

Salmon season on the Kenai

by Greg George

'Tis the season once again. People everywhere are feeling the spirit. The stores are having sales and the radio, TV and newspapers are constantly reporting about it. To cement the fact that the season is upon us, we are now regularly hearing from family and relatives. Now that summer is really here, it can only mean one thing: It's Salmon Season On The Kenai!

Our day-to-day summer activities can feel stressful compared to the calm of winter. Visitors, family and friends fill our homes, B&B's, stores and streets. The boat shops are hurrying to get boats ready, the tackle shops have the shelves stocked, and we are getting excited. This is the time to put salmon in the freezer and fire up the smoker for those mouth-watering delights.

Where salmon are concerned, there is something for everyone on the Kenai. You can troll in saltwater, drift or motor a river, or simply stand at the water's edge. Some popular salmon fishing spots are the Homer Spit, Halibut Cove, Anchor Point, Ninilchik, Kasilof, Seward, Hope, and of course, the Kenai and Russian Rivers. There are many places to fish, and different regulations for each place.

Before you head out for a day of fishing, be sure you have your year 2000 fishing license and a copy of the year 2000 fishing regulations. You should be able to pick up both at the same place. The regulation booklet is an essential item to take with you. It tells you what tackle is allowed, what stream banks are being protected to prevent erosion and what is open for fishing. Don't be overwhelmed by the booklet. Thoroughly read about the water in which you plan to fish and don't be afraid to ask questions of a wildlife officer or at your favorite tackle store. Most parking areas and boat ramps have the regulations for that area posted.

If you decide to fish for a king salmon on the Kenai River, be prepared for a lot of work. Kings can be huge, like the world record fish that was more than 97 pounds! Fishing from a boat will give you the best opportunity. A boat can follow a king up and down the river, preventing you from losing an entire spool of line. Whether you go in your boat, a neighbor's boat or with a guide, wear a life jacket and bring layers of clothing, rain gear, sunglasses and snacks. The weather can change quickly and you'll need to keep

your energy up when fishing that king. A good bank fishing opportunity for a king is on the Kasilof River at Crooked Creek State Park, where fish exceeding 30 pounds have been caught.

If red salmon are more to your taste, the Kenai, Kasilof and Russian Rivers have what you are looking for. Bank fishing opportunities are more abundant for red salmon than kings. Again, read the regulation booklet because different sections of the same river can have different tackle restrictions. "Combat fishing" is most commonly associated with the Russian River area. Many places along the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers are known as "combat zones" and should be fished with caution. Eye protection is a foremost consideration as hooks and lead weights are in constant motion in these areas.

The Central Peninsula General Hospital Emergency Room removes more than 100 impaled fishhooks from unlucky anglers each year. Pliers are a handy tool to take when fishing for reds. It is easy to unhook a salmon, especially ones that are hooked anywhere other than the mouth that has to be returned to the water. (And please handle "snagged" fish carefully—future runs of salmon depend on the successful return of some fish to spawning grounds. If you snag a fish, remember to handle it as little as possible as you release it, and be gentle! Don't drop kick the fish back into the water.) Lastly, don't forget an extra dose of patience for your shoulder-to-shoulder "combat" experience. Go to a "combat zone" expecting a busy social gathering of people having fun, not solitude.

A fun, family salmon is the pink, or "humpy." The Kenai River has a run of pinks on even-numbered years. The past few runs have been very productive. When pinks are in the river, they are hard to keep off of your hook. Bank fishing is often successful to anglers of all ages in the Kenai River and in Hope.

Silver salmon are very aggressive and exciting to catch. Both salt water trolling from Seward and river fishing can be rewarding for this late summer salmon.

When salmon fishing is good, it can be tempting to catch a whole summer's worth in a day. It is important to know the daily limit and possession limits.

A fish being stored on ice in a cooler is considered to be in possession, not preserved. Salmon fishing can be very expensive. Don't add to the cost by being cited with an over limit of fish.

You might have a favorite recipe for cooking, or a favorite brine for smoking your salmon. Do others the favor of sharing some of your recipes, and you may find new ones you like too. If you are going to store salmon for any length of time, try vacuum sealing or canning it. Vacuum bags don't break like glass jars do, but they need to be kept frozen. The Alaska Cooperative Extension will test your canning gauges for free. If you are going to send frozen salmon to someone, use a next day or 2nd day shipping service and an insulated box. Temperatures in other parts of the country can be very hot right now, especially in a delivery truck and

on airport loading ramps. These ideas can help keep that precious cargo from going bad.

If you are floating the upper Kenai, look for Dall sheep on the mountainsides. When you are fishing the lower Kenai, keep your eyes open for an osprey. If you are trolling the salt water, keep alert for porpoise off the bow. While you are standing on the water's edge, remember that you are out of the office. Keep your hook sharp, your eyes protected, your camera handy, and most of all, enjoy your wonderful wild salmon season!

Greg George is a law enforcement officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns and general information about the Refuge are on the web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.