

Steelhead trout fishing

Steelhead trout return to freshwater streams and lakes in early to mid-April, and runs peak in early May. There are few fall-run steelhead in the Sitka area. Rearing steelhead normally spend 3 years in fresh water before migrating to sea when they reach a length of 6 or 7 inches.

Sitkoh Creek on Chichagof Island has the largest known steelhead run in the Sitka area—ADF&G weir counts have ranged from 520 to 1,073 immigrating steelhead.

Many other streams support smaller runs, but unless a river is fed by a lake, its steelhead population is probably fewer than 50 fish. Steelhead populations exist in Lake Eva, Salmon Lake, Port Banks at the outlet falls from Plotnikoff Lake, and the outlet of the Rezanof Lake chain at the head of Sandy Bay. When you explore for steelhead trout streams, look for streams that drain from an accessible lake system.

In 1994, a management plan was adopted for steelhead in all waters of Southeast Alaska. Anglers fishing for wild steelhead may only keep fish over 36 inches in length.

The bag limit for wild steelhead is one per day with a seasonal limit of two fish (see Regulations, below). The management plan was designed to protect the reproductive capability of wild steelhead populations, yet allow an angler to keep a large trophy fish.



Fred Gaffney

Historical weir counts of steelhead entering Sitkoh Creek during 6 nonconsecutive years between 1936 and 1996:

Year	Weir operated from:	to:	Date of peak count	Peak count	Midpoint of immigration	Total count
1936	4/17	5/31				760
1937	3/28	5/31				1,073
1982	4/16	5/31	5/07	97	5/08	690
1990	5/05	6/01	5/05	49	4/30	660
1993	3/31	6/01	4/24	40	5/02	520
1996	3/31	6/30	5/14	66	5/08	926

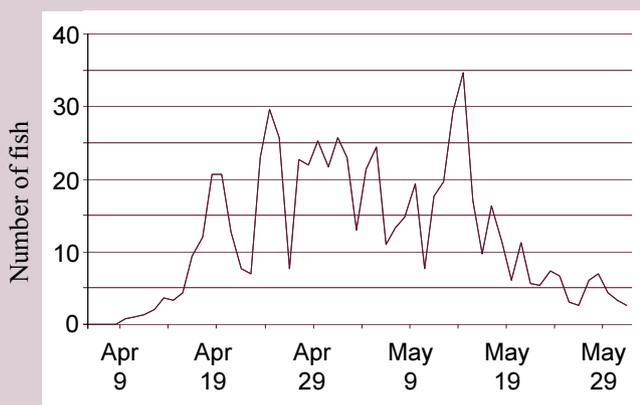
Trout regulations

Cutthroat, rainbow, and steelhead trout occur throughout Southeast Alaska, but ADF&G became concerned in the early 1990s that these species had been overharvested.

Regionwide cutthroat and steelhead harvests had declined, and anglers expressed concern over lower catch rates. At the same time, angler effort had more than doubled since 1985. To preserve these fish populations, the Alaska Board of Fisheries set an annual limit on steelhead and modified daily bag, possession and size limits for cutthroat and rainbow trout. A seasonal ban (November 16–September 14) on bait in fresh water was also introduced because higher catch-and-release mortality rates result when bait is used, especially for smaller fish.

Some fresh waters have year-round bait restrictions. Consult the current Southeast Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary.

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Average daily number of steelhead entering Sitkoh Creek based on ADF&G weir counts during 1990, 1993, and 1996.

Trout regulations. . .continued

The steelhead regulation of one wild steelhead per day 36 inches or longer (two per year) will protect over 90% of adult steelhead from harvest.

The cutthroat and rainbow trout size limits (must be longer than 11 inches and less than 22 inches) will protect female trout until they can spawn at least once and also protect juvenile trout until they can migrate to sea. Buck Lake, Lake 436, and Sukoi Lake (on Kruzof Island), produce fish that mature at a smaller size; these lakes have a 9-inch size limit on cutthroat and rainbow trout.

Some high-use lakes and “trophy” lakes have more stringent size limits. Consult the current Southeast Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary.

Trout regulations are complex, and they can vary within even a single watershed. Review your current Sport Fishing Regulations Summary carefully for the waters you intend to fish, to make sure you are in compliance with the applicable regulations for each water body.

Anglers must complete an ADF&G harvest record for each steelhead caught (the harvest record is printed on the back of your sport fishing license). For anglers who are not required to be licensed, a harvest record card will be issued by the nearest ADF&G office or license vendor. ■



Wild steelhead trout

Wild steelhead and resident cutthroat trout populations are fragile in many Sitka area waters—catch-and-release fishing is encouraged for steelhead and cutthroat. Here are recommended catch-and-release techniques to avoid injuring released fish:

- Land fish quickly by using heavier line and leader
- Do **not net** fish to be released; **keep fish in the water**
- Carefully remove hooks from fish with forceps or needlenose pliers and minimize handling
- For deeply hooked fish, leave the hook in place and cut the leader close to the fish's mouth
- Use artificial lures or flies (to reduce deep-hooking) or **use barbless hooks.**