



Fishing the Russian River

The Russian River

The Russian River is a popular tributary that drains into the Kenai River. The Russian River is located 110 miles south of Anchorage, which is about a 2-3 hour drive through some of Alaska's most spectacular roadside scenery. The river flows 12 miles from Upper Russian Lake, through Lower Russian Lake, and empties into the upper Kenai River at River Mile 74 (as measured from Cook Inlet).



With its clear waters the Russian River is one of the most popular fishing destinations in Southcentral Alaska. Depending on the season, anglers who fish the waters of the Russian River will find sockeye, coho, and the occasional pink salmon, and resident fish species such as rainbow trout and Dolly Varden.

Most fishing takes place in the lower three miles of the Russian River and in the Kenai River from its confluence



with the Russian River downstream about one mile. Certain tackle restrictions, opening dates, and open and closed areas apply, so be sure to read the Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulation Summary booklet before going fishing.

For additional information on the Russian River fisheries, please visit the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) webpage at www.adfg.alaska.gov. During the summer ADF&G posts weekly in-season fishing reports online. Anglers can find these under the Fishing Reports tab under the Fishing Information tab. ADF&G staff records these in-season fishing reports on the Soldotna sport fishing hotline at (907) 262-2737. Anglers can also subscribe to receive the notifications via their email. Updates are also posted on the ADF&G - Sport Fishing Southcentral Alaska Facebook page. If you have any questions, please contact the Soldotna ADF&G office at (907) 262-9368.

Fishery Management

The Russian River fisheries are managed conservatively for sustainability by the Division of Sport Fish (DSF) through management plans approved by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Enforcement of fishing regulations is primarily the responsibility of the Alaska Wildlife Troopers. The ADF&G Soldotna office is the management office for this area. To help with management, DSF maintains a





fish weir at the outlet of Lower Russian Lake, about 78 miles from the mouth of the Kenai River. Weir counts, that are updated daily during the summer are available on the ADF&G website under Fish Counts tabs.

Fishing pressure made on Russian River fisheries are sometimes greater than the resource can provide. At other times, more fish arrive than were expected. At such times, ADF&G may either close or liberalize all or part of the fisheries by advisory announcements and emergency orders on the ADF&G website at www.adfg.alaska.gov. During closed periods, the stocks are closely monitored by ADF&G staff. As soon as escapement goals can be assured, the fishery may reopen. When more fish arrive than were expected, and after escapement goals are met, then the fishery may be liberalized by increasing the bag and possession limits or season.



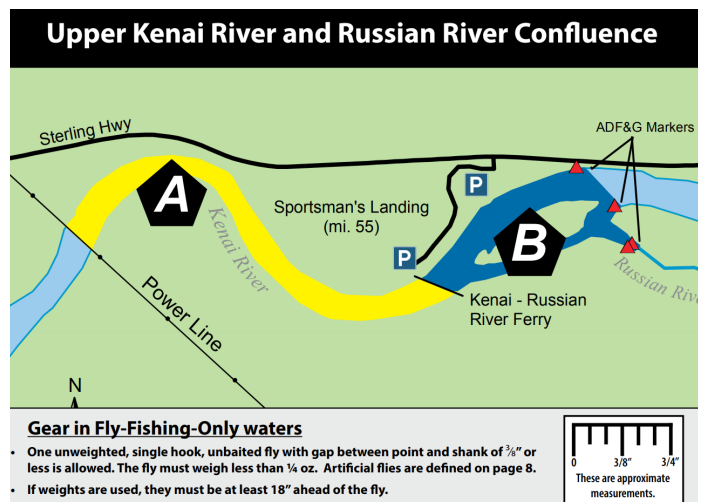
ADF&G may issue an advisory announcement and emergency order to open, liberalize, close, or restrict any fishery at any time due to biological needs. In the event an advisory announcement and emergency order is issued, ADF&G attempts to release the documents a minimum of 24 to 48 hours before it becomes effective. Anglers can find advisory announcements and emergency orders on the ADF&G website under the Sport Fishing tab. Select the Fishing Information link and then the Emergency Orders and News Releases tab. Once there, anglers can select the region and management area they intend to fish.



Sockeye Salmon

Fishery Management

Russian River sockeye or red salmon use the mainstem river as well as its tributary streams to spawn. Each female salmon lays between 3,000 to 4,500 eggs, which hatch in late winter. The fry emerge from the gravel in early spring and immediately enter the Upper Russian Lake. Most early-run Russian River sockeye salmon spend two years in the Upper Russian Lake and three years at sea



before returning in their sixth year of life to spawn and die. The average adult early-run salmon weighs about six pounds, but a few grow to about ten pounds. Most late-run salmon return to the Russian River in their fifth year of life, after spending two years in freshwater and two years in saltwater. They are a little smaller, since they have one less year of ocean growth than early-run fish.



Run Timing

The early-run usually arrives by June 15, with the historic midpoint of the run occurring on June 27. Most of the early-run fish have completed their migration by mid-July, although in some years the fish are late, or hold in the Kenai River. The early-run averages about 41,000 fish, and the Russian River Sockeye Salmon Management Plan sets the early-run escapement range at 22,000 to 42,000 sockeye salmon past the weir. Anglers generally harvest about one-half of this run.

The second run usually arrives in mid-July and is the larger of the two runs, averaging around 72,000 fish. The management plan sets the late-run escapement range at 44,000 to 85,000. About 21,000 of these fish are harvested by anglers; however, many more are harvested by lower river anglers, personal use, and commercial fisheries. Although thousands of fish return each year to the Russian River, there may be considerably more or fewer fish due to egg survival during winter months, rearing conditions at Upper Russian Lake, ocean survival, and the size of the commercial sockeye harvest in Cook Inlet.



Fishing for Sockeye Salmon

For most of the year, the Russian River is a “fly-fishing-only” area. A fly rod is not required, anglers may use spinning or baitcasting rods, but the hook must be a fly. Most Kenai River anglers use a bucktail streamer fly, called the ‘Russian River Coho’ fly. Other anglers say that more sparsely-dressed flies, such as the Green Lantern, Comet, or any shrimp pattern outperform streamers. Many successful sockeye salmon patterns have enough hackle to aggravate the fish into biting.

Perhaps more critical than the composition of the fly is the amount of weight used. Enough weight must be used so that the fly bounces very near the bottom. There are special restrictions that apply to the placement of the weight, so make sure you read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet for the weight placement restrictions.



Most anglers cast their fly 10 to 15 feet upstream into the current at about a 45-degree angle, and allow the fly to dead drift with the current until reaching its furthest downstream point. It is then retrieved and the procedure repeated. Sockeye salmon travel very close to shore, and inexperienced anglers often wade or cast too far out, not realizing the fish are probably passing behind them.



Coho Salmon

Coho or silver salmon arrive at the confluence of the Kenai and Russian rivers by late July or early August. By the second week of September, the bulk of the run has passed through the weir. Coho salmon runs are

highly variable. Some years the weir may count over 9,000 coho salmon and other years only 2,000 fish. Often in years of high water, coho salmon will utilize impoundments created by beaver dams as spawning grounds. High water often means good coho salmon fishing.

Many anglers use a single-hook spoon such as a Pixee or a small Mepps spinner. Fly anglers have success using any streamer pattern tied with a bit of flash. Pinks, purples, and oranges are very popular colors.

Many waters have special regulations for retention and release of coho salmon. Please carefully read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet for the waters you plan to fish.



Rainbow Trout

“Shoulder season” rainbow trout fishing is usually a surprisingly quiet experience for this normally crowded area. Early spring Russian River trout fishing can be excellent, before the trout spawning season closure. Late fall trout fishing is also excellent, after the sockeye salmon anglers have left for the season.

The trout range in size from 12 inches to 30 inches. It takes a wily angler who can tempt one of these beauties to take a fly. Conservative tackle, size, and season restrictions apply; please read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet carefully before fishing for rainbow trout in the Russian River.



Dolly Varden

Dolly Varden are year-round residents of the Russian River system. They are often caught near the fish cleaning tables on small egg patterns. Conservative tackle, size, and season restrictions apply; please read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet before you go fishing.

Other Fish Species

The Russian River, as well as, the Upper Kenai River is closed to fishing for Chinook salmon, including catch-and-release. Occasionally, especially on even-numbered years, anglers may catch pink salmon, but most are late into their spawning phase, and anglers choose to release them.



Russian River Fishing Etiquette

- In crowded conditions, land your fish quickly. Try not to allow your line to cross others'. Playing your fish across others' lines is rude, and interrupts fishing for everyone.
- Try to cast in unison with those around you.
- Don't walk immediately behind those who are trying to cast.
- Once you've kept your bag limit, consider switching to trout or Dolly Varden fishing on another part of the river. If consideration is shown to other anglers waiting for their chance, they will be considerate of you when you are waiting for a spot to open up.
- Don't leave a messy fishing site. Pack out what you've packed in, including used fishing line.
- To reduce the chance of attracting bears, clean your fish at home, or cut your fish carcasses into small pieces, and be sure the pieces are deposited into deep, fast-moving water, away from the shoreline.
- For everyone's health and to maintain the sanitation of the area, do not use the area as your bathroom. Restroom facilities are provided.

Healthy Bank Stewardship

The banks of the river are crucial to the long-term health of the Russian River fisheries. Trampled banks are a certain way to reduce the fish population.

Most people understand healthy river systems are important for strong and healthy salmon populations. However, it is important to ensure that clean, healthy rivers don't stop at the water's edge. In fact, protecting and managing healthy streambanks and adjacent riparian areas are critical components to the overall health of a river system.

Vegetation along streambanks helps keep river water clean by filtering out sediment and pollutants from surface and storm runoff, reduces peak flows during rain and runoff events, slows flood waters, stabilizes streambanks from excessive erosion, and helps moderate stream temperatures. Vegetated streambanks also provide food and nutrients to fish and other aquatic organisms, as well as, provide critical habitat for rearing juvenile salmon. Any alteration to the streambank area reduces its ability to carry out these important functions, this includes repeat trampling of the vegetation while trying to get to your favorite fishing spot. While out on the river, please be respectful and follow any requirements landowners may have. By following the simple steps listed below, you can help maintain important habitat for salmon and be good stewards of the land.

- Use established trails to reach the river.
- Use established entry and exit points to get in and out of the river.
- Respect and abide by signs that close areas to fishing from the bank.
- Stand in the river to fish and don't place your pack or other gear on the vegetation.
- Pack out what you pack in, including discarded fishing line and tackle.
- Use the restroom in the provided facilities.

Services & Campgrounds

There are many services and campgrounds in the immediate Russian River area, and four additional public campgrounds within a 20-mile radius. The closest community is Cooper Landing, which provides emergency medical services, lodges, hotels, motels, laundromats, charter services, grocery stores, gas stations, fish processors, and tackle shops.

Many anglers stay at the U.S. Forest Service's Russian River campground which is located at Mile 52.5 of the Sterling

Highway. There are 83 fee-based campsites, several fee-based day-use parking areas, public restroom facilities, picnic shelters, and summer interpretive programs. The campground and day-use parking fill quickly, so keep in mind some alternatives.

At Mile 55 of the Sterling Highway, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge manages Sportsman's Landing, with fee-based boat launching, fee-based parking for 180 vehicles, public restroom facilities, and a privately-operated foot-traffic-only ferry that carries anglers across the Kenai River. This parking area fills quickly.

Additional public campgrounds include the U.S. Forest Service's Quartz Creek campground which is located at Mile 45 of the Sterling Highway and has 45 campsites and Cooper Creek campground which is located at Mile 50.7 of the Sterling Highway and has 26 campsites.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge also maintains the Hidden Lake campground which is located at Mile 3.6 of the Skilak Lake Loop Road, which intersects the Sterling Highway at Mile 58 and has 44 campsites; and the Upper Skilak Lake campground which is located at Mile 8.5 of Skilak Lake Loop Road and has 25 campsites. For additional information about the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge area, please call (907) 262-7021 or visit their website at www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai.

The U.S. Forest Service also maintains three cabins along the Russian River. For more information on Forest Service campgrounds and cabins, please call 1 (877) 444-6777 or check their reservation website at www.recreation.gov.

In addition, to registering with ADF&G, guides on the Kenai River must have a commercial permit issued by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. A list of permitted guides is available from the Kenai River Center at (907) 714-2460 or by email at KenaiRivCenter@kpb.us.



SPORT FISHING SERIES PRODUCED BY:

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Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Division of Sport Fish

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Anchorage, Alaska 99518
Sport Fish Information Center

(907) 267-2218
M-F 8am - 5 pm
Except on state holidays



These opportunities funded in part by Federal Aid in Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game complies with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This summary is available in alternative communication formats. If you need assistance, please contact the ADF&G ADA Coordinator at (907) 465-6078; TTY/ Alaska Relay 7-1-1; or 1 (800) 770-8973.

Pacific Salmon Identification

Chinook (king) Salmon



- Spots on back and both lobes of the tail
- Black mouth with a black gumline

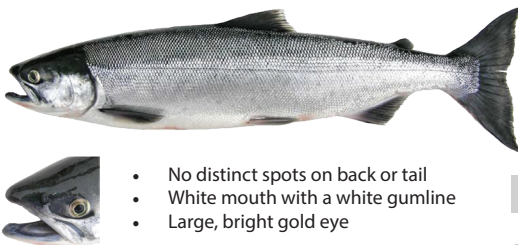
Coho (silver) Salmon



- Spots on back and upper lobe of the tail
- Black mouth with a white gumline

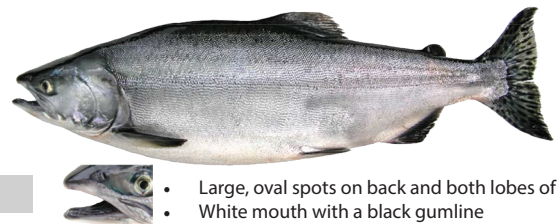
Marine Phase

Sockeye (red) Salmon



- No distinct spots on back or tail
- White mouth with a white gumline
- Large, bright gold eye

Pink (humpy) Salmon



- Large, oval spots on back and both lobes of tail
- White mouth with a black gumline

Chum (dog) Salmon



- No spots; calico bands on body (often faint in salt water)
- White mouth with a white gumline

Photographs courtesy of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Chinook (king) Salmon



- Spawning adults turn maroon or olive brown
- Spots on body and both lobes of the tail remain

Coho (silver) Salmon



- Males develop pronounced "kype" (hooked-nose)
- Spots on back and upper lobe of the tail remain
- Male and female turn dark maroon and have dark backs

Spawning Phase

Sockeye (red) Salmon



- Spawning adults develop dull-green heads
- Males develop hump on back
- Both female and male turn red

Pink (humpy) Salmon



- Spawners turn dull gray on their backs and upper sides
- Lower sides appear cream color or white
- Large, oval spots on back and both lobes of tail remain

Chum (dog) Salmon



- Spawners develop pronounced, vertical calico bands on sides
- Males exhibit large, canine-like teeth



Scan the QR code for Southcentral sport fishing regulations.

Find Ship Creek regulations under the "Anchorage Bowl"

