

## Fish of the Week! Transcript: King Salmon of Kachemak Bay 3/8/2021

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week. I'm Katrina Liebich with the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service in Alaska...

And I'm Guy who might just be a little too interested in fish.

It's Monday, March 8 2021, and we're excited to talk about ALL THE FISH.

This week's fish is the Chinook salmon. Sometimes known as the king salmon and the "Tye" if we got any listeners down in British Columbia.

When you think about Chinook salmon, or kings, you may think about the runs that happen in the summer when fish are returning to spawn. The fishery we're talking about today is targeting these fish when they're at sea during the ocean phase of their life cycle. Our guests today are Mike Booz and Holly Dickson who are the Sport Fish Area Managers in the Sport Fish Department of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and we're going to be talking specifically about winter kings in Kachemak Bay. Nice to have you two today!

Thanks for having us.

I do have a question related to the specific epithet of Chinook Salmon. I'm curious how you guys go about pronouncing that.

You're asking about the scientific name?

Yeah. For people who don't know how to spell it, Chinook Salmon is *Onchorynchus T-S-H-A-W-Y-T-S-C-H-A*. I've heard it pronounced a lot of different ways. Chawichi, Cha Cha for people who are kind of lazy about it. I'm trying to figure out what's official like what do you guys say?

I think everyone says it a little different. I was taking a salmon class from Tom Quinn at University of Washington a few years ago and he's kind of a salmon expert for those who know and I asked him in the class and he didn't have an answer. I think that says it all. But I think I would say "Shaw-ee-shaw".

Oh my. Ok. I've been saying it wrong.

The faster you say it the more likely you have it right.

"cha cha"

Yeah that sounds right!

Ok so where are these kings originating from and what are they doing in Kachemak Bay this time of year in Alaska?

These king salmon that are hanging out in Kachemak Bay in the wintertime are from all over the place. It's really a mix-stocked fishery. So they come from all over the west coast and the Gulf of Alaska. California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia.

From 2014-2018 we conducted a genetics study to assess the mixed stock composition to genetic reporting groups in Cook Inlet and the winter fishery was comprised of 99.8% fish from outside Cook Inlet.

Oh wow. I've heard these fish called "feeder kings". Is that due to kind of that phase in their life cycle where they're feeding at sea or is there some other reason that they're called that?

Yeah they're in their ocean phase. SO they're out there looking for as much food as they can. They're not the spawners yet. These feeder kings in the winter tend to be about two years old. They're in their second winter in the ocean. It's the most common age that we see here.

These are just fish that are out rearing in the ocean, growing bigger prior to returning to their natal streams to spawn.

Just to give people a visual, how big is a 2 year winter fish and can you just describe a little bit what they look like? I mean they look a little bit different from when they're well into their spawning migration into fresh water.

A fish that's a 2 ocean fish—it's in its second winter in the ocean. It's about 10 lbs. It could be a little bigger. 10-15. They're really gorgeous in this stage. This is before they start to turn their spawning colors and go back. You can't tell if they're male or female really. They don't have any of the hook jaw going on. They're really full and bright and silvery. They lose their scales easily when you get them in the net. They're just gorgeous at this point.

Awesome.

You mentioned that these fish are silver and it's hard to distinguish between the sexes and they look a lot different than the salmon that people typically think about when they go into spawn. I've heard it's hard to tell all the 5 Pacific salmon species apart from one another. How can you tell what you're catching down there are actually king salmon and not some other species.

There's a few defining characteristics for kings. I think the two best things to look at are the color of the gums. Their mouth is completely black. One of their synonymous names is black mouth. And then the spots on the tail. They have black spots on both the upper and lower lobes of their tail. The other thing is that we really don't catch any other species of salmon here in the winter. There aren't Coho or Sockeye feeding in cook inlet or Kachemak Bay in the winter. It's just king salmon.

Yeah kinda fascinatingly so. If someone catches a Coho or a Chum, it's big fishing news around town

[Music]

What's the mix of folks that have their own person boat vs going out with a guide service this time of year?

In the winter it's really popular to book a charter for the winter king derby. It's in April this year. I think typically a lot of charters will get going by then so they can take people out during the derby/

What's the derby? Like what do you get for doing it?

Oh man, it's been growing in popularity the last five or ten years. It's a 100 dollar entry fee I think and there's a money prize for first through 10<sup>th</sup> place fish. This is all put on by the Homer Chamber of commerce.

At the last king tournament there were roughly 1,400 anglers. The winning fish was about 26 pounds

The last few years the person who has caught the winning fish has won upwards of 50-60 thousand dollars.

Oh whoa.

So it's a high stakes derby all of a sudden. It's a fun day.

[Music]

Hey there everyone, one thing we always want you to keep in mind regardless of what it is or where it is that you're fishing is safety. Every week we're going to give you a tip or two that you can use to stay safe while you're fishing.

The situation that you might not think about while you're fishing is skin care. Snow and ice have high albedos, meaning they reflect sunlight very well. In fact, fresh snow can reflect up to 90% of the light that hits it. What does this mean for us anglers then? It means on a nice sunny day we have intense sunlight coming from us from the sky and the ground. You want to make sure you're wearing a hat, sunglasses, and photo protective clothing as well as sunscreen, preferably with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide as active ingredients on exposed areas of the skin. Remember that the ultraviolet radiation responsible for causing sunburns and even skin cancer penetrates clouds so don't let an overcast sky lull you into complacency.

[Music]

So if we're talking about these feeders—they're at sea feeding. What are they eating and how does that inform what we're using to catch them with. What kinds of baits? What kind of lures?

So yeah, match the hatch. Kind of the same thing as fly fishing in the stream. You're still doing that in saltwater fishing. King salmon overall feed primarily on forage fishes and small invertebrates in the gulf of Alaska or here in Kachemak Bay. Some of the primary forage fish that we have are herring, sand lance, they'll also feed on capelin, Eulachon, crustaceans. They'll feed on worms, they'll also feed on squid. Working back from squid. There are plastic lures called hoochies that mimic those. There just a plastic skirt that work pretty darn well. Herring being kind of the primary food source for these guys is also the primary bait used to fish for king salmon in salt water.

And then also on the fishing line itself from the rod almost everyone fishes with a flasher. These are attractants. They rotate and spin in the water to catch the kings attention. There's lots of different

colors and styles that have different action. They'll kick around back there and move your bait or lure. One of the most common set-ups I'd say is a white flasher with herring and a head clip back there. But there's all kinds of variation.

And in terms of how you present the bait. Are you trolling? Are you mooching? Where in the water column are you? How do you present the bait to them.

For the most part these fish are down deep so the longer you can keep your bait at the depth you think they are the more likely you will be that you get bit. So I think that's the benefit of trolling.

Mooching is not a term that I've heard before. Can you describe that for me a little bit?

Mooching is done with either herring as bait or with spoons. You're using an inline weight to drop the bait or lure down to particular part of the water column. And you're fluttering that by slowly lifting it up and down

And why's it called...?

I don't know why it's called mooching [everyone laughs] And don't ask me why they're called hoochies either.

I was going to [laughter]

So yeah, you're out there with your boat, you've got rods, and you need to get them down to the depth that these kings are at. Almost everybody uses down riggers with a lead cannon ball on them.

Is it common practice for people who go out in a fishing party of 3-4 maybe and they're looking for the fish to set the down riggers at different depths and see where they start getting strikes?

Yeah for sure. The more people you can have on your boat without making a huge mess which does happen the more likely you are to figure out where the bite is or where the fish are.

One final question in this part of the podcast in terms of preparing yourself to be out on the water. Do you have any tips for keeping warm or what to bring if you're going to be going out with friends or on a boat? General safety or preparation tips?

Endless amount of logistics or planning or preparation for participation in winter king salmon fishing here in Homer. I really like to take an ice scraper with me when I go out on days when it's cold to remove ice or freezing spray from the windshield of the boat. I think it's really important to pay attention to your deck and how slippery it gets and just extra layer of caution for the conditions that you're going in.

And you know the other thing—not that there's not strong currents and tides in other places as too but—Cook Inlet has a reputation for its tidal exchange.

And to put that tide in perspective for folks that are listening from other parts, what are the tides? I mean they're huge! How big are we talking?

The standard or average is 17 feet of tidal exchange. It will go all the way up to close to 25 feet of exchange from low to high tide.

Yep. It's something you gotta think about when you're launching the boat as well. You gotta get that timing right.

We see people fishing in sea kayaks or small inflatable boats close to the Homer Spit. Those are very brave people.

[Music and cooking sounds]

So to get into the cooking piece and to make people hungry, do you guys have a favorite recipe for winter kings or kings in general?

Chinook or kings they're the best salmon that you can eat and then on top of that coming out of the ocean these feeder kings are the most rich. They're very high in oil content. The big ones are very oily. I don't think you can do anything wrong. I tend to think fresh is the best and tend to put a lot of salt on to get a good crust on top.

One of my favorite ways and you want to make sure you freeze it first is to make fresh poke with raw king salmon.

SO I've heard from some friends of mine who have gone fishing for kings near Homer is when you open it up it doesn't have that distinctive orange-red flesh that we associate with salmon. It's more of a pale kind of white meat. Is this a different subspecies of king? A unique variant or mutant? Can you talk a little bit about this and if the meat tastes any different than the orange and red flesh.

SO these white kings we catch them occasionally around Homer. They're not a different species or subspecies. They're just missing the ability to express that color in their flesh. So it's sort of like an albino fish but just of the flesh. They're more common in a couple of river systems in British Columbia. Chinook or kings from most of Alaska and Cook Inlet are not white king salmon. SO they are like genetically identifiable in that sense. But otherwise they're exactly the same as the perfectly orange king salmon. White king salmon are always great and oily but they're just as good as the orange ones and vice versa. There's not really any flavor difference. They are kind of more prized though. Anglers tend to get very excited when they get a white king and yeah there's some prestige around them I would say.

[music]

Thank you Mike. Thank you Holly. I really enjoyed this discussion!

Yeah thanks that was a lot of fun. It was nice talking to you both.

K everyone. Hope you enjoyed this episode of Fish of the Week and that you get out there and enjoy all the fish!

[music]

Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week!

My name is Katrina Liebich, and my co-host is Guy Eroh.

This show is produced by David Hoffman of Citizen Racecar, assisted by Garrett Teidemann and Kelsey Kohrs.

Fish of the Week is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs.

As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor, thank, and celebrate the whole community – individuals, Tribes, the State of Alaska, sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists, and others – who have elevated our understanding and love, as people and professionals, of all the fish.