Marine salmon fishing

KING SALMON This highly prized sport fishing species is one of the least abundant salmon species in northern Southeast Alaska, but grows the largest and is a powerful, enduring fighter.

King salmon inhabit the waters of Southeast Alaska year-round. Large king salmon bound for spawning grounds and weighing up to 70 pounds are around from late April through June. Immature "feeder" kings ranging from 10 to 40 pounds come through the Sitka area and remain in the area to feed during August and September. Persistent anglers can find a few scattered fish throughout winter.

Anglers visiting the Sitka area most frequently ask, "When's the best time to fish for king salmon?" Fishing improves greatly with spring weather in late April, but the prime time is from late May through the month of June. Anglers targeting king salmon may have catch rates of up to 5 hours per fish harvested (0.2 fish per hour) in June. Catch rates fall with the beginning of the commercial troll fishery in July, although good king salmon fishing continues throughout the summer.

The best way to locate king salmon is to locate bait fish—usually with a fathometer. Once herring or needlefish schools are found, you can be sure king salmon are not far away. Presence of sea birds also indicates presence of bait fish. Murres, murrelets, auklets, and other diving birds are notorious for swimming under herring schools and forcing bait fish to the surface. When this happens, flapping, anxious gulls can be spotted from miles away attacking the balled-up herring schools. If you don't find baitfish schools on the fathometer or see bird activity, explore around points of land that project out into tidal currents, where schools of bait fish are likely to be found. The currents create eddies and rips that concentrate food for bait fish, and, in turn, attract king salmon.

Marine sport anglers use two techniques for ocean salmon fishing: trolling and mooching. The traditional method, "trolling," uses flasher gear like commercial salmon trollers, but many trollers forego the use of flashers and fish a single herring behind the sinker, hooked to swim in a large oscillating circle. This method usually

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catches larger, although maybe not as many, fish and is often used near dropoffs and submerged kelp beds. Flashers or dodgers require relatively heavy line (30-pound test or greater) and heavy sinkers (12–32 oz). A downrigger with a quick disconnect snap lets an angler fish without heavy weights on his gear and makes fighting a hooked fish much easier.

Rotating flashers or side-wobbling dodgers attract salmon either by resembling a school of bait avoiding a predator or by imitating the flash of a salmon attacking a school of bait.

A suitable flasher rod is long enough to cope with 5 or 6 feet of flasher leader, plus $2^1/_2$ feet of terminal leader. Shorter rods can be used along with a downrigger, as no flasher leader is required. Rods should be sensitive enough to feel what is on the line. (Flasher gear may appear to be insensitive and unwieldy, but it is in fact so

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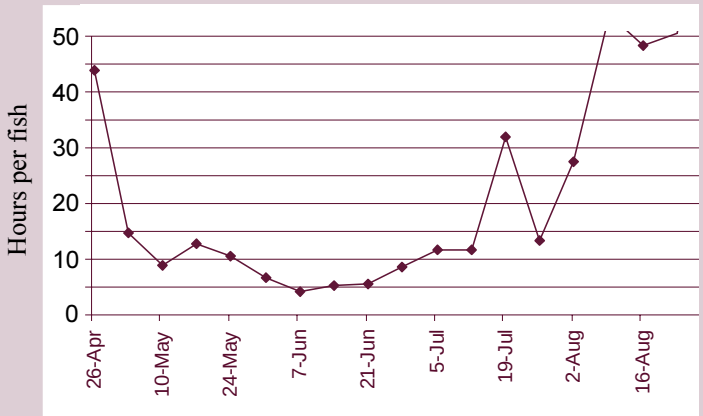


Average weekly king salmon catch rates in Sitka, 1994 to 1998.

sensitive that small pieces of grass fouled on the terminal gear are easily detected and corrected).

Terminal gear usually consists of a small herring, or a strip from a larger one, threaded onto a treble hook or affixed onto twin single hooks with a "bait biter" so that it is tossed back and forth by the rotating flasher. Single- or double-hook artificials (plastic hootchies or "skirts," bucktail flies, and small spoons) can also be used behind a flasher. Most anglers trail the terminal gear 28 to 32 inches behind the flasher when fishing for king salmon. Flasher color and size are individual preferences, based on experience, reputation, or superstition.

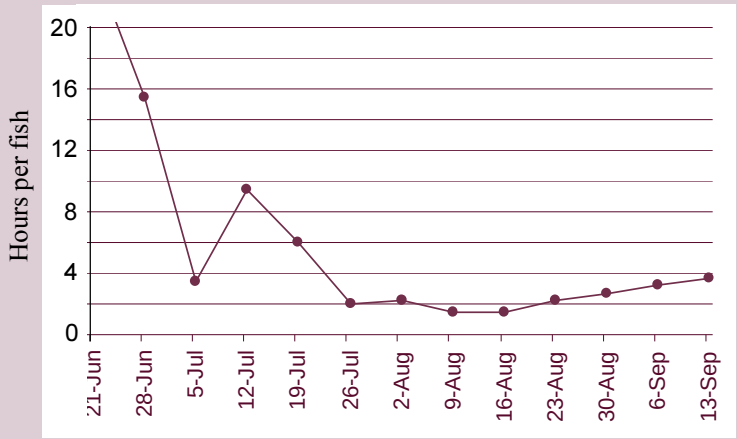
The other saltwater salmon fishing technique, "mooching," consists of fishing with lighter gear from an anchored, drifting, or slowly trolled boat. During the peak summer months, mooching probably is more effective for catching large king salmon because it can cover the widest range of depths. Mooching rods are 7 1/2- to 10-foot fiberglass or graphite composite, rigged with a light saltwater revolving spool reel with line capacity of about 200 yd of 10- to 30-pound test monofilament.

The many kinds and colors of artificial lures, plugs, and spoons displayed on tackle shop walls may all be used effectively, although some colors work better than others during certain times of the year. Many king salmon anglers, though, leave the artificial lures hanging in the tackle shop, because the very best bait day in and day out is herring. The three basic herring setups are a whole herring, a plug-cut herring (head severed), and a strip—a narrow triangle cut from the side of a frozen or salted herring. Most anglers use two hooks of size range 2/0 to 5/0, tied in tandem depending upon bait length; some prefer a single hook rig. All herring bait setups are designed to spin in the water. Any rate of rotation will work as long as there is rotation. Which of the three setups to use is purely a matter of personal preference, and the best way to learn to use them is to have someone who fishes them show you how.

COHO SALMON

To many anglers, these are second only to king salmon. With the exception of pink salmon in some years, more coho salmon are harvested by sport anglers than any other species in Southeast Alaska. They are easy to catch, and they often travel in large schools that provide intense action. Coho salmon fishing can be done with a variety of gear from any vessel. Large boats can work deeper waters, and open skiffs—even canoes—can cruise along the margins of kelp beds. Most anglers fish with fresh or frozen herring bait while trolling, drifting with the tide, or anchoring in areas of active tidal currents.

Coho salmon are usually no deeper than 30 feet and are frequently caught within a foot or two of the

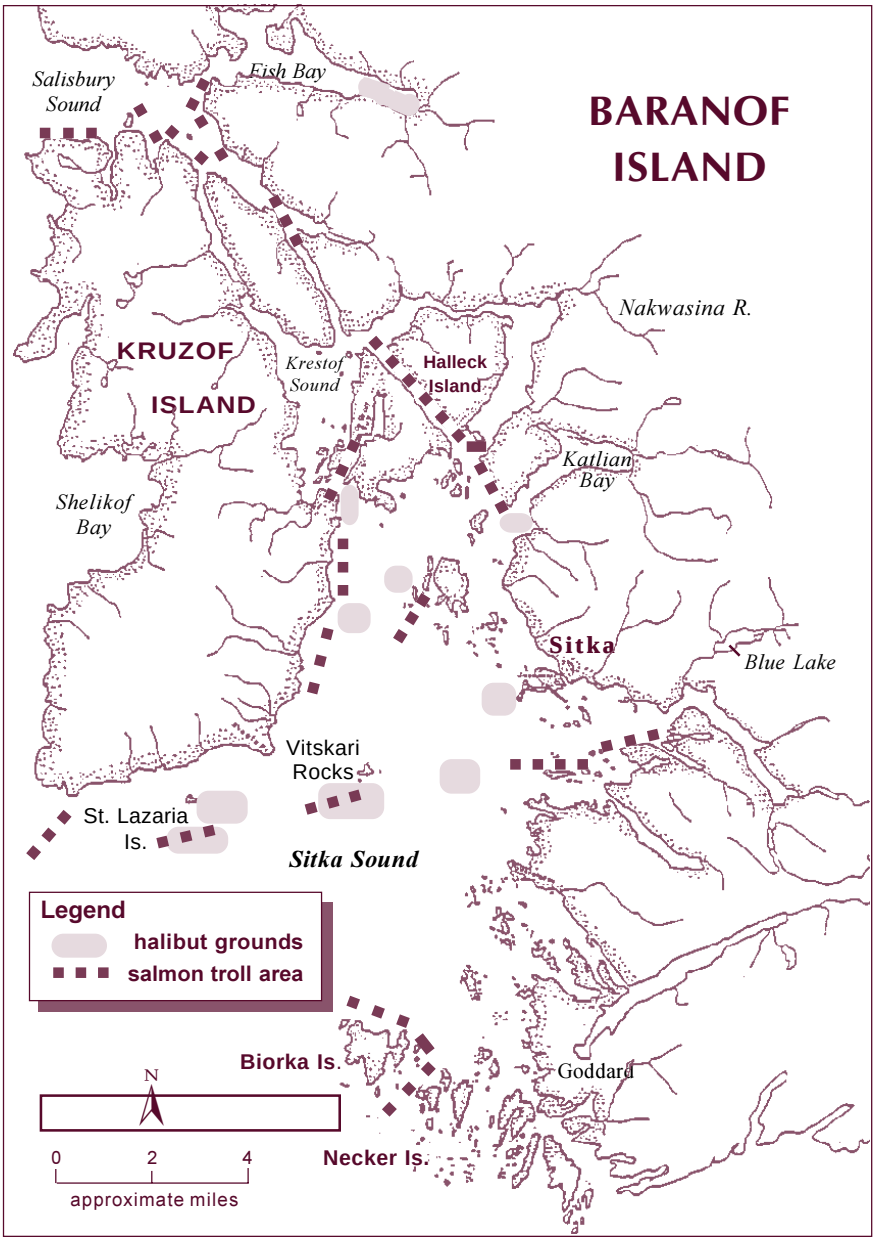


Average weekly coho salmon catch rates in Sitka, 1994 to 1998.

surface. Gear varies with the angler's style. Some use heavy line with leaders, flashers, or dodgers, and a whole herring for bait, but coho can be taken just as effectively on the simplest gear: 15- to 20-pound test line and 2- to 6-ounce trolling weights, followed by a 25-pound test double hook leader and a herring fished whole, as a strip, or plug. When they're biting, nearly anything works.

Spinning gear is equally effective, with fly rod and flies, or bait casting. Coho salmon are aggressive and strike readily; they usually do so "on the run" and set the hook themselves.

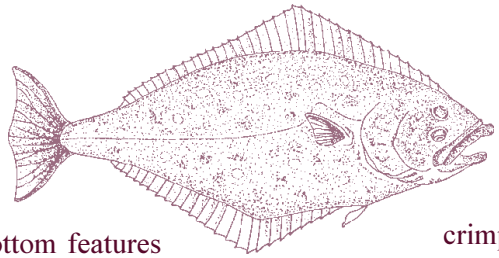
All anglers agree on one thing: successful coho salmon fishing is a matter of being in the right place at the right time. The right place is an area where ocean currents and coastal topography concentrate the fish or their food source. The right time is usually an hour or so before or after a change of tide. However, none of the above seems to matter when the run is at its peak, usually the third week in August.



Map 4. *Some of the more popular trolling drags and halibut holes around the Sitka area.*

Coho salmon begin appearing in the sport catch late in June, when anglers are fishing for king salmon. Their availability and catch rates rise through mid-August (see graph on page 13). In early to mid-September they head rapidly toward their home streams to congregate near the estuaries they left as smolt 17 months earlier. Saltwater fishing for coho salmon is essentially over by the end of September.

In the early 1990s, coho salmon populations in the Sitka area were depressed, and escapements to local rivers and streams were very low. This created poor fishing from shore in areas where spin-casting was once a very popular sport. But in 1994, record numbers of coho salmon returned to streams and, since then, returns to the Sitka area have remained moderately high.



HALIBUT

Like many other bottomfish, these stay near physical bottom features or "structure" such as kelp beds, drop-offs, deep trenches, underwater bars or reefs, pinnacles, and transition areas of rocky, sandy, or muddy bottoms. They hold in these areas while tides change, and as tides slacken, they move and feed. Bottom depth contour charts help the angler determine potential feeding and migration areas; a good-quality depth flasher or graph recorder helps locate specific fishing "holes."

Use a heavy, saltwater revolving spool-type reel, equipped with a good drag system and large line capacity for Dacron, nonstretch-type line in 60- to 100-pound test. Mount reels on heavy, stiff action, 5- to 7-ft fiberglass rods. Some anglers prefer roller guides along the entire rod length to lessen line stress and abrasion. Many use at least a roller tip, to reel in heavy weights from deep water, especially in fast tidal currents. Of many different options available for terminal tackle, many anglers prefer the slip sinker/leader hook rig for bait presentation. This includes a sleeve-snap weight system which slides up and down the main line coming from the rod tip. The end of the main line is tied to a heavy-duty snap swivel, to which a 20- to 30-inch monofilament or wire strand leader is attached (80- to 300-pound test to allow for abrasion). The leader should have a large barrel swivel crimped on at one end and the hook on the other. Standard long shank J hooks, 4/0 to 10/0 size, are popular as well as the newer circle hooks. The leader pulls freely through the attached sinker and allows an angler to detect more and lighter strikes.

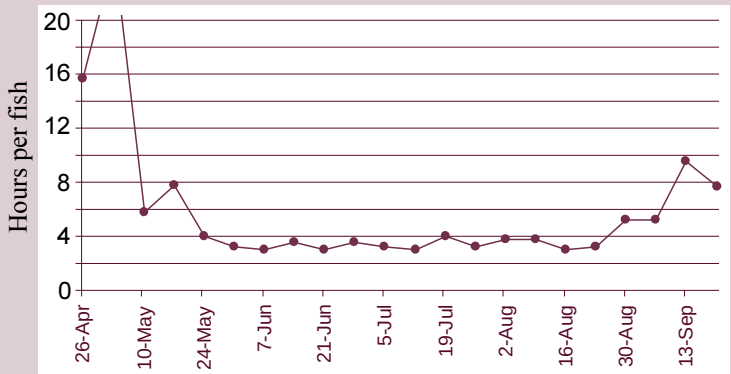
Robert Anchor

Bait presentation by drifting is simpler and more popular than anchoring, but anchoring is probably the most effective technique for halibut fishing, once the fish are located. Anchoring the boat allows the fished baits to distribute a scent pattern down-current which, because of the halibut's keen sense of smell, actually attracts them from some distance. A group of anglers using herring bait will create more scent effect than a single angler. Many baits work—herring, squid, octopus, and salmon heads or tails.

The halibut's sense of sight is also important in finding food. For visual effect, hootchies or plastic skirts on baited hooks give a definite advantage. The plastic material in the skirts picks up the smell of the bait being fished. So, even if the halibut hits and "steals" the bait, the remaining skirt which now emits the bait scent can draw another strike. Various lead head jigs and plastic squid or octopus imitations work well. Flashy spoon-type jigs, decorated with fluorescent or iridescent green/blue adhesive, also prove very effective when fluttered erratically off the bottom. Most fish can detect greens and blues from the color spectrum better than most other colors as depth increases.

Halibut move from deep water to shallower shelves near shore in late spring, and by late May catch rates average one fish for every 3 hours of fishing (see graph on page 16). Catch rates remain high on into September, when the halibut move back out to deeper waters. This fishing period conveniently coincides with better weather and quieter water in the North Pacific. Halibut can be found later in fall and in early spring, but catch rates are low. The entire month of January is ***closed to halibut fishing.***

Landing and boating halibut can be an interesting proposition, especially when a fish over 100 pounds is on the line. A large salmon landing net can be



Average weekly halibut catch rates in Sitka, 1994 to 1998.

used on halibut up to about 50 pounds, but once it's inside the net and alongside the boat, use a small club to dispatch the fish by a sharp blow to its head. Halibut are very strong—they can do considerable damage if brought aboard a small boat alive.

ROCKFISH These slow-growing fish are surprisingly long-lived. The most common species in the sport fishery (yelloweye, quillback, and black) can live to 114, 71, and 40 years, respectively (yelloweyes average 50 years), and they mature at about 15, 12, and 10 years. Males mature earlier, but are usually smaller than females the same age. Rockfish are often caught incidentally by anglers targeting on salmon, halibut, or lingcod. Those who want to target on rockfish need access to rocky bottom or shoreline areas. The best fishing is from May to August (rockfish tend to go much deeper in winter). Use a fairly limber rod and light saltwater tackle, so that you can feel what is happening on the other end of the line. Jigs, buzz-bombs, herring bait, or other lures may be used. Favorites are the leadhead jigs and the many types of plastic "worm-tails"—they can be kept from snagging rocks and are very effective jigged just above bottom.

Rockfish should be bled, filleted and chilled immediately after catching, to enhance edibility. (Watch out for the sometimes venomous spines on the fins, though—punctures from these spines can be very painful!) Rockfish have firm flesh that turns snow white when cooked. Flavor and texture varies subtly between species, but all are excellent, and the mild flavor lends itself to a variety of cooking methods and sauces. (For some good recipes, write the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, at 311 N. Franklin Street, Suite 200, Juneau, AK 99811, for their brochure on preparing and cooking rockfish).

LINGCOD A large piscivore (fish-eater), the lingcod grows to 50 pounds or more and ranges along the rocky coastal area, inhabiting rocky bottoms and reef areas.

Lingcod gear is essentially the same equipment used for trolling or mooching for salmon: limber to medium-stout 6- to 9-foot rods and level wind reels with 200- to 300-yard capacity of 20- to 50-pound test line. You can use lighter gear, but care must be taken with the terminal tackle. Lingcod have a mouthful of the most wicked-looking teeth found in the northeastern Pacific ocean, and wire or heavy monofilament leaders are necessary to keep your line intact during the fight. Fish bait such as herring, salmon tails, and viscera work best. Lures and jigs work well, too. A unique feeding behavior of lingcod is to grab hold of hooked live fish and hang on while being hauled to the surface.

Adult lingcod live on or near reefs, drop-offs, and steep boulder gradients in areas of high current down to 30 fathoms. Not an active swimmer, the lingcod waits perched on rock outcroppings or reef tops and lets tidal currents bring baitfish within reach, then dashes out to seize its prey. They often feed better when the tide is running; if you fish at slack tide, fish deeper. One very successful technique is to fish with anything silver-colored over a rocky reef or reef edge while drifting with the tide or wind. If a lingcod is in the neighborhood, it will not be able to resist.

Lingcod have a life history that makes them particularly vulnerable to harvest and predation. They spawn in winter and early spring and the males guard the nest of egg masses until hatching. Research has indicated that egg masses are extremely vulnerable to predation when males are removed from the nest. To protect lingcod during this sensitive nest-guarding season, ***fishing for lingcod is closed from December 1 through May 15.***