn.

In an apron of clear water where the slough eases into the Nush, I pick up two spotted rainbow trout on five casts, two- and three pounders, switch to a black-ant pattern and add a couple of grayling.

Down river from the mouth of the slough a long, open gravel bar shallowly slants into the main river. The other evening a pair of Alberta dentists told me of dead-drifting big streamers here, gaudy reds and yellows mostly and catching a mix of chums and kings. I shuffle out on the bar until I'm hip deep and far enough into the river to double-haul a shooting head and garish Popsicle pattern into the channel and swing. A spey rod would be welcome but it's back in the tent and the 9-weight I'm using for main-river kings is doing the job.

Before I call it a day the Popsicle is eaten by a football of a rainbow, three chum salmon, two jack Chinook, and a pair of kings in the mid-teens before it disappears downriver along with a powerhouse of mystery muscle. I never see that king but it leaves me shaking.

Like the outfitter said, "On the Nushagak you never run out of something to catch." Or sometimes just hook. Come for the kings and stay for the rest, some might say the best. I don't remember the last time I had a 100 silver day, with unfished rainbows, grayling, dollys, chums and northern pike on the side. I could use another.

Terry W. Sheely is a contributing editor for Fish Alaska magazine and can be reached through his website at www.tnscommunications.net.

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The hottest current technique for icing Chinook and coho salmon up and down the west coast is undoubtedly *Pro-Trollin'*. The technique was employed first on the Columbia River in eastern Washington and Oregon several years ago. Its use has since migrated west down the Columbia all the way to the coast, and has spread to other bay systems such as Tillamook Bay, and indeed up and down the coast in saltwater, especially in areas where maturing salmon are gathering. It flat out works, and works very well. This technique isn't yet used much in Alaska's troll fisheries, but in areas like Southeast, Seward, Whittier, upper Cook Inlet, and Valdez, it should be. It is highly effective at attracting fish and stimulating them to bite—even maturing fish in terminal areas that have slowed or stopped feeding.

The key to this technique is the use of what many refer to as “360 flashers.” That's a little ambiguous, as all flashers rotate 360 degrees while being trolled. We're definitely not talking about dodgers, which are designed to wobble from side to side. Rather, we're talking about a specific type of flasher.

Flashers have been in use in salmon fisheries for decades. The particular flashers that make this technique work so well, though, are those that have the addition of a kicker fin, or “agitator fin.” This little fin near the stern end of the flasher grabs water and results in a consistent, aggressive rotation of the flasher—more so than flashers that don't have the fin. The effect of this aggressive, kicking rotation is that the bait or lure in

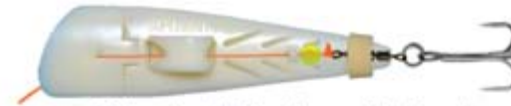


PRO-TROLLIN'

Story & photos by George Krumm

Above: A prototypical spinner rigged inline on mono with a pink and copper Dutch Fork size 4 blade proved to be this Chinook's undoing. Note this rig uses two single hooks instead of a treble. Though the sample size is small, this two-hook rig has so far delivered a 100% hook-to-land ratio. At right: This Chinook couldn't resist a Hot Tamale Original Super Bait.

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Standard Rigging with Bead:

Hook: (1) #2 Treble Hook

Bead: (1) #6 Round Bead

Swivel: (1) 3 Bead Chain Swivel

Run leader through: Leader Guide, Hook Tunnel, & Head Leader Hole & set swivel under the Band



Single Siwash Bead Chain Swivel:

Hook: (1) #2/0 Siwash Hook

Swivel: (1) 3 Bead Chain Swivel

Run leader through: Leader Guide, Hook Tunnel, & Head Leader Hole & set swivel under the Band



Double Mooching Rig with Beads:

Hook: (1 Bottom) #3/0 (1 Top) #4/0 Octopus Hook

Bead: (1 Top) #8 (3 Bottom) #5 Round Beads

Run leader through: Hook Tunnel & Head Leader Hole



Single Hook with Tube & Beads:

Hook: (1) #4/0 Octopus Hook

Bead: (2 Bottom) #6 (1 Top) #8 Round Beads

Swivel: #5 Barrel Swivel

Run leader through: #6 Bead, Tubing #6 & #8 Beads, Hook Tunnel, & Head Leader Hole



Double Mooching Rig in Tubes with Bead:

Hook: (1 Bottom) #3/0 (1 Top) #4/0 Octopus Hook

Bead: (1) #8 Round Beads

Run leader through: #6 Bead, Hook Tunnel, & Head Leader Hole



Mooching Rig with Treble & Octopus Hooks:

Hook: (1 Bottom) #3/0 Octopus Hook (1 Top) #2 Treble Hook

Run leader through: Hook Tunnel, & Head Leader Hole

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The author with a Chinook taken with a 360 flasher and Original Super Bait in Seahawk color.

tow gets jerked around significantly more than with a non-finned flasher. This added lure movement, combined with the flash and thump of the flasher, seems to be the trigger for fish to climb on like groupies on a tour bus.

There are several advantages to this technique:

- You can cover large amounts of water to locate fish.
- A variety of lures or baits can be used.
- Large attraction radius—fish will see your gear from a long way off and will approach the gear.
- It works extremely well for suspended- or scattered fish.
- Most significantly, it triggers bites where other techniques fail—lots of bites!

Pro-Trollin' generally requires using significant weight or downriggers to get the gear down. As such, fairly heavy, composite trolling rods are the best choice for this technique. One I'm particularly fond of for this technique is the Cousins Columbia Composite Series CC 955TG. This rod is nine-and-a-half feet long, rated for four- to 12-ounce weights, and lines from 15- to 40-pound-test. The length and action of this rod transmits the beat of the flasher well, and it's enough rod to handle Kenai-sized kings yet still make silvers fun. I will also use a Canadian-style mooching rod for this technique, with a single action reel. I like Islander's TR3.

For conventional reels, line-counter models are the way to go. I like the Okuma Coldwater Low Profile and the Daiwa Lexa 400 LC (though the 300 will work in a pinch, too). Spool these up with 50- or 65-pound braid and you have a rod/reel/line setup that not only works for Pro-Trollin', but also for Kenai backtrolling and other Chinook fisheries.

I mentioned that this technique requires significant weight to get the gear down. The flasher adds quite a bit of drag and I normally use cannonball leads of 10- to 20 ounces for this technique. I rig the weights on a slider, and one that works really well for this is the Shortbus Flashers Slide-n-Lock. Any slider will do, but this one has a built-in notch in the terminal end that catches the eye of your bead chain swivel, preventing line twist from traveling up your braided mainline. Trust me, with a normal slider your main line is going to get twisted. If the twist gets bad enough, your main line will be damaged

and weakened. It is possible to cut a small notch in a typical slider that will catch the bead chain eye and prevent line twist, but the convenience of the Slide-n-Lock, plus the additional color and flash it provides, makes it a great choice.

The next piece of gear needed for this technique is a flasher leash. This is the section of material that connects your flasher to your mainline. Mono is popular, and most fishermen are using heavy mono from 100- to 200-pound-test for their flasher leashes. The reason? It is more durable and makes undoing tangles much easier than smaller diameter mono. Most use crimps to make their flasher leashes, and most make them two feet long. A lot of experimentation has gone into figuring out the right length of leash. Two feet is what I use. When I build my flasher leashes, I put a six-bead chain swivel on one end, and a large duo-lock snap on the other.

This technique is built around the specific type of flashers we use. Three brands in particular work well: The Pro-Troll ProChip 11, the Shortbus Super Series 11-inch, and the Leo Flasher. All work for this technique, and all come in a variety of eye-catching colors. I've used plain, chrome Mylar finishes as well as fluorescent-, glow- and UV finishes, even lighted flashers, and caught fish with all of them.

The Pro-Troll ProChip 11 is the original flasher associated with this technique. The most popular Pro-Troll ProChip 11 flasher for this technique is the PC11-700 All Chrome. Regardless of brand, all chrome is usually a good place to start. If all chrome isn't doing it, one of the other colors might. Pro-Troll also makes a lighted version of their ProChip 11 and during low light conditions (early- or late in the day, or deep water), this blinking flasher has proven to work well.

The Shortbus Super series flashers are another solid option for Pro-Trollin'. They have similar action as the ProChip 11 and are available in Shortbus' wide variety of unique colors such as Sweet Abbey, Déjà Vu, and Green Pole Dancer aka Electric Pole Dancer.

A large Leo Flasher is also a great option. One of the advantages of the nearly round Leo is that it will rotate at slower speeds than the Super Series or ProChip 11 flashers. Another advantage to the Leo is that it has two attachment points at the front end of the flasher. Attached to the centered hole, the flasher spins on its axis like a triangle-shaped flasher. Attached to the offset hole, it rotates and kicks similar to the Super Series and ProChip 11 flashers. So, you essentially get two flashers in one with the Leo.



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Above: A selection of 3.5 spinners. Some days, the 3.5s outperform Super Baits; other days, it's the other way around. Below: A selection of Brad's Super Bait Cut Plugs with a highly effective, alternate rigging. FishEng Products leader boards are a great way to store rigged Super Baits. © Brad's Killer Fishing Gear



One of the major disadvantages with Pro-Trollin' is the number of fish seemingly well-hooked that get off. It's hard to pinpoint exactly why this happens, but it has something to do with the drag of the flasher, and the difficulty of keeping a straight, tight line to the fish. Something that helps reduce the drag of the flasher once a fish is hooked is the use of flasher-release mechanisms. What they do is allow the stern end of the flasher to disconnect and "flap in the breeze," so to speak, while you play a fish. This reduces the flasher's drag, minimizing the number of pulled hooks and broken leaders. There are now a couple commercially-made models on the market, including the Good Day Fishing Quick Release and the Simon 360

Breakaway Flasher System. Both are easy-to-use and effective. I highly encourage you to use a release mechanism of some sort; you will land more of the fish you hook.

For the leader, I generally use 40-pound mono or fluorocarbon. For mono, I like Izorline Platinum Leader in clear. For fluoro, I like Seaguar STS Fluorocarbon. The reasons for the heavy leader are threefold: 1) The fish don't seem to be leader shy when they respond to this presentation. 2) The heavy leader minimizes break-offs due to the often-violent strikes and the drag of the flasher. 3) Heavy leader material is durable and I don't have to change leaders as often as I would if using lighter leader material.

Leader length depends on the bait or lure

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Above: Small Chinook taken on a 3.5 spinner trolled behind a Pro-Troll ProChip 11 Flasher. Below: Spinners built on Dutch Fork Tackle's quick change clevis allow for changing the blades.



used, and the mood of the fish. Generally, I use leader lengths from 26- to 36 inches with lures, and four feet if using a herring bait. I'd use a shorter leader for the herring baits too, however, the aggressive action of the flasher sometimes tears the herring off the hooks. The shorter the leader, the more your bait or lure gets jerked around by the flasher. I tend to use short leaders of less than 30 inches with small lures like size 3.5 spinners, Brad's Kokanee Cut Plugs and Mini Cut Plugs, and progressively longer leaders (around 36 inches) with larger lures such as Brad's Cut Plugs and Original

Super Baits. These are guidelines. Feel free to experiment.

Finally, we're at the end of the line, pun intended. What you put on the end of the rig matters. For this technique, you don't want to use too large a lure as the flasher will not be able to yank it around in the water. Remember, the key to the success of Pro-Trollin' is the action the flasher imparts to the lure.

Brad's Original Super Bait was probably the first lure to be used for this technique. Its slim profile allows it to get moved by the flasher easily, and its body cavity can

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Line counter reels, such as the Okuma Coldwater Low Profile Line counter and the Daiwa Lexa 300 LC, are excellent reels for Pro-Trollin'.



flasher. Note that there are a large number of ways to rig hooks for Super Baits. See Brad's website for suggestions.

Another great lure to use behind 360 flashers is a spinner. I'm not talking about the big, size 6- and 7 models. I'm talking about little spinners—nothing more than a hook, short section of tubing and a couple beads, plus a small blade. A size 3.5 blade is most popular. It's small and the flasher

is easily able to jerk it around, creating the action that produces bites. Commercially made versions of 3.5 spinners are made by a variety of companies. I generally make my own. Most are made with treble hooks, but I did some experimenting last year that deviates from the norm. I rigged my spinners without wire on the monofilament leader. I ditched the treble hook, instead tying two octopus hooks (size 2/0- and 1/0)

in tandem about an inch apart. I slid a one-inch length of tubing onto the leader, then two- or three 6mm beads. I then attached a clevis from Dutch Fork Tackle that allows me to change blades without building a new spinner, and added a plastic Dutch fork blade to it. The reason for making the spinner this way was to avoid wire spinners getting destroyed by the fish, and to try to increase the hook-to-land ratio. Though my sample size was small, every fish that bit this lure wound up in the boat. Real promise, indeed. At times, spinners out-fish Super Baits. Sometimes it's the other way around.

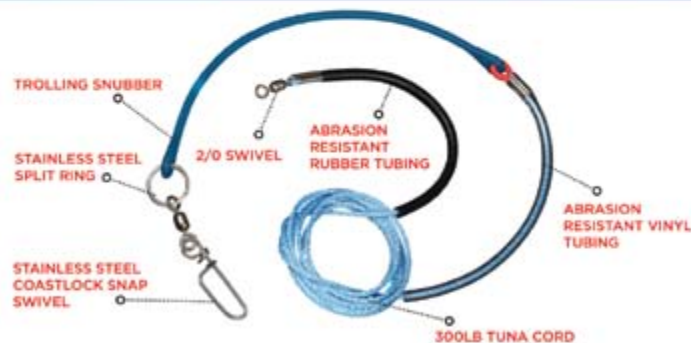
Although people don't do it often, you can also fish herring or anchovies behind a 360 flasher. If you're fishing whole or plug-cut, it's helpful to lengthen the leader to about four feet. This results in a little less action on the bait but keeps it from getting ripped off the hooks by the action of the flasher. Though this can be incredibly effective, in my experience a Super Bait or spinner works as well or better, and saves a fair amount of money over the season from not buying herring at \$6.00 a dozen.

From top to bottom, here's how I put the rig together. First, thread a bead or Gum Pucky to your main line, then slide on the slider you plan to use. As mentioned previously, the Shortbus Slide-n-Lock



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378
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be filled with a variety of bite-inducing fillings. Perhaps the simplest is just tuna packed in oil. The cheaper the better, as you want not only the oil leaching out, but small particles of tuna too. Scents can be added to the tuna mixture. I sometimes add Pro-Cure's Powdered Krill, Bloody Tuna, anise oil and/or Salmon Slammer to my mixture. I've also added sodium sulfite, Slamola and Monster Bite to it and at times they have proven effective. Pro-Cure worked with Cody Herman of *Day One Outdoors* to make a product just for stuffing into Super Baits called Fish Nip. In a pinch, you can also mince up herring or anchovy and stuff it in the lure. The key is to fill the lure, but not to overfill it. If overfilled, you might break the lure while trying to close it, plus if the filling is packed too tight, particles and oils don't leach out of the lure as well. A stuffed Super Bait easily fishes for 45 minutes before it has to be reloaded.

Brad's Super Bait Cut Plug series is also a great lure to use Pro-Trollin'. It has a wider profile, and is made in three different sizes. All can be effective. Bear in mind that although the Kokanee and Mini Super Baits are small, Chinook and coho will both whack 'em when fished behind a 360

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Left: All things chrome: A platinum Chinook, chrome Pro-Troll ProChip 11 and a Black Jack Mini Cut Plug. Right: These 360 flashers are the Shortbus Super Series, notable for their unique Shortbus colors.

is a great choice as it prevents line twist. Attach a cannonball weight of 10- to 20 ounces to the slider. Next, tie on a six-bead chain swivel to your main line with your knot of choice. Snap the duo lock end of your flasher leash to the bead chain swivel. To the other end of the flasher leash, you will add your flasher. Be sure to attach the flasher release mechanism to the flasher if using a Pro-Troll ProChip or Shortbus Super Series per the instructions on the package. If using a Leo flasher, no release mechanism is used. To the aft end of the flasher, attach your leader/lure. If using a Super Bait, stuff it with whatever you plan to use for stuffing.

To fish the rig, put the motor in forward and simply lower the gear in the water as follows: Lure first, then flasher, then weight. This will make handling all that gear a little easier and prevent you from tangling it up. Wind line until the bead or Gum Pucky is at the rod tip. Zero out your line counter, then slowly lower your gear to the desired fishing depth. Adjust boat speed so that the rod is thumping about once per second. It's just like any other trolling after that.

Strikes while Pro-Trollin' can best be described as violent. Either this rig really makes them want to crush the lure, or the lure is moving so much that the fish has to aggressively charge it to capture it—whatever the case there will be no doubt when a fish strikes.

Landing fish with 360 flashers has been the most frustrating part of using the system. On a good day, we might land 70% of the fish that bite. On a really bad day, you might go two for 10. The flasher release mechanisms help, but we still lose a lot of fish using this technique. I've heard some say to play the fish really aggressively with a fairly tight drag to get them to the boat quick. Others say using lighter drag or a softer rod helps. I've tried everything and still lose a fair number of fish with this method. However, the number of bites you get in a day seems to make up for it.

Pro-Trollin' is a sure-fire way to get more bites while trolling for salmon. Whatever the reasoning, salmon respond aggressively and frequently to this technique. Lower this down in the vicinity of fish and prepare to load the fish box.

George Krumm is the Editor for Fish Alaska and Hunt Alaska magazines. He can be reached at george@fishalaskamagazine.com.

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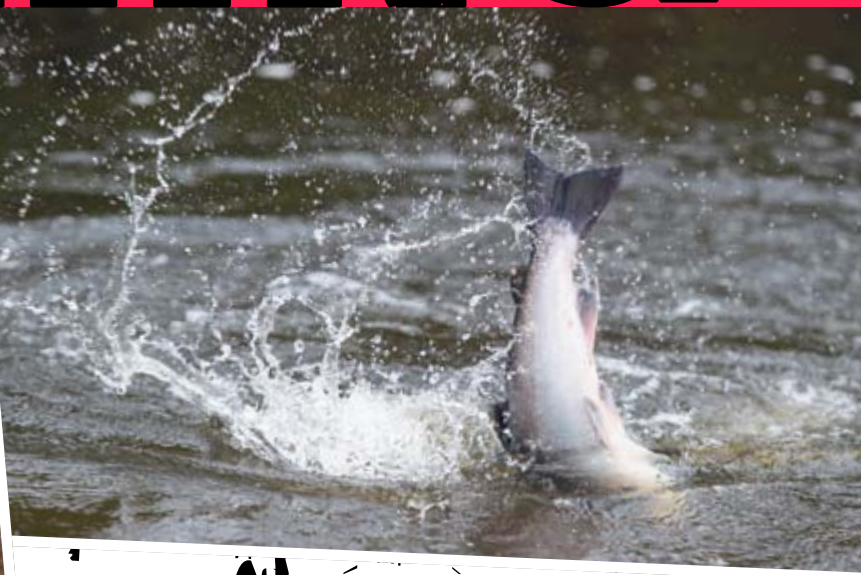
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COHO FISHING

THE ALASKAN DREAM

It's early September and I find myself standing in a crystal-clear river, water gently flowing against my waders. I don't hear a thing as I am one with nature. Every so often an eagle screeches. My eyes and ears are wary of the mighty grizzly. As I look around I can't believe how beautiful and peaceful it is. With the assistance of my polarized lenses, I see dozens of chrome-bright coho lined up along the far bank. I gently toss my lure just above them and it plops into the water. All of a sudden, the water erupts like a volcano as I've set the hook by pure instinct into a nice, fat silver salmon. The reel screams as it is peeling line out while racing downstream. Then, trying to outsmart me, the fish rockets upriver as I frantically reel as fast as I can to catch up

Top Left: The author plays another feisty coho. © Steve Turner. Top Right: A jig caused this coho to strike. © Jake Reardon Bottom Left: In much of Alaska, anglers share the waterways with bears. © Steve Turner Bottom right: Coho are often airborne and that's part of the thrill. © Steve Turner



This fine buck is destined for the table. © Steve Turner

STORY BY TERRY J WIEST

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with it. Several runs and acrobatic leaps later I bring the fish to hand. I gently glide the barbless hook from its snout and after it catches its breath, I release the fish. The brute pulls off a nice tail slap on the water, which I take as a "high five" for a well-fought battle.

Wow, I'm hoping I don't wake up anytime soon from this fantastic dream. But is it a dream? For anglers seeking the true Alaskan experience it can be reality. Coho fishing is, to me, the most exhilarating, head-rushing adventure one can have. The incredible number of fish, the size, the aggressiveness and the pure beauty of these fish is unrivaled by anything, except Alaska. While there's plenty of action for kings and coho in the salt, and again kings, sockeye and pinks in the rivers, nothing beats silver salmon fishing in one of the many of Alaskan rivers and streams they inhabit.

Prior to jetting up the rivers and streams, of course, there are fish to be caught out in the salt. Being from Washington we are used to trolling for coho; most mooching would be for targeting Chinook. For some reason many of those in Alaska love to mooch for both species. And why the heck not when you have as many fish running loose in the local waters as they do. Generally speaking, once you locate



Coho often school up in soft water locations, much to the delight of anglers across Alaska. © Steve Turner

the fish, mooching is an extremely effective way at getting into some serious action. Many will use whole herring to mooch, but I prefer cut plug as they are faster to rig up and a serious, drill-bit-looking spin can be achieved almost every time. If it doesn't spin tight, don't fish it! Re-position the hooks first, if that doesn't work remove the hooks and cut the herring at a different angle. If that doesn't work use it for chum and rig another bait.

Using a four- to six-ounce weight, I'll start stripping out line while counting the number of pulls. Many times on the way down you'll swear you hit bottom while being far from it. This is a telltale sign that a fish has picked up your bait and has taken the pressure off the weight by swimming upwards. This is when you want to reel like mad to catch up to the fish before it shakes the hook. When the line tightens, hold on, because they generally go berserk once they

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Jigs, either twitched or floated, often produce bites when fished to coho salmon. © Jake Reardon

realize they're hooked.

If a fish doesn't pick it up, I try and stop about every 10 pulls and gently lift up the rod and then let it drop so the herring spins its way down. After a few times of this go another 10 pulls. Repeat this until you feel you've gone deep enough. When the water is 120 feet or less, I keep dropping until I hit the bottom. At this time I'll reel up towards the top and repeat.

The reasoning behind counting the pulls when going down is simple; you want to know where the fish are and at what depth they are on the bite. Once I get a fish I'll try and stick within 10 pulls above and below the productive level. Another alternative to counting pulls is to use a line-counter style reel.

For those that haven't mooched before, you're in for a treat. To feel the fish mouth the bait before sucking it in and doubling your rod over, as Chinook will often do, is incredibly rewarding. Just as exciting is when a coho hits the bait at a dead run and almost yanks the rod from your hands. And here's a tip for you: Until the rod is doubled over, do not set the hook. It's amazing that even with super sticky-sharp hooks, if you set the hook too quickly it will actually pull the bait out of the fish's mouth without grabbing some jaw.

For gear, I don't think you can beat the G.Loomis 1174-C for mooching. It's my favorite saltwater stick that I also use for my downrigger rod. I use a Tekota 500 reel loaded with 30-pound PowerPro line in moss green. For mooching, braided line gives you a huge advantage as you'll feel even the slightest bump from a curious fish. Anytime you feel a fish and they don't take it, feed them line. Getting that bait spinning down will usually draw a strike.

As you can imagine, with all the spinning of the bait and continuously going up and down through the water column, getting line twist is quite common. I use Sampo ball-bearing swivels in addition to Sampo bead chains which will work wonders in keeping your line tangle-free.

Barbless Owner Cutting Point hooks in 5/0 on both bottom and top are my go-to hooks for Alaska. A common herring size you'll find is blue label and these will fit perfectly. 4/0 hooks are a better choice for the slightly smaller, green-label herring. You never know when you might scrap with a trophy-sized salmon and if your hook doesn't penetrate you may lose the opportunity to hang a fish (replica) on the wall.

Now, just because most in Alaska will mooch, don't discount trolling. Trolling, in my opinion, is still the way to go unless you can find the fish and sit on them. Always troll with the tide. The

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currents are much stronger in Alaska than most are used to so trying to go against the tide will leave you going backwards which is counterproductive. If trolling, a downrigger is a must unless you are fishing specifically for coho, in which case you can get away with just lead since you'll often want to be in the top 30 feet of the water column anyway.

Trolling a flasher and hootchie setup, or flasher and spoon works killer. Don't be afraid to step up the speed to as much as 2.5 knots. I'm usually somewhere between 2- and 2.5. A green splatter back, or any other flasher that has green, will work. Use a 60-pound leader, which increases the hootchie action from the flasher whipping around. A leader length of 40- to 42 inches from the knot to the bottom hook works best. If you have herring with you, a little herring teaser can also increase your odds. When rigging the hootchies, put three to five beads up into the head of the lure, followed by two 5/0 Owner Cutting Point Hooks one inch apart and facing opposite directions. This hook setup is so deadly many times you'll have a fish hooked in both jaws . . . and they don't swim away after that.

If using a hootchie, I like the green splatter back, army truck, or purple haze. For spoons, try the Silver Horde Kingfisher



This prime coho ate a Wicked Lure. © Steve Turner

Lite in Cookies 'n Cream, Irish Cream or the "Jambo Special."

Finally, after a couple months of fishing the salt, the fish begin to head up the rivers and streams to their spawning grounds. Not that fishing in the salt isn't a blast, but fishing in the rivers is where it's at. I love it!

Many anglers heading to Alaska will seek out king salmon. Heck, I did the same many times and have had great success. There are two instances that rival that of coho fishing. One, in fact, is probably my all-time favorite trip up north. In the year 2000, my Dad and I fished the world-famous Kenai River for kings—a trip of a lifetime that I will always cherish. While I

was able to land 40- and 45-pound salmon in the two days on the river, my Dad landed a twin to my 45-pound hen, and then, a true beast: a 70-pound Kenai River king. Dad passed away the next year, but I have the entire hour and 15 minutes of the best fight I've ever seen from a fish on tape.

The second king salmon trip that probably will never be topped is when I and two fishing buddies brought 121 salmon to hand in eight hours of fishing, a Jake's Nushagak Salmon Camp record that I cannot see ever falling.

I'm not saying a trip for king salmon to Alaska is not the way to go; I'd do it again in a second. For those looking for a legendary



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pig, or multiple 30-pound kings, Alaska is the place, and even though the action is far superior than anywhere else on earth, there will be some slow times where you're waiting for a bite. What I'm trying to say is if you're looking for sheer numbers, the thought of hooking wild fish on repeated casts over and over, then coho are the way to go.

If you have the luxury of a boat on the rivers, then the eggs have it. Big 'ol golf-ball-size clusters are the staple of the Alaskan king salmon fishery. Back bouncing with a large Spin-N-Glo, or back trolling with an inline spinner and eggs, either way you can't go wrong. Pulling plugs is another option with the only caveat to make sure the plug is a winner; one that has already caught multiple fish. You don't want to go to Alaska and experiment with new plugs.

From the bank, get those eggs and Spin-N-Glos out and lob them above the hole and let them bounce through. By casting into a hole you've already missed the top end.

My suggestion for kings is to hire a qualified guide, so I won't go into the details of fishing for these incredible fish. These are the guys and gals that spend their life on the rivers and know how to catch them for their clients. I'd put my faith in them for getting you on that fish of

a lifetime.

On to coho, the ultimate Alaskan fishing experience.

Literally tens of thousands of coho start lining the banks of the rivers from July through October. I've found that the best time in general would be the first couple weeks in September, but of course there are exceptions so do your research on the river(s) you plan to fish before finalizing a trip.

From well-known rivers like the Kenai, Situk and the Nushagak to gems like the Tsiu, Italio and Kanektok, these rivers are world-class, bar-none, and fished correctly the words lock-jaw are never uttered.

The Blue Fox Pixie spoon is a favorite in most of Alaska. Why fix something that works! To fish it properly, cast the Pixie out slightly upstream and let it flutter down, occasionally hitting bottom. Often, it's not long before you have a limit of fish. The last few years, orange or blue seems to be the hot Pixie but if presented correctly, in my opinion, color doesn't matter a whole lot. Just make sure it flutters and then tumbles.

Spinners come in an endless variety and they all seem to work when following a few simple rules. First, take that treble off and put on a good-quality siwash or sickle hook. Three points are not better than one. Second, cast slightly upstream and as the

spinner sinks give it a quick little jerk to get the blade spinning. Third, only retrieve fast enough that the blade rotates and the spinner keeps off the bottom. The Blue Fox Vibrax, Mepps Aglia, and Kodiak Custom spinners are good options.

Brighter colors are generally used for coho, but I've also done very well on blacks and purples, too.

For spoons and spinners, the setup is quite simple: a fast-action, nine-foot rod, with a high-quality reel loaded with 30-pound PowerPro. The reel is key as these fish will burn up an inferior drag system. Casting or spinning, my money is with Shimano, especially because of the drag systems they use.

Wicked Lures are another killer option. Although technically a spinner, it's set up a little differently. The directions are on their website and the package. With this lure, a little weight is needed and also a leader. Following the same principles as the spinners above, the addition of a squid skirt can make a huge difference, especially in off-colored water.

Saving the best for last, jigs! Twitchin' jigs!

If I had no other option to fish for coho I'd still be happy because I would be thrilled to twitch for coho all day, every day. Not as popular in Alaska as in Washington and



Jigs turn on the bite with silvers.
© Steve Turner

Oregon, it's quickly becoming a mainstay as the locals and guides have been utilizing this method more and more after seeing its deadly effectiveness.

In shallow, clear water I'll use a 3/8-ounce jig. In deeper or off-colored water, I'll bump it up to a 1/2-ounce jig. A G.Loomis twitchin' rod and Shimano Stradic 2500 loaded with 30-pound PowerPro are my tools of choice for this amazingly simple but deadly technique.

Look for slowly-moving or frog water, even better if it has some structure, and

cast directly where you think the fish are. If there is a high bank, it doesn't hurt to hit the bank and let the lure drop in. Let the jig drop down towards the bottom and then using your wrist only, twitch the rod tip up from 10 o'clock to 12 o'clock. Drop quickly back to 10 o'clock and reel approximately one crank to reel in the slack. Continue this until you are out of the fish. Most often the fish will hit as the jig is falling, so let it fall. You'll hook the fish on the next twitch.

My absolute all-time favorite jig for

fishing coho is what I call the Creepy Nightmare. It's an Aerojig Twitching Jig in the Nightmare pattern, but what makes it creepy is the addition of rubber legs. Also check out the offerings by BnR Tackle.

Don't be afraid to cast near or at wood. Coho love wood. Taking those chances when casting will pay off in extra fish when your buddies aren't hooking up. The PowerPro helps with this as it will generally straighten the hook instead of breaking off if you get snagged. Make sure your pliers are handy to bend the hook back to its normal shape. I also use barbless hooks since I release 95% of the fish I catch.

Double- and triple hook-ups can come if you're fishing with friends. Multiple casts in a row can result in silver hookups in Alaska. The thought of hooking another coho never gets old but your arms will feel it the next day, that is, until you're up fishing again.

You need to fish for coho in Alaska. It's a must for the bucket list. For those who haven't experienced this incredible phenomenon, it will remain only a dream until you make the commitment to go do it.

Terry J Wiest is an award-winning outdoor writer and photographer with over 42 years of fishing experience.

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[RECIPE]
Salmon Spoon-Meat Crudo Tacos
 Recipe by Executive Chef Brie Lauren, Bridge Seafood



Crudo Ingredients:
 10 oz spooned raw salmon meat from ribs and spine of carcass (you can include minced salmon belly too)
 1 each juice of lemon with zest
 2 tbsp minced red onion or shallot
 2 tbsp minced flat leaf Italian parsley
 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
 2 tbsp capers drained and minced
 2 tbsp olive oil
 1 tsp kosher salt
 1 tsp cracked black pepper
 2 each peeled and minced garlic cloves

Mix all items together and keep chilled until ready to serve.

Shells:
 Taco shells can be made of a variety of items. Fried wontons, taco wraps, lettuce leaves or

even thinly-sliced root vegetables like turnips for a tart, radish-like crunch are all good choices.

Sauce and Cucumber Garnish:
 1/2 cup mirin or rice wine vinegar
 1 tbsp sugar
 1 tbsp fresh dill weed minced
 1/4 each cucumber sliced as thin as possible
 1 tsp sambal (optional)

Mix the vinegar and sugar in a small bowl. Allow to settle and completely mix for about five minutes. Place thinly sliced cucumbers in sauce. Let sauce marinate the cucumbers for at least 30 minutes. Keep this in the fridge. Assemble the tacos by spooning a small amount of crudo into your shell of choice. Top with a few folded cucumber sliced and drizzle with a little sauce. Enjoy!

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[FINAL DRIFT]

Guest

Story by Kelly Pinnell

Sometimes life is just too good. Sometimes you get asked to go to one of Alaska's premier lodges on your vendor's dime. This was one of those times. I got the call last minute because they had a cancellation and I was on their list. My boss at the time was just as insane for fishing as I am and gladly gave me the days off. I only had a few hours to get ready for the trip, so I quickly loaded my fishing gear into a large duffle bag and cleared my schedule for the next four days.

I arrived at the airport and met a few of the other travelers heading out to the lodge. We were all guests of the company that had invited me and all completely out of our minds with the fishing possibilities that awaited us. I knew things were going to be good when one of our hosts started passing refreshments from the cooler as soon as the plane leveled off.

The flight in was a good start to the level of excitement we were about to experience. We circled around the gravel runway and into the strong headwinds at an angle almost perpendicular to the ground. As I was calculating the distance between the ground and the lowest wingtip, the pilot snapped the DC-9 to level and dropped us on the runway with a precision that both startled and impressed me.

We got off the plane and mingled with the outbound guests while the ground crew was busy unloading and reloading for the return trip to Anchorage. The reports were good. King fishing was hot on several of the streams the lodge targets. The sockeye salmon were streaming into Lake Iliamna by the tens of thousands, passing the lodge on their way. And, best of all, trout fishing was picking up nicely.

If I had more space, I'd tell you about the morning we caught those twenty-five-plus-inch rainbows while the guides were inflating the rafts. Then I'd say something about the hordes of thirty-inch lake trout we started catching thirty minutes later when the guides put us at the outlet of the lake we had landed on. I might even mention that we picked up a dozen or so twenty-plus inch rainbows in the mix of lake trout. I should also mention the swarms of grayling and smaller 'bows we caught while drifting the river to our pick-up point later that day.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the evening I went out with one of the guides to dry fly fish for big grayling on the Kvichak. The guide taught me a new trick and I caught fish until I couldn't cast anymore. I should say something about the evening fishing for sockeye or the food, the food, and did I mention the food?

But what I really want to tell you is about the day we were the guinea pigs for the lodge on a new trip they were introducing. I had fished the lower section of this river on a previous trip and fell head over heels in love with it. The crazy mix of colored rocks, the surrounding terrain, and the beautiful rainbows all felt like home the minute I saw them. We were going to be the first guests to take the "new" trip on the upper section for this lodge. I was selected to go because I was more interested in trout than salmon and I was the type that wouldn't give a rat's bottom if things went a little wonky.

We loaded into the Beaver early and set out across Lake Iliamna and toward adventure. And, it was an adventure. Almost immediately, we had to get out of the raft to portage around a small, sloping waterfall. The guides roped the rafts and dropped them over. They had obviously done this before and had a well thought-out and safe process. This routine was repeated twenty minutes later when we hit the second small waterfall. The third set of falls was more serious, ending in a thirty-foot drop into a huge pool below. We unloaded the raft, shouldered our share, and hiked around the falls to the bottom. It wasn't long before we saw the rafts come over the falls and work their way near us. The guide had a weighted buoy on a rope which he used to catch the raft and pull it to shore. We hadn't even wetted a line and I was having the time of my life.

We started to fish once the rafts were collected and re-populated. The guide gave me a nod and rowed us out into the middle of the pool. I immediately hooked into a huge rainbow that bent my eight-weight rod to its limit. I lost the fish just as we got the raft to shore. It was the biggest fish of the trip, basically handed to me by the guide, and I blew it.

The rest of the day brought 'bow after 'bow out of this wild, gin-clear river. The guides were great about alerting me to top-water opportunities when they arose. That was an excellent bonus to an already mind-blowing day. I caught more fish that day than I can remember, but I do distinctly remember the last fish. It was a twenty-two-inch beauty that fought like a badger until the end. I put up a tougher fight when I had to leave; the claw marks on the dock are mine.

Author Kelly Pinnell is a long-time Alaskan and fly fisherman. His books include The Dolly Made Me Do It and The ABC's of Reading Alaska's Small Rivers and Streams. He enjoys standing in water and waving sticks at fish.

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