



Fishing the Kenai River

The Kenai River

With its close proximity to the road system, the Kenai River offers many accessible points and an abundance of fishing opportunities for a novice angler or experienced angler. Whether you like to fly fish, cast, or troll, the Kenai River gives anglers a chance to fish for all five species of salmon and resident species like rainbow trout and Dolly Varden.



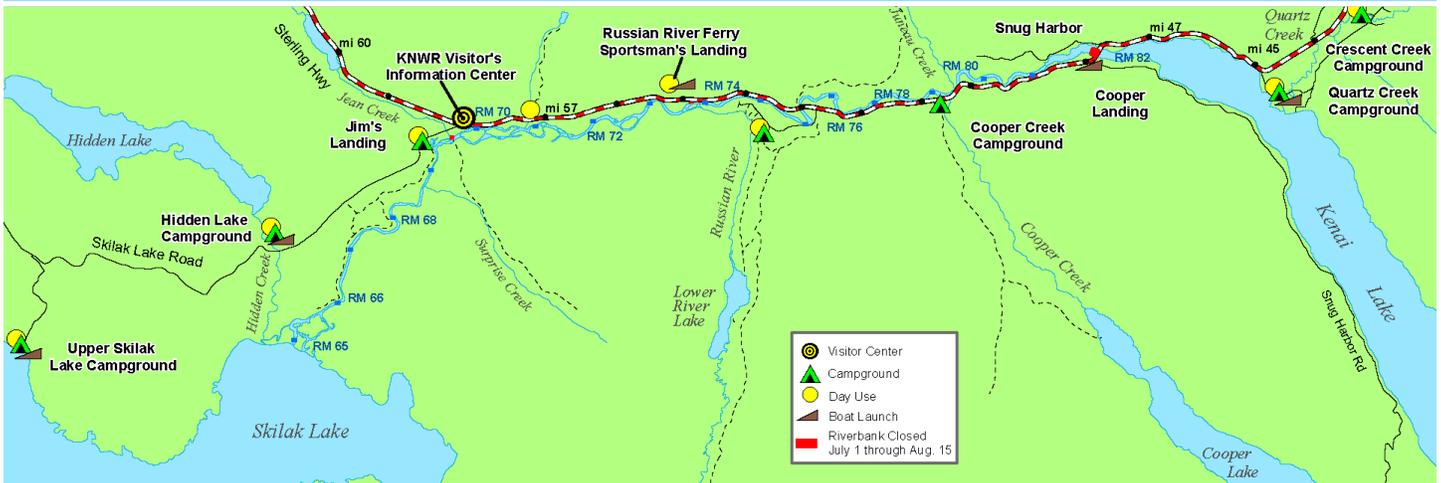
The Kenai River is a glacial stream that drains the central Kenai Peninsula. Glacial silt gives the Kenai River its blue-green shade and cloudy appearance. The Kenai River is the longest river in Southcentral Alaska, flowing 82-miles from Kenai Lake to the outlet at Cook Inlet. Kenai Lake flows into the Kenai River in the community of Cooper Landing. The river meanders through slack water for approximately six miles, crossing gravel riffles before narrowing again into a stream of greater gradient, and continues six miles before the “canyon” section. This consists of two miles of fast river with enough whitewater to excite even experienced boaters, rafters, and kayakers. The canyon section is not recommended for the novice boater. Below this, the river continues in a more gentle fashion for about three more miles to Skilak Lake. This 17.3 miles stretch of river from Kenai Lake to Skilak Lake is commonly called the ‘Upper Kenai River.’



At the outlet of Skilak Lake, the river widens and continues for 10.5 miles with little to no fast water, before encountering Naptowne Rapids. These rapids are about one mile long on a slightly greater gradient and contain many large boulders. Only experienced boaters, rafters, and kayakers should attempt this run, especially when the water levels increase in mid to late summer. Downstream of the rapids, the river is faster, and continues to have many large boulders. This section, between Skilak Lake and Naptowne Rapids is typically called the ‘Middle River’, it is 19.5 miles in length. The Middle River is best accessed by boat. The Sterling Highway Bridge in Soldotna marks the beginning of the ‘Lower Kenai River.’ The final 21 mile section is gentler, and winds its way, emptying into Cook Inlet near the City of Kenai. In addition, the last 12 miles of this section are tidally-influenced.



Upper Kenai River: From Kenai Lake downstream to Skilak Lake



In the Kenai River, there are resident fish such as rainbow trout and Dolly Varden which spend their entire lifecycle in the Kenai River; anadromous fish, such as Pacific salmon and sea-run Dolly Varden which spend a portion of their lifecycle in the river and the other portion of their lives in saltwater; and fish such as flounder that are common to the intertidal area, which is a mixture of both fresh and salt water.

These booklets are free of charge and are available at ADF&G offices, the ADF&G Mobile App, wherever sport fishing licenses are sold, and online at 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. 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. 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 Advisory Announcements tab. Once there, anglers can select the region and management area they intend to fish. 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.



Sport Fishing Regulations

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

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 Soldotna sport fishing hotline at (907) 262-2737. Anglers can also subscribe to receive the notifications via their email. Updates are also posted on the ADF&G - Sport Fishing Southcentral Alaska Facebook and Instagram page. If you have any questions, please contact the Soldotna ADF&G office at (907) 262-9368.

Chinook Salmon

The world record Chinook salmon was caught in 1985 on rod and reel from the Kenai River, weighing in at 97 lbs. 4 oz. Most Kenai Peninsula king salmon spend one year in freshwater, then migrate to sea when they are about four inches long. The length of time in saltwater, how much food they find, and the genetic composition of the fish all help to determine their final size.



Some Chinook salmon return after only one year in the ocean. These fish weigh only a few pounds, and are almost always fertile males. Others return after two years and weigh 10 to 20 pounds and a majority of these fish are males. The majority of Southcentral Chinook salmon weigh 25 to 60 pounds and some return after five years at sea. Chinook salmon of the same age will also vary in size from stream to stream, perhaps due to genetics. A “four-ocean” fish in lower Kenai Peninsula streams will rarely grow to (and only a few exceed) 40 pounds. In the Kenai River, though, a 50-pound “four-ocean” fish is fairly common. The world record fish caught in 1985 spent one year in freshwater, five years in saltwater and returned in its seventh year of life.

Chinook Salmon Run Timing

The Kenai River supports two distinct Chinook salmon runs; an early-run and a late-run. The early-run usually starts to enter the river in mid-May. The early-run fishing peaks in mid-June, and is over by the end of June. The early-run fish primarily head for smaller Kenai River tributaries to spawn. Late-run Chinook salmon enter the river in early July, with the best fishing found from mid- to late July and are generally considered mainstem spawning fish.

Chinook Salmon Fishery Management

Both Chinook salmon runs are managed by the Division of Sport Fish (DSF) under management plans outlined by

the Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF). Special restrictions on bait, tackle, and harvestable sizes apply to both runs. The DSF uses the best technologies and most accurate methods available to estimate both the run strength and the spawning escapement of Kenai River Chinook salmon. The DSF primarily relies on two methods to estimate run strength: 1) an in-river sonar program, and 2) an in-season creel survey/census which consists of ADF&G Fishery Technicians interviewing anglers on



the Kenai River. The DSF then estimates the spawning escapements - how many fish have escaped harvest - by subtracting the creel census figure from the number of Chinook salmon going through the sonar counter. In order to ensure accuracy, additional measurements of run strength such as harvest in the commercial fishery, and test net catches in the river are also used.

Tackle and Fishing Methods

There are three types of fishing techniques that are popular with Chinook salmon anglers on the Kenai. Each technique takes advantages of the fact that Chinook salmon travel deep, through the center of the river channel. Shore anglers are at a slight disadvantage when fishing for Kenai River Chinook salmon.

Fishing from a boat allows anglers to drift with the current, with their lures bouncing along the bottom at the

Middle & Lower Kenai River: From Skilak Lake downstream to the mouth



speed of the current. 'Back bouncing' is a very popular method. The boat is constantly under power and slowly backed down the river. As the boat backs through a hole the angler bounces the lure along the bottom of the river. 'Back trolling' is another popular method, and involves the use of a plug, such as a Kwikfish. A diver can be attached ahead of the lure to take the lure deeper. The boat is backed down river under power.



The most common rig for drifting and back bouncing is a large Spin-N-Glo with fresh or preserved salmon eggs (when permitted) and enough weight to get the lure to the bottom. Since the lure is moving quite rapidly, clearer water increases the efficiency of these techniques. Much depends on the skill of the boat operator, as well.

The Kenai River Chinook salmon fishery is crowded, so bring along an ample supply of patience and courtesy. Know your boat and how to operate it. Be familiar with the "rules of the river." For example, the universal signal on the Kenai River of a "fish on" is a raised landing net. Give those boats the widest berth possible. On the Kenai River, guided anglers are more efficient at catching fish. You can improve your chances by hiring a local guide.

Kenai River Sonar Programs

Both of the Chinook salmon runs, as well as the late sockeye salmon run, are measured by state-of-the-art sonar equipment. The Chinook salmon sonar site is operated by the Division of Sport Fish and is located at river mile 14. The sockeye salmon sonar site is operated by the Division of Commercial Fisheries and is located at river mile 19.5.

At the river mile 14 site, sampling on both banks is controlled by electronics housed in a tent located on the left bank of the river (left bank facing downstream). Data from the right bank are transmitted wirelessly to the left bank tent. All data files are then transported to the ADF&G office for processing.

ADF&G assesses in-season Chinook salmon abundance based on daily estimates of large fish (≥ 34 inches from snout to tip of tail as measured by the sonar). Estimates of fish size are generated by measuring the video-like images of fish produced by the sonar. Post season estimates of all Chinook salmon, regardless of size, are produced using river mile 9 netting data and river mile 14 sonar counts.

Because both sport and commercial fishing regulations

partly depend on how many fish are estimated to have passed through the sonar beams, the proper operation of this expensive and highly sensitive equipment is critical to the entire salmon fishing industry. Submerged sonar equipment will entangle your fishing gear, or boat propeller. Obey the traffic signs near the sonar sites to avoid trouble.

Sonar estimates are available on our website at www.adfg.alaska.gov, and click on "Fish Counts." More information about the Chinook salmon sonar program can be found at www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=sonar.



Sockeye Salmon

Run Timing

Although there are two sockeye or red salmon runs on the Kenai River, the early-run sockeye salmon does not present much opportunity for the Kenai River sport angler. It's a small run, and the fish are headed for the Russian River drainage. Anglers can find more information about the Russian River fishery by picking up a copy of the "Fishing the Russian River" publication from ADF&G offices or from the ADF&G Sport Fishing Brochures webpage.

Late-run sockeye salmon enter the lower Kenai River in early July, peak in late July, and generally have finished their run by late August. Most fish arrive during the last two weeks of July. At the peak of a good run, it is not uncommon to see sonar estimates of greater than 20,000 fish per day. These fish are headed for many tributary streams throughout the area, as well as the Russian River, the mainstem of the Upper Kenai River, and Kenai Lake to spawn.

Sockeye Salmon Fishery Management

Both sockeye salmon runs are managed by DSF and the DCF under management plans outlined by the Alaska BOF. Special restrictions apply to both runs, including special sections of the Kenai River that are fly-fishing-only.

Tackle and Fishing Methods

Most Kenai River sockeye salmon anglers use a streamer or "Russian River Fly", although some claim that the

“Green Lantern,” “Comet,” or any shrimp pattern all outperform the popular streamers. Weights are used to get the fly close to the bottom. The fly is cast out 10 to 15 feet into the current at about a 45-degree angle upstream and allowed to “dead drift” with the current until reaching its furthest downstream point. It is then retrieved and the action repeated.



The most productive fishing areas are pools immediately downstream of shallow riffles, and mainstem close to shore. Sockeye salmon tend to hold in these areas before migrating through the riffles. Since this species travels close to shore, most sockeye salmon fishing takes place from the bank. Inexperienced sockeye salmon anglers often wade or cast too far out, not realizing the fish are often swimming behind them.



Coho Salmon

Coho or silver salmon arrive to the Kenai River in late July, with more fish arriving early to mid-August through early October. Most anglers will boat to a favorite hole and anchor, or tie off to the bank. From the boat, they then fish fresh or cured salmon roe (if permitted) on the bottom, or use Mepps, Pixee, or Vibrax lures. Since coho salmon use the entire river to travel, there is more opportunity for anglers to access more bank areas that are productive for coho salmon than there are for Chinook salmon. Many guides offer coho salmon charters for novice and/or those anglers who lack suitable equipment.



Pink Salmon

Because of their two-year lifecycle, pink or humpy salmon numbers are highest on even-numbered years in the Kenai River system. Young and novice anglers favor pink salmon because of this species’ large numbers and aggressiveness towards almost any lure. Pink salmon also offer an excellent challenge to anglers preferring light tackle.

Most Kenai River pink salmon are taken downstream from the Sterling Highway Bridge in Soldotna. One good place to try is at Cunningham Park, in the City of Kenai. Although pink salmon degrade very rapidly after entering freshwater, pink salmon can be good to eat if they are caught fresh in the lower river and cooked right away. Try them on the grill or smoke and pressure can them for the winter. Pink salmon are found in the Kenai River from late July through September.



Rainbow and Steelhead Trout

The Kenai River is home to trophy-sized wild rainbow trout, and “off-season” fishing is a fly angler’s dream. The majority of the Kenai River rainbow trout are year-round residents of the Kenai River, although small numbers of steelhead have been documented by DSF. The majority of these fish are released by anglers and this is a popular catch-and-release fishery. Rainbow trout fishing occurs

in all sections of the Kenai River. Wet flies, streamer flies, spinning lures, and patterns imitating salmon roe are popular. The best time to fish is often fall when trout are feeding on salmon carcasses and eggs.



Dolly Varden

The Kenai River is assumed to have populations of both resident and sea-run Dolly Varden. Resident Dolly Varden are likely present the entire year throughout the river, and overwinter in Kenai and Skilak lakes. Preferred fishing areas are from Naptowne Rapids upstream to Skilak Lake (Middle River), and from the inlet of Skilak Lake upstream to Kenai Lake (Upper River). Anadromous Dolly Varden enter the river in early July, with the run continuing into September. These fish spawn in the fall and overwinter in Kenai and Skilak lakes before heading back out to sea in April. Anglers intercept them in the lower river from mid-to late July.

Lake Trout in Kenai and Skilak Lakes

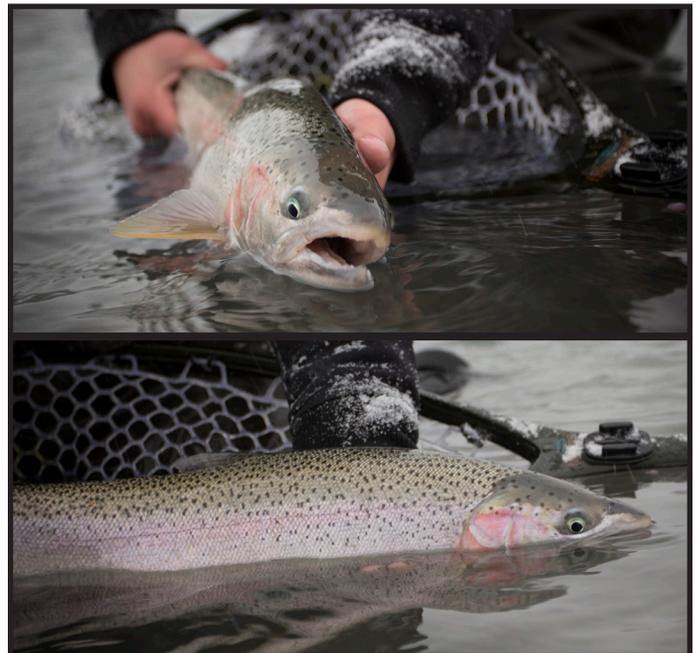
Lake trout are wild year-round residents of both Skilak and Kenai lakes. They can sometimes be found in the river at the outlets of these lakes as well. Little is known about lake trout populations in either lake. During the summer, knowledgeable anglers believe that the fish are in deeper water; for the most part, few fish are caught this time of year. In the fall and spring, lake trout may be found in the shallower areas of the lakes and/or lake outlets.

Catch-and-Release Practices

At one time or another, almost every angler accidentally foul-hooks or snags a fish. Snagging is illegal in all freshwaters of Alaska. In some Alaskan fisheries, if you plan to release a fish, you may not remove it from the water, even to take a photo. These fish must be released immediately, and when released correctly will suffer little to no permanent injury. In some fisheries, once you remove a fish from the water (if you are legally allowed to) then that fish counts toward your daily bag & possession limit. More anglers seem to be adopting a voluntary

catch-and-release philosophy when fishing for specific species. This catch-and-release method can be applied to all resident species and salmon. To effectively practice catch-and-release fishing, or to release a fish which has been snagged, please do the following:

1. Land the fish as quickly as possible. Playing the fish to complete exhaustion reduces the chance of survival.
2. Keep the fish in the water while handling it. The longer the fish is out of the water, the lower the chance of survival.
3. Never squeeze a fish or hold them by their jaw, gills, gill plate, or eyes. Never hold a fish upside down by its tail, as this can dislocate vertebra and causes almost certain death.
4. If you handle a fish with your hands, make sure to wet them first. Dry and gloved hands can remove the slime layer off the fish. This is a protective layer on their skin which protects them from diseases and infections.
5. If you need to hold the fish, do so by gently placing one hand on the underside of the fish by the pectoral fins and the other hand near the base of the tail. This will help avoid injury to the internal organs.
6. Use flies or artificial lures. Hooking mortality in some fish is much lower if they are caught with flies or lures instead of bait. If the fish is hooked deeply, cut the leader and leave the hook in the fish. The hook will quickly dislodge or rust away.
7. Some fish have “soft” mouths that are easily torn and should never be allowed to hang vertically from a hook and line.
8. When releasing fish in flowing water, position the fish with its belly down and with the head facing into the current. Gently hold it there until its gills are working and it swims away on its own.



Kenai River Public Shoreline Access Sites

Please note that fees may be charged at some of the access sites. There are also many private facilities in the area.

Please contact the appropriate Chamber of Commerce or visitor's information center for information.

River Mile 0: Surfcasting off the sandy beaches at the mouth of the Kenai River. A popular residents only personal use fishery occurs in July. North bank access: South on Spruce Drive in Kenai to large parking area. South bank access: Kalifornsky Beach Road to Cannery Road to small parking area, or four-wheel drive onto beach.

River Mile 5.0: Intertidal fishing at the DNR State Parks' Kenai Flats State Recreation Site at the Warren Ames Bridge. Small parking area, unimproved site, can be muddy.

River Mile 6.5: Intertidal fishing and picnic area at the City of Kenai's Cunningham Park, off Beaver Loop Road in Kenai to small parking area, steps to boardwalk.

River Mile 11.25: Boat launching and day parking at the DNR -State Parks' Eagle Rock Boat Launch, Mile 5 of the Kenai Spur Highway.

River Mile 12.5: Boat launching and day parking at the DNR State Parks' Pillars Boat Launch, Mile 4.2 of the Kenai Spur Highway.

River Mile 15.5: day parking and bank fishing from DNR State Parks' Ceichanski Day use area.

River Mile 17.0: Fishing & day use area DNR State Parks' Big Eddy Day Use Area.

River Mile 19.0: Fishing and day use area at DNR State Parks' Slikok Day Use Picnic Area.

River Mile 20.5: Riverbank fishing, camping, picnic area, parking, and boat launching at the City of Soldotna's Centennial Campground, steps to boardwalks. Off Kalifornsky Beach Road near the intersection of the Sterling Highway.

River Mile 21.0: Riverbank fishing and picnic area at the Soldotna Visitor's Center boardwalks, off the Sterling Highway, just south of the bridge. Steps in river.

River Mile 22.0: Fishing, day use picnic area, boardwalk river access at Soldotna Creek Park. RM 22.5 fishing, parking, and day use area at the Donald E. Gilman River Center.

River Mile 23.0: Riverbank fishing, camping, picnic area, and boat launch at the City of Soldotna's Swiftwater Campground, off East Redoubt Avenue near the intersection of the Sterling and Kenai Spur highways.

River Mile 23.5: Day use and bank fishing at City of Soldotna Rotary Park.

River Mile 25.75 & 26.75: Fishing and day use area at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Moose Range Meadows.

River Mile 27.5: Boat launch and fishing at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge boat launch on Keystone Drive.

River Mile 30.5: Riverbank fishing, camping, picnic area at the DNR State Parks' Funny River State Recreation Site, at Mile 12 of the Funny River Road.

River Mile 31.0: Riverbank fishing, camping, picnic area at the DNR State Parks' Morgan's Landing State Recreation Site, Mile 84.5 of the Sterling Highway. Trail to boardwalk.

River Mile 36.5: Riverbank fishing, boat launch, camping, and picnic area at the DNR State Parks' Izaak Walton State Recreation Site, near the Moose River bridge at Mile 82 of the Sterling Highway.

River Mile 39.5: Riverbank fishing, boat launching, camping, and picnic areas at the DNR State Parks' Bing's Landing State Recreation Site, Mile 80.5 of the Sterling Highway.

Skilak Lake: Lake fishing, boat launching, camping, and picnic areas at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's two Skilak Lake campgrounds, Upper and Lower. Off Skilak Lake Loop Road, Mile 58 and Mile 75 of the Sterling Highway.

River Mile 69.5: Boat launching at Jim's Landing, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Off Skilak Lake Loop Road near Mile 58 of the Sterling Highway.

River Mile 71.0: Riverbank fishing from pullouts near Mile 57 of the Sterling Highway. Land in this area is managed by the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Unimproved, no facilities.

River Mile 73.5: Boat launching (and riverbank fishing on the opposite bank) at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's Russian River Ferry and Sportsman's Landing, Mile 55 of the Sterling Highway, just past Cooper Landing. Riverbank fishing, camping, and picnic area at the U.S. Forest Service's Russian River Campground. Steps to boardwalks and trails along the Russian River down to the Kenai River. Entrance to campground at Mile 52.5 of the Sterling Highway.

River Mile 79.0: Riverbank fishing and camping at the U.S. Forest Service's Cooper Creek Campground, Mile 50.7 of the Sterling Highway, just past Cooper Landing.

River Mile 83.0: Riverbank fishing and boat launching at the U.S. Forest Service's Cooper Landing boat launch. Mile 47.5 of the Sterling Highway, where Kenai Lake narrows into Kenai River, just before Cooper Landing.

Kenai Lake: Lake fishing, creek fishing, boat launching, and picnic area at the U.S. Forest Service's Quartz Creek Campground. Mile 45 of the Sterling Highway. The U.S. Forest Service also operates Trail River, Crescent, Parmigan, and Primrose campgrounds on Kenai Lake, but since the lake is so large, these facilities are over 15 shoreline miles and over 25 highway miles from the Kenai River.



SPORT FISHING SERIES PRODUCED BY:

Southcentral Region

Alaska Department of Fish and Game

Division of Sport Fish

333 Raspberry Road

Anchorage, Alaska 99518

Sport Fish Information Center

(907) 267-2218

M-F 8am - 5 pm

Except on state holidays



These opportunities funded in part by Federal Aid in Sport Fish and Wildlife Restoration.

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www.adfg.alaska.gov

Pacific Salmon Identification

Chinook (king) Salmon



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

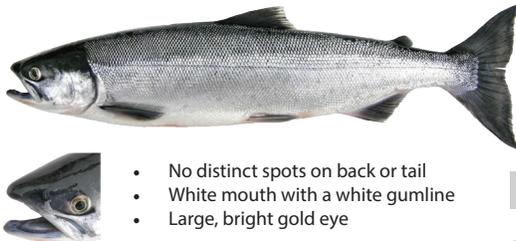
Coho (silver) Salmon



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

Marine Phase

Sockeye (red) Salmon



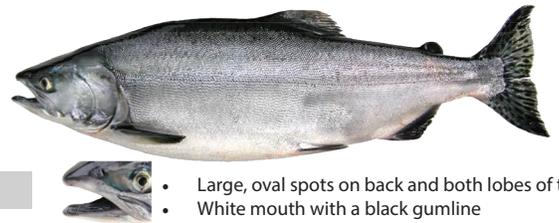
- No distinct spots on back or tail
- White mouth with a white gumline
- Large, bright gold eye

Chum (dog) Salmon



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

Pink (humpy) Salmon



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

Chum (dog) Salmon



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

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

