

# Fishing

the

# Gulkana River

Those who have yet to travel to the Gulkana are missing a rare glimpse of a unique piece of Alaska

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# Fishing The Gulkana River

The Gulkana River originates in the Alaska Range and flows south to join the Copper River near the community of Gulkana. This beautiful clearwater system affords unique and diverse remote sport fishing opportunities. The Gulkana River drainage supports the single largest recreational fishery in the Glennallen area and has grown to be one of the largest Arctic grayling fisheries in the state. In addition to its renowned grayling fishing, the Gulkana River drainage has great summertime fishing for king

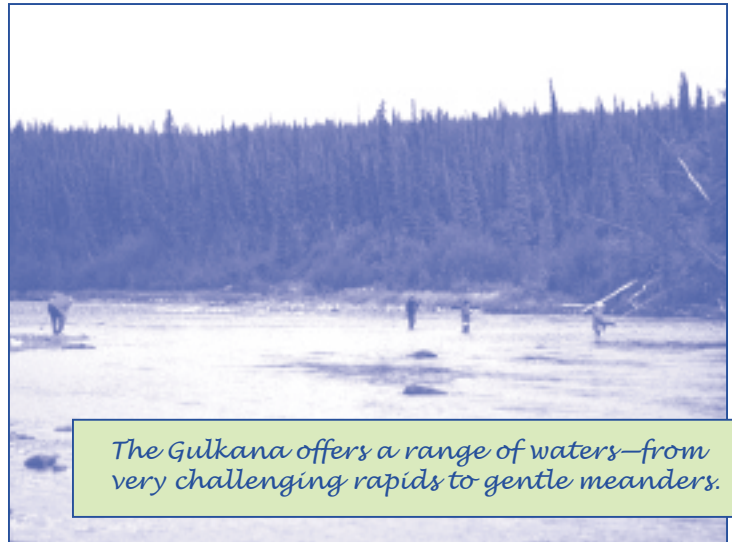
and sockeye salmon, as well as fewer numbers of lake trout, and catch-and-release-only fisheries for rainbow and steelhead trout. In the winter, there is excellent ice fishing for lake trout and burbot in area lakes.

Land upstream of Sourdough is mainly federal and state-owned. The section of the Gulkana River upstream from Sourdough has been designated by the U.S. Congress as a Wild River. This classification recognizes the area's exceptional scenic, recreational,

fish, and wildlife values and provides protection for the benefit of present and future generations.

Those who have visited the Gulkana River can appreciate the reasons for this classification; those who have yet to travel to the Gulkana are missing a rare glimpse of a unique piece of Alaska.

Flowing through a basin of rolling hills covered by spruce and scattered hardwoods, the Gulkana offers a range of waters from very challenging rapids to stretches of gentle meanders. Moose, beaver, bear, eagles, ducks, and trumpeter swans are often seen along the river, and much of the Nelchina caribou herd summers in the area.



*The Gulkana offers a range of waters—from very challenging rapids to gentle meanders.*

## Roads, access, and lodging

You can reach the Gulkana River by roads and trails leading off the Richardson Highway, which parallels much of the river. Comfortable lodgings can be found along the road system in Glennallen and Gakona, and at Paxson and Summit Lakes.

## Remote fishing sites: the Middle Fork and the West Fork

For the more adventurous angler seeking a truly remote fishing experience, the Gulkana's two major tributaries—the Middle Fork and the West Fork—may be the places to go.

To reach the **Middle Fork**, take a canoe or small raft south through the upper Tangle Lakes.

Two short portages lead to an unnamed muddy, shallow lake. From there, you have two choices: (1) continue to the south end of the muddy lake, where two short portages and a 1-mile portage south will take you to Dickey Lake and the headwaters of the Middle Fork; or (2) travel/line up the Tangle River out of the muddy lake and paddle to the 1-mile portage above Dickey Lake. You may also choose to fly in to Dickey Lake to begin your float trip. Grayling fishing can be very fine in that section from the outlet of Dickey Lake on downstream 15 miles.

**USE CAUTION:** the first 5 miles after leaving Dickey lake are Class II waters, and

a short stretch of Class III waters lies approximately 6 miles downstream from Dickey Lake. The last 10 miles of the Middle Fork, before it flows into the mainstem Gulkana, is a slow meander and a good time for wildlife viewing and relaxing.

The **West Fork** drains several bogs and lake systems as it travels down to

join the mainstem of the Gulkana River, 8 miles above Sourdough. Here also, waterfowl nesting and wildlife viewing are at their best. A canoe is the best choice for travel along this stretch. A float plane trip to several lakes along the West Fork can provide access to the river, depending on water conditions.

Anglers enjoy some of Alaska's premier grayling fishing

Air charter operators for these trips are available throughout the Copper River Basin. The Copper Valley Visitor Center (907-822-5555) has current information on area air charter operators.

Another option is to enter the upper reaches of the West Fork from the Tyone River. Just a few short portages, and the entire drainage is available to your canoe paddle, camera, and fishing rod.

## The mainstem Gulkana: Paxson Lake to Sourdough

The most popular and scenic section of the Gulkana River is the 50-mile stretch from Paxson Lake downstream to Sourdough. Anglers who float this section in June

through August are treated to some of Alaska's premier grayling fishing. These fish average 8 to 16 inches long and are relatively fast-growing; most fish caught are 3 to 5 years old.

To experience the upper Gulkana River, floaters in rafts or canoes begin at the Paxson Lake campground (Mile 175 Richardson Hwy) and paddle the 3 miles to the outlet of Paxson Lake where they can fish for grayling, lake trout, and whitefish. The next 3 miles, to the confluence with the Middle Fork, is swift, boulder-strewn water, with excellent grayling fishing. Then the river meanders over a 16-mile stretch, broken up by small rapids that provide fast-action grayling fishing (and an occasional rainbow trout). The river then enters an area called Canyon Rapids

(Class III/IV). The well-marked 1/4-mile portage around the rapids is used by all but the most experienced canoeists, kayakers, or rafters equipped with suitable rowing frames. Eight miles of small boulder rapids and excellent grayling fishing lie below the canyon. From there to Sourdough, the river meanders more slowly with occasional riffles and small rapids. The entire float covers almost 50 river miles, and anglers should allow a minimum of three or four days to complete the trip. Camping sites are plentiful along the wooded shoreline.

Two main 7-mile long trails provide access to the middle reaches of the mainstem Gulkana. The Meiers Lake-Middle Fork trail begins at Mile 169

Richardson Highway and passes through forest, bog, and alpine tundra as it winds its way back to the confluence of the Middle Fork. The Haggard Creek trail (Mile 161) runs through bogs and lowlands and intercepts the Gulkana in the Canyon Rapids area. Both trails are open to ATVs, but bogs and lowlands make motorized travel difficult.

## Fishing for grayling in the Gulkana

With declining grayling populations in other area

roadside streams, and resultant closures and bag limit restrictions, many anglers are turning to the Gulkana River to fish for grayling. The Gulkana supports a healthy population of Arctic grayling and is presently being managed

*An effective technique for grayling is to "skitter" the fly along the surface to entice a strike.*



for conservation of its historic grayling size, age compositions, and abundance levels.

Size and bag limits have been introduced to protect the larger

grayling for spawning. To do your part, keep a few of the more numerous smaller grayling for your shoreside lunch. Practicing catch-and-release (see tips on page 11) also helps insure the continued health of the grayling population in this system.

As in other areas, grayling in the Gulkana concentrate in large schools during their spring and fall migrations. In summer, they move to feeding areas (larger fish are



*The Gulkana River is home to the most northerly rainbow trout population in North America.*

usually found in the upper reaches of the river). Drifting aquatic insects: mayflies, stoneflies, and caddis flies are the grayling's primary food source—although terrestrial insects, salmon eggs, and outmigrating salmon smolt are also a part of their diet. The grayling's healthy appetite and willingness to strike at almost anything an angler can offer makes spincasting and flyfishing effective.

For spincasting, a couple of favorite lures are small red

and silver spinners and white or yellow jigs (similar to a crappie jig). Cast the spinners upstream and retrieve the lure slowly near the bottom.

For flyfishing enthusiasts, dry flies (#14-#16) are recommended in the slower river sections. Wet flies (#10-#12) are usually more productive in fast water. A few favorites are mosquito imitations, "Adams," elk-hair caddis, and various nymphs such as the hare's ear.

## Fishing for rainbow trout in the Gulkana

Anglers fishing the Gulkana River can anticipate hooking a rainbow trout during their float trip. The river is home to the most northerly native population of rainbow trout in North America.

Our research shows fewer fish than in historic counts. Because these trout are slow-growing and few in number, certain restrictions have been placed in order to protect this unique resource.

Please consult the Region III (AYK/UC/US) Sport Fishing Regulations summary for daily bag and possession limits and any special regulations that apply to the Gulkana River.

## **The lower Gulkana River: Sourdough to the Richardson Highway bridge**

Land downstream of Sourdough is primarily private and Native corporation lands. Be sure to obtain permission from the landowner(s) before you enter these lands. River-front land below ordinary high water mark is public land.

Anglers can float the river from Sourdough campground (Mile 147.6 Richardson Hwy.) downstream to the Richardson Highway bridge (about 30 river miles). Sourdough campground is also the main access point for power boats that fish the Gulkana River from the campground up to the West Fork.

King salmon fishing is excellent from late June through mid-July, and Arctic grayling move into the lower streams crossed by the Richardson Highway during early to mid-May as they migrate upstream to spawn.

During May, the two top Arctic grayling producers in the lower Gulkana are Sourdough Creek (Mile 147.5) and Poplar Grove Creek (Mile 137). The preferred terminal tackle in this reach is white or yellow jigs.

From late June to mid-August, the lower Gulkana also holds large schools of sockeye salmon on their way to upstream spawning grounds.

Sport fish guiding services are available in Glennallen, Gakona, and at Sourdough. Call Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce for listings: (907) 822-5555.

## **Salmon fishing in the lower Gulkana**

**Salmon eggs fished near the bottom or "back-bouncing" hotshots produce good king catches**

King salmon (25 to 50 lb) enter the river in early June, and by late June they reach peak concentrations. Sockeye salmon enter the river in late June, and the sockeye salmon run stays strong through mid-August.

Salmon eggs fished near the bottom or "back-bouncing" hot-shots produce good king catches.

Sockeye are usually caught on large streamer flies fished close to shore.

But, although large streamer flies have been generally preferred for catching sockeye salmon, a new approach has proven to be very effective: single, barbless, blue, black, or red fishing hooks. Sockeye feed primarily on zooplankton, and the colored bare hook is apparently very tantalizing. In lakes, the bare hooks have been most effective when fished on a 16-inch monofilament leader behind a chrome dodger.

Sockeyes migrate up the entire length of the Gulkana River and pass through Paxson and Summit lakes, where the



*The abundant supply of sockeye salmon in the Gulkana River throughout the summer is an untapped resource, just awaiting the prospecting angler.*



best fishing is found

along the lake shore and at the mouth of Gunn Creek in Summit Lake during late August and September. This sockeye fishery offers anglers a unique opportunity to prospect sites and techniques without competition from other anglers.

Sockeye numbers increased after development of the Gulkana River Hatchery (at Mile 185

Richardson Highway). About 36 million eggs are taken each year, providing 40,000 to 50,000 returning adult sockeye annually for sport anglers in the Gulkana River.

Few anglers target sockeye in the Gulkana, and the abundant supply of sockeye throughout much of the summer is an untapped resource, just waiting for the prospecting angler.

## **Downstream from the Richardson Highway bridge**


Downstream of the bridge (at Mile 127), the Gulkana River is managed as a single-hook, artificial fly area from June 1 to July 31 of each year. The majority of land between Sourdough and the Copper River is owned by Ahtna, Inc., one of 12 Alaska Native regional corporations. Ahtna, Inc. does not allow access across their land without a permit. Apply in person for access permits at Ahtna, Inc., in Glennallen at Mile 115 Richardson Highway.

Anglers seldom fish the lower reach because of

its inaccessibility and the gear restrictions. However, you can get to the mouth of the Gulkana River by a 12-mile riverboat trip up the Copper River from the mouth of the Klutina.

## **Lake trout fishing in Summit and Paxson lakes**

Two of the largest lakes in the Gulkana River drainage—Summit and Paxson lakes—offer excellent fishing for lake trout, grayling, burbot, and sockeye salmon. The new boat ramp and expanded campground facilities at Paxson Lake (Mile 175 Richardson Highway) provide good access to this popular fishing site, and access is also available at the Paxson Lake Wayside (Mile 180). The



Richardson Highway parallels Summit Lake and provides many access points along the lake shore. Lake trout and grayling fishing in both lakes is best in early summer. Lake trout can be caught by casting from shore or by jigging or trolling from a boat. Shore fishing is most productive early in the season, when the ice is melting off the lake and at the mouths of inlet streams.

Lake trout fishing is also good during late winter/early spring while jigging through the ice with large spoons or cut fish. (Jigging also produces good burbot catches in summer.) A large flashy lure to act as an attractant combined with cut fresh fish as bait will often improve your luck.

Favorite tackle includes streamer flies, brightly colored spoons and spinners, and bait such as cut herring.

A number of other lakes and streams that lie along the Denali and Richardson highways offer good fishing. Many lakes are in controlled use areas where ATVs are prohibited, so anglers must walk in. For information on these areas, contact the Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen District, P.O. Box 147, Glennallen, AK 99588, (907) 822-3217; and ADF&G offices in Anchorage (267-2218), Fairbanks (459-7207), and Glennallen (822-3309).

## What to do if you catch a tagged fish:

Anglers who fish the Gulkana may catch a grayling, king salmon, or rainbow trout with a tag just below its dorsal fin. The department has conducted studies of grayling and rainbow trout in the Gulkana River since 1986, and the tagging information plays a major role in our data collection efforts. Should you catch a tagged fish, please note the tag number, date, and location caught, and return this information to any ADF&G employee or office. If you keep the fish, remove its tag and return it with the date and location where you caught it.

Please *do not* remove the tag if you are planning to release the fish.

## Gulkana River float trips

**Points of Interest.** The scenery is superb, and there is always a good chance of seeing moose, bear, beaver, wolf and an occasional caribou. Many species of waterfowl nest along these systems (especially the

Crosswind to Sourdough trip), creating wonderful opportunities for the photographer.

**Camping.** If you stay below the high water mark you will be on the state right-of-way. Practice low-impact camping techniques.

### Gulkana River from Paxson Lake to Sourdough

To access the Gulkana River, it is first necessary to boat or row across three miles of Paxson Lake from the public campground to its outlet. Unless you are an experienced floater, it is recommended that you use the Canyon portage—200 yards long. A marked trail is there. You will find good rainbow fishing below the rapids, and excellent grayling fishing throughout the river. Some king salmon and red salmon are in the river during July, which is the best month. The trip is not considered difficult, although a few persons have dumped their rafts. You should travel with at least two rafts or canoes, and allow a minimum of three days for the trip.

#### Mileage Table

	Approximate distance (in river miles)
Paxson Lake to Middle Fork Gulkana River .....	3 miles
Middle Fork to Canyon Rapids .....	20 miles
Canyon Rapids to West Fork .....	19 miles
West Fork to Sourdough Creek campground .....	8 miles
(at mile 148 Richardson Highway)	50 miles

### Gulkana River from Paxson Lake to the Richardson Highway bridge

An extension of the above float trip. Fishing is fair to good. No falls, but many long series of rapids—we recommend four days minimum for this trip. Sourdough Campground to Gulkana Village can be done in two days. Takeout points at Sourdough Campground and the Richardson Highway bridge can be reached by automobile.

#### Mileage Table

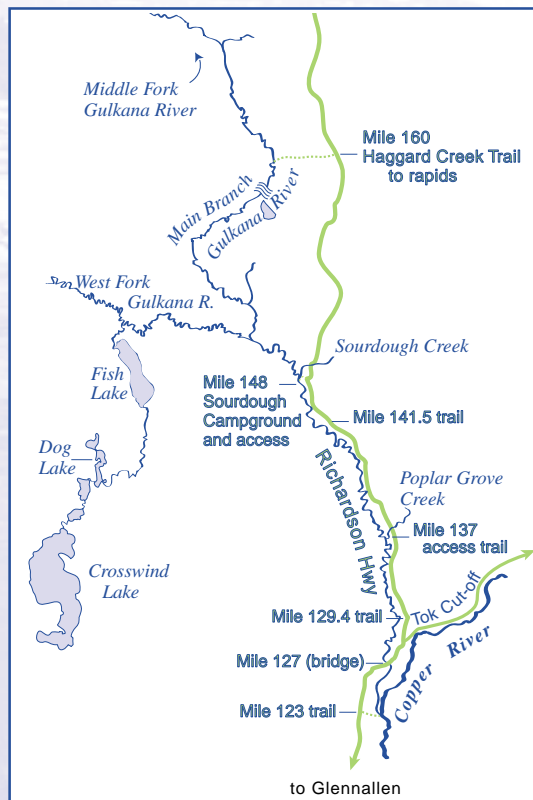
	Approximate distance (in river miles)
Paxson Lake to Sourdough Creek Campground .....	50 miles
Sourdough Creek Campground to Richardson Highway bridge .....	33 miles
(at mile 126 Richardson Highway)	83 miles

## Crosswind Lake to Sourdough Campground

This entails transporting your rafts or canoes to Crosswind Lake—about 15 minutes flying time from Tolsona Lake (at mile 170 Glenn Highway).

From Crosswind Lake to the mouth of West Fork Gulkana, there are lake trout, grayling and whitefish. Below that point, there are grayling, red salmon, and king salmon. Fishing is only fair in the West Fork Gulkana, but there is good fishing in Crosswind Lake and Fish Lake. Dog Creek originates at the outlet of Crosswind Lake, passes through

four lakes (including Fish Lake), and drains into the West Fork. Dog Creek is small and winding, but there are no long or difficult rapids. The West Fork also has no dangerous sections—it is quite flat in spots and relatively slow. Plan a minimum of three days from Crosswind to Sourdough Campground.



### Mileage Table

Approximate  
distance  
(in river miles)

Crosswind Lake to first lake .....	2 miles
distance across first lake .....	1 mile
first lake to second lake .....	1 mile
distance across second lake ...	1 1/2 mile
second lake to Dog Lake .....	1/2 mile
distance across Dog Lake .....	1/2 mile
Dog Lake to Fish Lake .....	16 miles
distance across Fish Lake .....	4 1/2 miles
Fish Lake to West Fork .....	2 miles
mouth of creek to mainstem Gulkana .....	30 miles
mouth of West Fork to Sourdough campground .....	<u>17 miles</u>
<b>Total river miles .....</b>	<b>76 miles</b>

# The ADF&G Trophy Fish Program

Anglers have been participating since the 1960s in the ADF&G Trophy Fish Program. Minimum weights for trophy fish certificates are listed below.

Entries must be weighed in the presence of witnesses and a Trophy Fish Official, on a scale currently certified by the Division of Weights and Measures.

At least one witness is mandatory, as is a photograph. Entries must be legally caught, from waters open to the public, in compliance with current ADF&G sport fishing regulations. ■

## CATCH-AND-RELEASE HONORARY CERTIFICATES

ADF&G issues honorary trophy fish certificates and a patch to entrants who catch and release fish of minimum length qualifications.

To limit handling of the fish, estimate its length instead of actually measuring it. Send a clear photograph with each entry (see instructions on page 11) showing a close-up side view of the fish. Any sign of improper handling or injury in the photo will disqualify the entry. At least one witness is mandatory.

Minimum lengths for catch-and-release honorary certificates:

*Arctic char/Dolly Varden:* 30 inches  
*Arctic grayling:* 18 inches  
*brook trout:* 20 inches  
*cutthroat trout:* 20 inches  
*lake trout:* 36 inches  
*northern pike:* 40 inches  
*rainbow/steelhead:* 32 inches  
*sheefish:* 45 inches

SPECIES	MINIMUM WEIGHT	RECORDHOLDERS			
		Lbs/oz	Year	Location	Angler
Arctic char/ Dolly Varden	10 lb	19/12.5	1991	Noatak River	Ken Ubben
Brook trout	3 lb	<i>(Species added in 1995—no entries to date)</i>			
Burbot	8 lb	24/12	1976	Lake Louise	George R. Howard
King salmon <i>see below</i>		97/4	1985	Kenai River	Lester Anderson
Chum salmon	15 lb	32/0	1985	Caamano Point	Fredrick Thynes
Coho salmon	20 lb	26/0	1976	Icy Strait	Andrew Robbins
Cutthroat trout	3 lb	8/6	1977	Wilson Lake	Robert Denison
Grayling	3 lb	4/13	1981	Ugashik Narrows	Paul F. Kanitz
Halibut	250 lb	459/0	1996	Unalaska Bay	Jack Tragis
Lake trout	20 lb	47/0	1970	Clarence Lake	Daniel Thorsness
Lingcod	45 lb	71/0	2000	Seward	Mark D. Gomez
Northern pike	15 lb	38/0	1991	Innoko River	Jack Wagner
Pink salmon	8 lb	12/9	1974	Moose River	Steven A. Lee
Rainbow/ steelhead trout	15 lb	42/3	1970	Bell Island	David White
Rockfish	18 lb	37/2	1995	Passage Canal	Colin Gamble
Sheefish	30 lb	53/0	1986	Pah River	Lawrence E. Hudnall
Sockeye salmon	12 lb	16/0	1974	Kenai River	Chuck Leach
Whitefish	4 lb	9/0	1989	Tozitna River	Al Mathews

King salmon minimum weight in the Kenai River is 75 lb. For the rest of the state, it is 50 lb.

Affidavits must be submitted by January 31 of the year following the catch to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Sport Fish, P.O. Box 25526, Juneau, AK 99802. Affidavit forms and complete Trophy Fish Program rules are available at ADF&G offices, and you can also download them from our website at [www.state.ak.us/adfg/sportf/geninfo/trophy/form.htm](http://www.state.ak.us/adfg/sportf/geninfo/trophy/form.htm).

# Catch-and-release techniques

## Tackle

**1. Use a single-hook lure.** Do not just clip off two of the hooks from a factory supplied treble-hook lure—replace it with a larger single-hook. The large hook will not usually be taken as deeply as a smaller, clipped treble-hook.

**2. Pinch down the barb with pliers.** A barbless hook is much easier to remove than a barbed hook. Although a barbless hook may penetrate deeper, the hooking injury is usually less severe because additional damage does not result from backing out a barbless hook.



### 3. Do not play the fish to exhaustion.

Use a heavy rod and line (30-pound test or greater for king salmon) so the fish can be brought to hand before it is completely exhausted.

## Handling Your Catch

**1. Do NOT** drag the fish up onto the gravel beach if fishing from shore; *keep the fish in the water.* Stand in the water to release fish.

**2. Use a landing net**—preferably one with soft woven mesh.

**3. Do NOT** grasp the fish tightly around its belly, and **DO NOT** put your fingers up under its gill cover.

**4. Do NOT** grasp the fish by its eyes. Control the fish by grasping its lower jaw, with your thumb inside its mouth.

**5. Keep the fish in the water.** If you need a photo, grasp the base of its tail in one hand and cradle the fish under its belly with the other, until the photographer is ready, then lift the fish partly from the water for the brief time it takes to snap the photo, before releasing it.

## Hook Removal

Use needle-nosed pliers or a hemostat to grasp and gently remove the hook while stabilizing the fish in the water by its lower jaw.

If the fish is hooked in the gills and bleeding heavily, consider killing it for a meal.



## Reviving Your Catch

After unhooking it, point the fish into the current, holding it by the base of the tail. If all the previous recommendations are followed, the fish will not be exhausted, and will swim away briskly.

If the fish is exhausted (the fish will not remain upright, lies on its side, or cannot maintain itself in slow current), cradle it upright, facing into the current, until it has the strength to swim away on its own.

**Alaska Department of Fish and Game**  
**TROPHY FISH AFFIDAVIT**  
(Please type or print clearly)

I am applying for the following certificate:       Honorary Catch-and-release Certificate       Trophy Certificate

Species: \_\_\_\_\_ Certified weight: \_\_\_\_ lbs. \_\_\_\_ oz. (does not apply to catch-and-release entries)

Length: \_\_\_\_ inches (to nearest 1/8 inch)      Caught in (check one):       Marine       Fresh water

Date caught: \_\_\_\_\_ Location caught: \_\_\_\_\_ Sport Fish License No. \_\_\_\_\_

Entrant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_ Age (if under 16 years of age): \_\_\_\_

Mailing address \_\_\_\_\_ City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code \_\_\_\_\_

The undersigned, being a Trophy Fish Official, does hereby verify the identity of the described fish:

Official's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_ Scales certification date: \_\_\_\_\_

Official's address \_\_\_\_\_

We, the undersigned, witnessed the weighing and measuring of the fish described above, and verify the weight and measurements recorded:

Witness 1. (signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (address) \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 2. (signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (address) \_\_\_\_\_

I hereby swear that in taking this fish I complied with all the rules and regulations in the location the fish was caught, and that the witnesses hereto actually witnessed the weighing and measuring of this fish. I further declare that all the above information is true and correct.

Entrant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Official's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Certified by me this date: \_\_\_\_\_

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game may wish to include the photograph taken in conjunction with the issuing of this Trophy Fish Affidavit as part of its Division of Sport Fish website. Please indicate your preference by initialling below:

\_\_\_\_ I agree to allow the ADF&G to include my photograph on its internet website.      \_\_\_\_ I do not wish the ADF&G to include my photograph on its internet website.

Mail this original affidavit and the photograph to: **ADF&G Division of Sport Fish P.O. Box 25526, Juneau, Alaska 99802-5526**  
A separate affidavit form must be completed for each entry. INCOMPLETE FORMS MAY DISQUALIFY ENTRANTS. ADF&G reserves the right to check fish identification or to refuse any questionable affidavits. Decisions of the department are final.

