



# The Russian River

## Alaska's extremely popular fishery

The Russian River is a tributary of the Kenai River, which drains the central Kenai Peninsula. The Russian is located 110 miles south of Anchorage, about a 2-3 hour's 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 Kenai River Mile 74 (as measured from Cook Inlet). For more information about the Kenai, request the ADF&G Recreational Fishing Series brochure "Kenai River."

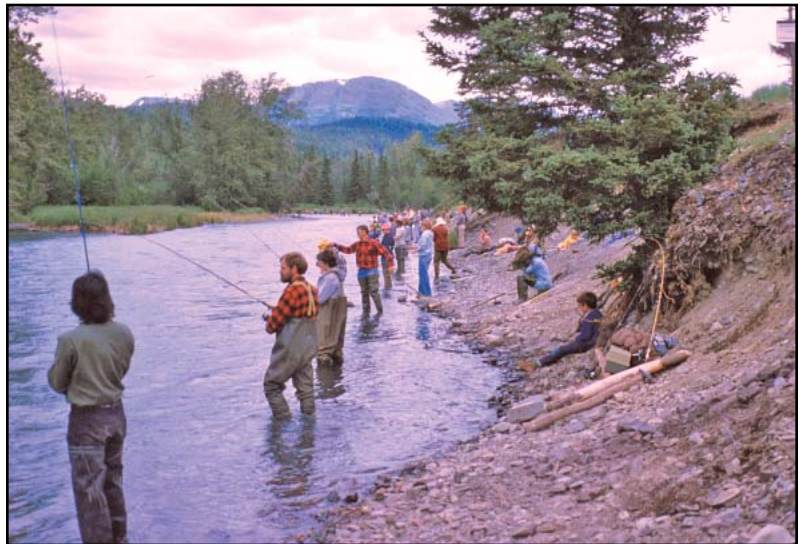
The clear water Russian is one of the most popular red salmon fisheries in the state of Alaska. The most recent 10-year average is 57,815 angler-days per year. An angler-day is one angler fishing for all or part of a day. At times more than 1,000 anglers a day can be fishing the Russian River/Kenai River confluence.

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

More information on the Russian River fisheries is also posted at [www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/Region2/areas/kenai/ken-home.cfm](http://www.sf.adfg.state.ak.us/Region2/areas/kenai/ken-home.cfm). The ADF&G Division of Sport Fish Southcentral Region Information Center can be reached at (907) 267-2218 (Anchorage), or by e-mail to [sfreg2@fishgame.state.ak.us](mailto:sfreg2@fishgame.state.ak.us).

In-season 24-hour telephone hotline recordings are also a good way to get information after hours. Call (907) 267-2502 (Anchorage) or (907) 262-2737 (Soldotna).

For opening dates, daily limits, regulations, and special tackle restrictions, consult the Southcentral Alaska regulation booklet.



The Russian River confluence area is a perfect place to practice your ethical angling and low impact camping skills:

- 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 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. Rest facilities are provided.

## Fishery management

Russian River fish are conservatively managed for sustainability by the Division of Sport Fish through management plans given to us by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. To help with management, the Division maintains a fish weir at the outlet of the first lake, above the fishery. Weir counts are available on our web site under "Fish Counts."

Demands made on Russian River fish are sometimes greater than the resource can provide. At other times, more fish arrive than were expected. At such times the Department of Fish and Game closes or liberalizes all or part of the fisheries by Emergency Order.

During closed periods, the stocks are closely monitored by Department biologists. 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 is sometimes liberalized by increasing the bag limits, or by other methods.

The Division sends Emergency Orders to newspapers, television and radio stations, other agencies, the telephone hotlines, and posts them right away on the web site, under "Emergency Orders and News."

## 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.

Vegetation slows runoff and erosion, provides cover for juvenile fish, cools the water, and slows the current. Because of the large number of people fishing the Russian, some shoreline areas may be closed to access due to rehabilitation projects. You can take other actions to preserve the Russian River for generations to come:

- ❖ Do not cut brush or trees within 50 feet of waterline.
- ❖ Use established trails to reach the river, and established entry and exit points.
- ❖ Stand in the river, away from fragile vegetation.
- ❖ Pack out what you pack in, including discarded fishing line and tackle.
- ❖ Respect and abide by signs that close certain critical areas to bank fishing.
- ❖ Use only the rest facilities 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, with 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, Mile 52.5 of the Sterling Highway. There are 83 campsites, two day-use parking areas, toilets, 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, parking for 180 vehicles, toilets, and a privately-operated foot-traffic-only ferry that carries anglers across the Kenai. This parking area also fills quickly.

Additional public campgrounds include U.S. Forest Service's Quartz Creek campground (45 campsites Sterling Hwy. Mile 45) and Cooper Creek campground (22 campsites, Sterling Hwy. Mile 50.7).

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge also maintains the Hidden Lake campground (44 campsites, Mile 3.6 on Skilak Lake Loop Rd. which intersects the Sterling Hwy. at Mile 58), and the Upper Skilak Lake campground (25 campsites, Mile 8.5 of Skilak Lake Loop Rd.)

The U.S. Forest Service also maintains three cabins along the Russian River. For more information on Forest Service campgrounds and cabins, call 1-877-444-6777 (toll-free), or check out their reservation web site at [www.reserveusa.com](http://www.reserveusa.com).

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at (907) 262-7021 is also a good source of information about the area. Their web site is <http://kenai.fws.gov>

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, 514 Funny River Road, Soldotna, Alaska, 99669, (907) 260-4882, e-mail [KenaiRivCenter@borough.kenai.ak.us](mailto:KenaiRivCenter@borough.kenai.ak.us).

## Red salmon

### Life cycle

Russian River red salmon use the main stem 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



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If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility, or if you desire further information please write to ADF&G, P.O. Box 115526, Juneau, AK 99811-5526; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4040 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 300 Webb, Arlington, VA 22203; or O.E.O., U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington DC 20240.

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from the gravel in early spring and immediately enter Upper Russian Lake.

Most early run Russian River red salmon spend two years in 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 fresh water and two years in salt water. They are a little smaller, since they have one less year of ocean growth than the early run.

## Run Timing

The early run usually arrives by June 15, with the historic midpoint of the run occurring on June 30. 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 27,000 fish, and the Russian River Sockeye Salmon Management plan sets the early run minimum escapement range at 14,000-37,000 sockeye 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 about 61,000 fish. The management plan sets the late run escapement range at 30,000-110,000. About 20,000 of these fish are harvested by anglers.

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.

## Fishing for red salmon

For most of the year, the Russian River area is “fly fishing only” (see the regulation booklet). 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 red 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 ft. into the current, upstream 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.

Red salmon travel very close to shore, and inexperienced red salmon anglers often wade too far out, or cast too far out, not realizing the fish are probably passing behind them.

## Silver salmon

Silver salmon (coho) 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



*Plan on releasing your fish? Here's a fish-friendly way to get a photo of your great catch.*

1. Land the fish as quickly as possible. Playing the fish to complete exhaustion takes away the energy it needs for spawning. Do not remove the fish from the water
2. Never place your hands under the fish's gill covers. This injures fragile gill arches and causes almost certain death.
3. Gently grasp the fish around its body to remove the hook. A long-nosed pliers is excellent for this task. Don't wet your hands: it makes the fish more difficult to handle.
4. If the hook cannot be easily removed, cut the line as close as possible to the fly, and leave it in the fish. Do this if it appears that removing the hook will cause more damage than leaving it in.
5. Immediately return the fish to the water and point it upstream. Gently cradle it in this position until it swims on its own.

## Catch and Release

Snagging or trying to snag a fish is illegal in all fresh waters of Alaska. Also, in some Alaskan fisheries, if you plan to release a fish, you may not remove it from the water, even to take a photo. In these fisheries, once you remove a fish from the water, it's counted as your harvest. Check the regulations carefully before going fishing.

At one time or another, almost everyone accidentally foul-hooks or “snags” a fish. The fish must be released immediately, and if released correctly, will suffer little permanent injury and will spawn successfully. Here are some suggestions that minimize harm to fish:

