



# FISHING THE RUSSIAN RIVER

## The Russian River

The Russian River is a popular tributary that drains into the Kenai River. The Russian River is located 110 miles south of Anchorage, which is about a 2-3 hour drive through some of Alaska's most spectacular roadside scenery. The river flows 12 miles from Upper Russian Lake, through Lower Russian Lake, and empties into the upper Kenai River at River Mile 74 (as measured from Cook Inlet).

With its clear waters the Russian River is one of the most popular fishing destinations in Southcentral Alaska. Depending on the season, anglers who fish the waters of the Russian River will find sockeye, coho, and the occasional pink salmon, and resident fish species such as rainbow trout and Dolly Varden.

Most fishing takes place in the lower three miles of the Russian River and in the Kenai River from its confluence with the Russian River downstream about one mile. Certain tackle restrictions, opening dates, and open and closed areas apply, so be sure to read the Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulation Summary booklet before going fishing.

For additional information on the Russian River fisheries, please visit the Alaska Department of Fish and Game webpage at [www.adfg.alaska.gov](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov). Anglers may also contact the ADF&G Soldotna office, which manages this fishery, at (907) 262-9368, or call the area in-season sport fishing hotline at (907) 262-2737.

## Fishery Management

The Russian River fisheries are managed conservatively for sustainability by the Division of Sport Fish through management plans approved by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. To help with management, the Division maintains a fish weir at the outlet of Lower Russian Lake, about 78 miles from the mouth of the Kenai



River. Weir counts, that are updated daily during the summer are available on the ADF&G website under "Fish Counts."

Fishing pressure made on Russian River fisheries are sometimes greater than the resource can provide. At other times, more fish arrive than were expected. At such times, ADF&G may either close or liberalize all or part of the fisheries by Emergency Order. During closed periods, the stocks are closely monitored by ADF&G staff. As soon as escapement goals can be assured, the fishery may reopen. When more fish arrive than were expected, and after escapement goals are met, then the fishery may be liberalized by increasing the bag and possession limits or season.

Emergency Orders and their respective News Releases are available on the ADF&G website. Select the "Sport Fishing" webpage and under "Quick Links" select "News Releases/EOS." After posting online, the Division sends Emergency Orders to newspapers, television and radio stations, and other agencies. Anglers may also subscribe to receive email notifications regarding sport fishing closures and liberalizations.





## River Bank Habitat & Restoration

The banks of the river are crucial to the long-term health of the Russian River fisheries. Trampled banks are a certain way to reduce the fish population.

Most people understand healthy river systems are important for strong and healthy salmon populations. However, ensuring clean healthy rivers doesn'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. 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, stabilize 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 and trout. 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, and 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.

## Sockeye Salmon

### Life Cycle

Russian River sockeye salmon use the mainstem river as well as its tributary streams to spawn. Each female salmon lays 3,000-4,500 eggs, which hatch in late winter. The fry emerge from the gravel in early spring and immediately enter Upper Russian Lake. Most early-run Russian River sockeye salmon spend two years in the Upper Russian Lake and three years at sea before returning in their sixth year of life to spawn and die. The average adult early-run salmon weighs about 6 pounds, but a few grow to about 10 pounds. Most late-run salmon return to the Russian River in their fifth year of life, after spending two years in freshwater and two years in saltwater. They are a little smaller, since they have one less year of ocean growth than early-run fish.

### Run Timing

The early-run usually arrives by June 15, with the historic midpoint of the run occurring on June 27. Most of the early-run fish have completed their migration by mid-July, although in some years the fish are late, or hold in the Kenai River. The early-run averages about 41,000 fish, and the Russian River Sockeye Salmon Management Plan sets the early-run escapement range at 22,000-42,000 sockeye salmon past the weir. Anglers generally harvest about one-half of this run.

The second run usually arrives in mid-July and is the larger of the two runs, averaging around 72,000 fish. The management plan sets the late-run escapement range at 44,000-85,000. About 21,000 of these fish are harvested by anglers; however, many more are harvested by lower river anglers, personal use, and commercial fisheries. Although thousands of fish return each year to the Russian River, there may be considerably more or fewer fish due to egg survival during winter months, rearing conditions at Upper Russian Lake, ocean survival, and the size of the commercial sockeye harvest in Cook Inlet.

**Upper Kenai River and Russian River Confluence**

**Gear in Fly-Fishing-Only waters**

- One unweighted, single hook, unbaited fly with gap between point and shank of  $\frac{3}{16}$ " or less is allowed. The fly must weigh less than  $\frac{1}{4}$  oz. Artificial flies are defined on page 8.
- If weights are used, they must be at least 18" ahead of the fly.

These are approximate measurements.

## Fishing for Sockeye Salmon

For most of the year, the Russian River is a “fly-fishing-only” area. A fly rod is not required, anglers may use spinning or baitcasting rods, but the hook must be a fly. Most Kenai River anglers use a bucktail streamer fly, called the “Russian River Coho.” Other anglers say that more sparsely-dressed flies, such as the Green Lantern, Comet, or any shrimp pattern outperform streamers. Many successful sockeye salmon patterns have enough hackle to aggravate the fish into biting.

Perhaps more critical than the composition of the fly is the amount of weight used. Enough weight must be used so that the fly bounces very near the bottom. Special restrictions apply to the placement of the weight.

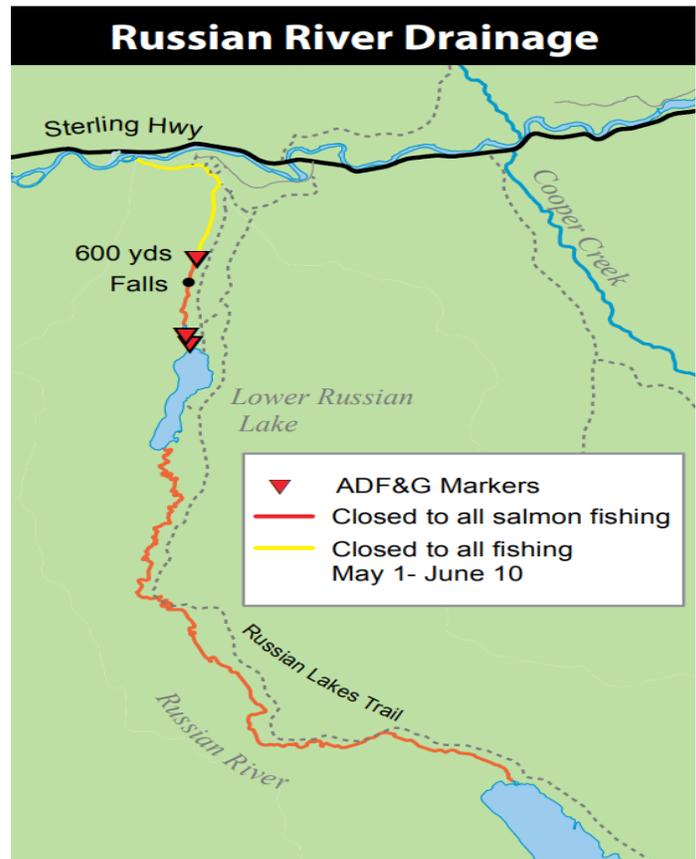


Most anglers cast their fly 10-15 feet upstream into the current at about a 45-degree angle, and allow the fly to dead drift with the current until reaching its furthest downstream point. It is then retrieved and the procedure repeated. Sockeye salmon travel very close to shore, and inexperienced anglers often wade or cast too far out, not realizing the fish are probably passing behind them.

## Coho Salmon

Coho salmon arrive at the confluence of the Kenai and Russian rivers by late July or early August. By the second week of September, the bulk of the run has passed through the weir. Coho salmon runs are highly variable. Some years the weir may count over 9,000 coho salmon and other years only 2,000 fish. Often in years of high water, coho salmon will utilize impoundments created by beaver dams as spawning grounds. High water often means good coho salmon fishing.

Many anglers use a single-hook spoon such as a Pixee™ or a small Mepps™ spinner. Fly anglers have success using any streamer pattern tied with a bit of flash. Pinks, purples, and oranges are very popular colors.



Many waters have special regulations for retention and release of silver salmon. Please carefully read the regulations for the waters you plan to fish.

## Rainbow Trout

“Shoulder season” rainbow trout fishing is usually a surprisingly quiet experience for this normally crowded area. Early spring Russian River trout fishing can be excellent, before the trout spawning season closure. Late fall trout fishing is also excellent, after the sockeye salmon anglers have left for the season.

The trout range in size from 12” to 30”. It takes a wily angler who can tempt one of these beauties to take a fly. Conservative tackle, size, and season restrictions apply; please read the Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet carefully before fishing.

## Dolly Varden

Dolly Varden are year-round residents of the Russian River system. They are often caught near the fish cleaning tables on small egg patterns. Conservative tackle, size, and season restrictions apply; please read the Southcentral Alaska Sport Fishing Regulations Summary booklet.

## Other Fish Species

The Russian River, as well as, the Upper Kenai River

is closed to fishing for Chinook salmon, including catch-and-release. Occasionally, especially on even-numbered years, anglers may catch pink salmon, but most are late into their spawning phase, and anglers choose to release them.

### Russian River Fishing Etiquette

- In crowded conditions, land your fish quickly. Try not to allow your line to cross others'. Playing your fish across others' lines is rude, and interrupts fishing for everyone.
- Try to cast in unison with those around you.
- Don't walk immediately behind those who are trying to cast.
- Once you've kept your bag limit, consider switching to trout or Dolly Varden fishing on another part of the river. If consideration is shown to other anglers waiting for their chance, they will be considerate of you when you are waiting for a spot to open up.
- Don't leave a messy fishing site. Pack out what you've packed in, including used fishing line.
- To reduce the chance of attracting bears, clean your fish at home, or cut your fish carcasses into small pieces, and be sure the pieces are deposited into deep, fast-moving water, away from the shoreline.
- For everyone's health and to maintain the sanitation of the area, do not use the area as your bathroom. Restroom facilities are provided.

### Services & Campgrounds

There are many services and campgrounds in the immediate Russian River area, and four additional public campgrounds within a 20-mile radius. The closest community is Cooper Landing, which provides emergency medical services, lodges, hotels, motels, laundromats, charter services, grocery stores, gas stations, fish processors, and tackle shops.

Many anglers stay at the U.S. Forest Service's Russian River campground which is located at Mile 52.5 of the Sterling Highway. There are 83 fee-based

campsites, several fee-based day-use parking areas, public restroom facilities, picnic shelters, and summer interpretive programs. The campground and day-use parking fill quickly, so keep in mind some alternatives.

At Mile 55 of the Sterling Highway, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge manages Sportsman's Landing, with fee-based boat launching, fee-based parking for 180 vehicles, public restroom facilities, and a privately-operated foot-traffic-only ferry that carries anglers across the Kenai River. This parking area fills quickly.

Additional public campgrounds include the U.S. Forest Service's Quartz Creek campground which is located at Mile 45 of the Sterling Highway and has 45 campsites and Cooper Creek campground which is located at Mile 50.7 of the Sterling Highway and has 26 campsites.

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge also maintains the Hidden Lake campground which is located at Mile 3.6 of the Skilak Lake Loop Road, which intersects the Sterling Highway at Mile 58 and has 44 campsites; and the Upper Skilak Lake campground which is located at Mile 8.5 of Skilak Lake Loop Road and has 25 campsites. For additional information about the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge area, please call (907) 262-7021 or visit their website at [www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai).

The U.S. Forest Service also maintains three cabins along the Russian River. For more information on Forest Service campgrounds and cabins, please call 1 (877) 444-6777 or check their reservation website at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov).

In addition, to registering with ADF&G, guides on the Kenai River must have a commercial permit issued by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. A list of permitted guides is available from the Kenai River Center at (907) 714-2460 or by email at [KenaiRivCenter@kpb.us](mailto:KenaiRivCenter@kpb.us).



#### SPORT FISHING SERIES PRODUCED BY:

Southcentral Region	333 Raspberry Road	(907) 267-2218
Alaska Department of Fish and Game	Anchorage, Alaska 99518	M-F 8am - 5 pm
Division of Sport Fish	Sport Fish Information Center	Except on state holidays



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

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game complies with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This summary is available in alternative communication formats. If you need assistance, please contact the ADF&G ADA Coordinator at (907) 465-6078; TTY/ Alaska Relay 7-1-1; or 1 (800) 770-8973.