Russian River Sockeye Madness

There’s an old believe here in Alaska that says, “Don’t run away from crowds as it usually means lots of fish.” The Russian River, in Cooper landing Alaska, is the epitome of this maxim. By Colin Lowe

Fishing at the mouth of the Russian River

As June 11th approaches, so does the fever for the opening day of the Russian River, stream through the veins of our local and out of state anglers. The thought, of easy, chrome bright, limits of fresh sockeye, dangle through the minds of both local and out of state anglers who choose the Russian as their fishing destination of choice. The Russian River has an annual visitor count of about 150,000 people, comprised of both anglers and folks just wanting to observe the spectacle of great fishing here in Alaska.

Each year, the Russian River host a return of a 1st and 2nd run of Sockeye salmon with the 1st run peaking on or about the 20th of June and the 2nd run peaking on or about the 20th of July. I often tell people that fishing for these hard fighting fish is more like “catching” than fishing as both novice and experts easily catch their limits of these great eating fish. Most years, the limit per person per day is 3 fish and the fish average about 8 pounds. Every now and then, the ADF&G will raise that limit to 6 fish per person per day like last year, which saw a record amount of fish return to the fishery. Fish counts for these 2 runs headed specifically to the Russian River can easily exceed 400,000 fish with
about a third of that reaching the fish weir above the Russian River falls. The ADF&G keep very close tabs on this great fishery to ensure that the run remains strong for years to come.

Catching these fish is as easy as obtaining the rod of your choice rated to at least 25 pound test as this is necessary for fishing in crowded conditions. Your choice of equipment can be a fly rod, spinning rod or a conventional rod. The type of rod is of no consequence as the technique is the same and the rod and reel serve as a vehicle, once hooked, for reeling in your fish. Having said that, the rods of choice for most anglers is a fly rod rated to 9wt or a spinning rod rated to a minimum of 25-pound test.

The standard set up for a fly rod is a floating fly line rated to a 9wt rod. I have found that Rio and Scientific Angler both make outstanding fly lines that hold up well with out cracking and endure the constant beating they take while fishing for these fast and hot fish.

The standard set up for a fly rod is to attach a 25 or 30 pound test straight mono leader to your floating fly line, a sinker of the appropriate weight and a Coho fly to the end. Maxima Ultra Green in 30-pound test is my favorite as it hold up well in the crowds and allows for a significant amount of chaffing without breaking.

The type of sinker you use depends on the angler as many employ split shot, rubber core, pencil lead or a banana sinker to get the job done. The same set up is used for spinning and conventional rods as well. No fancy rigs are required to be successful in this fishery. Most folk’s use a direct line set up with the fly attached to the main line and either a rubber core sinker or split shot attached a minimum of 18” above the fly.

The standard technique for catching Sockeye is as simple as flipping your line in the water and allowing the current to swing your fly into the bank below. A standard technique that works well for me is to use the imaginary lane technique. Picture to your front 6 lanes. The drift closes to your front is lane 1. Pull a foot of line from your reel

Where To Stay

There are a variety of campgrounds and lodging facilities to choose from to accommodate individual needs. Cooper Landing has Fisherman Cabins up to 4 star facilities.

Make reservations as early as possible to ensure availability especially during the months of June and July

There are several top-notch shower facilities in town to accommodate campers and those choosing Fisherman Cabin arrangements. Cost: $3 to $5 per person
and flip it out slightly above 12 o’clock, this is lane 2. Pull another foot, flip it out, and now you are in lane 3. I think you get the picture. Continue this process within reason out to about lane six. Be cognizant of the fishermen around you as excessively long cast can disrupt the rhythm of the other fishermen on the bank. If you hook a fish, say in lane 3, go back to that lane again once you have landed and dispatched your previous fish. Chances are there are more in the same spot and could result in a quick limit.

Area stream & river guide “Fly Bob” netting another nice Sockeye on the Russian River.

The amount of weight is critical to catching these great fish in the mouth. Sockeye salmon are one of the most aggressive salmon of all the species and when fresh have a bad attitude. They are known to strike at anything they are unfamiliar with within a foot of their area. Here are my rules that I share with my clients and store customers during the season:

•Color does Matter! Watch and see what's working and use it!!! Light conditions typically dictate the best shade. Contrast and something different can make the difference.
•Lighten up on your weight; lead should be just heavy enough to hit bottom only a few times each drift; cast slightly above 12 O’clock for best results.
•Pay close attention to where you hooked your last fish and work it hard. Key in on these spots by matching all factors as best possible. Key factors include, exact position, leader entry point, weight, leader length, weight of line etc.
•Feel the rhythm; pay attention to the rhythm of your drift. Set the hook if you feel something different.
•Work the water; imagine 6 lanes to your front. Start at 1 and work your way out to 6 and start again
•SET THE HOOK AT LEAST ONCE EACH DRIFT. Something should feel different each drift. This rule will develop an unconscious set response when a take does occur.
•Contrary to popular believe, Sockeye are “very” aggressive. When pressured, apply finesse techniques such as a longer leader, less weight, a smaller fly, and throw further out.
• Sockeye are light sensitive…when the sun is out they will typically hold further out and at the current break. Your more aggressive fish will be here!
• Finally, Sockeye grab your fly more often then you think. A good quality graphite, fast action rod gives you the sensitivity needed to consistently put fish on the stringer
• Remember, distance between fishermen is relative to the amount of anglers…do not be offended if someone jumps in next to you.

One of my favorite memories of Sockeye fishing occurred on the world-renowned Russian River between salmon runs. I was hunting for these fish between the falls and the Pink Salmon fishing area. About mid river, I spotted a fresh sockeye behind a rock. As I carefully moved into casting position, I took my first shot at this fish. Missed. I was about 3 feet to far. I reloaded and cast again. This time I was about 2 feet over my target objective. Reloaded a 3rd time and my drift was about a foot from the fish. As the fly swung by him, to my amazement, the fish shot out to the right, grabbed the fly, and just as quickly, moved back behind the rock. For about a nano second, I was in disbelief until instinct kicked in and I set the hook. The image before me quickly turned to reality as this fish headed down stream, up stream, to the far bank, straight at me, eventually banking it self just above me. Wow, and all this in a matter of seconds. Talk about shock and awe. I was in fishing heaven. As I dispatched the fish and placed him on a stringer, another fish moved in behind the same rock. I couldn’t believe my eyes. To my utter amazement, I repeated the same scenario two more times for a limit of Sockeye salmon. Having said that, we catch them all the time while fishing with clients on Hotshots, flies and spinners.

Okay enough of the stories and back to the process. Caring for your catch is as important to the experience as catching them. A good fish bonker is a must for all fishermen to allow for a quick dispatch of your catch. Immediately thereafter, cut one or both gills to bleed them out to prevent the blood from tainting you fillets and place your catch on a good, heavy-duty stringer. Place your fish in the water, as it is cold and will Keep your catch in tiptop shape.

Getting Here

Arrange flight to the Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage Alaska.

There are several rental car agencies to choose from so ensure you make your reservations months in advance for the best rates and availability.

Drive South on the Seward Highway for a little over an hour. Turn right on to Sterling Hwy. Cooper Landing is about 20 minutes in from the junction.

Cooper Landing is spread out over roughly 10 miles of Sterling Hwy. The fishing grounds are on the West end.
One of the favorite ways to package these fish is to fillet them. A good quality fillet knife is in order to facilitate a good fillet and eliminate waste. Use a fillet glove as they are worth their weight in gold. Every year we help to patch up several fishermen who did not have one and wish they did after the fact. The final step in this process is to spend the extra time and money to vacuum seal all of your fish as it will keep them from freezer burn for a good year or longer. Packaging fish in freezer bags is fine if for immediate consumption. It only takes a few days before they start to burn thereafter so protect your investment by vacuum packing and enjoy this fish as fresh as the day you caught them.

On a final note, get out there and have fun catching these great fighting and wonderful tasting Sockeye Salmon. Remember, there is plenty of fish for every one so be patient and help each other out. Remember, the distance between fishermen is relative to the amount of fishermen in the area. So don’t be upset when someone steps in above or below you, smile and wish him or her luck. More often then not, the person next to you turns out to be a great guy or gal and it all adds up to a great time.

Tight lines,

Colin

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