



# SOUTHCENTRAL REGION

## DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

### Fishing for Mat-Su Valley Coho Salmon

#### Coho Salmon in the Mat-Su Valley Area

Coho or silver salmon are found throughout the Cook Inlet and Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley areas. Excellent eating and well known for their fighting ability, coho salmon promise great sport fishing fun for anglers of all ages and experiences.

Coho salmon abundance varies widely from year to year. During years of plenty, up to a million coho salmon return to Cook Inlet streams. To measure run strength, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) relies partly on catch numbers in sport and commercial fisheries. A few weirs are also in place to count escapements.

Immediately after entering freshwaters, coho salmon are very sensitive to hooking and handling, particularly when bait is used. A study conducted on the Little Susitna River concluded that 70 percent of 'ocean bright' coho salmon hooked and released when bait is used did not live to spawn. In part because of the results of this research, many waters have special regulations for retention and release of coho salmon. Please review the regulations in the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet carefully before you head out fishing.



#### Managing Alaska's Fisheries

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Division of Sport Fish (DSF) is charged with the management of Alaska's sport fisheries under the



sustainable yield principle, through regulations and management plans adopted by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Enforcement of fishing regulations is primarily the responsibility of the Alaska Wildlife Troopers. The ADF&G Palmer office is the management office for the Northern (including the Mat-Su Valley) and West Cook Inlet areas.

Every year ADF&G releases four sport fishing regulations booklets for the Northern, Southcentral, Southeast, and Southwest areas. Sport fishing regulations specific to the Knik Arm area such as bag and possession limits, seasons, tackle, or tackle can be found in the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.





These booklets are free of charge and are available at ADF&G offices, wherever sport fishing licenses are sold, and online at [www.adfg.alaska.gov](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov) under the Regulations tab. Before you cast out your line, make sure you read all the regulations for the waters you are fishing. Don't forget to check for advisory announcements and emergency orders on the ADF&G website at [www.adfg.alaska.gov](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov). ADF&G may issue an advisory announcement and emergency order to open, liberalize, close, or restrict any fishery at any time due to biological needs.

In the event an advisory announcement and emergency order is issued, ADF&G attempts to release the documents a minimum of 24 to 48 hours before it becomes effective. Anglers can find advisory announcements and emergency orders on the ADF&G website under the Sport Fishing tab. Select the Fishing Information link and then the Emergency Orders and News Releases tab. Once there anglers can select the region and management area they intend to fish.



During the summer ADF&G posts weekly in-season fishing reports online. Anglers can find these under the Fishing Reports tab under the Fishing Information tab. ADF&G staff records these in-season fishing reports on the Palmer sport fishing hotline at (907) 746-6300. Anglers can also subscribe to receive the notifications via their email. Updates are also posted on the ADF&G - Sport Fishing Southcentral Alaska Facebook page. If you have any questions, please contact the Palmer ADF&G office at (907) 746-6300.

## Sport Fishing Guides

Many charter services are available and some are based out of Anchorage but the majority are located in Wasilla, Palmer, Willow, and Talkeetna. Charter services include everything from drop-off day trips to full-service lodging and guiding trips. Please contact the Mat-Su Visitor's Bureau at (907) 746-5000 for a list of local guides, charters, and lodges.

## Run Timing

In northern Cook Inlet, coho salmon run from mid-July through October. Runs typically peak the last week of July through the end of August, depending on the location. In the Susitna River drainages, a few coho salmon enter after early September. After runs peak, coho salmon are spread throughout the Susitna and Knik rivers drainages. Anglers fishing later can usually catch bright dime coho salmon from less crowded fishing spots.



## Methods and Strategies

What type of gear do you need to catch these acrobatic fighters? Many anglers use a medium weight spinning or bait-casting rod loaded with a high quality monofilament line with about 10 to 14 pound test. Slightly heavier line as high as 20 pound is suggested if you plan to fish in fast current.

Fly fishing anglers use a 6- or 7-weight rod about 9 feet in length. Fly fishing line should be a weight-forward, rapid-sinking line, which will get the fly quickly down to the fish. A 6-foot tippet of 10 to 14 pound test monofilament will do. Where legal, many coho salmon anglers prefer bait, especially preserved quarter-sized chunk of cured



salmon eggs. Regulations concerning the use of bait vary from stream to stream. In some streams or sections of streams unbaited, artificial lures or single-hook artificial lures are required year-round. Make sure you read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet before you head out fishing.



Under the right water and light conditions, brightly colored spoons and spinners can out-fish bait. Although many types of lures will catch a feisty coho salmon, pay special attention to the size and color of the lure. Many novice coho salmon anglers use lures intended for Chinook salmon, which are generally too large for coho salmon. Stick with size number two through five spinners and ½-ounce spoons. Red is more visible in silty water or near the surface, while greens and blues are more visible in clearer water and at greater depths. Small diving plugs intended for steelhead will also attract coho salmon.

The best bait hooks are size 2/0 or 3/0 single hooks. Most people simply attach a ½-ounce sinker about 16 to 18 inches above a quarter-sized chunk of cured salmon eggs, and let it rest on the bottom. The idea is that coho salmon will pick up the scent trail of the eggs and follow it to the baited hook. Some anglers also drift the eggs through fishing holes. Another highly productive methods of bait fishing includes using a slip-bobber, which presents your bait to fish in different levels of the stream.

Coho salmon also strike flies. Black or purple Egg-sucking Leech patterns are hard to beat, especially those that include some sparkly material. Most of the top fly patterns for coho are dark with a bright attractor, but egg patterns can also be effective. The top five coho patterns are Electric Egg-Sucking Leech (black & purple with pink head); the Marabou Popsicle (black, purple & brown); Bunny Leech (black or purple with pink head); Dr. Bill's Spin Tail (dark colors); and the Hairball Leech (dark colors).



## Knik Arm Drainages

There are several coho salmon streams throughout the Knik Arm drainage, with the Little Susitna River being the most popular destination. These streams are easily accessible on foot and without a boat or airplane; however, many anglers still choose to use boats to escape crowds along the streambanks and to fish in more remote areas. A majority of the fishing takes place in the Palmer Hayflats State Game Refuge, a 45-mile complex of forest, wetlands, tidal sloughs, lakes, and tide flats encompassing the mouths of the Knik and Matanuska rivers.

Each year, anglers spend more than 4,5000 angler-days fishing for coho and sockeye salmon on Cottonwood Creek, Wasilla Creek, and Rabbit Slough. There are three main access points. Off the Glenn Highway, boats can be launched at the Knik River bridge. There is a boat and foot access at Rabbit Slough, a tributary of Wasilla Creek. Access to Cottonwood Creek is located off Hayfield Road at the southwest end of Fairview Loop Road provides for canoe, foot, and limited off-road vehicle access. Visitors to the refuge should be aware that there are seasonal restrictions regarding off-road use of motorized vehicles, boats, and airplanes. For additional information, please contact the Palmer ADF&G office.

## Coho Salmon in the Knik Arm Drainages

Coho salmon generally arrive by late June, and continue their run through September. There are lots of smaller fishing areas within the Knik Arm drainages, in fact, just about any place where clear waters mixes with the Knik or Matanuska rivers you will find a few coho salmon, generally during August. The average weight of Knik Arm coho salmon, excluding those of Little Susitna River origin, is just under six pounds.

## Eklutna Tailrace

The Eklutna Tailrace is approximately 34 miles north of Anchorage, near mile 3.5 of the Old Glen Highway. The sport fishery is confined to the ½-mile long tailrace, which

extends from the Old Glen Highway down to the Knik River. All waters within a 1/2-mile radius of its confluence with the Knik River, and to an ADF&G marker located 2 miles downstream of the confluence is open year-round to fishing for coho salmon.

The Eklutna Tailrace is an enhanced or terminal fishery meaning it is supported by coho salmon smolt reared and released by the William Jack Hernandez Sport Fish Hatchery. Coho salmon were first stocked in 1998, and the fishery started in 2004. A few native coho salmon from the Knik or Matanuska rivers stocks may also be found at the tailrace. The Eklutna Tailrace is not tidally influenced.

Anglers use a wide variety of lures, most sweeten with a quarter sized chunk of preserved salmon eggs. Chinook, sockeye, and chum salmon can all be found in the Eklutna Tailrace waters. Additional information such as bag and possession limits for all salmon species can be found under the Knik area in the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.



### Eklutna Tailrace Youth-Only Coho Salmon Fishery

On the third Saturday in August, from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. a section of the Eklutna Tailrace is the site of a youth-only fishery for coho salmon. During the youth-only fishery, only anglers 15 years old and younger may fish for coho salmon from the confluence with the Knik River upstream to the pedestrian bridge. Sections dedicated to this Youth-Only Fishery are closed to anglers 16 years and up, including catch-and-release, during this time but the remainder of the Tailrace will be open to fishing for anglers of all ages.

The bag limit for both Youth-Only Fisheries is two coho salmon per day and in possession. Bait and multiple hooks are allowed in both locations. Snagging is not allowed. People age 16 and older are encouraged to help the young anglers but remember these are Youth-Only Fisheries for anglers under 16 years-old. So, kids keep your hands on that fishing pole because you must set the hook. Be safe and take precautions around the water. Additional information can be found under the Knik Arm area in the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.

### Eklutna Tailrace Access

From Anchorage drive north on the Glenn Highway and take the Old Glenn Highway exit. Turn right at the stop sign and follow the winding road. The Eklutna tailrace is located at mile 3.5 of the Old Glenn Highway on the left. The recently-improved access site includes a paved parking lot, wheelchair-accessible paved trails, paved foot trails, a foot bridge, and public use toilets and dumpster.

### Wasilla Creek/Rabbit Slough

Access is located at mile 35 of the Glenn Highway, just north of the Alaska Railroad crossing. Follow the signs along the frontage road to the public access road leading to the slough. There are seasonal restrictions on motorboat use at this location. Salmon fishing is only allowed from the mouth of Wasilla Creek/Rabbit Slough upstream to the Alaska Railroad bridge. Please review the Wasilla Creek regulations under the Knik Arm area in the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.

### Cottonwood Creek

Public access is off the Fairview Loop Road a few miles from its intersection with the Knik-Goose Bay Road. Look for a gravel road on the right side of the road at a sharp 90-degree corner, this is Hayfield Road. Turn right and watch for a brown sign directing you to a dirt road to the left. This road leads to a parking area on the Palmer Hayflats State Game Refuge near the mouth of Cottonwood Creek.

Most anglers fish this intertidal section about one to two hours before high tide. This section has special fishing regulations including a limited open and close fishing times, make sure to read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet before you head out fishing.



### Fish Creek

Fish Creek is located at mile 16 of the Knik-Goose Bay Road from Wasilla. The best fishing is where the clear creek and the muddy Cook Inlet waters meet. Again, most anglers fish the incoming tide. Be careful when fishing near the mouth of Fish Creek. The Knik Arm tide comes in swiftly and it is possible to be trapped by sticky



mud and rising water. Fish Creek has special regulations including when the creek is open and closed to fishing, and a later season start date.



### Fish Creek Youth-Only Coho Salmon Fishery

On the first Saturday and Sunday in August, from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. a section of Fish Creek is the site of a youth-only fishery for coho salmon. During the youth-only fishery, only anglers 15 years old and younger may fish for coho salmon from the mouth of Fish Creek upstream to an ADF&G marker  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile upstream from the Knik-Goose Bay Road. Sections dedicated to this Youth-Only Fishery are closed to anglers 16 years and up, including catch-and-release, during this time.

The bag limit for both Youth-Only Fisheries is three salmon per day and in possession, which only two salmon per day and in possession may be coho salmon. Chinook salmon may not be fished for or retained. Bait and multiple hooks are allowed. Snagging is not allowed. People age 16 and older are encouraged to help the young anglers but remember these are Youth-Only Fisheries for anglers under 16 years-old. So, kids keep your hands on that fishing pole because you must set the hook. Be safe and take precautions around the water. All other sport fishing regulations remain in effect for Fish Creek, additional information can be found under the Knik Arm area in current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.

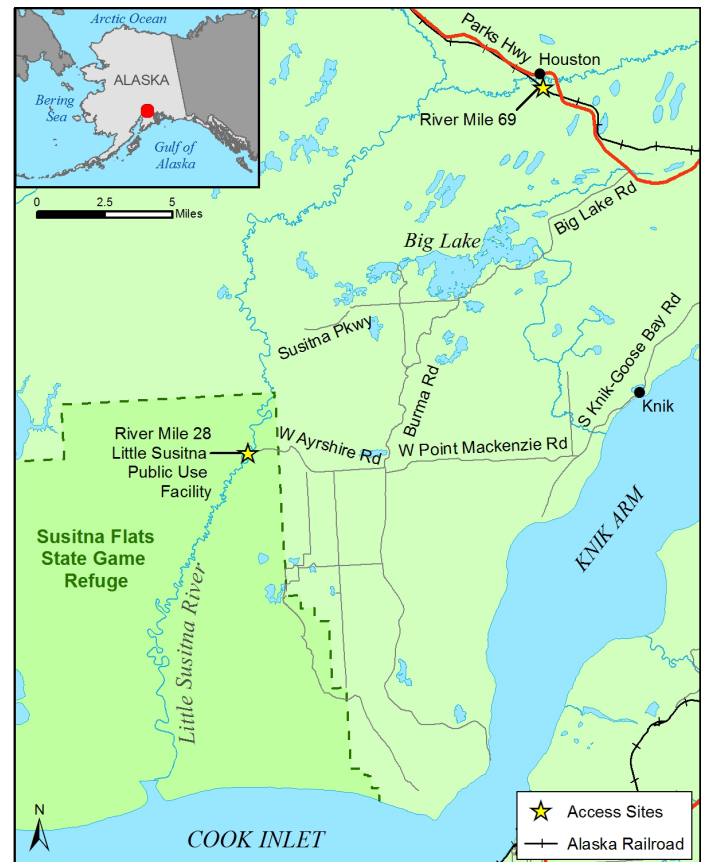
### Jim Creek

Located near Palmer, Jim Creek drains a wetland of shallow lakes then enters the Knik River about 10 miles upstream from the saltwaters. These waters provide the latest fishable run of coho salmon in the Mat-Su Valley, with coho salmon available from late July through freeze-up in October or November. Sockeye salmon and a few chum salmon are also present in Jim Creek. Anglers can

reach Jim Creek by taking the Old Glenn Highway to Plumley Road, which is near Bodenbergs Butte. Follow the Plumley Road to Caudill Road and take a right. Drive down Caudill Road for a mile to a large parking area on the left. From here, follow a gravel road for about two miles to the mouth of Jim Creek. A word of caution, on warm days the nearby Knik Glacier melts rapidly and swells the shallow Knik River to flood stage. It is possible to become marooned on a temporary island or return to find your vehicle underwater. Worse yet, when the water is high, the fishing success for coho salmon declines drastically.

### Moose Creek

Located at mile 54.5 of the Glenn Highway the mouth of Moose Creek is often one fishing spot that is overlooked.



### Coho Salmon in Little Susitna River

The Little Susitna River produces the second-largest freshwater harvest of coho salmon in Alaska. The 'Little Su,' as it is locally known, has 70 river miles of prime coho salmon fishing from its mouth upstream to the Parks Highway bridge at mile 58 in Houston.

### Little Susitna River Access

The Little Susitna wanders through part of the Susitna Flats State Game Refuge, over 300,000 acres of prime waterfowl, moose, coyote, wolf, and bear habitat. Access to the refuge is managed by ADF&G for the protection of fish and wildlife, their habitats, and public use of the area. Use of the state refuge lands area controlled to prevent habitat changes which would be harmful to the wildlife, fish, and habitat.



There are three primary ways to access the Little Su. Experienced boaters can reach the intertidal reaches of the Little Susitna River by launching from the Port of Anchorage and crossing the Cook Inlet. Boaters are warned to be cautious of this access point as the Northern Cook Inlet can have up to 30-foot tides and strong winds. Definitely not a good place or starting point to being a boating career! However, if you are experienced and have a properly-equipped 20-foot or longer boat, or have a saltwater-capable inflatable, crossing the inlet is an efficient way to reach the mouth of the Little Susitna River.

Just remember to enter and exit the river's mouth during the hours of high tide. When reading the tide book make certain that you adjust for the difference in time that the high tide arrives at Anchorage and then at the mouth of the Little Su. If the river is running high, power boats can sometimes travel from the mouth up to the Parks Highway bridge. During low water; however, most power boats travel up only as far as river mile 28.



The second access site, the Little Susitna Public Use Facility boat launch and campground, is the most popular site for boat anglers, and for anglers who don't have a boat or don't want to risk the strong tides of Cook Inlet. To reach the facility, drive to Wasilla, then turn southwest on Knik-Goose Bay Road. After about 18 miles, turn right onto Point Mackenzie Road. Turn right at the "T" and follow the blue boat launch signs.

The third access site is at mile 58 of the Parks Highway bridge, near the community of Houston, to the Little Susitna River. Many anglers streambank fish here and anglers also launch rafts and canoes at the bridge, and then take out at the Little Susitna Public Use Facility. The scenic 42-miles float trip to the facility takes 2 to three days. There are charters and guides that operate out of Wasilla, Willow, and Houston. The Houston area also has a large private campground and other services.

### Coho Fishing in the Little Susitna River

Productive fishing for coho salmon usually begins

mid-July through September. ADF&G tagging studies indicate that coho salmon migrate slowly up the Little Su and remain available to the fishery for about four weeks. Fishing is generally good in the lower river during the run's first few weeks. As fish migrate upstream in early August, fishing in the Houston area, near the Parks Highway bridge, picks up.

Anglers can also fish from shore in the Houston area downstream of the Parks Highway bridge. Remember coho salmon fishing is closed upstream of the bridge. Typically coho salmon arrive in the Houston area by mid-August and remain plentiful through mid-September.



### Eastside Drainages

Eastside Susitna River drainages include Willow Creek and everything north of it on the eastern side of the Susitna River including Little Willow Creek, Grey's Creek, Kashwitna River, Caswell Creek, Sheep Creek, Goose Creek, Montana Creek, Sunshine Creek, Rabideux Creek, Talkeetna River, Fish Creek, Clear Creek, and Chulitna River drainages. Coho salmon typically show up in late July and fishing is good through late August.

### Access to the Eastside Fisheries - Road Accessible

If you don't have a boat, Eastside Susitna waters that cross by the Parks Highway or the Talkeetna Spur Road offer the best opportunity for shore based anglers. If you're in good hiking condition, the Alaska Railroad 'whistle stop' service provides relatively inexpensive access to the Susitna River coho salmon fisheries north of Talkeetna. You can find the whistle stop schedule on the Alaska Railroad webpage [www.alaskarailroad.com](http://www.alaskarailroad.com).

If you have a boat or a raft, you have your choice of four access sites along the Parks Highway to access these water. You can access via Deshka Landing, Susitna Landing at the mouth of the Kashwitna River, the bridge crossing the Susitna River at mile 104 of the Parks Highway, and Talkeetna Landing in Talkeetna. Aside from the Parks Highway bridge, there are fees charged to launch your boat or raft from the other three access sites.

If you operate a jet boat or have a larger boat, the Susitna Landing, Deshka Landing, and Talkeetna Landing are



your best bet. Not only because of the excellent launching facilities available for larger boats but also because you can access the main channel of the Susitna River directly from these sites.

The Deshka Landing is located off the Willow Creek Parkway at the Parks Highway mile 71.3. The Susitna Landing is located at Parks Highway mile 82.5. There is also bank fishing and handicapped access. Talkeetna Landing is close to downtown Talkeetna, near the confluence of the Talkeetna, Chulitna, and Susitna rivers. The launch site was initially developed by the community of Talkeetna for public use, and has been upgrade with Federal Aid from sport fish restoration funds.

The Parks Highway mile 104 'boat launch' is basically an unmaintained gravel bar with a road approach. The access road starts from the small state campground on the southeast side of the bridge, then continues through private land to the river. It can be extremely hazardous at high water levels.

### **Willow Creek**

Located at mile 71.3 of the Parks Highway Willow Creek offers access at the state campground at the mouth. Many anglers fish the mouth, though coho salmon are found throughout the river as far as Deception Creek. The best time to fish Willow Creek is late July through early August.

### **Kashwitna River**

This river crosses at mile 83.1 of the Parks Highway. This is a glacial system, and is cloudy in midsummer and during rains. A glacial melt slows in fall, water levels drop and clarity improves, as does coho salmon fishing. Susitna Landing located at mile 82.4 offers a boat launch with camping facilities and excellent handicap access at the of the Kashwitna River. Many fishing guides and charters also use Susitna Landing as their launch site.



### **Sheep Creek**

The mouth of Sheep Creek is reached by driving west on Resolute Avenue located at mile 86.3 of the Parks Highway. At the mouth of the creek is a seasonally-maintained camping area with public restrooms. A short unpaved trail from the parking area leads to the confluence of Sheep Creek and Susitna River. Coho

salmon can arrive as early as late July, but fishing improves in early August.

### **Montana Creek**

Located at mile 96.5 of the Parks Highway Montana Creek is a popular coho salmon fishing spot. Coho salmon provide good action here by mid-August. Camping and RV parking is available in privately-operated campgrounds at the highway bridge.

### **Rabideux Creek**

Access to the mouth of Rabideux is just north of where the Parks Highway crosses the Susitna River at mile 105. When the Susitna River is running high, water often floods the road to Rabideux Creek. When this happens, an alternative route located at mile 105.4 of the Parks Highway from a turnout may be used. Rabideux Creek crosses the Parks Highway at mile 105.5. A large hole located downstream of the culverts, within the road right-of-way, typically provides fair coho salmon fishing. Passable numbers of coho salmon may be in the creek even after the Labor Day weekend.

### **Sunshine Creek**

Access to the mouth of Sunshine Creek is by a gravel road located at mile 102.5 of the Parks Highway. The Mat-Su Borough maintains a parking area near the mouth of the creek. Typically coho salmon arrive at this creek by mid-August.



### **Access to the Eastside Fisheries - Boat**

### **Little Willow Creek**

Access is located at mile 74.8 of the Parks Highway immediately adjacent to the Parks Highway bridge. But you will need to boat to its confluence with the Susitna River where the best fishing takes place. There are no facilities or boat launch at Little Willow Creek, and the property outside the road right-of-way along that stream is privately-owned. Typically coho salmon arrive at the Parks Highway bridge by mid-August.

### **Grey's Creek**

Grey's Creek crosses the Parks Highway at mile 81.8. Outside the road's right-of-way, the shoreline is private property, and there is no public shoreline access to the

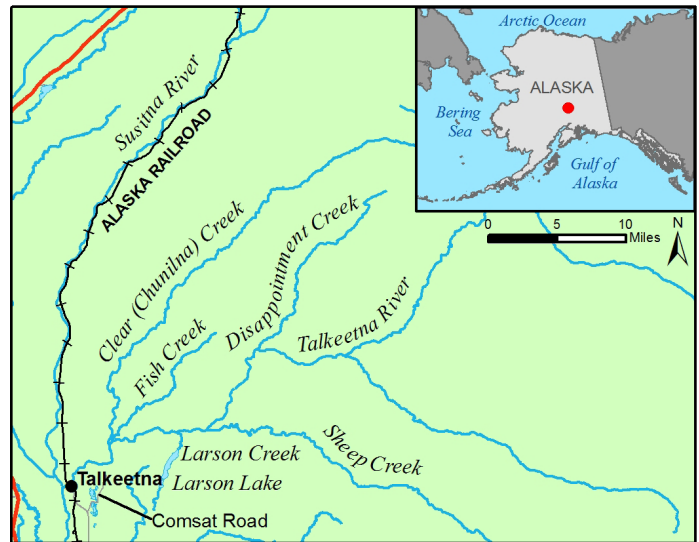
mouth of the Parks Highway bridge. Access to the mouth is by boat only and you can launch a boat from one of the previous described facilities. The mouth of Grey's Creek can provide good coho salmon fishing in August.

### Caswell Creek

The mouth of Caswell Creek can provide an excellent coho salmon fishing spot. A large gravel turnout at mile 84 begins the ½-mile gravel access road to the mouth and a primitive campground with limited public restrooms and trash service.

### Upriver on the Big Susitna River

Roughly 54 miles of Susitna River separates Talkeetna from the dangerous waters of Devil's Canyon. These 54 miles offers the skilled river boater some exciting water and great fishing. There are many stories of the famous and deadly waters of Devil's Canyon. Few anglers have taken the trip up the Susitna River to the canyon's outlet. This reach of river requires a moderately powerful jet boat and the experience to operate in 10-mile-per-hour currents and three to five-foot waves. These qualifiers will allow you to access the mouths of Portage Creek and Indian River. It is not advised that anglers travel beyond Portage Creek. Indian River and Portage Creek typically offers fair coho salmon fishing in mid- to late August.



### Talkeetna River

A boat is a must for coho salmon fishing on the Talkeetna River. The boat launch located at mile 14 of the Talkeetna Spur Road is a popular jumping off spot for both guided and nonguided anglers. Although, not as large or swift as the Susitna River, the Talkeetna River also requires caution when navigating its many snags, boulders, and shoals. Typically coho salmon is good from mid-August through early September.

It's about a 15-minute boat ride upstream from the boat launch to Clear Creek and is probably the most popular and easily reached Talkeetna River tributary. Lower Fish Creek also provides some angling opportunity. Fish Creek has special fishing regulations, including no bait and one single-hook allowed, and anglers are reminded to read the current Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet before you head out fishing. Fishing is typically best in mid- to late August.

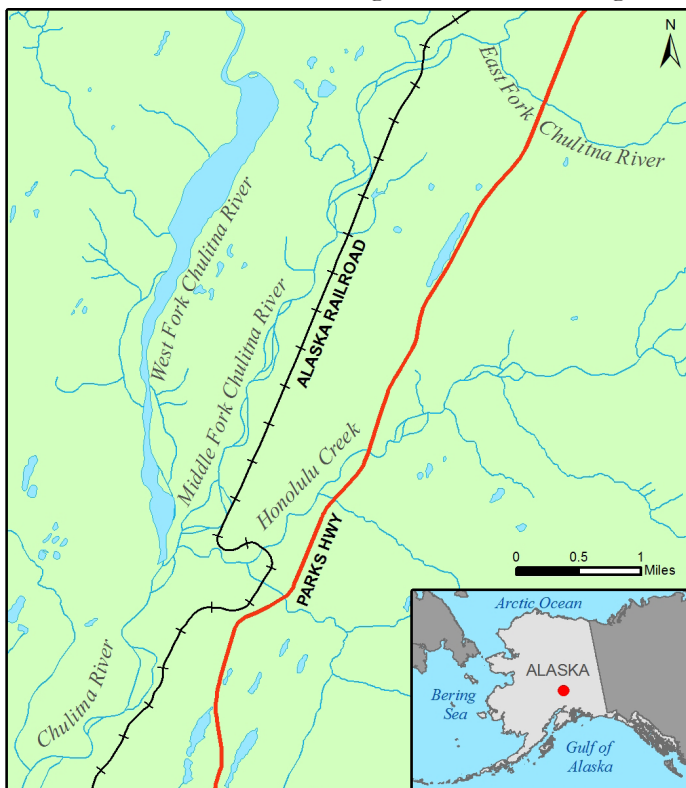
### Coho Salmon Fishing in Westside Tributaries

Westside Susitna River drainages that include coho salmon are Deshka River, Alexander Creek, Lake Creek, Talachulitna River, and a myriad of small streams where clear water mixes with the Susitna, Yentna, or Skwentna rivers. These coho salmon are early-run stocks and typically peak in the last week of July. The migration into the Yentna River drainage normally peaks the last week of July. Generally, the closer the drainage is to saltwater, the earlier coho salmon arrive. The average size of Deshka River coho salmon are about 22 inches long.

### Access to the Westside Fisheries - Road Accessible

Moose, Kroto, and Peters creeks are accessible from Petersville Road located at mile 114.8 of the Parks Highway. Anglers looking for late-season action will find that coho salmon typically arrive about mid-August this far upstream, and have more color than those caught lower in the Susitna and Yentna rivers drainages.

Moose and Kroto creeks are tributaries of the Deshka River. Peters Creek is a tributary of the Kahiltna River



### Chulitna River

Continuing north on the Parks Highway anglers will find Troublesome Creek, Byers Creek, Honolulu Creek, and the east and middle forks of the Chulitna River. There are several highway pullouts to access these little fished streams. After swimming upriver for over 100 miles, coho salmon typically arrive in these waters between mid-August to September.



which flows into the Yentna River, which then flows into the Susitna River. There are small camping areas near each creek, and limited services along the Petersville Road. The mouth of Peters Creek is also accessible by trail from Shulin Lake, which is a popular floatplane landing spot.

### Fishing in Remote Sustina Fisheries

Alexander Creek flows directly into the Susitna River at river mile 10 upstream from Cook Inlet. It's not a big stream, but it is usually boatable by a jet-equipped river boat as far upstream as Trail Creek which is about 14 creek miles. The Yentna River enters the Susitna River from the west, approximately 30 river miles upstream from Cook Inlet. This river system drains the high peaks of the Alaska Range from Mount McKinley to Rainy Pass.



The mouth of Lake Creek can be fished from a boat or shore. Boat rentals are available from local lodges or air charter services, but it is advisable to make reservations ahead of time. Hiking up Lake Creek is tough. Few people get very far, so boating is the preferred choice. Lake Creek is shallow, rocky, and fast and there are braided channels and fallen trees. Only experienced boaters should attempt Lake Creek with extreme caution, and only in a light, nimble jet boat, for example an 18-footer boat with a 40 to 50-horsepower jet outboard. Even with this suggested rig, because of the current, sweepers, and rocks, boaters are limited to three to five miles of the creek. Above the five creek miles, Lake Creek becomes hazardous to life and safety, as well as very hard on your valuable equipment.

Lake Creek can also be an exciting float trip, but it is not recommended for beginners. There are stretches of Class III waters, so don't overload your raft. Use at least a 12 or 13-foot self bailing raft with a rowing frame, and tie down your gear. Start in Chelatna Lake and plan on at least four to five days to complete the trip. These are also private guides offering float trips.

Bulchitna Lake, located about two miles upstream of

Lake Creek's confluence with the Yentna River, offers an alternative to the fly-in angler who wants to hike to excellent fishing. Lake Creek is especially fast in the Bulchitna area, so bring heavier gear, and load up with at least 15-pound line if you want to keep one of the 8 to 12-pound coho salmon.



The Talachulitna River is known for its quality rainbow trout and salmon fishing. The Talachulitna River is about 15 river miles upstream of the Skwentna River, and typically has coho salmon by early August. You can boat up from the Skwentna River, but be careful. The Skwentna River is a very fast, braided glacial river with many deadfalls and overhanging trees. The mouth of the Talachulitna River is not a large area. If water conditions are right, only four to six boats can fish the confluence without compromising each other. Typically coho salmon fishing in this area can be excellent.

If you want to float the Talachulitna River for coho salmon, wait until at least August 10. Few coho salmon will be in the upper reaches by that time, but the rainbow trout and Arctic grayling fishing should be excellent. The Talachulitna River is a five to seven-day float trip, if you choose to float the entire river from Judd Lake to the Skwentna River confluence. The upper third is often shallow, and it is occasionally necessary to walk your raft and make short portages. During the high water season, this section of the river can be hazardous, as sweepers are abundant. Anglers have died as a result of rafts being pinned against or forced under sweepers.



A spillway through a short canyon is located about halfway down the Talachulitna River from its confluence with Talachulitna Creek. It should provide anglers with some excitement but unless you have an overloaded raft or if the river is very high, you shouldn't have any major problems.



### Coho Salmon Fishing in Westside Susitna

If you plan to use your own boat to gain access to westside Susitna River coho salmon, you can launch from one of the access sites described in the eastside Susitna River section. Or you can launch at the Port of Anchorage and cross the Northern Cook Inlet to the mouth of the Susitna River then head upstream. Just remember to enter and exit the river's mouth during the hours of high tide. When reading the tide book make sure you are adjusting for the difference in time the high tide arrives in Anchorage and then the mouth of the Susitna River.

Small plane access to westside Susitna River coho salmon fisheries is quite good. However, even for the experienced pilot, tricycle gear is not recommended. There is one developed and maintained airport in the area located in the community of Skwentna and the 2,500-foot-long runway is not monitored. Once you land at Skwentna, you will find a roadhouse offering guide services, rooms, meals, and a post office. To find coho salmon from Skwentna you must have access to a boat.

Other than the Skwentna airport, unless you have a properly-equipped wheel plane and are familiar with gravel bar landings, a float plane is your best option. Float planes can access the mouths of most tributary streams, many of the lakes adjacent to the rivers, or the rivers themselves. The best advice for pilots is to land only where you feel safe. Call an air charter operator in Anchorage's Lake Hood or Merrill Field and ask where they land. They may not give out any 'secret spots,' but in the interest of safety they will tell you where the traditional landing areas are.

### West Cook Inlet Drainages

The west Cook Inlet area consists of all waters north of the latitude of the southern tip of Chisik Island and the

mouth of the Susitna River. West Cook Inlet offers one of the finest coho salmon fishing around. Since these streams are accessible only by small plane, anglers looking for a less crowded coho salmon experience might want to try one of the air taxi or guide services leaving from Anchorage's Lake Hood or Merrill Field.

As any remote fishery, public access and services are limited and specific knowledge of the area is often the difference between having a successful trip and a bad experience.

### Access to the Westside Fisheries - Boat or Plane

The west Cook Inlet area is not linked by road to Southcentral Alaska's highway system. There are a number of Merrill Field air taxi operators that run regularly scheduled flights to the area. Once you arrive in the area you will find a well-developed road system, and this is the key to reaching much of the available fishing. Once servicing oil and gas exploration and the timber industry, these roads are now largely unused and unmaintained. Even though landing strips were also constructed, and you may find some maps with landing strips indicated, with a couple of exceptions, these landing areas are now privately-owned and not available to the angling public.

Once on the ground you may still have to hire transportation, but the cost of a shuttle to the fishing holes is usually reasonable. Wheel-plane access to a few of the streams is quite good, using the old road as a runway. The oil and gas industry is still very active in the Beluga area, so be careful to avoid their work sites and watch out for equipment on the roads.



If you plan to use a boat to gain access, you are faced with a number of significant logistical challenges. Realistically, boats are not practical in this area. The first challenge you face is crossing northern Cook Inlet with its 30-foot tides and frequent high winds. In addition, because of the west Cook Inlet streams, with the exception of the Chakachatna-McArthur and Beluga rivers systems, are boatable above their intertidal zones. If you get into either the Chakachatna-McArthur and Beluga rivers, you won't go very far without a jet drive.



The Beluga, Lewis, and Theodore all wander through part of the Susitna Flats State Game Refuge. The lower reaches of the Chakachatna-McArthur River flows through the Trading Bay State Game Refuge. The Beluga River is glacial and not too productive for coho salmon, but several of its clear water tributaries are excellent producers. Coho salmon are found in Coal, Drill, Bishop, Coffee, Olsen, and Pretty Creeks from mid-July through mid-September.

The Theodore and Lewis rivers are accessible by plane, and once on the ground, by a gravel road system connecting with the Beluga landing strip. Coho salmon are present from mid-July through mid-September. Further south along the west Cook Inlet shoreline anglers will find good coho salmon fishing in the Kustatan and McArthur rivers, Polly Creek, Cannery Creek, Wolverine Creek which is a drainage of the Big River lakes, and Silver Salmon Creek. These streams are only accessible by airplane.



Vegetation along streambanks helps keep river water clean by filtering out sediment and pollutants from surface and storm runoff, reduces peak flows during rain and runoff events, slows flood waters, stabilizes streambanks from excessive erosion, and helps moderate stream temperatures. Vegetated streambanks also provide food and nutrients to fish and other aquatic organisms, as well as, provide critical habitat for rearing juvenile salmon. Any alteration to the streambank area reduces its ability to carry out these important functions, this includes repeat trampling of the vegetation while trying to get to your favorite fishing spot. While out on the river, please be respectful and follow any requirements landowners may have. By following the simple steps listed below, you can help maintain important habitat for salmon and be good stewards of the land.

- Use established trails to reach the river.
- Use established entry and exit points to get in and out of the river.
- Respect and abide by signs that close areas to fishing from the bank.
- Stand in the river to fish and don't place your pack or other gear on the vegetation.
- Pack out what you pack in, including discarded fishing line and tackle.
- Use the restroom in the provided facilities.



### Healthy Bank Stewardship

Most people understand healthy river systems are important for strong and healthy salmon populations. However, it is important to ensure that clean, healthy rivers don't stop at the water's edge. In fact, protecting and managing healthy streambanks and adjacent riparian areas are critical components to the overall health of a river system.





# Pacific Salmon Identification

**Chinook (king) Salmon**



- Spots on back and both lobes of the tail
- Black mouth with a black gumline

**Coho (silver) Salmon**



- Spots on back and upper lobe of the tail
- Black mouth with a white gumline

## Marine Phase

**Sockeye (red) Salmon**



- No distinct spots on back or tail
- White mouth with a white gumline
- Large, bright gold eye

**Pink (humpy) Salmon**



- Large, oval spots on back and both lobes of tail
- White mouth with a black gumline

**Chum (dog) Salmon**



- No spots; calico bands on body (often faint in salt water)
- White mouth with a white gumline

Photographs courtesy of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

**Chinook (king) Salmon**



- Spawning adults turn maroon or olive brown
- Spots on body and both lobes of the tail remain

**Coho (silver) Salmon**



- Males develop pronounced "kype" (hooked-nose)
- Spots on back and upper lobe of the tail remain
- Male and female turn dark maroon and have dark backs

## Spawning Phase

**Sockeye (red) Salmon**



- Spawning adults develop dull-green heads
- Males develop hump on back
- Both female and male turn red

**Pink (humpy) Salmon**

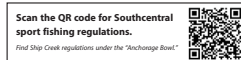


- Spawners turn dull gray on their backs and upper sides
- Lower sides appear cream color or white
- Large, oval spots on back and both lobes of tail remain

**Chum (dog) Salmon**



- Spawners develop pronounced, vertical calico bands on sides
- Males exhibit large, canine-like teeth



Photographs by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.



## Sport Fishing Series Produced By:

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